

THE MOON COLONY



WILLIAM
DIXON
BELL

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE MOON COLONY ***

THE MOON COLONY

BY WILLIAM DIXON BELL

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CHAPTER I

Bullet Proof

Julian Epworth reasoned that his departure from Salt Lake City was a profound secret. The fact that an airship carrying gold was on the way to Los Angeles convoyed by armed airplanes had been kept inside of the office. Because of this Epworth thought that he had an easy job.

“What’s the big idea about all this fancy maneuvering?” Billy Sand inquired curiously as Epworth gave the order to close up a little on the other nine planes flying in a straight line ahead in military formation. “You are acting as if there is a war on, and if we were trying to hatch a machine gun nest.”

“Now that we are up in the air, and there is no chance of a leak I will explain. The twin red and green lights that you see ahead are on one of our airplanes carrying a gold shipment consigned to the mint. Recently a plane similarly loaded disappeared, and our company lost a million dollars. We do not propose that such a steal shall be repeated.”

“A million! And this crate ahead is carrying that much?”

“It is carrying two million. But,” Epworth’s lips twisted determinedly, “I do not think that an air pirate will be able to get away with it—not as long as these ten little babies can shoot.”

Julian Epworth was the head of the secret service of the Atlantic-Pacific Airlines, Inc., and he imagined that his plans had been extremely well laid.

Billy glanced up at the clear sky, picked up the signals, and, in obedience to Epworth’s command, closed in on the four planes flying on the left of the large passenger ship in the lead. A ship launched secretly into the air in the

dead of night, and picked up on the desert by an escort of ten planes, should certainly be safe from a robber.

“Not a chance in a million that we will be stopped,” he remarked thoughtfully. “Look at the moon and the stars! We could see a plane ten miles away, and get it long before it could get in shooting distance.”

Feeling in a good humor and perfectly safe, Epworth tuned in on the radio—just loud enough to bring the news of the world to them, and not loud enough to give a warning to any other flyer in the sky that might be secretly approaching.

Suddenly Billy leaned toward his companion excitedly, and caught his arm.

“Did you hear that? I am speaking about that noise that is coming over the radio.”

“Of course I heard it.”

The radio was saying:

“This is Clarence Ainslee, astronomical observer at Mount Wilson Observatory. Are you looking at the moon? If not, get a large telescope and look at the extreme western extremity of the Sea of Vapours. You will see something you never saw before. There is a lake or sea forming there. At least that is the judgment of astronomers.”

“What do you think about it?” Billy asked.

“Horse radish.”

Both aviators looked toward the bright shining full moon.

“But,” Epworth remarked, “we could not tell anything with our naked eyes.”

“In addition to the appearance of a new lake,” the radio continued, “vegetation is appearing not far from the eastern border of the water. The mystery of this is now puzzling the scientific world.”

“Let them puzzle,” Epworth muttered as he switched the radio dial. “I should worry.”

“This is the news report from the morning *Blade*,” they heard the radio say. “Station WGCF. The report has just come in that twenty masked men, all of whom spoke a foreign tongue, have robbed the Swift & Co. laboratory. They lined up the seventy chemists and their assistants, and while the gunmen held them and their helpers the bandits looted the plant. Thousands of dollars in liquid air, saltpeter, and chemicals were carried off

in two enormous airplanes, dim shadowy things that stretched out two thousand feet in length.”

“Some little airplane. I’d like to see it!”

“Airplane?” Billy snorted indignantly. “They are using dirigibles of course.”

“What do you suppose they wanted with all that nitrogen and fertilizer?”

“Couldn’t guess in a million years.”

Epworth sat up straight. He had caught a view of two wriggling red lights ahead.

“There are the signals,” he cried excitedly. “Something is going on ahead.”

Both aviators went into action. Epworth seized the controls and Billy grabbed a machine gun. Both were still thinking about the long cylinder-like airplanes described by the radio. Epworth kept his eyes fixed on the airship carrying the gold. A red rocket shot out suddenly from the side of this airplane; followed by another. These signals were answered by nine planes that were following Epworth’s guidance through the silent night lanes.

To one who did not understand, the sky looked like a pyrotechnic display.

Like avenging demons the entire convoy started toward the plane sending out the distress signals, sweeping through the sky without lights, and their silencers hiding their approach. But what they saw caused every aviator and every machine gunner to pause for a second in astonishment.

An immense airship, not less than two thousand feet long, was hovering over the passenger Douglas, guiding its movements, and twenty men were running down a ladder that had been let down into the aviator’s seat of the Douglas.

Epworth, who was leading the formation of five on the larboard side, did not permit his astonishment to delay action. With a jerk he seized the control, slammed the stick into his stomach, banked slightly, leveled out until the side of the big airship was in line with his machine gun, and with a hoarse cry opened a broadside at the sky pirate—for pirate he was certain the big plane was.

When he fired he was not over one thousand feet from the pirate, and it was impossible to miss. In addition to this he had come up with a big

surprise—feeling certain that the air bandits did not know that the treasure ship was convoyed. He expected to see his rain of lead tear through the cowlings of the stranger and deal death and frenzy. His example was followed by every scout plane on the larboard side. A second later the five planes on the starboard swept up and poured a fierce rain of lead at the stranger. It was a barrage from both sides that it seemed would destroy anything earthly.

Yet the pirate floated serenely in the air as if it had been bombarded with peanuts, its secretly-constructed armor turning machine bullets like pellets.

Epworth gave the signal, and again both formations poured their hurricane of death at the pirate. But when this bombardment seemed to pass harmlessly through the stranger, Epworth changed his tactics. He aimed at four men who were climbing down the ladder from the pirate into the Douglas. This time his shots cut the ladder into ribbons, and the four men tumbled down into the Douglas. Epworth, while feeling that he had full authority to do battle, wanted to capture the pirate and not kill the men. In this he succeeded, as to the killing, as the four pirates fell on top of the Douglas, or into the aviator's seat.

At this moment the bandits got to fighting. Two sheets of mysterious flames burst simultaneously from both sides of the immense thing, and then all became still.

But those two broadsides were enough. The ten convoy airships conked, whirled over in the air, and began to fall.

“Jump, Billy!” Epworth cried out loudly. “Jump!”

There was need. The battle was over, and the pirate plane, with the stolen Douglas now under complete pirate control, passed away into a dim shadow. The twenty occupants of the destroyed convoy planes jumped out almost at the same second, and sprang as far away from their falling crates as possible.

Epworth's umbrella opened within ten seconds. He saw Billy shoot by like a chunk of lead. Billy was his best chum, and his heart sank with the thought that he would be dashed to pieces against the ground. Frantically he leaned out. Other pilots were going by but he managed to keep his eye on Billy. Finally he straightened up with a cry of relief. Billy's parachute was spreading.

“Safe,” he cried, “but great heavens what a battle! That plane’s sides are bullet proof, and it rides the sky as if it owned it.”

He looked upward. All he could see above his head were the stars. These were blotted out by the rapid approach of the earth, and the peak of the high mountain passing by him.

He landed safely but what would the president of the Air Company say when he returned with this terrible and unexpected disaster to report?

CHAPTER II

The Stowaway

They were seated in the living room of President Epworth's palatial residence in Hollywood. While the conversation was in a low tone and seemingly calm there was an air of tenseness that got on the nerves of the speakers.

"So you suggest——"

President Epworth paused, and looked interrogatingly at his nephew, Julian Epworth.

"That we send out a dummy on an alleged trip to Japan, start it secretly but with sufficient tips to permit the knowledge of its departure to circulate. With it send a small shipment of money. Let Billy Sand pilot the dummy, and I will follow in a swift scout plane equipped to cross the Pacific. If the sky bandits attack, Billy is to be instructed to offer no resistance, and I will lag behind and follow the robbers to their lair. When I return we will fall on that bunch with the entire United States army. Believe me I do not speak loosely when I say that the army will be necessary. Those bandits have the best fighting air vessel invented. They are far ahead of anything I have ever heard of in the way of air pirates."

"And that dummy should carry——"

"Enough gold to relieve it of the suspicion that it is a plant."

The president tapped the table with his fingers.

"Our company cannot afford to lose any money."

"My idea is to make the cargo large enough to pay a profit if it goes across but not large enough to create a great loss. If the bandits come I have

a hunch that they will be connected with the men who robbed Swift & Co., Ford, Dupont, and others. If I can trace them to their lair we stand a chance to get all that back.”

“Notwithstanding the fact that you are my nephew, Julian, I placed you at the head of our secret service because I knew that you had ability in spite of your youthfulness. I am now putting a grave responsibility on you. We cannot do business while a bunch of hijackers are running the air lanes, and stealing everything valuable we send out. We must stop business or catch the thieves. The first thing we know they will be dropping bombs on our airports. I am going to put this matter up to you.”

“Just what do you mean by that?”

“I mean that you have the responsibility of catching these men. I am turning the matter entirely over to you for action.”

“Very well, I accept the charge.”

As a result of this conversation Epworth concluded to send out the Greyhound, a large 12-passenger Douglas—old but a good flyer. Billy Sand was named as the pilot and entire crew. After studying weather conditions closely it was decided to make the start the following Thursday night.

So secret was Epworth in his method that he planted his small H.B. in an open space near Hines Field, six miles from the airport of the Atlantic-Pacific Company, and the only person he took completely into his confidence was Billy Sand, his aviation buddy and chum. Billy did not even let Bert Orme know that Epworth was to follow them. To Orme it looked as if an honest-to-goodness flight was being made across the Pacific Ocean.

Billy was instructed to show constantly by night three red lights, one on each wing, and one on the tail of the Greyhound. These lights were to be turned on every night at sundown during the entire trip. In addition to this Epworth decided to fly the pursuit by himself.

At eleven forty-five the young man moved his plane from its hiding place, and mounted into the air. He chuckled as he took the air. His sister, Joan, was the only living person who knew where this plane had been hidden and he felt certain that it could not have been “doctored,” although he had been late in getting to it.

Unfortunately for his purpose the night was dark and a heavy fog had come up from the ocean about ten o’clock, and for ten minutes he feared that the fog banking against the windows of his cockpits would prevent

observation. With a snort of dismay he threw open the window, and leaned out. The great City of Los Angeles, with its myriads of beautiful lights spread beneath, and he lost three minutes locating the five-pointed lights that marked the Atlantic-Pacific airport. He was flying low, circling like an eagle, and he lost several seconds more getting to the airport.

Had he arrived too late?

He anathematized himself, and snarled at the darkness that had caused him to be late in getting to his plane. Billy, by this time, was probably on his way.

He searched the sky with his binoculars. The three red lights the Greyhound was to display were not visible. Was it possible that his secret plans had already come to naught? Would Billy fly out over the ocean and rush into the hands of the pirates without accomplishing any good?

For a moment he had a spell of very bad humor; then he whirled the nose of his plane out toward the Pacific Ocean. He knew the course the Greyhound would travel. He had been careful with his instructions to Billy about getting into the air and these instructions conveyed to Billy the idea that he was to give no heed to the little plane that followed him. This meant that Billy would take a direct bee line out over the ocean, and expect him to follow as if there was to be an ordinary oceanic flight.

Rising two thousand feet, he shot forward with all the speed his wonderfully fast little bird could travel—three hundred miles an hour. In a brief slip of time he was over San Pedro, and could hear the roar of the ocean sweeping against the rocks north of Point Firmin. Bearing N by W he flashed over the extreme end of Catalina Island on the north. Still the dense fog rolled against his windows and into the cabin; and the three red Greyhound lights were not visible.

He groaned in an agony of spirit. What would his Uncle William say to this terrible waste of money and inefficiency?

“And what will Joan say?” he asked himself aloud in a strained hurt way. “She also will think that I’m a slip-up.”

“She will say that you have a very fast little airplane, that you can fly circles around the Greyhound, and that now is the time to fly them.” A soft, mellow voice answered his query from the rear end of the cabin. “Fly low, say one thousand feet above the water, and keep your eyes glued to your field glasses. Joan will watch for you while you manipulate the controls.”

A handsome, well-formed and athletic young girl, about eighteen years old, crawled out of the tail of the fuselage, and dropped into the aviator's seat by his side.

"H-how did you get here?" Epworth blustered. "What do you mean by butting in on a dangerous mission like this? How did you find out that I was going to make this trip? Now I will have to turn around and take you back. If you were not my sister I'd slam you overboard."

"Oh, no, you wouldn't throw me overboard. If you did that you wouldn't have a little sister to fuss about. As to all those other questions—come at me easy. Put them one at a time. But before you begin to propound them get into some kind of action. Go down a thousand feet. You are too high in the air."

This was good sense, and Epworth nose-dived immediately. When he straightened out on the thousand foot line he leveled his nose northward into a vast encircling movement.

"You needn't go any further north," Joan remarked casually. "I see your three little old red lights out toward the west."

Epworth heaved a sigh of relief; and then turned angrily on his sister.

"Now talk up. You have balled things up terribly. When daylight comes I will have to signal Billy to go back so that I can take you back home. You are set for college, young lady, and it is nearing the opening of the year."

"I am not going back. My brother is out here on a life and death mission, my uncle stands to go broke if this mission fails, and I'm going to help. Get that, Mister Bossy."

"But you can't go, Joan. This task may take me to the North Pole, or to some island in the South Pacific, or to Siam."

"I am going with you or I am going to jump over the side of this plane into the ocean."

There was a finality about her words that carried conviction. That was Joan all over. She was very quiet, very self-possessed, very polite, but she was like the Rock of Gibraltar when she made up her mind.

Epworth did not reply. Now that he was actually following the Greyhound he did not want to desert his task. He pushed nearer to the three red lights. Billy was purposely running with his cut-outs open, and he could hear the roar of the Greyhound's engines. This was another evidence that he

was trailing the right airplane. At this time all other planes that sailed the air were as silent as birds.

“Now let me hear how you got on to this job?”

“You talk too much,” Joan rebuked severely. “I heard you talking to Billy last night when he came up to the house.”

“Then if you know about it I guess the bandits know something about it also,” he chuckled.

Joan did not answer, and for an hour Epworth ran to the starboard of the Greyhound, and several hundred feet higher.

“There is a shadow hanging over the Greyhound,” Joan observed presently. “Is it a cloud?”

“So soon!” Epworth exclaimed in astonishment. “Those robbers are certainly wise ones, and the leak out of the Atlantic-Pacific Airlines must be as big as a river.”

“I do not seem to get you,” Joan replied slangily. She had been associating so much with aviators and air men that she had become one. “Spring a little larger leak in your gas line.”

“You are now going to view the methods of the sky bandits,” he said slowly, handing her his binoculars. “Keep your eyes fixed on that shadow, and I will manipulate the plane nearer so that you will be certain.”

Within three minutes they were close enough to see a sky hold-up. A long cylinder, tremendously long it seemed to her as she viewed it through the fog, swung gracefully and easily into position over the Greyhound, and for several moments ran along smoothly as if it were a part of the lower airship. Then a trap door opened in the bottom of the cylinder, a rope fell into the aviator’s seat of the Greyhound, and ten men descended quickly. For several seconds the ladder swung to and fro over the Greyhound but when a signal whistle, sharp and clear, rang out from the aviator’s seat of the Greyhound, the great cylinder whirled with lightning speed and darted away directly north. It was swallowed up so quickly in the fog that Joan could only stare at it with open-mouthed surprise.

When she thought to look back at the Greyhound the captured vessel had swung into the course of the cylinder.

“It is impossible to follow that thing,” she whispered in awe. “Why it flies—it flies—like—like——”

“A ball out of a cannon,” Epworth finished. “But fortunately I did not contemplate following it. We will follow the Greyhound. I knew before we started out on this trip that those cylinders could gain a speed of six hundred miles an hour, and my plot was to get them to capture the Greyhound, and follow it. They have fallen into the plot, and now a sky bandit, and not Billy, is piloting the plane.”

With a careful movement he dropped in behind the Greyhound, and climbed up over it. But presently he discovered that he would have to go higher. The Greyhound was gradually seeking altitude in a long upward nose sweep. This movement was continued until an altitude of five thousand feet had been attained. At this altitude the Greyhound leveled out, put on more speed, and darted courageously toward the frozen North. Epworth followed, easily keeping the three red lights in view although the cut-out of the Greyhound was now closed.

“Six hundred miles an hour!” Joan’s voice contained an element of doubt. “How could they attain such a speed? There is no known force that will pull them that fast.”

“Goddard’s liquid rockets,” Epworth answered briefly. “I was studying their explosion when the hold-up was taking place. They have a soft, low, whirling explosion but these men have gone the scientist one better. They have found a method of silencing the explosions and still retaining all the force.”

“My, I wonder where they are taking the Greyhound?”

“We are following them to find out.”

“I am still wondering how the cylinders can give such speed.”

“The rockets are propelled by the steady combustion of carbon in liquid oxygen.”

“I have an idea that they must be taking the Greyhound a long distance from home.”

They were.

Four days later Epworth and his sister, Joan, were still following the stolen airship—and were flying over an unknown portion of the Arctic Ocean. Below them there was a vast sea of ice.

CHAPTER III

An Arctic Blizzard

On and on, over pale gray wastes, above fleecy clouds and heavy fogs; high up over tossing waters, and floating mountains of ice—not a stop for fuel, with engines silenced until they flew like bats in the night, the Greyhound leading the way, and Epworth sticking to it like a dark, hungry shadow with his ship lines camouflaged by sky blue paint, and his eyes ever vigilant.

How Billy managed to keep the three red lights going notwithstanding the fact that he was a captive was a mystery that Epworth did not attempt to solve. It was being done, and Epworth was contented to follow.

At last Northeastern Siberia, and a mysterious range of mountains. Epworth, taking his position, knew them for the Cherski Mountains, recently discovered and completely unexplored—a barren, cold, lifeless region bordering on the Arctic Ocean a thousand miles from the outmost limits.

How long would this journey last? Where would the Greyhound lead? Had the sky bandits discovered that they were being followed, and were they leading him into a death trap amid a vast wilderness of ice?

He examined his gas supply. Joan looked at him inquiringly.

“Just about enough to take us back to Point Hope.”

Her eyes sought the cowl of the little machine fearfully.

“Shall we go back?”

She pointed at the Greyhound.

“Billy is in that ship,” she replied softly. “We cannot leave him. His liberty, and very likely his life, depend upon our actions.”

He put his hand affectionately on her shoulder—just like a chum. Few brothers loved their sisters as Epworth loved Joan.

“You are the bravest, squarest girl in the world. I knew you would say it. But——”

He shook his head.

“We will have to depend upon stealing enough gas from the tank of the Greyhound to get back,” she added smilingly.

Now the Greyhound turned abruptly westward, and followed the Cherski Mountains, lowering its altitude to five hundred feet above the highest peak. Epworth followed persistently, keeping a higher altitude.

“Small wonder,” Joan remarked as she watched the shadow of the Greyhound flit swiftly over the face of the white-capped ridges, “that the governments could not locate them. With their swift airplanes they dart down on the commerce of the world like Omar on a desert caravan, and are back in their hidden North Pole lair before the robbery is known by the authorities. Where are we?”

“Eight hundred miles north by west of Bogosloff Island, perhaps a thousand miles.”

“So far,” Joan observed patiently, “we have had unusually even weather. Now we are going to have an Arctic blizzard.”

She pointed north over the long reach of ocean that came up to lash the mountains beneath them. Epworth shivered. Then he smiled.

“We have a mighty staunch little airship.”

She did not answer for several moments. Would these bandits go on forever? Was there no hole anywhere for them to hide in?

“The Greyhound has disappeared,” Joan suddenly broke out excitedly. “I saw it just a moment ago behind that distant peak.”

Epworth glanced out of the window. A sudden sheet of frozen snow and a rain of heavy chunks of ice struck the window. It came with terrific fury, unexpected. However, he had adjusted the stabilizer, and notwithstanding the fact that the little ship was tossed up and down like a feather and went lop-sided for a second it weathered the furious burst, and staggered on like a wounded bird.

Epworth gave one more look for the Greyhound. Not a thing was now visible—not even the rugged snow mountains below. With a grave face he banked and faced the storm, putting on every ounce of power the engine

would carry. The little plane stood still, poised like an eagle, with the bronzed shadow of its wings dipped in the immensity of gray storm and whirling, shrieking wind.

On the windows of his ship the rubber vacuum wipers stopped, choked immovable by lumps of ice hurled against the glazed surface. To see out was impossible—he was shooting through darkness, a howling, shrieking, terrifying murk created by storm. He glanced at Joan. She smiled at him to cheer him, but it was a courageous effort to conquer a mighty fear.

He must see out. If they moved forward in the direction they were headed they would be forced out over the ocean, away from the sky bandits' retreat. That camp was somewhere in this range of mountains. He had a hunch that it was not far away. If he succeeded in his mission he must keep the mountains in view and make a search when the frenzy of the storm had passed.

Nevertheless he moved with slow deliberation. He pasted a small strip of inch-thick Balsa wood beneath the wipers on the window, lighted two candles and stuck them on the Balsa shelf thus made. It was dangerous—deadly dangerous. If the storm shot a flash of that blaze into the gas tank the end would be instantaneous. He smiled grimly, and nodded at his sister. The girl bowed her head in acquiescence. She also realized the danger of a flame of fire at this time.

The heat of the candles warmed the window and the wipers began to move, clearing the space for visibility.

His observations were useless. All he could see was a world of whirling snow and ice.

He sought altitude. But the higher he ascended the fiercer grew the storm. Then he nosed down slowly until he stood a thousand feet above the highest mountain. Then he slowed his engines and allowed the storm to push him backwards. He was seeking the neighborhood where he had last seen the Greyhound.

Again he turned his eyes on Joan. She was taking the battle like a Trojan.

"You are very brave," he said gently.

"And the boy with me is not a coward," she replied softly.

She gave him her hand, and there was not a tremble in it.

"I have lost our reckoning, but——"

The sentence was not completed. The tempest increased with irresistible fury, and shot them down obliquely, catching the starboard wing, and with weird, demoniacal power whirled the plane over and over in a rush of air that the propellers were unable to stop.

Joan was hurled into Epworth's arms, and both were tossed up and down in their seats, and against the light cowling. Each second they expected to be hurled out of the cabin. In order to lessen the danger Epworth shut off the engine. At least there would be no fire.

"We must jump," he explained briefly. "The plane is whirling over and over and will strike a peak soon."

"Small chance for an umbrella in a storm like this," Joan returned quite calmly. "It will be whipped into strips."

"Yet the parachute is our only hope."

He hooked the package around her shoulders and adjusted it carefully. Then he put one around his own shoulders, and handed her a package that he took from a pocket in the fuselage.

"Some useful articles, and a little food and water," he informed her. "May come in useful. We can't tell what is ahead of us."

"Good bye, sister."

"Good bye, brother."

They smiled at each other, and jumped.

CHAPTER IV

A Flashing Cylinder

Joan was caught in the mighty whirl of the blizzard, her parachute opened with a spurt, and she was jerked back and forth like a feather while large chunks of ice shot against her face with sufficient force to lacerate the skin. She was a brave girl but now a great fear overpowered her, and she sent out a wild cry of terror.

Her scream reached the ears of her brother over the howling storm, and his heart went dead. What was happening to Joan? Would it be possible that she could still have a thread of her parachute left, and that the wind was ripping it apart?

With feverish eyes he sought in every direction. He could not see her. Then he realized how puerile his thoughts were. If he chanced to see her there was nothing that he could do to aid her.

Both parachutes had been made to stand up against hard storms, and they held notwithstanding the fact that they were whirled over and over in the rushing air.

After that one wild shout of fear Epworth heard nothing more from Joan, and now his own danger was such that he had little time to worry about her. He had to give his own chute all his mind. Drifting swiftly he was held up by the wind that got under his parachute. Frequently the umbrella tilted and he thought that it would turn inside out but his weight held it down in proper shape, and he raced onward. Suddenly a mountain of snow and ice shot up in front of him. He was on the peak so quickly that he had little time to think or act. Would he be slammed against a jagged rock by the terrible wind, and his head smashed, or would he be dropped into a deep crevasse

from which there would be no possible escape—a place where he would freeze quickly or else starve?

He was blown over the summit with a scarce twenty feet to spare, and felt himself falling. He had not fallen far before he discovered that the mountain sheered off at this point with a deep precipitous cliff. This cliff shut off the wind, and he began to fall slowly. Looking down he saw no bottom. He was still in the air.

A sudden gust of wind, a wild shriek and something bumped against him. Before he realized what was taking place a pair of arms passed around his waist, and clutched him spasmodically. He recovered his surprise instantly, and in turn threw his arms around Joan in order that they should not be separated. The two parachutes had bumped together in an eddy, and now the ropes were entangled so that they could not separate if they desired. With a gentle hand he pulled the girl up to his level.

“Oh, very well,” she said calmly, when she discovered the situation, “we will die together. It is best.”

She was cold, wet, frightened, but was taking her medicine like a soldier.

When he looked around the blizzard seemed to be losing its force. He understood the reason. They had been blown over the top of the mountains and were falling on the opposite side, and the mountains shut off the wind. As they fell steadily and their parachutes became more stable he realized that so far as the storm was concerned they were safe.

But what would they fall into? He could not look down and see but presently they slipped into a deep recess in the mountains, and the noise of the blizzard slackened materially, and they began to descend faster. Epworth felt as if he wanted to guide the things that were holding them up to a soft spot—if there was such a thing in this wild, terrible country—but he was helpless. All he could do was to hold his sister, and look wild-eyed in all directions.

They were laced together beyond separation, and this gave him comfort. They would land together; they would meet the same fate; and perhaps he might be able to save her from death after all.

Now he looked toward the north, and saw some mountains free from snow. How could this be in this land of perpetual ice? He glanced down, and discovered that they were falling into a valley several miles long protected by four immense peaks. As they descended lower the air became

milder, the intense cold, which almost froze his face, decreased perceptibly, and the wind stopped entirely.

Looking upward he saw the blizzard covering the sky with a sheet of snow; looking down he saw green spruce trees, and a stretch of sand.

“Snap into it, Joan!” he exclaimed cheerfully, sweet hope springing up in his heart. “We are going to make a safe landing.”

Joan opened her eyes and shivered.

“A-a-are—we—dead?” she gasped. “This is too awful for life.”

She lifted her head and looked around, and when she saw the rugged mountains she blanched, but made no comment. He caught her suddenly in his arms and lifted her above his head.

“W-w-what are you doing?” she whispered faintly. “Let me——”

They landed on a stretch of soft sand before she finished her remark, and he ran with her for a few steps and stopped. Then, still holding her, he cut the cords that bound them to the two parachutes. Relieved of their burden the parachutes tumbled away and disappeared.

When they were able to stand steadily they discovered that they had stopped just in time to keep from going over and down another steep precipice.

“I see,” Joan grumbled, “trying to keep me from being hurt. I will have you know, Mister Man, that I take my share of all the dangers.”

Epworth did not answer. He was looking down into a deep valley alive with men, women and children—a valley heated by slow, spluttering volcanic fires that came up out of the earth. While he was still staring there came a muffled explosion, a humming noise, and there flashed into the sky a streak of bright aluminum. It shot upward with such swiftness that it was barely visible for a fraction of a second, leaving behind a somewhat lurid trail that hung in the air for a second and then disappeared.

“W-w-what was it?” Joan gasped.

Epworth gave no heed to the question. He was staring, open-mouthed at the spot where the cylinder came from. He was still staring when it seemed to him that the earth opened, and another flash of aluminum shot into the sky, followed by a muffled explosion.

“W-what the Sam Hill?”

Epworth could get no farther. His astonishment choked him.

CHAPTER V

Down into the Den

Joan shook her glossy hair as Epworth sat up and looked around, and twisted her eyebrows in a puzzled way.

“It came out of that round black tube buried in earth at the far side of the valley; or, perhaps, it was one of the mysterious flying machines that the newspapers talked about—like the one that captured the Greyhound. You can readily see that this is the lair of the sky bandits. There is the Greyhound.”

Epworth drew out his powerful field glasses. He never failed to carry them with him. In fact, he had become so accustomed to searching the earth for miles around as he flew over it that it had become as much of a habit to carry binoculars as it was to wear his nose. His observations corroborated Joan’s statement concerning the Greyhound. In addition to that plane he saw a number of other machines that belonged to the Atlantic-Pacific Airlines, Inc., and bags of saltpeter piled indiscriminately around a large warehouse made of corrugated iron.

But there were no indications of idleness in the camp. Even the women and children were doing some kind of work, and the men—more than a thousand of them—were rushing pell mell hither and yon, gathering up large quantities of stuff, pushing it into containers, and piling the containers systematically into cylinders at least two thousand feet long.

“No, it was not an airship. It was one of those long aluminum cylinders that are being loaded by the men at work. It was shot up into the air by some kind of machinery. But why do they do it, and where is the machinery?”

“In that hole in the ground,” Joan explained, as she glanced through the binoculars. “There seems to be a round pit over there.”

“Well, we are going down there and find out what it all means. Very likely the crews of all the airships stolen are down there. I am quite sure that Billy Sand is there.”

“Going to walk right in, turn right around, and walk right out with all the airships and the rescued crews?”

Her tone was quite sarcastic.

“I hardly think that we will work that fast but if we are not able to sneak into that place and get the Greyhound there is very little hope of ever returning to dear old Uncle Sam.”

“There are forty of the new-style airships,” she pointed out, “and it would be easy for them to overtake the Greyhound.”

“We will have to risk something. We will never——”

He was stopped by a giant cylinder being catapulted out of one of the dark tubes, and flashing away into space. They stood staring for fifteen minutes, and another cylinder followed. Then the hum of the machinery quieted down. Epworth drew out his watch. “It has been just ninety minutes since the first cylinder was fired,” he asserted. “The second the cylinder goes into space the men below get awful busy loading another. They are—yes, I really believe that they are systematically shooting something into space.”

“Are they crazy?” Joan looked around apprehensively. “I would rather run into a nest of robbers than a camp of crazy people.”

“We will try to get down there, and get away without being seen. Around the side of the cliff I see a place where it will be possible to slip down without hurting ourselves, although it is steep.”

“I don’t like the looks of things down there,” his sister objected. “Look at that ugly giant!”

She gave Epworth the field glasses, and pointed to a certain man. He was a great giant, long-bearded, hairy, and powerful. He was viciously whipping a smaller man while four men held the small man a prisoner with his face to the wall of a big corrugated iron building.

“Slave drivers,” Epworth observed sharply, his mouth twitching angrily. “I wonder if the little fellow can be Billy?”

Joan shuddered. She was thinking of the gallant young aviator flying away into the night to give himself voluntarily into captivity for the sake of the men who employed him—a captivity that at present looked as if it was the most vicious of all tyranny.

“We’ve got to get away, and send help,” she whispered fiercely. “This racket must be cleaned out if it takes the entire United States army.”

“The United States army cannot come into this country. It is foreign soil. The easiest thing to do is to steal the plane.”

“I’ll venture there are a thousand eyes watching it.”

“You’d throw cold water on a fish,” Epworth grumbled. “But just the same we shall make the attempt.”

At this moment a door in one of the large corrugated iron buildings opened, an enormous cylinder was rolled out, twenty men got aboard, and it shot up into the air with incredible rapidity.

“How would the Greyhound get away from an airship like that?”

Joan’s eyes fastened on the disappearing ship with intense fascination.

“I do not see any propellers,” she added thoughtfully.

“It is a rocket plane, I previously described, the latest improvement on the German idea of shooting an airship forward with liquid rockets. However, let’s be moving.”

They ate from the lunch boxes that Epworth had hastily snatched up when they jumped into the air, and with stealthy steps descended the steep incline, hiding frequently behind the large boulders on the hillside. Fortunately the men in the valley, or rather huge crater—for it was patent that it had one time been a volcano and the fires were only now simmering in spots—were busy and did not see them, and they finally got safely behind the large hangar that protected twenty or more of the big airships. Inside of the building the men at work were talking in a strange language but when Epworth peeped around the corner he discovered the coast to the Greyhound seemed clear.

Slipping from behind the hangar they darted across the open space, and gained the protection of another building without being seen. Repeating this maneuver several times they finally came up to several of the American planes. But they had been purposely battered. A wing had been destroyed, an engine had been put out of running, the propeller had been broken, or the fuselage and rudders shot to pieces. The Greyhound had not been in camp

long, and seemed to be in working condition. They centered their attention on it.

First Epworth surveyed the field. The crater pit was swarming with men, and weaving in between them were hundreds of women and children. Obviously it was some kind of a colony, and Epworth caught himself wondering what all these people meant by coming this far from civilization to live.

Some distance away the young man saw a body of American aviators. They were shoveling saltpeter into an enormous vat, and were being herded around by heavily armed guards. Frequently a heavy whip was used on the back of a prisoner to expedite his movements.

When Epworth saw this he realized that it would not be long before the Greyhound would be dismantled. The pirates did not intend to give the prisoners a chance to escape.

Again he gave the Greyhound a careful study. It was guarded by four men who were seated on a boulder on the side of the mountain opposite from his possible approach. He and Joan would have to get to the Greyhound, get in it, rev up, and get away with a swiftness that was almost an impossibility.

Still it was their only chance. He would make a stagger at gaining his liberty. If they remained in this crater it would be only a matter of a short time before they would be discovered.

To make the break Joan must go also, and it would be hard to slip into the plane without one of them being seen.

“Concealment is useless,” he asserted. “We must run for it. When you get there jump in, and if we are attacked I will try to hold them off while you start the engine.”

Fleet as swallows the two darted forward. Epworth, an all-round athlete, timed his speed to keep even with the girl. They got to the door, Joan’s hand was on it, when the four guards ran around the plane, gave a shout and closed in on them.

“Jump in!” Epworth urged. “Snap at it. I will hold them.”

He whirled like a lion, dodged, and caught the leading guard a heavy blow in the stomach. The man doubled up with a grunt, and Epworth, foot-working swiftly and dodging with the expertness of a prize fighter, evaded a

rush by two men, and caught the fourth a right hand body blow on the run. His victim toppled over sideways.

Not for a second did he pause. He was fighting for life. These men were unscrupulous robbers. He knew this by the way in which they destroyed airplanes. They would not hesitate to slug him, and make Joan's future life miserable.

Wheeling fiercely he flung himself on the other two men. This time he made a football rush, jerked a man's legs from under him, and crashed his head against the ground. Before the other man could catch him he bounded to his feet, and struck him a vicious blow under the chin. The man toppled like a tenpin.

All this time the man he had punched in the stomach was doubled up groaning. Now he lifted his head, and straightened up. But before he could advance Epworth bounced forward, leaped into the open door of the Greyhound, and dropped into the aviator's seat, panting from his violent exertion.

The next second the Greyhound was spluttering loudly and taxiing across the rocky ground. If the engine would pick up a little safety was in sight.

It did. After popping loudly for several seconds it purred down and the Greyhound lifted its wheels from the ground.

At this moment a huge giant stepped out of the most pretentious house in the place. In his hand he held a light machine gun. Leveling it at the Greyhound he began to shoot. There were three propellers, and one by one, with uncanny aim, the giant disabled the blades and just as escape seemed at hand the airship staggered, slumped like a wounded bird, and struck the ground with powerful impact.

Joan, seeing inevitable fall, braced herself with her feet, and escaped with a slight jar.

Epworth, in a vain attempt to lift the nose of the ship upward, was hurled against the cowling with a force that knocked him unconscious.

CHAPTER VI

A Dangerous Scientist

Julian Epworth returned to consciousness on a luxurious day bed in a pleasant plastered room tinted a light green. For several moments he did not comprehend. Presently he put his hand up to his head, and found a bandage.

“Just what happened?” he asked curiously, not expecting a reply.

“Take it calmly,” Joan advised. She was sitting by him in a dejected attitude. “We’re prisoners, and——”

“Where are we?” he demanded impatiently.

She placed her finger on her lips, and pointed at an open door. The only thing the young man could see through the door was another plastered room tinted blue, and a radio receiving set.

“This is KFI, Los Angeles, California,” he heard come over the radio. “We are now going to hear from Professor Ainslee, the distinguished astronomer of Mount Wilson Observatory. He is going to tell you something about the things that are going on in the moon.”

There was a brief delay, and then Prof. Ainslee’s well-known voice came over the air.

“Greetings, ladies and gentlemen of Radio Land: Continuing my short talks about the marvelous growth on our satellite, I will state that the newly discovered lake in the extreme western part of the Sea of Vapours is rapidly getting larger. I should say that it is about a mile in diameter at this time. Of course it cannot be water as water cannot exist on the moon. The heat of the sun, shining steadily for fourteen days, would dry it up as there is no air on the moon to give the water protection. As all readers are aware air forms a

blanket over water, and prevents its gradual evaporation. But there is certainly a dark spot at the point indicated, and the scientific world is studying it thoughtfully. The spectroscopic investigation states absolutely that it is water. This increases the mystery.”

“Ah, ha,” a shrill voice broke out in the adjoining room, “I, the greatest and mightiest scientist in the world, am the only man who can answer this mystery. Bring in the prisoners, Kosloff, and let them hear the rest of this astronomical lecture. Perhaps they may be interested to discover how ignorant their scientists are.”

The speaker had hardly finished when the door was pushed open, and four men sprang into the green-tinted room, covering Epworth and Joan with their guns.

“Come,” one of the men commanded in broken English, “the general wishes to speak to you.”

Epworth got up from the bed, and followed by Joan passed through the door guarded by the gunmen. Their captors stopped them in front of a large mahogany desk. Seated behind this desk was an enormous giant. Epworth instantly recognized him as the man who had prevented the get-away in the Greyhound with a machine gun.

The giant stood up and made an elaborate bow, drawing his immense height erect. He was fully eight feet tall, and extended an arm almost as large as Joan’s body. Epworth weighed 160 pounds, and mentally compared his weight with the appearance of the giant. He was willing to wager that the giant would weigh 350 pounds, and that there was not an ounce of surplus fat about the man’s red-haired body. He thought of red hair all over the man because the giant’s shirt was open at the throat and a huge mat of red hair was visible. In addition to this he had a mass of tousled red hair on his head and a long red beard, which came almost to his waist. He was, in fact, a Man Mountain Dean, beard and all.

He smiled at Epworth and Joan, and they thought of horse teeth, and the nose of Cyrano de Bergerac.

As Joan stepped in front of him he leaned forward, and gave her a hard stare out of his small, twinkling pale blue eyes. At first there was a slight pucker of puzzlement around his big mouth. Then he spoke in good English in a small shrill voice. His voice was so small and sharp that it was all Joan could do to keep from laughing. Epworth saw that she was about to smile,

and punched her lightly in the side, shaking his head vigorously in the negative.

“It will never do to laugh at him,” he whispered out of the corner of his mouth. “Our lives are in his hands.”

“Ah, ha! The beautiful Miss Joan Epworth, flying sister of the noted air man, Julian Epworth,” the giant exclaimed. “I think that she walks like a fly into our trap.”

He opened a drawer in the mahogany table and pulled out a Los Angeles magazine. Opening the magazine at a certain page he whirled the sheet around so that she could see. Then he stared at her again. Joan shrank back from that stare. There was something dangerous about it that she could not understand.

But she understood the picture in the magazine. It was her own picture.

“My lady,” continued the giant with distinguished courtesy of speech but with a sarcastic stare in his eyes, “that magazine is a year old. I have been keeping it for a purpose. I planned in the near future to visit Los Angeles with one of my fastest airships, and kidnap you. That picture told me that you were a very charming and fascinating young lady. Now that I see you I realize that the magazine did not tell half of the truth.”

“Just what do you mean by that speech?” Epworth demanded sharply. “I will have you to understand this girl is my sister, and is not to be hurt or insulted.”

“I am not going to hurt her. I wouldn’t hurt her for a million dollars. All I am going to do is to make her my wife. We are a little short of women up here in the colony, and I have known for a year that she would fit in admirably.”

“Marry you, you red-haired brute?” Joan cried passionately. “I shall never marry you. Besides I do not want a husband. I am just a school girl. I will not be thinking of marrying for ten years.”

“You are old enough—quite old enough. I like them young. But you will have to be satisfied with a rather crude ceremony. We go very little on ceremonies here, especially religious ceremonies. There are no priests here, no churches here, no god to solemnize a marriage. I am the only god here, but believe me I am a big one. I make and unmake worlds.”

“You will never call this girl wife,” Epworth said softly. “Not as long as I live.”

“Then you would fight for her? Fine.” He paused and looked at them with narrowing eyes. “But I am forgetting the astronomical lecture. I am the man who is doing things with the moon. I am transforming that satellite, which is a boiling caldron for fourteen days and then a freezing Arctic Ocean for fourteen days, into a pleasant place to live. It will be a place where I can take my sweet comrades, and establish a colony which will not be annoyed by world dictators or tyrannical democracies.”

He paused and drew his hand across his huge mouth, exposing his horse teeth as his hand left his face. The act proved so repulsive to Joan that she turned her head. The giant noted this and frowned. The frown was not pleasant to behold.

“The moon you are aware has for untold centuries been a dead planet,” he continued without rebuking the girl but with a sinister contortion of his under lip. “The scientists tell us that there is no atmosphere there; no plant life; no water; and that men cannot live there even if they could go there. I am fixing that all up, working the moon over so that we will find life quite pleasant when we go there. I am sending rocket projectiles loaded with water from the Arctic Ocean to the moon. A projectile leaves here loaded with ice; immediately behind it goes another projectile carrying liquid air, hydrogen and oxygen. Both projectiles hit in the same spot on the moon, and the liquid air explodes and forms a protecting velvet for the ice water when it melts.”

He paused, and began to laugh, his sides shaking up and down ludicrously. Again Joan had to turn her head; again he eyed her savagely without saying anything for a second. When he spoke there was a threat in his voice.

“When you are my wife you’re going to have to watch your risibilities,” he said gently. “But to proceed. We delay—spread out too much for your small minds. Taking cognizance of my projectiles, you see the beginning to the Lake of Vapours. Fearing that there may be no nitrogen on the moon I am sending frequent projectiles loaded with saltpeter to unite with the supposed volcanic soils, and make vegetable life possible. In addition I am sending all kinds of seeds—vegetable seeds, flower seeds, fruit tree seeds, cereal seeds. They go mixed with commercial fertilizer liquidized.”

“And you get the saltpeter and fertilizer from——”

The giant did not wait for Epworth to finish his sentence.

“Various and sundry plants in the United States—from Ford, Dupont, etc. The wholesale robberies you were about to speak of are not what one would call stealing. We need these things to start a great civilization on another planet. Your people have them. Unfortunately we have not the money to buy all we need; and consequently we are forced to adopt the methods of other nations. We take them.”

“And you think that this crazy idea is going to work?”

“Ha, ha! Do you know who I am?”

Without realizing that she was speaking to the man Joan shook her head.

“I am Herman Toplinsky, the greatest scientist in the world. I have been run out of my home country because I am too smart for the other scientists. I am being hunted like a wild animal by all the governments of the earth. This is why I am hiding in this remote place with my comrades, and using my airships to get chemicals, supplies, gold, and all the things I need. Am I a bandit? Nay, nay. I am simply a wronged scientist—a smart man without a country. I cannot help the antagonisms of rude and ignorant men.”

Epworth had heard of the man. He was no idle boaster. Before he had been chased out of his home country he had stood at the head of International Science.

The scientist turned his eyes on Joan. She had her fingers pressed on her nose, and could not remove them before he discovered her act. He smiled, and sprang nimbly forward.

“What you smell is my chemical laboratory,” he explained. “It is in here.” He threw open a door. The scent that came from the inner room caused the girl to draw back quickly. “I have just removed my hands from a vat of NH_3 .”

It was the smell of rotten eggs accentuated a hundred times, and Epworth now knew that what had been so repulsive to his nostrils since he had been in the room was hydrogen mixed with sulphur and nitrogen.

CHAPTER VII

Ready to Crush Out Life

The guards, at a motion from the giant, pushed the prisoners inside of the laboratory. Toplinsky shot his eyes around the room for a second, and then bounded forward with energetic fury across the floor to where ten men were working as if death was just ahead of them.

With a light slap of his big hand he turned a man upside down, and rolled him across the floor.

“That for your ignorance,” he shrilled. “Have not I, the great Herman Toplinsky, repeatedly told you nitrogen is an inert element—that it does not care to unite with other elements, and that we must be very careful at the beginning if we want to live when we get to the moon? We cannot wait until we can grow vegetables. We must have nitrogen free for the atmosphere, and we must also have it *fixed* so that we can charge the new atmosphere with electric currents and cause it to rain on the face of the moon. Yes, I, the great Toplinsky, tell you all these things, and yet you attend to this apparatus slothfully—you do not complete the electric arc; you do not hook three hydrogen atoms to one of nitrogen. Ah, ha! Do I not tell you again, and again, that as condensed ammonia we shoot it easily into the moon, and that when it releases it becomes again hydrogen and nitrogen?”

He kicked the prostrate form of the unfortunate worker, who was an American aviator, and turned amiably to Joan and Epworth, all traces of anger disappearing. Epworth and his sister looked at each other in a puzzled way. Was the giant crazy? The idea of shooting hydrogen and nitrogen at the moon in small packages indicated that he was.

“My friends, it is so.” Toplinsky smiled amiably. He was pleased with the impression he was making. “I, the great Toplinsky, do more than shoot packages of NH_3 to the moon. I shoot everything I need, and soon—well, we shall see what we shall see. In the meantime——”

He bowed like a diplomat to Epworth. The young American caught the intent.

“Did I understand you to say that you objected so violently to my marrying this young maiden that you were ready to fight for her?”

Epworth shivered slightly. This was the biggest man he had ever seen—a man as strong as Samson. If he went into a fight with him it would be a very desperate affair. He glanced at Joan. She was looking at the giant with a loathing that she did not attempt to disguise, and she was his sister.

“Yes, I am ready to fight for my sister. She shall marry when she pleases, and the man she wants.”

Joan gave him a look of intense gratitude. She had great confidence in her brother’s fighting ability.

Toplinsky turned away as if the matter was of no more interest, and passed out of the house. As he walked from the big building he waved his hand in an explanatory way at two giant tubes buried in the ground.

“Beneath these two tubes,” he remarked casually, “I have a powerful power plant, and much complicated machinery. With the electric current generated by the ebb and flow of the Arctic Ocean I load the cylinders with heavy blocks of ice, and then give the projectiles a start into space. Lean heavily, my dear bantam, lean heavily on this point. The projectile I shoot leaves the earth at a speed of 6.77 miles per second; that speed carries it beyond the gravity clutch of the earth. When it gets a certain distance, in order to land it at a certain spot on the moon, its speed is accelerated by the explosion of a liquid rocket, fired by clock work. It is easy when you know how.”

“Mercy!” Joan ejaculated in admiration. “Why do you shoot so accurately? Why not scatter your stuff all over the moon?”

“It would be wasted,” he responded mildly. “I am working on the same plan one acts when he builds a dam in a flowing stream. Little by little I build outward, making the territory around the point I have selected inhabitable. In fact, in addition to creating vegetation on the moon, I am preparing a livable climate where I anticipate establishing my colony. I am

doing this—first, by locating my site in a deep valley between two high ranges of mountains. Here my lake and vegetation are established in a spot where the sun shines one day out of the twenty-eight, and then not with great heat. The rest of the time the colony will be shaded from the sun by the high mountains, and yet the valley will have ample light. For heat during the long fourteen days of night I expect to erect a solar heater on the top of the mountains, and reflect the rays of the sun into Paradise Valley with big mirrors. But let us hasten to the conflict. I have not had a real good fight since I was a boy.”

Joan’s spirits dropped. The giant had been acting so indifferently that she had come to the conclusion that he had been bluffing about wanting to fight her brother, and that he was simply trying to annoy her with his talk about marrying her. Now she discovered that she was mistaken.

She had not seen Toplinsky give a command but as they approached the large hangar it seemed as if the entire population had assembled for a celebration. Against the walls of the hangar had been placed a table, a space had been roped off in front of the table, and a temporary arena made. Toplinsky mounted the table, and addressed the crowd.

“Do you see this lovely maiden?” he shrilled out in his small voice. “I think that she will make an excellent mate for your leader. But notwithstanding the fact that I want her there is a ruling among us that a man can keep his wife just as long as he is able to do so by main strength,—provided some other man wants her. Unfortunately for me this lady has a brother, and he is not willing to allow me to take her for wife. But——”

He paused and looked down thoughtfully.

“Really, I had forgotten something. I might buy the lady. Mr. Epworth, I will give you twenty thousand dollars for your permission as guardian to make this girl my wife.”

Epworth looked at the giant apprehensively, saw that he was soft, and shook his head decidedly.

“He seems uppish about it,” the giant grinned. “Very well, I shall *kill him with these great bare hands!* I have said. It shall be an open fight, and no favors.”

He threw off a long robe, and dropped to the ground. Epworth was surprised to see that he was clothed in tights, and that his massive chest swelled out like a steam engine expansion.

The colonists gave a wild cheer. It was plain that they liked a spectacular scrimmage.

“Bring in the girl and set her on the table,” Toplinsky cried, “and then put fighting clothes on this Lilliputian.”

Joan was seated on the table in great state while the guards with rare good humor took Epworth into the hangar and forced him to don tights. When the young American came back to the arena and confronted Toplinsky it was in reality a contest between a Lilliputian and a giant, although Epworth’s figure was beautifully shaped, symmetrical, smooth, and well muscled for his age.

When the American prisoners saw the difference in weight they groaned. Joan heard the groan and paled. If Epworth was defeated she would take the first possible chance to commit suicide. Life with the giant monster was nauseating, horrifying. She thought that she preferred death a hundred times. When Epworth passed in front of the table on which she was seated as if on a throne her heart went cold. The hairy giant would crush him with ease, and there would be no help for him. Those mighty hands would clench around the boy’s neck, and he would never utter a sound until choked to death.

Toplinsky meant to kill him. She did not have to be told. Intuitively she recognized the fact that beneath the giant’s sarcastic talk and extravagant boasting there was a great hatred of Epworth. True she had not seen the big scientist before this but he had kept her picture for a year; had thumb-marked it until it was black with grime and dirt. She groaned inwardly. This came of too much publicity. How she hated herself for letting that reporter get her picture in his magazine. Vanity—how she hated her vanity now that it was going to cost her the life of the only companion she could trust.

“Ah, he is a bantam, a mere child!” There was a smirk of satisfaction on Toplinsky’s face. “Yet he has the temerity to stand up in front of me—the great Toplinsky. Friends, comrades,” he made a grandiloquent flourish with his hand, “it is not often that I diverge but when I do it becomes great sport. And this young lady—now hear me. I want her badly but if this bantam wins he shall have her. What I have said I have said. The great Toplinsky never goes back on his word. So shall it be. Herloff, announce the approach.”

A bugle sounded, a drum beat musically, a guard jabbered in a strange

language; then in broken English he turned to the American prisoners.

“When this fight is over,” he said coldly, “this young American will be dead.”

The calm statement, authoritatively made, caused Joan to scream.

“Now, young sir, be on your guard. This is a fight regardless of Marquis of Queensbury rules.”

Epworth was considerably astonished at the agile rapidity with which the giant sprang forward. His movements were graceful and as lithe as a panther. But the American was ready for him. He had been taught boxing and wrestling by skilled men. He waited like a post until Billy Sand, watching with feverish excitement, shouted:

“Snap into it, kid. For the love of Mike, snap into it! You’re fighting for your life!”

Still he waited until the giant was at his elbow; then he dodged with seeming lack of haste beneath Toplinsky’s extended arms, and planted a heavy jab into the man’s stomach. Then he turned his eyes on Billy, and nodded. He was pleased to see Billy still alive.

But Toplinsky’s stomach was cast iron and copper bottomed, and just a slight hesitation flickered across his face. Epworth paled slightly. He had to subdue this man by constant, steady, repeated body blows. To strike him on the head, was like butting into a brick wall with his fist, and the first blow indicated that the soft portions of Toplinsky’s body were as hard as his head.

Toplinsky whirled like an automaton, and rushed with clenched hands. If he landed his blow Epworth would be knocked cold. But it seemed as if Epworth did not see his danger.

“Hey, kid!” Billy howled. “Look out for that John L. rush.”

Billy’s voice was instantly checked by a guard who put his hand over his mouth and jabbed a gun into his side. Epworth, however, caught the feeling of sympathy, and waved his hand. It did him good to know that Billy was at hand to cheer him.

But he did not need the warning.

His footwork was smooth, and the giant pounded air. Again Epworth’s right found lodging in the giant’s abdomen, and he grunted a little, faintly, and advanced with fists on guard.

It was evident that he knew a little about boxing, and Epworth's heart weakened. He had been counting on Toplinsky's ignorance. If the man was only partially skilled his great weight, long reach, and massive power gave him the decided advantage. Yet the young American, though a little doubtful, had no intention of permitting fear to gain possession of him. Fear, he knew, would result in quick defeat.

He sprang forward like a catapult, dodged downward just as the giant met him with a terrific blow at his face, and got in two good blows before Toplinsky could regain his equilibrium. Then with deft footwork he slipped beneath the giant's arms, battered him in the rear of his short ribs, and darted out of reach.

"Atta boy! At——"

But again Billy's mouth was choked off.

Toplinsky did not speak. Very quietly he paused, and studied his opponent attentively. It was a menacing, cruel, determined gaze. Joan caught his facial expression and suppressed a cry of terror. She was beginning to think that Epworth was a great fighter for one so small and that he might whip this enormous beast but that if he did Toplinsky would break his promise, and be more terrifying in defeat than in victory. His cruel red face expressed this thought. She shuddered, and glanced helplessly at the colonists who were backing Toplinsky. They were grim visaged and fierce, and there was small promise of help in that mass of intent, unsympathetic faces.

Her thoughts were broken by Epworth. The American made a dash as if he intended to strike the giant in the face. Toplinsky covered and shot his hands up in front of his face. Instantly Epworth stopped his rush, and kicked his opponent with all the force of his leg and foot in the pit of the stomach. The giant doubled up with a groan, and instantly Epworth sent a mighty right hand blow to the back of his neck.

Toplinsky went down, his followers groaned, and the Americans sent up a shout of triumph.

It was short-lived. The giant in falling threw out his right and encircled Epworth's neck. When he got to his feet with his hands around the American's neck he gave a ferocious grin, and stuck his face, streaming with blood, against Epworth, at the same time jabbing the American with his left. Epworth retaliated with a short hand jab into the scientist's

stomach. Again the giant's mighty left landed in the American's face. If he could not soon break loose from the terrific embrace around the neck his face would be pounded to a jelly.

Bending his head he lifted his feet, permitting the giant to sustain his weight for a fraction of moment, and doubling up slammed both feet with all of his strength into Toplinsky's abdomen. In order to sustain his footing the giant held him up, and then slammed his terrible left on his nose. The blood spurted out like a pump working but in regaining his equilibrium Toplinsky slightly relieved the strangle hold around the American's neck. Taking the blow in his face, quick as thought Epworth struck back with all of his strength, landing beneath the giant's chin. He had his mouth open at the time, and his tongue was caught between his teeth.

It was not a severe blow but it caused Toplinsky to bite his tongue. The pain was so severe that for a second he released his grip around Epworth's neck. Epworth slid out of the clinch, and feeble-footed aside. He was sick and groggy from that awful left hand, and yet he realized that if the man had been hammering him with his right instead of his left the fight would have ended quickly.

Toplinsky, recognizing his advantage, rushed him, giving him no time to recover from the shock of the clinch. Unable to strike Epworth dodged. In this he was far superior to his enemy. Now he darted right and left, and remained out of reach of those mighty arms. Thus he began to regain his breath.

"Keep away from him, kid," Billy howled. "Don't try any more stunts. Give him shots in the stomach."

Epworth kept away for a time but he couldn't knock a man out running from him, and when he recovered somewhat he wheeled as if to run into the giant, who was chasing him around in a circle. Toplinsky stopped to throw up his guard, and envelop the American again with his great arms. He failed. Epworth shot in two punches, and got away, although he was sighing for a gong to sound to end a round.

But this was not a battle by rounds, and now a scheme entered his mind to tire out the giant. Still dizzy and with his eye closing he began to invite the giant to chase him. Toplinsky, foolishly thinking that he was weakening, made repeated rushes. Epworth avoided them as if weary and lacking energy.

The scientist's admirers now sent up a whoop of triumph. It looked as if the American was whipped.

Toplinsky chased until he began to blow slightly. This was what Epworth was waiting for. Wheeling, while seeming to run away, he charged into Toplinsky's face. To the observer it looked as if he was running into certain destruction. Billy was the first to groan; his fellow countrymen followed. The colonists cheered.

Toplinsky smiled, showing his horse teeth in pleasant good humor. He would catch this young American by the nape of the neck and crush the life out of him. First, however, he would cover his face and protect himself from the American's blow.

It was a terrible mistake. Never before had Epworth driven a body blow with such terrific force. He put all of his strength and the full weight of his body, and landed in the giant's stomach.

To the great astonishment of the observers Toplinsky staggered, and before he could regain his footing Epworth landed another under his chin, a fierce swipe. The last blow rolled the giant over. But he was down for only a second. In getting up he ran into some angry punches below the belt. They made him sick, weakened him, but he struck the American angrily in the face, peeling the skin from beneath Epworth's eyes, and staggering him. Again the American got in his fast footwork, backed away, and returned with another rush into the giant's stomach.

Strong as he was this rush doubled Toplinsky again, and before he could straighten up Epworth was hammering him from the left side below the belt. With a mighty effort the giant closed his eyes to the pain, and jabbed with all of his strength. Epworth caught the blow on his chest, and struck the ground on his back. Behind it there was enough power to knock down a horse.

With a shrill scream like a wild animal Toplinsky plunged at him. Epworth had just enough energy to lift his foot and kick the rusher in the stomach. The kick landed by accident in the exact spot where the American's fist had been hammering. Toplinsky stopped short, turned white, and hunched over.

Hope swept again into Epworth's heart, and with a bound he was on his feet. Now he danced around Toplinsky like a bull fighter. Flashing in and out, his swift blows were delivered into the unprotected part of the giant's

anatomy, finding soft places. Twice he struck at the giant's face, closing both eyes. This however only served to give Toplinsky some relief from his abdomen pains, and he rushed.

But Epworth was now going strong, and was wary.

He foot-worked, dodged in and out, and kept his enemy breathing hard. Never for a second would he permit those giant hands to get to his body or face. In and out, like a shadow, quick as a wink, he pounded without getting anything in return, seeking the vulnerable spots.

With a sudden howl of anger Toplinsky dropped his guard, and sprang at him. If he could just get his hands on this fleet-footed foe. If——

But he spent his energy in the rush, and Epworth was not there. Instead he was delivering those aggravating blows at the solar plexus. Toplinsky paused, whirled half around, and snarled like a wild animal. It was an unfortunate thing for him to do. Epworth rushed him, sent a powerful blow into the lower regions and before the giant could straighten up, or attempt to defend himself he slammed him along the side of his left ear, and rolled him over. It was the first time that Toplinsky had been floored until he could not readily get to his feet.

Epworth saw his condition, and did not pause. Dropping on top of his foe's body, he pounded him on both sides of his abdomen with terrible punches. He was getting a little weak himself, and realized that what he did must be done quickly.

“Take him off!” Toplinsky gasped in terror. “Help! Quick, com——”

Epworth closed his mouth with a solar plexus blow that put him out. Then he rose slowly and faced the arena. In front of him were over a thousand frowning colonists, hard featured, cruel men, with guns in their hands. They were eyeing him threateningly.

Joan saw the menacing glances, and cried out. She felt sure that these maddened men would not do the fair thing by the brother who had fought for her so gallantly—to the uttermost end of his strength. She also feared for herself.

These men who did not hesitate to shoot down airships, and steal, would shoot them later without mercy.

CHAPTER VIII

Billy Takes a Part

Six guards ran into the arena with a folding cot, and stretched Toplinsky out comfortably on it. He groaned miserably, lay silent for several moments, and then lifted his head on his elbow. In this attitude he gazed threateningly at Epworth for several seconds without speaking, his light blue eyes twinkling viciously.

“The woman is free,” he at last shrilled out. “I, the great Herman Toplinsky have said, and it is so. But for him—that is another thing. I have it. He has dodged about like a jack-in-the-box, he has run away from me and would not fight where I could reach him with these strong arms, he has pounded me in the softest parts of my anatomy when I could not catch him. For that, ah, ha, he shall be whipped—whipped until his back streams blood and he shouts aloud with pain, until his head falls forward in a faint. Strap him up. I have said.”

With a deep groan he dropped back on the cot, lay on his back, for several seconds, and then turned over so that he could view the whipping.

“Oh, my! Oh, my! my stomach,” he half sobbed.

“How it hurts. Strap the rascal where I can see him wither and suffer. I say that he shall suffer as I suffer.”

The six men jerked Epworth to a post in front of the giant and lashed him face to the post, pulling down his tights so that his back was exposed.

“Ah, ha, his back is smooth and white. I shall make it red and striped, and then pour salt on it. Proceed, Kosloff, good comrade, and spare not the rod.”

The man addressed as Kosloff, a big double-jointed man with a mean countenance, seized a cat-o'-nine-tails, and began to whip Epworth unmercifully on his back, each stroke cutting into the flesh and leaving strips of red. Notwithstanding the fact that the pain was excruciating Epworth clenched his teeth, and uttered not a sound.

"One, two, three, four, five, and fifteen," roared the giant with pleasure. "Make him howl if it takes two hundred. He's a husky lad and can stand a lot."

"Hold! One more stroke and I'll blow you to bits!"

Epworth twisted his head. He first caught a view of Joan with her face buried in her hands, weeping hysterically; then his eyes flashed to the rope, and he saw Billy standing inside with a gun frowning at Kosloff. With a sudden dash he had grabbed a gun from one of the guards and had covered the whipper before he could be stopped.

Kosloff stopped, and turned white. There was a note in the small American's voice that brooked no rebellion, and the gun pointed menacingly.

"Go on," Toplinsky snarled, "until I shout stop."

"Let him have it, Billy," twenty American throats shouted in unison. "We are with you. Plug him between the eyes."

"One more slash and he gets it," Billy declared. "Go on, Kosloff, if you have made your peace with God."

"I'll put you on bread and water," Toplinsky threatened.

Kosloff held his whip undecidedly, and Billy stepped swiftly across the intervening space and jabbed the gun against Toplinsky's head.

"You've got nerve, Toplinsky," he said with grudging admiration, "but you are too healthy to be in a hurry to die, and I'm telling you that you are mighty near death at this moment. I have been thinking mean about you for the last hour and a half, and there is now going to be a reckoning between us."

Toplinsky, whose strength was coming back, sat up.

"Ah, ha, slave, do you talk of an agreement with your master?"

"Say, Whiskers, if you think I'm a slave you've got another think coming. Right now you have a lot of men behind you but I'm holding the trump card. If you do not come to my terms, and agree quickly, this gun is

going off. After that—well, you will not be interested in what happens next.”

The grimness in the young aviator’s voice spoke volumes. The vast crowd listened in silence.

“Yes,” he continued, “you are going to give an order that sticks. You are going to say that there will be no more whippings in this camp.”

“What else?” Toplinsky sneered.

“And no killings.”

Toplinsky made an effort to stand up.

“Sit down!” Billy thundered. “This agreement is going to reach a conclusion before you get up.”

“I will agree that there will be no more whippings,” Toplinsky said quietly, “provided the work is done industriously. But the guards will shoot the first American who makes a break for liberty. I have said.”

“I will not be unreasonable,” Billy returned slowly. “We will not ask for freedom at this time but we must have fair treatment.”

“I will go no further than modify the regulations concerning whippings,” Toplinsky declared firmly. “What I have said I have said. Turn your gun over to one of the guards.”

With a sarcastic bow Billy obeyed. The act surprised Joan. She thought that Billy had the advantage, and should force their release. But Billy had saved Epworth from death, and Epworth and all the Americans were well pleased with the result.

“Arrest that man!” Toplinsky screamed the moment Billy was disarmed. “Put them together in the stocks and throw mud at them.” When they were bound together and their feet thrust through an old-fashioned stock that was dragged out, Toplinsky added slyly: “It may be puritanical but I imagine that by the time my babies get through playing with you, whippings will appear somewhat less painful.”

The mud was full of small sharp gravel and when it began to strike their faces it left red smears. When Joan saw this she sprang off the table, ran across the open space to where the two boys were fastened, and threw herself in front of them as a protection from the gravel.

“Drag the wench back to her room,” Toplinsky called out with a loud, shrill laugh, “and hold her there in the window where she can see without being able to interfere.”

Epworth and Billy were finally taken out of the stocks in an unconscious condition.

CHAPTER IX

Start to the Moon

Kosloff came into Joan's room, and surveyed her with sneering eyes.

"Get ready! Quick! There is no time to lose. You are going with us."

"Going with you? Where?"

Joan felt a sudden depression creep over her. Was this man going to separate her from her brother?

"Ask the general, or wait and find out. I have my instructions."

With another sneer Kosloff turned to the door, paused, and looked back, and added:

"I am coming back in less than half an hour for you."

"I must get word to Julian or Billy," Joan gasped. "Where can they be taking me? Once separated from my friends my life will be a constant misery."

She paused in her cogitations, and began to tremble. What could be ahead of her? She did not find out, and threw herself across her bed. She was still lying with her head buried in the bedspread when Kosloff returned. This time he was accompanied by several guards, who were none too polite. They lifted the girl in their arms, and carried her aboard a large airship. While they were taking her up a steel-like ladder Joan had an opportunity to observe the machine carefully. It was the biggest thing she had ever seen in the way of an aircraft, being eight hundred yards long, three hundred feet wide. In shape it was an elongated cylinder, and she knew enough about modern metal to discover that it was made of beryllium—a wonderful new material impervious to heat or cold. The walls were hollow, and heavily

armored so that it was proof against the strongest shells. The openings were sliding doors with an inner door of glass. Thus, when the outer door was closed, the entire ship seemed compactly built without an opening. It was propelled by rockets fired from long metal tubes located in the bow, in the stern, and on both sides.

With rude hands her captors shoved her through an open door and along a narrow companionway to a small cabin daintily and charmingly furnished. Here they threw her on the floor and departed, slamming the door behind them. The second they were gone she sprang to her feet. When she tested the door she found that it had locked so that it would be impossible to break out of the cabin. Then she began a search for a window. There was none, and she ran around and around the small chamber like a frightened rat without getting anywhere.

Presently she began to beat the walls with her clenched hands. She did not expect to gain anything by this but it gave vent to her feelings. In the rear of the room she accidentally struck a small round knob with her thumb. The blow caused a secret panel to slide back and expose an opening about eight inches square. The opening was above her head but she found a stool and climbed up on it.

Her eyes took in a large warehouse-like room full of boxes and supplies piled from the floor to the ceiling, and extending three hundred feet toward the rear of the airship. Her mental comment was to the effect that it was a mammoth apartment, and that it held supplies enough to care for an army for several months.

But the most interesting part of the room that confronted her were the men who were loading the airship. There were only three people in the warehouse department, and two of them were Julian Epworth and Billy Sand. They were being herded around by a single guard who talked to them amiably and in a friendly manner.

Fortunately as she looked through the opening they passed very near, and the guard lagged.

“Julian! Billy!” she whispered softly. “I have been locked up in this place. Can’t you get me out?”

Epworth heard her but for some time he could not locate her. When he did, the guard was hurrying them away. Joan saw them disappear behind some boxes, and imagining that they had not heard her, allowed despair to

fill her soul. With a deep moan she sank on a couch near by and buried her face in her hands, leaving the panel open slightly but held firm by the spring. She thought that she was deserted, and her eyes filled with tears.

Epworth, however, had no idea of deserting her. The second he heard her voice he knew that she was entrapped on the airship and that he must devise some scheme to save her. With this end in view, he dragged slowly back of the guard. Billy, noticing this, fell behind to talk to him.

“Where do you suppose this ship is going?” Billy asked indolently as he lowered his last burden to the floor. “She seems to be loading up for a trip around the world.”

“Worse than that,” the guard called out in an undertone. “That mighty scientist, Herman Toplinsky, is going to try to go to the moon, and, unfortunately, I have been detailed to go with the crew.”

“Say, sonny,” Billy exclaimed enthusiastically, “that sounds good to me. I don’t care if he never gets back. Snap up, Epworth. We may find a chance to break away while he is speeding along the interplanetary ways.”

“I’m thinking of going with him,” Epworth whispered. “He is kidnaping Joan, and taking her with him.”

Billy gulped.

“How’d you find out?”

“Get a move on you, slow boys!” the guard called out. “It is about time you were leaving the ship.”

As he spoke he turned his back carelessly on the two Americans. Epworth glanced at Billy; Billy nodded his head. Both edged up softly toward the guard.

“Out you go,” the guard shouted again. “Drop down and I will stay on top until she starts.”

With two bounds Epworth and Billy were on him. He was attacked unexpectedly and before he recovered the two had him on the floor of the airship, and his own gun sticking in his face.

“Not a word!” Epworth hissed.

“Not even a squeak,” Billy added.

The guard grinned up into their faces. It was a good natured smile and half disarmed them.

“I do not get the idea,” he said in a low voice. “Are you two contemplating a trip to the moon as a pleasure jaunt? If you hold me here

ten minutes you will be on your way.”

“We couldn’t part with you, Michael,” Billy lisped. “No indeed. We love you too well.”

“We have known you long enough, Michael,” Epworth explained, “to know that you are a good sort, and I will tell you what we are doing. My sister has been put aboard this airship, and is now a prisoner in the room adjoining the wareroom. We are staying to see that she is not mistreated.”

“Toplinsky is a dirty scrub,” Michael burst out, angrily “and his people would not stand for this—not after he had given his word. Anyway I am not going to stand for it. Let me up—I am with you. I’ll drop aboard and leave here, and get together a bunch of men who will force Toplinsky to leave the girl here. I am sure——”

The airship trembled from stem to stem, a muffled explosion was heard on the outside; there came a sudden upward jerk, and then a smooth, even motion of acceleration.

“Too late,” Michael groaned nervously. “We are off, and Toplinsky will boss you for several years longer unless we are lost in space.” He paused and added. “Do you know, Americans,” he spoke very plain English, “that I have always thought that man was crazy. He may have been hitting the moon with his cylinder projectiles but I’ve always doubted it, and I don’t feel good starting out to explore space. It gives me the shakes.”

“Were it not for the fact that my sister is aboard this plane I would feel the same way,” Epworth said. “But with her future unsettled I am not thinking of what is in front of me.”

CHAPTER X

Toplinsky Calls the Bluff

The two Americans released Michael, and when he got to his feet the three stood gazing at each other in silence for several moments. Presently the air began to get extremely cold.

“S-say, fellows,” Billy grated with his lips trembling, “I don’t like this. If the weather continues like this much longer I’ll become a little snowball.”

Michael bounded up and slammed the hatch down. The atmosphere became slightly warmer.

“We can’t stay in here,” he asserted presently. “This part of the airship is not connected with the oxygen tanks, and we must have air to live.”

He again opened the hatch and looked out. Epworth crowded up to him. Overhead was space, all around them was space, and they were traveling at a speed that took their breath. When they searched for a view of the earth it was not to be seen, as the body of the airship obscured it.

“We will try to get out and get into the other part of the ship,” Epworth suggested.

“And Toplinsky will land on me for letting you and your companion come aboard.”

Michael closed the hatch part way.

“Besides,” he added, “how will you pass that first hatch opening. If you will look but again you will see Toplinsky standing with his head out and an air helmet over his head. For some reason he is on the look out.”

This time he let the hatch down softly and closed it firmly.

“We will fix you up with Toplinsky,” Epworth proposed. “We will tie you up, then go below and inform Toplinsky that we made you a prisoner.”

“Sounds fine, but it won’t work. Toplinsky will give me a beating for getting where you could put your hands on me.”

The three men put their heads together. It was now getting terribly cold, and for the first time they discovered that breathing was painful.

“We’ve got to do something—and do it quick,” Billy asserted anxiously. “I’m getting——”

He collapsed. Michael extended his hand to help him, and also stumbled.

Like lightning Epworth acted. Grasping Billy by the collar in one hand and Michael in the other he pulled them up to the point in the warehouse where the panel opened into the chamber Joan was occupying, and drawing a box up put them in a position where they could get a breath of air through the hole. It was only a breath but he had reasoned that Toplinsky would not put his sister where she would die for want of atmosphere, and now found that he had reasoned correctly. They could barely thrust a portion of their faces toward the hole. It was not large enough for all three to get air, and heroically he pushed his companions forward.

Joan, stretched on her couch sobbing, heard a tap on the panel that separated her compartment from the storeroom. Curiously she got up and pushed back the panel. In front of her was Billy’s face and the face of a guard. Both were chattering with cold.

“O-open the panel full out,” Billy choked. “We are dying for want of air.”

“Mercy!” Joan ejaculated with infinite relief. “I thought you had left the airship. Where is Julian?”

Billy shoved his head aside from the blessed air hole and caught Epworth. He was just in time to keep his companion from falling.

“Here he is,” he replied. “Get your face away from the panel so we can all get a breath of that air. This compartment is shut off from the air tanks and we will soon die if we get away from this hole.”

However all three men soon revived, and pulled boxes up to the air panel to stand on.

“We can’t stand here all our lives,” Billy grumbled. “My legs are getting tired already.”

“Open your door and call some one,” Epworth instructed.

“It is locked,” Joan replied. “I have——”

The door opened and Herman Toplinsky stepped in.

“Ah, ha, ho, ho, it is a great voyage—a magnificent start.” Toplinsky closed the door carefully. “Indeed a wonderful trip is ahead of us. We leave the earth at a speed of six hundred miles an hour with our liquid rockets working admirably. Fair Joan, do you know where we are going?”

Joan was breathless with the fear that Toplinsky would discover Epworth and Billy at the panel, but when she replied her voice was cold and hard. At least she could put this man in his place.

“I haven’t the least idea, and my name—well, my name is a good name and I am not ashamed of it. It is Miss Joan Epworth to you, sir.”

“Ah ha, ho, ho, high hatty—somewhat ritzy. Well, Miss Joan, we are on the way to the moon. By the time we get there I am of the opinion that you will be pleased to hear me call you Joan. This is our initial trip—the first out—and I could not forego myself the pleasure of seeing your beautiful face during the journey. In fact I am crazy about you. Presently—ah, ha, we shall see what we shall see.”

There was a treacherous threat in the words that caused the girl to grow cold and hot by turns. The words meant more than death to her.

“And how about that agreement with me?”

Toplinsky, startled with surprise, looked up at the panel. Epworth was gazing at him with blazing eyes over the blue barrel of a gun.

“Ah, ha, ho, ho.” The giant was not in the least disconcerted. “Our bantam fighter—our fast foot runner. Now I wonder how you got in there? But that is a matter of indifference. Long before we get to the moon you will be frozen into an Eskimo pie. It suits me well. I think that I shall move this young lady into another apartment, and seal this one. We can get along very well this trip without this room. Of course——.” He paused as if thinking deeply, and an ugly sneer appeared on his mouth. “Yes, I really believe that such an act would prevent any air from getting back into the store room.”

The cool, devilish ingenuity of the man was appalling.

“Y-y-you mean that you will let these men die in there for lack of breathing air?”

Joan’s face was deathly white as she asked this question.

“I didn’t tell them to go in there,” the giant apologized with asperity. “Probably they were trying to hitch-hike a ride with us, thinking that we were going to some other part of the world, and got caught in their own trap. Why should I trouble myself about them? If they die I assure you that decomposition will not commence during the trip to the moon. The frigid air will act like a refrigeration process, and preserve their bodies from offensive smells. We can dump them out when we get to the moon. Their carcasses will make good fertilizer.”

“Toplinsky, I confess that I do not get you.” Epworth spoke calmly. “I do not understand your actions concerning Joan. You gave me your word, and I thought that your word would stick.”

“I do stick to my word,” Toplinsky shrilled in intense anger. “The man who says that Herman Toplinsky is not a man of his word is a liar—a double-dyed liar by the town clock.”

“And yet my sister is here—kidnaped.”

“Just so.” The giant smiled broadly. “Still I have not broken my word. I did not promise you that I would not take her with me to the moon. I did not tell you that I would cut her off my visiting list. On the contrary I have seen to it that she was treated like a great lady. She has been given every comfort, and I intend to see that she is treated with distinguished courtesy on this trip.”

He showed his teeth aggravatingly.

“Sounds fishy but you are going to put that down in writing. You are going to sign a written agreement that she shall not be harmed or insulted, and you are going to agree that we can go along to see that you keep your word. With me is my chum, Billy Sand, and the guard you put over us. These two are also going with you. I will add, in justice to the guard, that we knocked him down and took his gun away from him, making him a prisoner.”

“Really, my dear fellow, I am seriously afflicted with writer’s cramp.” Toplinsky spoke politely. “I cannot put such an agreement in writing. It would be very painful to me to have to write it.”

“We may never leave this store room alive,” Epworth said threateningly, and it was evident that he meant what he said, “but as sure as fate if you do not put that agreement in writing I shall shoot you. One explosion will be all that will be necessary.”

The giant did not seem to be frightened. Quite the contrary. He replied very quietly.

“Quite a marksman, eh?” Toplinsky’s smile was sneeringly cold and mocking. “Do you know what will happen if I am killed? I hope I may not seem pedantic if I modestly explain. I am the only person aboard the Aerolite who can pilot it back to the earth, or to the moon. If you shoot me, all on board will be lost in space. It is hardly necessary to inform you that the moon does not stand still. It is moving now in three ways. First it is rotating once every sixteen hours on its axis; second it is moving around the world once every twenty-eight days; third it is traveling through space in a giant circle with the earth around the sun, making the circle once in three hundred and sixty-five days. Off-hand I would suggest that these three statements alone, especially numbers two and three, present to you, an expert air navigator, something of a problem in the way of making the moon a landing spot.”

He paused and grinned broadly, seeing a look of dismay appear on the American’s face.

“Yes,” he continued pleasantly and in an academic manner, “the moon moves 0633 miles each second—double the velocity of a cannon ball, and add to this the encircling movement of one thousand miles an hour around the sun, we have a decided mathematical calculation in navigation—especially as our little ship is at present only making six hundred miles an hour. Perhaps, a little later on we may get up to eight hundred. But, my dear fellow, do I see you, even at a speed of eight hundred miles an hour, overtaking the moon? I pause for a scientific response.”

Epworth was obviously upset, and his hand trembled on the trigger.

“Toplinsky, it is all I can do to keep from killing you this instant.”

“If you really wish to see your sister live——. Well to be just a little slangy, you will draw in your horns. Kill me and you also kill her and the crew.”

“And you will leave my brother and his companions in there without air to breathe?” Joan demanded heatedly.

“My dear young lady, really, we have no air to spare.” Toplinsky lifted the palms of his hands outward, and shook his head. “We manufacture our air with chemicals, and the supply is limited. In making my preparations to visit the moon I did not anticipate the presence of guests in a compartment

where no air is needed. Our air is confined entirely to the living-parts of the ship. Yours is the last compartment supplied with air. There is no sense in wasting air and running machinery for fun.”

Again he opened his hands expansively, and showed his horse teeth apologetically.

“And—and——”

“So there you are,” he finished.

Epworth lowered his gun.

“Toplinsky, you win. I cannot endanger the lives of all the people aboard this airship.”

The giant grinned good humoredly. He had been very close to death, and he realized that his escape had been narrow.

“Don’t kill them that way,” Joan moaned. “I shall not give you any trouble. I——”

“Joan, that is enough!” Epworth hissed. “You are going to obey me, and you are going to stay right in this room during the entire trip—stay where I can keep my eyes on you.”

“Where you can keep your eyes on her, ha, ha!”

Toplinsky smiled crookedly.

CHAPTER XI

Tables Turned and No Eats

With a cautious movement that did not attract Toplinsky's attention Billy Sand touched Epworth on the shoulder.

"The hatches may be closed but not locked," he suggested in a whisper. "Perhaps we can get out on the top of the old crate, and find a way to get inside of the airchambers."

Epworth dropped down as silently as possible from the air hole. The second he was away from the hole, Toplinsky popped up, and slammed the panel shut.

"Ah, ha, my young cockerel," they heard him exclaim exultantly, "I guess that will fix you. I have not promised that I would save your life when it was in jeopardy. True I have said that I would not kill you. While this was under durance I shall stick up to it. However I am not responsible for the temperature of space. You should have remained where you belong."

They heard him cackling shrilly but without pausing to hear more, accompanied by Michael, who had informed them that his last name was Strauss, they ran hurriedly to the hatch, pushing it open.

"Lady Luck," Epworth exclaimed as he stepped out on the top of the airship. "Not a living object in view, but——"

He was going to speak of the force of the wind but realized with surprise that there was no wind. They were already beyond the earth's stratosphere.

They climbed out of the storeroom, dropped the hatch door into place, and started to walk along the narrow runway over the top of the plane. Epworth, who was in the lead, glanced outward.

Six hundred miles an hour, and no place to fall. In every direction extended a dense black sky, lighted by gleaming balls of red that he knew were stars and the sun—nothing above, nothing below, and on each side endless ether. If they fell off this ship going with incredible swiftness, where would they go? They were now too far away from the earth to fall back on the terrestrial globe, and even if the gravital drag of the earth grasped them they would be frozen stiff before they got there, or shattered into fragments if they landed. It was a cold, clammy, helpless feeling. Once off that ship they would go nowhere; they would find death in endless space, where it is supposed to be 439° below zero.

Aside from this they realized that they had very few minutes to spare. They must get below into the air chambers very quickly or perish with cold, or in the rare atmospheric void.

All three were suddenly afflicted with vertigo, and began to reel along dangerously near the edges of the little platform-run. Realizing that this was certain destruction, they gained control of their faculties by sheer force of will power, and holding their breath dashed up to the first hatchway, and pulled at the ring.

It was locked on the inside, and therefore immovable.

For a second Epworth was appalled. Had Toplinsky beaten him to the idea of escape? If so they were doomed. Already it was too late for them to run back to the storeroom hatch opening. They were too far spent to undertake it.

Had they simply jumped from one death to another in leaving the storeroom? Epworth shivered at the thought—with cold as well as the fear of death. For the first time he thought of his body floating through space, embalmed in ice.

Then gathering his courage he ran on to the next hatch opening. By this time he had discovered that the openings in the top of the airship were four in number and about equal distances apart.

Glory be! The hatch door was locked but a small, slender stairway ran down the side of the ship to a side door. Like a monkey he flashed down this stairway followed by his companions. They dropped onto a small square platform, and Epworth caught the bright knob of the door. If it was locked they were as good as dead men. They were still holding their breath, and life hung by a hair.

He jerked at the door nervously. It slid open, and he darted in instantly. As his companions came down the ladder he caught each frantically and pulled him inside, closing the door.

With one motion the three opened their mouths, and gulped down the living, warm air. They were all but gone, and it required several seconds for them to recover.

They were treading softly down the narrow companionway when a door opened and Toplinsky came out of Joan's room.

"By this time," he was saying, "that young brother of yours is dead, and I am going to change your place of abode."

He extended his hand to pull the girl out of the room.

"I'm not going. I'm going to stay here, and get that panel open so my brother can get air."

She jerked back, and the giant put forth some force to move her.

Epworth bounded forward with fierce anger, and before the giant could turn brought the butt of his gun down on the giant's head.

"Get inside, and lock the door," he urged. "Make it snappy—before some one else drifts along."

"Not by myself," Joan protested quickly, sensing that in some miraculous manner Epworth and his friend had escaped death in the storeroom. "You and Billy must come in also."

"Michael Strauss, the guard who is with us, must also come."

"Just as you say."

"In with you, Billy."

Billy and Michael entered the room while Epworth guarded Toplinsky with his gun. Just as Michael disappeared Toplinsky came around. He had been knocked a little silly but was not totally out—just enough to permit Billy and Michael to get into Joan's room without being discovered.

"Not a move! Not a whimper!" Epworth thundered when he discovered that Toplinsky was coming back to the world. "There is not going to be a loud noise."

"Ah, ha, so you would threaten again," Toplinsky shouted. "Ho, comrades, this way."

The scientist was demonstrating that he was a man without fear.

Epworth did not wait for the guards to appear, and from natural kind heartedness did not strike the giant with the gun. Instead he slipped into

Joan's room, and slammed and locked the door.

"So far so good," he murmured. "Now if they do not shut off the supply of air."

"If he does that," Michael explained, "we can knock a hole in the door, and get air from the outside. The ship is constructed so that the air is always inside of the companionway."

"Fine and dandy," Billy grinned in high good humor. "We are all dressed up and on our way."

"On our way," Joan interposed, "but while we are traveling what will we eat? I am already hungry."

The three Americans looked at each other in dismay.

CHAPTER XII

Toplinsky Grinned Slyly to Himself

Without speaking his thoughts, Michael stepped to the side of the room, and shoved a hidden panel aside, exposing to the view of his companions a small room containing a lavatory and supplies. Thrusting a plug in the white bowl he turned on a faucet and filled the bowl with water.

“I did that,” he explained, “as a precaution in case the general turns the water supply off of this apartment. It would necessitate considerable work and a general overhauling but it is possible to stop the water. With this bowl full we will have enough to drink until we get to the moon—provided, of course, Toplinsky gets there in the time he has allowed for the trip. But as for eats I am afraid that we will have to get outside occasionally. My brother is the cook, and if I could get out to the kitchen we could get a supply of edibles without Toplinsky getting much too wise.”

Epworth tiptoed to the door of the companionway, opened it slyly, and peeped out. A guard was standing in front of the entrance with a gun in his hand. Toplinsky had disappeared.

“We will be watched constantly,” he explained, as he closed the door softly. “There is a man out there with a gun on the door.”

He spoke despondently.

“Not so bad,” Michael said thoughtfully. “Probably he does not know that Michael Strauss is in bad with the general. If I step out there he may think that I have been placed inside as a guard, and I can get a chance to knock him out.”

Epworth gave this idea consideration for some time. Finally he smiled.

“Did Toplinsky know that you were guarding us in the storeroom?”

“If he did it was an accident. He seldom pays attention to such small details. I was sent in by Kosloff.”

“Fine. I see how we can eel out of this. You can go out, and talk to the guard. While you are talking Billy and I will slip out and help you knock him out; then we will drag him in here, put him in the closet, and you can take his place. Toplinsky will not know that there has been a change of guards, and will think that he is the man we knocked out in the beginning.”

“Sounds easy.”

Michael nonchalantly opened the door, and slid out into the companionway. Immediately the guard threw a gun down on him.

“You can’t come out here,” the guard snarled in a surly way. “The general instructed me to let no one pass.”

“I’m not trying to pass,” Michael protested carelessly, “but I’m fed up with guarding that bunch inside. How would you like to exchange places?”

“Not me. I’m staying where the general put me.”

Michael carelessly stepped up to the guard.

“Got a cigarette?”

“Cigarette.” The guard smacked his lips. “I’m crazy for one but you’ve got your crust asking for one. The general says that we are liable to blow up the ship, as it is full of hydrogen gas. In fact, if he should catch you smoking I’d hate to be in your shoes.”

Michael leaned negligently against the wall, and the guard lowered his gun and turned half around. He was startled by a noise at the door. He whirled but was too late. Epworth and Billy landed on his back like a pile of brick, and Epworth’s hand closed over his mouth and throat.

Struggling fiercely the guard dropped his gun. Michael picked it up with a chuckle, and slammed him on the head. The blow partially stunned him and Epworth and Billy dragged him into Joan’s room, and with a bedspread stripped into cords bound him. The second they released his throat he sent up a loud shout for help.

“Take it easy,” Epworth advised, shoving the gun against his side. “If there is any talking to be done Michael will do it.”

Michael did. Toplinsky heard the shouts and came running. When he got to Joan’s room he found Michael on the outside acting as the guard.

“What is the matter here?” the general demanded harshly.

Michael saluted.

“They must be killing our comrade in there,” he responded somewhat indifferently. “He has been howling loud enough to raise the dead.”

“Why do you not look inside?”

“You told me to stay here, and let no one come out,” Michael answered stupidly. “I’m doing it.”

“Pig! All of you are pigs,” Toplinsky blustered. “I meant, of course, for you to exercise some judgment.”

The giant turned the door knob and pushed. The door was fastened tightly on the inside with a bolt but he heard a loud sputtering that Epworth choked off quickly.

“Shut up!” Epworth roared. “I’ll choke the life out of you.”

“What are you doing to my comrade in there?” Toplinsky demanded. “I _____”

“Just choking him a little,” Epworth responded amiably. “Of course you do not mind a little thing like that. It hasn’t been two hours since you left him in the storeroom to die. However, if he obeys me he will not be hurt. I am only making a good fellow out of him.”

“Ah, ha, let it be so.” Toplinsky turned away. “He deserves some punishment for falling into your hands.”

“Shall we leave our comrade in there without anything to eat?” Michael asked innocently.

Toplinsky stopped short.

“We will have to feed them,” he replied thoughtfully. “I could not think of leaving him there without food—or the girl either. As for the two Americans—well we cannot feed our comrade and the girl without feeding them, so when the dinner hour arrives you may instruct the cook to bring them something to eat.”

Michael saluted and turned his face away to grin. Toplinsky strode away angrily. He would fix the two Americans, he promised himself—fix them plenty—when he got to the moon. They were prisoners aboard the Aerolite, and he would find some method of disposing of them if they undertook to leave the ship.

He grinned slyly to himself.

But he would have to dispose of them carefully. It would not do to break his promise. No indeed. He must stand by his promises or his men would go

back on him. He couldn't afford to allow this.

His method of eliminating that upstart Epworth must necessarily be unique. But he mentally promised himself that it would be certain.

CHAPTER XIII

The Landing

A sudden burst of light, stronger than the meridian sun, flashed into Epworth's face, causing him to jump excitedly.

"Holy smoke!" he exclaimed. "Is the ship on fire?"

"The general is throwing open all the windows," Michael Strauss replied from outside of the door. "We are approaching the moon. Come out and peep through a windowpane. It is safe. The crew is busy at the far end."

Epworth slipped out of Joan's cabin into the companionway. From where Michael stood they could see out and downward. Far below him Epworth saw a rounding world, full of deep pits, enormous craters, steep mountains. For several moments he gazed at it in silence and awe, and then his mind flashed back to a previous air ride he had taken. This was almost exactly like flying over Mount Vesuvius.

He was still standing at the window gazing downward when Joan and Billy joined him.

"That prisoner in there," Billy observed. "What are we going to do with him if we make a landing? From what I see we are about ready to drop."

They shot suddenly across a range of high mountains and came to a long level stretch of shimmering white.

"If a landing is made we will have to tie him up and——"

Epworth had not completed his sentence when the Aerolite dropped downward and landed as light as a feather. When he turned to look out again he discovered that they were located on the peak of a high mountain that sheered off almost straight down for ten thousand feet to a long level

stretch of land composed of brownish colored soil. This stretch of land sloped gradually eastward. Remembering that east was west and west was east on the moon, Epworth tried to establish the point of landing from his knowledge of the surface of the moon as outlined by Flammarion. The moon, he knew, was now full, and the entire surface was flashed with sunlight—that is the portion that faced the earth.

But, to his astonishment, they were not landing in the light of the sun.

When the ship came to a stop and he was able to get a better view of their surroundings he discovered that they were surrounded by a dim reflected light that came from the east. On the west the darkness was steadily deepening. While he was still watching the darkness in wonder, the colonists began to pour out of the ship onto the moon.

They looked strange—not at all like men—and Epworth gasped slightly as he recognized the fact that they were encased in air helmets, and wore heavy iron shoes to maintain a balance on the light gravity of the small globe.

The moment they landed the men began to unload sheets of metal silvered into giant reflectors.

“W-w-what are they going to do?” Joan gasped in astonishment. “Why all those sheets of silvered metal?”

“That Toplinsky is a deep man,” Michael responded in awe. “He has never been on the moon before, but he has a great scheme to make it inhabitable by men. That silvered metal, when completed, and erected, will be his first moon mirror. If you notice it is to be erected on a particular point of this mountain—just beyond the part visible from the earth. For fourteen days the sun will be reflected directly toward the earth, and then the rays will move further westward, finally presenting only a dark sphere to the earth. This results, Toplinsky says, in the establishment of a line on the moon which is always lighted by the appearance of the sun in the distance. This line travels into the sunlight and retains the light of the sun while the face of the moon fronting the earth is dark. Thus, at a point only several miles removed, when the sun disappears from the Sea of Vapours, we will say, it touches the mountain system on the west and remains there until the moon’s movements shift it back again. Toplinsky’s scheme is simple. He intends to locate mirrors on that line, catch the light of the sun as it disappears from the part facing the earth, and reflect its heat down into the valley. With the heat naturally will come the reflected light. In this manner

he will build solar heaters to overcome the cold and darkness of the long night. Naturally he will locate his colony close to the mountain where it will be near the solar heaters.”

Hardly had Michael finished his explanation when some of the colonists re-entered the airship, and started the machinery. Again they lifted in the air. But they were not up long. For ten minutes they sailed over a dark line where the rocks showed beneath them rugged and mountainous, and then they flitted like a long silent streak across the line of darkness into a brilliant sunlight. Here Toplinsky dropped the airship quickly to the ground, and presently they landed in a small, narrow valley on the bank of a lake half a mile in diameter.

“That is some more of Toplinsky’s work,” Michael explained. “He made that lake by shooting rockets filled with water from the Arctic Ocean. The rockets also contained liquid air and enough hydrogen and oxygen to protect the water from evaporation.”

Epworth sauntered down the companionway, and peeped out of the door. The colonists were again leaving the ship, protected by their air helmets.

“Does he expect to find hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, and other elements here?” Joan asked.

“He left orders for the men behind to continue to shoot the rockets filled with chemicals at a certain spot, gradually drawing eastward so as to enlarge the lake.”

“It is light enough here,” Epworth observed, “but I perceive that Toplinsky has landed in a spot where the country is shaded for ten miles by the high mountain on which he left his mirrors. That mountain must be six miles high.”

“Another part of his colonizing scheme,” Michael explained. “He thinks that if men can be protected from the rays of the sun the heat will not be unbearable during the long day.”

“I see.” Epworth was considerably astonished at the giant’s scientific ideas. “The shadow of the mountain will certainly moderate the heat, but I am yet to be convinced that he can generate enough heat with his mirrors and solar heaters to warm up the valley during the long night.”

“Leave it to him. See that long strip of light?”

Michael pointed to a narrow slit of sunlight that suddenly shot down from the top of the mountain. It came straight down like a ladder, piercing

the darkness of its source and dropping down in brilliant coruscations on the rugged rocks on the west end of the little lake, and sweeping swiftly over the level stretch of land between the mountain and the lake. It brought brilliant light and heat.

“I’m for getting out of here,” Billy put in.

“Fine,” Epworth replied scathingly, “but how are you going to live out there? The colonists are wearing air helmets, and that indicates to us that if we undertake to leave the Aerolite we must find some way to store oxygen over our own heads.”

“There are air helmets in the storeroom,” Michael suggested, “and an oxygen tank in the cook room. Perhaps——”

But without waiting for a command from Epworth, he sped down the companionway into the kitchen. When he came back he was carrying three air helmets.

“Here you are,” he said energetically. “I found them hanging near the kitchen oxygen tank, and of course filled them so that you can use them.”

“But, how will we refill them after we exhaust the supply now imprisoned in them?” Epworth protested. “I——”

“I brought along a recharger, and——”

“Even so, one recharge will not last us long.”

“Perhaps we may not need them after all,” Joan suggested. “The colonists are taking them off their heads.”

Epworth opened the window cautiously and stuck his head out.

“There is atmosphere here,” he observed slowly, “but it is exceedingly thin.”

“It is not half as thin as these air helmets promise to become,” Billy snorted, “and I think I can explain it. The astronomers on the earth cannot see deep into these craters. They see only the tops of the mountains, and the atmosphere has done the same as it does on the earth—sought the lower levels, being pressed down from above and gathering density in the holes and caves.”

“That being the case right here we separate from Toplinsky,” Epworth decided quickly. “If we wait he will put a watch over the ship, and cut off our escape.”

“You say that Toplinsky has been shooting liquid air, oxygen, nitrogen and hydrogen up here?”

Joan put the question to Michael as if she had just heard this, and Epworth looked at her in surprise.

“Of course,” Epworth answered, taking the words out of Michael’s mouth. “That has been gone over half a dozen times.”

“True, but a new idea has just struck me. Perhaps the liquid air and all the other ingredients that make air, which Toplinsky shot up here, made good breathing air when the explosions occurred and that enough have been unloaded from the earth to create a small air circle at this point.”

“Such atmosphere would be held down at this point by the pressure from above,” Epworth agreed, “and remain in natural form.”

“If my theory proves true,” Joan continued, “we can breathe only when we are near the lake.”

“Be that as it may, we will go out and see how we get along but be sure to hold on to your air helmets.”

Locking the prisoner inside of the small cabin the three Americans moved softly down the companionway toward the kitchen. On the way they caught a glimpse of Toplinsky and his men standing in a circle, with their air helmets in their hands, while several of the company were turning up the soil with shovels for Toplinsky to examine. The scientist was doing this carefully, and Epworth could not restrain a thought of admiration. The man was certainly a thorough scientist, and in his scheme to make the moon inhabitable he would be sure to plant vegetation that would grow prolifically.

Michael had informed them that there was a companionway beyond the kitchen which would lead them to the opposite side of the ship, and they had been thoughtful enough to get instructions that would enable them to locate it. When they arrived at the kitchen they found it deserted, the entire outfit having rushed to see the landing, and with very little trouble they gained the companionway. But when they came to the door that opened out on the small balcony on the opposite side they found it locked.

For several moments the two men were puzzled. Epworth fumbled at the lock without result, and then Billy took his place. Billy, being a mechanic of great ability, used the blade of his knife and after working for some time forced the bolt back, and pulled the door inward. With beating hearts they ran down the ladder and stepped upon terra firma.

Here they paused for a brief consultation. They were hidden from Toplinsky's men by the airship but it was evident that if they escaped they would have to run for it in the open. The nearest protection consisted of a range of small mountains on the south. There were other mountains on the north but these were too far away, although they were taller and more promising as a hiding place. Both ranges appeared rocky and rugged, treeless and desolate. In front of the Aerolite, stretching as far as the eye could reach was a pitted desert of white ashy sand dunes; behind the machine was the newly made lake which rippled softly on a nearby beach; beyond this the mountain with the solar heat.

"We will have to try the southern mountains," Epworth said briefly, "and run like scared rabbits. It is lucky, Joan, that you are wearing short skirts."

"Let us scatter," Billy proposed, "and meet at that large rock which is projecting over that lower mountain."

"Not me," Joan objected quickly. "I'm staying close to Julian. I might need his strong right arm."

"Then all together."

They kept the Aerolite between them and their enemies as long as possible, and then broke into a run.

Their attempt to run was at first ludicrous. Being used to the gravity drag of the earth they put forward all their efforts in taking long quick steps. Instead of steps these muscular movements proved to be jumps, and they moved like Jack in the Magic Boots, covering about thirty yards in a single step, and jerking their legs up ludicrously when they took the next step. In fact, after getting off the ground it took an effort to put their feet back.

Joan immediately tumbled over, laughing somewhat fearfully.

"This will not do," she exclaimed anxiously, as she fell the second time. "I can't run. Let us walk."

Epworth, the second step he took, discovered the situation, and was moving in accordance with what he thought a moon action should be. It was not perfect but it kept him from falling and was a rapid mode of advance. He now stopped and gave them instructions in the way he thought they should move. While he was doing this Toplinsky came around the side of the Aerolite and discovered them. At the time they were probably about twelve hundred feet distant.

“Ah, ha, they run,” he shrilled in that sharp voice they had learned to dread. “Our guests are wearying of their entertainment. They would leave us without bidding us farewell. Atta, boys, up and after them!”

He started on a big run for the Americans. Epworth expected to see him fly up and turn over but the giant was too scientific-wise. He came on with a hop-skip-and-jump that seemed to make him fairly skim over the ground.

“A regular flying squirrel,” Billy grunted, “and dangerous as a snake.”

Toplinsky landed in front of Epworth with a broad grin.

“Ah, ha, ho, ho, my bantam American pugilist, we meet again, and on different footing. This time we shall fight in the same way, but with different results. Then I shall be freed of my promise.”

He stared savagely for several seconds into the American’s face, and then leaning forward, with his little eyes twinkling, he aimed an ugly blow at Epworth’s head. The American attempted to dodge it but the difference in the gravity pull made him clumsy and he half-floated to one side, the blow striking him on the chest, spinning him around and rolling him forty feet.

“Run, Joan,” he shouted. “Make for the mountains. I can’t fight here. Billy will take care of you while I hold this great brute.”

He scrambled to his feet as Toplinsky tore down on him.

“Shall I shoot him?” Billy asked softly.

“And stay on the moon all the rest of your life?” Toplinsky shrilled. “Shoot, will you? Shoot! I’m the only man who can take this expedition back to the earth.”

He stopped, tore open his shirt and exposed his hairy chest.

“Run,” Epworth urged. “Keep your cartridges as long as possible. I will attend to this gentleman.”

Without waiting to see what Billy did, Epworth squatted, sprang forward, and threw his arms around Toplinsky’s legs, jerking at them with all his strength. The result was exceedingly funny.

Toplinsky threw out both hands, waved them wildly, and attempted to fasten himself down with his powerful leg muscles. But this time light gravity aided the American, and he was able to shove the giant’s feet from under him. For a second Toplinsky was a bundle of flying arms and legs threshing the air and he fell in half a dozen directions. Joan, looking back, laughed outright.

To be laughed at was the crudest punishment that could be inflicted on the egotistical scientist. He let out a bellow like a bull, and made a desperate, thoughtless effort to stand up. The effort proved a contortion of muscles in the wrong way, and he sprawled in every direction again.

There was now no mercy in Epworth's battles with this man, and he was not overlooking an opportunity. The first assault by the giant had taught him caution, and now he moved slowly, thoughtfully. He was not a man to draw a weapon carelessly on a man but he was fighting for the lives of three people. He could not afford to be squeamish. This was not like fighting on the earth. He was physically outclassed.

Drawing his gun he brought the butt down on Toplinsky's head with all the force he had in his arm.

The giant was like an ox but the blow knocked him out.

By this time Toplinsky's men were stumbling over each other to get to the fight, and pausing only for a second to get the direction in which Joan and Billy had gone, Epworth adopted Toplinsky's method of travel, and departed with a hop-skip-and-jump. The progress he made was startling, and very soon he was some distance away from the pirate band, and had caught up with his companions.

"Do this," he instructed. "Make it snappy. The giant will be after us shortly."

But again Toplinsky proved wise. When he discovered that his companions could not master the art of advance, he did not give chase. He knew now that Epworth had a gun, and he was not anxious to push a contest where the gun would have to be used. Thus the three fugitives reached the mountains, and found refuge in a cave, the entrance of which they blocked with a large boulder.

"We're sitting pretty now," Billy remarked as he rolled a cigarette, "but I am wondering what we are going to eat and drink?"

The three Americans looked gravely out at the dreary waste land. Not a sprig of green grass, not a tree, not a sign of a spring—only barren white sand dunes, climbing cliffs with crater-like holes in them, and the food and water supply in the hands of men who would kill.

CHAPTER XIV

A Moon Army

The fact that they were physically comfortable gave the Americans much satisfaction. They were not too warm, and not cold. Toplinsky had been exceedingly wise in selecting a deep shaded valley for his colonizing idea, and after being two days of twenty-four hours' duration each, in a cave hidden from the giant, Epworth concluded that Toplinsky's scheme of heating the valley by solar heat during the long night and withdrawing the heat during the day might prove successful, and that the air created by firing the projectiles from the earth might in the course of time, provided the bombardment continued indefinitely, spread all over the face of the moon.

He did not attempt to get food and water during this time, feeling sure that Toplinsky would keep a careful watch, but after forty-eight hours the necessity for water prompted action. He started out with Billy to go to the Aerolite and attempt to steal into the storeroom. They waited until the Aerolite seemed in a state of rest, and its crew, Epworth reasoned, slept.

They had to be careful of footsteps because of the Lunar attraction.

Like shadows they flitted across the open space, and approached the airship, gaining the sides of the vessel, they thought, without being observed. Here they paused and Epworth placed his hand on the steel ladder-steps, and glanced around. He was startled at the clearness of the light. Men on guard would have had little trouble seeing them come across the open space. He shuddered. It would be easy for Toplinsky to prepare an ambush for him; and as easy for him to keep an eye on the cave.

From where he stood he could readily make out the mouth of their hiding place.

“Thank goodness,” he murmured, “he doesn’t know where we are hiding.”

He looked up at the deck of the plane. It was entirely too still—suspiciously quiet. If he was preparing to receive an enemy in secret he would maintain just such a stillness. He would lead his victim on.

Nevertheless, it was board the Aerolite or starve.

With a cat-like step he climbed the ladder, gun in hand, his knife in his mouth. At the balcony there was a dark shadow. Instantly he covered it with his gun.

“Not a whimper!” he commanded in a low voice.

“Sh—h.” It was Michael Strauss, and he put up his gun. “Toplinsky is expecting you just inside of the door,” Michael continued. “I let myself down from the balcony on top of the airship when I saw you coming. He has purposely left the door open in the hope that you will push it, and walk in.”

“We must have food,” Epworth stated tersely. “Also water.”

“Slip back down the ladder, and go around to the rear of the ship. I also have been waiting for you, and have dropped several days’ supplies on the ground. Take this, and come back the day after tomorrow, when the coast is clear. By that time Toplinsky will think that you have discovered other means of getting food. Then you can keep coming back until you are well supplied. Fortunately Toplinsky has not yet discovered that I aided you when you were on board.”

“Michael, you’re a fine sport,” Epworth whispered. “Some day I will find a means of returning this great favor. By your efforts you save the lives of three people.”

“It is enough for me to know that,” Michael replied quietly.

Epworth squeezed his hand, and dropped down the ladder.

They found the supplies where Michael had designated, and returned with them to their cave. Two days later they made another trip, and again Michael aided them. They kept this up for over a week, and during this time Toplinsky and his men were busily engaged in building a large house, which they supposed he would turn into a warehouse as well as a barracks for his men. Another force erected the solar heater on the rim of the northern range of mountains.

At the end of six days, they had enough food and water on hand to last three months, and as a final inspiration Epworth got Michael to send down material to use in the construction of gliders. With this material they worked for another day, building three small gliders propelled with foot-power and elevated by running down hill.

The gliders were, of course, a venture, constructed along original lines, but when Epworth tried them out the night they were finished, he found that he could easily float them in the air against the slight gravity of the moon.

Quite pleased with their idea, and determined to fly over Toplinsky's camp the next day, they retired in high spirits to sleep like rocks until quite late. They were awakened by loud shouts and the noise of exploding guns. When they rushed to the mouth of their cave a strange spectacle met their gaze.

Swarming across the space north between the Aerolite and the northern range of mountains an army of mammoth cricket-shaped things were approaching. They came in military formation, hopping with steady, persistent leaps, measured to an exactness that enabled each company to land and leave the ground at the same time and in perfect unison. Each cricket was as large as a man, and possessed six legs and two long sharp antennas extending straight out from the eyes. They traveled on the four rear legs, and held long, sharp, steel-pointed lances in their front antennas and two front legs. Their backs were hard and black, and Epworth wondered as he noted the strength of the coating if they were bullet proof.

That they were possessed of a rare degree of intelligence was evidenced by their military approach, and their splendid formation. That they could use these weapons the Americans did not doubt, and congratulated themselves that they were not the objects of attack.

When he turned his eyes toward the Aerolite, Epworth saw that Toplinsky was already fighting. Many of his men were backed against the half-built wall of the house, and were sharp-shooting with their rifles.

"If Toplinsky had only a few projectiles of liquid air," Billy observed regretfully, "he might teach these Things something about war."

"As it is he and his men are going to have the fight of their lives," Epworth replied soberly.

"Look at their leaders!" Joan exclaimed in amazement. "They have some kind of marvelous growth on their backs."

Epworth, who never went without a pair of binoculars, put the glasses to his eyes, and studied the things she pointed out. The things he saw on top of the crickets were more wonderful than the huge insects.

They were men-shaped humps riding on the back of the crickets. At least their small bodies, legs and arms were shaped like men but their heads were enormous knotty projections with eye openings an inch and a half in diameter.

“Do I see properly?” the young man inquired, handing the glasses to Joan. “Do I see some kind of a man with a metallic-like head?”

Joan examined the riders thoughtfully. They were now approaching with incredible rapidity and she got a better view of them.

CHAPTER XV

Battling with Crickets

“They are little men with some kind of a device over their heads,” she asserted with assurance. “And they are acting as the general and commanding officers of the cricket army.”

“You’ve hit it,” Epworth declared excitedly. “They are wearing a headgear to protect them from this outside atmosphere that has been suddenly sent down upon them. At least——”

“Perhaps they do not know that there is an atmosphere,” Billy argued, “Maybe they live some place where there is air, and think that they must be prepared to travel through a world where there is no air.”

“G’wan,” Joan snorted slangily. “Do you mean to suggest that they came here from some other world?”

“Probably they came up out of some of the holes in the moon. I have heard it suggested that the moon is hollow, and that there is a possibility of air inside.”

Before Joan could reply to this the battle began. Toplinsky, like a good general, waited until the moon insects were quite close, and then poured seven volleys from repeating rifles into their ranks. The crickets went down by hundreds. The questions as to whether or not their backs were bullet proof was answered.

Just for a second the lines wavered; then there rent the air a loud musical chirp. It went up and down the various lines of cricket soldiers in waves. It was not unpleasant to hear. In fact, it was accompanied by notes. But it was

none the less deadly and demoralizing to the colonists, and sent a chill down the backs of the three Americans, safe in their cave retreat.

Toplinsky shouted in his shrillest voice; from far in the rear of the cricket army came an answering call. To the unbounded wonder of both the Americans and the colonists this answer came back in English.

“Surrender, earth men,” it called out in broken but understandable English, “or we will wipe you out, and not leave a single person living.”

Toplinsky’s answer was a shower of lead in the direction of the voice. Again hundreds of crickets fell; again the ranks closed in strong formation and came forward as if there had been no deaths.

“These Things do not fear death,” Joan whispered in awe. “They do not know what it is. They are just big insects.”

They were coming slowly now but surely, treading softly forward as if sneaking up on an enemy. To the observers in the cave it looked as if they were so many cats preparing to jump on a mouse. The colonists fired desperately. Michael, who seemed to be leading one end of the pirate gang, got a small machine gun out of the storehouse, and began to mow them down like a health officer doping flies. Still they came on—seemingly irresistible, holding their sharp prongs outward, and leaping with invisible movements with their small thin legs.

Now they were fighting the colonists hand to hand. It was apparent however that one colonist was more than a match for ten crickets, and they were thrown back on their second rank, only to be pushed forward again.

Nevertheless it was patent that in time the little band of colonists would be wiped out. Epworth was of the opinion that the crickets would eat them. This however was merely a hunch.

“I do not like those colonists,” he remarked, “but the idea of human beings being cornered by enormous strange insects and turned into a lunch does not appeal to me. These Things look as if they may be of the Orthoptera family but one cannot tell. I’m for butting in.”

“Me too,” Billy agreed, “but how?”

“Follow me and we will see.”

Epworth ran to his newly constructed glider, fastened the plane around his shoulders, and started down the mountainside for a take-off.

“Where are you going?” Joan inquired anxiously.

“We must get to the Aerolite storeroom, and see if we can unlimber some of the heavy gas guns and nitroglycerine weapons. No time to lose.”

All three ran down the mountainside, got into the air, and with the bicycle motors they had attached to the planes directed their course to the Aerolite. Finally they landed on top of the machine as gently as birds. Entering the storeroom, the two men hastily put together one of the large nitroglycerine guns, a big cannon, and a powder gatlin gun Toplinsky had brought along as a measure of defense. These weapons they rolled to the side of the machine from whence came the attack, and both began a bombardment of the cricket army.

The result was startling.

At the first tremendous roar of the cannon, the crickets came to a dead stop. Not since untold ages had such a noise been heard on the face of the moon. Here was all stillness—a terrifying quietude, not even the chirp of a bird or the whirr of a snake. The sudden explosion, as if the entire face of the moon was bursting, and with it was blowing into pieces a large number of crickets, frightened not only the crickets but the little men who were riding on their backs, and with one movement they turned and fled.

But as they departed they carried with them a number of colonists as prisoners. Epworth shuddered as he saw the colonists captured. Their fate was plainly apparent. They would not even get the treatment of a fat missionary. There would be no preliminaries. They would be dragged into a hole in the moon and eaten.

The two Americans fired another shot at the disappearing insects, saw them go forward with great bounds like grasshoppers, and finally disappear over the top of the highest northern mountains. It was incredible the swiftness with which they left the scene of battle.

Supposing that Toplinsky would still be antagonistic the Americans left the top of the Aerolite with leaps that lifted them into the air, and soon were again hidden in their cave.

“Sup—pose the crickets come back,” Joan said fearfully as she removed the shoulder straps of her glider. “They seemed highly intelligent, and were led by minds that did not think of defeat. If they return they will have a large increase in number, and——”

Billy drew his finger across his throat, and pointed at the colony camp.

CHAPTER XVI

Billy Disappears

They were not in the cave over an hour when Michael appeared. He was quite nervous, and greatly troubled.

“We want you, Mr. Epworth,” he greeted, “to come and take command of the camp. Toplinsky has been carried off by the huge moon monsters of insect creation, and we are not able to contend with what may come up.”

“But suppose Toplinsky escapes and returns,” Joan objected. “Our heads will not be worth much.”

“We have threshed that out, and the camp will, as one man, force him to treat you kindly, and as an equal. In fact, they say that the Americans won the day for them against these Lunar enemies, and that hereafter they cannot afford to trust everything to the general. He will have to divide authority with you, and agree to your terms.”

“Very well. We will come. Billy, remain here and put things in shape to keep. We will not go off and leave ourselves without supplies in case we have to come back. Later we will return and all of us will go back to the Aerolite. I also think that we must band together to protect ourselves from all kinds of Lunar enemies.”

Accompanied by Joan, Epworth entered his glider and flew over to the Aerolite. They were greeted as conquering heroes, and Epworth was immediately put in charge of the camp. First, he established a strong military organization with Michael as the commanding officer, and arranged to materialize all the stores of the Aerolite into defense weapons. When this work was completed he created a council of five, and had the colonists elect the members. This council was to be the governing power, and he bound the

pirates by firm obligations to force Toplinsky to obey the orders of this council.

With this accomplished he and Joan returned, well satisfied, to their cave, leaving the entire membership of the colony housed in the Aerolite so that if any danger arose they could fly out of it.

“Hey, there, Billy!” Epworth shouted as he landed lightly in front of the cave. “Snap out of it. We’re going to go to the Aerolite. From this on, I think it will be perfectly safe for us.”

There was no answer, and with a frown on his face the young man divested himself of his glider, and entered the cave.

Billy was not there, and his glider and all their supplies were missing.

“W-w-what do you suppose happened to him?” Joan inquired nervously, looking over Epworth’s shoulder. “We were not gone over two hours, and yet all of our supplies are gone—things that it took us ten days to cart from the Aerolite. Looks as if ghosts had been here.”

“Billy could not have moved them in this time,” Epworth reasoned. “Something has happened to him.”

With the carefulness of a detective he began to search the cave for evidence that would lead to the direction in which Billy had gone. Every article they had left in the way of supplies was gone. Even the water jars were missing, and the only evidence of the presence of enemies consisted of numerous small lines in the sand of the floor. These lines looked like finger marks. Billy’s foot prints, close to the point where they had last seen his glider, were plainly evidenced, but Epworth could not ascertain the direction he had gone when he left. In fact, reasoning by his foot tracks, he went up into the air, and he could not have gone far in this direction because the top of the cave would have stopped him.

Running back in the cave the young American looked for evidence that would indicate that the small finger tracks had gone that way. The back of the cave, which they had not previously investigated, ran up against a big pile of boulders and seemingly came to an end.

“These tracks,” he finally said to Joan in a hushed voice, “were probably made by those cricket-like animals that attacked the Aerolite. If so——”

“They have twelve hands and no feet. With their front hands they hold their weapons, and are also able to use their four leg hands as feet and

hands.” She shivered. “It’s ghostly; it gives me the all-overs. They came in here, captured Billy and disappeared in the air.”

“I reason the same way,” Epworth agreed. “But what are we going to do? We must do something to help Billy.”

“Find out where they went and follow them.”

“Rather large order.” Epworth grinned dryly. “There may be two million of them.”

“They didn’t go back into the cave,” Joan insisted heatedly; “consequently they must have come up around the mountains and slipped up on Billy.”

“Then they discovered him while we were at the Aerolite, and have taken him to the northern range of hills—where they carried Toplinsky.”

“Sounds likely.”

“Then it is me for the north. You go to the Aerolite, and wait until I come back. I will make a thorough search in my glider.”

“Not me. Where you go I go also. I am not taking any chances of being separated from you in this strange world. To be candid I don’t like these cricket Things; and I don’t like the pigmy men who ride on them and direct them in battle.”

“Have it your way. We will communicate with Michael, and tell him to keep a constant watch, and that at the first approach of the enemies get into the air with the Aerolite. I am quite sure that in the airship they will be safe.”

But when they spoke to Michael and informed him that they contemplated going in search of Billy and Toplinsky, the young guard demurred.

“Suppose you discover them prisoners in the hands of a large army?” he suggested. “What will you do?”

“Scheme to free them. I certainly will not leave human beings at the mercy of myriads of cricket-shaped Things that may eat them.”

Equipped with food to last for a week, armed with tear guns and automatics, and carrying with them two large air helmets which they thought they might need in case they were forced to seek high altitude, they entered their gliders, and sailed toward the range of mountains in the north. There were many tall peaks ahead of them—mountains that stuck their

noses high into the dark sky, and which Epworth knew were pitted with enormous craters.

When they got to the point where the cricket army had disappeared, they circled around for half an hour studying the country with their glasses. In front of them, near the range of mountains which they encircled, they saw another large valley, almost circular. Beyond this valley came a rugged foothill country and further on there was an immense peak, eighteen thousand feet high.

Epworth jockeyed his glider close to his sister.

“According to the maps of the earth astronomers,” he explained, “that mountain is the Crater Agrippa. I’ve got a hunch that our crickets dwell inside of that crater. It is deep down, over five miles, to the bottom, and if my reasoning is sound the air in the bottom of the crater is heavier than on the surface of the moon. It would, it seems, make an ideal place for Things like these crickets to live. They are thin of body, elongated in form, spread out broadly, light in weight but strongly muscled, and the gravity of the moon would about fit their physical shapes.”

“Granting all your science, what are you going to do?”

“Go to the bottom of that crater. If we find nothing there we will search among these innumerable small pits that we see everywhere.”

Joan shuddered.

“Go into the darkness of all these holes?”

She was terrified at the thought.

“Certainly—if we fail to find our friend above the hollows that we know are inside of the moon.”

“Hollows inside of the moon?” She dropped her eyes. She was startled, made afraid. The idea of crawling around on her hands and knees hunting for lunar crickets in dark holes was terrifying. “And—and—we must crawl in——?”

“I am more cheerful. These crickets were led by pigmy men. It is not likely that the pigmies live in holes, although, I am free to confess that I would naturally expect the crickets to be crawling around in dark places.”

With a slight shrug of her shoulders, Joan turned her glider toward the peak that Epworth had declared was the Crater Agrippa. In two minutes Epworth was in the lead. They were both determined, but their hearts were beating furiously.

What dangers would they meet deep in the bowels of the moon? What kind of life could they expect to find? Was Billy alive or dead? Had they taken him to join Toplinsky or would they have to make separate hunts for the two men?

To gain the summit of the high peak they had to go up in running jumps. They would run several steps, then jump into the air, and pedal to gain height. In this way they finally got to a point where they could look down into a deep crater.

CHAPTER XVII

“Something’s Got Me”

Down, down—on into a pit of bottomless depth, circling slowly, cautiously, and nosing steadily. Now they could look upward, and see the stars shining out of a black sky, as if they were in a deep well; and still they descended past steep cliffs of white rock, walls as smooth as a rifle bore; then into a region of jagged walls, and stone of volcanic ore; past innumerable dark holes that pierced gloomily into dreadful, mysterious places under the ground; whirling all the time within the grasp of a crater ten miles in diameter.

Suddenly it grew dark. The sun, in throwing its light into the crater had been cut off by the slight rotations of the moon. It was a gloom that caused Joan to close her eyes, and hold her breath.

Would they never reach the bottom?

Miles dropped away, and still the air held them up, and they sailed in circles. That his companion might follow, Epworth turned on his flash light, and attached it to the wing of his glider.

It was a flight like Mercury speeding as a messenger through inscrutable space. Two little planes, with operators wearing air helmets that dimmed vision, were slipping softly, silently, into the bowels of the moon, hunting a strange land in an unknown world.

It necessitated matchless courage, and steady nerves. These two went on seeking to save.

They went on until complete darkness engulfed them—a darkness that grew steadily murky, oppressive, frightful. Still they continued. Where

Epworth led, Joan was determined to follow. Would they ever be able to climb out? Would their small, inefficient gliders, the invention of a moment, notwithstanding their propelling power, be able to ascend that dizzy height? True that when they entered, the air was so rare that they had to wear air helmets, and that now they put them aside to find heavier and better breathing; but the space was limited, there was no wind to get beneath the plane and elevate it; the whole mysterious dark world was as still as death, and as creepy as the grave.

Joan was on the verge of screaming aloud. Epworth was beginning to get nervous.

He looked down, and thought he saw a light. Before he could settle his mind on this point he bumped against the ground. It was a light shock, and he felt no injury but it served to stop the flight of his glider. The next moment Joan bumped into him and also came to a stop. The contact came before he had an opportunity to call out to her to be on guard.

“Julian! Julian!” she cried. “Where are you?”

“Do not be alarmed,” he reassured. “I am here.”

Disengaging the plane from her shoulders, and leaving the straps that held it tight on the wing, she advanced toward him. When she came to him he was stepping out of the glider.

“What now?” she inquired dryly. “We are in the bottom of Mount Agrippa, and, if you will excuse the slang, it certainly has a grip I do not like.”

“I believe I see a dim light off there,” he pointed out with his index finger. “Do you see it?”

“Perhaps it is an underground volcano,” she suggested. “I feel warm.”

“Merely underground heat. Were it a volcano it would be brighter. However we will not know unless we investigate.”

Shifting his tear gun, which he had attached to his belt, to a convenient place, and holding his flash light in his hand, the young man led the way cautiously. They were on a level, ashy floor, in which their feet buried at each step; but without pausing to investigate the character of the soil they strode forward steadily. It was a longer walk than he thought it would be, and presently they became aware that there was a roof over their heads—a roof of earth. When Joan made this discovery she was for turning back.

“No,” Epworth decided. “The light ahead is getting stronger. Presently we will be somewhere.”

This conclusion was not justified by what they saw but the light began to get brighter, and after a time they could see each other.

“It is spooky,” Joan breathed out, lagging behind a little. “Absolutely unhuman. There is no sun, there is no heat, but we can see. What causes it?”

“It is a phosphorescent glow emanating from the walls of the crater,” Julian replied thoughtfully. “That is the only ex——”

“Help! Help, Julian!” Joan screamed. “Something’s got me. Something _____”

Her utterances were cut off by two long, thin, bone-like tentacles twisting around her neck. At the same second Epworth was attacked.

The young man however was as swift as an eagle, and had been ever on the alert. He recognized the fact instantly that the crickets were upon them, and that he could not fight them with his flash light. Dropping the light, which was attached to his clothing by a cord, he drew his tear gun and swept a stream of tear gas into the face of the Things around him. The gas stopped them instantly, and with an agile bound he darted to Joan’s side. She was in the hands of six crickets, their bodies dimly visible in the phosphorous light. They were standing on their hind legs, and were making a saddle of their middle extremities while pushing Joan into the saddle with their front hands.

Epworth’s tear gun proved highly efficient. It gassed the two who made the saddle. This caused the other four to drop the girl. Instantly the young man shot the tear gas above Joan’s head into their faces, caught the girl and dragged her to him. A stream of the insects came at him, chirping savagely. Darting to the side of the cave he carried his companion with him.

The effort seemed useless, for now his retreat was cut off by an army of the hopping monsters. The only thing left him was to back against the wall, and use his tear gun. This he did.

The crickets, with their singing chirps, became suddenly appalling with their din. Epworth shuddered, side stepped, and undertook to push Joan behind him in order to protect her. The move was fatal. Stumbling over a boulder, he fell backward head over heels into a hole in the wall.

In a desperate effort to save Joan he twisted her in his arms, and placed her above his body with a view of making a cushion of his body when they

struck terra firma. How far it was to the bottom of this hole he had no way of ascertaining. It might be two thousand feet deep. These moon holes were tremendous affairs. All he knew was that he was falling and that the crickets were sending out musical notes of triumph.

However, since coming to the moon he had discovered that he could jump a long ways and land without being hurt; that he could even leap off a high cliff without danger to life or limb, and now he found that they were not falling fast, and this gave him encouragement.

They struck bottom abruptly. Epworth was jarred and bruised some, but not seriously hurt although he lay as if stunned for several seconds. Joan was unhurt, and during the descent had regained her full faculties, which were leaving her under the choking power of the cricket tentacles. The second they were still she twisted out of Epworth's arms, caught his flash light, which had been knocked out of circuit by the fall, and began to work with it hysterically. In a brief period she had it in action and was throwing a narrow stream of light around.

They had landed on a large ledge suspended over a bottomless chasm, and behind them there was a big tunnel. As they were dangerously close to the edge of the precipice she staggered to her feet and pulled Epworth away from the danger point.

"My," she whispered, "I thought we were goners."

Without waiting for Epworth to speak she stepped to the tunnel and shot her light ray into its gloomy depth. For several seconds the light pierced the gloom for fifteen feet, flickered, and died out. The battery had been exhausted, and now they were in murky, terrifying gloom with a deep chasm on three sides. In dying despair the girl covered her face with her hands.

Epworth, breathing heavily, sat up.

"Let me have the flash light," he suggested.

"It has gone out for good," she replied in a hopeless voice, at the same time handing him the tube. "I can't get a ray out of it."

Epworth fumbled with it for a moment in the dark.

"The batteries are dead," he explained. "How foolish not to have looked into this before we started."

"Great heavens!" Joan moaned. "Lost in the center of the moon, and no light to direct our steps."

“Never say die,” the young man encouraged. “Take my hand. It is my left. I am holding my automatic in my right.”

They groped forward. Action was at the moment necessary to keep Joan from losing her mind. On and on they stumbled. Each step they expected to plunge heels-over-head into another deep chasm but persistently they followed the twisting meanderings of the passage.

Suddenly Joan stopped and sniffed the air, trembling violently.

“There—there—is something alive in this place,” she muttered feebly. “I—I—smell something awful—horrid, and—and—I—feel—a—sinister—presence.”

Epworth sniffed with his nostrils. The scent was now overpowering, musty, terrifyingly rotten.

“You must be mistaken about there being living beings in here,” he protested. “That smell would indicate that we have stumbled on the crickets’ graveyard.”

“Or, or, or,” Joan caught his hand convulsively to keep from screaming, “their commissary department. Maybe—maybe—living beings are confined here until they rot, and are then eaten as food.”

Epworth could not suppress the shudder that swept over him from head to foot.

CHAPTER XVIII

In the Chamber of Horrors

“It—it—is a chamber of horrors,” Joan gasped. “I know there is a ghost in this place or some living thing. I can feel it; I can hear a slight movement.”

Epworth strained his eyes in every direction. All was murky darkness, Cimmerian gloom. If there was anything living near, the darkness wrapped it in an envelop impossible to penetrate.

“You are certainly mistaken,” he soothed. “There is no living thing here. It couldn’t——”

He paused. There came the suspicion of a sound to his ear. It was very soft. A rat could not move with less noise; a cat in stepping would have sounded like a cannon exploding. What could it be? Noiseless crickets—a nest of young crickets expecting a mother? The cavern seemed large and the air seemed pure but that animals or things could live in such a place seemed impossible. He voiced his thoughts.

“It is strange that there is air in here,” Joan admitted, “and stranger yet that I should think that there is life here. But this is a strange world. We never saw a Thing on earth like these moon crickets. Nor is there a pigmy on earth like the pigmies that rode on the crickets; nor are there great hollows in the earth where the air has congealed and left the outside cold and airless. It is a different creation entirely. Mercy! I see—I see—eyes staring at me from out the darkness. Holy angels, protect me! There are three of them, and they are running me crazy to look at them.”

Her teeth chattered until Epworth could hear them, and she buried her head in the young man’s shirt front. Now he also saw the eyes. There were three—great red lights that flared in the darkness. Two on a level, and one

in the center. The center eye was enormous and terrifying to the extreme. Brave as he was he shivered with terror. There was something so ghostly, uncanny, about the Thing that his nerves washed out.

Then it flashed by. A nasty-smelling Thing shot out of the gloom; a Thing with a lizard-like, scaly body, long legs and antennas; a Thing that carried a phosphorus glow that plainly disclosed its proportions. It went by them like a railroad train, an enormous whirling, gliding animal that chilled them unto death.

Joan screamed at the top of her voice, and fell limp. Epworth stumbled and fell forward on his face. Each second they expected the Thing to pounce on them, and mash them flat.

Then oblivion fell on both.

It seemed hours later that the two returned to consciousness. They were on the same level, rocky floor, lying side by side, and Epworth was holding his gun in his hand. It had not been discharged.

When he made this discovery he rose quickly to his feet. His first thought was of the evil-smelling Thing that had appeared out of the darkness. Where was it? Were there others back in this chamber of horrors? Was the one he saw preparing another attack on them?

He looked around with fearful eyes. He could not see any signs of the animal. That did not mean that it was not near. He thought that the Thing could move with less noise than a cat, and with the swiftness of an eel.

“W-w-what was it?” Joan stammered.

“I hope to high heaven I never find out,” Epworth breathed fervently. “It was the most gosh-awful horror that ever stirred my nerves. It has probably crawled back in its hole, which must be down this chamber. I hope it dies before I see it again. At least I am going to go in the direction directly opposite from that taken by the Thing—and I am going as fast as my slow feet will let me.”

He sprang up, caught her hand, and ran hurriedly down the chamber, stumbling over big rocks, and against the sides of the tunnel in his desperate effort to leave the spot.

He had no idea where he was going. For all he knew he was going back the way he came. He was getting away from that chamber of horrors as speedily as possible.

They wandered on for an hour—two hours. There was no end to the dark tunnel but they were moving and getting farther and farther away from that hidden monster; and they were going swiftly, without thinking of falling into another chasm. In fact any kind of a hole would have been preferable to this, and they dared not stop.

Finally Joan looked ahead and saw a streak of light.

“Thank heavens,” she breathed. “At last we are coming to the end of this horrible tunnel.”

Epworth did not reply. He was not so sure. On the contrary he could not, by his greatest scientific legerdemain, figure how they would ever get out of this crater.

The end came abruptly—butting up against a pile of large stones. There were large cracks between the stones, and it was patent that intelligent hands had placed them and not Nature. Some being or some intelligent Thing had blocked up the passage purposely with loose stones, to keep out the enormous reptiles.

But the light was streaming through the cracks, and the two were crazy to get to light again. If this darkness enveloped them many hours longer they would lose their minds. Both fell on the rocks with one thought, and began to tear them aside.

When a crack large enough to see through was made they drew back dismayed. The walls of the chamber ahead were lighted by a stream of fiery lava, and there seemed no prospect of escaping from their cavern prison. However the dim light was preferable to the intense gloom that pervaded the passage they were in, and Epworth decided to dig in.

He attempted to survey the interior of the other chamber but his view was shut off by the narrowness of the opening, and again he fell to removing the loose stones. Soon he had an opening large enough to push through.

When they stepped into the chamber their hearts jumped with surprise. Billy Sand and Herman Toplinsky were lying on the floor near where they entered with their hands bound, and their faces against the floor. On a stone couch near them was a beautiful little woman, no larger than a ten-year old girl. She was splendidly formed, and her blonde hair was wrapped around her body in a braid and fell almost to her feet. She also was bound hand and foot.

With a leap Epworth was by Billy's side, slashing the cords that bound him. When Billy was free Epworth released Toplinsky and the girl on the couch in the same manner. When freed Toplinsky sat up lazily and stretched his arms and legs.

"Ah, ha, the beautiful Joan—the lady who hates me," he greeted amiably. "Pleased to meet you—truly am—but before we make merry let us hurriedly get away by the passage through which you entered. I fear that we have very little time to lose. In fact——"

He was interrupted by a noise at the far end of the chamber. Glancing in the direction they saw a large stone rolled away, and thirty crickets, marching in military formation, came in, stepping carefully over the stream of lava. They carried sharp steel-pronged spears, and it was apparent that their intentions were not friendly.

They were led by five men and a woman. And such a woman! Like the blonde girl on the couch she was no larger than a ten-year old child but she was bewilderingly beautiful although her flesh was copper colored. Her hair, a deep blue black, was twisted around her waist over a richly colored red breech cloth. Otherwise she was naked. Her eyes, slightly oblique, were slothful at times and at other times full of fire, transforming her into a menacing dictator. She was ornamented like a barbarous queen with bracelets on her arms, and a crown of jewels on her head.

The men who led the crickets were also copper colored, and small in stature, well-formed except their heads, which were just a trifle large for their bodies. When Joan looked into their faces she closed her eyes. The lines of the faces were badly wrinkled, the mouths were contorted and there was a smirk of evil stamped over them. That they were highly intelligent, however, she was soon to learn.

The woman, whose head was better formed, spoke, to their surprise, in broken English with a peculiar pronunciation that caused them to bend their ears attentively to comprehend.

"I am Carza, the queen of the moon." She drew her form proudly erect and stared arrogantly at the little blonde girl on the couch. "You are aware of that now, Moawha," she continued addressing the girl. "From this on you are my slave. Perhaps, a little later I shall slay you, and be rid of your pretensions forever."

She paused, shrugged her shoulders, and smiled softly. It was not an angelic expression but it exhibited her even, white teeth, and proved exceedingly attractive to Toplinsky, and the others thought that she was quite exquisite.

“You are earth men.” She turned imperiously to Toplinsky. “You are wondering how I am able to speak to you in your own language? It is simple. For years our scientists have been getting peculiar words out of the air, and recording them on their space records. For a long time they could make little out of the noises from space but in time they concluded that they were hearing the people on the great world around which our smaller planet revolves every twenty-eight days. Were they correct in their surmise?”

She looked inquiringly at Toplinsky. He nodded in the affirmative, and with the grace of a courtier.

“Ah, ha, it is so, your most gracious majesty. We are charmed to meet a lady of such distinction.”

Carza knitted her eyebrows slightly, and then smiled sweetly at the giant.

“So they put their intellects to work, and gradually worked out an understanding of things that you call earthly as well as an ability to talk in your language.”

“Wonderful! Wonderful!” Toplinsky added. “Did they also discover a way of sending to the earth?”

She shook her head.

“Our instruments, it seemed, are not of a character that will put us into direct communication. We can hear but not send. However I do not understand how you gained your liberty. I was told that you were bound hand and foot, and that my people only waited word from me to slay you.”

One of the copper leaders approached deferentially, dropped to his knees, and began to speak to her in an unknown tongue.

“So, so,” she mused when he had completed his explanation, “there were only two men and Moawha when you were left here as prisoners, and you have been hatching a man and woman.” She smiled artfully, and the smile was more disagreeable than a threat. “Some of your friends have been able to follow and have broken in to help you escape. Seize them!”

She thundered the command shrilly, and drew back to lean against the wall. The copper men, followed by the crickets, sprang forward giving the cricket chirp of command.

“Keep them off!” Epworth commanded harshly. “They must not undertake to touch us.”

“Must not,” sneered Queen Garza. “A bold word, Sir Earth Man. We shall see. Have at them, Noble Tauran.”

The copper men and the crickets rushed in a body. Epworth knocked down the leader with the butt of his gun, and Toplinsky, seizing a large cricket by its rear legs, swung the insect around his head, and charged, knocking the copper men and crickets around like marbles.

Queen Carza leaned negligently against the wall, and dropped her chin nonchalantly into the palm of her hand. These men had been reported to her to be great fighters, and she loved fighters. She watched with keen interest. Frequently she nodded her head as if well satisfied.

Joan could not understand this satisfaction. The crickets and the pigmy men were obviously unable to do harm to the three earthmen. But the queen was only waiting. When she discovered that her body guard was facing inevitable defeat she chirped through her teeth.

It was the musical chirp of the crickets, calling them to battle. They came, swarming through the door and surrounding Toplinsky and the two Americans like locusts. Billy, because of his small stature (he was only five five) went down quickly; Epworth fought aggressively for several moments but his long, fast and strenuous efforts in the cave without water had weakened him temporarily, and finally he gave way, his feet slipped, and a hundred crickets had him pinned to the floor.

“Ah, ha, ho, ho! The bantam fighter is down,” Toplinsky roared with a laugh that sounded like a fiend. “It is sad indeed. Some day we will renew that interesting contest for Lady Joan’s favor. At present however——”

He backed against the wall, and began to use his arms like a windmill, pushing the crickets and pigmies around like chaff. It seemed to the onlookers as if flesh and blood could not battle in this manner. With his pale blue eyes flashing fire, his long, shaggy hair whirled back over the crown of his head, and his heavy red beard twisting from right to left with each movement of his head, he looked like a fiend.

Epworth, Joan and Billy, and the girl called Moawha, by the queen, were bound and placed with their backs to the wall, and still Toplinsky fought. If his strength held out it seemed as if he would be able to stand off a nation of crickets.

“Hold!”

The command came from the queen, and was accompanied by a cricket chirp. Instantly her cohorts ceased fighting, and Toplinsky, smiling as if in the face of death, extended his hand, jerked a toga off of one of the pigmies, and wiped the blood from his forehead where he had been hit by a spear.

Pushing aside the crickets and soldiers Carza strode fearlessly up to the giant, and stopped to gaze into his face fascinated.

“You are a great fighter,” she said abruptly.

“I am,” Toplinsky agreed without modesty. “I am the greatest fighter you ever saw, or ever will see.”

“Bend your head,” she commanded.

With a smile that displayed his huge teeth disagreeably Toplinsky obeyed. The queen took the cloth from his hands, cleaned the blood from his face, and thrust the bloody rag into her waist band.

“I have been looking for a man of mighty valor—a man like you. Yes, you have been the search of my life. Come! Together we will go far. You will aid me in destroying my enemies, and increase my power over the whole world.”

“But how about me?” Toplinsky objected. “What do I get?”

“You will become the husband of the queen, and if I find that I love you as I think I shall, you will become the leader above me.”

Toplinsky picked her up in his left hand, kissed her, and put her back on the floor.

“It shall be as you say.”

“If you take that woman for your queen you must slay thousands of innocent people,” Moawha broke out passionately. “They are gentle, kind-hearted, and constantly warred upon by these abominable crickets—who eat them.”

Moawha also spoke in broken English but her words were not as clear as those pronounced by the queen.

“I shall have your feet toasted in that nice little stream of fire,” Carza said coldly, turning malevolently on Moawha. “You are not interested in this.”

Her black eyes were flashing fiercely as she spoke but they cleared instantly when she turned to Toplinsky.

“Yes, it pleases me. I shall make you king.”

“Ho, comrades!” Toplinsky called out to the little men. “See that these Americans do not escape. Also look after this strange little woman. Presently we shall slay the two men but not the earth woman. Ha! ha!”

He laughed uproariously.

“Be sure to guard Moawha well,” the queen commanded, recognizing as official the authority Toplinsky was grasping. “She shall die during the crowning ceremonies.”

CHAPTER XIX

The Knife Dance

After two days, during which they were fed on water and dried fruit—a variety that the Americans had never seen before—their captors entered the prison, lifted them on to the backs of crickets, and marched them along for hours through a vast underground world, lighted by a phosphorescent glow, and teeming with crickets. The insects displayed rare intelligence in the way they lived. They had traffic regulations, certain paths of progress, large stacks of food guarded carefully by armed crickets, and constantly added to and systematically given out, playgrounds of peculiar construction, and places—or rather—spots of—assemblage where they listened to each other chirp as if they were singing.

The prisoners were hurried along so rapidly that they could see very little of this life, and could only marvel at its strangeness.

Finally they came to a large underground palace. It was not a house but Nature had built large pillars that extended upward several hundred feet. They were composed of shining quartz interspersed with uncut diamonds burned into the quartz by Nature.

As they entered through these portals they trod upon a yellow floor that they soon discovered was panned gold dust.

At the entrance the crickets turned them over to a body guard of pigmy men—fifteen in number. The pigmies cut the cords from around their feet, and marched them into a large throne room with their spears thrust against their sides and their hands tied behind their backs. At the back end of the room was a throne ostentatiously ornamented with gold and glittering jewels. Seated side by side on the throne were Toplinsky and Queen Carza.

“Ah, ha, ho, ho, we meet again.” The giant looked at Joan with a glare that caused her to shrink backward. “My statuesque blonde, again, but I fear that I cannot offer her very great inducement at present. You are invited to take part in the ceremonies that will make me king of the moon, and join me in power with this lovely queen. Kneel to her!”

The last was whipped out like a lash, and Joan dropped thoughtlessly on her knees, frightened at the giant’s tone of voice. The other three prisoners, however, stood firmly erect.

“I kneel to God only,” Epworth declared vigorously. “If you wish to take up with a female murderess that is your business, but we are Americans.”

Queen Carza’s slothful eyes glittered ominously.

“The first part of the program,” she remarked as if Epworth had not spoken, “will consist of a dance by the beautiful and accomplished Moawha, formerly queen of the Selinites but now a mere dancing slave. When the dance is finished we will eat some delicate fruit gathered from the groves of her Land, and then—ah, then, my dear, I will have your feet, and the feet of these other prisoners, thrust into that smouldering fire.”

She pointed at a small stream of lava that spluttered softly over the rocky bottom of the cavern, and flowed gently into a deep hole.

Joan dropped her head to repress a cry of alarm. Was this woman an incarnate fiend that she loved to torture unto death innocent girls?

“Ah, ha! We win,” Toplinsky exclaimed as if in great admiration. “A fit mate for the greatest scientist of the earth-world. We shall get along admirably. But for the benefit of you Americans, who are going to die presently—all of you except Joan whose death I shall endeavor to have shifted to some remote period—I will say that Queen Carza and I have some great plans ahead. Already I have discovered that her people are gifted and know much science. True they do not live here but we will soon be at home with them. Then we shall first conquer the moon. I understand that there are about two million pigmies who give allegiance to Moawha. We will capture them, and make slaves of them although Carza has only an army of fifty thousand soldiers. To capture them will be easy with Moawha dead, and my knowledge of gunpowder and gas. When we have destroyed them and gained complete control over crickets and pigmies I shall turn my attention to Capitalistic America. I have always hated that country, and shall

wipe it out. First I will land my exploding projectiles on the City of New York. Ah, ha, ho, ho!”

He paused and sneered evilly at Epworth, and the American felt a cold chill pass over him. As a power for evil he admitted that Toplinsky could be monstrous.

“Ah, ha, I laugh loudly! I roar with genuine amusement! I wring my hands together with great pleasure! I see consternation and terrible disaster sweep over fair America. Secure in my moon kingdom I shoot deliberately, quietly, when I will, and I direct my projectiles by radio. When I say unto myself ‘today I shall wipe out Chicago,’ that day I will do it; when I look in the glass at the faces of myself and my beloved queen and point at the map where there is now the City of St. Louis, and say, ‘I will make a huge telescope and tomorrow week you may watch that City and see it go up in smoke.’ Ah ha, it is so. I, Herman Toplinsky, the greatest man that ever lived, have said, and what I have said I have said.”

“Let the dance proceed,” Queen Carza commanded, placing her little copper hand affectionately on the giant’s enormous hand, and dropping her head into his lap. “I would see her dance the ‘Knife Dance’ for the last time. I hear that the beautiful blond queen is the most graceful dancer in our world. I wish to discover if this is true. If she proves extraordinarily artistic I may conclude to dance with her—or rather against her.”

Epworth and Joan glanced at each other.

“She is quite capricious,” Joan observed in a low voice.

“And as deadly as a rattlesnake.”

“I prefer the snake,” Billy put in. “In fact, I think you basely slander the reptile.”

Moawha’s bonds were removed, a number of crickets and pigmy soldiers moved up around her, cleared a space before the throne, and encircled the space. Before she began the dance she was handed a long, sharp two-edged knife. The blade was ten or twelve inches.

“I’d like to get hold of that knife,” Billy remarked whimsically in a low voice.

Moawha flashed upon him an expressive glance, and then began her pirouette mazes. With her long blond hair sweeping around her like a cloak, she soon demonstrated that if she had a moon-wide reputation as a dancer she could maintain it. It was a strange, wonderful, weird, mystical

terpsichorean exhibition during which she brandished the knife she held in a seemingly reckless manner. Up to the throne, back again, across the chamber, and each time that she neared the throne her lithe form twisted gracefully, somersaulted over the knife held in a dangerous manner, and the knife flashed wickedly toward the queen.

“Ah, it is so,” Toplinsky suddenly burst out. “Me-thinks that Queen Carza is wise in watching this dance from an elevated platform. If the fair blond came close enough I have an idea that her life would be a short one, if not merry.”

He had scarcely finished his remark when Moawha darted backward, flipped over with an athletic whirl, dropped down behind Billy’s back, and whirled away.

But she had done much with that dexterous movement. Her keen knife had slashed the bonds that bound Billy.

“Keep your hands behind your back,” she whispered to him. “Let them appear tied.”

Before Toplinsky or the queen discovered her intention she made another dexterous whirl, turned a somersault over Epworth’s head, landed behind him and freed his hands. The next second she was whirling away toward the throne. But this time she was a little too slow. Toplinsky, who was quite observant, caught her freeing Epworth.

“Ah, ha, the little blond is——”

Like a cannon ball Epworth shot across the chamber, and landed in front of Queen Carza.

“Call them off!” he hissed, seizing the queen by the arm with a fierce, painful clutch. “Call them off, Toplinsky, or this lady is going to be hurt.”

There was need of rapid action. Urged by the pigmy officers the crickets were jumping forward directly at Billy and Joan. Billy pulled his knife, and with one sweep cut the cords around Joan’s wrists.

“Use your tear gun!” Epworth called out. “Joan, you still have it in your belt.”

Joan remembered the gun, and acted. With a single motion she swept a circle around her.

“Get my automatic,” she whispered to Billy. “This promises to be interesting. It is also in my belt.”

“Tell the queen to order them back,” Epworth again commanded.

There was no mistaking his intention. Toplinsky had previously braved the American's gun, and he responded to the threat. The queen obeyed him, and the crickets slowly drew back as Queen Carza chirped at them. Toplinsky made a move even in the face of Epworth's threat.

"Slow down, Toplinsky!" Epworth growled. "Not a move or your snake-like queen is going to begin to cry out loud."

Toplinsky sneered a little. By this time he had regained his composure, and was preparing to leap on Epworth. When he noticed the glare in the young American's eyes he slumped back. Epworth did not realize it but many thoughts were racing through the giant's mind. Suppose Epworth should strangle the queen? He shivered. He really did not think that Epworth would commit such an act but if he did he would be in more danger than Epworth and his friends. With Queen Carza to aid him he would soon be in complete control of the moon-world; without her the crickets and pigmies would kill him instantly. He had lorded it over them quite harshly during the few days he had been at liberty and in power, and he had escaped death at their hands only recently. Now he realized that the crickets and pigmies did not like him. He had ruthlessly killed too many of them. True they did not understand what death was but they knew enough to realize that this big giant did not hesitate to wipe them out.

"Go easy, Epworth," he said soberly. "You are standing on dynamite. Perhaps we can ar——"

He was temporizing, preparing for a treacherous attack, and Epworth knew it.

"I am going easy as long as you keep off your dogs of war but you are not going to act funny."

"So far so good," Billy called out, "but where are we going—and how?"

It was a problem. For the moment they seemed to be on top—they had their enemies tied. But this could not last. They were still in the center of the great Crater Agrippa, buried alive amid thousands of crickets that would eat them if they got a chance, with every avenue of escape seemingly closed, and long, dark, terrifying tunnels between them and the open air.

Joan breathed a breath of despair. Escape seemed impossible. They could not march the queen through phalanx after phalanx of armed crickets and intelligent pigmy men. Any second a number could sneak up in their rear, or

drop upon them out of one of the dark holes over their heads. Yet this seemed to be the only way out.

But in what direction was *out*?

Epworth was asking himself that question fearfully. There were four directions, and innumerable caverns penetrating the lighted chambers. Only one of these passageways would lead back to their gliders.

He looked around at the frowning spear-tubes of the crickets apprehensively.

CHAPTER XX

Mysterious Cavern Lamps

Epworth surveyed the chamber carefully. Behind the throne, about three hundred feet distant, he saw one of the innumerable holes that pierced the crater in all directions. There were few crickets between the throne and this hole, and he inwardly decided that it would be the best way out of the dilemma.

But he did not fool himself. He realized that once inside of that hole he would again be in a corridor of death and darkness.

“Still,” he cogitated, “there is no possible chance of escaping in any other way. We will at least be temporarily freed of cricket masters.”

“Follow me,” he urged in a low voice, “and, Billy, be sure to bring the little girl. Joan can look out for herself.”

Lifting Queen Carza in his arms, holding her pressed tightly against his chest with his right arm, and keeping a tear gun against her head, he slid from the throne, and ran hurriedly across the chamber.

“Stop him!” Toplinsky roared in a loud voice. “St——”

“Dry up, Toplinsky, if you want to keep this girl whole. If you keep your mouth shut I promise you that she shall not be hurt.”

Toplinsky quieted down, and waved the crickets and pigmies back. This enabled the four to gain the dark passage. Unhesitatingly Epworth plunged into the yawning darkness. As he and his companions disappeared Queen Carza sent out a wild shout. She was being dragged along with little regard for her queenly disposition, and she was angry; not afraid. Wicked though she was, she knew no fear.

Her shout was answered by a squealing sound from her pigmy soldiers, and scarcely were they inside of the hole when four pigmies dashed in to aid their queen. They leaped upon the backs of Joan, Billy, and Moawha. This caused Joan to send out a cry of alarm.

Epworth turned to go to Joan's assistance. He could see the pigmies plainly, although in the darkness they could not see him. As he wheeled, Queen Carza wriggled out of his arms, and started to run. Epworth did not stop her. He wanted to assist Joan; he did not wish to injure the queen. Calmly he permitted the queen to escape.

But Joan did not need his help. Throwing off the pigmy with an effort she darted back into the cave. By this time the struggle had carried all of them back into the darkness, and they were hammering away at each other in the gloom. At least the Americans were in the darkness, but soon the pigmies demonstrated that they could see. This was another surprise to Epworth but he had not time to hunt an explanation at the moment.

Billy, at the outset, knocked his man out and turned to aid Moawha. This was hard to do as he could not distinguish her from the other pigmies in the gloom. The pigmies took advantage of this, and leaping on the girl began to drag her back to the throne room.

"Help!" she screamed, and Billy rushed to her aid, pulling her away from the pigmies who held her.

At this moment the crickets came crowding in from the throne room.

"Run for it!" Epworth shouted.

"No, no," Moawha answered a little wildly. "Not yet. You will be lost in the cave. Wait for me, and keep the crickets back."

While they did not understand her purpose, Epworth and Billy stood up side by side to fight. They were now far back in the cave and the gloom was so dense they could barely see; but they knew that the crickets were advancing. They could hear their silent, snoopy hands creeping softly over the stones.

Moawha ran up to Epworth, and slammed something over his head.

"Adjust it to your eyes," she whispered. "Hasten, and then rush the crickets to stop them, while I cover the heads of the others."

Epworth was too surprised to speak. A second and he was in terrible darkness, thinking that they would be lost in a hole that wound around in gloom forever; when Moawha left him he could see in front of him a red

world—Joan was red, Billy was red, Moawha was red; the crickets, stealing up out of the darkness to leap upon them, were red.

He did not pause to inquire the explanation. Leaping forward he crashed into the crickets with his automatic, showering surprise and fear at them. There were only a few, and when they heard the awful roar of his gun they fled backward to wait for their companions.

“Come,” Moawha cried. “They will be on us in a moment in great numbers.”

Recklessly they fled down the dark passage—dark no longer; but now a stream of crimson and a flash of red. Presently they came to three intersections. It was no time to choose. Behind them came the musical chirps of the crickets, and the whistles of the pigmy men. They darted into the left hand passage, and hurried onward. When they had gone some distance they looked back. The crickets had arrived at the intersection and were dividing into three parties. They intended to take no chances. Faster than race horses they ran on and on; they came to a deep chasm, forty feet wide, and Moawha stopped with a cry of despair.

“Lift her in your arms and jump,” Epworth urged as Billy also paused. “The crickets are behind us.”

“But—but——”

Epworth lifted Joan, ran back a short distance in the cave, and running forward with all of his speed, leaped into the air. He sailed across the chasm like a bird.

“You can do it,” he called back to Billy. “Remember that this gravity is twelve times less than the earth, and that you can do things that you would not dream of on the earth.”

Billy picked Moawha up in his arms. Her heart was beating wildly, and with a gentle hand he smoothed her face. She caught his hand and held it, and he jumped. For a second his heart was in his mouth, and then he dropped by the side of Epworth and Joan.

But the chasm did not stop the crickets. It only served to delay the advance of the Americans, and in a split second they were again chasing down a long corridor as fast as they could go. Now, they discovered that they could outrun the crickets. It was a long straight-a-way, and they could leap many feet in a single jump.

They came to another division of the passage, and Epworth started to take the left hand. Joan stopped him.

"I may be wrong," she said, "but I seem to have a natural orientation that tells me that our planes are in this direction."

"All dark holes in the moon look alike to me," Epworth responded. "We turn to the right to suit you."

There was a delay, and they were not far down this new cavern when they heard the patter of the crickets behind them. Now the cavern twisted and turned; now the crickets began to chirp their musical notes of triumph.

And their hearts went cold.

Joan stumbled, and Epworth stopped to help her. When he raised her and looked upward he could not see the roof. Ahead he saw a wide open space. When he looked to the right he heard a loud chirping of crickets but could not see them. In other words, in one direction he could see; in the other he could not.

"I can't understand that," he exclaimed aloud. "Why can I not see to the right?"

"Because on your left there is darkness, and on the right there is light. The light comes from the great cricket chamber. We have run around in a half circle and are coming again to the hive of crickets."

As Moawha spoke she lifted the head gear from Epworth's head.

"I still do not understand."

"Very simple," Joan put in impatiently. "You are wearing——"

"Cavern lights," Moawha explained. "An invention of the Taunan pigmies which enables them to travel through the darkest recesses of the moon. So far my people have not been able to make them."

Epworth looked around thoughtfully.

"I believe this is where we left our gliders," he exclaimed hopefully. "Out toward the center of this ashy floor."

"Joy be!" Joan shouted. "Put on your head gear, and let's get to them. I am certainly fed up of crickets."

At this moment there came a warning chirp from their right. They did not wait to ascertain how near the crickets were. Bolting forward Epworth lifted Moawha in his arms and, followed by Joan and Billy, ran rapidly across the deep ashes. They found their gliders almost by a miracle. Joan drew the

shoulder straps over her head and shoulders and fastened them around her waist, and turned to Epworth.

“Let me have Moawha,” she entreated. “Billy will be too heavy in my plane.”

Without a word Epworth placed the girl in Joan’s glider, and darted to his own.

“Now, Billy, you and I together.”

While Billy was mounting Epworth’s shoulders, Joan placed Moawha’s arms around her waist and supported her on the bar of the bicycle power.

“All ready,” she called in a whisper. “Let us run together.”

“Circle around in a wide circle until I can find my second flashlight,” Epworth suggested. “And——”

He was interrupted by a rush of crickets that began to swarm around him. But he made no mistake. Finding an opening he ran forward and jumped into the air, and began to work his pedals vigorously.

The glider went forward but did not rise. When he put his feet down to make another start he could not touch ground.

He had jumped off into a bottomless crater, and instead of going up, weighted with Billy, he was going down.

“Julian! Julian!” he heard a faint voice call. “Where are you? We are falling, falling.”

With a dexterous movement Epworth whirled the glider in the direction of Joan’s voice. Presently he saw her, and gave devout thanks for the crater lamps. True she was red; the plane was red; the whole wide open space was red; but he could see her.

“The explanation is simple,” he explained as he drew near her fluttering plane. “Keep the glider on an even keel; never let it turn over. With the weight of the girl you cannot fly but you can make a parachute out of the glider and descend slowly. Take it easy. That is the best we can do at present.”

He did not tell her that his heart was blue with dark forebodings; that he believed that they would never again see the sun or get out of the awful darkness that encompassed them.

The only hope that he could hold out to himself was that they were wearing a peculiar head gear that enabled them to see what was going on

around them notwithstanding the darkness. It was little to build hope upon but he grasped it, and determined that he would go down into this strange, terrible world with as much courage as possible.

CHAPTER XXI

Crickets Swarming to War

On and on, fluttering side by side, the two gliders descended, circling hour after hour with sufficient motor power to keep them from tumbling into a crack up, but continuing steadily downward—slowly but surely. There was no possible escape. They would go on downward forever or fall through the moon.

Through the mysterious cavern lamps which Moawha had taken from the heads of the pigmies who attacked them in the cave they could see quite plainly although everything appeared very strange. For a long time Epworth watched the red planes of Joan's glider anxiously but finally ascertaining that she was following him closely and imitating his movements he turned to Billy.

"Well, young fellow, give an account of yourself. We went to the cave to find you and you had disappeared and taken with you all of our supplies."

"I disappeared but I did not take the supplies," Billy replied. "Some fairy got the supplies. I expect if you raked his back you would find a cricket."

And then he told of what had happened to him. Shortly after Epworth and Joan went to the Aerolite, while he was standing by his glider working with the bicycle pedals an army of crickets came out of the rear of the cave and surrounded him so stealthily that he did not know they were present until they had made him a prisoner. They carried him back into the cave, moved the supplies quickly, and closed up the cave with heavy boulders. Then they took him on a long journey through numerous and winding dark caves, conveying him on the back of two of the crickets bound hands and feet.

“Boy,” Billy whispered in awe, “that journey was ghostly. Two large crickets lined up on each side of me, and believe it or not their backs gave out a phosphorous glow that lighted up that cavern, and made the journey easy for my captors. I have been wondering all this time how it was that two crickets could give out a glow and the others were black as midnight.”

“Easy, lad. They had rubbed some of that phosphorous mineral on their backs. A mineral powerful enough to light up a whole crater miles in circumference could readily be utilized as a personal light.”

“I’m handing it to you, boy,” Billy exclaimed admiringly. “You’ve got a brain. I never thought of that.”

“Go on with your story,” Epworth retorted smiling, “and do not ask questions.”

“I didn’t ask a single question,” Billy snorted. “You butted in with an answer when I was merely stating a fact. However there is not much more to the story. I was carried to a large chamber, dumped on the floor and left. When I was able to look around Moawha was near me similarly trussed up. My hands being small I after a time succeeded in working the cords over my wrists and then cut myself free, and freed Moawha. So far so good. But it was too good to last. About the time we were ready to try to sneak out of the chamber two pigmies entered. I shot at them like a rocket but could not get to them in time to stop the singing chirp they sent out calling the crickets to their assistance. Of course I put up all the fight that was in me, and Moawha helped quite a bit but they were too much for us, and again we were bound and lashed until it was impossible to break loose. In this condition we were carried to the chamber where you found us, and shortly after we were thrown on the floor Toplinsky was brought in. Here we were held prisoners until you came, our food consisting of dried fruits and water. Not so bad but Lady Baltimore cake and ham and—would go mighty fine for a change.”

He glanced ahead, and jammed the rudder quickly.

“Watch where you are going,” he bawled out. “You came mighty near wrecking us on that sharp extension of the crater.”

The glider turned abruptly, and dropped rapidly for several seconds before Epworth could level out.

“What is getting the matter with these things on my eyes?” Billy demanded petulantly. “It is getting dark. I can’t see a thing below us, and

ten minutes ago I could see the walls of the crater easily.”

Epworth stared around. It seemed that they had been suddenly engulfed in a gloom that the night spectacles would not penetrate. Had their cavern lamps suddenly grown useless from age, or had they been broken in some way? It was an annoying interrogation. To go on, and on, and on, through everlasting darkness was appalling, fearful, mentally destructive.

“Moawha says remove your cavern lamps,” Joan called out. “We must be drifting into some kind of a light.”

When Epworth removed the head gear, and carefully placed it around his neck so that he could quickly replace it on his head, he discovered that the walls of the crater were no longer visible although there was an eerie, mysterious light all around. It was not a phosphorous glow because there were no rocks or vegetation to give out such a glow. It was a dim light of day, and they were falling through space.

When he looked downward he saw no land.

“Heavens,” he muttered, “we have dropped entirely through the moon, and are we now sailing out into space?”

They fell a mile before the interrogation was answered. Then the light grew brighter and they saw beneath them trees, rivers, green rolling hills.

“Heaven be praised!” Joan cried out with a shout of joy. “At last we are getting somewhere. It must be Moawha’s home. She was laughing, chattering, and cooing to me in an unknown tongue.”

They landed gently on a high hill overlooking a large valley but the moment she got out of the glider and looked around, Moawha lost her enthusiasm, and grasping Joan by the arm ran hurriedly to a dense thicket of undergrowth to hide.

“Come with us,” she called in a low tone to Epworth and Billy. “Hide the gliders and then hunt cover.”

They followed her instructions, and when they were hidden in the undergrowth, she caught Epworth by the arm, tiptoed to the edge of the thicket and pointed down into a part of the valley he had not seen. His eyes opened wide at what he saw.

Ten thousand pigmy men were marching across the field in military formation, drilling, shouldering arms, charging an imaginary foe, and practicing all the arts of war preparatory to engaging in a sham battle.

“Queen Carza’s soldiers,” Moawha explained briefly. “If we are captured we will be taken back to the cricket hive. Carza’s soldiers have succeeded in gaining a complete mastery over the crickets. They fight us, kill us, and give our bodies to the crickets to eat, and they pay the crickets by giving them fruits and vegetables. For thousands of years they have been doing this, and when they succeeded in kidnaping me they probably demoralized my fighting men, and are now preparing to make a bold attack on them. With the help of this great giant that came with you I am fearfully afraid they will make my people slaves, although there are not more than fifty thousand pigmies, and there are two million Selinites. With the crickets to aid them, however, they have a larger fighting force than we have.”

Without replying Epworth returned to the gliders, and pushed them deeper beneath the foliage of the thicket and planted limbs over, and around them.

“First,” he remarked, “we must eat, and then sleep. Nature can go very little farther.”

They lunched from the supplies left in the gliders, and then stretched out beneath the undergrowth. Joan thought she would never sleep again because of the nervous strain but in this she was mistaken. She was, in fact, the first to close her eyes.

They were awakened by a loud chirping of crickets and a whizzing sound in the air. Moawha started to jump up excitedly but Epworth stopped her.

“No,” he commanded in a low voice, “lie still. We may be discovered.” Moawha burst out into tears.

“What is the matter?” Joan asked solicitously.

“The crickets are coming out of the caverns in swarms to attack my people.”

She pointed upward. When Joan looked up she saw a black cloud sweeping down from above and shooting far out over the land.

“They are all armed,” Epworth observed thoughtfully, “and to——”

“Get to my people we will have to pass through them, over them or around them,” Moawha finished, and then added naively: “May I not expect you two gallant soldiers to aid me in defending my people?”

“You can sure count on me,” Billy asserted quickly. “I am for you, Moawha, as long as there is life in my body.”

Epworth grinned, and glanced at Joan. Joan’s eyes twinkled merrily.

“Most assuredly, Moawha, we will help you,” she replied for Epworth. “To the bitter end but we will hope that it will be a happy end.”

“If your king will help me my people will win,” Moawha declared emphatically. “He is a greater man than the giant.”

She put her hand timidly on Epworth’s shoulder, and looked into his eyes inquiringly. The young man turned his head in embarrassment.

“You can count on me,” he replied soberly. “But when you put me up against Toplinsky you are making a mistake. He is unquestionably the greatest scientist, and the most ruthless robber and scoundrel that ever lived.”

“And that is where Julian has him beat,” Joan put in. “God is on the side of right, and Julian is the kind of man who fights always on the side of right so we are bound to win.”

“G’wan, Joan, you embarrass me. Look upward, and note what we are up against.”

Another cloud of crickets was shooting across the sky, and now they could see Toplinsky and Queen Carza riding in state on the backs of four of the largest insects.

CHAPTER XXII

The Wheezing Ramph

They traveled as fast as they could, and when tired they hid in some cave or secret nook. From Moawha the three Americans learned that the country she called Taunan was not very large, the population consisting of about one hundred and fifty thousand men, women and children. Her country, the Land of the Selinites, was much larger, and had a population of three million. It extended from a space on the south, which was open, and had never been explored, to another open space on the northeast. It had perpetual light but Moawha did not know where the light came from, and had never heard of the sun. Both open spaces on the south and northeast she said, were guarded by cricket armies under the direction of the Taunans.

When Moawha made this explanation Epworth jumped to the conclusion that he had solved a problem that bothered the earth astronomers.

“Her country,” he explained to his companions, “is a long narrow stretch of land, about the size of Mexico, stretching from Mount Leibnitz at the south pole to Mount Tycho. The sun shines all the time on Leibnitz, and I conclude, through a hole in the moon entirely across the Land of the Selinites, and out of Mount Tycho, which gives that Mountain its mysterious bright light. If I understand her correctly the light does not come in a straight line from the sun, and they do not see the sun because the edge of the crater of Leibnitz hides it from view. The Taunans, however, are so located that they can see the sun and much of our world.”

“Fair enough,” Billy put in. “Now let’s get somewhere.”

As he spoke they were crossing a long bridge made of heavy stones which spanned a deep chasm. At the beginning of their journey across the

Taunan country they had encircled many cities and had been forced to avoid many groups of men and women but now they were going through a country that was greatly broken by splits in the earth—all of which were bridged with strong, substantial masonry that exhibited great masonic skill on the part of the pigmies. This section of the country was not as populous as the fertile and alluvial fields of natural vegetation and luscious fruit, and the further they advanced toward what Moawha termed the borderland, the rougher the country became.

In response to Billy's suggestion they increased their speed, relaxed their vigilance, and were halfway across the structure talking in loud voices when they heard a shout behind them. Curiously they whirled around. The light was so strong that they had little difficulty in making out the forms of a hundred or more pigmies rushing on the bridge behind them.

"Say, Julian," Billy announced whimsically, "I haven't any business on this bridge—none whatever."

He started on a run for the end of the bridge and the others joined him. They did not go far. In front of them bobbed up another small army of pigmies, and from the side of the structure another horde of enemies sprang into life out of the shadows that had obscured them.

"An ambush as sure as life," Epworth exclaimed.

"And we cannot jump off of the bridge without jumping into a chasm that goes down probably for forty miles," Joan added. "What shall we do?"

"Fight!" Billy responded, making a dive at the nearest line of pigmies. "Give them all we have."

Epworth swung his strong arms into action and sent four of the pigmies head over heels. Joan drew her automatic and whacked one in the face; four pigmies caught Moawha, and she screamed. Billy answered the cry for help by knocking the four pigmies down.

It annoyed them to think that up to this time they had eluded the inhabitants and had grown so careless as to permit discovery and an ambush.

With an angry snarl Epworth clenched his teeth and drove straight into the spears, dropped to a stooped position, caught two pigmy soldiers by their legs, whirled them around his head, and clubbed them back. Then the pigmies closed in on them like a bed of ants, caught them by their legs, arms, and waists and began to pull them down.

But at this moment, when capture seemed certain, the Taunans suddenly released them, sent up a shrill shout of terror, leaped to their feet, and fled as if possessed. Taking advantage of this Epworth staggered to his feet with Billy by his side, and looked around to ascertain what had caused the flight of their enemies. What they saw caused them to stop in horror and Moawha to scream in wild terror.

“A ramph! a ramph!” she cried. “Run!”

She pointed with staring eyes at the side of the bridge on the north. Along the edge of the structure, with its head lifted above the railing and its long, lizard-like body stretched in scaly coils two hundred feet, was the most terrifying monster they had ever seen. It had ten legs, and elongated tail, and its movements were as swift as thought, silent as death and terrifying; and its three eyes, as large as saucers, glared vicious red at them in a head fifteen feet wide. But it was not altogether the appearance of the animal that frightened them.

In its deep, cavern-like mouth, glowing a phosphorescent light, was a shouting pigmy, crying loudly for help.

“Mercy,” Joan cried, “that is the kind of an animal we fought in the cave.”

“They live in the darkest parts of the caves,” Moawha gasped, “and never come out unless they come to eat people.”

Epworth did not wait for a technical description of the Thing that was as big as four elephants. He had brought his Police Positive pistol with him from the glider, and a tear gun. The tear gun being packed away for future emergency was hard to get but he jerked his police gun, and began to fire, aiming with certainty and firing slowly.

The first shot struck the center eye of the monster. The eye flicked out, and the Thing paused in its efforts to swallow the pigmy. Again Epworth’s pistol rang out. This time the bullet crashed into the right eye. The long, slender tail began to lash the bridge until it knocked some of the stones from position and sent them into the chasm. Again Epworth fired. The last eye was destroyed.

With a wheezing, siren-snarl the monster dropped the pigmy, lowered its head and began to wave it around in the air. That it was now blind was patent, and Epworth pushed his companions back several feet. The giant body began to fold up, coil, and roll forward like a rolling snake; its mighty

paws went up into the air, and the front right paw started downward. Directly beneath the paw the little pigmy that it had held in its mouth stumbled and fell. If the paw came down it would certainly crush the pigmy into a mass.

Swift as an eagle, without counting his own danger, Epworth bounded forward, caught the pigmy's clothing and jerked him backward. He was just in time. The paw descending struck slightly on the pigmy's face and drew the blood.

But the animal now knew not which way to turn. For several seconds it floundered around, opened and closed its enormous mouth, and wheezed until the listeners felt their blood run cold. Finally, still wheezing it twisted off the bridge and plunged down into the chasm.

Epworth released the pigmy, and placed him on his feet. Frightened into a frenzy the little man sped away.

"Seems to be in a hurry," Billy observed dryly.

"I can't blame him," Joan snorted. "I have a hasty mind myself. Suppose we travel."

They gained the end of the bridge but the pigmies in their rear, regaining their courage, followed. Like wild men they ran to get away but Moawha was too slow and Epworth lifted her in his arms. She was heavy for a pigmy but Epworth managed to keep ahead of his pursuers. Just ahead of them appeared a long line of trees. If they could get into the forest there was a chance of them eluding the little men with their spears.

With thankful hearts they darted under the trees, and dashed pantingly into the forest. Their thankfulness came to an end quickly. The moment they were beneath the trees an army of pigmies dropped out of the branches on their heads, their shoulders, their legs, and before they had time to resist they were pulled to the ground, and their hands tied behind their backs.

CHAPTER XXIII

Sons of The Great Selina

With grunts of satisfaction the pigmies rose to their feet, punched them slyly in the ribs with their sharp-pointed spears, and indicated that they must get up and march. It was not to be a very long march.

Hidden away in a deep recess of mountains they saw a large building constructed with a stupendous round tube pointing at the sky where the earth was now shining with soft, refulgent splendor. In front of the building were many stone steps, arranged artistically, and forming a long stairway that led upward to an opening supported by large white pillars, ostentatiously decorated with painting and signs. Surrounded by an armed bodyguard they were marched up these steps, and into a big round chamber.

Their guards marched them up to a large, glittering disk in the center of the chamber, and stopped. Beyond the disk were twenty seats; in front of the seats there was a long, narrow platform. As they came to a stop the disk in front of them began to whirl. At first it was noiseless motion; then there came a slight scratching sound; followed by a voice.

“Glory be!” Billy shouted. “A good old American is talking.”

But when he heard the words his enthusiasm faded.

“This is KFI, Los Angeles, California,” the disk declared. “We will now hear from Professor Ainslee, who will talk to us on the condition of the moon.”

The next second, Epworth’s old college classmate stepped on the disk, looked into the microphone, and began to talk in a perfectly natural tone.

“They’ve got the old earth skinned a city block,” Billy asserted in disgust. “Look at that, will you. They not only hear but they see.”

The disk stopped sharply, Ainslee disappeared. The disk started again and the City of Los Angeles, silent and still flashed on the disk. Again it stopped, and for several seconds they stared at nothing. Then a slight noise on their left attracted their attention. When they glanced around twenty pigmies were filing into the room and seating themselves in the chairs behind the platform.

They were different in appearance to any they had yet seen. While the Taunan soldiers had large heads—entirely too large for their bodies—these men had great round bulbous balls stuck on stringy necks, and slender, ghastly bodies, showing that they were of a different race.

“Sons of the Great Selina,” Moawha whispered in awe. “They are the smartest and greatest men on our sphere. It is said that there are only one hundred of them in their race.”

For some time the twenty bulbous-headed men sat gazing at the Americans in silence. Their gaze was penetrating, far-reaching, cutting.

“You are earth men,” the leader finally remarked in slow, manufactured English. “We saw you coming in the disk, and placed a trap for you. How did you get here?”

“We came in a flying machine,” Epworth answered, determined to put on a bold front in the hope that they had not heard of Toplinsky and would release them. “Who are you?”

The pigmy frowned. It was an ugly, dangerous contraction of a peculiar round face, and it made him look fiendish.

“We compose the council of Lunar,” he said softly, his eyebrows stretching across his moon-shaped face like a rainbow. “We are the brains of this world. We make the laws, we furnish the thought, we are the scientists who visualized the great world out in space and brought its language to our people; we rule through Carza, our queen, who was taught from childhood to obey our slightest command. Just as soon as we capture the Land of the Selinites we shall be complete rulers of the world.”

“You are quite an honorable and distinguished body,” Epworth agreed, bowing courteously, “but I fear that you are not destined to rule this world much longer.”

The leader glanced at him inquiringly, and when he saw that Epworth was not making a military move against him, smiled gently.

“I am afraid that you will have very little to say about it,” he suggested mildly.

“You need not worry about me,” Epworth added with another bow. “Just wait until Toplinsky gets his hooks in.”

“Toplinsky?”

The leader thought over this for some time, and then consulted his companions. Turning to the soldiers he issued a sharp command. The soldiers responded by seizing Epworth, pushing him close to the leader of the council, and dropping a metal cap over his head. This cap they connected by wires with one the leader placed on his own head.

“This little cap,” the councilman explained, “is a thought transferring device. It will keep you from lying, and enable me to read all your thoughts. Now tell me about this Toplinsky.”

“Have you not heard of him? I should think by this time his connection with your queen would be known everywhere in your land. Your queen has made him her king, and together they expect to conquer the Selinites.”

“I had heard that the queen had taken a consort but——”

“A great giant, and a scientist of mighty ability. He is the man who started your world to turning around.”

“Started our world to turn—a man?”

Very calmly Epworth told Toplinsky’s story, permitting his mind to revert back to the camp in the Arctic Circle, and the manner in which Toplinsky had shot water at the moon in a great projectile, and followed it in fifteen minutes with another projectile of liquid air to prevent the immediate evaporation of the water and in order to build up an atmosphere on the moon. The council leader saw it all flashing through the American’s brain, and in turn Epworth saw fear, dread, hate, envy, creep into the bulbous brain in front of him—a fear that this giant scientist from the earth would gain supreme control over the Taunans, and eliminate the council of the Sons of the Great Selina.

“You have reason to fear him,” Epworth remarked quickly. “I do not like Toplinsky, I am constantly at war with him, but I hand it to him as being the biggest thing in the way of science I ever read about. In his scheme to make the moon inhabitable he shot the rarest vegetable and fruit seed from the

earth, he planned a rotation of your little planet that would give it a Garden of Eden climate, he timed his projectiles absolutely accurately to prevent the evaporation of the water he sent up, and he sent nitrates and fertilizer to assure the growth of his vegetation. When he was selected by Queen Carza as her consort he boasted to me that he would soon be the absolute monarch of this world.”

The councilman removed his head gear, and motioned to the soldiers to remove the cap over Epworth’s head. Before this was done however Epworth saw the thought flash through the pigmy’s brain that he must do something to rid himself of Toplinsky’s power.

“You will have to act quickly,” the young American said slyly. “Toplinsky is a fast worker.”

“What are your intentions?” the pigmy demanded angrily. “Why are you sneaking around our country?”

Epworth made no effort to disguise the purpose. He realized that it would be useless with the thought exposer again on the councilman’s head.

“I intend to keep him from conquering your world. I am now on the way to help Moawha and her army keep the crickets out of the Land of the Selinites.”

“Just what can you do against this great scientist?”

The pigmy did not attempt to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. Epworth shook his head.

“I do not know. I can only hope for the best.”

The cap was removed from the American’s head, and the councilman leaned forward nonchalantly.

“You are a fool—straight out in the open with your thoughts, and I doubt if you get anywhere but we will try to see what your giant friend is doing at this moment, and then compare notes.”

He stood up, drew aside a curtain, and exposed to view a bright silvered sheet of metal about four feet square. In front of this had been placed a peculiar machine with a projecting orifice connecting with the sheet with numerous wires made of glittering copper. With a slight movement of his hand the pigmy pushed a switch and a cylinder began to revolve inside of the machine shooting pictures on the silver square. These pictures were entirely lunar, and showed houses, land, people.

“By this machine,” the pigmy explained, “we discovered that you were approaching our retreat. Now watch for the giant.”

The interior of a large house flashed in front of his eyes. Thousands of pigmies with large heads and small bodies were running to and from working industriously. Among them, towering almost to the roof, was Toplinsky. On his shoulders, with her copper legs locked around his neck, was Queen Carza. She was playing with his coarse red hair and bending over frequently to caress him with her cheek.

As his figure came prominently into view the giant stooped and dropped a soft vegetable fabric into a large vat. Then he called to several pigmies, and instructed him to follow his example. The pigmies hung back timidly for a moment, and the queen shouted at them angrily. They obeyed her quickly.

“She has decided control over them,” Epworth remarked gently, “and Toplinsky, if I mistake not, has complete mastery of the queen. When he desires to be nice that giant can make a post believe he is in love with it.”

The councilman frowned.

“It seems so,” he admitted. “What is the mighty giant doing?”

“He is putting a soft vegetable fabric into a vat full of nitric and sulphuric acid.”

“I can see that, of course. But why?”

“He is making gun cotton—a high explosive that can be used in the place of gun powder. He contemplates blowing up Moawha’s people, and all their cities.”

“With that stuff?”

Toplinsky was removing some of the gun cotton from the vat at the moment.

“Yes, with that stuff he can blow off the side of a mountain.”

Epworth spoke quietly but he was greatly excited. Toplinsky was making rapid strides. It had been only three days since they had escaped from the crickets, and during that time the giant had put enough men to work to make guns and manufacture a goodly supply of gun cotton and powder. If he expected to aid Moawha’s people he would have to hurry. And how could he hurry when he was a prisoner?

The big-headed pigmy shut off the pictures, and turned soberly to the other members of the council, speaking to them rapidly in an unknown

tongue. As one man they acquiesced in his conclusions.

“Free them!” the leader commanded, pointing at Epworth and his companions. “We wish to form an alliance with you. We have heard that you destroyed a ramph, and rescued one of our men from his jaws. That was a kind deed, and I am especially grateful because the man rescued was my son. But it is not gratitude that prompts me to this act. We want to see this man Toplinsky defeated in his purposes. We would rather leave things as they are than fall into the power of a mighty monster like this. Hence we are going to free you, and aid you to get across the light gap to the Land of the Selinites.”

He led them to a secret corner of the chamber, pushed aside a large stone, and showed them four cricket shells.

“Get into them,” he commanded. “They have been prepared for disguises, and if you use caution they will hide you from the soldiers. My son, the man you rescued from the ramph, will guide you.”

The four greatly harassed adventurers obeyed, and soon four crickets, guided by a pigmy soldier, left the Observatory of the Sons of the Great Selina, and somewhat clumsily made their way toward the border land, avoiding traffic and observation as much as possible.

CHAPTER XXIV

Behind a Copper Wall

The sun was sending its rays obliquely into the hole of Taunan when the four disguised crickets, still guided by the pigmy soldier, passed through a sleeping camp of crickets composing an army that was besieging the mountain pass into the Land of the Selinites. Notwithstanding the fact that the crickets had out guards well trained, their disguises enabled them to reach the beginning of a deep ravine that led up to a stretch of copper wire spread across the mountain to keep the crickets from getting into the Land of Selinites. This wire was an inch thick and meshed in six inches. It extended up into the sky as far as the eye could reach, and behind it they could see dimly a vast army of small men armed with copper axes, bows and arrows, spears and sharp lances. They were also enclosed in copper armor.

In the past, Moawha informed them, this armor had proved a great protection in battle but she was now afraid of the new methods of warfare that Toplinsky would introduce.

“And well may you be afraid,” Joan said. “But fortunately there has not yet been a serious attack on the wall, and if you leave things to Julian I am sure he will save your people.”

“G’wan,” Billy snorted indignantly. “I haven’t gone anywhere, and I’m something of a fighter myself.”

Again they discovered that they were talking too loud. Their guide, when he pointed to the wall, disappeared, and now, when they heard a chirping sound behind them, they turned apprehensively. Their fears were warranted. A band of crickets was entering the ravine behind them, and hailing them.

As they did not understand the cricket chirpings they decided to ignore them.

They hopped quickly toward the wall. Their movements were clumsy, the shells which covered their backs were heavy, and the sharp eyes of the crickets discovered that they were not what they represented themselves to be. A sharp, shrill, terrifying chirp went out, and the crickets rushed at them in a body, brandishing their sharp pronged spears.

Putting forth all their efforts they rushed toward the wall. The crickets pursued, chirping angrily, and gradually drawing nearer. That they would be overtaken was obvious.

“Throw off the shells, and run for it,” Epworth urged. “Hurry.”

He was obeyed, and soon the four were fast-footing over the uneven ground. They gained some but in discarding their disguises they lost much of their original position, and the crickets began to hop dangerously near.

At this moment curious faces were thrust against the copper wall on the other side. Moawha shouted at them in her language. At first they did not answer, and several crickets hopped in front of her.

Epworth and Billy acted in concert, firing their pistols. This brought them to a stop.

Shoving Moawha and Joan to the front the two men defended the rear.

“Call to your friends to open the wall,” Epworth shouted. “Let them know in as few words as possible who you are.”

The Selinites heard Moawha’s cries, recognized her, and with loud shouts of joy, threw open a gate, and rushed out in a body and drove the crickets back. Moawha jumped through the wall opening and pulled Joan with her; Billy and Epworth followed, and the wall door was slammed and fastened.

With a deep sigh of joy Moawha fell on her knees and extended her hands, palms open upward. That she was offering a prayer to God for her deliverance was obvious, and Billy uncovered his head and stood reverently by her side.

While Epworth was just as thankful he was a man of action. His first observation told him that under the leadership of Toplinsky the crickets and Taunans would walk through the copper mesh with wire cutters very easily. The wire, while strong enough to hurl back the bodies of the crickets, could be readily cut.

“Come,” he urged. “We have little time to lose. We must put your borderland in a condition to stand a siege.”

The Selinites were crowding around Moawha, and singing songs of joy, quite plainly establishing her claims to being their lost princess. With an impatient gesture Epworth caught her hand, and started down the incline toward the city he saw not five miles distant. The Selinites objected.

“Inform them that they must obey me implicitly,” Epworth instructed. “Tell them that there is grave danger from a new and mysterious source, and that action cannot be delayed. If they wish to hold a reception for you it should come later.”

Moawha obeyed, and the American, lifting her in his strong arms, ran hurriedly down the incline to the city. Going five miles on the moon, it must be remembered, is easier than going half a mile on the earth, and soon they were inside of the city, where they were met by a large concourse of people who wanted to take Moawha out of Epworth’s hands. But still holding her he pushed his way through the assemblage, and went to a building that looked like a power house.

His guess was correct, and he deposited Moawha on the floor and ran to a large coil of copper wire.

“Get busy, Billy,” he insisted anxiously. “This is an electric plant, and we must use the juice to charge that copper wire wall, and lay a mine for Toplinsky’s cricket army. If we can hold them outside for a time—until we can get our breath—perhaps we will find a means of pushing them back permanently.”

Billy, who was a splendid electrician, picked up another coil, attached the wire to a generator, and began to unroll the wire toward the top of the pass. The pigmies, crowding into the building, watched them with annoyance. Who were these white giants with their queen? What did they mean by short circuiting the industries of the city? Why were they meddling with the central electric plant?

A dozen little men came up to Moawha and protested. Epworth paused in his work to look at them. They were smaller in size than the Taunans but were more perfectly built. On their bodies, about the size of an eight year old boy, were handsomely formed heads, and pleasant, friendly faces.

“Explain to them that we are going to stop all their machinery until we can run electric juice into the wall that protects them from the cricket

army.”

The moment the Selinite scientists understood what the white giants were doing they joined in the work with enthusiasm, and sent out a call for help. Soon there were ten thousand small men rolling coils of wire toward the copper fence between the two countries. Never before had it entered their minds that they could make the wall deal death to their enemies. All they had hoped for was to see them fly against the mesh and rebound back.

In six hours the copper wall was electrically charged until its touch meant a shock of death, and Epworth stopped to sleep. While he was sleeping the Selinites recrowned Moawha queen. This was necessary because there was a law in the land that if a ruler was absent a certain length of time the crown was forfeited. Moawha had been a prisoner months over the time but they had loved her so dearly that hoping against hope they had not elected her successor.

Epworth was awakened by Joan and Moawha, both of whom were greatly frightened.

“Come,” Moawha pleaded, “they are assaulting our wall—or rather getting ready to.”

When the young man, accompanied by Billy, reached the scene, a great army of crickets was rolling up the mountainside in military formation. Epworth pushed into the Selinites at a critical moment. The crickets came within twenty feet of the wall and stopped. The pigmies, thinking that they were afraid of their spears and bows and arrows, began to gibe them.

The answer came before Epworth could give instructions. It was in the shape of a storm of lead from the front ranks of the crickets. It was a terrifying volley. The bullets whistled through the six inch mesh of copper and the Selinites were badly demoralized and fled in wild disorder.

Epworth saw the blast of gun fire with passionate anger. It looked to him like firing cannons at little children. Nevertheless he shouted and made a desperate effort to rally the Selinites. But they would not stop. Never before had they heard the report of a gun and although the guns being used were small and of rifle character they had no inclination to stay long to hear another discharge.

Urged on by their pigmy generals the crickets charged the wall. In their long feelers, extending from their mouths were strong wire cutters, and in their front arms they carried rifles and spears. For the safety of the Selinites

Epworth had turned on the electric current only to see that it was in working condition and had turned it off again. Now he gave the signal to charge the wall.

The signal was answered from the city just as the first ranks of crickets slammed against the copper wire. The charge caught them and hurled tons of them backward against their fellows, who crowded against them with their wire cutters.

Again Epworth signaled to the city, and the juice was cut off.

Not understanding this mysterious power flashed against them a number of Taunan officers approached the wire wall, and placed their hands on it. Nothing happened, and with puzzled faces they commanded another charge. Again Epworth signaled for the juice; again tons of crickets butted against the wall only to be hurled back by the invisible force of electricity.

For the second time the pigmy officers investigated the wall. It still seemed perfectly harmless, and they mustered up their courage to the point of ordering another attack. This time they threw an army of crickets against the wall, pushing the nearest crickets forward to the danger point with regiment after regiment.

The force of the movement was so severe that it bent the wall inward but the electric current still held them back.

The pigmy leaders now became genuinely alarmed at the fall of so many crickets, and drew the belligerent army back sullenly several hundred yards. For a time they stood in battle array just beyond the reach of the arrows from the wall, and waited until a messenger could be sent back inland to Toplinsky.

“Ah, ha,” Toplinsky muttered to himself when he heard the news, “these Selinites have recently received some scientific advice on war. I wonder if it is possible that those two Americans escaped from the caves, and landed here? If so——”

He clenched his right hand and put his left arm around Queen Carza’s waist.

“It will not do, my great lord and master,” Carza whispered to him in an undertone, “to permit the killing of so many crickets. See they are piled up in heaps in front of that copper wall. I have led my people to think that you can defeat the Selinites easily, and give them the new green world with few

fatalities. They are already mumbling to themselves. There have been killed
_____”

“Twenty thousand, I should roughly estimate,” Toplinsky interrupted abruptly. “They should have been more careful but I, the great Herman Toplinsky, will teach these people much. Draw back the army for a week, and at the end of that time I promise that there will be something doing. We will go through that wall as if it were not there.”

CHAPTER XXV

Gunpowder vs. Chlorine Gas

When the ranks of crickets dropped back, and established a great camp within shooting distance of the copper wall, Epworth was puzzled for a time to understand the object. Finally he concluded that Toplinsky was not yet ready to start his heavy guns to battering down the wall. This meant that the guns were not made.

“It will give me several days,” he told himself, “in which to prepare and take an inventory of the war material on hand.”

“That Toplinsky is hatching something,” Joan said, coming up from the city and looking over his shoulders as he was peering through the wall at the encamped crickets.

“Not at this moment,” Epworth reasoned. “He is getting ready to blow us out with gun cotton but he has not fully completed his preparations.”

“Let us drive them away from the wall before he gets a chance,” Billy suggested. “If we can make them draw back, or if we can defeat them before he is ready to shoot we will be on an equal footing.”

“The only way to drive them off is to kill them!” Epworth replied slowly, “and honestly, I do not like to do that.”

“They are not human beings,” Joan broke out snappily. “It will not be any worse than destroying an ant bed. If these Selinites are to be made happy they must be rid of this terrible menace.”

“I’ve got an idea,” Billy declared breathlessly. “Why not make a lot of gliders, sail out there over the heads of the fighters and lay them low with tear guns, spear thrusts, and arrows? True they can shoot a little but I have

an idea that they are not yet sufficient marksmen to stop an army of men over their heads.”

“Fine idea. Call Moawha.”

Moawha was not far distant, and when Billy called she came running.

“I want five hundred thousand of your best workmen, and as many of your bravest soldiers,” Epworth announced seriously. “I want them quickly and I want the material that goes into one hundred thousand gliders—two hundred thousand if we can get it. Rake your country quickly.”

Moawha did not know what kind of material went into a glider but when her scientists and expert mechanics appeared Epworth explained to them what he wanted, and with the assistance of Billy and Joan, put a glider together in five hours. When the glider was finished he sailed it into the air, and explained its workings, how he pedaled it like a bicycle, and the detail of manufacture. The pigmies proved very apt, and the day had not closed before they were turning the sailing crafts out rapidly. In three days they had fifty thousand, and were learning to sail them.

While the Selinites were making gliders under the instructions and guided by Billy, Epworth made a thorough search in the neighborhood for a large salt deposit. He found it—a long stretch of waste land which he reasoned had once been a small sea. With the help of the Selinite scientists he extracted from the salt hundreds of tanks of chlorine gas. By working feverishly he transferred this gas to the fighting front while he had another body of Selinites making chloroform guns. They were small and disappointing. When he first thought of the chlorine gas his heart beat high with hope but this hope was killed by an inability to construct a gas projectile that would throw the gas beyond a point where it would not sweep back into the face of his own men.

He was not certain but he thought that Toplinsky was laboring just as rapidly as he was but he was quite sure that the scientist was working entirely along the gun powder idea, and finally he developed an idea of air attack with the chlorine that he was convinced would put him on a good fighting footing although it did not promise such effect as bombing with great airplanes or throwing gas from a swift moving Zeppelin, or out of a huge cannon.

However he realized that this had narrowed down to a race between him and Toplinsky, and the moment he felt that he had a successful weapon he

concluded to open the doors of the border wall and make an attack on the cricket army.

On the evening of the sixth day he had fifty thousand gliders and as many chloroform guns ready for use. By the end of the next day he expected to add ten thousand more to his equipment. Of course he measured time by his watch, which he had managed to keep. With sixty thousand he would make the attack.

He was seated in a palatial room in the palace of Queen Moawha taking a brief rest, and talking over his plans with his three companions when the ground was shaken by a mighty roar—an explosion that reverberated throughout the underground world. Epworth knew instantly what it was but Moawha sprang up screaming with fear.

“Take it easy,” Billy soothed, putting his hand gently on her arm. “We are still here.”

“W-w-what was it?” she cried hysterically. “Is the whole world blowing up?”

“It is Toplinsky’s first big gun.”

“Run out to the gliders, and get the men in flying shape,” Epworth commanded quietly. “I will get the gunners and have the gas ready. Fortunately we have fifty thousand of the gliders armed, and the aviators have some idea of what we intend to do. We must not waste a second. Toplinsky will batter down that wire wall in ten minutes.”

“B-b-but,” Moawha hesitated.

“You have the only orders that will save your country. I am going to make for the borderland, and see if I can keep them from coming in on the women and children.”

He rushed out of the building, ran hurriedly to the house where the gun aviators were waiting in case of a call, and sent them hurriedly to join Billy and Moawha. Then he got one of the largest gliders, strapped the planes to his shoulders, and lifted into the air. As he whirled upward in a great circle another glider left the earth and came rapidly toward him.

Who was following him without orders? He frowned. He had set a task for himself. If he was killed Billy and Moawha could go on with their fight and possibly win the war. This party who was following him was getting in the way.

“Why are you trailing me?” he broke out angrily, slowing up a little in his pedaling. “I gave explicit orders to——”

“I happen to be an individual who does not take orders.” He looked around and found his sister, Joan, grinning at him. “I know that you are flying off at a tangent for some purpose, and I want to help.”

“Women are always getting in the way,” he ejaculated, somewhat annoyed. “I am going on a dangerous task, and you increase the danger.”

“I am no weakling,” she answered sharply. “I am thrown into a strange world without any friends except my brother. If he is killed I am left alone. I do not want to be alone. I am sticking right by your side until we find a resting spot where we can live without a constant threat of death.”

They arrived at the summit of the pass. Before them, huddled together like sheep, were many Selinite soldiers speeding toward their homes, and throwing away their arms as they hurried along.

“Hold! Stop!” Epworth shouted from the air. “Do you want your women and children to fall into the hands of these flesh-eating crickets? Turn back, and be men. Help me hold the wall.”

“A demon is belching at us,” one of the men cried out in broken English. “He is hiding behind an immense block of rock and with each breath he blows away our wall.”

“If you are men face the danger. If you are cowards run away. If you conclude to stay, pause behind this mountain side and if the crickets come in stay them if you can until re-enforcements arrive.”

The Selinites stopped, turned around and gathered up their weapons. Slowly but determinedly they backed against the mountain Epworth pointed out, and waited to see if their enemies came in. Here they were protected from the big guns, and Epworth and Joan topped the summit and sailed toward the copper wall. The defenders had departed as one man but the crickets had made no attempt to enter. They were waiting orders which were to come later.

Epworth had been bothered during his flight up to the wall about getting out. He had been rushed to an extent that he had had little time for the details of battle, and now he found that there were no Selinites to open and close the wall gates for the gliders, which he expected to shove out and start into the air on the other side.

However there was no necessity to open the gates. Toplinsky's big gun, fired only twice, had ripped the wall in a dozen places, and just as they came up another discharge rent the air. The gun scattered and the heavy slugs of rock, which Toplinsky was using instead of lead, whistled by on all sides. While another strip of wall fell the explosion only served to direct Epworth's gaze to its hidden resting spot.

"I am going to silence that gun," he called to Joan in a low voice. "Go back."

"Not me," Joan replied bravely. "I am going to aid you."

"It is probably manned by Taunans."

"Unlucky for them. I have my chloroform gun."

The Taunans and crickets did not see the camouflaged gliders slip softly out of the border gap, and sail slowly toward the smoking gun nest. They were ramming another load into the breech when suddenly from above them came a stream of greenish gas. When they looked up a strange bird-like animal was hanging over their heads, and sprinkling their faces with some mysterious fluid that smelt——

This was as far as they got in their cogitations. Under the powerful stroke of chlorine gas they fell on the ground unconscious, and Epworth dropped silently by the side of the monstrous cannon. Around him were scattered numerous cartridges stuffed with stones and gun cotton, and separating himself from his glider, with desperate haste he began to tear the roughly made cartridges to bits. Presently he had a large pile of gun cotton beneath the breech of the gun and stretched along the barrel. Then he strapped on his glider and took to the air, circled slowly around the gun and dropped a lighted match in the gun cotton.

It was a reckless act, and he knew it. The second the match left his hand he whirled his bicycle motor rapidly and pedaled with all of his strength.

He was lucky. The gun cotton did not blow up until he was out of the danger zone, and the explosion destroyed the usefulness of the cannon. With a grim smile Epworth sailed back to the borderland. He was just in time to meet an army of planes headed by Moawha and Billy.

His orders were for the pigmies to fight in pairs. One soldier, armed with a chlorine gun, was to fly over a cricket, discharge his gun into his face, and another Selinite was instructed to lean out of his glider as he passed over

and spear the crickets as they staggered. The gliders, it is well to state, were made large enough to carry two of the small Selinites, and the soldiers were equipped with gas masks.

Epworth had hoped to assault the crickets at a time when they were not expecting a battle but in this he was unsuccessful. Toplinsky had already begun the battle. However, in compliance with his orders when the gun was put out of commission a horde of Selinite soldiers rushed up to aid in the defense of the wall.

The fight began with a clear sky but the explosion of the heavy gun seemed to shake the air and send clouds of blackened powder upward, and long before the gliders were in good action a dark cloud spread across the sky. This aided the men in the air, and they sailed over the cricket army with very few fatalities. Their execution was terrible.

When the gliders reached the end of the cricket army they sent up rockets, and then darted hither and yon over the rear ranks shooting chloroform in great quantities on all sides. Thousands of crickets began to rush pell mell to and fro. While they were ready to obey their masters and fight anything on the ground this mysterious smell that came out of the air above them from winged birds that did not flap their wings was something they could not understand, and they threw down their arms and began to seek safety.

When this movement was completed and Epworth discovered that they had the crickets frightened he sent up more orders in the way of rockets which brought the Selinites in vast numbers charging down the side of the mountain with chloroform guns and spears in their hands.

And it was then that Toplinsky awoke to a bedlam of defeat around him. Everywhere his army was seeking safety; everywhere crickets were chirping wildly, demoralized, frightened; rushing over each other and crushing their pigmy officers. Toplinsky waved his arms and howled, cursed loudly, and hammered crickets with his great fists to force them back into battle; promised them victory, wheeled, fought and anathematized. But it was all in vain. A swarm of hopping insects shot by him on their way to the dark caves of Agrippa.

Presently the giant paused in manhandling his men, and sniffed the air. At the moment a Selinite glided by and shot a stream of wet stuff into his face. He closed his nostrils, and struck a mighty blow at the Selinite who was trying to gas him from the glider. Instantly he was surrounded by men, and

recognizing the fact that he had been chloroformed he suppressed his breath and charged into the Selinites who were upon him.

Toplinsky was in truth a mighty fighter—a giant of matchless courage, and single handed he stemmed the tide of opposition.

“Ah, ha, ho, ho,” he howled like a madman. “That cursed American! He is smart. How I hate him. Come out of the air, you coward, and fight like a man.”

Epworth, who was sailing near by, heard him.

“I am here, Toplinsky, and this is final.”

He dropped out of the air by the side of the giant, releasing his glider. Toplinsky charged with a bellow like a stuck bull. Epworth side stepped and slammed a terrific right into the giant’s face, and then a left into his side.

“Same old tactics,” sneered the scientist, “but you can’t get me that way.”

He jerked his gun. But he was destined never to fire. Moawha, with a host of her fighting men swept between them, and brandished their spears in the giant’s face.

“Hold!” Epworth shouted loudly. “Do not kill him. Take him alive. He is the only man who can pilot a ship back to the earth.”

“Ha, ha, ho, ho, the bantam wishes to return. He shall not.”

With a laugh like a demon the giant swept the small figures aside, whirled, and lifting Queen Carza upon his shoulders, leaped away into the night.

The rout of the crickets was complete. When the morning came and the clouds rolled away the field was a shambles and crickets lay gassed in piles. And Moawha and her soldiers were chasing the crickets in every direction. Across the arid wastes of Carza’s kingdom, on to her capital, a handsome city of twenty thousand inhabitants, and up to the mouth of the great crater that shot upward out of the inner world of the moon toward the unknown skies, Moawha’s soldiers followed the crickets.

But now the crickets were in the air, and when they came to the Agrippa Crater the little people were stopped. True they had been able to capture the entire land of the Taunans, and make prisoners of the leading military commanders but Carza and Toplinsky, convoyed by a band of winged crickets, had deserted the field of action and were flying rapidly toward the crater. Epworth, Joan and Moawha chased them to the opening, and

stopped. Their gliders, while strong enough to support them in the inner atmosphere, were not able to fly up through that dark forbidding hole.

Toplinsky, although defeated for the moment, discovered this, and stopped his band of crickets at the entrance.

“Ah, ha, ho! ho!” he shouted in his shrill loud voice that carried far into the inner world. “For the moment the American bantam triumphs. But the war has only begun. Soon I shall come again. The next time my valiant crickets and brave Taunans shall be armed with gases and guns that will slay millions. Until that time——”

Epworth and Moawha saw him wave his hands as if in high spirits. His action cast a damper over Moawha’s spirits, and Joan also was troubled.

“W-w-what would you advise?” Moawha asked of Epworth with much anxiety. “Never before have my soldiers been this far, and it seems to me if the crickets pour out of that hole over our heads, armed as that giant asserts they will be, they can creep upon us when we are asleep, and totally annihilate my forces.”

“It is a serious problem,” Epworth replied thoughtfully. “You say that you have a million fighting men?”

“About that number.”

“Then we’ve got to go up into that hole, and clean out that nest before Toplinsky has time to arm them. Give him three weeks and he will certainly destroy your country.”

CHAPTER XXVI

Writhing, Wriggling Ramphs

To prevent Toplinsky from sending a swarm of crickets out of the crater hole Epworth planted an army beneath the opening. The soldiers were armed with the longest range chloroform guns, and many of them were placed on the mountains that thrust up their summits near the crater. Then the young man turned his attention to solving the problem of seeing in the dark.

Tearing apart the cavern lamps he had hidden when he left his glider at this place he called in the brightest of the Selinite scientists and studied the lamps carefully. Fortunately he had worked with oven glass in his aviation work, and now he discovered that the outer lens of the lamps were made of this quartz glass, and the scientists informed him that behind the glass had been placed a coat of rhodamine dye. Thus an invisible image had been formed by ultra violet rays, and had been held by the rhodamine dye in a way that the darkness could not dissolve the image before it reached the eye.

When this discovery was made and the secret of the cavern lamps exposed he ordered two hundred thousand cavern lamps made as quickly as possible.

While he was doing this Toplinsky came down near the crater opening on the back of a crawling cricket, discovered the army camped beneath him, and dropped two large bombs on the Selinites.

“That’s just a reminder,” the giant shouted through a huge megaphone, “that I am getting busy. In two weeks—ah, ha! perhaps in two weeks—I

shall come again.” The Selinites shot up at him and his crickets with their chloroform guns, and were rewarded by a loud laugh, and then silence.

A terrifying, baffling gloom settled down on the Selinites. They had won a great victory, they had chased the crickets out of their country and had captured the Land of Taunan, and yet they realized that a man who could drop bombs out of the sky in the end would defeat them. Epworth, who was also puzzled deeply over a way to get into the crater, heard this underground rumbling, and felt his own spirits dampen. He and his sister, Joan, and Billy, of all the people in the Lunar world, knew just how dangerous Toplinsky was.

It was during a period of his deepest gloom that the leader of the Sons of the Great Selina came out of his mountain retreat and called on him.

“You wish to go up into the crater?” the councilman inquired with a sly smile.

Epworth did not like the smile. There seemed to be hidden treachery behind the smirk. But he was in a desperate hurry. He felt sure that if given time he could finally build an airship operated by electricity with a wire line attached to a power plant constructed beneath the crater to run an electric motor on the plane but this could only carry a limited number of soldiers, and what he had to do must be done at once. “I certainly do,” he answered abruptly, putting aside his suspicions.

“It will take courage.”

“I am not boasting of courage,” the young American said quietly.

“The path leads through a nest of ramphs—many thousands of the most vicious reptiles known.”

Epworth shuddered. The fights he had had with this monstrous Thing on the bridge, and inside of the crater were still fresh in his mind.

“If it is the only way,” he responded.

The councilman of the Great Selina patted him on the shoulder.

“Certainly you have courage. It is a pity you are not a Son of the Great Selina. Perhaps if you clean out the dangers of this world we may make you an honorary member. You remember the dark chasm beneath the bridge that is near the retreat of our order?”

“I should say. I was just thinking of the terrific battle we had with one of the monsters on that bridge as you were speaking of them.”

“It came up out of that chasm. Drop down to the bottom of that chasm, follow it inside of the planet into a narrow tunnel until you come to the Chamber of Horrors, clean out the Chamber of Horrors, cross it and enter another corridor that leads straight ahead and upward, and if you live you will come to the home of the crickets.”

“Did you ever make that journey?” Epworth demanded sharply.

“No, I care not to meet those terrifying reptiles.”

“How then do you know that this chasm will lead me to the crickets?”

“Other Sons of the Great Selina, more hardy than our present council, made the trip ages ago, and left records.”

Epworth put himself at the head of an army of two hundred thousand Selinites armed with chloroform guns and long sharp steel spears, and with their heads covered with gas masks, and their eyes aided by cavern lamps, lowered the soldiers into the chasm on long ropes, gliders, and various devices of a temporary character. At a point where the chasm extended into the earth and the light of day was shut out he stopped in a narrow defile, and addressed the army briefly.

“We are going into that hole,” he said slowly, instructing all who could hear to carry his words on to the rear ranks. “If we come out your country will be saved. If we do not come out your wives and children will know that you are dead, and become the slaves of the crickets and Taunans.”

With this he adjusted his cavern lamp, and darted forward. The moment he left the light of day and looked downward he saw that the floor of the cavern was slightly sandy. Soon he discovered evidence of gigantic bodies having been dragged through the sandy soil. Examination disclosed the fact that they had been made by lizard-shaped ramphs over a hundred feet long with six feet on each side of their bodies.

When Epworth and Joan saw the imprint of these feet cold chills passed down their backs. Very likely there were thousands of these Things ahead of them, and every time they thought of the fight they had had with one of the Things near the cricket home Epworth shook with fear, and Joan thought that her mind would be shattered.

Nevertheless they marched bravely into the hole in the moon.

Onward, climbing steadily upward, hour after hour, moving like silent shadows in order that their presence might not be betrayed, the Selinites

marched with Epworth, Joan, Billy, and Queen Moawha at their head. They traveled with their chloroform guns in their hands, and their eyes straining ahead, the way being given additional light by strong electric flash lights. The danger Epworth was aware would not have been as great if he had had room to spread out his army but the corridor was so narrow in places that he could march his men only a hundred abreast.

They had been climbing upward fifteen hours, pushing earnestly ahead, when they were warned that they were approaching something by a noisome smell that came to their nostrils. Joan was the first to get the scent, and she stopped with a shudder.

“I know now what that smell means,” she whispered in a frightened voice, “and I can also feel the invisible movement of the Things ahead. They are preparing for us.”

The idea that innumerable great and mysterious monsters were preparing to do battle against them caused Epworth and Billy to pause also and shoot their flash lights far ahead.

“There is something uncanny, terrifying, unnatural, inhuman about the Things,” Epworth answered. “I feel as if I were going forth to battle with gigantic spiritual monsters of evil. They move so swiftly, so silently. They are on you before you know it.”

Billy’s teeth chattered, and Joan trembled violently. The horrors of that dark underground world were upon them notwithstanding the fact that they were backed by a splendid army.

Epworth waited until several hundred soldiers were around them, and then gave orders to march forward with all their flash lights hurling flames ahead.

The cavern heretofore had been a long, narrow corridor. Now it suddenly flared out into an immense underground chamber, and at the entrance of this chamber, lying flat and the color of their bodies changing like variegated lizards to fit into their surroundings, were twelve round-bodied, scaly backed animals with polygonal plates covering their heads. They had their tongues sticking out, and their three red eyes glared savagely.

“Flash every light into their eyes,” Epworth shouted. “Blind them.”

Instantly a hundred flashes of steady crimson shot into the eyes of the ramphs, and their tails began to lash up and down on the gray floor. Their

changing colors made this motion barely perceptible.

“Now let twenty chloroform guns shoot into their eyes and nostrils.”

The gas guns were long straight tubes that carried repeated shots of chloroform, and by the time the twenty guns had fired one shot each the twelve ramphs had dropped their heads.

“Glory be!” Joan cried. “It works.”

“Advance and use your spears.”

One hundred men rushed forward, and began to thrust at the doped reptiles. Their thrusts were seemingly useless, the hard gristle of the lizards turning the spears easily. For a moment Epworth was nonplussed. They could chloroform the Things but how could they kill them?

“Stab them in their eyes!” he commanded sharply, stepping up to one of the monsters, which was over a hundred feet long, and jabbing his own weapon into the monster’s middle eye. “Perhaps that will get them.”

It did. The animal, stricken, doubled up suddenly, and lashed downward with its tail then quieted down. Epworth stepped over its immense leg, and looked into the chamber. What he saw caused him to draw back hastily.

He was looking into a large subterranean world alive with hideous Things. Thousands of them were slinking back against the floor, changing their color to suit the rugged rocks around them until they were almost invisible; others were standing on their rear feet gazing toward the entrance; others were fastened to the walls of the chamber with their fierce eyes glaring fire. The young American felt his blood run cold.

Would it be possible to wipe out this pest hole with his army of little children—small men who depended entirely on his leadership?

A little thought convinced him that it was imperative that they must take the ramphs by surprise. But the fact that there had been twelve reptiles at the entrance indicated that there was some sort of a military organization that knew the value of sentinels.

He glanced again into the chamber. This time he steeled himself to meet the horror. The monsters, while many of them had their heads lifted, had not discovered the presence of enemies.

Fearing that the flash lights might arouse them he ordered all lights closed, and made an investigation with his cavern lamps. In front of him the enormous chamber extended as far as the eye could reach, and the walls went up to a ceiling he knew was there but could not see. At the outer edge

of his vision he could make out a pool of black water. The pool and the chamber were full of writhing, wriggling, monstrous reptiles. Old lizards, young lizards, male lizards, female lizards, baby lizards, lizards in all stages of growth, crawled like ants around the chamber and into the lake.

A wave of despondency swept over the young man. A single lizard, crashing into the narrow corridor where his army was concealed, could wipe it clean of human life. He must get his men out of the corridor where they could spread out, and he must do it without letting the lizards know they were in the chamber.

Quietly, with desperate courage, he placed himself at the head of his soldiers and gave whispered orders, and slipped cautiously into the ramph chamber. The smell was awful, nauseating, sickening, almost death-dealing.

“A Chamber of Horrors, truly!” Joan gasped. “Will we ever get out?”

However the Selinites moved with such caution that several hundred soldiers were in the room, and lined up along the sides of the walls nearest the entrance before their presence was noticed.

“We must protect the entrance,” Epworth urged. “The second a lizard starts into it we must get him, and keep the door open for our companions to come in. Fire obliquely with your chloroform guns.”

He had hardly ceased speaking when the battle began.

One who has seen a lizard dart up the trunk of a tree can form an idea of the incredible swiftness of these great monsters. Before Epworth was aware a huge Thing dropped from the ceiling in front of him with a shrill siren call to its companions. Its eyes were flaming red; its mouth was foaming; its split tongue, protruding in evil menacing, twisted to and fro swiftly. It came with such awful quickness that Epworth was paralyzed for a second.

Joan saved him.

With remarkable calmness she extended her long light chloroform tube, and squirted the gas into the reptile’s snorting nostrils. It sent out a flaming, overpowering smoke, snorted fearfully, and toppled over immediately in front of Epworth, who jumped back hastily against the wall, and thrust his sharp spear into its eye. Then with a little gasp of horror he grabbed Joan and dropped down behind the animal’s body, making it a fortress against another attack. Thus protected the two began to use their dope guns with deadly effect. Their example was followed by the soldiers under their command.

In the meantime Billy and Moawha, who were leading the attack on the opposite side of the entrance, were having an experience very similar, although Billy dropped the first reptile quicker than Epworth had done, and protected his men with greater ease.

In a short time the lizards were piled up around the entrance for several hundred yards, and were climbing over each other in a vain attempt to get to the soldiers. This enabled the Selinites to run out of the narrow corridor and join their companions, thus pushing the tide of battle back on the lizards, and piling them high around. While many of the Selinites were hurt, in two hours the entire army was inside of the Chamber of Horrors, and the battle was won.

Soon the great chamber was full of chlorine gas, and the ramphs were choking, snorting, snapping death (without knowing where it came from) while the Selinites were protected by their gas masks. Now Epworth commanded a company of soldiers to circle around the place, find the tunnel on the other side that led to the Cricket World, and bar it up with stones in order to keep the gas inside of the ramph chamber.

When this was accomplished the reptiles were driven from the walls and floors into the lake of black water. This lake, Epworth found out, was several miles long and over a mile wide but the water was shallow, and proved of little aid to the lizards. When the reptiles stuck their heads under the water they gained some respite but not understanding what was troubling them they lifted their heads immediately, again to be caught by the breath of chloroform. Then they sank never to rise.

When the dope had cleaned them out, the Selinites calmly plunged their spears into their eyes.

At the end of a day's hard fighting the work was done. Not a single ramph was left to start another race of monsters, and Epworth, opening the tunnel on the opposite side, led his soldiers out of the terrifying place, and sealed it up again in order that the fumes should be confined to the area occupied by the lizards.

Then, after a long rest, he turned his face toward that nightmare of horror—the home of the crickets. Here he expected to meet Toplinsky armed with gun cotton, huge guns, and powerful explosives, an intelligent man leading a multiple host of soulless insects—insects that ate flesh of all kinds of men and animals.

CHAPTER XXVII

Carza's Use of Lava Streams

While he was backed by an army of Selinites, Epworth felt as he came to a halt in front of a crude stone wall as if the lives of thousands of little children were in his hands. Under his leadership these little men could be brave and victorious. Without him he imagined that they would melt like snow before the onrush of the crickets, and the vicious Taunan dwarfs. To protect them he concluded to go ahead and reconnoiter.

He recognized the corridor. It was the place where he and Joan had had their first encounter with a ramph. He shivered again as he thought of the uncanny feeling that had swept over him at the time.

They discovered that the wall which blocked their way was of recent construction, and that it cut them off from the Lava Chamber. When they attempted to remove the heavy stones they proved burdensome although no attempt had been made to cement the stones into position.

Finally Epworth and Joan removed their gas masks and cavern lamps, and thrust their heads through the new-made hole in the wall. As they expected they found that the little stream of spluttering, moving fire sent out a dim light that created ghostly shadows, and dark spots, deepened by the fact that their eyes were not accustomed to any light except that given by the photographing of dark images on the open glass and rhodamine dye by the cavern lamps.

The chamber appeared empty, and Epworth stepped through the wall into the chamber.

"Come on," he said to Joan, "everything seems all right."

Joan obeyed quickly, and the two turned to step across the chamber toward the lava stream. As they moved away Billy and Moawha, who had been aiding them in removing the loose stones, ran back to join the Selinite army. This left the man and girl alone to spy out the situation.

“Ah, come in lads! Sure everything is all right,” a shrill voice called out. “Most assuredly the goose hangs high. Throw up your hands!”

The last command was jerked out viciously.

Epworth rubbed his eyes and glanced in the direction of the voice. He did not need to be told that the speaker was Toplinsky. The giant was standing behind the divan on which he first saw Moawha, and had a long rifle pointed at his heart. Near Toplinsky were Queen Carza, and six Taunans, all of whom were covering him with guns.

The young American dropped to his knees and plunged forward like a football player. Joan stood still, not knowing what to do.

Toplinsky and the Taunans fired but their bullets went wild. Before they could shoot again Epworth was on the giant. But the divan was in the way, and he was forced to stand up, and drive at Toplinsky's face with his clenched hand. With a howl of rage the giant threw his immense arms around the young man and pinioned him as he was struck.

“Ah, ha! I have you at last. In these great arms I hold you. You are my meat.” Toplinsky grinned to himself as he thought of the trap he had laid for these spies when he heard the noise of the stones being removed. “I shall delight in squeezing you to death.”

“Not so, my dear,” Queen Carza put in sweetly. “This earth man has given us much trouble, and he has sneaked in here for no gentle purpose. We must discover his purpose. Let me deal with him.”

“Just as you say, my little one. Ho, soldiers! Tie him up tight.”

The command was obeyed quickly, Epworth's hands and feet being laced together.

“What are you doing here?” Carza inquired slyly, shoving her thumb viciously into Joan's ribs. “Where did you come from? We know that that passage leads to the ramph chamber, and you must have found some other way to get in. Tell us about it, my little dear.” Her voice was soft but menacing.

She pinched Joan wickedly, and the girl shrank from her.

“The man will tell,” Toplinsky broke in anxiously. “The girl——”

“Is nothing to you,” Queen Carza interrupted brittlely. “And I do not like her.”

Toplinsky did not reply. Stooping down he removed Epworth’s sandals, and pushed up the pants until his knees were exposed. Queen Carza, noting the soft white skin, rubbed his leg gently.

“Nice. Soft. White.” She spoke very pleasantly. “Almost as soft——”

She removed Joan’s stockings, and pointed at the stream of lava.

“Why the girl?” Toplinsky protested. “We are not making war on women.”

This remark astonished Epworth. He was of the opinion that Toplinsky would not hesitate to war on a child.

“The man may let us burn his legs but he will not permit the delicate coloring of his sister’s legs to be changed by harsh measures.”

Toplinsky shuddered. He really had no intention of burning Epworth’s legs. His act was a bluff in the hope of getting the American to speak up.

“Yes we will begin with the man.” The queen kneeled down by the side of the American and smilingly stroked his leg. “But think not of the woman kindly. It is not likely that she will ever leave this chamber, so you had best forget her.”

“She came with me against my will,” Epworth asserted. “I am the one who holds the scheme under his hat, and you two are not going to discover it.”

“Tush, tush, my friend,” Toplinsky sneered. “That is too bad.”

“Nice white legs that will burn quickly.” Queen Carza pulled Epworth slowly toward the lava fire. He was surprised at the strength she displayed. She stopped before she got to the stream of lava but when she placed his bare legs on the stone floor he discovered that it was scorching hot.

“Not too hot but comfortably nice,” Carza observed with an interested stare, and added brightly, “did I understand that you wanted to talk?”

Epworth thought of the Selinite soldiers hidden in that narrow passage just beyond the pile of loose boulders. If Toplinsky discovered that they were there he could roll into the lava chamber one of his big guns and clean the passage of every vestige of life. The Selinites could neither retreat or advance. Inwardly he cursed the evil ramph corridor but outwardly he was calm and even-tempered. He shook his head quietly and looked at Joan.

Joan understood him, and he saw her clench her teeth. It broke his heart to think of the torture that would come to her but he was now convinced that Toplinsky would never know that his foes were getting ready to spring out of the darkness upon him.

“No, he does not wish to talk, and he has such a long tongue, and it can wag so swiftly at times. Perhaps the lady would like to talk for him?”

Carza shoved Epworth up to the edge of the lava stream, and permitted his legs to hang over the spluttering fires. At the same time she looked inquiringly at Joan. Joan shook her head dumbly. She would gladly give her life to save Epworth from torment but this had now become a question of honor.

“No!”

Carza waved her hand. Instantly her Taunan soldiers sprang forward, and dragged Joan up to the stream of lava. The sweat of torture began to pour from the faces of Epworth and Joan.

“No, stop it!”

Toplinsky leaped across the chamber and dragged Joan from the fire.

“Ah, so you want her. You think that you will keep her, and when you get control of the world you will throw me down and make her your queen. I have feared it.”

“Honestly, I never thought of it that way,” Toplinsky replied abashed.

CHAPTER XXVIII

In the Armory

Carza stamped her foot with imperial authority. The Taunans grasped Joan and lifted her in their arms.

“Hold! Drop the girl.”

Billy and Moawha, both of whom had grown anxious over the prolonged absence of Epworth and Joan, thrust their faces through the hole in the wall. The second Billy saw his friend he understood the situation, and shouted loudly. But he was not satisfied with calling out.

Thrusting his chloroform gun through the wall he sprayed the six Taunans who were carrying Joan toward the fire. The chloroform stupified them instantly, and Joan fell to the floor. Immediately Billy, Moawha and many Selinite soldiers crowded into the chamber. Moawha and her soldiers used their guns on the dwarfs and while they were doing this Billy rushed to the aid of Joan and Epworth. Slashing the cords that held them he grabbed some gas masks from two of the Selinite soldiers and brought them down over Epworth's and Joan's heads.

This was an infinite relief to Epworth and Joan. Already they were feeling the effects of the chlorine, and as soon as they experienced the relief they sprang to their feet, and shot their eyes around in search of Toplinsky and Queen Carza. They were in time to see the two leaders dashing toward an open door.

“This way!” Epworth called out hurriedly. “Toplinsky and the queen are rushing to organize the crickets. We must beat them to it.”

Followed by Joan and many Selinite soldiers Epworth pursued Toplinsky and the queen. As they passed corridor after corridor of caves Queen Carza sent out her chirping warning to the crickets.

While Epworth and Joan chased anxiously after Toplinsky, Billy and Moawha stopped many of the Selinite soldiers, and began to pour chloroform at the insects. But not all of the soldiers followed them. Several thousand rushed after Epworth and Joan.

Suddenly Toplinsky and the queen, who had been dimly visible down the corridor, disappeared. When Epworth and Joan arrived at the point where they had disappeared they found themselves looking down a long incline into an immense chamber. The moment he saw this chamber Epworth realized that he was looking at the magazine and armory that Toplinsky had prepared for the crickets. The space was teeming with crickets, multiplied thousands of them. Toplinsky was standing on a keg of powder bellowing commands, which were translated to the crickets by the queen in the chirping voice of the crickets.

As Epworth stopped he looked behind him, and discovered that he was followed by Selinite soldiers ready to attack the crickets. Already Toplinsky was forming gun troops to shoot heavy cannon balls down the corridor he was standing in. If Toplinsky could get his big guns into operation he would annihilate the small army of Selinites in the corridor.

Epworth was worried. What should he do? His entire scheme of surprise had fallen flat before he could get his chloroform guns battering at the center of the cricket population.

A blundering cricket solved his problem for him. A dwarf was explaining to the cricket the method of firing a cannon with a torch. The cricket fumbled the torch, and the flame fell on a powder fuse.

The fuse was Toplinsky's fatal mistake.

He had placed it and connected it with all of the powder and explosives he had made with the intention of trapping invaders in the armory, and blowing them up. It was a good idea of defense properly managed.

Now the torch fired the fuse, and the blaze spluttered along toward the great magazine like a swiftly crawling snake. Toplinsky saw it, and dashed recklessly at the fuse to stamp it out. He did not pause to lower the queen, who was sitting on his shoulders.

He ran like the wind. Swiftly spluttered the fuse. Great beads of sweat slipped out of the giant's face. It was a race with death.

Faster and faster raced the fuse. Toplinsky, in his hurry, forgot the gravity of the moon. He lifted his foot as if running in an Olympic meet. The act caused him to topple over although it carried him nearer the goal. Staggering to his feet, with the queen still clinging to his shoulders, he made another attempt.

Now the spluttering fire was almost to the magazine. Epworth shuddered and jerked Joan back. If Toplinsky failed——

The giant was almost on the fuse; he lifted his foot upward to stamp out the fire. Again in his excitement he overlooked the moon's light gravity. His foot came down on the opposite side of the spluttering fire.

There came a terrific explosion. It sounded like an inside volcano blowing off the top of the moon.

Epworth and Joan were lucky. They were standing in a corridor Toplinsky had set apart as a safety valve for the men who fired the fuse if commanded. Crouching down they saw the interior of the tremendous cavern shoot upward. Then rocks and debris began to fall with loud crashes.

The sides and roof of the cavern had caved in, and the debris was showering down like falling snow.

The vast horde of crickets that had been rushing around arming themselves and pushing guns forward to drive out the Selinites disappeared as if by magic.

Toplinsky, their scientific leader, had brought annihilation to himself and his whole colony of crickets by his shrewd attempts to slay others.

The living remnants of crickets, hidden in their secret nests, were hunted down by the Selinite soldiers, who rooted them out forever.

Moawha, kind-hearted and troubled, granted amnesty to the Taunan dwarfs when they pledged allegiance to the Selinite nation.

CHAPTER XXIX

Out of the Depths

Epworth, Joan, and Billy soon grew weary of life with the Selinites. They were banqueted, honored in every way possible, and assured constantly of the gratitude and friendship of Moawha and her people. But the people were little, the houses were small, life was narrowed to investigations of the interior of the moon, and what they could learn from the Selinite scientists.

In addition to this Epworth felt that it was his duty to go back to the Aerolite, and give aid to the colonists. They had made him co-leader with Toplinsky; and they expected him to give them the best advice and help he could. It entered his mind that he could bring them down into the interior of the moon where they could live with greater ease.

But when he spoke of this to Moawha she demurred. She had heard about the colonists from Joan, and she was not impressed with the idea of turning a lot of robbers and bad men loose among her people.

“At first, under your control, they might behave themselves,” she said, “but if you were to die they might decide to run wild, and annoy my people.”

“That is true,” Epworth admitted reluctantly. “I am not bragging about their religious background.”

“Even if I agreed, there comes the question of getting them here. How would you manage that? How will you go back to them?”

“We might take them back to the earth,” Billy suggested.

“That is another problem with Toplinsky dead. Just the same I am going to see just how easy it will be for us to fly up to the outer crust through

Crater Agrippa.”

“When you make the attempt I go with you,” said the loyal Joan.

“Count me in it,” Billy added.

“Very well; we are on our way.”

To accomplish the ascending flight Epworth made three large motor-gliders. Well supplied with provisions for the trip, the three hardy Americans, accompanied by Moawha, made their way to the spot where the hole of the crater opened out from the inner world of the moon. It was a great frowning, black hole but the hardy adventurers did not let the looks of the route affect them. They bade Moawha a pleasant farewell, climbed into their gliders, and began to pedal around in a circle. In this manner they soon left the land of the Selinites, the light of day, and climbed up into the darkness with their flashlights in hand and their cavern lanterns fastened to their heads.

The upward trip was uneventful until Epworth suddenly found himself flying near a roof of large boulders and rocks which had not been there when they came down from the cricket nest. When he was joined by Joan and Billy all three flew around in a circle looking for an opening that would lead them upward.

They could find no way to go out.

“What has happened?” Billy inquired in great alarm when they discovered that their way out was blocked. “All these rocks were not here when we came down.”

“It looks to me as if that terrific explosion that Toplinsky set off has caused the insides of the crater to fall in and block all passage upward,” Epworth reasoned. “We are probably in a part of the crater which was narrow, and when the big boulders fell they crashed together.”

“That means that we are not going out,” Joan observed very quietly. She was very anxious to get out and try to get back to the earth. Of the three she was the one who had little interest in the inside of the moon. “I—I—had been building up great hopes.”

Epworth made a thorough examination of the rocks and debris that blocked the way.

“We are not going out this way,” he said, shaking his head sadly. “It looks as if we are doomed to become Selinites.”

“Moawha and her people are very charming,” Joan added thoughtfully, “but they are not our kind of people. They like us now but the Selinites may take a notion to change rulers over night. If they did we might not be so popular.”

“The light in the Land of the Selinites is steady, constant, and never lets up,” Billy put in. “You have explained that to me with the statement that the sun shines all the time through an open space in Mount Leibnitz. That means that there is an outer opening in that mountain. Why not try going out that way?”

“Billy, you are a scholar and a statesman,” Epworth declared enthusiastically. “We will do that very thing.”

They returned to Moawha’s city, and explained to her why they could not go on to the outer portion of the moon. When they told her that they were going to try to go out through the hole in Mount Leibnitz she immediately informed them that she would go with them as far as Mount Leibnitz.

Moawha had spent her entire life in the Land of the Selinites, and the idea that there was a great ball of fire out in space and shining through the outer rim of the moon was new and strange to her.

“I can’t believe that there is such a fire,” she exclaimed. “If there is I want to see it.”

Again Epworth, Joan and Billy, accompanied by Moawha, made a journey with a view of gaining the exterior. It was not a hard trip. All four had motor-gliders, and were able to fly easily over the rugged hills and interior projections of the moon which stuck up like small mountains.

But as they approached the great Mount Leibnitz the air grew warmer and warmer. Presently it became intensely hot, and even when they faced this heat they did not get a view of the sun. It was the steady flame of sunlight reflected against the rugged interior near the south pole that created the heat.

Nevertheless Epworth insisted on pressing onward. Finally they came to a mountain that ran up into a sharp peak. This mountain reflected many and varied coruscations, indicating that it was a large heap of colored stones. The heat here was almost unbearable but Epworth persisted in his advance until the three stood on a high peak with a blazing light all around them. Epworth was the first one to climb to the top of this peak.

“There, Moawha, is the mass of fire that makes the light and heat for your world.”

He turned, and lifted the little queen in his arms. What she saw caused her to cover her eyes with her hands and scream.

A great ball of blazing fire, bigger than anything Epworth had ever seen, shot down at them from out of the sky. Its heat was scorching, burning, blistering. Just a few moments under that blazing glare, and their clothing would be scorched, their flesh would be a mass of blisters, and they would fall down never to rise, yet this was their only way out!

“We can’t go out here,” Joan remarked quietly, as she pulled her brother back so that he was protected from the blazing sun by the top of the mountain. “This is just the beginning. There may be miles and miles of heated interior before we can get out of the hole to outer space.”

“Then we will have the same heat until we get to a point where the movements of the moon bring about the fourteen days of night.” Billy’s voice was mournful. “It looks to me that we are inside of the moon for keeps.”

Epworth led them down the mountain side to a spot where they were given the shadows of the hill in a way that brought a little relief from the terrible blaze. When he stopped he glanced at Joan’s hat. It was a combination of light straw and cloth, held away from her head by four slender slits of leather in such a way that the air percolated through her hair.

Taking the hat in his hand he studied it for several moments.

“I have an idea,” he said quietly. “Let’s go back to the Land of the Selinites, and work it out.”

Blindly his companions followed him, and for two weeks Epworth worked with the best scientists of the Land.

The result of this labor was the construction of three hollow body-helmets of asbestos, held away from the skin of the body so that air could percolate between the asbestos and their bodies. Air helmets for their heads were also made of asbestos. In addition to this, they covered their gliders with asbestos. Over all Epworth spread a coat of aluminum.

Thus prepared they flew again to the South Pole. Moawha went with them.

“I am not going to let my good friends leave me as long as I can see them,” she assured them. “Maybe you will have to come back again. I hope

so. But if you do not you shall know that Moawha loves you, and wants you with her.”

It was a solemn parting. They left Moawha standing on the shady side of Mount Leibnitz’ peak waving her hand at them, and crying softly.

All three sprang into the air at the same time. Epworth jockeyed his glider near to Joan, and pointed upward. Upward meant straight into a blazing sun without any signs of land around them until they passed out of the crater.

“That for the heat!” shouted Billy when he got up into the glare of the sun, and discovered that the improvised protection would in a way answer the purpose. “I can stand a little heat.”

But he had no idea of the heat he would have to stand. Soon he discovered that he had spoken joyfully too soon.

It was an endless fiery furnace. Hour after hour they circled upward and outward. The hole in Mount Leibnitz proved of enormous size; the heat was greater than any they had ever encountered.

Fortunately Epworth had brought his binoculars with him, and using these, and his natural orientation, he was able to keep near the western line of the crater and know when they had left the inner part of the moon and had gained the outer portion.

Then began another long, wearisome journey, traveling over the surface of the moon without a compass. Putting the sun to their backs the three flew on, and on and on. But to give all the details of that terrible trip through blinding, blazing heat would necessitate a volume. They found some diminution in the heat after leaving the crater of Mount Leibnitz. Had it not been so they would never have accomplished their journey.

But finally they got to the Sea of Vapours and the lake that Toplinsky had made. Here they met with a pleasant surprise.

Epworth and Billy were of the opinion that they would experience much trouble in learning to operate the Aerolite. The nearer they got to the Rocket ship the more depressed they became because of this idea.

But when they landed near the Aerolite they were met by Michael Strauss. He greeted them joyfully.

“You are just in time,” he said, shaking their hands heartily. “I have been digging into Toplinsky’s desk. The giant left hidden there some blue prints of the Aerolite, and instructions about controlling it, and directing its

course. These instructions are simple to a navigator and mechanic, and now that Toplinsky is dead I will undertake to guide the Rocket back to the earth.”

Gladly Epworth placed the matter in Michael’s hands after he had read the instructions, and under Michael’s skillful navigation the trip was made safely.

Naturally Toplinsky’s moon colonization scheme fell through but Epworth gave the colonists time to disappear from the Arctic camp, and then he and Joan and Billy found their way back to America, and sent government planes to recover the loot Toplinsky had stolen.

But one mystery always remained to trouble the astronomers. What had made the dark spot near the corner of the Sea of Vapours, and why did it gradually vanish?

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE MOON COLONY ***

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