The Emancipatrix



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THE EMANCIPATRIX

by HOMER EON FLINT

New York

[Illustrated title: ‘The Emancipatrix’ in script, over a background of a bee silhouetted against a full moon on the horizon.]

I

THE MENTAL EXPEDITION

The doctor closed the door behind him, crossed to the table, silently offered the geologist a cigar, and waited until smoke was issuing from it. Then he said:

“Well,” bluntly, “what’s come between you and your wife, Van?”

The geologist showed no surprise. Instead, he frowned severely at the end of his cigar, and carefully seated himself on the corner of the table. When he spoke there was a certain rigor in his voice, which told the doctor that his friend was holding himself tightly in rein.

“It really began when the four of us got together to investigate Capellette, two months ago.” Van Emmon was a thorough man in important matters. “Maybe I ought to say that both Billie and I were as much interested as either you or Smith; she often says that even the tour of Mercury and Venus was less wonderful.

“What is more, we are both just as eager to continue the investigations. We still have all kinds of faith in the Venusian formula; we want to ‘visit’ as many more worlds as the science of telepathy will permit. It isn’t that either of us has lost interest.”

The doctor rather liked the geologist’s scientific way of stating the case, even though it meant hearing things he already knew. Kinney watched and waited and listened intently.

“You remember, of course, what sort of a man I got in touch with. Powart was easily the greatest Capellan of them all; a magnificent intellect, which I still think was intended to have ruled the rest. I haven’t backed down from my original position.”

“Van! You still believe,” incredulously, “in a government of the sort he contemplated?”

Van Emmon nodded aggressively. “All that we learned merely strengthens my conviction. Remember what sort of people the working classes of Capellette were? Smith’s ‘agent’ was typical—a helpless nincompoop, not fit to govern himself!” The geologist strove to keep his patience.

“However,” remarked Kinney, “the chap whose mind I used was no fool.”

“Nor was Billie’s agent, the woman surgeon,” agreed Van Emmon, “even if she did prefer ‘the Devolutionist’ to Powart. But you’ll have to admit, doc, that the vast majority of the Capellans were incompetents; the rest were exceptions.”

The doctor spoke after a brief pause. “And—that’s what is wrong, Van?”

“Yes,” grimly. “Billie can’t help but rejoice that things turned out the way they did. She is sure that the workers, now that they’ve been separated from the ruling class, will proceed to make a perfect paradise out of their land.” He could not repress a certain amount of sarcasm. “As well expect a bunch of monkeys to build a steam engine!

“Well,” after a little hesitation, “as I said before, doc, I’ve no reason to change my mind. You may talk all you like about it—I can’t agree to such ideas. The only way to get results on that planet is for the upper classes to continue to govern.”

“And this is what you two have—quarreled about?”

Van Emmon nodded sorrowfully. He lit another cigar absent-mindedly and cleared his throat twice before going on: “My fault, I guess. I’ve been so darned positive about everything I’ve said, I’ve probably caused Billie to sympathize with her friends more solidly than she would otherwise.”

“But just because you’ve championed the autocrats so heartily—”

“I’m afraid so!” The geologist was plainly relieved to have stated the case in full. He leaned forward in his eagerness to be understood. He told the doctor things that were altogether too personal to be included in this account.

Meanwhile, out in the doctor’s study, Smith had made no move whatever to interrogate the geologist’s young wife. Instead, the engineer simply remained standing after Billie had sat down, and gave her only an occasional hurried glance. Shortly the silence got on her nerves; and— such was her nature, as contrasted with Van Emmon’s—whereas he had stated causes first, she went straight to effects.

“Well,” explosively, “Van and I have split!”

Smith was seldom surprised at anything. This time was no exception. He merely murmured “Sorry” under his breath; and Billie rushed on, her pent-up feelings eager to escape.

“We haven’t mentioned Capellette for weeks, Smith! We don’t dare! If we did, there’d be such a rumpus that we—we’d separate!” Something came up into her throat which had to be choked back before she could go on. Then—

“I don’t know why it is, but every time the subject is brought up Van makes me so WILD!” She controlled herself with a tremendous effort. “He blames me, of course, because of what I did to help the Devolutionist. But I can’t be blamed for sympathizing with the under dog, can I? I’ve always preferred justice to policy, any time. Justice first, I say! And I think we’ve seen—there on Capellette—how utterly impossible it is for any such system as theirs to last indefinitely.”

But before she could follow up her point the door opened and the doctor returned with her husband. Kinney did not allow any tension to develop; instead, he said briskly:

“There’s only a couple of hours remaining between now and dinner time; I move we get busy.” He glanced about the room, to see if all was in place. The four chairs, each with its legs tipped with glass; the four footstools, similarly insulated from the floor; the electrical circuit running from the odd group of machinery in the corner, and connecting four pair of brass bracelets—all were ready for use. He motioned the others to the chairs in which they had already accomplished marvels in the way of mental traveling.

“Now,” he remarked, as he began to fit the bracelets to his wrists, an example which the rest straightway followed; “now, we want to make sure that we all have the same purpose in mind. Last

time, we were simply looking for four people, such as had view-points similar to our own. To-day, our object is to locate, somewhere among the planets attached to one of the innumerable sun-stars of the universe, one on which the conditions are decidedly different from anything we have known before."

Billie and Van Emmon, their affair temporarily forgotten, listened eagerly.

"As I recall it," Smith calmly observed, "we agreed that this attempt would be to locate a new kind of —well, near-human. Isn't that right?"

The doctor nodded. "Nothing more or less"—speaking very distinctly— "than a creature as superior as we are, but NOT IN HUMAN FORM."

Smith tried hard not to share the thrill. He had been reading biology the previous week. "I may as well protest, first as last, that I don't see how human intelligence can ever be developed outside the human form. Not—possibly!"

Van Emmon also was skeptical, but his wife declared the idea merely unusual, not impossible. "Is there any particular reason against it?" she demanded of the doctor.

"I will say this much," cautiously. "Given certain conditions, and inevitably the human form will most certainly become the supreme creature, superior to all the others.

"However, suppose the planetary conditions are entirely different. I conceive it entirely possible for one of the other animals to forge ahead of the man-ape; quite possible, Smith," as the engineer started to object, "if only the conditions are different ENOUGH.

"At any rate, we shall soon find out. I have been reading further in the library the Venusians gave us, and I assure you that I've found some astonishing things." He fingered one of the diminutive volumes. "There is one planet in particular whose name I have forgotten, where all animal life has disappeared entirely. There are none but vegetable forms on the land, and all of them are the rankest sort of weeds. They have literally choked off everything else!

"And the highest form of life there is a weed; a hideous monstrosity, shaped something like an octopus, and capable of the most horrible—" He stopped abruptly, remembering that one of his hearers was a woman. "Never mind about that now."

He indicated another of the little books. "I think we will do well to investigate a planet which the Venusians call 'Sanus.' It belongs to the tremendous planetary family of the giant star Arcturus. I haven't read any details at all; I didn't want to know more than you. We can proceed with our discoveries on an equal footing."

"But," objected Smith, recalling the previous methods, "how are we to put our minds in touch with any of theirs, unless we know enough about them to imagine their view-points?"

"Our knowledge of their planet's name and location," replied the doctor, "makes it easier for us. All we have to do is to go into the telepathic state, via the Venusian formula; then, at the same time, each must concentrate upon some definite mental quality, some particular characteristic of his own mind, which he or she wishes to find on Sanus. It makes no difference what it may be; all you have to do is,

exert your imaginations a little."

There was a pause, broken by Smith: "We ought to tell each other what we have in mind, so that we don't conflict."

"Yes. For my part," said the doctor, "I'd like to get in touch with a being who is mildly rebellious; not a violent radical, but a philosophical revolutionist. I don't care what sort of a creature he, she, or it may be, so long as the mind is in revolt against whatever injustice may exist."

"Then I," stated Smith, "will stick to the idea of service. Nobody was surprised that the engineer should make such a choice; he was, first, last, and all the time, essentially a useful man."

Van Emmon was not ready with his choice. Instead: "You say, doc, that you know nothing further about Sanus than what you've already told us?"

"I was about to mention that. The Venusians say that conditions are reversed from what we found on Capellette. Instead of Sanus being ruled by a small body of autocrats, it is—ruled by the working class!"

"Under the circumstances," said Van, "I'll take something different from what I got last time. No imperiousness this trip." He smiled grimly. "There was a time when I used to take orders. Suppose you call my choice 'subordinacy.'"

"How very noble of you!" gibed Billie. "My idea is supremacy, and plenty of it! I want to get in touch with the man higher up—the worker who is boss of the whole works!" She flashed a single glance at her husband, then threw herself back in her chair. "Go ahead!"

And before two minutes were up, the power of concerted thought, aided by a common objective and the special electrical circuit which joined them, had projected the minds of the four across the infinite depths of space. The vast distance which separated their bodies from Sanus was annihilated, literally as quick as thought.

Neither of the four stirred. To all appearances they were fast asleep. The room was quite still; only the clock ticked dully on the wall. Down-stairs, the doctor's wife kept watch over the house.

The greatest marvel in creation, the human mind, was exploring the unknown.

II

ALMOST HUMAN

Of course, the four still had the ability to communicate with each other while in the trance state; they had developed this power to a fair degree while investigating Capellette. However, each was so deeply interested in what he or she was seeing during the first hour of their Sanusian experiences that neither thought to discuss the matter until afterward.

When the doctor first made connection with the eyes of his agent, he instinctively concluded that he, at least, had got in touch with a being more or less like himself. The whole thing was so natural; he was surveying a sunny, brush-covered landscape from eyes whose height from the ground, and other details, were decidedly those of a human.

For a moment there was comparative silence. Then his unknown agent swiftly raised something—a hand, presumably—to a mouth, and gave out a piercing cry. Whereupon the doctor learned something that jarred him a trifle. His agent was—a woman!

He had time to congratulate himself upon the fact that he was (1) a doctor, (2) a married man, (3) the father of a daughter or two, before his agent repeated her cry. Almost immediately it was answered by another exactly like it, from an unseen point not far away. The Sanusian plainly chuckled to herself with satisfaction.

A moment later there came, rather faintly, two more calls, each from a different direction in the dun-colored brush. Still without moving from the spot, the doctor's agent replied two or three times, meanwhile watching her surroundings very closely. Within half a minute the first of her friends came in sight.

It was a young woman. At a distance of about twenty yards she appeared to be about five feet tall and sturdily built. She was dressed in a single garment, made of the skin of some yellow, short-haired animal. It may have been a lion cub. Around her waist was a strip of hide, which served as a belt, and held a small, stone-headed tomahawk. One shoulder and both legs were left quite bare, revealing a complexion so deeply tanned that the doctor instantly thought: "Spanish!"

In a way, the girl's face gave the same impression. Large, dark-brown eyes, full lips and a healthy glow beneath her tan, all made it possible for her to pass as a Spaniard. However, there was nothing in the least coquettish about her; she had a remarkably independent manner, and a gaze as frank and direct as it was pure and untroubled.

In one hand she carried a branch from some large-leafed shrub. The eyes which Kinney was using became fixed upon this branch; and even as the newcomer cried out in joyous response to the other's greeting, her expression changed and she turned and fled, laughing, as the doctor's agent darted toward her. She did not get away, and immediately the two were struggling over the possession of the branch.

In the midst of the tussle another figure made its appearance.

“Look out! Here comes Dulnop” [Footnote: It made no difference whatever as to what language was used. The telepathic process employed enabled the investigators to know all that their agents’ subconscious minds took in. The brains of the four automatically translated these thought-images into their own language. However, this method did not enable them to learn what their agents were thinking, but only what they said, heard, and saw.] cried Kinney’s agent; at the same time she made a special effort, and succeeded in breaking off a good half of the branch.

Instantly she darted to one side, where she calmly began to pluck some small, hard-shelled nuts from the branch, and proceeded to crack them, with entire ease, using a set of teeth which must have been absolutely perfect.

She gave the latest comer only a glance or two. He—for it certainly was a man—was nearly a half a foot taller than the girl already described; but he was plainly not much older or younger, and in build and color much the same. He was clothed neither more nor less than she, the only difference being that some leopard-like animal had contributed the material. In his belt was tucked a primitive stone hammer, also a stone knife. His face was longer than hers, his eyes darker; but he was manifestly still very boyish. Dulnop, they had called him.

“Hail, Cunora!” he called to the girl who had brought the nuts; then, to her who was watching: “Rolla! Where got ye the nuts?”

Rolla didn’t answer; she couldn’t use her mouth just then; it was too full of nuts. She merely nodded in the direction of Cunora.

“Give me some, Cunora!”

The younger girl gave no reply, but backed away from him as he approached; her eyes sparkled mischievously and the doctor thought, somewhat affectionately. Dulnop made a sudden darting move toward her branch, and she as swiftly whirled in her tracks, so that he missed. However, he instantly changed his mind and grasped the girl instead. Like a flash he drew her to him and kissed her noisily.

Next second he was staggering backward under the weight of her hard brown fist. “Do that again, and I’ll have the hair out of thy head!” the girl screamed, her face flaming. Yet Kinney saw that the man was laughing joyously even as he rubbed the spot where her blow had landed, while the expression of her eyes quite belied what she had said.

Not until then did the doctor’s agent say anything. When she spoke it was in a deep, contralto voice which gave the impression of riper years than either of the other two. Afterward Kinney learned that Rolla was nearly ten years their senior, a somewhat more lithe specimen of the same type, clad in the skin of what was once a magnificent goat. She carried only a single small knife in her belt. As seen reflected in pools of water, her complexion was slightly paler and her whole expression a little less self-assertive and distinctively philosophical. To those who admire serious, thoughtful women of regular feature and different manner, Rolla would have seemed downright beautiful.

“Dulnop,” said she, with a laugh in her voice, “ye will do well to seek the nut tree, first as last.” She nonchalantly crushed another shell in her mouth. “Neither Cunora nor I can spare good food to a kiss-hungry lout like thee!”

He only laughed again and made as though to come toward her. She stood ready to dodge, chuckling excitedly, and he evidently gave it up as a bad job. “Tell me whence cameth the nuts, Cunora!” he begged; but the girl pretended to be cross, and shut her mouth as firmly as its contents would allow.

Next moment there was a shout from the thicket, together with a crashing sound; and shortly the fourth Sanusian appeared. He was by far the larger; but his size was a matter of width rather than of height. An artist would have picked him as a model for Ajax himself. His muscles fairly strained the huge lion’s skin in which he was clad, and he had twice the weight of Dulnop within the same height. Also, to the doctor’s eye, he was nearer Rolla’s age.

His face was strong and handsome in a somewhat fierce, relentless way; his complexion darker than the rest. He carried a huge club, such as must have weighed all of forty pounds, while his belt was jammed full of stone weapons. The doctor classed him and the younger girl together because of their vigor and independence, while Dulnop and Rolla seemed to have dispositions very similar in their comparative gentleness and restraint.

“Hail, all of ye!” shouted this latest arrival in a booming baritone. He strode forward with scarcely a glance at the two younger people; his gaze was fixed upon Rolla, his expression unmistakable. The woman quietly turned upon Dulnop and Cunora.

“Look!” she exclaimed, pointing to a spot back of them. “See the curious bird!” They wheeled instantly, with the unquestioning faith of two children; and before they had brought their gazes back again, the big man had seized Rolla, crushed her to his breast and kissed her passionately. She responded just as warmly, pushing him away only in order to avoid being seen by the others. They showed only an innocent disappointment at having missed seeing the “curious bird.”

“A simple-minded people, basically good-humored,” was the way the doctor summed the matter up when reporting what he had seen. However, it was not so easy to analyze certain things that were said during the time the four Sanusians spent in each other’s company. For one thing—

“Did They give thee permission to go?” Rolla was asked by the big man. His name, it seemed, was Corrus.

“Yes, Corrus. They seemed to think it a good idea for us to take a little recreation to-day. I suppose ye left thy herd with thy brother?”

He nodded; and the doctor was left to wonder whom “They” might be. Were They a small group of humans, whose function was to superintend? Or were They, as the books from Venus seemed to indicate, another type of creature, entirely different from the humans, and yet, because of the peculiar Sanusian conditions, superior to the humans?

“They have decided to move their city a little farther away from the forest,” Rolla overheard Dulnop telling Cunora; which was the first indication that the planet boasted such a thing as a city. Otherwise, things appeared to be in a primitive, rather than a civilized condition.

These four skin-clad savages seemed to be enjoying an aboriginal picnic. For lunch, they munched on various fruits and nuts picked up en route, together with handfuls of some wheat-like cereal which the big man had brought in a goatskin. From time to time they scared out various animals from the brush,

chasing the creatures after the fashion of dogs and children. Whenever they came to a stream, invariably all four splashed through it, shouting and laughing with delight.

However, there were but two of these streams, and both of them quite small. Their banks indicated that either the season was very far advanced, or else that the streams were at one time vastly larger.

“A rather significant fact,” the doctor afterward commented.

Nevertheless, the most impressive thing about all that the doctor learned that day was the strange manner in which the excursion came to an end. The quartet was at that moment climbing a small hill, apparently on the edge of an extensive range of mountains. An occasional tree, something like an oak, broke the monotony of the brush at this point, and yet it was not until Rolla was quite at the top of the knoll that Kinney could see surrounding country with any degree of clearness. Even then he learned little.

The hill was placed on one edge of a valley about forty miles in width. A good part of it was covered with dusty vegetation, presumably wild; but the rest was plainly under cultivation. There were large green areas, such as argued grain fields; elsewhere were what looked like orchards and vineyards, some of which were in full bloom—refuting the notion that the season was a late one. Nowhere was there a spot of land which might be called barren.

Rolla and her three friends stood taking this in, keeping a rather curious silence meanwhile. At length Cunora gave a deep sigh, which was almost instantly reproduced by all the rest. Corrus followed his own sigh with a frank curse.

“By the great god Mownoth!” he swore fiercely. “It be a shame that we cannot come hence a great deal oftener! Methinks They could allow it!”

“They care not for our longings,” spoke Cunora, her eyes flashing as angrily as his. “They give us enough freedom to make us work the better —no more! All They care for is thy herd and my crops!”

“And for the labor,” reminded the big man, “of such brains as Rolla’s and Dulnop’s. It be not right that They should drive us so!”

“Aye,” agreed the younger man, with much less enthusiasm. “However, what can ye do about it, Corrus?”

The big man’s face flushed, and he all but snarled. “I tell ye what I can do! I, and ye as well, if ye but will! I can—”

He stopped, one hand upraised in mighty emphasis, and a sudden and startling change came over him. Downright fear drove the anger from his face; his massive body suddenly relaxed, and all his power and vigor seemed to crumble and wilt. His hands shook; his mouth trembled. At the same time the two women shrank from him, each giving an inarticulate cry of alarm and distress. Dulnop gave no sound, but the anger which had left the herdsman seemed to have come to him; the youngster’s eyes flared and his breast heaved. His gaze was fixed upon Corrus’s neck, where the sweat of fear already glistened.

Suddenly the big man dropped his head, as though in surrender. He gasped and found voice; this time a voice as shaky and docile as it had been strong and dominant a moment before.

“Very well,” he spoke abjectly. “Very well. I—shall do as you wish.” He seemed to be talking to thin air. “We—will go home at once.”

And instantly all four turned about, and in perfect silence took the back trail.

III

WORLD OF MAMMOTHS

Immediately upon going into tele-consciousness Smith became aware of a decided change in his surroundings. The interior of the study had been darkened with drawn shades; now he was using eyes that were exposed to the most intense sunlight. The first sight that he got, in fact, was directed toward the sky; and he noted with an engineer's keen interest that the color of the sky was blue, slightly tinged with orange. This, he knew, meant that the atmosphere of Sanus contained at least one chemical element which is lacking on the earth.

For a minute or two the sky remained entirely clear. There were no clouds whatever; neither did any form of winged life make its appearance. So Smith took note of sounds.

Presumably his agent—whoever or whatever it might be—was located in some sort of aircraft; for an extremely loud and steady buzzing, suggesting a powerful engine, filled the engineer's borrowed ears. Try as he might, however, he could not identify the sound exactly. It was more like an engine than anything else, except that the separate sounds which comprised the buzz occurred infinitely close together. Smith concluded that the machine was some highly developed rotary affair, working at perhaps six or eight thousand revolutions a minute—three or four times as fast as an ordinary engine.

Meanwhile his agent continued to stare into the sky. Shortly something arrived in the field of vision; a blurred speck, far to one side. It approached leisurely, with the unknown agent watching steadfastly. It still remained blurred, however; for a long time the engineer knew as little about its actual form as he knew about his mysterious agent.

Then, like a flash, the vision cleared. All the blurring disappeared instantly, and the form of a buzzard was disclosed. It was almost directly overhead, about a quarter of a mile distant, and soaring in a wide spiral. No sound whatever came from it. Smith's agent made no move of any kind, but continued to watch.

Shortly the buzzard "banked" for a sharper turn; and the engineer saw, by the perspective of its apparent speed, that the aircraft whose use he was enjoying was likewise on the move. Apparently it was flying in a straight line, keeping the sun—an object vastly too brilliant to examine—on the right.

The buzzard went out of sight. Once more the clear sky was all that could be seen; that, and the continual roar of the engine, were all that Smith actually knew. He became impatient for his agent to look elsewhere; it might be that the craft contained other specimens of the unknown creatures. But there was no change in the vigilant watch which was being kept upon the sky.

Suddenly the engineer became exceedingly alert. He had noticed something new—something so highly different from anything he had expected to learn that it was some minutes before he could believe it true.

His borrowed eyes had no eyelids! At least, if they did, they were never used. Not once did they flicker in the slightest; not once did they blink or wink, much less close themselves for a momentary rest from the sun's glare. They remained as stonily staring as the eyes of a marble statue.

Then something startling happened. With the most sickening suddenness the aircraft came to an abrupt halt. Smith's senses swam with the jolt of it. All about him was a confused jumble of blurred figures and forms; it was infinitely worse than his first ride in a hoist. In a moment, however, he was able to examine things fairly well.

The aircraft had come to a stop in the middle of what looked like a cane brake. On all sides rose yellowish-green shafts, bearing leaves characteristic of the maize family. Smith knew little about cane, yet felt sure that these specimens were a trifle large. "Possibly due to difference in gravitation," he thought.

However, he could not tell much about the spot on which the machine had landed. For a moment it was motionless; the engine had been stopped, and all was silent except for the gentle rustling of the cane in the field. The unknown operator did not change his position in the slightest. Then the craft began to move over the surface, in a jerky lurching fashion which indicated a very rough piece of ground. At the same time a queer, leathery squeaking came to the engineer's borrowed ears; he concluded that the machine was being sorely strained by the motion. At the time he was puzzled to account for the motion itself. Either there was another occupant of the craft, who had climbed out and was now pushing the thing along the ground, or else some form of silent mechanism was operating the wheels upon which, presumably, the craft was mounted. Shortly the motion stopped altogether.

It was then that Smith noticed something he had so far ignored because he knew his own dinner hour was approaching. His agent was hungry, like himself. He noticed it because, just then, he received a very definite impression of the opposite feeling; the agent was eating lunch of some sort, and enjoying it. There was no doubt about this. All that Smith could do was to wish, for the hundredth time, that he could look around a little and see what was being eaten, and how.

The meal occupied several minutes. Not once did the strange occupant of that machine relax his stony stare at the sky, and Smith tried to forget how hungry he was by estimating the extent of his vision. He decided that the angle subtended about a hundred and sixty degrees, or almost half a circle; and he further concluded that if his agent possessed a nose, it was a pretty trifling affair, too small to be noticed. It was obvious, too, that the fellow's mouth was located much lower in the face than normal. He ate without showing a single particle of food, and did it very quietly.

At length hunger was satisfied. There was complete stillness and silence for a moment, then another short lurching journey through the cane; and next, with an abruptness that made the engineer's senses swim again, the fellow once more took to the air. The speed with which he "got away" was enough to make a motorcyclist, doing his best, seem to stand still.

It took time for Smith to regain his balance. When he did, the same unbroken expanse of sky once more met his gaze; but it was not long until, out of the corners of those unblinking eyes, he could make out bleary forms which shortly resolved themselves into mountain tops. It was odd, the way things suddenly flashed into full view. One second they would be blurred and unrecognizable; the next, sharply outlined and distinct as anything the engineer had ever seen. Yet, there seemed to be no change in the focus of those eyes. It wasn't as though they were telescopic, either. Not until long afterward did Smith understand the meaning of this.

The mountains grew higher and nearer. Before long it seemed as though the aircraft was entering some sort of a canon. Its sides were only sparsely covered with vegetation, and all of it was quite brown, as

though the season were autumn. For the most part the surface was of broken rock and boulders.

Within a space of three or four minutes the engineer counted not less than ten buzzards. The unknown operator of the machine, however, paid no attention to them, but continued his extraordinary watch of the heavens. Smith began to wonder if the chap were not seated in an air-tight, sound-proof chamber, deep in the hull of some great aerial cruiser, with his eyes glued fast to a periscope. “Maybe a sky patrol,” thought the man of the earth; “a cop on the lookout for aerial smugglers, like as not.”

And then came another of those terrifying stops. This time, as soon as he could collect his senses, the engineer saw that the machine had landed approximately in the middle of the canon, and presumably among the boulders in its bottom. For all about it were the tops of gigantic rocks, most of them worn smooth from water action. And, as soon as the engine stopped, Smith plainly heard the roar of water right at hand. He could not see it, however. Why in the name of wonder didn’t the fellow look down, for a change?

The craft began to move. This time its motion was smoother arguing an even surface. However, it had not gone far before, to the engineer’s astonishment, it began to move straight down a slope so steep that no mechanism with which Smith was familiar could possibly have clung to it. As this happened, his adopted eyes told him that the craft was located upon one of those enormous boulders, in the center of a stream of such absolute immensity that he fairly gasped. The thing was—colossal!

And yet it was true. The unseen machine deliberately moved along until it was actually clinging, not to the top, but to the side of the rock. The water appeared to be about five yards beneath, to the right. To the left was the sky, while the center of that strange vision was now upon a similar boulder seemingly a quarter of a mile distant, farther out in the stream. But the fellow at the periscope didn’t change position one whit!

It was so unreal. Smith deliberately ignored everything else and watched again for indications of eyelids. He saw not one flicker, but noticed a certain tiny come-and-go, the merest sort of vibration, which indicated the agent’s heart-action. Apparently it beat more than twice as fast as Smith’s.

But it relieved him to know that his agent was at least a genuine living being. For a moment he had fancied something utterly repellent to him. Suppose this Sanusian were not any form of natural creature at all, but some sort of supermachine, capable of functioning like an organism? The thought made the engineer shudder as no morgue could.

Presently the queer craft approached the water closely enough, and at such an angle, that Smith looked eagerly for a reflection. However, the water was exceedingly rough, and only a confused brownish blur could be made out. Once he caught a queer sound above the noise of the water; a shrill hiss, with a harsh whine at the end. “Just like some kind of suction apparatus,” as he later described it.

And then, with that peculiar sound fresh in his ears, came the crowning shock of the whole experience. Floating toward the boulder, but some distance away, was what looked like a black seed. Next moment the vision flashed clear, as usual, and the engineer saw that the object was really a beetle; and in a second it was so near that Smith’s own body, back on the earth, involuntarily shrank back into the recesses of his chair.

For that beetle was an enormity in the most unlimited sense of the word. It was infinitely larger than

any beetle the engineer had ever seen— infinitely! It was as large as a good-sized horse!

But before Smith could get over his amazement there was a rush and a swirl in the water behind the insect. Spray was dashed over the rock, a huge form showed itself indistinctly beneath the waves, and next instant the borrowed eyes were showing the engineer, so clearly as to be undeniable, the most astounding sight he had ever seen.

A fish of mountainous size leaped from the water, snapped the beetle into its mouth, and disappeared from sight. In a flash it had come and gone, leaving the engineer fairly gasping and likewise wondering how he could possibly expect anybody to believe him if he told the bald truth of what he had seen.

For he simply could not have invented anything half as incredible. The fish simply could not be described with ordinary language. IT WAS AS LARGE AS THE LARGEST LOCOMOTIVE.

IV

THE GOLD-MINER

As for Van Emmon, his experience will have to be classed with Smith's. That is to say, he soon came to feel that his agent was not what is commonly called human. It was all too different. However, he found himself enjoying a field of view which was a decided improvement upon Smith's. Instead of a range which began and ended just above the horizon, his agent possessed the power of looking almost straight ahead.

This told the geologist that his unsuspecting Sanusian was located in an aircraft much like the other. The same tremendous noise of the engine, the same inexplicable wing action, together with the same total lack of the usual indications of human occupancy, all argued that the two men had hit upon the same type of agent. In Van Emmon's case, however, he could occasionally glimpse two loose parts of the machine, flapping and swaying oddly from time to time within the range of the observer, and at the front. Nothing was done about it. Van Emmon came to the same conclusion as Smith; the operator was looking into something like a periscope. Perhaps he himself did not do the driving.

From what the geologist could see of the country below, it was quite certainly cultivated. In no other way could the even rows and uniform growth be explained; even though Van Emmon could not say whether the vegetation were tree, shrub, or plant, it was certainly the work of man —or something mightily like man.

Shortly he experienced an abrupt downward dive, such as upset his senses somewhat. When he recovered, he had time for only the swiftest glance at what, he thought rather vaguely, was a great green-clad mountain. Then his agent brought the craft to one of those nerve-racking stops; once more came a swimming of the brain, and then the geologist saw something that challenged his understanding.

The craft had landed on the rim of a deep pit, or what would have been called a pit if it had not been so extraordinary. Mainly the strangeness was a matter of color; the slope was of a brilliant orange, and seemingly covered with frost, for it sparkled so brightly in the sun as to actually hurt the eyes. In fact, the geologist's first thought was "A glacier," although he could not conceive of ice or snow of that tint.

Running down the sides of the pit were a number of dark-brown streaks, about a yard wide; Van Emmon could make them out, more or less clearly, on the other side of the pit as well. From the irregular way in which the walls were formed, he quickly decided that the pit was a natural one. The streaks, he thought, might have been due to lava flow.

His agent proceeded to drive straight over the rim and down the slope into the pit. His engine was quite stopped; like Smith, the geologist wondered just how the craft's wheels were operated. Next he was holding his breath as the machine reached so steep a point in the slope that, most surely, no brakes could hold it. Simultaneously he heard the hiss and whine which seemed to indicate the suction device.

"It was a whole lot like going down into a placer mine," the geologist afterward said; and in view of

what next met his eyes, he was justified in his guess.

Down crept the machine until it was “standing on its nose.” The sun was shining almost straight down into the slope, and Van Emmon forgot his uneasiness about the craft in his interest in what he saw.

The bottom of the pit was perhaps twenty feet in diameter, and roughly hemispherical. Standing up from its bottom were half a dozen slim formations, like idealized stalagmites; they were made of some semitransparent rock, apparently, the tint being a reddish yellow. Finally, perched on the top of each of these was a stone; and surrounding these six “landmarks,” as Van Emmon called them, was the most prodigious display of wealth imaginable.

For the whole queer place was simply sprinkled with gold. Gold—gold everywhere; large nuggets of it, as big as one’s fist! Not embedded in rock, not scattered through sand, but lying LOOSE upon the surface of that unbelievable orange snow! It was overwhelming.

The mysterious Sanusian lost no time. Operating some unseen machinery, he caused three shovel-like devices to project from the front of his machine; and these instantly proceeded, so swiftly that Van Emmon could not possibly watch their action, to pick up nuggets and stow them away out of sight in what must have been compartments in the hull. All this was done without any sound beyond the occasional thud of a nugget dropped in the scramble.

Suddenly the Sanusian wheeled his machine about and started hurriedly up the slope. Van Emmon judged that the chap had been frightened by something, for he took flight as soon as he reached the top of the pit. And—he left half a million in gold behind him!

This new flight had not lasted two minutes before the geologist began to note other objects in the air. There were birds, so distant that he could not identify them; one came near enough, however, for him to conclude that it was a hawk. But he did not hold to this conclusion very long.

The thing that changed his mind was another aircraft. It approached from behind, making even more noise than the other, and proceeded to draw abreast of it. From time to time Van Emmon’s agent turned his mysterious periscope so as to take it all in, and the geologist was able to watch his fill. Whereupon he became converted to a new idea:

The birds that Smith and he had seen had not been birds at all, but aircraft built in imitation of them.

For this new arrival had been made in almost perfect imitation of a bee! It was very close to an exact reproduction. For one exception, it did not have the hairy appearance so characteristic of bees; the body and “legs” were smooth, and shiny. (Later, Van Emmon saw machines which went so far as even to imitate the hairs.) Also, instead of trying to duplicate the two compound eyes which are found, one on each side of a bee’s head, a perfectly round representation of a single eye was built, like a conning tower, toward the front of the bow. Presumably, the observer sat or stood within this “head.”

But otherwise it was wonderfully like a drone bee. Van Emmon was strongly reminded of what he had once viewed under a powerful lens. The fragile semitransparent wings, the misshapen legs, and even the jointed body with its scale-like segments, all were carefully duplicated on a large scale. Imagine a bee thirty feet long!

At first the geologist was puzzled to find that it carried a pair of many-jointed antennae. He could not see how any intelligent being would make use of them; they were continually waving about, much as bees wave theirs. Evidently these were the loose objects he had already noted. “Now,” he wondered, “why in thunder did the builders go to so much trouble for the sake of mere realism?”

Then he saw that the antennae served a very real purpose. There was no doubt about it; they were wireless antennae!

For presently the newcomer, who so far had not shown himself at any point on his machine, sent out a message which was read as quickly as it was received by Van Emmon’s agent, and as unconsciously translated:

“Number Eight Hundred Four, you are wanted on Plot Seventeen.”

Whereupon Van Emmon’s unknown assistant replied at once:

“Very well, Superior.”

It was done by means of an extremely faint humming device, reminding the geologist of certain wireless apparata he had heard. Not a word was actually spoken by either Sanusian.

Van Emmon kept a close watch upon the conning tower on the other machine. The sun was shining upon it in such a fashion that its gleam made inspection very difficult. Once he fancied that he could make out a short, compact figure within the “eye”; but he could not be sure. The glass, or whatever it was, reflected everything within range.

Was the airman a quadruped? Did he sit or stand upright, like a man? Or did he use all four limbs, animal-fashion? Van Emmon had to admit that he could not tell; no wonder he didn’t guess the truth.

Shortly after receiving the summons, the geologist’s agent changed his direction slightly; and within ten minutes the machine was passing over a large grain field. On the far edge was a row of trees, and it was toward this that the Sanusian proceeded to volplane, presently coming to another nausea-producing stop. Once more Van Emmon was temporarily helpless.

When he could look again, he saw that the machine had landed upon a steep slope, this time with its nose pointing upward. Far above was what looked like a cave, with a growth of some queer, black grass on its upper rim. The craft commenced to move upward, over a smooth, dark tan surface.

In half a minute the machine had reached the top of the slope, and the geologist looked eagerly for what might lie within the cave. He was disappointed; it was not a cave at all. Instead, another brown slope, or rather a bulging precipice, occupied this depression.

Van Emmon looked closer. At the bottom of this bulge was a queer fringe of the same kind of grass that showed on top of it. Van Emmon looked from one to the other, and all of a sudden the thing dawned upon him.

This stupendous affair was no mountainside; it was neither more nor less than the head of a colossal statue! A mammoth edition of the Goddess of Liberty; and the aircraft had presumed to alight upon its cheek!

The machine clung there, motionless, for some time, quite as though the airman knew that Van Emmon would like to look a long while. He gazed from side to side as far as he could see, making out a small section of the nose, also the huge curves of a dust-covered ear. It was wonderfully life-like.

Next second came the earthquake. The whole statue rocked and swayed; Van Emmon looked to see the machine thrown off. From the base of the monument came a single terrific sound, a veritable roar, as though the thing was being wrenched from the heart of the earth. From somewhere on top came a spurt of water that splashed just beside the craft.

Then came the most terrible thing. Without the slightest warning the statue's great eye opened! Opened wide, revealing a prodigious pupil which simply blazed with wrath!

The statue was alive!

Next second the Sanusian shot into the air. A moment and Van Emmon was able to look again, and as it happened, the craft was now circling the amazing thing it had just quit, so that the geologist could truthfully say that he was dead sure of what he saw.

He was justified in wanting to be absolutely sure. Resting on the solid earth was a human head, about fifty yards wide and proportionately as tall. It was alive; but IT WAS ONLY THE HEAD, NOTHING MORE.

V

THE SUPER-RACE

It will be remembered that Billie wanted to get in touch with a creature having the characteristic which she had said she admired: supremacy—"A worker who is the boss!" Bearing this in mind, her experience will explain itself, dumfounding though it was.

Her first sight of the Sanusian world was from the front of a large building. The former architect was not able to inspect it minutely; but she afterwards said that it impressed her as being entirely plain, and almost a perfect cube. Its walls were white and quite without ornament; there was only one entrance, an extremely low and broad, flat archway, extending across one whole side. The structure was about a hundred yards each way. In front was a terrace, seemingly paved with enormous slabs of stone; it covered a good many acres.

Presumably Billie's agent had just brought her machine from the building, for, within a few seconds, she took flight in the same abrupt fashion which had so badly upset Smith and Van Emmon. When Billie was able to look closely, she found herself gazing down upon a Sanusian city.

It was a tremendous affair. As the flying-machine mounted higher, Billie continually revised her guesses; finally she concluded that London itself was not as large. Nevertheless her astonishment was mainly directed at the character, not the number of the buildings.

They were all alike! Every one was a duplicate of that she had first seen: cube-shaped, plain finished, flat of wall and roof. Even in color they were alike; in time the four came to call the place the "White City." However, the buildings were arranged quite without any visible system. And they were vastly puzzled, later on in their studies, to find every other Sanusian city precisely the same as this one.

However, there was one thing which distinguished each building from the rest. It was located on the roof; a large black hieroglyphic, set in a square black border, which Billie first thought to be all alike. Whether it meant a name or a number, there was no way to tell.[Footnote: Since writing the above, further investigations have proved that these Sanusian house-labels are all numbers.]

Billie turned her attention to her agent. She seemed to belong to the same type as Smith's and Van Emmon's; otherwise she was certainly much more active, much more interested in her surroundings, and possessed of a far more powerful machine. She was continually changing her direction; and Billie soon congratulated herself upon her luck. Beyond a doubt, this party was no mere slave to orders; it was she who gave the orders.

Before one minute had passed she was approached by a Sanusian in a big, clumsy looking machine. Although built on the bee plan, it possessed an observation tower right on top of its "head." (The four afterward established that this was the sort of a machine that Smith's agent had operated.) The occupant approached to within a respectful distance from Billie's borrowed eyes, and proceeded to hum the following through his antennae:

"Supreme, I have been ordered to report for Number Four."

“Proceed.”

“The case of insubordinancy which occurred in Section Eighty-five has been disposed of.”

“Number Four made an example of her?”

“Yes, Supreme.”

“Whereupon the operator flew away, having not only kept his body totally out of sight all the while, but having failed by the slightest token to indicate, by his manner of communicating that he had the slightest particle of personal interest in his report. For that matter, neither did Supreme.”

Scarcely had this colloquy ended than another subordinate approached. This one used a large and very fine machine. She reported:

“If Supreme will come with me to the spot, it will be easier to decide upon this case.”

Immediately the two set off without another word; and after perhaps four minutes of the speediest travel Billie had known outside the doctor’s sky-car, they descended to within a somewhat short distance from the ground. Here they hovered, and Billie saw that they were stopped above some bills at the foot of a low mountain range.

Next moment she made out the figures of four humans on top of a knoll just below. A little nearer, and the architect was looking, from the air, down upon the same scene which the doctor was then witnessing through the eyes of Rolla, the older of the two Sanusian women. Billie could make out the powerful physique of Corrus, the slighter figure of Dulnop, the small but vigorous form of Cunora, and Rolla’s slender, graceful, capable body. But at that moment the other flier began to say to Supreme:

“The big man is a tender of cattle, Supreme; and he owes his peculiar aptitude to the fact that his parents, for twenty generations back, were engaged in similar work. The same may be said for the younger of the two women; she is small, but we owe much of the excellence of our crops to her energy and skill.

“As for the other woman,” indicating Rolla, “she is a soil-tester, and very expert. Her studies and experiments have greatly improved our product. The same may be said in lesser degree of the youth, who is engaged in similar work.”

“Then,” coolly commented the Sanusian whose eyes and ears Billie enjoyed; “then your line of action is clear enough. You will see to it that the big man marries the sturdy young girl, of course; their offspring should give us a generation of rare outdoor ability. Similarly the young man and the older woman, despite their difference in ages, shall marry for the sake of improving the breed of soil-testers.”

“Quite so, Supreme. There is one slight difficulty, however, such as caused me to summon you.”

“Name the difficulty.”

The Sanusian hesitated only a trifle with her reply: “It is, Supreme, that the big man and the older

woman have seen fit to fall in love with one another, while the same is true of the youth and the girl."

"This should not have been allowed!"

"I admit it, Supreme; my force has somehow overlooked their case, heretofore. What is your will?"

The commandant answered instantly: "Put an immediate end to their desires!"

"It shall be done!"

At that moment there was a stir on the ground. In fact, this was the instant when Corrus began his vehement outcry against the tyranny of "They." The two in the air came closer; whereupon Billie discovered that Supreme did not understand the language of the humans below. [Footnote: The humans did not realize this fact, however; they assumed that "They" always understood.] Yet the herdsman's tones were unmistakably angry.

"You will descend," commented Supreme evenly, "and warn the big man not to repeat such outbreaks."

Immediately Supreme's lieutenant darted down, and was lost to view. The commandant glanced interestedly here and there about the landscape, returning her gaze to Corrus just as the man stopped in mid-speech. Billie was no less astonished than the doctor to see the herdsman's expression change as it did; one second it was that of righteous indignation, the next, of the most abject subservience.

Nevertheless, Billie could see no cause whatever for it; neither did she hear anything. The other flier remained out of sight. All that the architect could guess was that the operator had "got the drop" on Corrus in some manner which was clear only to those involved. Badly puzzled, Billie watched the four humans hurry away, their manner all but slinking.

A moment later still another aircraft came up, and its operator reported. As before, Billie could make out not a single detail of the occupant herself. She, too, wanted the commandant's personal attention; and shortly Billie was looking down upon a scene which she had good reason to remember all the rest of her life.

In the middle of a large field, where some light green plant was just beginning to sprout, a group of about a dozen humans was at work cultivating. Billie had time to note that they were doing the work in the most primitive fashion, employing the rudest of tools, all quite in keeping with their bare heads and limbs and their skin-clad bodies. About half were women.

Slightly at one side, however, stood a man who was not so busy. To put it plainly, he was loafing, with the handle of his improvised mattock supporting his weight. Clearly the two up in the air were concerned only with him.

"He has been warned three times, Supreme," said the one who had reported the case.

"Three? Then make an example of him!"

"It shall be done, Supreme!"

The lieutenant disappeared. Again the commandant glanced at this, that, and the other thing before concentrating upon what happened below. Then Billie saw the man straighten up suddenly in his tracks, and with remarkable speed, considering his former laziness, he whirled about, dodged, and clapped a hand upon his thigh.

Next second he raised an exultant cry. Billie could not understand what he said; but she noted that the others in the group echoed the man's exultation, and started to crowd toward him, shouting and gesticulating in savage delight. Then something else happened so sudden and so dreadful that the woman who was watching from the earth was turned almost sick.

Like a flash Supreme dropped, headlong, toward the group of humans. In two seconds the distance was covered, and in the last fifth of a second Billie saw the key to the whole mystery.

In that last instant the man who before had seemed of ordinary size, was magnified to the dimensions of a colossus. Instead of being under six feet, he appeared to be near a hundred yards in height; but Billie scarcely realized this till later, it all happened so quickly. There was an outcry from the group, and then the commandant's aircraft crashed into the man's HAND; a hand so huge that the very wrinkles in its skin were like so many gulleys; even in that final flash Billie saw all this.

Simultaneously with the landing there was a loud pop, while Billie's senses reeled with the stunning suddenness of the impact. Next second the machine had darted to a safe distance, and Billie could see the man gnawing frantically at the back of his hand. Too late; his hand went stiff, and his arm twitched spasmodically. The fellow made a step or two forward, then swayed where he stood, his whole body rigid and strained. An expression of the utmost terror was upon his face; he could not utter a sound, although his companions shrieked in horror. Another second and the man fell flat, twitching convulsively; and in a moment or two it was all over. He was dead!

And then the truth burst upon the watcher. In fact, it seemed to come to all four at the same time, probably by reason of their mental connections. Neither of them could claim that he or she had previously guessed a tenth of its whole, ghastly nature.

The "cane" which Smith had seen had not been cane at all; it had been grass. The "beetle" in the stream had not been the giant thing he had visualized it; neither had that fish been the size he had thought.

Van Emmon's "gold mine" had not been a pit in any sense of the word; it had been the inside of the blossom of a very simple, poppy-like flower. The "nuggets" had been not mineral, but pollen. As for the incredible thing which Van Emmon had seen on the ground; that living statue; that head without a body—the body had been buried out of sight beneath the soil; and the man had been an ordinary human, being punished in this manner for misconduct.

Instead of being aircraft built in imitation of insects, the machines had been constructed by nature herself, and there had been nothing unusual in their size. No; they were the real thing, differing only slightly from what might have been found anywhere upon the earth.

In short, it had all been simply a matter of view-point. The supreme creature of Sanus was, not the human, but the bee. A poisonous bee, superior to every other form of Sanusian life! What was more—

“The damned things are not only supreme; THE HUMANS ARE THEIR SLAVES!”

VI

IMPOSSIBLE, BUT—

The four looked at each other blankly. Not that either was at a loss for words; each was ready to burst. But the thing was so utterly beyond their wildest conceptions, so tremendously different in every way, it left them all a little unwilling to commit themselves.

“Well,” said Smith finally, “as I said in the first place, I can’t see how any other than the human form became supreme. As I understand biology—”

“What gets me,” interrupted Van Emmon; “what gets me is, WHY the humans have allowed such an infernal thing to happen!”

Billie smiled somewhat sardonically. “I thought,” she remarked, cuttingly, “that you were always in sympathy with the upper dog, Mr. Van Emmon!”

“I am!” hotly. Then, with the memory of what he had just seen rushing back upon him: “I mean, I was until I saw—saw that—” He stopped, flushing deeply; and before he could collect himself Smith had broken in again:

“I just happened to remember, doc; didn’t you say that the Venusians, in those books of yours, say that Sanus is ruled by the workers?”

“Just what I was wondering about,” from Van Emmon. “The humans seem to do all the work, and the bees the bossing!”

The doctor expected this. “The Venusians had our view-point—the view-point of people on the earth, when they said that the workers rule. We consider the bee as a great worker, don’t we? ‘As busy as a bee’ you know. None of the so-called lower animals show greater industry.”

“You don’t mean to say,” demanded Smith, “that these Sanusian bees owe their position to the fact that they are, or were, such great workers?”

Before the doctor could reply, Van Emmon broke in. It seemed as though his mind refused to get past this particular point. “Now, why the dickens have the humans allowed the bees to dominate them? Why?”

“We’ll have to go at this a little more systematically,” remarked Kinney, “if we want to understand the situation.

“In the first place, suppose we note a thing or two about conditions as we find them here on the earth. We, the humans, are accustomed to rank ourselves far above the rest. It is taken for granted.

“Now, note this: the human supremacy was not always taken for granted.” He paused to let it sink in. “Not always. There was a time in prehistoric days when man ranked no higher than others. I feel sure

of this," he insisted, seeing that Smith was opposed to the idea; "and I think I know just what occurred to make man supreme."

"What?" from Billie.

"Never mind now. I rather imagine we shall learn more on this score as we go on with our work.

"At any rate, we may be sure of this: whatever it was that caused man to become supreme on the earth, that condition is lacking on Sanus!"

Van Emmon did not agree to this. "The condition may be there, doc, but there is some other factor which overbalances it; a factor such as is— well, more favorable to the bees."

The doctor looked around the circle. "What do you think? 'A factor more favorable to the bees.' Shall we let it go at that?" There was no remark, even from Smith; and the doctor went on:

"Coming back to the bees, then, we note that they are remarkable for several points of great value. First, as we have seen, they are very industrious by nature. Second, all bees possess wings and on that count alone they are far superior to humans.

"Third—and to me, the most important—the bees possess a remarkable combination of community life and specialization. Of course, when you come to analyze these two points, you see that they really belong to one another. The bees we know, for instance, are either queens, whose only function is to fertilize the eggs; or workers, who are unsexed females, and whose sole occupations are the collecting of honey, the building of hives, and the care of the young.

"Now," speaking carefully, "apparently these Sanusian bees have developed something that is not unknown to certain forms of earth's insect life. I mean, a soldier type. A kind of bee which specializes on fighting!"

Van Emmon was listening closely, yet he had got another idea: "Perhaps this soldier type is simply the plain worker bee, all gone to sting! It may be that these bees have given up labor altogether!"

"Still," muttered Smith, under his breath, "all this doesn't solve the real problem. Why aren't the HUMANS supreme?" For once he became emphatic. "That's what gets me! Why aren't the humans the rulers, doc?"

Kinney waited until he felt sure the others were depending upon him. "Smith, the humans on Sanus are not supreme now because they were NEVER supreme."

Smith looked blank. "I don't get that."

"Don't you? Look here: you'll admit that success begets success, won't you?"

"Success begets success? Sure! 'Nothing succeeds like success.'"

"Well, isn't that merely another way of saying that the consciousness of superiority will lead to further conquests? We humans are thoroughly conscious of our supremacy; if we weren't we'd never attempt the things we do!"

Van Emmon saw the point. “In other words, the humans on the earth never BEGAN to show their superiority until something—something big, happened to demonstrate their ability!”

“Exactly!” cried Kinney. “Our prehistoric ancestors would never have handed down such a tremendous ambition to you and me if they, at that time, had not been able to point to some definite feat and say, ‘That proves I’m a bigger man than a horse,’ for example.”

“Of course,” reflected Billie, aloud; “of course, there were other factors.”

“Yes; but they don’t alter the case. Originally the human was only slightly different from the apes he associated with. There was perhaps only one slight point of superiority; today there are millions of such points. Man is infinitely superior, now, and it’s all because he was slightly superior, then.”

“Suppose we grant that,” remarked the geologist. “What then? Does that explain why the bees have made good on Sanus?”

“To a large degree. Some time in the past the Sanusian bee discovered that he possessed a certain power which enabled him to force his will upon other creatures. This power was his poisonous sting. He found that, when he got his fellows together and formed a swarm, they could attack any animal in such large numbers as to make it helpless.”

“Any creature?”

“Yes; even reptiles, scales or no scales. They’d attack the eyes.”

“But that doesn’t explain how the bees ever began to make humans work for them,” objected Van Emmon.

The doctor thought for a few minutes. “Let’s see. Suppose we assume that a certain human once happened to be in the neighborhood of a hive, just when it was attacked by a drove of ants. Ants are great lovers of honey, you know. Suppose the man stepped among the ants and was bitten. Naturally he would trample them to death, and smash with his hands all that he couldn’t trample. Now, what’s to prevent the bees from seeing how easily the man had dealt with the ants? A man would be far more efficient, destroying ants, than a bee; just as a horse is more efficient, dragging a load, than a man. And yet we know that the horse was domesticated, here on the earth, simply because the humans saw his possibilities; the horse could do a certain thing more efficiently than a human.

“You notice,” the doctor went on, with great care, “that everything I’ve assumed is natural enough: the combination of an ant attack and the man’s approach, occurring at the same time. Suppose we add a third factor: that the bees, even while fighting the ants, also started to attack the man; but that he chanced to turn his attention to the ants FIRST. So that the bees let him alone!

“We know what remarkable things bees are, when it comes to telling one another what they know. Is there any reason why such an experience—all natural enough—shouldn’t demonstrate to them that they, by merely threatening a man, could compel him to kill ants for them?”

Billie was dubious for a moment; then agreed that the man, also, might notice that the bees failed to sting him as long as he continued to destroy their other enemies. If so, it was quite conceivable that,

bit by bit, the bees had found other and more positive ways of securing the aid of men through threatening to sting. “Even to cultivating flowers for their benefit,” she conceded. “It’s quite possible.”

Smith had been thinking of something else. “I always understood that a bee’s stinging apparatus is good for only one attack. Doesn’t it always remain behind after stinging?”

“Yes,” from the doctor, quietly. “That is true. The sting has tiny barbs on its tip, and these cause it to remain in the wound. The sting is actually torn away from the bee when it flies away. It never grows another. That is why, in fact, the bee never stings except as a last resort, when it thinks it’s a question of self-defense.”

“Just what I thought!” chuckled Smith. “A bee is helpless without its sting! If so, how can you account for anything like a soldier bee?”

The doctor returned his gaze with perfect equanimity. He looked at Van Emmon and Billie; they, too, seemed to think that the engineer had found a real flaw in Kinney’s reasoning. The doctor dropped his eyes, and searched his mind thoroughly for the best words. He removed his bracelets while he was thinking; the others did the same. All four got to their feet and stretched, silently but thoroughly. Not until they were ready to quit the study did the doctor make reply.

“Smith, I don’t need to remind you that it’s the little things that count. It’s too old a saying. In this case it happens to be the greatest truth we have found today.

“Smith”—speaking with the utmost care—“what we have just said about the bee’s sting is all true; but only with regard to the bees on the earth. It is only on the earth, so far as we know positively, that the bee is averse to stinging, for fear of losing his sting.

“There is only one way to account for the soldier bee. Its sting has no barbs!”

“No barbs?”

“Why no? If the poison is virulent enough, the barbs wouldn’t be necessary, would they? Friends, the Sanusian bee is the supreme creature on its planet; it is superior to all the other insects, all the birds, all the animals; and its supremacy is due solely and entirely to the fact that there are no barbs on its sting!”

VII

THE MISSING FACTOR

By the time the four once more got together in the doctor's study, each had had a chance to consider the Sanusian situation pretty thoroughly. All but Billie were convinced that the humans were deserving people, whose position was all the more regrettable because due, so far as could be seen, the insignificant little detail of the barbless sting.

Were these people doomed forever to live their lives for the sake of insects? Were they always to remain, primitive and uncultured, in ignorance of, the things that civilization is built upon, obeying the orders of creatures who were content to eat, reproduce, and die? For that is all that bees know!

Perhaps it was for the best. Possibly Rolla and her friends were better off as they were. It might have been that a wise Providence, seeing how woefully the human animal had missed its privileges on other worlds, had decided to make man secondary on Sanus. Was that the reason for it all?

All but Billie scouted the idea. To them the affair was a ghastly perversion of what Nature intended. Van Emmon stated the case in a manner which showed how strongly he felt about it.

"Those folks will never get anywhere if the bees can help it!" he charged. "We've got to lend a hand, here, and see that they get a chance!"

Smith said that, so far as he was concerned, the bees might all be consigned to hell. "I'm not going to have anything to do with the agent I had, any more!" he declared. "I'm going to get in touch with that chap, Dulnop. What is he like, doc?"

Kinney told him, and then Van Emmon asked for details of the herdsman, Corrus. "No more bees in my young life, either. From now on it's up to us. What do you think?" turning to his wife, and carefully avoiding any use of her name.

The architect knew well enough that the rest were wondering how she would decide. She answered with deliberation:

"I'm going to stay in touch with Supreme!"

"You are!" incredulously, from her husband.

"Yes! I've got a darned sight more sympathy for those bees than for the humans! The 'fraid-cats!" disgustedly.

"But listen," protested Van Emmon. "We can't stand by and let those cold-blooded prisoners keep human beings, like ourselves, in rank slavery! Not much!"

Evidently he thought he needed to explain. "A human is a human, no matter where we find him! Why, how can those poor devils show what they're good for if we don't give 'em a chance? That's the only way to develop people—give 'em a chance to show what's in 'em! Let the best man win!"

Billie only closed her mouth tighter; and Smith decided to say, “Billie, you don’t need to stand by your guns just because the Sanusian working class happens to be insects. Besides, we’re three to one in favor of the humans!”

“Oh, well,” she condescended, “if you put it that way I’ll agree not to interfere. Only, don’t expect me to help you any with your schemes; I’ll just keep an eye on Supreme, that’s all.”

“Then we’re agreed.” The doctor put on his bracelets. “Suppose we go into the trance state for about three minutes—long enough to learn what’s going on to-day.”

Shortly Billie again using the eyes and ears of the extraordinarily capable bee who ruled the rest, once more looked down upon Sanus. She saw the big “city,” which she now knew to be a vast collection of hives, built by the humans at the command of the bees. At the moment the air was thick with workers, returning with their loads of honey from the fields which the humans had been compelled to cultivate. What a diabolical reversal of the accepted order of things!

The architect had time to note something very typical of the case. On the outskirts of the city two humans were at work, erecting a new hive. Having put it together, they proceeded to lift the big box and place it near those already inhabited. They set it down in what looked like a good location, but almost immediately took it up again and shifted it a foot to one side. This was not satisfactory, either; they moved it a few inches in another direction.

All told, it took a full minute to place that simple affair where it was wanted; and all the while those two humans behaved as though some one were shouting directions to them—silent directions, as it were. Billie knew that a half-dozen soldier bees, surrounding their two heads, were coolly and unfeelingly driving them where they willed. And when, the work done, they left the spot, two soldiers went along behind them to see that they did not loiter.

As for the doctor, he came upon Rolla when the woman was deep in an experiment. She stood in front of a rude trough, one of perhaps twenty located within a large, high-walled inclosure. In the trough was a quantity of earth, through the surface of which some tiny green shoots were beginning to show.

Rolla inspected the shoots, and then, with her stone knife, she made a final notch in the wood on the edge of the trough. There were twenty-odd of these notches; whereas, on other troughs which the doctor had a chance to see, there were over thirty in many cases, and still no shoots.

The place, then, was an experimental station. This was proven by Rolla’s next move. She went outside the yard and studied five heaps of soil, each of a different appearance, also three smaller piles of pulverized mineral-nitrates, for all that the doctor knew. And before Kinney severed his connection with the Sanusian, she had begun the task of mixing up a fresh combination of these ingredients in a new trough. In the midst of this she heard a sound; and turning about, waved a hand excitedly toward a distant figure on the far side of a near-by field.

Meanwhile Smith had managed to get in touch with Dulnop. He found the young man engaged in work which did not, at first, become clear to the engineer. Then he saw that the chap was simply sorting over big piles of broken rock, selecting certain fragments which he placed in separate heaps. Not far away two assistants were pounding these fragments to powder, using rude pestles, in great, nature-made mortars—“pot-holes,” from some river-bed.

It was this powder, beyond a doubt, that Rolla was using in her work. To Smith, Dunlop's task seemed like a ridiculously simple occupation for a nearly grown man, until he reflected that these aborigines were exactly like toddling children in intellects.

Van Emmon had no trouble in making connections with Corrus. The herdsman was in charge of a dozen cows, wild looking creatures which would have been far too much for the man had they been horned, which they were not. He handled them by sheer force, using the great club he always carried. Once while Van Emmon was watching, a cow tried to break away from the group; but Corrus, with an agility amazing in so short and heavy a man, dashed after the creature and tapped her lightly on the top of her head. Dazed and contrite, she followed him meekly back into the herd.

The place was on the edge of a meadow, at the beginning of what looked like a grain field. Stopping here, Corrus threw a hand to his mouth and gave a ringing shout. Immediately it was answered, faintly, by another at a distance; and then Van Emmon made out the form of Rolla among some huts on the other side of the grain. She beckoned toward the herdsman, and he took a half-dozen steps toward her.

Just as abruptly he stopped, almost in mid-stride. Simultaneously Van Emmon heard a loud buzzing in either ear. Coitus was being warned. Like a flash he dropped his head and muttered: "Very well. I will remember— next time." And trembling violently he turned back to his cows.

"Well," remarked the geologist, when the four "came out" of their seance, "the bees seem to have everything their own way. How can we help the humans best? Hurry up with your idea; I'm getting sick of these damned poisoners."

The doctor asked if the others had any suggestions. Smith offered this: why couldn't the humans retire to some cave, or build tight-walled huts, and thus bar out the bees?

No sooner had he made the remark, however, than the engineer declared his own plan no good. "These people aren't like us; they couldn't stand such imprisonment long enough to make their 'strike' worth while."

"Is there any reason," suggested Billie, indifferently, "why they couldn't weave face nets from some kind of grass, and protect themselves in that way?"

Smith saw the objection to that, too. "They'd have to protect themselves all over as well; every inch would have to be covered tightly. From what I've seen of them I'd say that the arrangement would drive them frantic. It would be worse than putting clothes on a cat."

"It's a man-sized job we've tackled," commented the doctor. "What Smith says is true; such people would never stand for any measures which would restrict their physical freedom. They are simply animals with human possibilities, nothing more."

He paused, and then added quietly, "By the way, did either of you notice any mountains just now?"

Smith and Van Emmon both said they had. "Why?"

"Of course, it isn't likely, but—did you see anything like a volcano anywhere?"

“No,” both replied.

“Another thing,” Kinney went on. “So far, I’ve seen nothing that would indicate lightning, much less the thing itself. Did either of you,” explicitly, “run across such a thing as a blasted tree?”

They said they had not. Billie hesitated a little with her reply, then stated that she had noted a tree or two in a state of disintegration, but none that showed the unmistakable scars due to being struck by lightning.

“Then we’ve got the key to the mystery!” declared the doctor. “Remember how brown and barren everything looks, excepting only where there’s artificial vegetation? Well, putting two and two together, I come to the conclusion that Sanus differs radically from the earth in this respect.

“The humans have arrived rather late in the planet’s history. Or—and this is more likely—Sanus is somewhat smaller than the earth, and therefore has cooled off sooner. At any rate, the relationship between the age of the planet and the age of its human occupancy differs from what it is on the earth.”

“I don’t quite see,” from Smith, “what that’s got to do with it.”

“No? Well, go back to the first point: the dried-up appearance of things. That means, their air and water are both less extensive than with us, and for that reason there are far fewer clouds; therefore, it is quite possible that there has been no lightning within the memory of the humans.”

“How so?” demanded the geologist.

“Why, simply because lightning depends upon clouds. Lightning is merely the etheric electricity, drawn to the earth whenever there is enough water in the air to promote conductivity.”

“Yes,” agreed Smith; “but—what of it?”

Kinney went on unheeding. “As for volcanoes—probably the same explanation accounts for the lack of these also. You know how the earth, even, is rapidly coming to the end of her ‘volcanic period.’ Time was when there were volcanoes almost everywhere on the earth.

“The same is likely true of Sanus as well. The point is,” and the doctor paused significantly, “there have been no volcanic eruptions, and no lightning discharges within the memory of Sanusian man!”

What was he getting at? The others eyed him closely. Neither Van Emmon nor Smith could guess what he meant; but Billie, her intuition wide awake, gave a great jump in her chair.

“I know!” she cried. A flood of light came to her face. “The Sanusians— no wonder they let the bees put it over on them!

“They haven’t got FIRE! They’ve never had it!”

VIII

FIRE!

From the corner of his eyes Kinney saw Van Emmon turn a gaze of frank admiration at his wife. It lasted only a second, however; the geologist remembered, and masked the expression before Billie could detect it.

Smith had been electrified by the idea.

“By George!” he exclaimed two or three times. “Why didn’t I think of that? It’s simple as A, B, C now!”

“Why,” Van Emmon exulted, “all we’ve got to do is put the idea of fire into their heads, and the job is done!” He jumped around in his chair. “Darn those bees, anyhow!”

“And yet,” observed the doctor, “it’s not quite as simple as we may think. Of course it’s true that once they have fire, the humans ought to assert themselves. We’ll let that stand without argument.”

“Will we?” Smith didn’t propose to back down that easy. “Do you mean to say that fire, and nothing more than fire, can bring about human ascendency?”

The doctor felt sure. “All the other animals are afraid of fire. Such exceptions as the moth are really not exceptions at all; the moth is simply driven so mad by the sight of flame that it commits suicide in it. Horses sometimes do the same.

“Humans are the ONLY creatures that do not fear fire! Even a tiny baby will show no fear at the sight of it.”

“Which ought to prove,” Van Emmon cut in to silence Smith, “that superiority is due to fire, rather than fire due to superiority, for the simple reason that a newborn child is very low in the scale of evolution.” Smith decided not to say what he intended to say. Van Emmon concluded:

“We’ve just got to give ‘em fire! What’s the first step?”

“I propose,” from the doctor, “that when we get in touch this time we concentrate on the idea of fire. We’ve got to give them the notion first.”

“Would you rather,” inquired Billie, “that I kept the idea from Supreme?”

“Thanks,” returned her husband, icily, “but you might just as well tell her, too. It’ll make her afraid in advance, all the better!”

The engineer threw himself back in his seat. “I’m with you,” said he, laying aside his argument. The rest followed his example, and presently were looking upon Sanus again.

All told, this particular session covered a good many hours. The four kept up a more or less connected mental conversation with each other as they went along, except, of course, when the events became too exciting. Mainly they were trying to catch their agents in the proper mood for receiving telepathic communications, and it proved no easy matter. It required a state of semi-consciousness, a condition of being neither awake nor asleep. It was necessary to wait until night had fallen on that particular part of the planet. [Footnote: It should be mentioned that the parts of Sanus showed the same condition of bee supremacy and human servitude. The spot in question was quite typical of the colonies.]

Van Emmon was the first to get results. Corrus had driven his herd back from the brook at which they had got their evening drink, and after seeing them all quietly settled for the night, he lay down on the dried grass slope of a small hill, and stared up at the sky. Van Emmon had plenty of time to study the stars as seen from Sanus, and certainly the case demanded plenty of time.

For he saw a broad band of sky, as broad as the widest part of the Milky Way, which was neither black nor sparkling with stars, but glowing as brightly as the full moon! From the eastern horizon to the zenith it stretched, a great “Silvery Way,” as Van Emmon labeled it; and as the darkness deepened and the night lengthened, the illumination crept on until the band of light stretched all the way across. Van Emmon racked his brains to account for the thing.

Then Corrus became drowsy. Van Emmon concentrated with all his might. At first he overdid the thing; Corrus was not quite drowsy enough, and the attempt only made him wakeful. Shortly, however, he became exceedingly sleepy, and the geologist’s chance came.

At the end of a few minutes the herdsman sat up, blinking. He looked around at the dark forms of the cattle, then up at the stars; he was plainly both puzzled and excited. He remained awake for hours, in fact, thinking over the strange thing he had seen “in a dream.”

Meanwhile Smith was having a similar experience with Dulnop. The young fellow was, like Corrus, alone at the time; and he, too, was made very excited and restless by what he saw.

Billie was unable to work upon her bee. Supreme retired to a hive just before dusk, but remained wide awake and more or less active, feeding voraciously, for hours upon hours. When she finally did nap, she fell asleep on such short notice that the architect was taken off her guard. The bee seemed to all but jump into slumberland.

The doctor also had to wait for Rolla. The woman sat for a long time in the growing dusk, looming out pensively over the valley. Corrus was somewhere within a mile or two, and so Kinney was not surprised to see the herdsman’s image dancing, tantalizingly, before Rolla’s eyes. She was thinking of him with all her might.

Presently she shivered with the growing coolness, and went into a rough hut, which she shared with Cunora. The girl was already asleep on a heap of freshly gathered brush. Rolla, delightfully free of any need to prepare for her night’s rest—such as locking any doors or cleaning her teeth—made herself comfortable beside her friend. Two or three yawns, and the doctor’s chance came.

Two minutes later Rolla sat bolt upright, at the same time giving out a sharp cry of amazement and alarm. Instantly Cunora awoke.

“What is it, Rolla?” terror-stricken.

“Hush!” The older woman got up and went to the opening which served as a door. There she hung a couple of skins, arranging them carefully so that no bee might enter. Coming back to Cunora, she brought her voice nearly to a whisper:

“Cunora, I have had a wonderful dream! Ye must believe me when I say that it were more than a mere dream; ‘twere a message from the great god, Mownoth, or I be mad!”

“Rolla!” The girl was more anxious than frightened now. “Ye speak wildly! Quiet thyself, and tell what thou didst see!”

“It were not easy to describe,” said Rolla, getting herself under control. “I dreamed that a man, very pale of face and most curiously clad, did approach me while I was at work. He smiled and spake kindly, in a language I could not understand; but I know he meant full well.

“This be the curious thing, Cunora: He picked up a handful of leaves from the ground and laid them on the trough at my side. Then, from some place in his garments he produced a tiny stick of white wood, with a tip made of some dark-red material. This he held before mine eyes, in the dream; and then spake very reassuringly, as though bidding me not to be afraid.

“Well he might! Cunora, he took that tiny stick in his hand and moved the tip along the surface of the trough; and, behold, a miracle!”

“What happened?” breathlessly.

“In the twinkling of an eye, the stick blossomed! Blossomed, Cunora, before mine eyes! And such a blossom no eye ever beheld before. Its color was the color of the poppy, but its shape—most amazing! Its shape continually changed, Cunora; it danced about, and rose and fell; it flowed, even as water floweth in a stream, but always upward!”

“Rolla!” incredulously. “Ye would not awaken me to tell such nonsense!”

“But it were not nonsense!” insisted Rolla. “This blossom was even as I say: a living thing, as live as a kitten! And as it bloomed, behold, the stick was consumed! In a moment or two the man dropped what was left of it; I stooped—so it seemed—to pick it up; but he stopped me, and set his foot upon the beautiful thing!”

She sighed, and then hurried on. “Saying something further, also reassuring, this angel brought forth another of the strange sticks; and when he had made this one bloom, he touched it to the little pile of leaves. Behold, a greater miracle, Cunora! The blossoms spread to the leaves, and caused them to bloom, too!”

Cunora was eyeing her companion pretty sharply. “Ye must take me for a simple one, to believe such imagining.”

Rolla became even more earnest. “Yet it were more than imagining, Cunora; ‘twere too vivid and impressive for only that. As for the leaves, the blossoming swiftly spread until it covered every bit of the pile; and I tell thee that the bloom flowed as high as thy hand! Moreover, after a moment or so, the

thing faded and died out, just as flowers do at the end of the season; all that was left of the leaves was some black fragments, from which arose a bluish dust, like unto the cloud that ye and I saw in the sky one day.

“Then the stranger smiled again, and said something of which I cannot tell the meaning. Once more he performed the miracle, and this time he contrived to spread the blossom from some leaves to the tip of a large piece of wood which he took from the ground. ‘Twas a wonderful sight!

“Nay, hear me further,” as Cunora threw herself, with a grunt of impatience, back on her bed; “there is a greater wonder to tell.

“Holding this big blooming stick in one hand, he gave me his other; and it seemed as though I floated through the air by his side. Presently we came to the place where Corrus’s herd lay sleeping. The angel smote one of the cows with the flat of his hand, so that it got upon its feet; and straightway the stranger thrust the flowing blossom into its face.

“The cow shrank back, Cunora! ‘Twas deadly afraid of that beautiful flower!”

“That is odd,” admitted Cunora. She was getting interested.

“Then he took me by the hand again, and we floated once more through the air. In a short time we arrived at the city of the masters. [Footnote: Having no microscopes, the Sanusians could not know that the soldier bees were unsexed females; hence, “masters.”] Before I knew it, he had me standing before the door of one of their palaces. I hung back, afraid lest we be discovered and punished; but he smiled again and spake so reassuringly that I fled not, but watched until the end.

“With his finger he tapped lightly on the front of the palace. None of the masters heard him at first; so he tapped harder. Presently one of them appeared, and flew at once before our faces. Had it not been for the stranger’s firm grasp I should have fled.

“The master saw that the stranger was the offender, and buzzed angrily. Another moment, and the master would surely have returned to the palace to inform the others; and then the stranger would have been punished with the Head Out punishment. But instead the angel very deliberately moved the blooming stick near unto the master; and behold, it was helpless! Down it fell to the ground, dazed; I could have picked it up, or killed it, without the slightest danger!

“Another master came out, and another, and another; and for each and all the flowing blossom was too much! None would come near it wittingly; and such as the angel approached with it were stricken almost to death.

“When they were all made helpless the angel bade me hold my hand near the bloom; and I was vastly surprised to feel a great warmth. ‘Twas like the heat of a stone which has stood all day in the sun, only much greater. Once my finger touched the bloom, and it gave me a sharp pain.”

Cunora was studying her friend very closely. “Ye could not have devised this tale, Rolla. ‘Tis too unlikely. Is there more of it?”

“A little. The angel once more took me by the hand, and shortly set me down again in this hut. Then he

said something which seemed to mean, ‘With this magic bloom thou shalt be freed from the masters. They fear it; but ye, and all like ye, do not. Be ye ready to find the blossom when I bid thee.’ With that he disappeared, and I awoke.

“Tell me; do I look mad, to thine eyes?” Rolla was beginning to feel a little anxious herself.

Cunora got up and led Rolla to the entrance. The glow of “the Silvery Way” was all the help that the girl’s catlike eyesight needed; she seemed reassured.

“Ye look very strange and excited, Rolla, but not mad. Tell me again what thou didst see and hear, that I may compare it with what ye have already told.”

Rolla began again; and meanwhile, on the earth, the doctor’s companions telepathically congratulated him on his success. He had put the great idea into a fertile mind.

Presently they began to look for other minds. It seemed wise to get the notion into as many Sanusian heads as possible. For some hours this search proceeded; but in the end, after getting in touch with some forty or fifty individuals in as many different parts of the planet, they concluded that they had first hit upon the most advanced specimens that Sanus afforded; the only ones, in fact, whose intellect were strong enough to appreciate the value of what they were told. The investigators were obliged to work with Rolla, Dulnop, and Corrus only; upon these three depended the success of their unprecedented scheme.

Rolla continued to keep watch upon Supreme; and toward morning—that is, morning in that particular part of Sanus—the architect was rewarded by catching the bee in a still drowsy condition. Using the same method Kinney had chosen, Billie succeeded in giving the soldier bee a very vivid idea of fire. And judging by the very human way in which the half-asleep insect tossed about, thrashing her wings and legs and making incoherent sounds, Billie succeeded admirably. The other bees in the hive came crowding around, and Supreme had some difficulty in maintaining her dignity and authority. In the end she confided in the subordinate next in command:

“I have had a terrible dream. One of our slaves, or a woman much like one, assaulted me with a new and fearful weapon.” She described it more or less as Rolla had told Cunora. “It was a deadly thing; but how I know this, I cannot say, except that it was exceedingly hot. So long as the woman held it in her hand, I dared not go near her.

“See to it that the others know; and if such a thing actually comes into existence, let me know immediately.”

“Very well, Supreme.” And the soldier straightway took the tale to another bee. This told, both proceeded to spread the news, bee-fashion; so that the entire hive knew of the terror within a few minutes. Inside an hour every hive in the whole “city” had been informed.

“Give them time now,” said the doctor, “and they will tell every bee on the planet. Suppose we want a couple of weeks before doing anything further? The more afraid the bees are in advance, the easier for Rolla and her friends.”

Meanwhile Corrus, after a sleepless night with his cattle had driven them hurriedly back to the huts

surrounding the “experimental station.” Here the herdsman turned his herd over to another man, and then strode over among the huts. Outside one of them—probably Rolla’s—he paused and gazed longingly, then gave a deep sigh and went on. Shortly he reached another hut in which he found Dulnop.

“I was just going to seek ye!” exclaimed the younger man. “I have seen a wondrous sight, Corrus!”

Thus the two men came to compare notes, finding that each had learned practically the same thing. Corrus being denied the right to visit any woman save Cunora, Dulnop hurried to Rolla and told her what he and the herdsman had learned. The three testimonies made an unshakable case.

“By the great god Mownoth!” swore Corrus in vast delight when Dulnop had reported. “We have learned a way to make ourselves free! As free as the squirrels!”

“Aye,” agreed the younger. “We know the method. But—how shall we secure the means?”

Corrus gave an impatient gesture. “‘Twill come in time, Dulnop, just as the dream came! Meanwhile we must tell every one of our kind, so that all shall be ready when the day comes to strike!

“Then”—his voice lost its savagery, and became soft and tender—“then, Dulnop, lad, ye shall have thy Cunora; and as for Rolla and I—”

Corrus turned and walked away, that his friend might not see what was in his eyes.

IX

FOUND!

It was two weeks to a day when the four on the earth, after having seen very little of each other in the meanwhile, got together for the purpose of finishing their “revelation” to the Sanusians.

“Mr. Van Emmon and I,” stated Billie coolly, as they put on their bracelets, “have been trying to decide upon the best way of telling them how to obtain fire.”

Neither Smith nor the doctor showed that he noticed her “Mr. Van Emmon.” Evidently the two were still unreconciled.

“I argue,” remarked the geologist, “that the simplest method will be a chemical one. There’s lots of ways to produce fire spontaneously, with chemicals; and this woman Rolla could do it easily.”

Billie indulged in a small, superior smile. “He forgets that all these chemical methods require PURE chemicals. And you don’t find them pure in the natural state. You’ve got to have fire to reduce them with.”

“What’s your proposition, then?” from the doctor.

“Optics!” enthusiastically. She produced a large magnifying-glass from her pocket. “All we have to do is to show Dulnop—he’s something of a mineralogist—how to grind and polish a piece of crystal into this shape!”

Van Emmon groaned. “Marvelous! Say, if you knew how infernally hard it is to find even a small piece of crystal, you’d never propose such a thing! Why, it would take years—Mrs. Van Emmon!”

Smith also shook his head. “Neither of you has the right idea. The easiest way, under the circumstances, would be an electrical one.”

He paused, frowning hard; then vetoed his own plan. “Thunder; I’m always speaking first and thinking afterward. I never used to do it,” accusingly, “until I got in with you folks. Anyhow, electricity won’t do; you’ve got to have practically pure elements for that, too.”

“Guess it’s up to you, doc,” said Billie. And they all looked respectfully toward their host.

He laughed. “You three will never learn anything. You’ll continue to think that I’m a regular wonder about these things, but you never notice that I merely stay still and let you commit yourselves first before I say anything. All I have to do is select the one idea remaining after you’ve disproved the rest. Nothing to it!”

He paused. “I’m afraid we’re reduced to the spark method. It would take too long to procure materials pure enough for any other plan. Friction is out of the question for such people; they haven’t the patience. Suppose we go ahead on the flint-and-spark basis.”

They went at once into the familiar trance state. Nightfall was approaching on the part of Sanus in which they were interested. Smith and Van Emmon came upon Dulnop and Corrus as they were talking together. The herdsman was saying:

“Lad, my heart is heavy this night.” Much of his usual vigor was absent. “When I were passing Cunora’s field this day, some of the masters came and drove me over to her side. I tried to get away, and one threatened to kill. I fear me, lad, they intend to force us to marry!”

“What!” fiercely, from the younger.

Corrus laid a hand upon his arm. “Nay, Dulnop; fear not. I have no feeling for thy Cunora; I may marry her, but as for fathering her children—no!”

“Suppose,” through set teeth, “suppose They should threaten to kill thee?”

“I should rather die, Dulnop, than be untrue to Rolla!”

The younger man bounded to his feet. “Spoken like a man! And I tell thee, neither shall I have aught to do with Rolla! Rather death than dishonor!”

Next moment silence fell between them; and then Van Emmon and Smith noted that both men had been bluffing in what they had said. For, sitting apart in the growing darkness, each was plainly in terror of the morrow. Presently Corrus spoke in a low tone:

“All the same, Dulnop, it were well for me and thee if the secret of the flowing blossom were given us this night. I”—he paused, abashed—“I am not so sure of myself, Dulnop, when I hear Their accursed buzzing. I fear—I am afraid I might give in!”

At this Dulnop broke down, and fell to sobbing. Nothing could have told the investigators so well just how childlike the Sanusians really were. Corrus had all he could do to hold in himself.

“Mownoth!” he exclaimed, his eyes raised fervently. “If it be thy will to deliver us, give us the secret this night!”

Meanwhile, in Rolla’s hut, a similar scene was going on under the doctor’s projected eye. Cunora lost her nerve, and Rolls came near to doing the same in her efforts to comfort the other.

“They are heartless things!” Rolla exclaimed with such bitterness as her nature would permit. “They know not what love is: They with their drones and their egg-babes! What is family life to Them? Nothing!

“Somehow I feel that Their reign is nearly at an end, Cunora. Perhaps the great secret shall be given us to-night!”

The girl dried her tears. “Why say ye that, Rolla?”

“Because the time be ripe for it. Are not all our kind looking forward to it? Are we not all expecting and longing for it? Know we not that we shall, must, have what we all so earnestly desire?” It was striking, to hear this bit of modern psychology uttered by this primitive woman. “Let me hear no more

of thy weeping! Ye shall not be made to wed Corrus!”

Nevertheless, at the speaking of her lover’s name, the older woman’s lips trembled despite themselves; and she said nothing further beyond a brief “Sleep well.” After which the two women turned in, and shortly reached the drowsy point.

Thus it happened that Rolla, after a minute or two, once more aroused Cunora in great excitement, and after securely closing the entrance to the hut against all comers, proceeded to relate what she had seen. She finished:

“The seed of the flower can be grown in the heart of rotting wood!” And for hours afterward the two whispered excitedly in the darkness. It was hard to have to wait till dawn.

As for Corrus and Dulnop, they even went so far as to search the heaps of stone in the mineral yards, although neither really expected to find what they sought.

But the four on the earth, not being able to do anything further until morning, proceeded to make themselves at home in the doctor’s house. Smith and the doctor slept together, likewise Billie and Mrs. Kinney; Van Emmon occupied the guest-room in lonely grandeur. When he came down to breakfast he said he had dreamed that he was Corrus, and that he had burned himself on a blazing cow.

Again in the trance state, the four found that Rolla and Cunora, after reaching an understanding with Corrus and Dulnop, had already left their huts in search of the required stone. Five bees accompanied them. Within a few minutes however, Corrus and Dulnop set out together in the opposite direction, as agreed upon; and shortly the guards were withdrawn. This meant that the holiday was officially sanctioned, so long as the two couples kept apart; but if they were to join forces afterward, and be caught in the act, they would be severely punished. Such was bee efficiency—and sentiment.

The doctor had impressed Rolla with the fact that she would find the desired stone in a mountainous country. Cunora, however, was for examining every rock she came to; Rolla was continually passing judgment upon some specimen.

“Nay,” said she, for the hundredth time. “‘Tis a very bright stone we seek, very small and very shiny, like sunlight on the water. I shall know it when I see it, and I shall see it not until we reach the mountains.”

Soon Cunora’s impatience wore off, and the two concentrated upon making time. By midday they were well into the hills, following the course of a very dry creek; and now they kept a sharp lookout at every step.

Van Emmon and Smith had similarly impressed Corrus and Dulnop with the result that there was no loss of time in the beginning. The two men reached the hills on their side of the valley an hour before the women reached theirs.

And thus the search began, the strangest search, beyond a doubt, within the history of the universe. It was not like the work of some of earth’s prehistoric men, who already knew fire and were merely looking up fresh materials; it was a quest in which an idea, an idea given in a vision, was the sole driving force. The most curious part of the matter was that these people were mentally incapable of

conceiving that there was intelligence at work upon them from another world, or even that there was another world.

“Ye saw the stars last night?” Corrus spoke to Dulnop. “Well, ‘tis just such stars as shall awaken the seed of the flower. Ye shall see!”

Both knew exactly what to look for: the brassy, regularly cut crystals with the black stripings, such as has led countless men to go through untold hardships in the belief that they had found gold. In fact, iron pyrites is often called “fool gold,” so deceptive is its glitter.

Yet, it was just the thing for the purpose. Flint they already had, large quantities of it; practically all their tools, such as axes and knives, were made of it. Struck against iron pyrites, a larger, fatter, hotter spark could be obtained than with any other natural combination.

It was Dulnop’s luck to see the outcropping. He found the mineral exposed to plain view, a few feet above the bottom of the ravine the two were ascending. With a shout of triumph he leaped upon the rock.

“Here, Corrus!” he yelled, dancing like mad. “Here is the gift of the gods!”

The older man didn’t attempt to hide his delight. He grabbed his companion and hugged him until his ribs began to crack. Then, with a single blow from his huge club, the herdsman knocked the specimen clear of the slate in which it was set. Such was their excitement, neither dreamed of marking the place in any way.

First satisfying themselves that the pyrites really could produce “stars” from the flint, the two hurried down-stream, in search of the right kind of wood. In half an hour Corrus came across a dead, worm-eaten tree, from which he nonchalantly broke off a limb as big as his leg. The interior was filled with a dry, stringy rot, just the right thing for making a spark “live.”

Then came a real difficulty. It will be better appreciated when the men’s childish nature is borne in mind. Their patience was terribly strained in their attempts to make the sparks fly into the tinder. Again and again one of them would throw the rocks angrily to the ground, fairly snarling with exasperation.

However, the other would immediately take them up and try again. Neither man had a tenth the deftness that is common to adults on the earth. In size and strength alone they were men; otherwise—it cannot too often be repeated—they were mere children. All told, it was over two hours before the punk began to smolder.

“By Mownoth!” swore the herdsman, staring reverently at the smoke. “We have done a miracle, Dulnop—ye and I! Be ye sure this is no dream?”

Quite in human fashion, Dulnop seriously reached out and pinched the herdsman’s tremendous arm. Corrus winced, but was too well pleased with the result to take revenge, although the nature of these men was such as to call for it.

“It be no dream!” he declared, still awestruck.

“Nay,” agreed Dulnop. “And now—to make the flower grow!”

It was Corrus’s lungs which really did the work. His prodigious chest was better than a small pair of bellows, and he blew just as he had been told in the vision. Presently a small flame appeared in the tinder, and leaped eagerly upward. Both men jumped back, and for lack of enough air the flame went out.

“Never mind!” exclaimed Dulnop at Corrus’s crestfallen look. “I remember that we must be ready with leaves, and the like, as soon as the blossom appears. Blow, ye great windmaker, and I shall feed the flower!”

And thus it came about that two men of Sanus, for the first time in the history of the planet, looked upon fire itself. And when they had got it to burning well, each of them stared at his hands, and from his hands to the little heap of “flowers”; from hands to fire they looked, again and again; and then gazed at one another in awe.

X

AT HALF COCK

Rolla and Cunora searched for hours. They followed one creek almost to its very beginning, and then crossed a ridge on the left and came down another stream. Again and again Cunora found bits of mineral such as would have deceived any one who had been less accurately impressed than Rolla. As it afterward turned out, the very accuracy of this impression was a great error, strange though that may seem.

Finally Rolla glanced up at the sun and sighed. “We will have to give it up for this day,” she told Cunora. “There be just time enough to return before night.” Neither said anything about the half-rations upon which they would be fed in punishment for running away.

So the two started back, making their way in gloomy silence through the woods and fields of the valley. Cunora was greatly disappointed, and soon began to show it as any child would, by maintaining a sullenness which she broke only when some trifling obstacle, such as a branch, got in her way. Then she would tear the branch from the tree and fling it as far as she could, meanwhile screaming with anger. Rolla showed more control.

It was nearing nightfall when they came within sight of the huts. At a distance of perhaps half a mile they stopped and stared hard at the scene ahead of them.

“Hear ye anything, Cunora?” asked the older woman.

The girl’s keen ears had caught a sound. “Methinks something hath aroused our people. I wonder—”

“Cunora!” gasped Rolla excitedly. “Think ye that Corrus and Dulnop have succeeded in growing the flower?”

They ran nearer. In a moment it was clear that something most certainly was arousing the people. The village was in an uproar.

“Stay!” cautioned Rolla, catching her friend’s arm. “Let us use cunning! Mayhap there be danger!”

They were quite alone in the fields, which were always deserted at that hour. Crouching behind a row of bushes, they quickly drew near to the village, all without being seen. Otherwise, this tale would never be told.

For Corrus and Dulnop, after having satisfied themselves that the wondrous flowering flower would live as long as they continued to feed it, had immediately decided to carry it home. To do so they first tried building the fire on a large piece of bark. Of course it burned through, and there had been more delay. Finally Corrus located a piece of slate, so large that a small fire could be kept up without danger of spilling.

The two men had hurried straight for the village. Not once did either of them dream what a magnificent spectacle they made; the two skin-clad aborigines, bearing the thing which was to change them from slaves into free beings, with all the wonders of civilization to come in its train. Behind

them as they marched, if they but knew it, stalked the principles of the steam engine, of the printing-press, of scientific agriculture and mechanical industry in general. Look about the room in which you sit as you read this; even to the door-knobs every single item depends upon fire, directly or indirectly. But Corrus and Dulnop were as ignorant of this as their teeth were devoid of fillings.

Not until then did it occur to the four watchers on the earth that there was anything premature about the affair. It was Smith who first observed:

“Say, Van, I never thought to impress Dulnop with any plan for using the fire. How about you and Corrus?”

“By George!” seriously, from the geologist. And immediately the two set to work trying to reach their agents’ minds.

They failed! Dulnop and Corrus were both too excited, far too wide awake, to feel even the united efforts of all four on the earth. And the two Sanusians marched straight into the village without the remotest idea of how they should act.

“It is a flower!” he shrieked, frantic with joy. “The flower has come!” the shout was passed along. “Corrus and Dulnop have found the flowering blossom!”

Within a single minute the two men were surrounded by the whole human population of the place. For the most part the natives were too awestruck to come very near; they were content to stand off and stare at the marvel, or fall upon their knees and worship it. It was now so dark that the flames fairly illumined their faces.

Shortly one or two got up courage enough to imitate Dulnop as he “fed the flower;” and presently there were several little fires burning merrily upon the ground. As for the aborigines, they let themselves loose; never before did they shout and dance as they shouted and danced that night. It was this Rolla and Cunora heard.

Before five minutes had passed, however, a scout awakened Supreme. Billie could see that the bee was angry at having been disturbed, but swiftly collected herself as she realized the significance of the scout’s report.

“So they have found the terror,” she reflected aloud. “Very well. Arouse all except the egg-layers and the drones. We can make use of the food-gatherers as well as the fighters.”

The hive was soon awake. Billie was sure that every last bee was greatly afraid; their agitation was almost pitiful. But such was their organization and their automatic obedience to orders, there was infinitely less confusion than might be supposed. Another five minutes had not passed before not only that hive, but all within the “city” were emptied; and millions upon millions of desperate bees were under way toward the village.

Rolla and Cunora knew of it first. They heard the buzzing of that winged cloud as it passed through the air above their heads; but such was the bees’ intent interest in the village ahead, the two women were not spied as they hid among the bushes.

By this time twilight was half gone. The firelight lit up the crowd of humans as they surged and danced about their new deity. For, henceforth, fire would replace Mownoth as their chief god; it was easy to see that.

Moreover, both Corrus and Dulnop, as primitive people will, had been irresistibly seized by the spirit of the mob. They threw their burden down and joined in the frenzy of the dance. Louder and louder they shouted; faster and faster they capered. Already one or two of their fellow villagers had dropped, exhausted, to the ground. Never had they had so good an excuse for dancing themselves to death!

And into this scene came the bees. Not one of them dared go within ten yards of the flames; for a while, all they did was to watch the humans. Such was the racket no one noticed the sound of the wings.

“Shall we attack those on the edge of the crowd?” one of Supreme’s lieutenants wanted to know. The commandant considered this with all the force of what mental experience she had had.

“No,” she decided. “We shall wait a little longer. Just now, they are too jubilant to be frightened; we would have to kill them all, and that would not be good policy.”

Of course, the bee had the pollen crop, nothing more, in mind when she made her decision; yet it was further justified. There was no let-up in the rejoicing; if anything, it became more frantic than before. Darkness fell upon a crowd which was reeling in self-induced mental intoxication.

Rolla and Cunora came a little nearer; and still remaining hidden, saw that more than half their friends had succumbed. One by one the remainder dropped out; their forms lay all about what was left of the fire. The two women could easily see what their friends were blind to: the bees were simply biding their time.

“Ought we not to rush in and warn them?” whispered Cunora to Rolla. “Surely the flower hath driven them mad!”

“Hush!” warned the older woman. “Be quiet! Everything depends upon our silence!”

It was true. Only two of the villagers remained upon their feet, and shortly one of these staggered and fell in his tracks. The one who was left was Corrus himself, his immense vitality keeping him going. Then he, too, after a final whoop of triumph and defiance, absolutely unconscious of the poison-laden horde that surrounded him, fell senseless to the earth. Another minute, and the whole crowd was still.

AND THE FIRE HAD GONE OUT.

The bees came closer. Several thousands of them were stricken by smoke from the embers, and the rest of the swarm took good care to avoid it. They hovered over the prostrate forms of the aborigines and made sure that they were unconscious.

“Is there nothing we can do?” whispered Cunora, straining her eyes to see.

“Nothing, save to watch and wait,” returned Rolla, her gaze fixed upon the dark heap which marked her lover’s form. And thus an hour passed, with the four on the earth quite unable to take a hand in any way.

Then one of the villagers—the first, in fact, who had dropped out of the dance—stirred and presently awakened. He sat up and looked about him, dazed and dizzy, for all the world like a drunken man. After a while he managed to get to his feet.

No sooner had he done this than a dozen bees were upon him. Terror-stricken, he stood awaiting their commands. They were not long in coming.

By means of their fearful buzzing, the deadly insects guided him into the nearest hut, where they indicated that he should pick up one of the rude hoelike took which was used in the fields. With this in hand, he was driven to the little piles of smoldering ashes, where the fires had flickered an hour before.

Hardly knowing what he was doing, but not daring to disobey, the man proceeded to heap dirt over the embers. Shortly he had every spark of the fire smothered beneath a mound as high as his knees. Not till then did any of the others begin to revive.

As fast as they recovered the bees took charge of them. Not a human had courage enough to make a move of offense; it meant certain death, and they all knew it only too well. As soon as they were wide awake enough to know what they were doing, they were forced to search the bodies of those still asleep.

“We must find the means for growing the flower,” said Supreme, evidently convinced that a seed was a seed, under any circumstances. And presently they found, tucked away in Corrus’s lion-skin, a large chunk of the pyrites, and a similar piece on Dulnop.

“So these were the discoverers,” commented Supreme.

“What is your will in their case?” the subordinate asked.

The commanding bee considered for a long time. Finally she got an idea, such as bees are known to get once in a great while. It was simply a new combination—as all ideas are merely new combinations—of two punishments which were commonly employed by the bees.

As a result, eight of the villagers were compelled to carry the two fire-finders to a certain spot on the bank of a nearby stream. Here the two fragments of pyrites were thrown, under orders, into the water; so that the eight villagers might know just why the whole thing was being done.

Next the two men, still unconscious, were buried up to their necks. Their heads, lolling helplessly, were all that was exposed. So it was to be the Head Out punishment—imprisonment of one day with their bodies rigidly held by the soil: acute torture to an aborigine. But was this all?

One of the villagers was driven to the nearest hut, where he was forced to secure two large stone axes. Bringing these back to the “torture-place,” as the spot was called, the man was compelled to wield one of the clumsy tools while a companion used the other; and between them they cut down the tree whose branches had been waving over the prisoners’ heads. Then the villagers were forced to drag the tree away.

All of which occurred in the darkness, and out of sight of Rolla and Cunora. They could only guess

what was going on. Hours passed, and dawn approached. Not till then did they learn just what had been done.

The villagers, now all awake, were driven by the bees to the place on the bank of the stream. There, the eight men who had imprisoned the two discoverers told what had been done with the “magic stones.” Each villager stared at the offenders, and at something which lay on the ground before them, and in sober silence went straight to his or her work in the fields.

Presently the huts were deserted. All the people were on duty elsewhere. Such bees as were not guarding the fields had returned to the hives. Rolla and Cunora cautiously ventured forth, taking great care to avoid being seen. They hurried fearfully to the stream.

Before they reached the spot Rolla gave an exclamation and stared curiously to one side, where the tree had been dragged. Suddenly she gave a terrible cry and rushed forward, only to drop on her knees and cover her face with hands that shook as with the palsy. At the same instant Cunora saw what had been done; and uttering a single piercing scream, fell fainting to the ground.

Heaped in front of the two prisoners was a large pile of pebbles. There were thousands upon thousands in the heap. Before each man, at a distance of a foot, was a large gourdful of water. To the savages, these told the whole story; these, together with the tree dragged to one side.

Corrus and Dulnop were to be buried in that spot every day for as many days as there were pebbles in the heap; in other words, until they died. Every night they would be dug up, and every morning buried afresh. And to keep them from telling any of the villagers where they had found the pyrites, they were to be deprived of water all day long. By night their tongues would be too swollen for speech. For they had been sentenced to the No Shade torture, as well; their heads would be exposed all day long to the burning sun itself.

XI

THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

It is significant that Billie, because of her connection with the bee, Supreme, was spared the sight that the doctor saw from Rolla's point of view. Otherwise, the geologist's wife might have had a different opinion of the matter. As it was—

"Corrus and Dulnop," said she as cooly as Supreme herself might have spoken, "are not the first to suffer because they have discovered something big."

Whereupon her husband's wrath got beyond his grip. "Not the first! Is that all you can say?" he demanded hotly. "Why, of all the damnably cruel, cold-blooded creatures I ever heard of, those infernal bees—"

Van Emmon stopped, unable to go on without blasphemy.

The doctor had got over the horror of what he had seen. "We want to be fair, Van. Look at this matter from the bees' view-point for awhile. What were they to do? They had to make sure, as far as possible, that their supremacy would never be threatened again. Didn't they?"

"Oh, but—damn it all!" cried Van Emmon. "There's a limit somewhere! Such cruelty as that—no one could conceive of it!"

"As for the bees," flared Billie, "I don't blame 'em! And unless I'm very much mistaken, the ruling class ANYWHERE, here on the earth or wherever you investigate, will go the limit to hold the reins, once they get them!"

The expression on Van Emmon's face was curious to see. There was no fear there, only a puzzled astonishment. Strange as it may seem, Billie had told him something that had never occurred to him before. And he recognized it as truth, as soon as she had said it.

"Just a minute," remarked Smith in his ordinary voice; "just a minute. You're forgetting that we don't really know whether Rolla and Cunora are safe. Everything depends upon them now, you know."

In silence the four went back into telepathic connection. Now, of course, Smith and Van Emmon were practically without agents. The prisoners could tell them nothing whatever except the tale of increasing agony as their torture went on. All that Van Emmon and Smith could do was lend the aid of their mentality to the efforts of the other two, and for a while had to be content with what Billie, through Supreme, and the doctor, through Rolla, were able to learn. However, Kinney did suggest that one of the other two men get in touch with Cunora.

"Good idea," said Smith. "Go to it, Van Emmon."

The geologist stirred uneasily, and avoided his wife's eyes. "I—I'm afraid not, Smith. Rather think I'd prefer to rest a while. You do it!"

Smith laughed and reddened. "Nothing doing for an old bach like me. Cunora might—well, you know

—go in bathing, for instance. It's all right for the doctor, of course; but—let me out!"

Meanwhile the two women on Sanus, taking the utmost care, managed to retreat from the river bank without being discovered. Keeping their eyes very wide open and their ears strained for the slightest buzz, the two contrived to pass through the village, out into the fields, and thence, from cover to cover, into the foothills on that side of the valley where their lovers had found the pyrites.

"If only we knew which stream they ascended!" lamented Cunora, as they stood in indecision before a fork in the river.

"But we don't!" Rolla pointed out philosophically. "We must trust to luck and Mownoth, ye and I."

And despite all the effort the doctor could put forth to the contrary, the two women picked out the wrong branch. They searched as diligently as two people possibly could; but somehow the doctor knew, just because of the wrong choice that had been made, that their search would be unsuccessful. He thought the matter over for a few moments, and finally admitted to his three friends:

"I wonder if I haven't been a little silly? Why should I have been so precious specific in impressing Rolla about the pyrites? Pshaw! Almost any hard rock will strike sparks from flint!"

"Why, of course!" exploded Van Emmon. "Here—let's get busy and tell Rolla!"

But it proved astonishingly difficult. The two women were in an extraordinary condition now. They were continually on the alert. In fact, the word "alert" scarcely described the state of mind, the keen, desperate watchfulness which filled every one of their waking hours, and caused each to remain awake as long as possible; so that they invariably fell to sleep without warning. They could not be caught in the drowsy state!

For they knew something about the bees which the four on the earth did not learn until Billie had overheard Supreme giving some orders.

"Set a guard on that river bank," she told her subordinate, "and maintain it night and day. If any inferior attempts to recover the magic stone, deal with him or her in the same manner in which we punished the finders of the deadly flower."

"It shall be done, Supreme. Is there anything further?"

"Yes. Make quite sure that none of the inferiors are missing."

Shortly afterward the lieutenant reported that one of the huts was empty.

"Rolla, the soil-tester, and Cunora, the vineyardist, are gone."

"Seek them!" Supreme almost became excited. "They are the lovers of the men we punished! They would not absent themselves unless they knew something! Find them, and torture them into revealing the secret! We must weed out this flowing blossom forever!"

"It shall be done!"

Such methods were well known to Rolla and Cunora. Had not their fellow villagers, many of them, tried time after time to escape from bondage? And had they not inevitably been apprehended and driven back, to be tortured as an example to the rest? It would never do to be caught!

So they made it a practice to travel only during twilight and dawn, remaining hidden through the day. Invariably one stood watch while the other slept. The bees were—everywhere!

Upon crossing the range of mountains going down the other side, Cunora and Rolla began to feel hopeful of two things—first, that their luck would change, and the wonderful stone be found; and second, that they would be in no danger from the bees in this new country, which seemed to be a valley much like the one they had quit. It was all quite new and strange to them, and in their interest they almost forgot at times that each had a terrible score to settle when her chance finally came.

Twice they had exceedingly narrow escapes. Always they kept carefully hid, but on the third day Cunora, advancing cautiously through some brush, came suddenly upon two bees feeding. She stopped short and held her breath. Neither saw her, so intent were they upon their honey; yet Cunora felt certain that each had been warned to watch out for her. This was true; Billie learned that every bee on the planet had been told. And so Cunora silently backed away, an inch at a time, until it was safe to turn and run.

On another occasion Rolla surprised a big drone bee, just as she bent to take a drink of water from a stream. The insect had been out of her sight, on the other side of a boulder. It rose with an angry buzz as she bent down; a few feet away from her it hung in the air, apparently scrutinizing her to make sure that she was one of the runaways. Her heart leaped to her mouth. Suppose they were reported!

She made a lightninglike grab at the thing, and very nearly caught it. Straight up it shot, taken by surprise, and dashed blindly into a ledge of rock which hung overhead. For a second it floundered, dazed; and that second was its last. Cunora gave a single bound forward, and with a vicious swing of a palm-leaf, which she always carried, smashed the bee flat.

Before they had been free five days they came to an exceedingly serious conclusion: that it was only a question of time until they were caught. Sooner or later they must be forced to return; they could not hope to dodge bees much longer. When Rolla fully realized this she turned gravely to the younger girl.

“Methinks the time has come for us to make a choice, Cunora. Which shall it be: live as we have been living for the past four days, with the certainty of being caught in time or—face the unknown perils on the edge of the world?”

Cunora dropped the piece of stone she had been inspecting and shivered with fear. “A dreadful choice ye offer, Rolla! Think of the horrible beasts we must encounter!”

“Ye mean,” corrected the philosophical one—“ye mean, the beasts which men SAY they have seen. Tell me; hast ever seen such thyself? Many times hast thou been near the edge, I know.”

The girl shook her head. “Nay; not I. Yet these beasts must be, Rolla; else why should all men tell of them?”

“I note,” remarked Rolla thoughtfully, “that each man tells of seeing a different sort of beast.

Perchance they were all but lies."

However, it was Cunora's fear of capture, rather than her faith in Rolla's reasoning, which drove the girl to the north. For to the north they traveled, a matter of some two weeks; and not once did they dare relax their vigilance. Wherever they went, there was vegetation of some sort, and wherever there was vegetation bees were likely to be found. By the time the two weeks were over, the women were in a state of near-hysteria, from the nervous strain of it all. Moreover, both suffered keenly for want of cereals, to which they were accustomed; they were heartily tired of such fruits and nuts as they were able to pick up without exposing themselves.

One morning before daybreak they came to the upper end of a long, narrow valley—one which paralleled their own, by the way—and as they emerged from the plain into the foothills it was clear that they had reached a new type of country. There was comparatively little brush; and with every step the rockiness increased. By dawn they were on the edge of a plateau; back of them stretched the inhabited country; ahead, a haze-covered expanse. Nothing but rocks was about them.

"Ye are sure that we had best keep on?" asked Cunora uneasily.

Rolla nodded, slowly but positively. "It is best. Back of us lies certain capture. Ahead—we know not what; but at least there is a chance!"

Nevertheless, both hesitated before starting over the plateau. Each gazed back longingly over the home of their kind; and for a moment Rolla's resolution plainly faltered. She hesitated; Cunora made a move as though to return. And at that instant their problem was decided for them.

A large drone passed within six feet of them. Both heard the buzz, and whirled about to see the bee darting frantically out of reach. At a safe distance it paused, as though to make sure of its find, then disappeared down the valley. They had been located!

"We have no choice now!" cried Rolla, speaking above a whisper for the first time in weeks. "On, as fast as ye can, Cunora!"

The two sped over the rocks, making pretty good time considering the loads they carried. Each had a good-sized goatskin full of various dried fruits and nuts, also a gourd not so full. In fact, it had been some while since they had had fresh water. Cunora was further weighed down by some six pounds of dried rabbit meat; the animals had been caught in snares. Both, however, discarded their palm leaves; they would be of no further use now.

And thus they fled, knowing that they had, at most, less than a day before the drone would return with enough soldiers to compel obedience. For the most part, the surface was rough granite, with very little sign of erosion. There was almost no water; both women showed intense joy when they found a tiny pool of it standing in a crevasse. They filled their gourds as well as their stomachs.

A few steps farther on, and the pair stepped out of the shallow gully in which they had been walking. Immediately they were exposed to a very strong and exceedingly cold wind, such as seemed to surprise them in no way, but compelled both to actually lean against its force. Moreover, although this pressure was all from the left, it proved exceedingly difficult to go on. Their legs seemed made of lead, and their breathing was strangely labored. This, also, appeared to be just what they had expected.

Presently, however, they found another slight depression the rocks; and sheltered from the wind, made a little better progress ahead. It was bitter cold, however; only the violence of their exercise could make them warm enough to stand it. All in all, the two were considerably over three hours in making the last mile; they had to stop frequently to rest. The only compensating thing was their freedom from worry; the bees would not bother them where the wind was so strong. So long as they could keep on the move they were safe.

But what made it worse was the steadily increasing difficulty of moving their legs. For, although the surface continued level, they seemed to be CLIMBING now, where before they had simply walked. It was just as though the plateau had changed into a mountain, and they were ascending it; only, upon looking back, nothing but comparatively flat rock met the gaze. What made them lean forward so steeply anyhow?

Rolla seemed to think it all very ordinary. She was more concerned about the wind, to which they had become once more exposed as they reached the end of the rift. On they pressed, five or six steps at each attempt, stopping to rest twice the length of time they actually traveled. It was necessary now to cling to the rock with both hands, and once Cunora lost her grip, so that she would have been blown to one side, or else have slipped backward, had not Rolla grasped her heel and held her until she could get another hand-hold.

“Courage!” gasped Rolla. Perspiration was streaming down her face, despite the bitter cold of the wind; her hands trembled from the strain she was undergoing. “Courage, Cunora! It be not much farther!” On they strove. Always it seemed as though they were working upward as well as onward, although the continued flatness of the surface argued obstinately against this. Also, the sun remained in the same position relative to the rocks; if they were climbing, it should have appeared overhead. What did it mean?

Finally Rolla saw, about a hundred yards farther on, something which caused her to shout: “Almost there, Cunora!”

The younger girl could not spare breath enough to reply. They struggled on in silence.

Now they were down on their hands and knees. Before half the hundred yards was covered, they were flat on their faces, literally clawing their way upward and onward. Had the wind increased in violence in proportion as the way grew harder, they could never have made it, physical marvels though they were. Only the absolute knowledge that they dared not return drove them on; that, and the possibility of finding the precious stone, and of ultimately saving the two men they had left behind.

The last twenty feet was the most extraordinary effort that any human had ever been subjected to. They had to take turns in negotiating the rock; one would creep a few inches on, get a good hold, and brace herself against the wind, while the other, crawling alongside, used her as a sort of a crutch. Their fingers were bleeding and their finger-nails cracked from the rock and cold; the same is equally true of their toes. Had it been forty feet instead of twenty—

The rocks ended there. Beyond was nothing but sky; even this was not like what they were used to, but was very nearly black. Two more spurts, and Rolla threw one hand ahead and caught the edge of the rock. Cunora dragged herself alongside. The effort brought blood to her nostrils.

They rested a minute or two, then looked at one another in mute inquiry. Cunora nodded; Rolla took great breath; and they drew themselves to the edge and looked over.

XII

OUTSIDE INFORMATION

The two women gazed in extreme darkness. The other side of the ridge of rock was black as night. From side to side the ridge extended, like a jagged knife edge on a prodigious scale; it seemed infinite in extent. Behind them—that is, at their feet-lay the stone-covered expanse they had just traversed; ahead of them there was—nothingness itself.

Cunora shook with fear and cold. “Let us not go on, Rolla!” she whimpered. “I like not the looks of this void; it may contain all sorts of beasts. I—I am afraid!” She began to sob convulsively. Rolla peered into the darkness. Nothing whatever was to be seen. It was as easy to imagine enemies as friends; easier in fact. What might not the unknown hold for them?

“We cannot stay here,” spoke Rolla, with what energy her condition would permit. “We could not—hold on. Nor can we return now; They would surely find us!”

But Cunora’s courage, which had never faltered in the face of familiar dangers, was not equal to the unknown. She wailed: “Rolla! A little way back—a hollow in the rock! ‘Tis big enough to shelter me! I would— rather stay there than—go on!”

“Ye would rather die there, alone!”

Cunora hid her face. “Let me have half the food! I can go back to the pool—for water! And maybe,” hopefully—“maybe They will give up the search in time.”

“Aye,” from Rolla, bitterly. “And in time Dulnop will die, if we do nothing for him—and for Corrus!”

Cunora fell to sobbing again. “I cannot help it! I am—afraid!”

Rolla scarcely heard. An enormous idea had just occurred to her. She had told the girl to think of Dulnop and Corrus; but was it not equally true that they should think of all the other humans, their fellow slaves, each of whom had suffered nearly as much? Was not the fire equally precious to them all?

She started to explain this to the girl, then abruptly gave it up. It was no use; Cunora’s mind was not strong enough to take the step. Rolla fairly gasped as she realized, as no Sanusian had realized before, that she had been given the responsibility of rescuing A WHOLE RACE.

Fire she must have! And since she could not, dared not, seek it here, she must try the other side of the world. And she would have to do it— alone!

“So be it!” she said loudly in a strange voice. “Ye stay here and wait, Cunora! I go on!”

And for fear her resolution would break down, she immediately crept over the edge. She clung to the rock as though expecting to be dragged from it. Instead, as she let her feet down into the blackness, she could feel solid rock beneath her body, quite the same as she had lain upon a moment before. It was like descending the opposite side of an incredibly steep mountain, a mountain made of blackness

itself.

The women gave one another a last look. For all they knew, neither would gaze upon the other again. Next moment, with Cunora's despairing cry ringing in her ears, Rolla began to crawl backward and downward.

She could plainly see the sun's level rays above her head, irregular beams of yellowish light; it served slightly to illuminate her surroundings. Shortly, however, her eyes became accustomed to the darkness; the stars helped just as they had always helped; and soon she was moving almost as freely as on the other side.

Once she slipped, and slid down and to one side, for perhaps ten feet. When she finally grabbed a sharp projecting ledge and stopped, her vision almost failed from the terrible effort she had put forth. She could scarcely feel the deep gash that the ledge had made in her finger-tips.

After perhaps half an hour of hard work among bare rocks exactly like those she had quit, she stopped for a prolonged rest. As a matter of course, she stared at the sky; and then came her first discovery.

Once more let it be understood that her view was totally different from anything that has ever been seen on the earth. To be sure, "up" was over her head, and "down" was under her feet; nevertheless, she was stretched full length, face down, on the rock. In other words, it was precisely as though she were clinging to a cliff. Sky above, sky behind and all sides; there were stars even under her feet!

But all her life she had been accustomed, at night, to see that broad band of silver light across the heavens. She had taken it for granted that, except at two seasons of the year, for short periods, she would always see "the Silvery Way." But to-night—there was no band! The whole sky was full of—stars, nothing else!

It will be easier to picture her wonder and uneasiness if she is compared mentally with a girl of five or six. Easier, too, to appreciate the fact that she determined to go on anyhow. Mile after mile was covered in the darkness. Rolla was on the point of absolute exhaustion; but she dared not sleep until she reached a spot where there was no danger of falling. It was only after braving the gale for over four hours in the starlight that Rolla reached a point where she was no longer half crawling, half creeping, but moved nearly erect. Shortly she was able to face the way she was going; and by leaning backward was able to make swift progress. In another half-hour she was walking upright. Still no explanation of the mystery!

Finding a sheltered spot, she proceeded to make herself comparatively comfortable on the rock. Automatically, from habit, she proceeded to keep watch; then she must have remembered that there was now no need for vigilance. For she lay herself down in the darkness and instantly fell asleep.

Three hours later—according to the time kept by the watchers on the earth—Rolla awoke and sat up in great alarm. And small wonder.

It was broad daylight! The sun was well above the horizon; and not only the Sanusian but the people on the earth were vastly puzzled to note that it was the western horizon! To all appearances, Rolla had slept a whole day in that brief three hours.

Shortly her nerves were steady enough for her to look about, uncomprehendingly, but interestedly, as a child will. There was nothing but rock to be seen; a more or less level surface, such as she had toiled over the day before. The day before! She glanced at the sun once more, and her heart gave a great leap.

The sun was rising—IN THE WEST!

"'Tis a world of contraries," observed Rolla sagely to herself. "Mayhap I shall find all else upside down."

She ate heartily, and drank deep from her gourd. There was not a cupful remaining. She eyed it seriously as she got to her feet.

Another look back at that flat expanse of granite, which had so gradually and so mysteriously changed from precipice to plain, and Rolla strode on with renewed vigor and interest. Presently she was able to make out something of a different color in the distance, and soon was near enough to see some bona-fide bushes; a low, flowerless shrub, it is true, but at least it was a living thing.

Shortly the undergrowth became dense enough to make it somewhat of an effort to get through. And before long she was noticing all manner of small creatures, from bugs to an occasional wandering bird. These last, especially, uttered an abrupt but cheerful chirp which helped considerably to raise her spirits. It was all too easy to see, in her fancy, her lover helpless and suffering in the power of those cold-blooded, merciless insects.

In an hour or two she reached the head of a small stream. Hurrying down its banks as rapidly as its undergrowth would permit, Rolla followed its course as it bent, winding and twisting, in the direction which had always been north to her, but which the sun plainly labeled "south." Certainly the sun mounted steadily toward the zenith, passing successively through the positions corresponding to four, three and two o'clock, in a manner absolutely baffling.

About noon she came out of the canon into the foothills. Another brief rest, and from the top of a knoll she found herself looking upon a valley about the size of the one she called "home." Otherwise, it was very different. For one thing, it was far better watered; nowhere could she see the half-dried brownishness so characteristic of her own land. The whole surface was heavily grown with all manner of vegetation; and so far as she could see it was all absolutely wild. There was not a sign of cultivation.

Keeping to the left bank of the river, a much broader affair than any she had seen before, Rolla made her way for several miles with little difficulty. Twice she made wide detours through the thicket, and once it was necessary to swim a short distance; the stream was too deep to wade. The doctor watched the whole affair, purely as a matter of professional interest.

"She is a magnificent specimen physically," he said in his impersonal way, "and she shows none of the defects of the African savages."

And such was his manner, in speaking of his distant "patient," that Billie took it entirely as a matter of course, without the slightest self-consciousness because of Van Emmon and Smith.

All this while Rolla had been intent, as before, upon finding some of the coveted crystals. She had no

luck; but presently she discovered something decidedly worth while—a fallen tree trunk, not too large, and near enough to the bank to be handled without help. A few minutes later she was floating at ease, and making decidedly better time.

A half-hour of this—during which she caught glimpses of many animals, large and small, all of which fled precipitately—and she rounded a sharp bend in the stream, to be confronted with a sight which must have been strange indeed to her. Stretching across the river was—a network of rusty wire, THE REMAINS OF A REINFORCED CONCRETE BRIDGE.

There was no doubt of this. On each bank was a large, moss-grown block of stone, which the doctor knew could be nothing else than the old abutments. Seemingly there had been only a single span.

The woman brought the log to the shore, and examined the bridge closely. Instinctively she felt that the structure argued a high degree of intelligence, very likely human. A little hesitation, and then she beached her log, ascended the bank, and looked upon the bridge from above.

A narrow road met her eyes. Once it might have been twice as wide, but now the thicket encroached until there was barely room enough, judged the doctor, for a single vehicle to pass. Its surface was badly broken up—apparently it had been concrete—and grass grew in every crack. Nevertheless, it was a bona-fide road.

For the first time in a long while, Rolla was temporarily off her guard. The doctor was able to impress her with the idea of “Follow this road!” and to his intense gratification the woman started away from the river at once.

Soon the novelty of the thing wore off enough for her to concern herself with fresh food. She discovered plenty of berries, also three kinds of nuts; all were strange to her, yet she ate them without question, and suffered nothing as a result, so far as the doctor could see.

The sun was less than an hour from the horizon when the road, after passing over a slight rise, swung in a wide arc through the woods and thus unveiled a most extraordinary landscape. It was all the more incredible because so utterly out of keeping with what Rolla had just passed through. She had been in the wilderness; now—

A vast city lay before her. Not a hundred yards away stood a low, square building of some plain, gray stone. Beyond this stretched block upon block—mile upon mile rather—of bona-fide residences, stores and much larger buildings. It is true that the whole place was badly overgrown with all sorts of vegetation; yet, from that slight elevation, there was no doubt that this place was, or had been, a great metropolis.

Presently it became clear that “had been” was the correct term. Nothing but wild life appeared. Rolla looked closely for any signs of human occupancy, but saw none. To all appearances the place was deserted; and it was just as easy to say that it had been so for ten centuries as for one.

“There seems no good reason why I should not go farther,” commented Rolla aloud, to boost her courage. “Perchance I shall find the magic stone in this queer place.”

It speaks well for her self-confidence that, despite the total strangeness of the whole affair—a city was

as far out of her line as aviation to a miner—she went forward with very little hesitation. None of the wild creatures that scuttled from her sight alarmed her at all; the only things she looked at closely were such bees as she met. The insects ignored her altogether, except to keep a respectful distance. “These masters,” observed Rolla with satisfaction, “know nothing of me. I shall not obey them till they threaten me.” But there was no threatening.

For the most part the buildings were in ruins. Here and there a structure showed very little damage by the elements. In more than one case the roof was quite intact. Clearly the materials used were exceptional, or else the place had not been deserted very long. The doctor held to the latter opinion, especially after seeing a certain brown-haired dog running to hide behind a heap of stones.

“It was a dog!” the doctor felt sure. To Rolla, however, the animal was even more significant. She exclaimed about it in a way which confirmed the doctor’s guess. On she went at a faster rate, plainly excited and hopeful of seeing something further that she could recognize.

She found it in a hurry. Reaching the end of one block of the ruins, she turned the corner and started to follow the cross street. Whereupon she stopped short, to gaze in consternation at a line of something whitish which stretched from one side of the “street” to the other.

It was a line of human skeletons.

There were perhaps two hundred in the lot, piled one on top of the other, and forming a low barrier across the pavement. To Rolla the thing was simply terrible, and totally without explanation. To the people on the earth, it suggested a formation of troops, shot down in their tracks and left where they had fallen. The doctor would have given a year of his life if only Rolla had had the courage to examine the bones; there might have been bullet-holes, or other evidence of how they had met their death.

The Sanusian chose rather to back carefully away from the spot. She walked hurriedly up the street she had just left, and before going another block came across two skeletons lying right in the middle of the street. A little farther on, and she began to find skeletons on every hand. Moreover—and this is especially significant—the buildings in this locality showed a great many gaps and holes in their walls, such as might have been made by shell-fire.

This made it easier to understand something else. Every few yards or so the explorer found a large heap of rust in the gutter, or what had once been the gutter. These heaps had little or no shape; yet the doctor fancied he could detect certain resemblances to things he had seen before, and shortly declared that they were the remains of motors.

“Can’t say whether they were aircraft or autos, of course,” he added, “but those things were certainly machines.” Later, Rolla paid more attention to them, and the doctor positively identified them as former motor-cars.

The sun had gone down. It was still quite light, of course; darkness would not come for a couple of hours. Rolla munched on what food she had, and pressed on through the ruins. She saw skeletons and rusted engines everywhere, and once passed a rounded heap of rust which looked like nothing so much as a large cannon shell. Had the place been the scene of a battle?

Just when she had got rather accustomed to the place and was feeling more or less at her ease, she

stopped short. At the same time the doctor himself fairly jumped in his chair. Somewhere, right near at hand, on one of the larger structures, a bell began to ring!

It clanged loudly and confidently, giving out perhaps thirty strokes before it stopped. The stillness which followed was pretty painful. In a moment, however, it was broken as effectively as any silence can be broken.

A man's voice sounded within the building.

Immediately it was replied to, more faintly, by several others. Then came the clatter of some sort of utensils, and sundry other noises which spoke loudly of humans. Rolla froze in her tracks, and her teeth began to chatter.

Next moment she got a grip on herself. "What difference doth it make, whether they be friend or enemy?" she argued severely, for the benefit of her shaking nerves. "They will give thee food, anyhow. And perchance they know where liveth the magic stone!"

In the end Rolla's high purpose prevailed over her weak knees, and she began to look for the entrance to the place. It was partly in ruins— that is, the upper stories—but the two lower floors seemed, so far as their interior could be seen through the high, unglazed windows, to be in good condition. There were no doors on that street.

Going around the corner, however, Rolla saw a high archway at the far corner of the structure. Approaching near enough to peek in, she saw that this arch provided an opening into a long corridor, such as might once have served as a wagon or auto entrance. After a little hesitation she went in.

She passed a door, a massive thing of solid brassy metal, such as interested the doctor immensely but only served to confuse the explorer. A little farther on, and the corridor became pretty dark. She passed another brass door, and approached the end of the pavement. There was one more door there; and she noted with excitement that it was open.

She came closer and peered in. The room was fairly well lighted, and what she saw was clear-cut and unmistakable. In the middle of the room was a long table, and seated about it, in perfect silence, sat an even dozen men.

XIII

THE TWELVE

For a minute or two Rolla was not observed. She simply stood and stared, being neither confident enough to go forward nor scared enough to retreat. Childlike, she scrutinized the group with great thoroughness.

Their comparatively white faces and hands puzzled her most. Also, she could not understand the heavy black robes in which all were dressed. Falling to the floor and reaching far above their necks, such garments would have been intolerable to the free-limbed Sanusians. To the watchers on the earth, however, the robes made the group look marvelously like a company of monks.

Not that there was anything particularly religious about the place or in their behavior. All twelve seemed to be silent only because they were voraciously hungry. A meal was spread on the table. Except for the garments, the twelve might have been so many harvest hands, gathered for the evening meal in the cook-house. From the white-bearded man who sat at the head of the table and passed out large helpings of something from a big pot, to the fair-haired young fellow at the foot, who could scarcely wait for his share, there was only one thing about them which might have been labeled pious; and that was their attitude, which could have been interpreted: “Give us this day our daily bread—and hurry up about it!”

Apparently Rolla was convinced that these men were thoroughly human, and as such fairly safe to approach. For she allowed her curiosity to govern her caution, and proceeded to sidle through the doorway. Half-way through she caught a whiff of the food, and her sidling changed to something faster.

At that instant she was seen. A tall, dark-haired chap on the far side of the table glanced up and gave a sharp, startled exclamation. Instantly the whole dozen whirled around and with one accord shot to their feet.

Rolla stopped short.

There was a second’s silence; then the white-bearded man, who seemed, to be the leader of the group, said something peremptory in a deep, compelling voice. Rolla did not understand.

He repeated it, this time a little less commandingly; and Rolla, after swallowing desperately, inclined her head in the diffident way she had, and said:

“Are ye friends or enemies?”

Eleven of the twelve looked puzzled. The dark-haired man, who had been the first to see her, however, gave a muttered exclamation; then he cogitated a moment, wet his lips and said something that sounded like: “What did you say? Say it again!”

Rolla repeated.

The dark-haired man listened intently. Immediately he fell to nodding with great vigor, and thought

deeply again before making another try: “We are your friends. Whence came ye, and what seek ye?”

Rolla had to listen closely to what he said. The language was substantially the same as hers; but the verbs were misplaced in the sentences, the accenting was different, and certain of the vowels were flatted. After a little, however, the man caught her way of talking and was able to approximate it quite well, so that she understood him readily.

“I seek,” Rolla replied, “food and rest. I have traveled far and am weary.”

“Ye look it,” commented the man. His name, Rolla found out later, was Somat. “Ye shall have both food and rest. However, whence came ye?”

“From the other side of the world,” answered Rolla calmly.

Instantly she noted that the twelve became greatly excited when Somat translated her statement. She decided to add to the scene.

“I have been away from my people for many days,” and she held up one hand with the five fingers spread out, opening and closing them four times, to indicate twenty.

“Ye came over the edge of the world!” marveled Somat. “It were a dangerous thing to do, stranger!”

“Aye,” agreed Holla, “but less dangerous than that from which I fled. However,” impatiently, “give me the food ye promised; I can talk after my stomach be filled.”

“Of a surety,” replied Somat apologetically. “I were too interested to remember thy hunger.” He spoke a word or two, and one of his companions brought another stool, also dishes and table utensils.

Whereupon the watchers on the earth got a first-class surprise. Here they had been looking upon twelve men, living in almost barbaric fashion amid the ruins of a great city; but the men had been eating from hand-painted china of the finest quality, and using silverware that was simply elegant, nothing less! Luxury in the midst of desolation!

Rolla, however, paid little attention to these details. She was scarcely curious as to the food, which consisted of some sort of vegetable and meat stew, together with butterless bread, a kind of small-grained corn on the cob, a yellowish root-vegetable not unlike turnips, and large quantities of berries. She was too hungry to be particular, and ate heartily of all that was offered, whether cooked or uncooked. The twelve almost forgot their own hunger in their interest in the stranger.

It was now pretty dark in the big room. The white-bearded man said something to the young fellow at the foot of the table, whereupon the chap got up and stepped to the nearest wall, where he pressed something with the tip of his finger. Instantly the room was flooded with white light—from two incandescent bulbs!

Rolla leaped to her feet in amazement, blinking painfully in the unaccustomed glare.

“What is this?” she demanded, all the more furiously to hide her fear. “Ye would not trick me with magic; ye, who call yourselves friends!”

Somat interpreted this to the others. Some laughed; others looked pityingly at her. Somat explained:

“It is nothing, stranger. Be not afraid. We forgot that ye might know nothing of this ‘magic.’” He considered deeply, apparently trying to put himself in her place. “Know ye not fire?” Of course, she did not know what he meant. “Then,” with an inspiration, “perchance ye have see the flower, the red flower, ye might call—”

“Aye!” eagerly. “Doth it grow here?”

Somat smiled with satisfaction, and beckoned for her to follow him. He led the way through a small door into another room, evidently used as a kitchen. There he pointed to a large range, remarkably like the up-to- date article known on the earth.

“The flower ‘groweth’ here,” said he, and lifted a lid from the stove. Up shot the flame.

“Great Mownoth!” shouted Rolla, forgetting all about her hunger. “I have found it—the precious flower itself!”

Somat humored her childlike view-point. “We have the seed of the flower, too,” said he. He secured a box of matches from a shelf, and showed her the “little sticks.”

“Exactly what the angel showed me!” jubilated Holla. “I have come to the right place!”

Back she went to her food, her face radiant, and all her lurking suspicion of the twelve completely gone. From that time on she had absolute and unquestioning confidence in all that was told her. In her eyes, the twelve were simply angels or gods who had seen fit to clothe themselves queerly and act human.

Supper over, she felt immensely tired. All the strain of the past three weeks had to have its reaction. Like a very tired, sleepy child, she was led to a room in another part of the building, where she was shown an ordinary sleeping-cot. She promptly pulled the mattress onto the floor, where she considered it belonged, and fell fast asleep.

Meanwhile, back on the earth, Van Emmon and Smith had lost no time in making use of the doctor’s description of the twelve. Within a few minutes they had new agents; Van Emmon used Somat’s eyes and ears, while Smith got in touch with the elderly bearded man at the head of the table. His name was Deltos.

“A very striking confirmation of the old legends,” he was saying through a big yawn, as Smith made connection. He used a colloquial type of language, quite different from the lofty, dignified speech of the Sanusians. “That is, of course, if the woman is telling the truth.”

“And I think she is,” declared the young fellow at the foot of the table. “It makes me feel pretty small, to think that none of us ever had the nerve to make the trip; while she, ignorant as she is, dared it all and succeeded!”

“You forget, Sorplee,” reminded Somat, “that such people are far hardier than we. The feat is one that requires apelike ability. The only thing that puzzled me is—why did she do it at all?”

“It will have to remain a puzzle until she awakens,” said Deltos, rising from the table. “Lucky for us, Somat, that you saw fit to study the root tongues. Otherwise we’d have to converse by signs.”

Neither Smith nor Van Emmon learned anything further that night. The twelve were all very tired, apparently, and went right to bed; a procedure which was straightway seconded by the four watchers on the earth. Which brings us in the most ordinary manner to the events of the next day.

After breakfast all but Somat left the place and disappeared in various directions; and Rolla noted that the robes were, evidently, worn only at meal time. Most of the men were now dressed in rough working garments, similar to what one sees in modern factories. Whimsical sort of gods, Rolla told herself, but gods just the same.

“Tell me,” began Somat, as the woman sat on the floor before him—he could not get her to use a chair —“tell me, what caused thee to leave thy side of the world? Did ye arouse the wrath of thy fellow creatures?”

“Nay,” answered Rolla, and proceeded to explain, in the wrong order, as a child might, by relating first the crossing of the ridge, the flight from the bees, the “masters’” cruel method of dealing with Corrus and Dulnop, and finally the matter of the fire itself, the real cause of the whole affair. Somat was intelligent enough to fill in such details as Rolla omitted.

“Ye did right, and acted like the brave girl ye are!” he exclaimed, when Rolla had finished. However, he did not fully appreciate what she had meant by “the winged masters,” and not until she pointed out some bees and asked if, on this part of the planet, such were the rulers of the humans, that the man grasped the bitter irony of it all.

“What! Those tiny insects rule thy lives!” It took him some time to comprehend the deadly nature of their stings, and the irresistible power of concerted effort; but in the end he commented: “Tis not so strange, now that I think on it. Mayhap life is only a matter of chance, anyway.”

Presently he felt that he understood the Sanusian situation. He fell silent; and Rolla, after waiting as long as her patience would allow, finally put the question temporarily uppermost in her mind:

“It is true that I have crossed the edge of the world. And yet, I understand it not at all. Can ye explain the nature of this strange world we live upon, Somat?” There was infinite respect in the way Rolla used his name; had she known a word to indicate human infallibility, such as “your majesty,” she would have used it. “There is a saying among our people that the world be round. How can this be so?”

“Yet it is true,” answered Somat, “although ye must know that it be not round like a fruit or a pebble. No more is it flat, like this,” indicating the lid of the stove, near which they sat. “Instead, ‘tis shaped thus”—and he took from his finger a plain gold band, like an ordinary wedding ring—“the world is shaped like that!”

Rolla examined the ring with vast curiosity. She had never seen the like before, and was quite as much interested in the metal as in the thing it illustrated. Fortunately the band was so worn that both edges were nearly sharp, thus corresponding with the knifelike ridge over which she had crawled.

“Now,” Somat went on, “ye and your people live on the inner face of the world,” indicating the surface

next his skin, “while I and my kind live on the outer face. Were it not for the difficulties of making the trip, we should have found you out ere this.”

Rolla sat for a long time with the ring in her hand, pondering the great fact she had just learned. And meanwhile, back on the earth, four excited citizens were discussing this latest discovery.

“An annular world!” exclaimed the doctor, his eyes sparkling delightedly. “It confirms the nebular hypothesis!”

“How so?” Smith wanted to know.

“Because it proves that the process of condensation and concentration, which produces planets out of the original gases, can take place at uneven speeds! Instead of concentrating to the globular form, Sanus cooled too quickly; she concentrated while she was still a ring!”

Smith was struck with another phase of the matter. “Must have a queer sort of gravitation,” he pointed out. “Seems to be the same, inside the ring or outside. Surely, doc it can’t be as powerful as it is here on the earth?”

“No; not likely.”

“Then, why hasn’t it made a difference in the inhabitants? Seems to me the humans would have different structure.”

“Not necessarily. Look at it the other way around; consider what an enormous variety of animal forms we have here, all developed under the same conditions. The humming-bird and the python, for instance. Gravitation needn’t have anything to do with it.”

Billie was thinking mainly of the question of day and night. “The ring must be inclined at an angle with the sun’s rays,” she observed. “That being the case, Sanus has two periods each year when there is continuous darkness on the inner face; might last a week or two. Do you suppose the people all hibernate during those seasons?”

But no one had an answer to that.

Van Emmon said he would give all he was worth to explore the Sanusian mountains long enough to learn their geology. He said that the rocks ought to produce some new mineral forms, due to the peculiar condition of strain they would be subjected to.

“I’m not sure,” said he thoughtfully, “but I shouldn’t be surprised if there’s an enormous amount of carbon there. Maybe diamonds are as plentiful as coal is here.”

At the word “diamonds” Smith glanced covertly at Billie’s left hand. But she had hidden it in the folds of her skirt. Next moment the doctor warned them to be quiet; Somat and Rolla were talking again.

He was telling her about his world. She learned that his people, who had never concerned themselves with her side of the planet, had progressed enormously beyond the Sanusians. Rolla did not understand all that he told her; but the people on the earth gathered, in one way or another, that civilization had proceeded about as far as that of the year 1915 in Europe. All this, while fellow humans only a few

thousand miles away, not only failed to make any progress at all, but lived on, century after century, the absolute slave of a race of bees!

But it was a fact. The ancient city in which Rolla found herself had been, only a generation before, a flourishing metropolis, the capital of a powerful nation. There had been two such nations on that side of the planet, and the most violent rivalry had existed between them.

"However," Somat told Rolla, "'twas not this rivalry which wrought their downfall, except indirectly. The last great war between them was terrible, but not disastrous. Either could have survived that.

"But know you that the ruler of one of the nations, in order to carry on this war—which was a war of commerce (never mind what that means)—in order to carry it on was obliged to make great concessions to his people. In the other nation, the ruler oppressed the workers, instead, and drove them mad with his cruelty. So that, not long after the end of the war, there was a great rebellion among the people who had been so long oppressed, and their government was overthrown."

Back on the earth the four investigators reflected on this in amazement. The case was wonderfully like that of Russia after the great war. Perhaps—

"Immediately the other nation forced its soldiers to fight the victorious rebels. But at home the workers had tasted of power. Many refused to work at all; and one day, behold, there were two rebellions instead of one! And within a very short time the whole world was governed by—the working class!"

So this was what the Venusians had meant when they wrote that Sanus was ruled by the workers!

"What became of these rebellions?" Rolla asked, little understanding what it meant, but curious anyhow.

"Devastation!" stated Somat solemnly. He waved a hand, to include all that lay within the ruined city. "Not altogether because of the workers, although they were scarcely fit for ruling but because the former rulers and others of that kind, who liked to oppose their wills upon others, saw fit to start a fresh rebellion. Conflict followed conflict; sometimes workers were in power, and sometimes aristocrats. But the fighting ended not until"—he drew a deep breath—"until there were none left to fight!"

"Ye mean," demanded Rolla incredulously, "that your people killed themselves off in this fashion?"

Aye," sorrowfully. "There were a few of us—they called us 'the middle class'—who urged equality. We wanted a government in which all classes were represented fairly; what we called a democracy. Once the experiment was started, but it failed.

"Saw ye the skeletons in the streets?" he went on." 'Twas a dreadful sight, those last few days. I were but a lad, yet I remember it all too well." He paused, then broke out fiercely: "I tell ye that I saw brother slay brother, father slay son, son slay mother, in those last days!

"Lucky am I that I fled, I and my parents! They took me to a mountainous country, but even there the madness spread, and one day a soldier of the army killed my father and my mother. He sought me,

also, that he might slay me; but I hid from him beneath a heap of manure. Aye," he gritted savagely, "I owe my life to a pile of manure!

"These other eleven men all have like tales to tell. Only one woman survived those awful days. Young Sorplee is her son; his father was a soldier, whom she herself slew with her own hands. Even she is now dead.

"Well," he finished, after a long pause, "when the madness had spent itself, we who remained came from our hiding-places to find our world laid waste. 'Tis now thirty years since Sorplee's mother died, since we first looked upon these ruins, and we have made barely a beginning. We have little heart for the work. Of what use is it, with no women to start the race afresh?"

Rolla started despite herself. Was this the reason why she, despite her savagery, had been made so welcome?

"Ye have not told me," said she hurriedly, "why ye and the others all wear such curious garments when ye eat."

Somat was taken off his guard. He had been chuckling to himself at the woman's childlike mind. Now he had to look apologetic and not a little sheepish as he made reply:

"The robes are a mere custom. It were started a great many years ago, by the founders of a—a—" He tried to think of a simpler expression than "college fraternity." "A clan," he decided. "All of we men were members of that clan."

"And," pursued Rolla, "will ye give me the magic stone, that I may take the flowing blossoms back to my people, and release my loved one from the masters' cruelty?"

The great question was put! Rolla waited in tremulous anxiety for the answer.

"Aye, stranger!" replied Somat vigorously. "More; ye shall have some of the little sticks!"

Whereupon Rolla leaped to her feet and danced in sheer delight. Somat looked on and marveled. Then, abruptly, he got up and marched away. He had not seen a woman in thirty years; and he was a man of principle.

That night, when the twelve were again seated at the table, Somat related this conversation with Rolla. Since he used his own language, of course she did not understand what was said. "And I told her," he concluded, "how we came to be here; also the reason for the condition of things. But I doubt if she understood half what I said. We have quite a problem before us," he added. "What shall we do about it?"

"You mean this woman?" Deltos asked. Rolla was busy with her food. "It seems to me, brothers, that Providence has miraculously come to our aid. If we can handle her people rightly the future of the race is assured."

Somat thought it was simple enough. "All we need to do is send this woman back with a supply of matches, and implicit instructions as to how best to proceed against the bees. Once released, their friends can make their way over the edge and settle among us. Let the bees keep their country."

The two who had seconded him before again showed agreement. Sorplee and Deltos, however, together with the other seven, were distinctly opposed to the method.

“Somat,” protested Deltos, as though surprised, “you forget that there’s an enormous population over there. Let them come in of their own free will? Why, they would overrun our country! What would become of us?”

“We’d have to take our chances, replied Somat energetically, “like good sports! If we can’t demonstrate our worth to them, enough to hold their respect, we’d deserve to be snowed under!”

“Not while I’m alive!” snarled Sorplee. “If they come here, they’ve got to give up their wilderness ways, right off! We can’t stand savagery! The safest thing for us, and the best for them, is to make an industrial army of ‘em and set ‘em to work!” His enthusiasm was boundless.

“I must say,” admitted Deltos, with his usual dignity, “that you have the right idea, Sorplee. If I had stated it, however, I should have been more frank about it. The arrangements you propose simply means that we are to take possession of them!”

“What!” shouted Somat, horrified.

“Why, of course! Make slaves of them! What else?”

XIV

THE SLAVE RAID

Despite all that Somat and his two backers could say, the other nine men swiftly agreed upon the thing Deltos had proposed. Somat went so far as to declare that he would warn Rolla; but he was instantly given to understand that any such move would be disastrous to himself. In the end he was made to agree not to tell her.

“We aren’t going to let you and your idealism spoil our only chance to save the race!” Sorplee told him pugnaciously; and Somat gave his word. At first he hoped that the nine might fall out among themselves when it came to actually enslaving the Sanusians; but he soon concluded that, if there was any difference of opinion, the aristocratic element would take charge of half the captives, while Sorplee’s friends commandeered the rest. The outlook was pretty black for Rolla’s friends; yet there was nothing whatever to do about it.

Among the four people on the earth, however, the thing was being discussed even more hotly. Van Emmon found himself enthusiastically backing Somat, the liberal-minded one.

“He’s got the right idea,” declared the geologist. “Let the Sanusians come over of their own free will! Let the law of competition show what it can do! Dandy experiment!”

Smith could not help but put in: “Perhaps it’s Deltos and Sorplee who are right, Van. These Sanusians are mere aborigines. They wouldn’t understand democratic methods.”

“No?” politely, from the doctor. “Now, from what I’ve seen of Rolla, I’ll say she’s a perfect example of ‘live-and-let-live.’ Nothing either subservient or autocratic in her relations with other people. Genuinely democratic, Smith.”

“Meanwhile,” remarked Billie, with exaggerated nonchalance, “meanwhile, what about the bees? Are they going to be permitted to show their superiority or not?”

Van Emmon took this to be aimed at him. “Of course not! We can’t allow a race of human beings to be dominated forever by insects!

“I say, let’s get together and put Rolla wise to what Deltos and Sorplee are framing up! We can do it, if we concentrate upon the same thought at the right time!”

Smith did not commit himself. “I don’t care much either way,” he decided. “Go ahead if you want to”—meaning Van Emmon and the doctor—“I don’t want to butt in.”

“Don’t need you,” growled the geologist. “Two of us is enough.”

“Is that so?” sarcastically, from Billie. “Well, it’ll take more than two of you to get it over to Rolla!”

“What do you mean?” hotly.

“I mean,” with deliberation,—“that if you and the doctor try to interfere I’ll break up our circle here!”

They stared at her incredulously. “I sure will! I’m not going to lend my mental influence for any such purpose!”

“My dear,” protested the doctor gently, “you know how it is: the combined efforts of the four of us is required in order to keep in touch with Sanus. Surely you would not—”

“Oh, yes, I would!” Billie was earnestness itself. “Mr. Van Emmon was so good as to blame me for what I did in that Capellette mix-up; now, if you please, I’m going to see to it that this one, anyhow, works itself out without our interference!

“Well, I’ll be darned!” The geologist looked again, to make sure it was really his wife who had been talking thus. “I’m mighty glad to know that you’re not intending to warn Supreme, anyhow!”

“Maybe I shall! snapped Billie.

“If you do,” stated the doctor quietly, “then I’ll break the circle myself.” They looked at him with a renewal of their former respect as he concluded emphatically: “If you won’t help us stop this slave raid, Billie, then, by George, you’ll at least let the bees fight it out on their own!”

And so the matter stood, so far as the investigators were concerned. They were to be lookers-on, nothing more.

Meanwhile the survivors of a once great civilization prepared to move in person against the bees. They did this after Deltos had pointed out the advantages of such a step.

“If we rout the bees ourselves,” said he, “the natives will regard us as their saviors, and we shall have no trouble with them afterward.”

This was sound policy; even Somat had to admit it. He had decided to be a member of the expedition, for the reason that Rolla flatly refused to accompany the other men unless he, her special god, went along. His two liberal-minded friends stayed behind to take care of their belongings in the ruined city.

The expedition was a simple one. It consisted of a single large auto truck and trailer, the only items of automotive machinery that the twelve had been able to reconstruct from the ruins. However, these served the purpose; they carried large supplies of food, also means for protection against the bees, together with abundant material for routing them. A large quantity of crude explosives also was included. The trailer was large enough to seat everybody; and the ten men of the party had a good deal of amusement watching Rolla as she tried to get accustomed to that land of travel. She was glad enough when the end of the road was reached and the truck began to push its way into the wilderness, giving her an excuse to walk.

No need to describe the trip in detail. Within three days the truck was as far as it could go up the rock wall of the “edge.” The point selected was about twenty miles west of where Cunora was hid, and directly opposite the upper end of her home valley. No attempt was made to go over the top as Rolla had done; instead, about two miles below the ridge a crevasse was located in the granite; and by means of some two tons of powder a narrow opening was made through to the other side. Through it the men carried their supplies on their backs, transferring everything to improvised sleds, a hundred pounds to a man.

While this was being done, Rolla hurried east and located Cunora. The girl was in a pitiful condition from lack of proper food, and comparative confinement and constant strain. But during Rolla's absence she had seen none of the bees.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked Rolla, after the explorer had told her story.

Rolla shrugged her shoulders indifferently. "These gods," she declared with sublime confidence, "can do no wrong! Whatever they propose must be for the best! I have done my part; now it is all in the hands of the Flowing Blossom!"

Not until they reached the head of the valley which had been her home did Rolla ask Somat as to the plan. He answered:

"Ye and the other woman shall stay here with me, on this hill." He produced a telescope. "We will watch with this eye-tube. The other nine men will go ahead and do the work."

"And will they separate?"

"Nay. They intend to conquer this colony first; then, after your people are freed and safely on the way to my country, the conquerors will proceed to the next valley, and so on until all are released." He kept his word not to warn Rolla of the proposed captivity. "In that way the fear of them will go ahead and make their way easy."

Meanwhile the nine were getting ready for their unprecedented conquest. They put on heavy leather clothes, also leather caps, gloves and boots. Around their faces were stiff wire nets, such as annoyed them all exceedingly and would have maddened Cunora or Rolla. But it meant safety.

As for weapons, they relied entirely upon fire. Each man carried a little wood alcohol in a flask, in case it was necessary to burn wet or green wood. Otherwise, their equipment was matches, with an emergency set of flint and steel as well. There could be no resisting them.

"We'll wait here till we've seen that you've succeeded," Somat told Deltos and Sorplee. "Then we'll follow."

The nine left the hills. The hours passed with Rolla and Cunora amusing themselves at the "eye-tube." They could see the very spot where their lovers were being punished; but some intervening bushes prevented seeing the men themselves. The other villagers were at work quite as usual; so it was plain that, although the bees were invisible, yet they were still the masters.

Hardly had the nine reached the first low-growing brush before they encountered some of the bees. None attempted to attack, but turned about and flew back to report. It was not long before Supreme, and therefore Billie, knew of the approaching raiders.

"They are doubtless provided with the magic flower," Supreme told her lieutenants. "You will watch the blossom as it sways in the wind, and keep always on the windward side of it. In this way you can attack the inferiors."

The word was passed, bee-fashion, until every soldier and worker in the colony knew her duty. The stingers were to keep back and watch their chance, while the workers harassed the attackers.

Moreover, with the hives always uppermost in her mind, Supreme planned to keep the actual conflict always at a distance from the "city."

It was late in the day when the nine reached the stream in whose bed rested the pyrites taken from Corrus and Dulnop. This stream, it will be remembered, flowed not far from the torture-place. Deltos's plan was to rescue these two men before doing anything else; this, because it would strengthen the villagers' regard for the conquerors.

The bees seemed to sense this. They met the invaders about three miles above the village, in an open spot easily seen by the people with the telescope. And the encounter took place during twilight, just early enough to be visible from a distance, yet late enough to make the fire very impressive.

"Remember, it's the smoke as much as the flame," Deltos shouted to the others. "Just keep your torches on the move, and make as much fuss as you can!"

Next moment the swarm was upon them. It was like a vast cloud of soot; only, the buzzing of those millions of wings fairly drowned out every other sound. The nine had to signal to one another; shouting was useless.

Within a single minute the ground was covered with bees, either dead or insensible from the smoke. Yet the others never faltered. At times the insects battered against the wire netting with such force, and in such numbers, that the men had to fight them away in order to get enough air.

Supreme watched from above, and kept sending her lieutenants with fresh divisions to first one man and then another, as he became separated from the rest. Of course, nobody suffered but the bees. Never before had they swarmed a creature which did not succumb; but these inferiors with the queer things over their faces, and the cows' hides over their bodies and hands, seemed to care not at all. Supreme was puzzled.

"Keep it up," she ordered. "They surely cannot stand it much longer."

"It shall be done!"

And the bees were driven in upon the men, again and again. Always the torches were kept waving, so that the insects never could tell just where to attack. Always the men kept moving steadily down-stream; and as they marched they left in their wake a black path of dead and dying bees. Half of them had been soldier bees, carrying enough poison in their stings to destroy a nation. Yet, nine little matches were too much for them!

Presently the invaders had approached to within a half-mile of the torture-place. One of Supreme's lieutenants made a suggestion:

"Had we not better destroy the men, rather than let them be rescued?"

The commandant considered this fully. "No," she decided. "To kill them would merely enrage the other villagers, and perhaps anger them so much as to make them unmanageable." More than once a human had been driven so frantic as to utterly disregard orders. "We cannot slay them all."

The bees attacked with unabated fury. Not once did the insects falter; orders were orders, and always

had been. What mattered it if death came to them, so long as the Hive lived? For that is bee philosophy.

And then, just when it seemed that the wisest thing would be to withdraw, Supreme got the greatest idea she had ever had. For once she felt positively enthusiastic. Had she been a human she would have yelled aloud for sheer joy.

“Attention!” to her subordinates. “We attack no more! Instead, go into the huts and drive all the inferiors here! Compel them to bring their tools! Kill all that refuse!”

The lieutenants only dimly grasped the idea. “What shall we do when we get them here?”

“Do? Drive them against the invaders, of course!”

It was a daring thought. None but a super bee could have conceived it. Off flew the lieutenants, with Supreme’s inspired order humming after them:

“Call out every bee! And drive every last one of the inferiors to this spot!”

And thus it came about that, a minute later, the nine looked around to see the bees making off at top speed. Sorplee raised a cheer.

“Hurrah!” he shouted, and the rest took it up. Neither admitted that he was vastly relieved; it had been a little nerve-shaking to know that a single thickness of leather had been all that stood, for an hour, between him and certain death. The buzzing, too, was demoralizing.

“Now, to release the two men!” reminded Deltos, and led the way to the torture-place. They found Corrus and Dulnop exactly as the two women had left them six weeks before, except that their faces were drawn with the agony of what they had endured. Below the surface of the ground their bodies had shriveled and whitened with their daily imprisonment. Only their spirits remained unchanged; they, of all the natives, had known what it was to feel superior.

For the last time they were dug out and helped to their feet. They could not stand by themselves, much less run; but it is not likely they would have fled. Somehow they knew that the strange head-coverings had human faces be hind them. And scarcely had they been freed before Sorplee, glancing about, gave an exclamation of delight as he saw a group of natives running toward them.

“Just what we want!” he exclaimed. “They’ve seen the scrap, and realize that we’ve won!”

Looking around, the nine could see the other groups likewise hurrying their way. All told, there were a couple of hundred of the villagers, and all were armed with tools they knew how to use very well.

“Who shall do the honors?” asked Sorplee. “Wish Somat was here, to explain for us.”

“Don’t need him,” reminded Deltos. “All we’ve got to do is to show these two fellows we dug up.”

And it was not until the first of the villagers was within twenty yards that the nine suspected anything. Then they heard the buzzing. Looking closer, they saw that it was—an attack!

“Stop!” cried Deltos, in swift panic. “We are friends, not enemies!”

It was like talking to the wind. The villagers had their choice of two fears: either fight the strangers with the magic flower, or—be stung to death. And no one can blame them for what they chose.

The nine had time enough to snatch knives or hatchets from their belts, or clubs from the ground. Then, with wild cries of fear, the natives closed in. They fought as only desperate people can fight, caught between two fires. And they were two hundred to nine!

In half a minute the first of the invaders was down, his head crushed by a mattock in the hands of a bee-tormented native. In a single minute all were gone but two; and a moment later, Deltos alone, because he had chanced to secure a long club, was alive of all that crew.

For a minute he kept them off by sheer strength. He swung the stick with such vigor that he fairly cleared a circle for himself. The natives paused, howling and shrieking, before the final rush.

An inspiration came to Deltos. He tore his cap from his head and his net from his face.

“Look!” he screamed, above the uproar. “I am a man, like yourselves! Do not kill!”

Next second he froze in his tracks. The next he was writhing in the death agony, and the bees were supreme once.

Supreme herself had stung Deltos.

XV

OVERLOOKED

Of the four on the earth, Smith was the first to make any comment. He had considerable difficulty in throwing his thought to the others; somehow he felt slightly dazed.

“This is—unbelievable!” he said, and repeated it twice. “To think that those insects are still the masters!”

“I wish”—Billie’s voice shook somewhat—“I wish almost that I had let you warn Rolla. It might have helped—” She broke off suddenly, intent upon something Supreme was hearing. “Just listen!”

“Quick!” a lieutenant was humming excitedly to the commandant. “Back to the hives; give the order, Supreme!”

It was done, and immediately the bees quit the throng of natives and their victims, rushing at top speed for their precious city. As they went, Supreme demanded an explanation.

“What is the meaning of this?”

For answer the lieutenant pointed her antennae straight ahead. At first Supreme could see nothing in the growing darkness; then she saw that some of the sky was blacker than the rest. Next she caught a faint glow.

“Supreme, the deadly flower has come to the hives!”

It was true! In ten minutes the city was near enough for the commandant to see it all very clearly. The fire had started on the windward side, and already had swept through half the hives!

“Quick!” the order was snapped out. “Into the remaining houses, and save the young!”

She herself led the horde. Straight into the face of the flames they flew, unquestioningly, unhesitantly. What self, compared with the Hive?

Next moment, like a mammoth billow, the smoke rolled down upon them all. And thus it came about that the villagers, making their cautious way toward the bee city, shouted for joy and danced as they had never danced before, when they saw what had happened.

Not a bee was left alive. Every egg and larva was destroyed; every queen was burned. And every last soldier and worker had lost her life in the vain attempt at rescue.

Suddenly one of the villagers, who had been helping to carry Corrus and Dulnop to the spot, pointed out something on the other side of the fire! It was Rolla!

“Hail!” she shouted, hysterical with happiness as she ran toward her people. Cunora was close upon her heels. “Hail to the flowing flower!”

She held up a torch. Down fell the villagers to their knees. Rolla strode forward and found Corrus, even as Cunora located her Dulnop.

“Hail to the flowing flower!” shouted Rolla again. “And hail to the free people of this world! A new day cometh for us all! The masters—are no more!”

The four on the earth looked at each other inquiringly. There was a heavy silence. The doctor stood it as long as he could, and then said:

“So far as I’m concerned, this ends our investigations.” They stared at him uncomprehendingly; he went on: “I don’t see anything to be gained by this type of study. Here we’ve investigated the conditions on two planets pretty thoroughly, and yet we can’t agree upon what we’ve learned!

“Van still thinks that the upper classes should rule, despite all the misery we saw on Capellette! And Billie is still convinced that the working classes, and no others, should govern! This, in the face of what we’ve just—seen! Sanus is absolute proof of what must happen when one class tries to rule; conflict, bloodshed, misery—little else! Besides” —remembering something, and glancing at his watch—“besides, it’s time for dinner.”

He and Smith got to their feet, and in silence quit the room. Billie and Van Emmon were still fumbling with their bracelets. The two young people rose from the chairs at the same time and started across the room to put flip bracelets away. The wire which connected them trailed in between and caught on the doctor’s chair. It brought the two of them up short.

Van Emmon stared at the wire. He gave it a little tug. The chair did not move. Billie gave an answering jerk, with similar lack of results. Then they glanced swiftly at one another, and each stepped back enough to permit lifting the wire over the chair.

“In other words,” Van Emmon stammered, with an effort to keep his voice steady—“in other words, Billie, we both had to give in a little, in order to get past that chair!”

Then he paused slightly, his heart pounding furiously.

“Yes Van.” She dropped the bracelets. “And—as for me—Van, I didn’t really want to see the bees win! I only pretended to—I wanted to make you—think!”

“Billie! I’ll say ‘cooperate’ if you will!”

“Cooperate!”

He swept her into his arms, and held her so close that she could not see what had rushed to his eyes. “Speaking of cooperation,” he remarked unsteadily, “reminds me—it takes two to make a kiss!”

They proceeded to experiment.

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