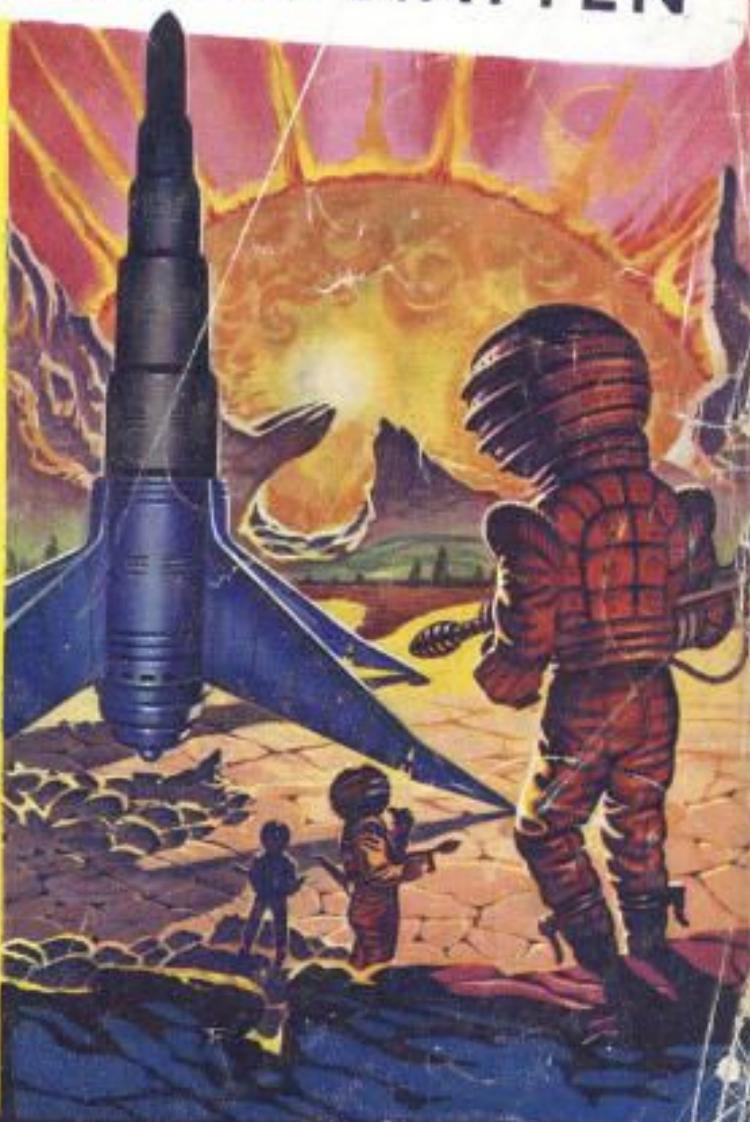


The
BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION

Magazine

Edited by **VARGO STATTON**



1/6

NO. 12

VOL. 1

New Worlds To Conquer

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Title: Ice Maiden

Date of first publication: 1955

Author: John Russell Fearn (as Vargo Statten) (1908-1960)

Date first posted: Dec. 8, 2021

Date last updated: Dec. 8, 2021

Faded Page eBook #20211214

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Ice Maiden

By

John Russell Fearn

Writing under the pseudonym Vargo Statten.

First published *The British Science Fiction Magazine*, April 1955, under the title *A Matter of Vibration*.

This ebook transcribed from *Bury the Hatchet*, Linford Edition, 2011.

‘Now, sweetheart, you stay here and play with your toys. It won’t be long before I’m back . . .’

Vera Morton’s nurse took a last, fond look at the merry-eyed child in the nursery, and then she went out and locked the door. Possibly Ella would have been more loyal to her charge had not spring been in the air as it was, the only thing which mattered to her was a date in town with a certain dashing young Lothario.

Vera Morton was just six years old, plump and black-haired. Also in town, her mother and father were attending an important social event . . . And below the Morton flat, directly under the nursery in fact, David Gregory toiled steadily with complicated apparatus. He surveyed the accumulation of equipment with satisfaction—the coils, condensers, insulator-banks, and loops of flex socketed to power points.

The click of the door latch made him glance up, and his young son William came strolling in, hands in pockets, interest written all over his youthful face.

‘How’s it coming on, dad?’

‘Oh, not so bad . . .’ David Gregory gave a smile and ruffled the boy’s shock of hair. ‘Will, you’re eight years old now, and unless I miss my guess you’ll be the son of a millionaire before you’re another eight years older . . .’

‘Better be before that, Dave . . .’ Gregory’s wife came in and closed the door. ‘This luxury apartment which you’ve transformed into something resembling a garage needs paying for, remember. Either that invention of yours works, or we go on the rocks . . . Landlords are funny that way.’

‘It’ll work, dear,’ Dave Gregory assured her earnestly. ‘In fact, I don’t think there could be a more perfect system for military defence. All a matter of getting the War Office to see eye to eye with me. Close the switch, and out goes a field of energy, which stops any invader getting within miles of us. That means directed missiles, too. Nothing whatever can get through a field like this: even A- and H-bombs would be dissipated.’

‘Yes, Dave,’ his wife said patiently, quite at sea.

‘I’ll show you what I mean,’ he volunteered. ‘Watch!’

He made a final check-over and then threw the master-switch. Instantly a tremendous pressure-wave surged through the room. It was followed by a terrific explosion that hurled David Gregory, already dead, clean through the window. His wife collapsed, blood streaming from her battered head. Young Will was swept off his feet and slammed senseless against the wall—

The entire building rocked.

But this was not all that happened. When young William, still living, had been rushed to hospital and the building was searched, the nursery of Vera Morton overhead was found to be intact. Door locked, windows shut—but of Vera herself there was no sign. The child had utterly vanished, nor did she return despite the frantic efforts of her parents to trace her. There just did not seem to be the vaguest clue as to how she had disappeared, or of her present whereabouts.

Gradually, the mystery of Vera Morton found its way into the files of unsolved problems, and the years passed by . . .

Will Gregory grew up with the remembrance of that sinister explosion rooted in his brain, and the death of his father and mother sharpened the remembrance. Once he left the care of the State to make his own way in the world his one aim was to find out exactly what his ambitious father had been driving at.

Will was now twenty-one, and even more scientific than his father had been. He was the owner of a small television, radio and electronic gadgets shop. In the back region of the shop, at night, he endeavoured to reconstruct the apparatus his father had made, piecing things together from the faded plans which had been left to him from the flat's few salvaged possessions.

'Some kind of energy screen,' Will muttered, brooding over the plans and partially reconstructed apparatus. 'It looks from this as though his basic idea was to shift the molecular foundation of matter and thereby cause a warp, or change, in—'

He looked up sharply, frowning. It seemed as though somebody had come into the shop for there was a distinct draught blowing. With a grunt of impatience Will turned towards the shop inter-doorway and then checked himself.

'You crazy?' he asked himself. 'You locked the shop up half an hour ago!'

As he stood pondering his momentary lapse he heard a sound exactly like a window closing. Puzzled, he rubbed his head and waited for he did not know what. Then he turned back to his pile of electronic components— But damnit, there was a draught, and a cold one too for a very mild night in the early autumn.

'You're getting soft, m'lad,' he murmured, throwing himself in the chair to study things out . . .

After a while he had decided upon a definite course of action. He got up, picked up the screwdriver, and then started to work. He hesitated in wonder as he felt the hairs on the backs of his hands tingling oddly. His knuckles, too, felt stiff and cramped and the draught from nowhere had swiftly and mysteriously increased. Giving a little shiver he pulled his coat from the back of the nearby chair and got into it quickly. As he did so he glanced casually at the thermometer and nearly dropped the screwdriver in his amazement. The thermometer's mercury had nose-dived to below freezing point!

Of course, the thing was impossible. Temperature just couldn't drop that quickly. He went across to the electric heater and switched it on; then turned to look through the slowly glazing window. Through the clear patches—for he had not drawn the curtains—he could see people walking about casually enough, and there was certainly no sign of frost.

Slow wonder settled on Will. It changed to alarm as he felt an unearthly aura growing round him—a tightening, biting cold that gripped every nerve.

The machine on which he was working? Perhaps it— No; that had nothing to do with it. The machine was not even switched on.

‘Yet if it isn’t the machine,’ he said out loud, ‘what the hell is it?’

‘I am responsible, Mr. Gregory, if it’s the cold you’re talking about.’

‘Huh?’ Will swung round and stared blankly at the radio, thinking that for a moment some queer coincidence had supplied the answer to his musing. Then he realised the radio, like the machine upon which he was working, was not switched on. Yet he could have sworn somebody had spoken—

‘You can’t see me, Mr. Gregory, but I can see you quite clearly. Maybe you can feel my presence, though?’ And as Will stood goggling at the emptiness cold such as he had never known bit into him like a buzz-saw. He gasped with the stinging pain of it and then relaxed helplessly against the window frame.

‘I gather you do feel it,’ the calm voice commented.

With difficulty Will found speech. ‘What—what is this? Some damned silly game? Some trick because I’m alone here experimenting? I heard you come through the window a little while ago, and if it’s you, Molly, with one of your practical jokes—’

‘My name isn’t Molly: it’s Vera Morton. Does that name mean anything to you?’

‘Vera . . . Morton?’ There was a long silence as Will wrestled with the incredible. ‘But—But Vera Morton was the kid who vanished from the flat above ours years ago!’

‘I was the kid!’ came the retort: ‘I’ve grown up since then. I’m nineteen years of age.’

‘For the love of heaven what is going on?’ Will demanded in bewilderment. ‘If this is some psychic manifestation I’ll get the proper authorities to deal with it . . . But frankly, I don’t think it is,’ he continued, his tone changing. ‘We’d get on a lot better if you’d bring out the concealed transmitter and refrigerator and called it a day. I’ve work to do!’

‘You’ll listen to me, Mr. Gregory! If you have doubts about my really being present take a look at this!’

Will turned slightly and then stood watching in amazement as inside the adjoining shop he saw small boxes and empty crates suddenly flake with frost, then rise into the air and hurl themselves several feet. Other objects rapidly iced over and capered about like the creations of a séance.

Something was there, then—invisible, diabolically cold, hurling things around by some kind of physical volition.

‘Now do you believe it?’ the feminine voice demanded. ‘I tell you I am Vera Morton, and I am the same girl who was blown into another plane by some infernal invention just over thirteen years ago— No, stand where you are! If you come too near me I might kill you with the cold. I may even do that anyway in the finish, but first I want to give you a chance to speak . . . Sit down!’

‘But—I—’ Will gazed blindly into space.

‘Stop bleating, can’t you, and sit down!’

Will obeyed, and waited. The voice seemed to be speaking from the store, about five yards distant. Frost had gathered round the spot where the girl now presumably stood.

‘Now listen,’ she continued deliberately. ‘I know exactly who you are because I have spent a long time looking for a relative of that crazy inventor, David Gregory. From information from various sources—and no place is barred to me, remember—I have been able to discover all about the explosion, all about the death of my parents, and their frantic and useless searching for me. Now I have found you. I have studied you, and I want justice. As the son of the man who got me into this mess, you have got to get me out! I hope you realise what has happened to me?’ The girl’s voice rose in anger.

Will shrugged. His first alarm had gone now.

‘You seem to forget that you’re invisible to me,’ he said. ‘How can I realise what’s happened to you when I can’t even see you?’

‘That’s just it! The fact that you can’t see me! I’m shut out from my own world because of what your father did to me with his insane meddling!’

Will sighed. ‘Seems to me you’re jumping to conclusions. I don’t see what my father did to get you into this condition. As a matter of fact I am trying to reconstruct his apparatus in an endeavour to find out what he intended. As far as I’ve got up to now it looks as though the experiment had something to do with a plane of force—’

‘Plane of force!’ The girl’s voice was derisive. ‘I’ll tell you what he did!’ Will shivered with cold as the girl came closer her voice quivering with emotion. ‘The radiations from his machine must have travelled upwards in a straight line. You, your mother, and your father simply got the explosive effect—but in the room above I got the full radiation onslaught. All I remember was being absorbed into a grey fog whilst my body was racked and twisted as though it were being torn to bits. Then the fog cleared and— Well, I’ll never forget it! I was in a strange land, a child in an unknown plane.’

‘Then?’ Will ventured, as there was silence for a moment.

‘I was taken care of by the people in this plane, but kind though they have been to me they still are not human beings. In fact, judged from human standards, they look pretty repulsive. All I can do is look out onto a world they can never see and consider myself labelled as a freak. I’m shut out, consumed by an overpowering longing to mingle with my own kind! And why? All because of your father!’

‘My father didn’t know what he did,’ Will answered quietly. ‘Please believe that. Incidentally. There’s another side to the picture. Don’t you realise how unique you are? Speaking from the scientific angle you are a masterpiece of—’

‘Never mind the scientific angle! As far as I am concerned, I am simply a human being locked in an alien plane of existence. Because of my normal birth I retain enough of my natural physique to enable me to see into this plane—your plane, that is—which is something the beings of this other world can never do, any more than you can see the place where they dwell. I can also hear what is going on in this world of humans, and that is how I learned to talk and read above the mere vaporings of a child of six. There are other things too. I can see heat waves, radio waves, cosmic waves . . .’

‘It’s incredible!’ Will whispered.

‘Not to me. As a matter of fact, it seems pretty clear that your father—unwittingly maybe—proved Heisenberg’s Principle of Indeterminacy. This, stated briefly, means that the electrons of matter do not so much exist as concrete things but as probabilities, as liable to be shifted out of their positions as a mist is dispersed by a breeze. Nothing is, Mr. Gregory: all that exists is the probability that it is. Well, then, the vibration from your father’s machine changed the entire probability make-up of my body. Understand?’

‘Vaguely. Keep on talking.’

‘The probability that I existed as Vera Morton in a world of humans yielded abruptly to the probability that I existed as Vera Morton in a plane of matter contiguous to this one. Molecules vibrate at a given speed, but your father’s machine’s radiation changed all that and transplanted me from one plane to the other. Not by actual physical transportation, but by altering my molecular vibration to the extent that I lost ‘sympathy’ with my normal plane and instead vibrated in ‘sympathy’ with this other one.’

Will did not say anything. By this time he was lost in thought, grappling with the theory the girl was postulating. It hung together too, especially so when based on the Principle of Indeterminacy.

‘You can never contact this plane,’ the girl resumed, ‘because you pass through the people and substances in it. Likewise they in regard to you. It is a simple matter of differing vibrations, which actually is all there is to any material structure. For years I have been lost in this other plane. It was only as I became older that it dawned on me where I really belonged and I set out to find the reason for my plight. I have, with the scientific resources my friends possess, made my body a little more normal—but I could only get so far. I have become solid enough to walk and see, and hear and talk, in this human plane, or I can see into my own plane as well by a slight optical effort. But I am not visible in this human plane! My molecular rate is so slowed down that I don’t radiate light waves back to you, and also because of that slowness I am surrounded by an aura of intense cold. Everything I touch here turns to ice! Somehow I’ve got to get back!’

‘Just why did you come to me?’ Will asked. ‘You could not possibly have known that I had any plans left of my father’s machine.’

‘No, I didn’t know.’ The unseen girl was quiet for a moment, then: ‘As a matter of fact I came to exact reprisal.’

‘Quite candidly, I don’t blame you—but it’s a bit unfair to blame me for something my father did. I was only a child too, then, remember.’

‘Much of what you have said, Mr. Gregory, makes me believe that the whole thing was an accident in the first place, but as your father’s son it’s still your job to try and get me back to normal. Find out precisely what your father did and then reverse the process. And don’t try anything likely to hurt me or those who’ve befriended me or I’ll hit back hard!’

‘I don’t see any reason for that tone!’ Will objected, getting to his feet. ‘I’m all for you, not against you. How could my father have known, anyway? Why on earth should he want to blow a six-year-old child into another plane? Be reasonable! As to your other-world friends, what reason would I have for wanting to hurt them?’

‘Silly of me,’ Vera Morton confessed, sighing. ‘But from what I have seen of men they’re a greedy, destructive lot when they have science in their grip. I’ve become so that I trust nobody after the raw deal I got early in life . . . Anyhow, carry on with your work and I’ll visit you again soon.’

And suddenly there was an icy breeze and Will watched stupidly as frost crept up the panes of his shop’s door glass. The bolts shot back apparently of their own accord, then the door opened and presently slammed shut. A warmer air began to settle.

‘I’ll get you back,’ he breathed. ‘Yes, I’ll get you back, if only to find out what you look like!’

He reflected for a moment on the odd fact that he did not know a single detail about her—except her voice, and he was willing to admit that he had liked this immensely.

He looked down at the pools of water where the frost was thawing; then he turned back to his job with new resolve.

Vera Morton’s icy presence did not make itself felt for some days afterwards, but Will pressed on just the same in the reconstruction of his father’s machine. A week later he felt he was far enough advanced to make a test. Giving the apparatus a final look-over he switched on the juice and waited uncertainly.

‘According to this setup, the energy-field should pass through the transformers and be released in an ever-widening area— But that isn’t right! Damnit, it’s simply radio transmission in a novel form. It’s no more a field of energy to deter an invader than my foot!’

He frowned, realising he had got things completely wrong somewhere. His instruments revealed clearly that he was generating radio short waves—but nothing more. Unusual radio waves, certainly, and with a microphone he could have had a passable ‘ham’ station.

Switching off again he fiddled around, examining the details and getting more puzzled— then he looked up sharply as a familiar icy draught blew about him.

‘Oh, it’s you again!’ He looked into space, still unable to absorb the fantastic wonder of the situation.

‘Yes, it’s I.’ For some reason Vera Morton’s voice was bitter with fury. ‘I should have known I couldn’t trust you! Like father, like son, eh? You try and kill my friends in this other plane—in fact you have killed some of them—just to show how smart you are! Why do you have to do it? What have they done to you?’

‘Done to me? Why—nothing!’ Will was trying hard to grasp what she meant; then he jumped back with a gasp as a searing cold flame seemed to come near him. In amazement he watched the humming apparatus become dead as a frost-glazed switch moved of its own accord and broke contact. Then the girl’s voice came again.

‘I warned you, Mr. Gregory, that if you tried to harm me or those who have aided me, I would take reprisal. I’m going to do just that! I don’t know your reason for attack—maybe fear of invasion from this other plane, which is quite impossible if you’d only take the trouble to think it out. But in any case I’m going to make you smart! I’ll make this whole city smart, in fact—’

‘Hey, wait a minute!’ Will cried. ‘I just don’t get what you mean! I *am* trying to help you—honest! I want to meet you, see you as you are, find out all about you—’

‘You’ll find that out very soon.’

‘Hear me out, can’t you? I haven’t managed to get this apparatus right yet, but I will do. I’ll bring you back to normal, I promise, but you’ve got to give me time in which to do it. As for trying to kill anybody in your plane, it’s just frankly ridiculous.’

‘Ridiculous, is it? You stand there and tell me that when you’ve generated a wave that means death to them? I don’t believe you! All radio waves are visible to me, and to my friends here, but they don’t do us any harm. Now you have invented a new type of short wave which is death to my friends and near-death to me because I am partly back to normal human form . . . You’ve murdered several of my friends, and that demands reprisal.’

‘But how was I to know? Radio waves don’t affect human beings: you must realize that. I never suspected—’

‘You’re telling lies! You must know that radio waves can hurt under certain conditions, else you wouldn’t do it . . . But you won’t get away with it!’

The cold suddenly ebbed from Will. He turned, rather stupefied, and watched the familiar frosty journey through the shop. The door opened and shut.

‘Of all the damned, crazy . . .’

Furiously he swung back to the apparatus, and then he paused, his eyes narrowed in thought.

‘I must keep reminding myself that I’m dealing with a girl who has no idea of the extent of the gulf between us. She has been brought up to see the very things which we only know of by instruments.’

He shrugged and tried to thrust the remembrance of her threatened reprisal out of his mind. He worked on steadily—one hour, two hours. Then he came to a halt, the whole thing crystal-clear in his mind.

‘Got it! The output load is altered by the fifth cadence, which shuts out the upper field . . . Great heavens, that would be a field of shattering power, with a vengeance! Matter itself would buckle up or else change its makeup. That must have been what happened to dad. He only half did the job, blew up the works, and shifted Vera Morton’s molecular makeup into another plane. Just the way it happened, and it could have been any scientist. That it happened to be dad was just too bad.’

He considered for a moment or two, then continued with the job, taking the entire formula to pieces bit by bit, reversing its whole action. And by degrees fatigue began to get the better of him and he started to doze—

He awoke shivering in every limb to find a grey daylight struggling through the frosty window. Blowing on his cramped blue hands, stamping his feet, he twisted his head to look at the thermometer.

Overnight it had dropped below the zero mark! It came as a shock to him when he realised that but for the heater, which was still operating, he might have frozen to death whilst he slept. The change in the weather was far beyond the normal for the autumn.

Reprisal? The thought began to creep unbidden around his mind as he recollected Vera Morton. Was it possible that she was in some way responsible for this, or was it just a local condition confined to this workshop?

Will got up and hurried through the shop. Opening the door he looked outside. A wind like the edge of a razor blew into his face. He saw a sheet of glassy ice where road and pavement had been. Overnight, the normal dew must have condensed into ice as fast as it had settled. What few people there were about were moving slowly, clinging to railings and shop fronts to save themselves from falling.

Puzzled, Will turned back into the shop and dragged on his overcoat. He turned on all the available heat and then set about gathering together some breakfast from the tinned rations he always had on hand. No sense in going to his rooms: he would have to open the shop soon, anyway. To shave, wash, and brew tea was impossible with every tap jammed with ice. In the end he had to gather broken ice from the cold water cistern and melt it in the kettle.

At noon he switched on the radio news bulletin and for the first time gained some idea as to what had happened.

‘. . . and this morning finds the whole of southern England in the grip of a severe cold spell,’ said the announcer. ‘It is considered curious in official circles that these arctic conditions are limited to southern England, the remainder of the country enjoying comparatively mild weather. The main weather bureaus are at a loss to understand the development since their charts do not reveal the presence of any cold front, or an anti-cyclonic system, which could bring in cold waves from the north or the Continent. Around two o’clock this morning the temperature dropped to thirty-four below zero. Rivers are now frozen, harbours ice-locked, reservoirs sealed; and hundreds of people have died from exposure and the sudden change. It is possible that it may be a climatic freak, confined to one area, and scientific experts are studying this factor. It is known that arctic conditions can be produced over a large area by artificial means if necessary. Some criminal blundering upon this

scientific possibility might make use of it for his own ends—to paralyse the life of a community, for instance . . .’

The announcer paused and then went on to a different topic. Will switched off, blew on his hands, then returned to his apparatus. But he just could not get Vera Morton out of his mind. She was back of all this somewhere. If only she would return and give him a chance to explain . . . That was not very likely, he realised. Possibly the only way to recall her was to get the apparatus so perfected that she could be restored to normal.

So throughout the day Will went on working steadily, only twice disturbed by customers since few people were venturing outside. By evening he had got the reversal process pretty well worked out in theory— Then he looked up in surprise as there came a sudden imperious hammering on the locked door of the shop. Puzzled, he went to open it and found himself gazing at two men who had the air of police officers about them. Such a possibility was substantiated to Will when, glancing beyond the two men, he saw a patrol car parked further down the ice-glazed street.

‘I’m a police officer, sir,’ the taller one announced, displaying his warrant card. ‘I have here a warrant to search your premises.’

‘What the blazes for?’ Will demanded blankly. ‘What do you suppose I’m doing? Counterfeiting money, or something?’

‘Take a look around,’ the taller one said, with a nod to his companion.

‘Hey, wait a minute—’ Will hurried after both men as they marched through the shop into the rear regions. ‘What’s the idea of busting in on me like this?’

Neither man answered. He followed them into his workshop and waited in silent wonderment whilst they surveyed his apparatus. Then the taller one switched it off and turned a grim face.

‘You own this apparatus?’ he asked briefly.

‘Certainly I do! But—’

‘What’s your name, sir?’

‘William Gregory. And I may as well tell you—’

‘You can save all that until later. You’re under arrest, Mr. Gregory. We got this wavelength at headquarters on the detectors just before the freeze up began, and we’ve been watching for it coming again. We got it again tonight from the same place—here! You’ve some explaining to do. Get your things on.’

‘But, officer, this is absurd—’

‘Move! Bring that stuff with you, sergeant.’

Will looked around him helplessly; then he donned his coat and afterwards sat in silence as he was driven over the glassy roads to the nearest police headquarters. Finally he found himself in the dreary office of the Superintendent.

‘Look here, Superintendent, I’ve got rights in this matter!’ Will snapped, thumping the desk. ‘You have no right to hold me on any charge, or search my place as you did—’

‘We had every right to search your place, Mr. Gregory, otherwise the warrant to do so would never have been issued. As for the charge against you, it follows automatically. We could have charged you last night only we wanted to be sure before picking you up—’

‘But what is the charge?’ Will nearly yelled.

‘Causing general public alarm. It’s the freeze-up.’

Will stared. ‘The—the freeze-up?’

‘We all know this freeze-up isn’t natural,’ the Superintendent explained. ‘We know that somebody is causing it deliberately through scientific means. The presence of a new type of radio wave, two nights on the run—which type of wave could produce atmospheric changes—is quite enough for us. Do you deny, after what was found on your premises, that you have a new design of radio apparatus?’

‘Of course I don’t deny it. But I do deny causing the freeze-up. Why on earth should I want to do that?’

‘That’s for you to say, isn’t it? If your apparatus is perfectly harmless, why not tell us what it does? It’ll make things easier for you at the trial.’

‘Trial?’ Will gave a start.

‘That’s what I said. It is an offence to use radio apparatus of new design without a Government test first, especially one liable to upset the public. Get it through your head, Mr. Gregory, that over two hundred people have died from this cold wave, and the cost in money and hold-ups presents a tidy item, too. If you’ve got an explanation to help prove your innocence then let’s hear it. Our scientists will go to work on it for you quickly enough.’

Will remained silent and shook his head slowly. It was just commencing to dawn upon him that he had no alibi at all. The story of an invisible woman, or that of a radio apparatus designed exclusively for the destruction of matter, would never be credited by the matter-of-fact police.

‘So you’re not going to say anything?’ the Superintendent asked bitterly.

‘No.’

‘It’d be best for you to think it over, Mr. Gregory, because you’re in an exceedingly tough spot. All right, boys, take him away.’

Still dazed, Will found himself escorted from the office and before long he had been bundled into a cell, upon which a barred door was noisily clanged . . .

For a reason which Will was at a complete loss to understand, he found next morning that the ice had thawed considerably and there was a warm wind blowing through the ventilator of his cell. The ice hold-up was over.

On the face of it, it looked as though Vera Morton had called off her reprisal—unless the freeze-up had been the overture to something far worse. In any case, Will was under no delusion now as to how things looked for him. The scientists would be taking full note of this thaw, were perhaps even now taking his machinery to bits and finding explanations, which, damnably enough, were there plainly enough! The machine could be proven to emit radio waves capable of producing cold: that was the devilish part of the whole business.

By and large, Will spent a restless day. It was around midnight again when he became aware of a chilliness coming into his cell. He jerked upright on his bunk, his heart pounding. Quickly he moved to the barred window, and then he fell back as the glass suddenly cracked. Immediately afterwards there followed a series of taps by something unseen and the broken pieces of glass were quickly removed.

Biting cold surged in upon Will. He shivered, but continued to watch the performance with fascinated interest, the details only dimly revealed by the solitary lamp glowing in the ceiling of the cell. He saw the strong bars of the frame coat with hoarfrost; then they began to glisten with ice. Colder and colder still the air became. Then gradually the window bars began to change their nature and powdered away into grey ash.

‘Mr. Gregory! Will Gregory!’ The familiar voice of Vera Morton was calling urgently, but how different it sounded! It was no longer harsh and impersonal; instead it was almost apologetic. And it was the first time the girl had used Will’s Christian name, too.

‘I’m here,’ he answered. Then he added: ‘Take it easy! Don’t come into this narrow cell or I’ll freeze to death!’

‘I know that. You noticed what happened to these bars when I held onto them? It shows very clearly the gulf there is between us, doesn’t it? Anyway, listen carefully, because I haven’t got very long. I’m perched on the stone ledge outside here and I don’t know how long it will hold me because of the cold I’m radiating. It’s quiet enough out here so when I’ve gone drop down into this alleyway and I’ll join you.’

‘Wait!’ Will moved as close to the invisible girl as he dared. ‘I’m wondering what made you come after me and give me the chance to escape. How did you know I was—’

‘Tell you later. Follow me the moment the frost has thawed from the window sill.’

Will fancied he heard the sound of her body dropping to the narrow little street back of the prison headquarters. He waited, thanking his lucky stars that the cell was only an ordinary one in a district police station, and not within a big State prison from which there would have been no possible chance of escape.

It seemed ages to him before the frost had thawed sufficiently for him to risk gripping the stonework. At last he dared it and dropped down into the gloom outside.

‘This way!’ came the girl’s voice from the night emptiness and by the cold she emanated Will guessed he was within speaking distance of her. He kept within range as she led the way swiftly through the quiet back streets of the city, only calling a halt when they were reasonably sure of immunity from pursuit.

‘I hope you’ve worked this out properly,’ Will said seriously. ‘Don’t forget I’m a fugitive on the run. I haven’t even stood trial yet and if I’m recaptured things will be pretty hot for me.’

‘If it comes to that, we’re both fugitives,’ she said—then as she sensed his surprise she continued: ‘You said you were puzzled as to why I had returned to aid you. The truth is that I decided to find out if what you had said about human beings being unhurt by all forms of radio waves was correct. I found that it was; that you had killed my friends quite unintentionally. I saw that I’d wronged you, and that it is the gulf of sensory perception between us that led to my mistaken conclusions. So I called off the reprisal I’d started—that of having electrical machines, invisible to human beings, placed at different parts of London. They slowed down the molecular vibrations of the atmosphere and thereby produced arctic conditions. Had I gone to the limit and slowed the molecules down to zero, life itself would have ceased to exist.’

‘So that’s what you did! And in calling it off you made it look as though I’d been responsible for the whole thing. I was arrested because—’

‘Yes, yes, I know why you were arrested. I saw the newspapers this morning and, realising what had happened, I decided to get you out of jail— But I said I am a fugitive, too—and I am. The beings of this other plane cannot even now believe that your radio wave was not intended to harm them. I’ve tried to explain to them, but it’s no use. Finally I destroyed the machines likely to produce arctic conditions and hurried to help you. But in so doing I’ve made it look as if I’ve forsaken my friends for you—their attacker. They’re after me, just as the police are after you. And don’t forget that in this other plane I am visible . . .’

The girl paused, then after a moment or two resumed: 'I don't see any signs of them at the moment. I told you I could adjust my vision to either plane, didn't I? I can see here, too, though it's dark to you.'

'But what's the answer to all this?' Will demanded desperately. 'We can't stand here theorising when we're both in danger. Where do we go? I can't go back to my shop because if I did that—'

'I know a place where we'll be reasonably safe. At any rate, you will, and I can look after myself. In my own plane the location is a pretty quiet spot. Follow me.'

Will did so, for an hour and more. They left the city behind and he found himself making his way across frozen ditches and iron-hard meadows, which had not yet thawed from the general relaxation of cold. At last he beheld a small wooden building looming up in the rising moonlight, set back on an elevated stretch of road.

'How about that?' the girl called out.

'Looks all right,' Will agreed. 'But to whom does it belong? We may be caught—'

'I've made sure of everything. It belongs to the Alvis Construction Company, but they went out of business a long time ago. It will probably be quite a while before anybody else takes over.'

'Nice work!' Will breathed. 'But look, two of us can't be in that place at the same time. You'd freeze me to death.'

'And if you put on too much heat you'd hurt me,' the girl pointed out. 'I can't stand large quantities of heat waves any more than you can stand scalding water. So I've worked out a compromise. I've taken a fur coat from a shop window for you to wear, and also a heater and some oil in a can. You can put on the fur coat and use the heater at half power. In that way I think we'll just about make it.'

'Then you're a lot more sanguine than I am,' Will sighed, starting to follow again. 'The way I see it, it seems we'll only sit tight until we're eventually caught.'

'No we won't. I've got some ideas about that, too. I'll explain them later— Here we are!'

Obviously the girl had been here before for Will noticed that the door padlock was crumbled ash and that she walked straight in. He waited; then her voice came out of the intense gloom.

'Oh, I'm so sorry! I forgot that you can't see in the dark . . . Come in, and see if you can stand my presence. The oil lamp's on the table.'

Will fumbled around, hands and face pricking with cold. He found the lamp at last and the box of matches beside it. To his surprise the girl gave a cry of pain as the light came up.

'My own fault,' she said, after a moment or two. 'I ought to have shut my eyes for a while. I can only take light in easy doses . . .'

Will chafed his hands and looked about him. Big splashes of frost were on the bare wood walls and against the rough furniture where the girl was standing in a far corner. He moved to the door and shut it, then drew the battered old blind over the window. Apparently this place had once been a surveyor's hut. In various directions were rules, theodolites, and tape measures. In the corner opposite the girl was the oil stove she had brought, a can of paraffin oil, one or two pots and pans, a kettle, and tins of food.

'Nice going!' Will commented, flapping his arms vigorously.

'I had to carry them in blankets to save cracking them with cold. The blankets were in shreds when I got here. How will that fur coat do? I think I covered it up enough to save it.'

Will picked up the fur coat from the chair back and dragged it on thankfully. Then he turned the heat up half way and began to get a meal together. It was as he was in the midst of this that a thought struck him.

‘Just how do you eat?’ he asked, pondering.

‘At present I’m limited to the food of my own plane. I’ll get some later on. You eat yours whilst I set about telling you a few things.’

Will nodded and when he got around to pouring himself some tea the girl said: ‘You got pretty close to working out the reverse system of your father’s invention, didn’t you? I went to your shop and found that the police had taken away your apparatus—but they’d left your notes behind. From them I could tell that—’

‘I had it solved,’ Will interrupted, his face grim. ‘Solved, I tell you! Then the police had to blow in and gum up the works! It’s the very devil!’

‘There may be a way round that. This shed is directly under a group of high-tension wires. Probably, though, you didn’t notice them in the dark. Suppose you had the necessary components and could clip cables to the high-tension wires, do you think there’s be a chance of getting me back to normal?’

‘A chance!’ Will echoed. ‘I know I could! But—there’s a snag. The components I need are all at my shop and I just daren’t return to get any—’

‘No; but I can, and I will. I’ll wrap them all up well so they won’t get damaged. You see, Will, you’ve got to get me out of this before my erstwhile friends in this plane catch up on me.’

‘Okay. That being so I’ll write down a list of what I need and you’ll have to memorise it ...’

Existence for Will was a pretty nerve-racking business from that night onwards. Daylight revealed to him that the surveyor’s hut was a good way from the beaten track, as unlikely a spot as any for the police to find him.

Vera returned at intervals, always with the cold air and frost, which presaged her arrival. Each time she returned with some new collection of vital components wrapped in fast rotting blanket, which looked as though it had been dipped in liquid air. Always she worked at night, and in different parts of the city certain radio dealers were becoming a nuisance in their demands that the police trace an unknown thief who was mysteriously robbing them.

Some of the materials Vera brought from Will’s own shop, necessary parts which only he could provide—and the more stuff she brought the harder Will worked, entirely from memory, the time he had spent poring over the original apparatus was now standing him in good stead.

‘You realise, of course,’ he said, when they were together on the third night, ‘that when I switch this thing on two things can happen? If the police are busy with detectors—as they invariably are to trace illegal radio transmissions—they’ll discover the origin of this instrument, and incidentally me. In your own plane your former friends are liable to get hurt yet again, but that is something I cannot avoid.’

‘Yes, I’ve foreseen all that,’ the girl responded, ‘but as far as I’m concerned nothing matters. My former friends have seen fit to turn against me, so they must take the consequences. It’s you I’m worrying about, Will. If the police should locate you before this job is finished we’ll both be lost. I can never keep clear of my former friends long enough to rescue you for the second time. Besides, the police will see to it that there is no second time.’

‘Yes, you’re right enough there . . .’ Will considered for a moment and then shrugged. ‘Well, we’ll have to risk everything on one throw of the dice. No tests, no anything, in case we give things away. You game?’

‘You bet I am!’

Will turned back to his work and thereafter toiled without a break for nearly three hours. At the end of it he was stiff, decidedly weary, but triumphant.

‘Shan’t be long now,’ he said quickly, collecting together a length of double cable. ‘I’m going to see what I can do to ‘pirate’ the high-tension wires.’

Once outside in the night he headed for the nearest pylon and then began the difficult climb up the braced steel bars to the summit. Once here he had to go to work with infinite care, protected by heavy rubber-leather gloves. First he reached out and clipped on one wire; then the other. When at last he got back to his apparatus he found everything was working perfectly.

‘Something occurs to me,’ came the girl’s voice, after a moment. ‘Isn’t there a chance of the power station noting the extra load you’re taking?’

‘Every chance. I’m afraid, but it may take them quite a long time to trace it, and the first place they’ll look will probably be in the city—not here. I’m not using up such a terrific lot of juice, anyway . . .’ Will hesitated, his hand on the switch control. ‘Listen, Vera, in spite of what I said earlier I’ve got to make one small test in order to be sure. Without it I cannot be sure that you’ll come through the experiment without harm.’

‘Up to you. What do you want me to do?’

‘You’d better get outside if you will—to a distance of about half-a-mile. I’ll give you five minutes.’

‘All right—but the actual job will have to follow afterwards, no matter what, because we’ll have given ourselves completely away.’

‘I know. Just get going.’

Will waited impatiently after the girl had gone, his eye on his wristwatch. Immediately the five minutes were up he switched on the apparatus. His eyes brightened as he made a quick checkover. The power meters and other complicated devices would show him exactly what was happening, and as far as he could determine everything was in order. Smiling to himself he switched off and presently Vera returned.

‘It works!’ Will told her excitedly. ‘Definitely it works! It’s force of some kind, same as that which blasted you into that other plane—only it works in a different way now. As far as I can tell your bodily molecular structure, which was so upset by the original experiment, should now be restored to normal. I’m afraid it will hurt you but I’ll stake everything I’ve got it will turn you into a visible human being in this plane.’

‘Good! That’s all we want to know—and I don’t mind what risks we take because there’s no turning back now. Let’s get the job done.’

At that, Will threw the switch, directing the field towards the frosty area in the corner of the hut—then he turned with a puzzled frown as the smell of burning rubber floated to him and the whining of the dynamo suddenly ceased—

‘The main cable!’ he gasped in horror. ‘You must have trodden on it, or something and it’s rotted away!’ He made a sudden dive. ‘Yes, it’s broken in two—Mind out! You may get hurt!’

Unwittingly he flung out his hand in a warning gesture and for a second contacted something yielding—but that something was as searing as the top of a white-hot stove. Anguish ripped at his finger-ends and brought tears into his eyes.

‘Will, you touched me! Your hand—’ Vera’s distraught voice came suddenly.

‘Skip it!’ Will panted. ‘It’s—it’s frostbite, or something. Go outside again while I fix this.’

It was far more than frostbite, as Will soon found out. On his right hand, the first and second fingers were white to the knuckles, dead, seared with that inconceivable coldness. It hampered every move he made, made him fumble helplessly in his efforts to catch together the severed pieces of cable.

He worked as rapidly as he could, gritting his teeth against pain, but he was bitterly aware that he had lost fifteen precious minutes before he at last had the break repaired and the wire clumsily patched up with cylinders of rubber and insulating tape.

He got to his feet, gave the job a final once-over, and then moved towards the door to tell the girl to return. At the same moment, however, he heard her entry and fell back quickly. A second or two later her startled voice reached him.

‘Will, they’re coming! *They’re coming!*’

‘What! The police, you mean? But how have they—’

‘No, no, the other beings! My enemies! I can see them. You must have killed off more of them and they know that where you are I will be also—Get that thing going before they find me, for God’s sake! They’ll turn heat-rays on me— They have done!’ she finished, with a sudden shriek.

Will slammed the switch and the dynamo climbed steadily up into maximum revs—but above it he could hear something else. The sound of a car engine from somewhere quite near, and it was becoming louder.

‘Will, hurry!’ the girl cried desperately. ‘The heat—!’

Her voice broke off and Will heard a thud. The bentwood chair went flying before an impact and frost cascaded along the floor. It was her fallen body: he knew that. He turned the projector downwards so that its power would still envelop her. Dead or alive, he had got to see just once what this mysterious girl looked like . . . Will’s gaze rose suddenly from the floor to three grim faces in the open doorway of the hut—the faces of police officers. There was no mistaking them. At the moment they were holding back from the unbearable waves of cold beating around them.

‘We’ve got you covered, Gregory,’ one of them said. ‘Switch off that cold-wave machine or take what’s coming to you! You’ve got exactly ten seconds from—now.’

‘Ten seconds are all I need,’ Will retorted, glancing over his instruments. ‘Wait and see for yourselves, then you can do whatever you want. You won’t believe it, but there’s a woman lying there on the floor—where that frost is. An invisible woman. She caused that cold spell which struck us. I had nothing to do with it. I’m bringing her back to visibility so she can answer to whatever charge there is—’

‘Stop lying, Gregory! Our detectors show—’

‘There!’ Will shouted abruptly. ‘Look! You can’t gainsay the evidence of your own eyes!’

Will was trembling so much from the reaction of pain and excitement he could hardly stand but his urgent words had an effect on the police. The icy cold was commencing to relax. The three men in the doorway stood stupefied, staring blankly at something beginning to take outline on the floor amidst the energy field. A solitary hand all by itself became visible first; then the receding tide of invisibility revealed a bare and slender arm. Still further the invisibility dissolved and a head, neck and shoulders came into sight. Within perhaps fifty seconds the whole graceful body had come into view, face downwards and nude, since the other-world clothes had gone too.

‘The Ice Maiden cometh,’ Will whispered, then sprang forward and shut off the machine. Tugging off his fur coat he flung it over the girl, then he raised her gently and stared into her face. Somehow, it was vaguely as he had imagined it. Oval in shape, framed in black hair. The mouth was firm and sensitive, the brows arching and intelligent. He wondered what colour her eyes might be.

Anxiously he felt her pulse, then smiled in relief. It was beating strongly enough.

‘All right,’ the leading officer said, struggling out of his bewilderment. ‘Get this woman round and let’s hear what she has to say for herself.’

Will found himself elbowed out of the way and Vera was laid back on the floor whilst professional restoration was applied. At length the girl’s eyes opened slowly—large brown ones—and she stared mystifiedly around her. Then at last she looked across to where Will was standing.

‘Will . . .’ He could hardly hear her voice. ‘Will, you made it! I just remember them getting me when I collapsed! You—you brought me back!’

‘Uh-huh,’ Will acknowledged quietly, studying her.

‘Yes, he brought you back,’ the police officer-in-charge growled. ‘And you’re lucky that we happened to see it all take place otherwise we’d never have believed it. But you’ve certainly got a lot of explaining to do. Soon as you’re all right we’ll get moving.’

Will gave a grim smile. ‘We can explain things okay—and open up a new field of scientific endeavour, maybe. As for me, the price will be two amputated fingers, I’m afraid.’ He held up the dead-white members and sighed. ‘Anyway, we’ll get the scientists to trace Vera Morton’s experience in full, then perhaps we’ll get off with a year or two.’

‘Or else—life,’ Vera murmured, and buttoned the fur coat tightly about her.

[The end of *Ice Maiden* by John Russell Fearn (as Vargo Statten)]