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FLIGHT INTO SUPER-TIME

BY CLARK ASHTON SMITH

Some who read this narrative will no doubt remember the disappearance of the eccentric millionaire Domitian Malgraff and his Chinese servant Li Wong, which provided the newspapers of 1940 with flamboyant headlines and many columns of rumor and speculation.

Reams were written concerning the case; but, stripped of all reportorial embellishments, it can hardly have been said to constitute a story. There were no verifiable motives nor explanatory circumstances, no clues nor traces of any kind. The two men had passed from all mundane knowledge, between one hour and the next, as if they had evaporated like some of the queer volatile chemicals with which Malgraff had been experimenting in his private laboratory. No one knew the use of these chemicals; and no one knew what had happened to Malgraff and Li Wong.

Few, perhaps, will consider that any reliable solution of these problems is now afforded through the publication of the manuscript received by Sylvia Talbot a year ago in the fall of 1941.

Miss Talbot had formerly been affianced to Malgraff, but had broken off the engagement three years prior to his disappearance. She had been fond of him; but his dreamy disposition and impractical leanings had formed a decided barrier from her viewpoint. The youth had seemed to take his dismissal lightly and had afterwards plunged into scientific researches whose nature and object he confided to no one. But neither then nor at any other time had he shown the least inclination to supplement by his own efforts the huge fortune inherited from his father.

Regarding his vanishment, Miss Talbot was as much in the dark as everyone else. After the breaking-off of the engagement she had continued to hear from him at intervals; but his letters had grown more and more infrequent through his absorption in unnamed studies and labors. She was both surprised and shocked by the news of his disappearance.

A world-wide search was made by his lawyers and relations; but without result. Then, in the late summer of 1941, the strange vessel containing the aforesaid manuscript was found floating in the Banda Sea, between Celebes and the Spice Islands, by a Dutch pearler.

The vessel was a sphere of some unknown crystalline substance, with flattened ends. It was eighteen inches in diameter and possessed an interior mechanism of miniature dynamos and induction coils, all of the same clear material, together with an apparatus resembling an hour-glass, which was half-filled with a grey powder. The outer surface was studded with several tiny knobs. In the very center, in a small cylindrical compartment, was a thick roll of greenish-yellow paper on which the name and address of Miss Sylvia Talbot were plainly legible through the various layers of the sphere. The writing had been done with some sort of brush or an extremely heavy pen, in pigment of a rare shade of purple.

Two months later, the thing reached Miss Talbot, who was startled and amazed when she recognized the writing as that of Domitian Malgraff.

After many vain experiments, by manipulating certain of the exterior knobs, the vessel was opened; and it came apart in two hemispheric sections. Miss Talbot found that the roll of paper contained a voluminous letter from Malgraff, written on yard-long sheets. This letter, with the omission of a few intimate paragraphs and sentences, is now offered to the public in obedience to the writer's wish.

Malgraff's incredible tale, of course, is easily enough to be explained on the ground of imaginative fabrication. Such, in the opinion of those who knew him, would be far from incompatible with his character. In his own whimsical and fantastic way, he is said to have been something of a joker. A new search has now been instituted, on the supposition that he may be living somewhere in the Orient; and all the isles adjacent to the Banda Sea will be carefully examined.

However, certain collateral details are somewhat mysterious and baffling. The material and mechanism of the sphere are unfamiliar to scientists, and are still unexplained; and the fabric on which the letter was written, as well as the pigment used, have so far defied analysis. The paper, in its chemical composition, seems to present affinities with both vellum and papyrus; and the pigment has no terrestrial analogue.

THE LETTER

Dear Sylvia:

You have always considered me a hopeless dreamer; and I am the last person who would endeavor or even wish to dispute your summary. It might be added that I am one of those dreamers who have not been able to content themselves with dreams. Such persons, as a rule, are unfortunate and unhappy, since few of them are capable of realizing, or even approximating, their visionary conceptions.

In my case, the attempted realization has led to a singular result: I am writing this letter from a world that lies far-off in the two-fold labyrinth of time and space; a world removed by many million years from the one wherein you live, the one whereto I am native.

As you know, I have never cared greatly for the material things of earth. I have always been irked by the present age, have always been devoured by a sort of nostalgia for other times and places. It has seemed so oddly and capriciously arbitrary that I should be *here* and not *otherwise*, in the infinite, eternal ranges of being; and I have long wondered if it would not be possible to gain control of the laws that determine our temporal or cosmic situation, and pass at will from world to world or from cycle to cycle.

It was after you dismissed me that my speculations along such lines began to take a practical turn. You had told me that my dreamings were no less impossible than useless. Perhaps, among other things, I desired to prove that they were not impossible. Their utility or inutility was not a problem that concerned me, nor one which any man could decide.

I shall not weary you with a full recountal of my labors and researches. I sought above all else to invent a machine by which I could travel in time, could penetrate the past or the future. I started from the theory that movement in the time-dimension could be controlled, accelerated or reversed by the action of some special force. By virtue of such regulation, one would be able to move forward or backward along the æons.

I shall say only that I succeeded in isolating the theoretic time-force, though without learning its ultimate nature and origin. It is an all-pervading energy, with a shorter wavelength than that of the cosmic rays. Then I invented a compound metal, perfectly transparent and of great toughness, which was peculiarly fitted for use in conducting and concentrating the force.

From this metal I constructed my machine, with dynamos in which I could develop an almost illimitable power. The reversal of the force, compelling a retrograde movement in time, could be secured by passing the current through certain rare volatile chemicals imprisoned in a special device resembling a large hour-glass.

After many months of arduous effort, the mechanism stood completed on the floor of my Chicago laboratory. Its outward form was more or less spherical, with flattened ends like those of a Chinese orange. It was capable of being hermetically sealed, and the machinery included an oxygen-apparatus. Within, there was ample room for three people amid the great tubular dynamos, the array of chronometric dials, and the board of regulative levers and switches. All the parts, being made of the same material, were transparent as glass.

Though I have never loved machinery, I surveyed it with a certain pride. There was a delightful irony in the thought that by using this super-mechanical device I could escape from the machine-ridden era in which I had been born.

My first intention was to explore the future. By travelling far enough in forward time, I expected to find one of two things: men would either have learned to discard their cumbrous and complicated engines, or would have been destroyed by them, giving place to some other and more sensible species in the course of mundane evolution.

However, if the human future failed to inveigle me in any of its phases, I could reverse the working of the time-force and go back into the æons that were posterior to my own epoch. In these, unless history and fable had lied, the conditions of life would be more congenial to my own tastes. But my most urgent curiosity was concerning the unknown and

problematic years of ages to come.

All my labors had been carried on in private, with no other aid than that of Li Wong, my Chinese cook, valet and housekeeper. And at first I did not confide the purpose of the mechanism even to Li Wong, though I knew him to be the most discreet and intelligent of mortals. People in general would have laughed if they had known what I was trying to do. Also there were cousins and other relations, all enviously watchful of my inherited wealth ... and a country full of lawyers, alienists and lunatic asylums. I have always had a reputation for eccentricity; and I did not choose to give my dear relatives an opportunity which might have been considered legally sufficient for the well-known process of "railroading."

I had fully intended to take the time-voyage alone. But when I had finished building the machine, and all was in readiness for departure, I realized that it would be impossible to go without my factotum, Li Wong. Apart from his usefulness and trustworthiness, the little Chinaman was good company. He was something of a scholar in his own tongue, and did not belong to the coolie class. Though his mastery of English was still imperfect, and my knowledge of Chinese altogether rudimentary, we had often discussed the poetry and philosophy of his own land, as well as certain less erudite topics.

Li Wong received the announcement of our projected journey with the same blandness and aplomb which he would have shown if I had told him we were going into the next state.

"Me go pack," he said. "You want plentee shirt?"

Our preparations were soon made. Apart from the changes of raiment suggested by Li Wong, we took with us a ten days' supply of provisions, a medicine kit, and a bottle of brandy, all of which were stored in lockers I had built for the purpose. Not knowing what we might find, or what might happen by the way, it was well to be prepared for emergencies.

All was now ready. I locked Li Wong and myself within the time-sphere, and then sat down before the instrument-board on which the controlling levers were ranged. I felt the thrill of a new Columbus or a Magellan, about to sail for undiscovered continents. Compared with this, all former human explorations would be as the crawling of emmets and pismires.

Even in the exultation of that moment, though everything had been calculated with mathematical precision, had been worked out to an algebraic degree, I recognized the element of uncertainty and danger. The effect of time-travelling on the human constitution was an unknown quantity. Neither of us might survive the process of acceleration in which lustrums and decades and centuries would be reduced to mere seconds.

I pointed this out to Li Wong. "Maybe you had better stay behind after all," I suggested.

He shook his head vigorously. "You go, I go," he said with an imperturbable smile.

Making a mental note of the hour, day and minute of our departure, I pulled a lever and turned on the accelerative force.

I had hardly known what to anticipate in the way of physical reactions and sensations. Among other contingencies, it had even occurred to me that I might become partially or wholly unconscious; and I had clamped myself to the seat to avoid falling in case of this.

However, the real effect was very strange and unforeseen. My first feeling was that of sudden bodily lightness and immateriality. At the same time, the machine seemed to have expanded, its walls, dynamos and other portions were a dim and shining blur, and appeared to repeat themselves in an endless succession of momentary images. My own person, and that of Li Wong, were multiplied in the same manner. I was indescribably conscious of myself as a mere flickering shadow, from which was projected a series of other shadows. I tried to speak, and the words became an indefinitely repeated echo.

For a brief interval the sphere seemed to be hanging in a sea of light. Then, incomprehensibly, it began to darken. A great blackness pressed upon it from without; but the outlines of everything within the sphere were still visible through a sort of luminosity that clung to them like a feeble phosphorescence.

I was puzzled by these phenomena and, in particular, by the outside darkness, for which I could not account. Theoretically, the days and night through which we were passing at such supreme velocity would merge in a sort of greyness.

Centuries, æons, *kalpas* of time, were going by in the strange night. Then, mysterious as the darkness, there came a sudden, blinding glare of light, intenser than anything I had yet known which pervaded the sphere, and died away like a lightning-flash. It was followed shortly by two lesser flashes, very close together; and then the outer gloom returned once more.

I reached out, with a hand that became a hundred hands, and succeeded somehow in turning on the light that hung above my instrument board and chronometric dials. One of these dials was designed to register my forward motion in time. It was hard to distinguish the real hands and figures in the ghostly blur by which they were surrounded; but somehow, after much poring, I found that I had gone onward into the future for no less than twenty thousand years!

Surely this would be enough, at least for the initial stage of my flight. I groped for the levers, and turned off the accelerative power.

Instantly my visual sensations became those of a normal three-dimensional being in normal time and space. But the feeling of lightness and immateriality still persisted. It seemed to me that I should have floated in mid-air like a feather, if it had not been for the metal clamps that held me to the seat.

I heard the voice of Li Wong, whom I had practically forgotten for the moment. The voice came from above! Startled, I saw that the Chinese, with his wide sleeves flapping ludicrously, had floated upward and was bobbing about in the air, trying vainly to recover his equilibrium and re-establish his feet on the floor!

"Me fly all same sea-gull," he tittered, seeming to be amused rather than frightened by his novel predicament.

What on earth had happened? Was the force of gravity non-existent in this future world? I peered out through the glassy walls, trying to determine the geographical features of the terrain in which we had landed.

It must be night, I thought, for all was darkness, shot with a million cold and piercing stars. But why were the stars all around us, as well as above? Even if we were on a mountain-top, we should be surrounded by the vague masses of remote nocturnal horizons.

But there were no horizons anywhere—only the swarming lights of irrecognizable constellations. With growing bewilderment, I looked down at the crystalline floor, and beneath me, as in some awful gulf, there swam the icy fires of unknown galaxies! I saw, with a terrific mental shock, that we were suspended in mid-space.

My first thought was that the earth and the solar system had been annihilated. Somewhere during the past twenty thousand years, there had been a cosmic cataclysm; and Li Wong and myself, moving at inconceivable speed in the abstract time-dimension, had somehow managed to escape it.

CHAPTER II

A Bizarre World

Then, like a thunderclap, there came the realization of the truth. *The sphere had moved only in time*; but, in the interim, the earth and the sun had been travelling away from us in space, even as all stellar and planetary bodies are said to travel. I had never dreamt of such a contingency in all my calculations, thinking that the laws of gravitation would keep us automatically in the same position relative to the earth itself at which we had started. But evidently these laws were non-effective in the ultra-spatial dimension known as time. We had stood still in regard to ordinary space, and were now separated from the earth by twenty thousand years of cosmic drift! Considered as a time-machine, my invention was a pretty fair vehicle for instellar transit.

To say that I was dumfounded would only prove the inadequacy of human words. The feeling that surged upon me was the most utter and abominable panic that I have ever experienced. The sensations of an explorer lost without a compass amid the eternal, unhorizoned ice of some Arctic desert would have been mild and infantile in comparison. Never before had I understood the true awfulness of inter-sidereal depth and distance, of the gulf wherein there is neither limitation nor direction. I seemed to whirl like a lost mote on the winds of immeasurable chaos, in a vertigo of the spirit as well as of the body.

I reached out for the lever that would reverse the time-energy and send the sphere backward to its starting-point. Then, in the midst of all my panic, of all my violent fear and topsy-turvy confusion, I felt a reluctance to return. Even in the bleak abyss that yawns unbridgeable between the stars, I was not allured by the thought of the stale and commonplace world I had left.

I began to recover something of stability, of mental equipoise. I remembered the bright flashes that had puzzled me. These, I now realized, had marked the passage of an alien sun and planetary system, coinciding in its orbit with the former position of the earth in space. If I went on in abstract time, other bodies would doubtless occupy the same position, in the everlasting drift of the universe. By slowing the movement of the sphere, it might be feasible to land on one of them.

To you, no doubt the sheer folly and madness of such a project will be more than obvious. Indeed, I must have been a little mad, from the physical and psychic strain of my unparalleled experience. Otherwise, the difficulties of the landing which I so coolly proposed to myself—not to mention the dangers—would have been glaringly manifest.

I resumed the time-flight, at a speed reduced by half. This, I calculated, would enable me to sight the next approaching orb in time to prepare for landing.

The darkness about us was unbroken for an interval of many ages. It seemed to me that eternity itself had gone by in the rayless void, ere a brilliant glare of light betokened a nearing sun. It passed us very close, filling half the heavens for an instant. Apparently there were no planets—or, at least none that came within sight.

Steadily we went on in time; till I ceased to watch the dial with its blurred and multiplied ciphers. I lived only in a dream of unreal and spectral duration. But somehow, after awhile, I knew that more than a million years had been traveled by the sphere.

Then, suddenly, another solar orb swam up before us. We must have passed through it, for the sphere was briefly surrounded by an incandescent flame, that seemed as if it would annihilate us with its intolerable flare. Then we were out of it, were suspended in black space, and a smaller, gleaming body was hurtling toward us.

This, I knew, would be a planet. I slowed the sphere to a rate of speed that would permit me to examine it. The thing loomed upon us, it whirled beneath us in a riot of massed images. I thought that I could distinguish seas and continents, isles and mountains. It rose still nearer, and appeared to surround us with swirling forms that were suggestive of enormous vegetable growths.

My hand was poised in readiness on the lever that would terminate our flight. As we swung dizzily amid the swirling forest, I brought the machine to a full stop, no doubt risking an instant destruction. I heard a violent crash, and the vessel rocked and reeled deliriously. Then it seemed to right itself, and stood still. It was lurching half to one side, and I had

nearly been wrenched from my seat, while Li Wong was sprawling in an undignified position on the floor. But nevertheless, we had landed!

Still giddy, and trying to regain my equilibrium, I peered through the crystalline walls on a weird and exuberant tangle of bewildering plant-forms. The time-machine was lodged between the swollen, liver-colored boles of certain of these plants and was hanging four or five feet in air above a pink and marshy soil from which protruded like sinister horns the brownish-purple tips of unknown growths.

Overhead, there were huge, pale, flabby leaves with violet veinings in which I seemed to detect the arterial throb of sluggish pulses. The leaves depended from the bulbous top of each plant like a circle of flattened arms from a headless torso.

There were other vegetable forms, all crowding and looming grotesquely in the green, vaporous air whose density was such as to give almost the appearance of a submarine garden to the odd scene. From every side I received a confused impression of python-like rattans, of poddy, fulsome, coral-tinted fronds and white or vermilion fungoid blossoms large as firkins. Above the jungle-tops, an olive-golden glimmering in the thick atmosphere betokened the meridian rays of a muffled sun.

My first feelings were those of astonishment—the scene before me was a source of giddiness to eye and brain. Then, as I began to distinguish new details in the medley of towering, outlandish shapes, I conceived a super-added emotion of horror, of veritable disgust.

At intervals there were certain immense, bowl-like flowers, supported on strong, hispid stems of a curious tripodal sort, and hued with the ghastly greens and purples of putrefying flesh. In these bowls the squat bulks of mammoth insects—or, rather, of what I took to be such at the moment—were crouching in an evil immobility with strange antennæ and other organs or members hanging down over the rims of the bowls.

These monsters appeared to mock the cadaverous coloring of the flowers. They were inexpressibly loathsome, and I shall not endeavor to describe their anatomy with any degree of minuteness. I shall, however, mention the three snail-like horns, ending in ruby-red eyes, that rose above their bodies and watched the forest around them with a baleful vigilance.

About the base of each of the tripodal stems, I perceived the carcasses of quaint animals, lying in a circle, in varying stages of decomposition. From many of these carrion, new plants of the same type as the bowl-flowers were issuing, with dark, ghoulish buds that had not yet unfolded.

As I studied these plants and their guardians with growing repulsion, a six-legged creature, something between a wart-hog and an iguana, emerged from the jungle and trotted past within a dozen feet of the time-sphere. It approached one of the bowl-shaped blossoms, and sniffed at the hairy triple stem with a thin ant-eater snout. Then, to my horror, the squatting form in the bowl sprang forth with lightning rapidity and landed on the spine of the hapless animal. I saw the flash of a knife-like sting that was buried in the grotesque body. The victim struggled feebly, and then lay supine, while its assailant proceeded to make use of an organ that resembled the ovipositor of the ichneumon-fly.

All this was highly revolting; and even more repulsive was my discovery that the insect-form was actually a part of the flower in which it had been reposing! It hung by a long, pallid, snaky rope, like a sort of umbilical cord, from the center of the tilted bowl; and after the hideous thing had finished with its victim, the cord began to shorten, drawing the monster back to its lurking-place. There it squatted as before, watching for fresh prey with its ruby eyes. It was damnably obvious that the plant belonged to a semi-faunal genus and was wont to deposit its seeds (or eggs) in animal bodies.

I turned to Li Wong, who was surveying the scene with manifest disapprobation in his almond eyes.

"Me no likee this." He shook his head gravely as he spoke.

"Can't say that I care much for it, either," I returned. "Considered as a landing-place, this particular planet leaves a good deal to be desired. I fear we'll have to go on for a few more million or trillion years, and try our luck elsewhere."

I peered out once more, wondering if the other plant-types around us were all possessed of some disagreeable and

aggressive character or ability, like the bowl-flowers. I was not reassured when I noticed that some of the serpentine rattans were swaying sluggishly toward the time-sphere, and that one of them had already reached it and was creeping along the wall with tiny tendrils that ended in suction-cups.

Then, from amid the curling vapors and crowding growths, a bizarre being appeared and ran toward the time-machine, barely avoiding one of the cord-suspended monsters as it launched itself from a tall blossom. The thing fell short of its intended prey by a mere inch or two, and swung horribly in mid-air like a goblin pendulum before it was retracted by the long, elastic cord.

The aforesaid being was about the height of an average man. He was bipedal, but exhibited four arms, two of which issued from either side of his elongated, pillar-like neck and the other two from positions half-way down on his wasp-waisted thorax. His facial features were of elfin delicacy, and a high, fluted comb of ivory rose from his broad and hairless crown.

His nose, or what appeared to be such, was equipped with mobile feelers that hung down beside his tiny puckered mouth like Oriental mustaches; and his round, discoid ears were furnished with fluttering, streamer-like diaphanous membranes, thin as strips of parchment, on which were curious hieroglyphic markings.

His small, sapphire-brilliant eyes were set far apart beneath ebon semi-circles that seemed to have been drawn with pigment on his pearly skin. A short cape of some flossy vermilion fabric served to cover his upper body; but, apart from this, there was nothing that one could distinguish as artificial raiment.

Avoiding several more of the plant-monsters, who lunged viciously, he neared the time-machine. Plainly he had seen us; and it seemed to me that his sapphire eyes implored us for succor and refuge.

I pressed a button which served to unlock and open the door of the sphere. As the door swung outward, Li Wong and I were assailed by numerous unearthly smells, many of which were far from pleasant. We breathed the surge of an air that was heavy with oxygen and was also laden with the vapors of unfamiliar chemical elements.

With a long, flying leap, the strange entity sprang in air and gained the crystal sill of the open machine. I caught the flexible three-fingered hands of his lower arms and drew him to safety. Then I closed the door, just as one of the cord-hung monsters hurtled against it, breaking its keen, steely-looking sting and staining the clear metal with a rill of amber-yellow venom.

"Welcome, stranger," I said.

Our guest was breathing heavily; and his facial feelers trembled and swayed with the palpitation of his fine, membranous nostrils. Apparently he was too breathless for speech; but he made a series of profound inclinations with his crested head, and moved his tenuous fingers with fluttering gestures that were somehow expressive of regard and gratitude.

When he had recovered his breath, and had composed himself a little, he began to talk in a voice of unearthly pitch, with sharp cadences and slowly rising intonations which I can compare only to the notes of certain tropic birds. Of course, Li Wong and I could only guess at his meaning, since the words, wherever distinguishable as such, were totally different from those of any human tongue or dialect.

We surmised, however, that he was thanking us and was also offering us an explanation of the perils from which we had rescued him. He seemed to be telling us a lengthy tale, accompanied with many dramatic gestures of an odd but eloquent sort. From certain of these, we gathered that his presence in that evil jungle was involuntary; that he had been abandoned there by enemies, in the hope that he would never escape from the wilderness of monstrous plants.

By signs, he told us that the jungle was of enormous extent, and was filled with growths that were even more dreadful than the bowl-flowers.

Afterwards, when we had learned to understand the language of this quaint being, we found that our surmises had been correct; but the narrative, in its entirety, was even stranger and more fantastical than we had imagined.

As I listened to our guest, and watched the swiftly weaving movements of his four hands, I became aware that a shadow had fallen upon us, intercepting the green, watery light of the blurred heavens. Looking up, I saw that a small air-vessel, of discoid form, surrounded with turning wheels and pointed wings that whirred like the sails of a windmill, was descending toward us and was hovering just above the time-machine.

Our guest perceived it also, and broke off abruptly in his story-telling. I could see that he was greatly alarmed and agitated. I inferred that the air-vessel belonged, perhaps, to his enemies, to the very beings who had left him to a cruel doom in that fearsome terrain. No doubt they had returned to make sure of his fate; or else their attention had in some manner been attracted by the appearance of the time-sphere.

The alien ship was now hanging near the tops of the giant plants between whose boles the sphere had become lodged in landing. Through the silvery whirl of its wings and rotating wheels, I saw the faces of several entities who bore a general likeness to our guest, and were plainly of the same racial type. One of these beings was holding a many-mouthed instrument with a far-off resemblance to the Gatling gun, or mitrailleuse, and was aiming it at the time-machine.

Our passenger gave a piercing cry, and clutched my arm with two of his hands while he pointed upward with the others. I required no interpreter, and no lengthy process of reasoning, to understand that we were in grave danger from the foreign vessel and its occupants. I sprang immediately to the instrument board, and released the lever that would send us onward in time at the utmost speed of which the machine was capable.



CHAPTER III

The Flight Through Time

Even as I pulled the lever, there came from the ship a flash of cold and violescent light that seemed to envelop the time-sphere. Then all things in the world without were resolved into a flying riot of formless, evanescent images, and around us once more, after a brief interval, was the ebon darkness of interstellar space. Again the ship was filled with momentary, repeated phantoms, to which were added those of our curious guest. Again the dials, the levers and the dynamos multiplied themselves in a dim, phosphorescent glow.

Later, I learned that our flight into forward æons had saved us from utter annihilation only by the fraction of a second. The force emitted by the many-mouthed weapon on the air-vessel would have turned the sphere into vanishing vapor if we had sustained it for more than a moment.

Somehow, I managed to clamp myself into the seat once more, and sat watching the weirdly manifolded hands and ciphers that registered our progress in universal time. Fifty thousand years—a hundred thousand—a million—and still we floated alone in the awesome gulf of the everlasting cosmic midnight. If any suns or planets had passed us during the interim, they had gone by at a distance which rendered them invisible.

Li Wong and the new passenger had clutched at the handles of the lockers in which our provisions were stored, to keep themselves from drifting aimlessly about in mid-air. I heard the babble of their voices, whose every tone and syllable was subdivided into a million echoes.

A peculiar faintness came upon me, and a dream-like sense of the unreal and irrational attached itself to all my impressions and ideas. I seemed to have gone beyond all that was conceivable or comprehensible, to have overpassed the very boundaries of creation. The black chaos in which I wandered was infinitely lost from all direction and orientation, was beyond life itself or the memory of life; and my consciousness seemed to flicker and drown in the dark nullitude of an incommensurable void.

Still we went on along the ages. On the far-off, receding earth, as well as on other planets, whole civilizations had evolved and elapsed and been forgotten, and many historical epochs and geological eras had gone by. Moons and worlds and even great suns had been destroyed. Travelling down their eternal orbits, the very constellations had all shifted their stances amid the infinite. These were inconceivable thoughts; and my brain was overwhelmed by the mere effort to visualize and comprehend their awfulness.

Strangest of all was the thought that the world I had known was lost not only in sidereal immensity, but in the rayless night of a remote antiquity!

With more than the longing of a derelict sailor, adrift on chartless seas, I desired to feel underfoot once more the stable soil of *terra firma*—no matter where, or what. We had already made one landing in the dizzy labyrinth of time and space; and somewhere, somehow, among the æons through which we were passing, another cosmic body might offer itself, intersecting in its spatial path our own position in abstract time.

Again, as before our initial landing, I slowed our progress to a rate that would allow inspection of any sun or world we might happen to approach.

There was a long, dreary interval of waiting, in which it seemed that the whole universe, with all its systems and galaxies, must have gone by us and left us hanging alone in the void that lies beyond organized matter. Then I became aware of a growing light; and, retarding the time-machine still further, I saw that a planet was nearing us; and beyond the planet were two larger fiery bodies that I took for a binary system of ours.

Now was our opportunity, and I determined to seize it. The new planet whirled beneath us, it rolled upon us amain, as we still moved in time at a rate whereby whole days were reduced to minutes. A moment more, and it rose from the gulf like some gigantically swelling bubble to surround us with a maze of half-cognizable imageries. There were Atlantean mountain-tops through which we seemed to pass, and seas or level deserts above which we appeared to hover in the midst of broken cloud-strata. Now, for an instant, we were among buildings, or what I assumed to be such; then we were hurled onward to a broad, open space. I caught a confused glittering of many-pointed lights and unidentifiable, thronging

forms, as I reached out and brought the sphere to a sudden halt.

As I have said before, it was a perilous thing to stop thus in accelerated time above a moving planet. There might well have been a collision that would have destroyed the machines; or we might have found ourselves embedded beneath fathoms of soil or stones. Indeed, there were any number of undesirable possibilities; and the only wonder is that we escaped annihilation.

As it was, we must have come to a halt in mid-air, perhaps fifteen or twenty feet above the ground. Of course, we were seized immediately by the gravitational influence of the new world. Even as my sense-impressions cleared with the cessation of the time-flight, we fell with a terrible, ear-splitting crash, and the sphere almost seemed to rebound and then rolled over, careening on its side. I was torn from my seat by the shock of impact, and Li Wong and our passenger were hurled to the floor beside me. The stranger and myself, though sorely bruised and shaken, contrived to retain consciousness; but I saw that Li Wong had been stunned by the fall.

Giddily, with swaying limbs and reeling senses, I tried to stand up, and somehow succeeded. My first thought was for Li Wong, who was lying inert against the tilted dynamos. A hasty examination showed me that he was uninjured. My second thought was for the time-machine, whose tough metal revealed no visible damage. Then, inevitably, the world into which we had fallen in a manner so precipitate was forced upon my attention.

We had come down in the very center of what appeared to be an active battle-field! All around us was a formidable array of chariot-like vehicles, high-wheeled and high-bodied, drawn by quaint monsters that recalled the dragons of heraldry, and driven by beings of an unearthly kind who were little more than pygmies.

There were many foot soldiers, too, and all were armed with weapons such as have never been used in human history. There were spears that ended in curving, saw-toothed blades, and swords whose hilts were in the middle, and spiked balls at the end of long, leathern thongs, which were hurled at the enemy and then drawn back by their owners. Also, each of the chariots was fitted with a catapult, from which similar balls were flung.

The users of these weapons had paused in the midst of what was plainly a ferocious battle, and were all staring at the time-machine. Some, I saw, had been crushed beneath the heavy sphere as it plunged among them. Others had drawn back, and were eyeing us doubtfully.

Even as I surveyed this singular scene, with bewilderment that permitted no more than a partial cognizance of its baffling details, I saw that the interrupted combat was being resumed. The monster-drawn chariots swayed back and forth, and the air was thick with flying missiles, some of which hurtled against the walls of the sphere. It seemed, perhaps, that our presence was having an effect on the morale of these fantastic warriors. Many of us who were nearest to the sphere began to retreat, while others pressed forward; and I was able for the first time to distinguish the members of the two factions, who obviously belonged to different races.

Those of one faction, who were all foot-soldiers armed with spears and swords, were seemingly a rude barbaric type. They outnumbered the others greatly. Their fearsome, uncouth features were like graven masks of fury and malignity; and they fought with a savage desperation.

Their opponents, who comprised all the chariot-drivers, as well as a smaller body of foot-soldiers, were more delicate and civilized in appearance, with slighter limbs and anatomies. They made a skillful use of their catapults; and the tide of the battle seemed to be turning in their favor. When I perceived that all those who had been struck down by the time-machine belonged to the more barbarous type, I inferred that possibly our apparition had been construed as favorable to one faction and inimical to the other. The catapult-users were gaining courage; and the spear and sword bearers were becoming visibly demoralized.

The combat turned to an ever-growing rout. The corps of chariots gathered in a crushing mass about the time-sphere and drove the enemy swiftly back, while, in the heat of conflict, a barrage of singular weapons continued to assail our hyaline walls.

Ferocious-looking as they were, the dragons seemed to take no active part in the struggle, and were plainly mere beasts

of draught or burden. But the slaughter was terrific; and crushed or trodden bodies were lying everywhere. The role of *deus ex machina* which I appeared to be playing in this outlandish battle was not one that I should have chosen of my own accord; and I soon decided that it would be better to fare even further afield in universal time.

I pulled the starting-lever; but, to my confoundment and consternation, there was no result. The mechanism in some manner had been jarred or disconnected by the violence of our fall, though I could not locate the precise difficulty at that moment. Afterwards, I found that the connection between the instrument-board and the dynamos had been broken, thus rendering the force inoperative.

Li Wong had now recovered consciousness. Rubbing his head, he sat up and appeared to be pondering our remarkable *milieu* with all the gravity of an Oriental philosopher. Our passenger was peering out with his brilliant sapphire eyes on this world to which he was no less alien than Li Wong and myself. He seemed to be eyeing the odd warriors and their dragon-teams with a cool, scientific interest.

The more civilized of the two factions was now driving its enemies from the field in a tide of carnage. Our sound-proof walls prevented us from hearing the crash and rumble of chariot-wheels, the clangor of clashing weapons, and the cries that were doubtless being emitted by the warriors.

Since nothing could be done at the moment to repair our machinery, I resigned myself, not without misgivings, to an indefinite sojourn in the world whereon we had landed so fortuitously.

In perhaps ten minutes the raging battle was over, the unslain remnant of the barbarians was in full flight, and the conquerors, who had poured past us in an irresistible torrent, were returning and massing about the sphere at a little distance.

Several, whom I took for commanding officers, descended from their cars and approached us. They prostrated themselves before the machine in the universal posture of reverence.

For the first time, I was able to form an exact impression of the appearance of these beings. The tallest of them was barely four feet in height, and their limbs, which were normal in number according to human ideas, were slender as those of elves or leprechauns. Their movements were very swift and graceful, and were seemingly aided by a pair of small wings or erigible membranes attached to their sloping shoulders.

Their faces were marked by a most elaborate development of the nostrils and eyes; and the ears and mouths were little more than vestigial by contrast. The nasal apparatus was convoluted like that of certain bats, with mobile valves arranged in rosettes, and a nether appendage that recalled the petals of a butterfly orchid. The eyes were proportionately enormous and were set obliquely.

They were furnished with vertical lids and possessed a power of semicircular rotation and also of protrusion and retraction in their deep orbits. This power, we learned later, enabled them to magnify or reduce any visual image at will, and also to alter or invert the perspective in which it was seen.

These peculiar beings were equipped with body-armor of red metal marked off in ovoid scales. Their light-brown arms and legs were bare. Somehow their whole aspect was very gentle and un-warlike. I marvelled at the prowess and bravery which they had shown in the late battle.

They continued their obeisances before the time-machine, rising and prostrating themselves anew, in an alternation like a set ritual with gestures and genuflections of hieratic significance. I conceived the idea that they regarded the machine itself as a conscious, intelligent and perhaps supernal entity; and that we the occupants, if perceived at all, were considered as internal and integral parts of the mechanism.

Li Wong and I began to debate the advisability of opening the door and revealing ourselves to these fantastic devotees. Unluckily, I had neglected to provide the sphere with any device for determining the chemical composition of other-world atmospheres; and I was not sure that the outside air would prove wholly suitable for human respiration. It was this consideration, rather than any actual fear of the mild, quaint warriors, that caused me to hesitate.

I decided to defer our epiphany; and I was about to resume my examination of the deranged machinery, when I noticed an ebullition in the massed ranks of soldiers that were drawn up around us at some little distance. The ranks parted with a swift, flowing motion, leaving a wide lane through which, presently, a remarkable vehicle advanced.

The vehicle was a sort of open platform mounted on numerous low, squat wheels, and drawn by a dozen of the dragon-creatures, arranged in teams of four. The platform was rectangular, and the small, castor-like wheels served to elevate it little more than a foot above the ground. I could not determine its material, which was copperish in color and suggested a heavily metallic stone rather than a pure, smelted metal. It was without furnishings or superstructure, aside from a low breastwork at the front, behind which three drivers stood, each holding the separate reins of a tandem of monsters. At the rear, a strange, outward-curving arm or crane of some black, lustrous material ending in a thick disk, rose high in the air. One of the elfin people stood beside this crane.

With exquisite and admirable skill, the drivers brought their unwieldy conveyance forward in a sweeping arc through the empty space between the time-vessel and the surrounding army. The devotees of the sphere, who must have been commanding officers, retired to one side; and the monster-hauled vehicle, passing us closely, was adroitly manuevered and drawn about till it came to a halt with its rear end opposite the sphere and the black arm inclining above our very heads with its heavy horizontal disk.

The being who stood beside the curving arm began to manipulate an oddly shaped and movable projection (which must have been a sort of lever or control) in its dark surface. Watching him curiously, I became aware of a sudden and increasing glare of light overhead; and looking up, I saw that a lid-like cover was sliding back from the disk at the arm's end, revealing a fire-bright substance that dazzled the eye.

Simultaneously, I felt a sensation of corporeal lightness, of growing weightlessness. I reeled with vertigo, and reaching toward the wall in an effort to steady myself, I floated buoyantly from the floor and drifted in mid-air. Li Wong and the stranger, I perceived, were floundering eerily and helplessly about amid the machinery.

Perplexed by this phenomenon of degravitation, I did not realize at first that there had been a similar levitation of the time-sphere itself. Then, as I turned in my aerial tumbling, I saw that the sphere had risen from the ground and was now on a level with the floor of the strange conveyance. It occurred to me that an unknown magnetic force was being emitted by the bright disk above our heads.

No sooner had I conceived this idea than the outward-curving arm began to rotate, swinging back upon the vehicle of which it formed a part; and the time-machine, as if suspended by invisible chains, swung with it, maintaining a vertical position beneath the moving disk. In a trice, it was gently deposited on the platform. Then, like the switching-off of a light, the glaring disk was covered again by its dark lid, and the properties of normal weight returned to my companions and to me.

CHAPTER IV

The Great Battle

The whole process of loading the sphere upon the platform had been accomplished with remarkable celerity and efficiency. As soon as it was completed the three drivers, in perfect concert, reined their animals about in a long semicircle, and started off on the route by which they had come. Moving at considerable speed, we rolled easily along the wide lane that had been opened through the quaint army. The chariots and foot-soldiers closed behind us as we went; and looking back, I saw them wheel about and reform, with the chariots in the van. Passing through the outmost ranks, we took the lead, and the whole army followed us in martial order across a low plain.

I was struck by the seeming discrepancy between the preter-human control of gravitation possessed by this curious people, and their somewhat primitive modes of warfare and conveyance. Judging them, as I did, by terrestrial standards, I could not reconcile these things; and the true explanation was too bizarre and fantastic for me to have imagined it beforehand.

We proceeded toward our unknown destination, with the dragons trotting at a leisurely pace that covered more ground than one would have expected. I began to observe the surrounding *milieu* and to take note of much that had escaped me heretofore.

The plain, I saw, was treeless, with low hummocks and intervals of winding mounds, and was wholly covered with a short, lichenous growth that formed a kind of yellow-green turf. One of the two suns was hanging at meridian; and the other was either just rising or setting, for it hovered close to a far-off horizon of glaucous hills. The sky was tinted with deep green, and I saw that this color was due to the combined light of the suns, one of which was azure blue and the other verging upon amber.

After we had gone on for several miles and had passed a row of intervening hummocks, I beheld a strange city in the near distance, with low mushroom domes and peristyles of massive pillars that gleamed like rosy marble in the sunlight amid plots of orange and indigo and violet vegetation.

This city proved to be our objective. It was thronged with people, among whom we passed on the dragon-drawn platform, borne like the trophies of a triumph. The buildings were roomy and well-spaced and were characterized by deep porticoes with swelling, bulbous columns. We learned subsequently that the material used in their construction was a sort of petrified wood, belonging to a genus of giant prehistoric trees, that had been quarried in enormous blocks.

After passing through many streets, we neared, in what was apparently the center of the town, a huge circular edifice. It consisted of a single dome upborne on rows of open, colossal pillars, with an entrance broad and high enough to admit with ease the vehicle on which the time-sphere was being carried. We rolled smoothly through the portals and along a level pavement beneath the vast dome.

The place was illumed by the horizontal rays of the sinking yellow sun, which fell on the ruddy floor in broad shafts between the massy pillars. I received an impression of immense empty space, of rosy-golden air and light. Then, in the center, as we went forward, I saw a sort of dais on which stood an extraordinary machine or contrivance of parti-colored metals, towering alone like an idol in some pagan fane.

The dais, like the building, was circular, and rose four or five feet above the main pavement. It was perhaps sixty feet in diameter, and there were several stairs, graduated to the steps of the pygmy people, that gave access to it. Around the dais, in semi-circles on the pavement, with ample space between, there stood many low tables, supported on carven cubes and with benches about them, all of the same material as the edifice itself. The tables were set with numerous black pots, deep and shallow and multiform, in which grew flowers of opulent orange and cassava colors, together with others of delicate white, of frail pink and silvery green.

These details I perceived hastily and confusedly as our conveyance moved on toward the central dais without endangering any of the tables. A sprinkling of people, who gave the impression of menials, were hurrying about the place, bringing new flower-pots or re-arranging certain of the ones that had already been disposed. Many of the elfin warriors, dismounting from their chariots, had followed us through the great portals.

Now the vehicle had drawn up beside the dais. By the operation of the black arm with its magnetic disk, the time-machine was lifted from the platform and deposited on the dais not far from the tall contrivance of multi-colored metals. Then, circling the dais, the vehicle withdrew with its dragon-team and vanished through the open entrance.

Whether the place was a temple or merely a public hall, I could not decide. It was like the phantasmagoria of some bewildering dream, and the mystery of it all was not solved when I noticed that hundreds of the faery people were seating themselves at the flower-laden tables and were bending toward the blossoms with a regular contraction and expansion of their voluted nostrils, as if they were inhaling delicious perfumes. To complicate my bewilderment still further, I could distinguish nothing on any of the tables in the form of food, nourishment or even drink, such as these heroic warriors might well be expected to require after an arduous battle.

Dismissing temporarily the baffling enigma, I turned my attention to the peculiar mechanism which occupied the dais together with the time-sphere. Here, too, I found myself at a loss, for I could not even surmise its nature and purpose. I had never seen anything like it among the most ingenious, pernicious and grotesque inventions of terrene mechanics.

The thing was quite gigantic, with a bristling, serried and fearsome array of highly polished rods and pistons. It had long, spiral bands and abrupt, angular flanges, behind which I made out the half-hidden outlines of a squat cylindrical body, mounted on at least seven or eight ponderous legs that terminated in huge pads like the feet of hippopotami.

Above the complicated mass there towered a sort of triple head, or superstructure of three globes, one above the other on a long metal neck. The heads were fitted with rows of eye-like facets, cold and bright as diamonds, and possessed numerous antennæ and queer, unnameable appendages, some of great length. The whole apparatus had the air of some mysterious living entity—a super-machine endowed with sentience and with intellect; and the three-tiered head with its chill eyes appeared to watch us malignly and inscrutably like a metal Argus.

The thing was a miracle of machinery; and it gleamed with hues of gold and steel, of copper and malachite, of silver and azurite and cinnabar. But more and more I was impressed by an evil and brooding intentness, an aura of the sinister and the inimical. The monstrosity was motionless—but intelligent. Then, as I continued my inspection, I saw a movement of the foremost legs, and became aware that the machine was advancing stiffly on its massive pads toward the time-vessel.

It paused at an interval of five or six feet, and put out a long, thin, supple, many-jointed tentacle from the mass of appendages that adorned its topmost head. With this tentacle, like a raised whip, it struck smartly several times at the curving wall of the sphere.

I could not help feeling somewhat alarmed as well as puzzled; for the action was unmistakably hostile. The blows of the tentacle were somehow like a challenge—the equivalent, so to speak, of an actual slap in the face. And the wary movement with which the machine stepped back and stood facing us, after delivering the whip-sharp blows, was curiously like the maneuver of a fighter, squaring himself for combat. The thing seemed almost to crouch on its elephantine metal legs and pads; and there was an air of covert menace in its poised array of mysterious, deadly-looking parts and appendages.

At this moment there occurred a singular interruption which, in all likelihood, was the means of averting our death and the destruction of the time-globe. A group of the elfin people, four in number, ascended the stairs of the dais and approached us, bearing among them a large vessel, like an open shallow urn or deep basin, which was filled to the brim with a sluggish, hueless liquid, suggesting immediately some sort of mineral oil. Behind this group there came a second, carrying another vessel full of the same oleaginous fluid.

The two delegations, moving forward in perfect unison, deposited their burdens at the same instant, with the same peculiar genuflections, setting one of the basins before the time-sphere and the other at the feet of the belligerent alien mechanism. Afterwards they retired discreetly as they had come. The whole performance had the air of a religious rite—a sacrificial offering, intended to appease doubtful or angry deities.

Not without inward amusement, I wondered what use the time-sphere was supposed to make of the oily liquid. It seemed probable that we and our conveyance were regarded as a single mechanism, active and intelligent, and perhaps similar in kind to the curious robot we had found occupying the dais.

The latter machine, however, was manifestly familiar with such offerings; for, without acknowledgment or ceremony, it proceeded to stoop over and dip certain of its metal proboscides in the oil. These organs, I perceived, were hollow at the ends, like the trunks of elephants; and I saw that the liquid in the basin was diminishing rapidly, as if it were being sucked up.

When the vessel was half empty, the monster withdrew its proboscides; and then, by the simultaneous use of these members, turning and coiling with great suppleness in different directions, it began to oil the innumerable joints and flanges of its intricate machinery. Several times it suspended this remarkable process, eyeing the time-sphere balefully as if watching for a hostile movement. The whole performance was inconceivably grotesque and ludicrous—and sinister.

The main floor of the huge pillared hall, I now saw, had filled with the pigmy warriors, who were seated about the flower-burdened tables. All of them seemed to be inhaling the odors of these flowers in a manner that resembled actual ingestion; and I conceived the idea that they were regaling themselves with a feast of perfumes and perhaps required no other nutriment.

Turning from this quaint spectacle, to which I had given only a cursory glance, I perceived that the metal monster had apparently finished the anointing of its complex machinery and was again posing itself in an attitude preparatory for battle. There was a stealthy turning of half-hidden wheels and cogs, a covert throbbing of well-oiled pistons, as the mechanism faced us; and certain of its tentacles were poised in air like lifted weapons.

What would have happened next, in the normal course of events, I am not altogether sure; but the probabilities are that we would have been blotted out of existence very promptly, efficiently and summarily. Again, by a singular intervention, the time-vessel was saved from the anger of its strange antagonist.

Without warning, there came a flash of brilliant blinding flame, as if a thunderbolt had issued from mid-air between the dais and the dome. There was a crashing, shivering noise that shook and penetrated our virtually sound-proof walls; and everything about us seemed to rock with the convulsions of a violent earthquake. The concussion hurled us back upon our dynamos; and I thought for an instant that the sphere would be flung from the dais. Recovering myself, I saw that a third machine had materialized on the dais, opposite the time-sphere and its opponent!

This machine differed as much from the hostile robot as the latter, in its turn, differed from the time-globe. It was a sort of immense polyhedron, with an arrangement of numberless facets alternately opaque and transparent. Through some of the facets, clearer than glass, I was horrified and astonished to behold the thronging faces of entities similar to, or perhaps identical with, the beings who had threatened us from the air-vessel in that far-off world where we had picked up our unusual passenger.

There could be only one explanation: we had been pursued through the cosmic continuum by these vengeful and pertinacious creatures, who had evidently employed a time-space vehicle of their own. They must have possessed unique instruments of incredible range and delicacy by which to detect and follow our course in the labyrinth of stellar gulfs and ages! Turning to our passenger, I saw by his troubled air and frantic gestures that he too had recognized the pursuers. Since I had not yet been able to repair our machinery, the position in which we now stood was a serious dilemma. We were without weapons of any kind, for it had not even occurred to me to bring along a revolver. I began to wish that I had fitted the time-machine with the arsenal of an American racketeer.

However, there was little time for either regret or apprehension. The course of events was now taking an unforeseen and incalculable turn. The formidable robot, diverted from its war-like designs upon us by the appearance of the newcomer, had immediately squared itself around to face the polyhedron, with its metal members raised in a flailing gesture of menace.

The occupants of the polyhedron, on their part, seemed to disregard the robot. Several of the opaque facets began to slide back in the manner of ports, and revealed the yawning mouths of tubular weapons, all of which were levelled at the time-sphere. It appeared that these people were intent only on destroying us, after having followed us with fantastical vindictiveness through many æons.

The robot, it would seem, construed the opening of the ports as an act inimical to itself. Or perhaps it did not wish to yield its legitimate prey, the time-sphere, to another and foreign mechanism. At any rate, it bristled forward, winnowing the air with all its tentacles and proboscides, and tramping heavily on the dais with its myriad pads, till it stood within grappling-distance of the polyhedron.

Coils of greyish vapor were beginning to issue from valves in its cylindrical body and pipe-like throat; and raising one of its hollow proboscides, it snorted forth a sudden jet of crimson flame—a briefly flaring tongue that struck an upper facet of the polyhedron, causing it to melt and collapse inward like so much solder.

The occupants of the alien time-machine were now slewing their tube-weapons around to face the robot. A violent fire leaped from one of the tubes, spreading like a fan, and severing cleanly an upraised tentacle of the monster.

At this, the angry mechanism seemed to go mad, and hurled itself at the polyhedron like some enormous octopus of metal. Jets of scarlet fire were issuing from several of its trunk-shaped organs, and great ruinous rents appeared in the facets of the polyhedron beneath their incessant playing.

Undismayed by this, the wielders of the tube-weapons concentrated their violet beams on the robot, inflicting terrific damage. The uppermost of the three globular heads was partly shot away, and metal filaments trailed from its broken rim like a shredded brain. The serried array of tossing members was torn and lopped like a flame-swept forest. Rods, cogs, pistons and other parts dripped on the dais in a molten rain. Two of the foremost legs crumpled in shapeless ruin—but still the monster fought on; and the polyhedron became a twisted wreck beneath the focussing of the red fires.

Soon several of the violet beams were extinguished, and their wielders had dissolved into vapor and ashes. But others were still in action; and one of them struck the central cylinder of the robot, after demolishing the outer machinery, and bored into it steadily like an acetylene torch. The beam must have penetrated a vital part, for suddenly there was a tremendous, all-engulfing flare, a cataclysmic explosion.

The immense dome appeared to totter on its trembling columns, and the dais shook like a stormy sea. Then, an instant later, there fell from a dark cloud of swelling steam, a rain of metal fragments, glancing along our crystalline sides and strewing the dais and the main floor for some distance around. The monster, in its explosion, had involved the alien time-vessel, which was wholly riven asunder; and nothing remained of our pursuers but a few blackened cinders.

Apart from this mutual and highly providential destruction of the inimical mechanisms, no serious damage had been done; for the main building, I now perceived for the first time, was deserted—the pygmies had abandoned their feast of odors and had retired discreetly, perhaps at the very onset of the battle. The time-sphere, though it had taken no part in the combat, was left by a singular and ironic fortuity in sole possession of the field.

I decided that fortune, being so favorably disposed toward us, might be tempted even further with impunity. So I opened the door of the vessel, and found that the atmosphere of the world outside was perfectly breathable, though laden with an odd mixture of metallic fumes that lingered from the late explosion, and fruity and luscious fragrances from the potted blossoms.

CHAPTER V

The World of Mohaun Los

Li Wong and the passenger and I emerged on the dais. The yellow sun had gone down, and the place swam with the blue, religious light of its ascendant binary. We were examining the littered ruins of the strange machines when a large delegation of elfin warriors re-entered and approached us. We could not divine their thoughts and emotions; but it seemed to me that their genuflections were even more expressive of profound reverence and gratitude than those with which the time-sphere had been hailed after the routing of the barbarian army. I received an almost telepathic impression that they were thanking us for a supposed act of deliverance at which we had been merely the onlookers.

In time, this impression was to be fully confirmed. The metal monster, it seemed, had come originally, like ourselves, from the outside universe, and had settled itself among this perfume-eating people. They had treated it with all due respect, had housed it in their public hall of assembly and had supplied it liberally with certain mineral lubricants which it required. The machine, in exchange, had deigned to instruct them regarding a few scientific and mechanical secrets such as that of degravitation by means of a reverse magnetic force; but the people, being somewhat non-inventive and non-mechanical by nature, had made little use of this robot-imparted knowledge.

The metal monster, in time, had become disagreeably exacting and tyrannical; and moreover, it had refused flatly to help the pigmies in their war with another people when need arose. Therefore they were glad to be rid of it; and they seemed to take it for granted that we had made away with the monster as well as with the invading time-machine. So far, I have not thought it worth while to disillusion them.

No less than seven terrestrial months have now gone by since the landing of the sphere. My companions and I are still sojourning among the perfume-eaters; and we have no reason to complain of our lot, and no cause to lament the worlds we have left so far behind us in time and space.

In the interim, we have learned many things, and are now able to hold converse with our hosts, having familiarized ourselves by slow degrees with the peculiar phonetics of their speech.

The name of the world, as well as I can render it in human spelling, is Mohaun Los. Being subject to the gravitational pull of two solar bodies, it follows a somewhat eccentric and prolonged annual orbit. Nevertheless, the climate is equable and salubrious, though marked by meteoric phenomena of an unearthly sort.

The people among whom we are dwelling call themselves the Psounas. They are a fine and estimable race, though bizarre from a human standpoint as any of the mythic tribes whose anatomy and customs were described by Herodotus. They are the ruling race of the planet, and are inconceivably more advanced in many ways than their rude weapons and methods of warfare would lead one to imagine. Astronomy and mathematics, in particular, have been developed by them to a degree that is far beyond the achievement of human savants.

Their food consists of nothing grosser than perfumes; and at first, it was not easy to convince them that we required a more material nourishment. However, once they had grasped the idea, they supplied us abundantly with the meaty foods in which Mohaun Los abounds; and they did not seem to be shocked or scandalized by our base appetites—even though fruits and other non-atomizable matters are eaten only by animals and the more aboriginal races of this world. The Psounas, indeed, have shown toward us at all times a spirit of urbane tolerance and *laissez faire*.

They are a peaceful race, and during their whole former history have had little need to acquire the martial arts. But the recent evolutionary development of a half-bestial tribe, the Gholpos, who have now learned to organize themselves and to make weapons, and have become quite aggressive as a consequence, has compelled the Psounas to take the field in self-defense.

The descent of the time-machine, falling upon their enemies during a crucial battle, was a most fortunate happening; for these ignorant savages, the Gholpos, regarded it as a manifestation of some divine or demoniac power in league with the Psounas, and were henceforward altogether broken and cowed.

The Psounas, it seems, were prone even from the first to a more naturalistic supposition regarding the character and origin of the time-sphere. Their long familiarity with the strange ultra-stellar robot may have helped to disabuse them of any belief in the supernaturalism of mere machinery. I have had no difficulty in explaining to them the mechanism of our vessel and the voyage we have made along the æons.

My efforts, however, to tell them something of my own world, of its peoples and customs, have so far met with polite incredulity or sheer incomprehension. Such a world, they say, is quite unheard-of; and if they were not so courteous, probably they would tell me that it could not even be imagined by any rational being.

Li Wong and I, as well as the Psounas, have learned to talk with the singular entity whom I rescued from the diabolic living flowers on a world midway between the earth and Mohaun Los. This person calls himself Tuoquan, and he is a most erudite savant. His ideas and discoveries, being somewhat at variance with the notions that prevail in his own world, had caused him to be regarded with suspicion and hatred by his fellows; and, as I surmised, he had been abandoned by them, after due process of law, to a cruel doom in the jungle.

The time-machine in which they had followed us to Mohaun Los was, he believed, the only vessel of the kind that had so far been invented by this people. Their zealous and fanatic devotion to legality and law-enforcement would have led them to pursue us beyond the boundaries of the universal continuum. Fortunately, there was small likelihood that they would ever dispatch another time-machine on our trail: for the lingering etheric vibrations that had enabled them to follow us, as dogs follow the scent of their quarry, would die out long before they could construct a duplicate of the unreturning polyhedron.

With the aid of the Psounas, who have supplied me with the necessary metallic elements, I have repaired the broken connection in the time-sphere. I have also made a miniature duplicate of the mechanism, in which I am planning to enclose this letter and send it backward through time, in the seemingly far-fetched and fantastic hope that it may somehow reach the earth and be received by you.

The astronomers of the Psounas have helped me to make the needful computations and adjustments which, indeed, would be utterly beyond my own skill or the mathematical knowledge of any human being. By combining in these calculations the chronometric records of the dials in the time-sphere with the ephemerides of Mohaun Los during the past seven months, and allowing for the pauses and changes of speed which we made during our journey, it has been possible to chart the incredibly complicated course which the mechanism must follow in time and space.

If the calculations are correct to the most infinitesimal degree, and the movement of the device is perfectly synchronized, the thing will stop at the very moment and in the very same place from which I left the earth in retrograde time. But of course it will be a miracle if it reaches the earth at all. The Psounas have pointed out to me a ninth-magnitude star which they think is the solar orb of the system in which I was born.

If the letter should ever reach you, I have no reason to think that you will believe my tale.

Nevertheless, I am going to ask you to publish it, even though the world in general will regard it as the fantasy of a madman or a practical joker. It pleases an obscure sense of irony in my mental makeup, to know that the truth will be heard by those among whom it must pass for a fantastic lie. Such an eventuation, perhaps, will be far from novel or unprecedented.

As I have said before, I am well enough contented with life in Mohaun Los. Even death, I am told, is a pleasant thing in this world, for when the Psounas wax old and weary, they repair to a hidden valley in which they are overcome by the lethal and voluptuous perfume of narcotic flowers.

However, it may be that the nostalgia of new ages and new planets will seize me anon, and I shall feel impelled to continue my journey among future cycles. Li Wong, it goes without saying, will accompany me in any such venture: though he is quite happily engaged at present in translating the Odes of Confucius and other Chinese classics for the benefit of the people of Mohaun Los. (This poetry, I might add, is meeting with a better reception than my tales regarding Occidental civilization.)

Tuoquan, who is teaching the Psounas to make the fearfully destructive weapons of his own world, may decide to go with us; for he is full of intellectual curiosities. Perhaps we shall follow the great circle of time, till the years and æons without number have returned upon themselves once more, and the past is made a sequel to the future!

Yours ever,
Domitian Malgraff.

THE END

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