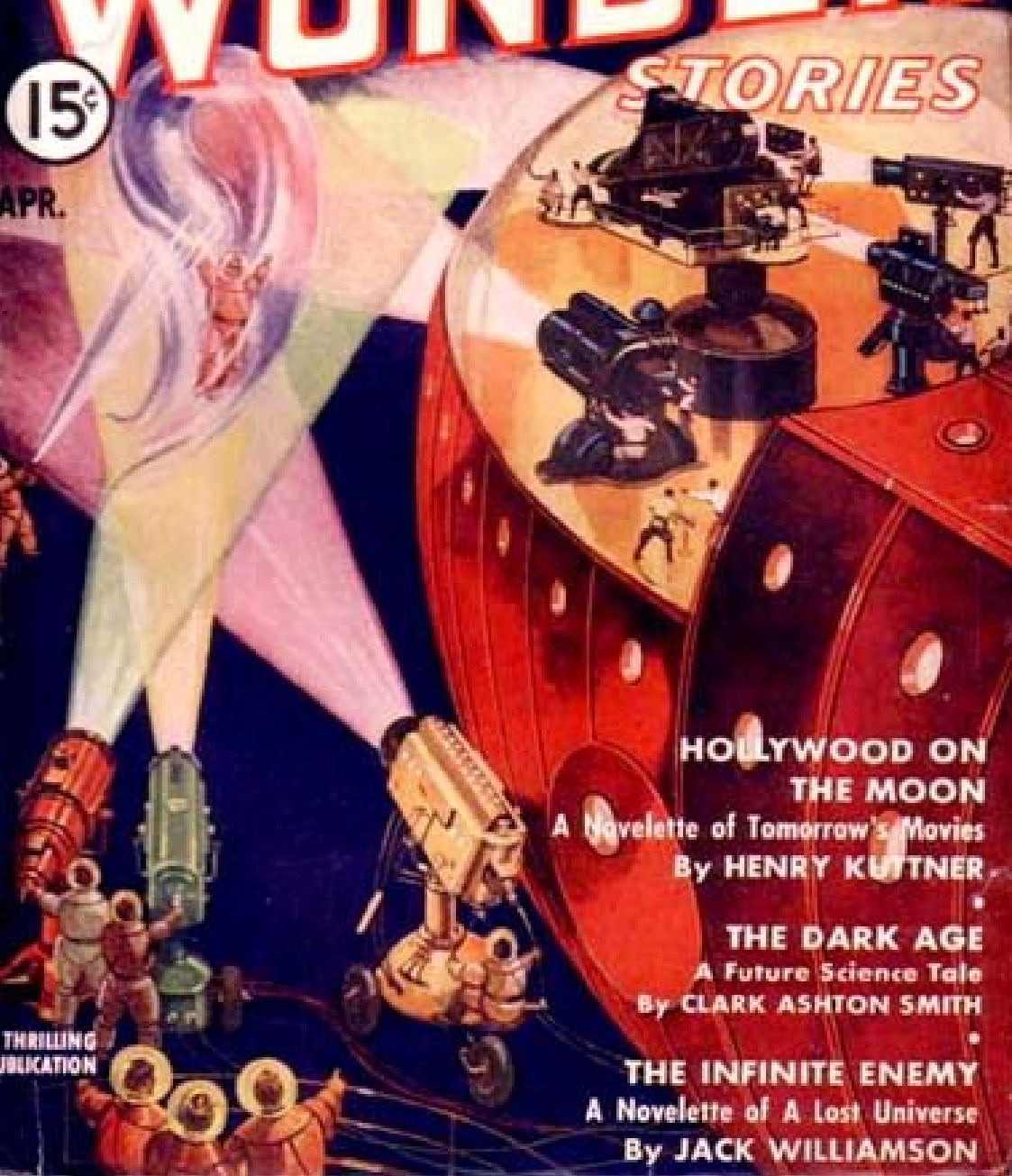


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Lords of 9016

John Russell Fearn

Author of "Brain of Venus," "The Man Who Stopped the Dust," etc.

Illustrations by H. W. Wesso.

First published *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, April 1938.

A Complete Novelette of Insect Conquest



What I saw jolted me

In the
Deep
Caves Far
Below the
Earth,
Rulers of a
Future Era
Pit Time-
Forces
Against
Mankind



into life again

CHAPTER I

Earthquake under America

I have no guarantee that this manuscript will ever reach you. Frankly, I am not altogether concerned about it, but if it does you will gain the first clear idea of what really happened in that troublous year of 1953.

I landed in the whole business by the sheerest accident. In those days I was a salesman, covering the country from New York to California, but one summer evening found me stranded, out of gas, five miles from the town of Dornford. There was nothing for me to do but to trudge.

I remember the scene clearly. Dornford was one of those straggling little places, a conglomeration of back to front shacks, one postoffice and filling station.

Even as I came over the brow of the hill leading into Dornford I felt sure there was something wrong. I cannot explain why, but there was a conviction of strangeness in the air, a strong persuasion of unexpected things. The place didn't look right somehow.

Have you ever seen a place desolated by an unexpected and ruthless foe? Seen it lying, strangely, indefinably quiet, in a western sun? If so, you can understand how I felt when I saw Dornford.

My puzzlement deepened as I advanced. It was not the first time I had seen this particular town by any means, but it was certainly the first time I had ever seen it utterly deserted. There was not a living thing moving. Here and there automobiles were standing idle; others had obviously collided with fences and buildings and overturned. On the main street the garage was open. I went across to it, but on looking inside beheld work unfinished. A tire lay on the floor, semi-inflated; in a far corner a car was slung in the air on ancient block and tackle—but of people there was no sign!

“Hey!” I yelled, cupping my hands. “Hello there! Everybody dead?”

But only my voice came back. Emerging again I stared out on the pasture fields. They were empty. A solitary hay-wagon, minus horse, had tipped forward with the animal's sudden removal.

I think I spent the remaining time until night in scouring what few open houses I could find, but there wasn't a trace of a living soul. It gave me the jitters, I must admit. Finally, I filled a can with gas, left payment on the bench, and returned to my car.

That, I say, is how the business started. I told police in the next village, Craytown, of what had occurred and they set off to investigate. Next morning the newspapers were full of the astounding occurrence. The mystery of Dornford had leaped into sudden and vivid prominence. The abrupt disappearance of some eight hundred people, together with animals, was undoubtedly front-page copy—and on arriving in New York two days later I found it was the main topic of conversation.

Had the Dornford mystery remained in its unsatisfactory condition it would probably have been relegated to the world's unexplained mysteries.

But it wasn't allowed to die, for not a week later the amazing news was flashed all over America that the people of Craytown had also utterly disappeared!

In consequence, law officials and scientists gathered in their legions in the deserted towns of Dornford and Craytown, but not a trace of anything did they find. One of the scientists was Moore Ladbrook, an old college chum of mine, so upon his return to New York I made it my business to find out his views. Not that I am, or ever was, very scientific, but being so closely connected with the Dornford riddle my curiosity was naturally aroused.

I found Ladbrook at his home. Still in his early thirties he had already earned an enviable position for himself in the sphere of science, but even so it had not caused him to lose touch with less interesting people like myself. I found him as cordial as ever.

"Thought you were traveling, Dick," he said casually, offering me his cigarette case.

"Not at the moment," I told him. "I'm off the road for another week yet—vacation, you know. Frankly, I want your opinion on Dornford and Craytown."

"I wish I could give you one," he answered slowly. "Our investigations revealed no sign of anything living in either village, nor for miles around. Not even a trace of a struggle or strange footprints. That those people melted into thin air is well nigh inconceivable. I have dared to toy around with the idea of visitors from another world—carnivorous visitors, perhaps, but in that theory I'm hampered by the absence of any space machine.

"No one ever saw a ship approach the Earth. The only solution is that the invaders, granting there are any, have solved the secret of invisibility. I'm not at all satisfied with the investigations myself; in two days' time I'm examining the matter again, with special instruments. Maybe you'd care to join me?"

"Count me in," I nodded promptly, and drew on my cigarette as he went on theorizing in his clipped, matter-of-fact voice.

That same night, just when I was returning from Ladbrook's to my uptown apartment, the earthquake came. It arrived, if I remember rightly, at a quarter after eleven, the most unexpected occurrence New York had ever witnessed.

I had been heading for a subway entrance when the disaster happened. The sidewalk seemed to rise up suddenly and hit me! I was hurled into the gutter with numbing force, twisted round.

I directed my gaze to a sudden amazing scene of toppling destruction.

New York rocked to its very depths. The taller buildings overbalanced and hurled their masonry with the force of shattering tons into the canyons of streets below. Roadways split in twain, swallowing up the yelling, stampeding people. Cars reeled and skidded sideward into suddenly smoking gulfs. Amidst a rending and tearing of twisted, tortured steel an elevated hurtled clean off its riven track into the chaos beneath, turned itself into a mad, flaming ribbon of screaming death.

Windows cracked, fire leaped from warping, crumbling façades; subways sloughed and gulped downward in whirling vortices of sulphuric smoke. Trains themselves were smothered in the maw of inwardly hurtling rock and earth.

Ships in the harbor, seized in a smashing, intruding tidal wave, splintered themselves to matchwood.

This ripple, this stupendous fault—as we then considered it—engulfed the entire continent, repatterned whole mountains, gave birth to new rivers and valleys, changed the entire topography of the United States in one overwhelming sweep. In twenty minutes of inconceivable convulsion America was reformed, recreated out of the shattering ear-splitting thunder of changing land.

I was caught up in the midst of a whirling mob of humanity, was punched and pounded helplessly before a battling, screaming flood. My ears were filled with the din of collapsing buildings, and subsiding earth; my eyes were blurred with clouds of dust and thickly rolling smoke.

Somehow, by an unknown mercy, I survived without undue mishap, found myself eventually in ruined, flaming Broadway, lending a hand in rescue work.

Throughout the long, hideous night I labored, carrying the dead and dying, moving wreckage, delving into smoky, scorching cavities, until at last a ragged dawn crept over the subsiding chaos and the survivors began to take stock of their infinitely changed and battered surroundings.

I need hardly record the fact that the almost total destruction of the American continent wrought worldwide havoc and repercussions, both elemental and financial. Everyone was alarmed, gravely concerned for his safety, so much so that the

scientists suddenly came into public demand. Their investigations on the mystery of Dornford and Craytown were shelved—but not by Moore Ladbrook.

A week after the disaster I managed to trace him again. He had sought refuge with other scientists in the half demolished research offices of the Science Institute.

When I did find him he was in a grimly determined mood.

“Fools—all of them!” he declared flatly, pacing up and down the dust-smothered laboratory. “The other scientists are out searching for the cause of the fault that’s ruined this continent. A fault, mind you! Good God, anybody with a grain of sense could see it was caused by some tremendous internal upheaval—the sudden removal of thousands of tons of solid matter; a repatterning of structure.”

“But what caused it?” I insisted.

“Something living, something breathing—down below. People perhaps. Beasts of some sort.” He came to a sudden halt, swung about on me. “In any case I’m going to find out while the others are fooling around with their earthquake equipment. You know perhaps that, two miles south of Dornford, there’s a hole—a veritable crater—two miles across and of unknown depth?”

“I’ve heard of it,” I nodded.

“Well, I’m going there—right now. Fortunately I’ve managed to secure a helicopter, have had it loaded with instruments and fitted with searchlights. I’m going down that hole, Dick! The others think I’m crazy. Perhaps they’re right, but I’m going just the same. Care to come?”

I looked dubious.

“It’s only a mile to the airport,” he went on. “Either I’m crazy, or else I’m scientist enough to realize that some new form of life is at work under our very feet. You don’t have to come—but I’d be glad to have you.”

“I’ll come,” I said, not because I’m a brave man but because the idea gripped me with sudden fascination. Ladbrook merely nodded in that cursory way of his, snatched up his hat, and we set off together through crumbled, riven streets to the airport.

Half an hour later saw us streaking westward in that powerful machine, Ladbrook the pilot. I noticed, with some doubts as to the future, that it was an entirely enclosed machine, hermetically sealed, air being supplied from some slightly hissing tanks in the rear.

“Never can tell what sort of poison gas is escaping out of that hell hole westward,” he explained curtly, when I drew his attention to the matter. “It’s emitting poisonous fumes same as all the rest of the volcanic craters. We’ll be okay. We’ve gas helmets as well if necessary.”

He was damnably cheerful in the face of what looked like certain death to me.

I didn't say anything. I began to think I was a darned fool for agreeing with the idea anyhow.

I turned my eyes to the speeding landscape a thousand feet below, took in the twisted ground, the changed rivers, the flooded areas, the disrupted and toppled towns. The earthquake had certainly been a thorough and devastating piece of work. Sometimes we passed over scientific units, complete with equipment.

Invariably they drew snorts of rage from my friend.

"Fools! They imagine they can find the cause of an earthquake that's countrywide! If they'd consider the idea of unknown beings they'd get somewhere perhaps."

"Beings that sort of arrived from nowhere and cleaned up the inner surface?" I suggested acidly.

"They didn't arrive from nowhere; that's illogical. They came from somewhere very definite. We'll be seeing for ourselves before long."

He relapsed into silence again and nearly an hour later we beheld the smoking streak on the horizon that denoted our goal. My nerves began to tighten; I felt oddly like a man suddenly summoned to the electric chair. Casting a quick glance at Ladbroke I beheld his face set and carved, his eyes gazing steadily at his destination.

His fingers gently eased the controls that sent the fast moving plane down toward the disturbance.

CHAPTER II

Menace Below

The actual area of the crater was rather indeterminable; the spewing sulphur clouds from its unimaginable depths rendered visibility feeble. Suddenly and completely the daylight left us and we went whirling into the midst of a yellow enigma, droplets of foul moisture clinging to the observation windows.

Ladbrook slowed the machine as we entered the area, brought the twin helicopter screws into commission and stopped our forward progress. With the slightest of jolts we began to drop slowly downward, engines throbbing with steady rhythm.

Ladbrook's brows knitted as he strove to see through the haze.

"Just a chance that all this discharge is from a riven upper strata," he said slowly. "That's what I'm counting on; below again may lie the very thing for which we're looking. Now hang on—we're going places."

He moved the controls again and our descent became speedier. I sat gripping my chair arms tenaciously, peering nervously into the murk. No trip through fog had ever been so nerve-racking. I was expecting solid ground below to rise up suddenly and hit us, pound us to wreckage. But no such thing happened.

Abruptly the murk cleared. We were left with absolute darkness—the velvet, sable darkness of a tomb.

Searchlights stabbed into the blackness, swirled automatically on their bearings to illumine a jetty emptiness, so wide, so expansive, that the very walls of the titanic shaft were invisible.

"Widens out as it goes down," Ladbrook muttered. "I was right about that volcanic stuff; it was only the upper strata cooling down after the gigantic land-slip. This part of the phenomenon was mechanically made, or I miss my mark."

"In so short a time?" I asked quickly.

"Not necessarily. This may have been going on for years, unknown, with unimaginable machinery. Then suddenly something happened—there was an earthquake. Hello! Things are changing!"

In that he was correct. Our searchlights had at last focused on something solid—smooth, shining escarpments of rock, streaked with various strata; monstrous holes resembling tunnel mouths; gangways, ledges, cliffs—an entire gamut of strange and inexplicable things, a veritable honeycomb tunneled in iron-hard material.

“Though we’re going down swiftly and have already dropped two miles, the external temperature remains the same as on the surface,” Ladbrook remarked. “That points to artificial cooling and ventilation. There’s something big behind this. In fact—”

He stopped suddenly, and I ceased to listen. With a sudden violent jolt the helicopter landed upon something of tremendous hardness. I was hurled out of my seat, cannoned into the control board. Black waves of unconsciousness engulfed me even as I heard Ladbrook’s shouting voice.

I think I was only unconscious a few moments. When I came to Ladbrook was standing over me, blood streaming from a cut on his forehead. Quickly he hauled me to my feet, shook me back to consciousness. His voice was grim as he spoke.

“Take a look at that,” he ordered curtly, and pointed through the half shattered observation window. Holding my bruised forehead painfully I obeyed—then started violently at what I beheld.

It would have been a sensational sight on the surface; two miles below it was incredible.

The helicopter, utterly wrecked by the concussion, was reposing on a long gallery of rock stretching into invisible black remoteness. Below, however, an immeasurable distance, was a shifting mass of white lights, an immense and incredible sea of dots. Steady gazing revealed that the lights were not actually moving; it was the vibrations of the air currents producing the effect. In short, there was a city down there, a city of unknown formation, perhaps four or even five miles down.

I turned, and noticed Ladbrook’s disheveled hair was blowing in the warm wind streaming through the smashed window. Warm wind? Down here? That confounded me more than ever.

“Come on,” he said suddenly, and took down revolvers and cartridge belts from wall hooks. “Strap one of these on. We can’t go back, so we’ve just got to go forward. Ready?”

I nodded and followed him through the opened airlock, trod warily on the slippery rock gallery on which I found myself. One miscalculation and I would have been hurled into that swirling enigma so far below. The very sight of it made me dizzy, but at least its reflected luminescence made our course faintly visible.

Ladbrook’s flashlight snapped into life as we turned off into a side gallery, filled with a wind strongly reminding me of the subway in pre-earthquake New York. It smelled strongly of chemicals and electric discharges. About us, all around us, was

the muffled thunder of buried machinery, conveying a suggestion of tremendous, unbelievable power.

The further we went the more complicated the tunnels became. One fact alone was obvious—they all led downward, and there were times when our progress was blocked by sheer pits descending into luminous, lambent depths below.

“Air shafts!” breathed Ladbrook, peering over as far as he dared. “Dick, I’m sure I’m right! Somehow—when, Lord knows—the earth has been tunneled out—just like a sponge. It’s a veritable honeycomb—”

He stopped, pivoted swiftly as a slight sound fell on our ears. It was a groan! A profoundly deep groan. Our eyes moved simultaneously to an adjoining cavern opening. Cautiously, hardly daring to think what we might find, we advanced, peered within, the flashlight casting its penetrating beam on a grim sight.

The cavern was stacked with dead human beings—or if not dead very close to it! Have you ever seen an abattoir’s storehouse stacked with carcasses? That was similar to what we saw. But imagine the horror that coursed through us at beholding men, women and children of our own race, nude and blood-streaked, suspended from a long, glittering bar by viciously curved hooks.

Some were hung by the wrists, others by the feet, the barbs driven mercilessly through their flesh. It was from one of these unhappy beings that the groan had come—from a naked, elderly man. He hung suspended by his hands, gray-haired head lolling on his skinny chest.

Instantly we jumped forward to him, gripped him tightly between us and made a tremendous effort to raise him from his ghastly crucifixion—but in that we were beaten. The hooks went up too far; we were not tall enough.

“What in God’s name has happened?” Ladbrook panted to him, forcing him to look up with tortured eyes. “What’s going on here?”

“Creatures—insects—” the poor devil answered thickly, face wet with agonized sweat. “Spiders—or something. Meat for them—”

“We’ve got to get them out of here,” I panted. “Our own people butchered, and hung like—mutton! Moore, we must—”

I stopped, the words struck from my lips. Silently, unheard in the intensity of the moment, the immense arched doorway of the cavern had filled with creatures, or beings—or whatever the blasted horrors were. I simply couldn’t speak. My eyes were fixed to them as they stood there plainly visible in the wavering light of Ladbrook’s unsteady flashlight.

“God!” he whispered in a strangled voice. “Good God!”

The faces of the things—there were six or eight of them—were extremely lengthy, narrow, and glistened like glazed chocolate. In the midst of this was a snoutish appendage, and on either side of it monstrous glaring eyes, compound eyes covered with a myriad, dully gleaming facets like those of a fly. The bodies, what we could see of them, were long, sloping downward to a point at the back, ending not a foot from the smooth cavern floor. The legs, covered in fine hair, terminated in viciously sharp clawlike appendages, the foremost ones almost resembling cruelly dangerous hands. Last of all came massive antennae, waving delicately in the warm, enervating breeze.

“Ants! Termites!” gasped Ladbroke’s voice from the gloom. “Why in hell didn’t I think of that before? Termites of vast proportions. Quick, man, we’ve got to move —”

His flash ceased to play on them as he jumped away into the shadows, but even as I dashed to follow him I realized how hopeless it was. In an instant I was overtaken by a pulpy yet unbelievably strong body, hurled to the floor, beheld glaring eyes above me glowing with strange lights. Then, to my surprise, all the life went out of me; I became completely passive, staring fixedly at a small instrument in the handlike appendage of my aggressor’s front paw.

A mechanical instrument, something like a futuristic paralyzing ray envisioned by surface scientists, in the hand of an ant? The thing was surely impossible.

Unhappily, it wasn’t impossible—far from it! Ladbroke and I, both unable to move or speak, became the witnesses of further unexpected incredible things on the part of our captors. We were removed from the cavern by an unknown process that caused us to float on the air, though my still active mind suspected a series of strong radio waves generated from a source unknown.

In this fashion, the termites behind us, we drifted down unearthly looking galleries, slid through softly lit caverns, dropped with the horrible sensations of a falling dream down what seemed infinite miles of shafting, until at last we came within visible range of that city we had first seen.

Still we drifted, coming ever nearer to that lambent haze, until quite suddenly it began to blur and distort like something seen through a curved mirror. Oddly, swiftly, it veered off into nowhere and was replaced by the gleaming interior of a tremendous hall, composed entirely of shining, crystalline metal.

The paralysis passed. Ladbroke and I found our faculties again, stood together watching. Behind us, now clearly visible in the strange pallor, loomed the termites, more hideous than ever. Before us, inexplicable and complex, were machines of

almost translucent texture reflecting the unknown shadowless light in a million varieties of bewildering but lovely color.

We waited—and wondered.

CHAPTER III

Riana—9016

At last, out of the haze of glory, there appeared another ant, similar in appearance to our captors save that he was slightly larger in size. He stood before us, glaring faceted eyes fixed upon us, his handlike tentacles reposing on a small, wheeled machine. Gently he moved a button; his thoughts came to us with a battering mental power, filled our brains immediately with his impression.

“You are only more fortunate than your fellows in escaping instant death because you, Ladbroke, happen to be the first scientist we have captured. Fortunately, the barrier of time and body makes no barrier to our communicating. With this machine your brain is rended plastic for my particular thought-vibrations. If you wish to reply, just speak; the concentration behind the words will be sufficient for me. I realize you are wondering about the strangeness of things?”

“Obviously you are ants—termites,” Ladbroke said.

“Naturally. Not ants of your time, however, but the rulers of the year ninety-sixteen, seven thousand or so years ahead of you—time enough for the busy creatures of your present day to have evolved into the significant might you see we have. In this age of nineteen fifty-three you see the beginning; in ninety-sixteen you have the pinnacle. There we are undisputed masters, lords of time, space and matter.

“Humans, petty and feeble, have almost stood still. We permit them to breed for only two reasons—one, because they sometimes have ideas that are useful to us, and the other because we need them as food, just as you breed cattle and kill them. Our evolution to this present immense size has made it necessary to change our early methods of eating the small things of life, common to this age, to taking the flesh and blood of warm-blooded living creatures. Human beings! That is why your humans on the surface disappeared. We stole them, to add to our waning supplies.

“We still have some of our own time with us, awaiting killing—but they are by no means enough. The beings above were brought here through the fourth dimension, through the very interstices of matter, which gave them free passage. In the same way you were merged into this city.”

“Then you have been here long?” Ladbroke asked slowly.

“Ten of your years; we arrived in nineteen forty-three—carefully, cautiously, so you would suspect nothing. Aided by invisibility screens we set to work with our machinery. In ten years, with our knowledge, we have hollowed out this world right

down to the central core of liquid nickel iron, supplying in the stead of the matter we destroyed an equipoise in weight by means of machines creating artificial gravitation.

"Recently one of these machines broke down and brought about the devastating havoc in your country. Otherwise you would not have been aware of our presence. Puzzled, perhaps—but nothing more. Your people would have continued to vanish and our slow conquest of this age would have gone on."

"If you are rulers of ninety-sixteen, why come back here?"

"For obvious reasons. Our own age has double its required amount of termite population; the creation machines have been very busy. We could kill half our number, of course, but being masters of Time we considered it better to come back to this age and hollow it out as we have our own, thereby establishing a second progressive insectile colony. Further, in our own age, there are not enough humans bred to satisfy all our numbers; here, the world is thick with them. They will make good fodder. That, my friends, is the explanation."

"And how do you come to be before your birth?" Ladbroke demanded. "That in itself defeats the law of Time."

"You will learn—if you live long enough, that is—that there are two states of Time; the one that is practical and the other that is abstract. In the latter condition it is possible to move in time just as you do in space. Actually, since time is a circle, we are not before our births but after our deaths. You understand?"

Ladbroke nodded vaguely.

"Not very well, I'm afraid. Am I to understand, then, that you intend to wipe out all the people on the surface of our world? Destroy humanity completely?"

"In due course—yes. And you two are not exceptions!"

With that the miniature paralyzers came into action again; once more the radio waves guided us helplessly through the profound and mysterious machine rooms of the termite city. At last we were permitted our faculties again within a grim looking apartment, hooks outjutting from its steel walls in a manner grimly reminiscent of the human storage cavern we had seen in the upper levels.

"Moore, they're not going to—" I began in horror, watching one of the insects pull down the hooks on a ratchet device.

"We'll try and make a dash for it," he answered quickly, glancing at the party of termites behind us. "We might make it. Come on—now!"

At that he jumped forward with me beside him, and with like speed the hideous insects closed in a grim circle, paralyzing beams flashing in the half light. I felt a sapping enervation at my nerves and muscles; my limbs turned to the consistency of

water. Weakly I collapsed to the floor. Then, just as suddenly, the effect vanished. Surprised, I turned my eyes upward, and what I saw jolted me completely into life again.

Standing in the cavern doorway was a girl, the merest slip of a girl, lightly attired in a flowing costume that shone like cloth of gold. Her white arms were bare; her corn-colored hair dropped in rippling waves to her rounded shoulders. I think she was rather beautiful; I had hardly time to notice just then. I only glanced over the details of her set face, then my gaze rested on her small hand. Within it, held with rock-like steadiness, was a small but efficiently designed instrument. Evidently it possessed considerable power; the termites were already backing away with all the manifestations of uneasiness.

“What the——” began Ladbrook in amazement, getting to his feet. “Say, Dick, what’s that girl up to? Where’d she come from?”

“How should I know? I don’t speak her language.”

As I stopped speaking she beckoned us toward her. When we had gained her side she indicated that we were to follow. Slowly she withdrew, then began to run with most amazing speed, tirelessly, unerringly, through the complex and bewildering tunnels and caverns of the termite hill. On the way we passed one particular cavern that deeply impressed me, filled with gigantic electric machinery that utterly baffled my understanding.

“The artificial gravitators, I should think,” Ladbrook puffed, as I drew his attention to them. “That’s what they’ll be. Wonder where this girl’s heading for?”

Under her twisting turns, side-stepping movements, journeys down unexpected galleries, pursuit finally dropped away. We came to a breathless halt at last within a vast and gloomy cavern. She looked at us, smiling faintly to reveal regular white teeth.

“You talk my language?” she asked very quickly, and though it was English it was truncated and abbreviated in the oddest way as though speed were the main object.

“We’re Americans——” Ladbrook began, and she interrupted him with a quick nod.

“I know—like the others in the storage rooms. I came from ninety-sixteen as fodder, along with many others. My name is Riana; I am the child of the human ruler of my age. I was captured by mistake before the termite exodus to this age; usually the high borns of the humans are left untouched. I have been here very long. Just now, when my termite guard fell asleep I managed to get his litholine gun from his belt—this.”

She paused, indicated the instrument in her hand. "This is very deadly," she continued. "Changes matter into energy. I dissolved my prison door with it. On my way to escaping I came across you. Being humans I saved you. Now I have work to do. No time to lose."

"What's your plan?" I asked quickly.

"I have a scheme whereby I can release my race in ninety-sixteen. As you know, perhaps, the termites subject us. If we could only be free of them we would be lords of the world again. In ninety-sixteen there are five thousand termites left behind to guard the humans. Suppose one of their number came from here, called on those reserves, and emptied the underworld? Leaving the humans free? We could then start again and all the termites would be trapped in this age."

"But while they've got time machines and understand time travel they could always get back to ninety-sixteen," Ladbrook objected.

"But they don't understand time travel," Riana answered almost impatiently. "My father is the inventor of time travel; only he knows the real secret behind it, and he retains it in spite of termite threats. They don't dare do much to him because he is useful to them with his knowledge. If the machines here are destroyed the termites can never get back."

"And the human beings of this age?" I asked doubtfully.

"Humans here outnumber the termites by nearly three to one—I know that. Once the termites are trapped here I will see to it that my father provides the humans of your surface with machinery and weapons sufficiently powerful to wipe out this insectile colony. We could never do it in our own time; we must be rid of the ants first."

Ladbrook nodded slowly.

"Sounds O.K.; I'm with you, anyhow. But how do you propose to snare the ants from your age to this one? What ant is going to give the order for reserves?"

"I am," the girl answered simply. Then, as we stared at her, she motioned us to follow once again.

It became more than obvious as we went with Riana through the weird turmoils of that colossal termite world that she was working on a plan long prearranged.

We continued with speed, and yet caution, through galleries that were unknown to us but obviously familiar to her, until at last we emerged in a cavern stacked with all manner of strange machinery, illumined by a pulsing red light not unlike neon. Here we paused and Riana turned to us in that quick little fashion she had.

"See that?" And she pointed to a machine not entirely unlike an electric chair;

electric bed would be a better simile. It was a long stretcher of crystalline substance with a queerly fashioned helmet at one end, from which snaked thick wires leading to generators and other quite unknown electrical equipment.

“Upon that lies my hopes,” she went on rapidly. “Termites, as you may know, even in this age, are amazingly resourceful. Imagine, then, their powers in ninety-sixteen. When the body of one of their numbers, usually a neuter or worker ant, gets out of action or badly hurt, but the brain unimpaired, his entire brain is changed instantly to another termite carcass from which the brain has already been removed. The body, of course, has not withered; it is preserved in solution for untold ages, but the brain that formerly tenanted it has probably suffered irreparable injury and been destroyed.

“So, the instant change of brain from one body to another one provides that ant with a new body with which to carry on working. The process is entirely by fourth-dimensional surgery. The brain is transferred without ever once coming into contact with anything material in transit—is simply rotated through hyper space to its new home. Every part of the operation is automatic, is accomplished by a movement of a master switch besides the stretcher table there. I happen to know; I’ve seen it at work thousands of times.”

“Well?” asked Ladbrook tensely.

“In the next cavern are some five hundred termite bodies waiting to be used for brain transference in case of damage to any of the workers. The place isn’t guarded; like everything else in this machine anthill it is automatically controlled. Besides, there is no need to guard it. I’m going to get one of those ant bodies and transfer my brain into it, afterward putting my own body in the same solution until I need it again.

“Thus, if in my own time I encounter other termites, which is more than likely, my real identity will not be known. My call for reinforcements will be apparently genuine. I know the termite telepathic language, of course—everything. Now do you see?”

“And us, if we come with you?” I asked quickly.

“You will come as my captives; leave me to arrange that.”

“You’re taking a terrific chance,” Ladbrook muttered. “How do you know that your brain will link up properly with that of a termite body?”

Riana smiled a little. “I don’t, but since the formation of an insect brain in ninety-sixteen is almost identical with a human’s, I see no reason to anticipate failure. In any case I’ve got to try. Will you help me?”

CHAPTER IV

Shattered World

Riana turned away quickly and we followed her into the adjoining cavern, removed with some difficulty the heavy body of a brainless neuter from an airtight cylinder of solution, dragged it along the floor to the specially designed trestles beside the complicated surgical bed.

Then Riana climbed onto the bed itself, lay down, and fitted the helmet into position on her head, afterward adjusting a complicated mechanism on the skull of the insect beside her. Once that was done her arm reached out and deflected the master switch of the amazing surgical instrument. From that instant onward we were the astonished observers of the most incredible surgery we had ever witnessed. Riana's young body relaxed gently under the anaesthetic automatically infused into her bloodstream. Her eyelids closed; her breathing stopped completely.

Still the clicking mechanism went on. Strange tubes began to glow oddly; ripples of violet light passed through inexplicable cylinders of transparent metal. Perhaps in all the operation lasted ten minutes, then the heavy, ugly, body of the neuter ant began to twitch and vibrate. The surgical machine stopped. With heavy movements the ant dropped from the trestles.

"It can't be—" Ladbrook began, staring dazedly—but a moment afterward we were both forced into realizing that the miracle had happened. The girl's brain had been transferred, through a fourth-dimensional medium, into the ant's carcass. Now, though unable to speak, she explained most of her wishes by actions.

Her own limp, apparently dead body was swept off the table and placed in position in the solution cylinder that formerly held the ant. The whole thing, to me anyhow, was decidedly nightmarish. I was sure I was dreaming the whole nightmare as I lowered that slim form carefully into the strange substance—and I began to realize for the first time, as I held that body in my arms, that it had a decided attraction for me, even though it did belong to a girl seven thousand years ahead of me!

From that moment onward we continued our harrowing journey through the galleries, Ladbrook and I pretty well exhausted by the constant strain of events and lack of food and rest—then our spirits began to rise somewhat at beholding ahead of us a fleet of some fifty cylindrical machines resting in an immense open space, guarded by two watchful neuters.

At that Riana—or rather the neuter carrying her brain—motioned us to go forward while she came behind, litholine gun held in her tentacle. Undoubtedly we looked captives all right, and evidently her communication with the guards satisfied them, too, for we were finally forced through the airlock of one of the gleaming, strangely designed machines and precipitated into the control room.

The airlock closed; Riana's insectile hands deflected the switches, and the view outside reeled away into a hazy mist of intervening Time.

Slowly we got to our feet. Riana the ant moved a machine forward, identical to the one the king termite had used. Under its influence her thoughts became appreciable to us.

"While this task is undertaken you will, as I explained before, remain apparently my prisoners. That is the only way in which I can explain away your presence. Leave the rest to me. In roughly thirty of your ordinary minutes the seven thousand year time gap will have passed. Say nothing—do nothing."

We nodded, and as she switched the machine off turned our attention to the windows, to behold nothing but the black opacity of intervening years.

I never quite found out how the time machines worked, but what bit I did gather from Riana at a later date seemed to show that they utilized the principle of time, like space, being an eternal circle, divided only by a hypothetical blank time—hyper space. Electrical frequencies, governing this space, produced a connecting link between a past and future moment, producing finally a continuous movement forward instead of the sporadic advancement of normal time. In essence, the whole principle boiled down to utilizing that split second of *no* time, the eternal riddle of early science.

So finally the thirty minute interval passed away. The switches on the board reversed; before us there began to merge the most unexpected sight—of a city of white stone, carved in sheer blatant angles against a brilliantly blue and sunlit sky. There were ordered streets, uniform squares, beauteous fountains and trees—for all the world resembling a tropical city of immense and far reaching power.

"It is deceptive," Riana remarked, via the machine once more. "It looks as if it is the ruling city of the world—but it isn't. Though populated by humans, ruled over by my father, it is the creatures below who are the real masters."

She moved to one side after that observation, moved more switches with her clawlike hands. In consequence the machine, evidently equipped for ordinary air flight as well, began to travel swiftly toward the lower walks of the stupendous city, and after that down a spiraling shaft that sank into a pearly lit profundity.

Finally we left the shaft and dropped swiftly through complete emptiness, until at length there gradually spread out of the oyster-gray infinity an immense insectile colony almost similar to that existing back in 1953.

Without pause our time flying machine sped over the outermost galleries and ramifications of the expanse, halting at last within a gigantic cavern, containing nothing save one immense machine which even my untrained mind readily recognized as an infinitely perfected radio-transmitting device, some kind of major alarm machine, designed no doubt to send its message to the furthest corners of the incredible 9016 ant world.

To this, once the time machine had come to rest, Riana went instantly, flicked the controlling buttons with quick tentacle hands. It came into instant life, its massive generators humming powerfully. No sound came from Riana's rigid, antish form, but nevertheless other noises reached our ears—the deep, heavy rumbling of machines, the scrapings of myriads of insectile feet, the bustle of a world disturbed.

Then Riana abruptly changed the position of one of the control switches and there came into our minds a sudden impression of her thoughts.

“This shortens the telepathic wave length to the radius of this transmission cavern so you can understand me. I have issued orders to all termites, told them all to leave for nineteen fifty-three at once, that upon their getting there depends the very safety of their race. I think they will obey; once they are gone it means the safety of this age—indeed the conquest of the termite menace entirely. Then—”

The communication stopped. We turned and followed the direction of Riana's compound eyes, and started at what we saw. A gigantic male ant was in the entranceway, slowly advancing. As he came closer his thoughts began to be picked up by the still functioning machine and reflected back to us.

“So, it is a trick?” The intonation of the thoughts was malevolent. “You are no neuter—I recognize the trend of your thoughts. You are a human—a surface human—like these two here.”

“I am a neuter, come to warn you of failure in nineteen fifty-three unless you all leave at once and reinforce our waning army,” Riana replied, but there was tremor in her thoughts.

“Fortunate indeed that I projected myself here four-dimensionally,” came the response. “You know me well enough—sub-ruler of this world until our master returns from his conquest of nineteen fifty-three. Your disguise does not fool me; the moment I heard your telepathic message I was dubious. You will die, and the humans too. As to the other termites, they will never leave this age. We will see

whether you will gain the mastery by such a childish subterfuge.”

“Get him!” snapped Ladbroke suddenly. “Quick, Dick! If we don’t stop him the whole scheme flops! Quickly—”

He jumped forward with admirable courage to attack the monster ant, but the insect was by far the quicker. He neatly vaulted to one side, dodged Ladbroke completely, then clutched Riana. With devastating force he hurled her insectile body to the cavern floor. There came the horrible sound of cracking limbs under the onslaught, of powerful mandibles snapping hideously. Still in the machine’s influence we could sense Riana’s agonized thoughts. She was mortally injured—dying, her limbs broken and crushed.

The thunderings in the anthill mounted. Preparations were going on, would go on if we could only keep this over-suspicious insect out of the way.

I lunged forward, fingered unaccustomed switches, and snapped the telephatic-radiator out of being. A violent pull and a series of wires came out of it; at least that would stop his orders from being radiated. This I accomplished in perhaps two seconds. Then, consumed with overwhelming fury, I swung about and came to immediate grips with that messy, pulpy body.

In a moment I realized the impossible thing I had taken on. I was but a baby in the clutch of the terrible insect. It bent and twisted me effortlessly, hurled me to the floor with stunning, numbing force. Ladbroke leaped upwards too, intent on assisting me—then suddenly to my alarm he turned aside and raced for the time machine. For an instant I dared to think he was turning tail—but no! He returned almost immediately, bearing in his hand Riana’s deadly litholine gun!

As I struggled even more weakly in the ant’s merciless clutches I saw him fiddling irritably with the gun’s peculiar mechanism—and suddenly it worked. A beam of green speared through the gloom. I felt the breath of an infinitely hot wind that scorched my face and singed my hair and eyebrows—but the pinioning grip fell away from me. Sickened and bruised I found myself lying beneath the dying remains of half the giant termite; he had been sawn in half as cleanly as if with a knife, the upper half containing his head radiated into instant energy.

“Quick!” Ladbroke shouted hoarsely, dragging me to my feet. “Before others come! Give me a hand with Riana!”

Between us we carried the limp body of the neuter into the time machine, slammed the door and shot the clamps over. Then, using the telepathic machine as I had seen Riana do it I switched over the controls.

“Riana, how do we control this thing?” I asked urgently. Her thoughts, weak

with pain from her shattered body, came back. While I supported her ugly, insectile head, held the machine near to her, Ladbroke followed out the orders she gave. Slowly and inevitably the year 9016 began to fade.

“I am dying,” came Riana’s thoughts again. “My—my brain is uninjured but this body is wrecked. You can save me only by getting my normal body back to me. You saw what I did; simply repeat the operation, but remember that my body goes on the trestles this time instead of the bed. If you are caught it means the end—of everything. Remember, you’ve got to succeed! For the sake of humanity you must!”

With that the unconsciousness of near-death claimed her. I lowered the body back to the floor, stood beside Ladbroke and aided him as well as I could to control the machine from the whispered instructions that had been given us.

We managed fairly well until the dials revealed we were around 1953. Then we experienced difficulties. We lost over four hours of valuable time trying to hit the right second that would give us entry into the right period, that would permit us to take up the thread in proper sequence without repeating anything already done.

“Better take a chance!” I said at last, worriedly. “We’ll never do it otherwise.”

Ladbroke nodded grimly and slammed the switches home, brought about an instant halt. It seemed in that moment that the entire Universe came to an end. Outside, there was a terrific explosion, a rending and thunderous concussion that set the time machine bounding up and down with the force of tremendous reverberation. It was minutes before the disturbance finally settled down and we dared to unlock the airlock and climb out. The instant we did so we stood astounded at the amazing sight that met our eyes.

Upon every hand were riven, shattered machines—monster engines of power that were racing themselves to destruction. But that was not all. Below lay the city, swarming with the hurrying forms of the termites, all of them struggling and heading directly toward the over-jammed time machine grounds. It was obvious that vast numbers had already arrived from 9016, probably in our four hour delay. And even as they ran we beheld vast mounds of earth falling inward, solid walls of rock caving in and collapsing with thunderous concussions.

“Good heavens, I get it!” Ladbroke panted hoarsely, wheeling about. “The time machine moved in space at the other end, when we went to the city and then to the termite colonies below it. That caused it to move the same distance here, of course. When we came back we merged *inside* one of the enormous gravitational machines used for supporting the surface! We destroyed it, burst it outward. The power has gone and thrown the force onto the ether machines. They can’t cope with it, hence

the surface is slowly collapsing. Don't you recognize this place again?"

I nodded quickly.

"Does this mean the whole world is crumbling?"

"Nothing else but—steadily and inevitably. Fortunately the beams from these things are diagonal; that means our part will hold a little while before it caves in. We've got to get to that operating room with Riana. It's straight ahead, then left, right and left, if I remember. Come on!"

So, carrying Riana, we began our desperate struggle, fighting against time and earth-collapse. Fortunately the ants were all in the lower galleries, heading for the time-grounds, obviously well aware of what had happened. In this we were lucky; had they come across our time machine we would have been in a ghastly predicament.

Several times on the trip we missed our way, had to retrace our path through the midst of occasionally falling lumps of the upper gallery—then ultimately we hit upon the operating room, dumped the dead body of the neuter ant on the electric bed and headed for the storage room.

In the space of a few moments, while the walls creaked and groaned and fissured about us, we withdrew Riana's own body from its glutinous preserving solution, dumped it on the adjoining trestles, strapped on the helmet and adjusted the mechanism to the head of the termite. Then the depression of the master-switch—

Never have I known such hellish moments. The earth was shaking madly, crumbling and roaring around us. As the four dimensional surgery began I tried to imagine what was happening on the surface. The world was ruined, humanity destroyed for the greater part—yet it was possible there would be survivors. More than possible—certain! The existence of humanity in future time was proof of that!

"In Heaven's name, how much longer?" Ladbrook groaned, and looked round in alarm at the sudden collapse of a portion of the heavy rock ceiling.

When he had swung back from gazing at it the girl was making slow motions at recovery. We didn't wait any longer. Whipping the mechanism from her head we snatched her up between us and pelted through the fast crumbling passages. Even as our time machine at last loomed in view there was seared into my brain an unforgettable sight—a vision of landscape and oceans of the upper world hurtling inward into the shattered earth.

Mud, sea water, rain, dust and rocks were tumbling through the air as we flung the airlock back, hurled Riana and ourselves within the time machine. Even as I jumped to the switches and closed them the complete mass of the surface subsided inward in a vast and overwhelming cataclysm.

Then peace. We were in future time, heading steadily toward 9016.

I have told my story. When we finally landed in 9016 we discovered that some of the time machines of 1953 had escaped the disaster and got back, but the numbers of termites to surface humans were comparatively few and Vanzax, Riana's patriarchal looking father, had taken the opportunity to reassert his powers and take possession of the entire world.

Reading over my history records I find that the Earth was utterly changed in that vast upheaval of 1953. For one thing, its mass was decreased by a fifth—all of the matter of the interior having, of course, been changed into energy by the termites. This, compensated by their artificial gravity controllers, was missing when they were destroyed. This fifth in difference is still visible in this world of 9016; the earth is considerably smaller, a fact I did not have time to notice on that other excursion.

Humans of 1953 did survive in places. Some three thousand remained, patterning their lives anew on a smaller world.

As to this age, the remaining termites have not been allowed to breed; all save neuters have been exterminated, and these sexless insects are entirely workers under the humans' commands, the underworld being used for the storage of scientific machines.

Ladbrook is a scientist still—and a very happy one, and I am his assistant. We are the only survivors of 1953 to be projected by sheer circumstance seven thousand years ahead of our time. This story I am sending to an era before the invasion came, way back into the remote ages between 1938 and 1940. Somewhere there the little automatic time machine I send may arrive. I hope so, so that you may know what is to come and prepare—if that is possible.

For myself I am happy—blissfully happy in this divine city. Besides, Riana is my wife now, and no man, of any age, could wish for one more loving, more clever, or more beautiful than she.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.
[The end of *Lords of 9016* by John Russell Fearn]