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Emperor of the If

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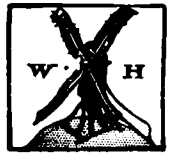

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TO

MY WIFE

WHOSE STAUNCHNESS IN EVERY DEPARTMENT
OF LIFE MADE THE PURSUIT OF
LITERATURE POSSIBLE FOR
THIS AUTHOR

EMPEROR OF THE IF

PART I

CHAPTER I

BLATHERWICK's friends had always told him that he should have been a professor ; he possessed, they said, at least one qualification—he looked the part.

No one, however, ever having been able to decide what special branch of abstruse learning might be considered suited to his alleged capabilities, the once popular remark lapsed with years into a kind of triumphant retort with which to close an inconclusive argument.

For he acquired a habit, did Blatherwick, as he grew up, of scowling fiercely from under those black bushy eyebrows of his, which made even the most censorious feel that directly personal epithets might, with advantage, be changed for vague insinuations, such as that of over-acting, of a more subtle and less openly offensive nature.

People were undoubtedly more than a trifle afraid of little Blatherwick—of what he might conceivably do if pushed too far.

And as he pattered along the crowded Kensington streets that cold morning in March it almost seemed

as if some misguided hero had committed the final foolishness—had pushed Blatherwick too far.

For he carried things, awkward, war-like, unaccustomed objects, which flogged his thin shanks revengefully as he strove, without success, to prevent them from battering the limbs of other swimmers in the pedestrian stream. And he was scowling.

Now Blatherwick had gone his own way for the last fifteen years almost unmolested. He was, therefore, the more annoyed that he had allowed himself to become involved in this business he was about. Should any of his friends meet him, his mere appearance would, he felt certain, convince them that he was unworthy his reputation as a Professor of Living—with a capital L—a reputation slowly built up and tenaciously retained. Also, he had an uneasy suspicion that there was more to follow.

Not, of course, that Blatherwick had ever been what is called "fast"—by no means. He had always, until that fatal Wednesday in March, been essentially a man of discretion.

To put it shortly, Blatherwick was quite inoffensive. It was in spite of his inoffensiveness, though also, curiously enough, somewhat because of that quality, that he was made an unwilling partner in the most amazing experiment.

It was, however, entirely because of his essential inoffensiveness that Blatherwick, broken, baffled, and

bewildered, at last conceived the wild idea of terminating that experiment, and thus came within an ace of steeping the whole created world for ever in a nightmare of fantastical formlessness.

Possibly one of the little man's outstanding characteristics was his perky walk, strongly reminiscent of the mode of progress affected by the common wagtail.

Blatherwick preferred walking. He had never in his life, again until that Wednesday of evil date, entered a car except under dire compulsion.

He was wont to say that his grandfather—or perhaps it was his great-grandfather—had owned the best horseflesh in "the county"—none being specifically mentioned—and nowadays, of course, horses were impossible owing to the macadamised roads; while motor-propelled vehicles were equally, "of course," anathema to all who *really* counted.

The wind cut him shrewedly as he bustled round the corner of Church Street and, leaving behind him the roar of detestable traffic between the staring shop windows, set himself to the ascent.

He walked faster and ever shot from side to side quick peering glances from under his professional thatch of eyebrow. He seemed like a man who looked for something in the face of each pedestrian he passed, something which he could not find—and he looked as if the lack made him angry.

As a matter of fact, that sharp probing was a mannerism which Blatherwick imagined became the

professor his friends told him he ought to have been. He but reflected as he walked what a perfectly beastly place Kensington could make of itself on a March day, and how lucky he'd been to escape detection so far. If he was angry it was because he considered that what he carried so awkwardly did not decently become a bowler hat and carefully-tailored blue coat ; and he was not at all sure that he had remembered the necessary cartridges, and did not propose to risk a chill while he searched.

Rather less than half-way up the long hill the stumpy figure turned sharply to the right and, after taking a score of odd jerky steps along the street, pattered up to a sober varnished door and jammed a gloved thumb on to a bell-push.

There was no immediate response, so the caller shrugged his coat tighter about him and frowned heavily at an errand-boy who showed a disposition to linger.

The lad, struck by something unusual, or at least unexpected, about that waiting figure, stopped dead, opening his mouth for a better view ; and the last few bars of a once popular song were saved yet another repetition.

Blatherwick shifted uneasily, striving to bring his body between the earnest gaze and the attraction. He plucked with his free hand at the woollen muffler about his oddly thin and stringy neck.

The boy dodged shamelessly to one side, and Blatherwick twisted yet more, so that he faced

squarely a brass plate, which winked back at him in the thin sunlight.

"Confound it," he muttered, and gave another stab at the ivory knob. Then, since there was obviously nothing else for a rather shy man to do, re-read the letters blackly engraved on that shining surface at the height of his eyes.

"A. CHILTON-GREYNE," he mumbled, half aloud, and, because he had seen them in that place nearly a thousand times already, he did not linger over the alphabet which, in clumps of three or scattered couples, followed that terse announcement.

At last Blatherwick risked a look over his shoulder, and knew immediately that he had made a mistake. His audience, swollen by a stout lady leading an Italian greyhound—both swathed like Arctic explorers—shuffled round in a quarter-circle as he moved, and feasted their incredibly curious eyes; they seemed to gloat.

In desperation, Blatherwick looked up and down the street. The door opened noiselessly at the exact moment that the strain became insupportable.

He scowled up at the girl and tried in vain to make of himself an imposing figure.

The errand-boy, balked of what seemed a promising entertainment, began again the chorus he had interrupted.

The stout lady passed on. Both gave a final look at the undersized figure as it passed into the shelter of the doorway.

"Quite an ordinary sort of man," the thought was in each mind. "Quite an ordinary inoffensive little man," always excepting the latent menace of those phenomenal eyebrows.

But both decided it was really a little surprising—almost odd.

"Perhaps he's going to the tropics," mused the well-clad female vaguely as she yanked at her lead. She was of opinion that "the tropics," wherever they might be, would constitute an ideal resort during this weather.

The shop lad was not strong on geography. "Bet it'll carry a mile." He uttered the thought of early optimism aloud as he forced his reluctant body into the teeth of a vicious squall, adding in a spirit of rigid criticism, "'E ought to get 'is hair cut."

The sober varnished door shut noiselessly.

* * * * *

"Mr. Greyne is in the laboratory, sir," murmured the girl as Blatherwick made a movement with his hand towards a row of hat pegs.

In moody silence he followed the trim back through the dining-room, and waved the girl to a halt on the edge of the thin strip of garden.

"Too cold," he muttered, and, still carrying his burden, hastened perkily in the direction of a gigantic grey puff-ball which bulked huge behind a straggling row of wind-nipped fir trees some eighty yards distant.

Very shortly, for the second time that morning, Blatherwick pressed an impersonal bell-push and stamped his icy feet upon the ground.

But the wind was no longer a torment in that house-enclosed ribbon of frozen vegetation, and the newcomer always felt an inexplicable pleasure in contemplating the swelling roundness of the odd-shaped building, by the base of which he appeared such an insignificant nonentity.

The inside, apart from the inevitable presence of his old friend with the numerous degrees, was not to him of such importance—merely a matter of jar-crammed shelves and unpleasant odours.

It was the exterior which attracted Blatherwick so strangely. The whole thing seemed so massive, so vastly impregnable, so obviously constructed in that odd puff-ball shape for a special reason.

Abruptly he realised that it had never occurred to him to ask why. . . .

One ungloved finger rasped upon the faintly rough surface. "Concrete," Blatherwick rather imagined, ". . . must be feet thick."

A section of the curving exterior swung inwards easily before he had finished his examination. Yet it gave the onlooker a fresh impression of ponderous durability.

The rounded back bent a trifle more and was engulfed beyond the low arching door.

It was dark within after the comparative light of early spring, and he knew there was a second heavy

door of steel set out of the direct line of entrance, so gave his attention to negotiating this, not worrying to address more than a brusque greeting to a tall shadow near by.

With a tiny sigh of relief, Blatherwick dropped what he had brought into a huge armchair and felt considerably eased in mind thereby.

He turned about then, expecting to see Greyne in his accustomed seat at the low solid table set against the bare wall.

Somewhat to the visitor's surprise, he discovered the other still busy about a complicated system of bars with which the inner door was liberally besprinkled.

The little man, watching the capable fingers as they moved here and there among the metal knobs, felt uneasy.

He drew down his eyebrows till they appeared to form a complete screen for his personality, through which perplexed eyes peered warily.

It was Blatherwick's manner of appearing more than ordinarily discreet, though often enough he hid indecision, and once at least fear, behind that impenetrable veil.

" What *are* you doing ? " he ventured, after a few moments.

" Locking the door, John," returned Greyne, as if humouring an intelligent child.

The other retired further behind his defences. Everything was of a piece . . . this sudden mania

for barring usually open doors coming on top of the over-night message.

Blatherwick looked sideways at the armchair. Possibly it was this east wind. . . . He waited.

" Well, my son," cried Greyne heartily as the last bolt clanged into the socket, and he swung about, " I see you've brought what I told you to." He smiled down from his superior height at the plump face with its network of reddish veins about the cheek bones.

" My dear Greyne," snapped his friend petulantly, " of course I have. If you had said you wanted a—a peacock, I should have attempted to get one. A gentleman should never be put out, whatever eccentric demands his friends may make of him."

The tall man smiled once more, and when he smiled his commanding nose seemed less beak-like and his whole appearance less despotic.

It is worth a few lines, that nose. It was a lovely thing, hawk-like and curved and large—distinctly large.

The sort of nose which its owner declares, proudly, to be a Family Possession, but which candid friends, when displeased, classify as Jewish.

Under the inducement of Greyne's smile Blatherwick came a little way out of his fortress.

" I wish you'd sit down," he complained. " Talking to you makes my neck ache. Nothing over five foot ten should be allowed, and I've had a trying morning."

"I should never ask you for a peacock, John," Greyne commenced mildly as he seated himself obediently.

"Well, what you want with a sporting rifle *I* don't know. I may tell you it's lucky my poor brother bought it when he meant to go on that shooting trip. It isn't at all the sort of thing I usually keep about me. I always say it was excitement that killed him . . . at his age. I could only find fifteen cartridges." He groped in his pocket, and was relieved to discover that he had not forgotten them.

"We may never want it, after all."

Blatherwick raised his eyebrows. "I wish to goodness you'd explain. . . ."

Greyne made a wide gesture with his hand, a vague movement, which might have meant anything —or nothing.

The smaller man flared up. "For thirty-one years," he cried in his high-pitched voice, "I've tried to break you of that stupid habit. Why can't you *talk*? You seem to think sometimes every one's deaf and dumb, and you've reduced the alphabet to three simple movements for beginners."

The hand made another of those expressively meaningless sweeps, and checked.

"Sorry," he apologised. "It's a habit, I suppose. There's a tidy bit of explaining to do before we start."

"Start, eh?" Blatherwick thought to himself. He was not appeased.

"*And* a sun helmet," he continued. "The man thought I was mad. A sun helmet in this weather—and every one staring in the streets."

"You could have wrapped it up."

"A solar topee is not at all the sort of thing that lends itself to wrapping up. He tried, but the string slipped before I was out of the lift." At the memory of his woes Blatherwick withdrew again behind his eyebrows and seemed to brood.

His eyes roamed secretly about the large room, which took up the entire interior of the laboratory. With a pang of incredulous exasperation he noted a pith helmet similar to his own hanging on a nail driven into a wooden shelf.

So the fellow actually imagined that he, Blatherwick, was going to wear the monstrosity he had brought along with him!

He had thought it was for Greyne. . . . Of course, it was absurd. . . .

Blatherwick remembered with distinct pleasure that he had a luncheon engagement at the Carlton . . . roast chicken and mushrooms.

His face brightened and, avoiding the packed rows of wide-mouthed jars on the many shelves, came momentarily to rest on what was very obviously the case of a typewriter standing in front of his friend.

He saw that one or two thickish electric cables ran from something presumably beneath it to a shallow bowl of some blackish material, which

reflected dully the light from an unglassed window cut sheer through the bulging wall.

"Vulcanite," he decided, mentally comparing the thing with a black soup dish. He noted again what he had long taken for granted—the extreme thickness of the room walls. At his companion's invitation he lowered himself into a chair, with due regard for the nice set of his coat tails.

From his comfortable seat Blatherwick had a clear view along a narrow passage which bordered the garden to where an occasional flash of passing vehicles indicated a main street thirty yards or so down the hill.

The outside of the puff-ball, as Blatherwick termed it to himself, formed a portion of the wall of the passage way, the floor being raised some five feet about the pavement.

He liked the little sense of detachment from worldly affairs which his position gave.

It was very quiet in the room. It was too quiet. Blatherwick spoke almost at random, but now his precise voice was perfectly friendly.

"You know, Greyne," he said, "my poor brother always declared you looked like a naval officer, and acted like a naval officer in emergency, but had the mind of a mystic. What are you thinking of now?"

Blatherwick's friend began the third of his vague sweeping gestures and stopped himself.

"It is an economical sort of shape," he said.

"Ah!" replied the other, and shifted in his chair crossly.

"Too thick," he added, and his glance came back to the embrasure, and returned once more to his survey of the narrow strip of street.

He disliked Greyne's trick of following a person's thoughts and referring back as it were; it made conversation so difficult.

"Too thick," he repeated. "What is it all about, any way? I've got to go by half-past twelve at latest."

"Have you ever realised the monstrous power of thought?" boomed Greyne abruptly.

This time his listener turned to confront him squarely. He wished the man wouldn't boom like that, and he wished his friend's nose didn't look so —yes—threatening—two signs that Greyne was in earnest.

"Coué, and so forth," he replied vaguely. "Are you going to do a trick with a couple of swinging sun helmets and a rifle, after the nature of Chevreul's pendulum?"

The little man spoke flippantly and contrary to his usual pedantic manner, because he was greatly moved.

He was profoundly persuaded that Greyne was about to embark on some fantastic, if not desperate, experiment.

More, he felt convinced that the friendship of over thirty years was to be employed as a lever to

ensure his own participation—that helmet for instance. . . .

Blatherwick remembered further details. The vagueness of the telephone message he had received just as he was going to bed—that now seemed deliberate. That unprecedented bolting of the inner door, and no doubt the outer one as well. Above all . . . the rifle.

He flicked a glance at the weapon where it leaned beside him against the arm of the chair.

It was a small calibre affair—·256, he believed—and he remembered how his brother had rejoiced over it. It was supposed to throw its long, slim nickel-jacketed bullet some prodigious number of feet in a second.

He wondered how one loaded it ; not at the muzzle, apparently.

Surely Greyne was not quite so stupid as to imagine his friend was going to fire it—at sparrows, or something of that sort ?

Under cover of his jet-black penthouse of eyebrow, Blatherwick managed a look at his wrist watch. Half-past eleven . . . perhaps an omelette after the chicken. His thoughts began to stray determinedly.

" Where's ' Boy ' ? " he asked, hoping for a respite. " Fine sort of uncle you make. I suppose you give him one of those confounded jars up there each birthday. That reminds me, I've got a model steam engine at home for the young scoundrel."

His voice was distinctly more cheerful. " I'll show him how to run it next week."

" Mary got back from India three days ago," replied the other absently, " and she's carried him off into Sussex somewhere . . . a farmhouse, I believe. I miss him, I must say."

Blatherwick knew, privately, that his friend idolised the sunny-haired youngster. In that direction, it had always seemed to him, lay Greyne's only emotional outlet.

" Your sister ought to be here," he grumbled. " She'd look after you, stop all this . . ."

" Oh, well, do not let us delay ! " he added impatiently, as the other seemed to be plunged into some secret well of thought.

The tall, thin figure opposite stirred and sat up. One well-shaped hand was passed thoughtfully over the close-cropped hair.

" I'll be as quick as I can, John, and will do my best to be clear." Again those ominous signs of rising excitement.

Blatherwick prepared himself to listen. His rather podgy fingers played with a button of the coat which he still wore ; it was usually chilly in that concrete building.

He gave a look to the enormous window space, and felt a little reassured. But he most fervently wished Greyne's nose did not give him such a threatening air. And how his eyes shone ! . . .

CHAPTER II

"WHEN I said," Greyne commenced, "that this building was of an economical shape, I meant economical from the point of view of an engineer.

"It is a design admirably calculated to withstand the most excessive pressure."

"I did not understand," interjected Blatherwick acidly, "that you contemplated a powder factory."

"I meant external pressure. Then, again, it would make a splendid landmark."

"Only if the houses were pulled down," objected his listener.

"Exactly," agreed the other gravely, looking at him significantly, and continued. "I do not think that during the three years since this place was completed I have been half a dozen times outside it, apart from occasions for needful exercise, meals, and sleep. Nor, I suppose, have you, John, been as many times a visitor."

Blatherwick withdrew his somewhat absent gaze from the typewriter cover, on which the name "Underwood" was picked out in faded gold lettering on a rusty black varnish.

"That's so," he nodded. "I have wondered

. . . we have all wondered . . . you had early established a brilliant record for research work . . ."

" I have been busy, stupendously busy. I doubt if any one has ever crowded so much mental endeavour into thirty-six months before. I have been driven . . ."

Greyne's thin mouth compressed itself beneath the beak-like nose into a lipless line. Blatherwick gave him a sharp look, and decided that he was extraordinarily well in spite of it. The man's eyes, deep sunk in pit-like sockets, glittered with vitality.

" Before I get on too far," resumed the booming voice, " I should like you to take a look at those specimens." He waved his competent-looking hand towards the crowded shelves.

With extreme reluctance, Blatherwick allowed his eyes to follow the movement. He peeped cautiously from under his extravagant eyebrows. He did not like the things ; they reminded him too strongly of those parts of the human structure which the surgeon is apt to say " must be immediately removed."

Very thankfully Blatherwick returned to an earnest contemplation of the letter " U."

" Alive ? " His long hair shook as he jerked his head to stare at the unemotional face so near.

" All alive," nodded Greyne. " I was telling you. . . . At least," he amended, " if to perform accurately and efficiently each its individual function

after a separation of months from the parent body can be rightly called 'alive.'

"But it is a commonplace," he continued, and the barely-furnished room rang to the timbre of his voice.

"Any doctor will tell you that the heart can be induced to beat indefinitely long after the vital essence of conscious life has departed from the organism to which it belongs.

"Any first year student knows that."

Blatherwick studied the letter "N" intently. He did not like this conversation.

"I have gone farther," went on Greyne, "much farther. Over a year ago I was able to secure appropriate reactions in the medulla oblongata—long continued and carefully observed reactions.

"In that china basin there . . . the long shallow one like a carving dish, with the depression at one end. . . . Taken away, mark you, more than twelve months now and still functioning."

Blatherwick endeavoured to concentrate on the letter "D"; part of it had been worn away, so that with a little imagination it might be taken for a "P" . . . "UNPERWOOD." He was able to persuade himself that he had not heard anything.

"But I have not stopped there," boomed the voice, cutting in on the pretence.

"No, I did not stop there." He boomed himself into silence and mused for a few moments.

" Have you ever realised the monstrous power of thought ? " Greyne broke out, with sudden reversion to a previous question, and, what seemed to his hearer, a more fastidious subject.

" Coué," answered Blatherwick, as he had answered once before. " Very helpful under certain conditions. And Christian science . . ."

" Coué did no more than touch the fringe of the subject," replied the other. " I tell you, John, he barely touched the extreme fringe. Nor the Christian Scientists ; they have perhaps done better—some people might say so. But though they limit the extent, they at least dimly realise the creative power of thought."

The speaker made a sweeping gesture with his arm and crashed his fist on to the table.

" The *creative* power of thought," he emphasised. " There lies the secret, Blatherwick, for in that lies the key to an extraordinary enigma. Why limit it to healing ? Why limit it at all ? "

He stared at the concrete wall as if thereon he saw inexplicable things as on a lighted screen.

The smaller man shook his head. Frankly, he had never thought about the matter. Well, why limit it ? He was anxious to hear. Anything to avoid an anatomical lecture.

" Can you explain why hypnotism is able to produce in the subject those reactions which the practitioner desires ? " boomed the great voice again. " Reactions which may be absolutely foreign to the

patient's whole nature as exemplified by the habits of a lifetime ?

" Can it be due to anything save the creative power of thought ?

" Again, to what, John, do you ascribe the undoubted miracles of faith healing ; those authenticated cures concerning which the lay mind finds itself unable to form a balanced opinion ?

" I say it is due to the creative power of thought, and I could multiply such instances a thousandfold."

" What had all this to do with the need for rifles ? " wondered the listener. But he did not interrupt.

" I tell you," Greyne burst out with extraordinary violence, " I tell you that the Universe, from star to star, is packed with Power, is stiff with it. Ineluctable, unavoidable Force . . . all round us, penetrating us. . . ." He gesticulated largely.

" It is the instrument which is at fault ! " he cried. " The brain. . . . Sometimes you get a fine transmitting instrument—and then you have a great creative artist—a renowned pioneer in medicine, such as Pasteur—a magnificent artist in colours or material—a deathless poet—what you will.

" But the limitless force at disposal is immeasurably grander than any manifestation of it which we have hereto seen.

" It is there as the waves of sound were there which, until the invention of the wireless receiver, could not be utilised.

"It is there as the waves of light were always there, though to one born blind the night is lifelong.

"I say to you, John, that creative force invisible, in waves and oceans, is surging through every particle of this universe, waiting but to be harnessed to our will. Only is lacking a worthy receiver, a brain, which shall show forth to the world the unparalleled energy of the imperceptible."

Greyne sprang from his chair and began to stride up and down the room, ten paces this way and ten that. He seemed as one who had opened the gates upon a new kingdom—yet somehow the watcher felt that the gates were but ajar.

He came to a halt by the armchair and stared down on his friend.

"The Force presses heavily about us, Blatherwick," he said sombrely. "The time is ripe and overripe that it should be harnessed. Men cry aloud for a new Heaven and a new Earth . . . and, behold! the means of creation trembles in each least leaf upon the bough."

For some few moments Blatherwick did not look up at that still form beside him. He felt curiously stirred by his companion's enthusiasm.

Greyne was speaking, peering out into the passage with unseeing eyes.

"Napoleon," he was saying, "wished to be an emperor, and he thought himself into an empire.

"We are not what we are—we become what we

think ourselves to be. The world—life itself—gives to us but what we think that it shall give.

"There are those who say that we are, only because some one dreams that we are.

"They say that when the great Dreamer wakes the earth shall be rolled up like a scroll and all our petty strivings be as nought.

"I do not know that they are wrong.

"Who shall set a boundary to the Power of Thought?"

* * * * *

Blatherwick was more than ever assured that he stood upon the threshold of some unprecedented enterprise.

He felt desperately disinclined. Unfortunately for his peace, he remembered that story about Greyne in 1904—about him and the Austrian professor who did not wish to try his own cure for old age. The fellow could be appallingly obstinate.

He moved abruptly, thrusting forth one stumpy finger so that he touched the typewriter cover on the table.

"It is getting late," said he in his precise manner. "I suppose that this has something to do with what you have been saying?"

The other did not stir; he still peered out into the world.

"It's getting late," Blatherwick suggested again. And even as he spoke he cursed himself for hurrying forward the events he dimly foreknew were marching

to meet him. A compulsion not his own was upon him.

At length Greyne dropped his gaze to the table and spoke in a voice unexpectedly indicative of doubt and indecision. His great nose seemed very hawk-like. "I have said," he began, "that it is the instrument which is at fault. I have told you—and I believe, that given the perfect transmitter, one might call upon the unavoidable Force which packs about us to the working of new miracles.

"I believe because I know. . . . What I took long and long ago by Faith I have shown forth at last in deeds. And yet . . . and yet . . ." He hesitated.

"I halt upon a landing, peering through a narrow window—and the watch tower is a weary climb above.

"I halt and know not if I dare to climb."

As he spoke he took one long stride and lifted up the cover.

He lifted it slowly—carefully.

It was as if a priest of old unveiled some sacred relic which should, by reason of its holy power, shake the discovered world.

But this man was a prophet of a new philosophy, and he dealt not with material emblems alone, but with the awful power of fluid invisibility.

The onlooker's first impression was of vague disappointment.

"A skull!" he exclaimed. "Isn't that a trifle

theatrical, Greyne ?" And by his words Blatherwick showed that he had been removed far beyond his usual attitude of complacent worldliness.

"That does not seem worthy," he continued, "of the vision which you undoubtedly have seen."

For a fleeting instant Greyne appeared to admit the criticism.

"And yet," he defended, "if it is not worthy, it is at the least a forecast of what yet may be. It is the almost perfect instrument presented in its rightful setting."

Unspeaking, Blatherwick regarded the thing of bleached grey bone, which appeared to stare back at him through its empty sockets.

His eyes were caught and held by the recurrent glimmer of light upon a transparent membrane which stretched across nearly the entire top of the skull.

This membrane apparently took the place of an oval section of bone which had been skilfully removed, and it seemed as if a pulse animated it so that it stirred with life.

At his friend's urgent invitation he rose and stooped above the table, looking down through the transparent window into the interior.

He saw that at certain points there was a glitter of what might have been polished metal.

At one spot there was an indication of translucent material which Blatherwick took for silica, or something similar.

But for the most part the cavity was filled with something resembling an unpeeled walnut—a slightly grey walnut—and one larger than any he had imagined possible.

He perceived that the whole mechanism was delicately adjusted, and gave plain evidence of extraordinarily dexterous workmanship.

" The almost ideal brain," murmured the man at his side. " As a matter of fact, it belonged once to a little greengrocer in the Tottenham Court Road. He died from worrying over debts, and I bought his corpse from the hospital, and I have had this brain six months.

" It has been improved.

" Certain lobes, by inoculation with a culture in one of those bottles up there, have been expanded —made to grow new tissue, if you understand me.

" The whole weighs fifteen ounces more than the normal, and none of it is waste matter."

Blatherwick sat down abruptly. He was fascinated by the steady pulse which beat upon the membrane. He felt hypnotised by it—its movement seemed as regular as the rise and fall of a woman's breast, yet somehow eternal . . . deathless in a pavilion of death.

He hazarded a question, yet was unable to turn his head from the table.

" Yes," answered Greyne, low-voiced, " it functions. It is most certainly alive."

Again he began to pace up and down the room, and his voice boomed about Blatherwick's head.

" I tell you it is alive," he declared ; " it works with a clarity never possible when in the body.

" It is removed from all danger of breakdown ; of lesions due to illness or to violence.

" It is calm with a calmness not of this world—dispassionate with an awful serenity."

Greyne swung about at the end of the room and bore down upon his friend.

" Look here ! " he cried, stabbing a finger at the dish in which the skull rested, borne on four short quartz supports.

" It can never wear out. In there is enough nourishment and preservative to outlast a world. There is practically no loss from evaporation. But what need to last for ever when it lives an age in the tick of a clock ? "

A faintly acid smell was noticeable about the dish —sour.

Blatherwick looked at the vulcanite bowl close by, which he had noted when he first came in. His eyes followed the attached cables which were led into the skull at the base on the far side.

" And yet," resumed Greyne, reading his thought, " my supreme achievement is that at which you are looking now. It looks simple. It is simple ; it possesses the simplicity of all startling discoveries.

" It stands to the remainder much as the loud-speaker or receiver in a wireless set stands to the

concert it re-echoes at a distance, perhaps, of half a thousand miles, but that one there is a receiver with a double purpose. That apparatus translates thought waves into different symbols, making them live again in terms of flesh and blood, of wood and iron and stone.

"Without it the remainder would be of little practical value."

The strident clamour of a church clock rushed into the room like a message from reality.

Blatherwick looked impatiently at his watch. Half-past twelve. Possibly, if he took a cab . . .

Five minutes more would surely suffice to complete the description.

He decided with a wrench that he could allow those minutes—if he were to break the habits of a lifetime.

He would take a taxi. Yes, he'd do that—this once.

Blatherwick was violently certain that at the end of that time he would leave. He felt he was becoming imprisoned in a maze of his friend's construction, and that he was in grievous peril of losing his way.

Blatherwick was also violently certain that Greyne did not mean him to leave.

"Those things which, I daresay, you imagine to be electric cables are nothing of the sort," continued the scientist. "I might call them the wireless aerials of this installation.

" It is not easy to describe their use to one totally ignorant of radiology.

" They are the spinal cord of a bodiless anatomy."

The smaller man stood up and firmly rebuttoned his coat. He took hold of his hat—his bowler hat—and held it in his hand.

" I must go," he muttered, and his eyebrows hid the expression in his eyes.

The tall man appeared neither to have seen nor heard him.

" And even so I have failed," he said.

At that unexpected statement the other sat down again.

The completed instrument—and now this talk of failure.

Mentally he gave himself another three short minutes.

But Greyne was away, it appeared, on another thought trail.

Standing in front of that grim relic of dead humanity, in which the ceaseless pulse of life rose and fell, his voice boomed out, carrying a new inspiration of a new hope.

But now he asked a question. He no longer stated facts.

" Have you ever been attracted," he inquired, " by the tremendous significance of the If in the history of the world ?

" Have you never allowed yourself to speculate as to how you personally, and the world in general,

would have been affected *If* certain key events in history had not occurred when and as they *did* occur ?

" Conversely, have you never considered, when dreaming before the fire on a winter's evening, under what sort of conditions we would now be living *If* certain things which did *not* happen had happened ?

" John, I tell you that civilisation as we know it has had more than one narrow escape during the centuries of being forcibly persuaded into dim and treacherous paths—or of being utterly extinguished."

The other shook his head. " I can't say . . ."

" If," boomed Greyne, " there had been no Drake to scatter the might of the Armada when it loomed against our shores.

" *If* there had been no Renaissance to relieve the drab gloom of the Dark Ages.

" *If* Greece had sunk beneath the waves while both Atlantis and Lemuria had been saved.

" *If* the specific gravity of water was *not* heaviest at four degrees Fahrenheit, and all life were to die in our rivers at the first frost.

" *If* Luther had not lived, or Cleopatra had died in infancy.

" How, John, I ask, would any of these things have affected you and me as we live to-day ?

" Consider a moment," he cried, " by what a little tilting of the balance the world might have been

plunged back a thousand years into barbarism, or have been lifted up mightily into the light.

" The hand of an assassin withheld, or the hand of friendship extended.

" What of the world if the knife had never fallen—or the word had not been spoken—or the hand of friendship had been stretched forth ?

" *If* Pilate had *not* released unto them Barabbas ! "

Greyne ceased, and his friend noted that a muscle in his throat jerked convulsively.

Blatherwick turned his head, and again the never-ceasing motion of that pulsing caught and held his gaze.

" Can *that* help you, then ? " he asked. " Can that help you, Greyne, to discern the answers to those tremendous riddles ? "

The tall man, with about him somewhat of the atmosphere of a prophet, bent upon his companion a look full of the splendour of achievement—yet in his voice was the bitterness of defeat.

" That it can do," he said, " and that is all that it can do.

" I have tested it," he added after a while. " I have tried it, as I might say locally, in here with trivial questions.

" After days of futile wondering if I had completely failed, the idea came to me—and yet the thought was not entirely my own. ' This,' something seemed to say, ' may not be so perfect as you had hoped—nor so useless. It may be only the first

step. It may be but as the child to the grown man.'

"So I made the attempt." He looked at Blatherwick. ". . . The result was very strange."

"Ah!" muttered his hearer uncertainly.

"It is indeed as if one were dealing with a child of superhuman prowess. It is as if one were to prompt a schoolboy with the first few lines of a piece of poetry which he had never learned, and he were to recite to you all the remainder.

"Give to this instrument I have created the details and the atmosphere of a time or of a condition. Then remorselessly, logically, will it recreate for you those conditions. More; it will continue the unfinished piece according to your prompting. But though the metre and the rhythm will be similar, yet the words will be such as no man had conceived."

His interlocutor made a movement of perplexity. "Telepathy?" he suggested.

"That and something more, for telepathy is thought transference, and this brain has no need of that. This is the most sensitive organism ever imagined by any investigator.

"At this moment its thoughts are the very thoughts of everything which has life upon the globe. It knows them all, and could, if I wished, carry forward to its inevitable conclusion the most wayward whim which barely entered the head of the most thoughtless girl.

"This brain, I say, functions only by reason of that unavoidable force which we call 'thought,' and which is ineluctable—not to be escaped.

"For the present I have not moved the lever. The brain is isolated in itself, in what you would call a 'Brown Study'—a composite 'Brown Study' of every one's inner reflections.

"Yet it has the power to create. I will connect it to the vulcanite bowl, which I have called the 'receiver.'"

Came the sharp click of a small handle, and Blatherwick leaped in his chair, biting back an exclamation.

Time stood still while a myriad myriad voices in all languages beat upon his ears. He saw a million million scenes, broken, chaotic, shifting, interposed one upon the other, and interpenetrating; broken, ever-moving scenes in which men and women, beasts and birds, moved fantastically in uncompleted episodes.

They were about him on every side; they lived. He shrank from their warm touch.

He was among them and yet removed. There were strange cries and a sound of weeping.

Greyne moved his finger, and the room was emptied to normality.

"The momentary thoughts, both good and evil, of everything which has life upon this world," said he, "pouring in, unregulated, unselected, without order, and made to live as those who

conceived them never dreamed that they could live.

"It is possible to tune our instrument to our own thoughts alone—or, I should say, it is possible to exclude others."

The clock clanged the three-quarters, and Blatherwick ran one finger along his eyebrows—brushing them. It was a habit of his when undecided.

He looked at the skull which contained the brain of a little greengrocer, a man who had woefully failed in the race of a life, but whose brain could now do marvellous things.

He opened his mouth to say definitely that he had seen enough.

This man with the commanding nose threatened to upset the even run of his life, and Blatherwick did not want it upset—the every-day placidity, the ordinary littleness. Probably, any way, he was romancing.

These mystics . . .

"I tell you," boomed Greyne on the thought, "that if, for a restricted test, you shall present to this brain a mental picture of the events and conditions in France in 1815.

"If you shall further suggest to it that on that fateful eighteenth of June, at half-past eleven of the forenoon, Napoleon did *not* doze while the bloody attack on Hougoumont was in progress.

"If you shall imagine in your thoughts, and tell It that the Emperor was alert on that day and

stopped Ney's massacre of his own cavalry—the finest in the world.

" And when you have done this, if you shall move that tiny lever and ask for the immediate and logical sequel . . .

" Then you shall see stirring about you a new life.

" Then you shall see once more the Eagles rushing across Europe at the bidding of a military genius such as this earth has never brought before nor since to birth.

" You shall hear the thunder of the guns upon the field of a greater Austerlitz.

" Time shall be put back and you shall move among an island nation crushed by defeat.

" The round Martello towers along the coast of England shall be filled anew with anxious watchers."

CHAPTER III

For some moments after the vibrant voice ceased the two men in that great domed building neither moved nor spoke.

There was something about the set of Greyne's features, possibly those deep lines about his mouth, which gave him, as he looked down at his handiwork, a look of ruthless determination. He appeared a man committed in his mind to a certain course of action ; action which might conceivably result in irretrievable disaster, but which might as easily be pregnant with sublime issue.

Blatherwick, so strong the suggestion of his companion's words, was back in the England of one hundred years before.

He lived in an age of slow communications, the age in which his much belauded great-grandfather had lived.

Life moved more simply and upon a more spacious canvas. In imagination he shrank before the menace of invasion.

Yes, he was not without some quality of the artist, for to be a professor of anything, if only of living, requires a certain touch of artistry.

At length he sighed and caressed his projecting

eyebrows with one short finger. He was well aware that he was beaten ; this man dominated him now, as he had always done. He knew that Greyne held him bound. But he made one last bid for liberty and the Carlton. After all, he'd be barely half an hour late. . . .

" I can't see why you want me," he complained. " What you're going to try to do I don't know, but . . ." He spoke petulantly, being afraid, yet not strong enough to forge an effective weapon from his dis-ease.

" How," the other put in suggestively, " do you suppose people would act if set down suddenly in a world similar, in the popular phrase, to what it was ' before the flood ' ? "

" That means—you will strip civilisation of security," Blatherwick objected.

" Nothing of the sort," Greyne retorted irritably. " It will merely put civilisation on its mettle—bring out the best qualities."

He hurried on.

" I am going to prompt the organism with a mental picture of this earth as it was before the glacial period—before the ice crept down across the world and wiped away the creatures of the prime. In general, I am conversant with the conditions which then prevailed.

" Having started this brain on a definite line of thought, I shall ask, not for the immediate sequel, but for a picture of the results which the world would

have to face had those primordial conditions remained unchanged until the present day—say, three to five millions of years after they had actually terminated in favour of a state of affairs more suitable to the evolution of mankind.

" I shall suggest, in fact, that the glacial period never was and never could have been—*this* will do all else."

He pointed.

" Having allowed sufficient time for the organism to work out the details and present to itself a definite picture, I shall move that little knob of ivory (this one which I am touching)—and that picture will live.

" It will be superimposed upon present-day conditions as another film might be thrown upon a screen on which one play is already being presented.

" And mind you, John, that will mean that men and women as we know them, civilisation as we have enjoyed or suffered it, will become on the instant anachronisms, out of place. I dare not say for certain that anything will outlast the shock of the new thought.

" But I am hopeful. If there is any foundation, any real resistance in modern folk and modern things, they will continue at least for long enough.

" I am anxious, above all, to discover how men and women of to-day will react to a more primitive setting.

" Have we gained or lost, I ask myself, by the

fact that life has been made so much more easy for us since machinery was invented for our need and danger removed from our daily path ? I, for one, cannot see that we have benefited."

Blatherwick plucked fiercely at his eyebrows.

" I see," he said at last. " I see. But surely, given those conditions of which you speak, until to-day, there would be nothing that we could recognise ?

" The course of evolution would have been drastically altered. There would have existed no regions of temperate climate in which humanity might have cradled and whence they might come, as, if I remember what they used to teach me, they did come, and people and subdue the whole world."

" Nature would have evolved something," replied Greyne. " And what it would have been I propose to find out. Possibly even men and women of a kind ; but they would have had to face terrible competitors."

Blatherwick struggled with growing panic.

" I cannot help you," he wailed. " It is impossible. I know practically nothing of these things. You must let me go. You tamper with the rights of God."

Greyne flung out a hand and gripped the other affectionately by the shoulder.

" You, John," he said softly, but his face was grim with an inexorable determination, " are the man above all others who *can* help me.

" It is not that I wish to destroy mankind and his works in the twinkling of an eye. I do not desire to walk about in a world empty of men, but to see how the mentality of our generation and the things which that mentality has created for itself will stand against the stark forces of the prime.

" I am certain, indeed, that the world will be a better place for my action. That I will explain to you when we have seen—if you are unable to discover for yourself."

Blatherwick sat huddled in his chair. Thoughts rioted through his brain. After all, he was being greatly honoured. But he was only seeking to excuse himself for a yielding which he knew to be inevitable.

" What can I do ? " he queried. " There seems no place for me in this."

" You will hold steady a picture of modern civilisation as we know it so very well. You will immerse yourself in that picture to the exclusion of all else. I seek only to impose something on what is already here, and it is you who will preserve what is against the aggression of what might have been.

" We shall be able, I hope, to go abroad—to compare. Not always, perhaps, to the advantage of this century.

" I cannot believe that when, in the very glimmer of Time's dawn, the First Cause started this world from the thin tenuity of the nebula, that there was

intended as the ultimate perfection of production the present-day politician.

" We are about to unleash little known forces. I am not afraid of failure, but it is wise to neglect nothing that may be of use.

" Everything is ready," he ended.

For the last time Blatherwick protested, but without any conviction of success.

He looked moodily down the crease in his blue serge trousers at his pearl-grey spats. He did not know much about what might or might not be appropriate to prehistoric conditions, but he imagined that spats would be distinctly out of place.

" Spats ! " he thought angrily, then added resentfully aloud : " I know no more than another."

" That from you, John," reproved his companion, " who has been aptly called ' The Last of the Corinthians.' "

The little man gave in. What a memory the fellow had ! . . . It must have been nearly thirty years ago. After all, he soothed himself, there could come no lasting harm out of this matter. Greyne's ideals were too lofty to allow him to attempt anything contrary to the best interests of mankind.

" Let me make some preparations," he conceded.

" No ! No ! No ! " boomed the other jovially. " Once I let you out of here . . . I have made all necessary arrangements, I tell you—and I am impatient to begin."

The other surveyed his friend's loose jacket and grey flannel trousers disconsolately.

"If you had only warned me . . ." he commenced.

Greyne smiled.

"What do you expect to see?" Blatherwick continued hopelessly.

"Frankly, I don't know. Anything. Everything. It will be hot, I suppose."

"Why not start the experiment at night?" murmured the smaller man, one eye on the atrocious sun helmet.

"Possibly the daytime would be safer. . . ."

"Ah! Safer." Blatherwick lost himself in unhappy conjecture. His glance flickered over the rifle.

"I can't even load it," he complained.

"It's a pity that the Ministry of Munitions, or whatever it was, didn't teach you something useful," remarked the other. "But we may never need it. Any way, I think I can show you how it works.

"What's that? Oh, it will be almost instantaneous, I imagine—after I've made the connection!"

While speaking, Greyne approached a deep cupboard on the wall and dragged out a medley of various articles, which he began to sort into two heaps.

There was, the peeping eyes behind their fortress

noticed, something resembling a compass. Blatherwick wondered.

" We must take accurate observations," explained his companion. He made one of his vague gestures.

" Landmarks may have altered . . . may be wiped out. I've long ago marked down our present position."

" Ah ! " murmured the other, and drew down his eyebrows further.

This was evidently going to be a tremendous affair. He wanted to ask what the rest of the world might say to such violent changes ; but he did not dare.

A sudden horrid thought jerked his head upright.

" You spoke of poetry ! " he cried. " Supposing the pupil were to forget a line. What then ? "

The busy hands about the packages held up a thermos flask to the light and tested the stopper.

" Granted there are vast spaces, huge unexplored tracts, of thought," answered Greyne without looking round.

" It may even well be that we shall round some unexpected corners. For that I am prepared—and for that I would by no means turn back.

" But the thing which you suggest. . . . No, it is not possible. Nothing can derange that dispassionate consciousness of my creating."

The scientist set down the flask and inspected the piles of gear which he had prepared.

Slowly he walked to the door and switched on the

light in half a dozen bulbs. He paused a moment, with his hand on the switch, while he ran his eyes round the well-remembered room.

As if coming to a satisfactory decision, he crossed with energy to the window and tugged at a lever.

A solid curtain of steel slid smoothly down from a niche in the embrasure and clanged into space.

Bolts screamed in their sockets.

There was an air of finality about those actions which vastly impressed the seated man. " Nothing *can* happen really," he said to himself soothingly. " It would not be allowed. I'll humour him, as he seems so much in earnest."

He sighed and glanced at his watch. Just one o'clock. There had been no sound from the church clock this time . . . how massive must be that steel blind !

Next, Greyne hung an arrangement of what looked like light wires across the space which had been the window, and tightened four or five shining brass terminals.

" We are now isolated," he said, coming back and seating himself at the table. " It is only responsive for the future to *our* thought impulses ; our thoughts are its thoughts."

He peered closely at the pulsing membrane and touched certain things gently with a questing finger.

" The network which I have just hung," he elaborated, looking up for a moment, " completes the isolating circuit all over the laboratory. No

other waves of thought can enter now to interfere with ours. It is rather as if I had tuned on to a private wavelength."

The bare room was as quiet as death. "God, how quiet!" thought Blatherwick. There was no slightest noise from the mechanism.

He felt numbed by the weight of an intangible burden. If only he had had the strength of mind to tear himself away. . . .

He looked at that Thing so near, and gnawed one end of his straggling moustache the while he wrestled inwardly for self-possession.

Blatherwick did not want to experiment. Not at all. The world contented him very well as it was.

"Come. Draw your chair closer to mine."

The castors screeched on the boards. Blatherwick's mind was a riot of jumbled conceptions.

If all his friend said was true, what fearful monstrosities might not almost immediately be resurrected to stalk, appalling, about the peaceful countryside?

He snatched at a drifting memory of school-day acquirements. . . . Dinosaurs—or some such devilish things—even larger now, perhaps, owing to a few more million years of dominant development.

"You quite understand," the other interrupted his musing, "you are to think—you had better shut your eyes for better concentration—only of the world as you know it. It is merely a precaution in case of unforeseen contingencies, but it would be as

well to make your mental picture as comprehensive as possible."

Blatherwick nodded.

This thing in theory was really simple. With the wireless receiver and loud speaker, which he had often used, a man created sound—played the violin or something—at one end, and at the other, one hundred, two hundred, or two thousand miles away, sound was re-born.

With this instrument, however, one had thought —intangible force—at one end, and from the vulcanite bowl arrangement at the other issued force re-born—a force which would build up, detail by invisible detail, around one the thought given to it.

The transmuted thought would be superimposed, it seemed, on existing conditions, as the concert at the wireless station might be superimposed on the idle chatter of a drawing-room—might even drown it.

But the thing would do more : it could to a limited extent create of itself.

It was rather like a mathematician in some respects, Blatherwick decided. If you gave it an algebraic sum $(a + b)(a + b)$, for example, it would deliver the answer, $a^2 + 2ab + b^2$, accurately in terms of life.

But supposing you altered the original symbols by a fraction : gave it $(a + b)(a - c)$, say—or even made such a slight alteration as $(a + b)(a - b)$;

again you would get your answer to the new combination.

But it would be a different answer. How great the difference might be depended on the value of the altered sign or symbol—it might be prodigious.

Greyne, it seemed to him, had mightily altered the combination.

" When I touch your arm, you are to pick up these things and follow me."

Blatherwick started and nodded again—roast chicken and mushrooms. What a pity !

A long arm shot out in the direction of a tiny lever to connect some attachment. One man watched the movement in an agony of apprehension. He imagined it must be as bad as waiting blindfold for the hangman's last gesture.

" Now ! "

The little man obediently shut his eyes. He passed in review a panorama of the commonplace world as he had hitherto known it.

He saw a picture of crowded restaurants, of empty ballrooms, when the growing sunlight shames the electric and the last guests yawn themselves homeward.

Other scenes repassed beneath his lids of London streets as seen at dawn by a small man hurrying to his flat ; of the same streets at noon—at eve—at night.

Yet others of sunny days, and cloudy, spent in great cities or amid homely scenery. Of famous

picture galleries in foreign lands, and all the innumerable trivial details which had contented him for the last forty years, which stood to him for life.

Lastly, he had a vision of the Brighton road, near Box Hill, on a certain June afternoon. He saw again the four sweating horses he used to drive. He could almost taste the acrid dust. . . .

* * * * *

Whether Blatherwick sat there for ten seconds, ten minutes, or an hour, he never knew. His whole mind was tense with the effort to get this thing right. It must not be due to any fault of his ; if . . .

A drop of perspiration trembled on his nose and tickled him. Fumbling for his handkerchief only resulted in knocking over the rifle, which fell with a loud clang of metal.

He wished he could open his eyes.

Abruptly recurred to him an extraordinary aural delusion.

It was as if a silver trumpet pealed within his head. The sweet clarity of those ringing notes echoed and re-echoed down the corridors of his mind.

It appeared, somehow, as if they had been proclaiming for untold ages some tremendous truth which he had only just heard, and could not yet understand.

There was nothing then which could have prevented him from opening his eyes.

At that moment a hand clutched him by the wrist.

He saw Greyne finger another small lever, saw a pencil, disturbed by Greyne's sleeve, roll to the edge of the table and commence to overbalance, heard a sharp click . . .

He sat up abruptly. What was happening ?

He noticed an electric light bulb opposite behaving most curiously. It was hazy, as if in violent vibration, as if a mist of itself had enlarged it on all sides.

The impression conveyed was similar to the appearance of a taut piece of string when sharply struck.

It steadied back to rest.

A look showed the laboratory to be as always—decent, soberly in order. No grotesque changes here.

The small man drew a breath of relief. Perhaps it had failed. . . .

But Greyne was furiously active, snatching at the prepared equipment as if racing for time. Even then, it seemed, he had a faint foreknowledge. . . .

He motioned to Blatherwick, who began, in his turn, to fill his arms with an assortment of objects from the table.

Neither spoke.

At last Blatherwick jammed the detested helmet anyhow on to his neatly-combed hair, grasped the fallen weapon by the muzzle, and turned at a gesture to follow his companion.

On the other side of the deep cupboard Greyne

stooped and, after a little delay, lifted aside a square of metalwork similar to that which he had hung across the window.

He raised a section of the floor and began to descend some steps, the existence of which his friend had never suspected.

A short passage led them eventually up another flight to a second door ; opening this, Greyne stepped out into the sunshine playing on the cobbles of a deserted stable-yard.

" I rented this," he explained as the other joined him. " I never did like neighbours too close. Just a minute. . . ." He slipped a bolt on the door they had just come through.

Blatherwick stared about him. Surely that was the top of Wooland's Store showing above the roofs over there ?

What a lot he had to learn about his friend ! He had never imagined this secret exit.

He looked back. The great bulk of the puff-ball heaved above them its curved dome far into the air.

In there, he supposed, that detached brain still worked, the light still glimmered on the stretched membrane pulsing so evenly.

They had forgotten to switch off the current to the lights—careless, that. Funny everything should look just the same.

The experiment *must* have failed.

" I had it built like that," said Greyne abruptly, " because of my obsession—titanic forces knocking

about unleashed all over the place." He waved an arm and shed a rain of odds and ends.

"Futile, of course, considering that they *are* titanic. But it may be useful."

Greyne also was staring back ; but in his mind was no slightest thought of failure.

"Better be moving," he ordered. "Don't know quite what's going to happen. These houses may come down on the top of us." He bent and gathered up what he had dropped.

Looking in the direction he took, Blatherwick saw a car, an unimpressive 8-h.p. affair, drawn up near the yard gate.

A spasm of anger twitched his eyebrows lower. Even cars still, it seemed. . . .

They did not talk much as the leader arranged their baggage in the small available space and took his seat.

The other squirmed in reluctantly beside his friend, and a sense of compunction for those others who knew nothing—had no warning—about what was presumably happening, or about to happen, to them moved him to speech.

"What ?" boomed Greyne, one foot stretched to a pedal. "Rubbish ! It'll be a great purging of humanity ; the most tremendous example of the survival of the fittest. I should imagine that only the finest and most stubborn brains will hold out against the thought I have caused to be impressed on them.

"From the moment I pushed that second lever we human beings became impossible—the sort of things which, given the conditions I outlined for the last five million years, could not conceivably have existed. Some few thousands—or even millions maybe—will continue to live because of the strength of their will."

His hearer frowned. No hint of failure there. Yet everything seemed very ordinary. . . .

For perhaps a quarter of a minute the couple stayed thus, with the bonnet of their vehicle pointed to the open double doors.

Greyne sat erect, seeming to challenge the universe. His beak-like nose was a menace.

Blatherwick was slumped sideways. His hair stuck out under the thick pith rim and cascaded over the velvet collar of his blue coat.

Particularly the latter noticed in those few seconds the two halves of the door, which seemed to beckon them. They were green and not very recently painted. There were numerous sun blisters, where the white deal showed through.

An unusually large striped fly—a brilliant thing—suddenly buzzed about the entrance and poised over one of the white spots.

It was positively getting hotter.

The driver suddenly let out a bellow of laughter. "By heavens, John!" he shouted, "I think I've waited all my life for to-day. We have raised the curtain on a new play, and our puppets are about to strut upon the stage.

"Other people have nothing to do with all this; it is we who are supreme."

Blatherwick decided that Greyne was in reality a little nervous—almost hysterical.

The engine coughed into life and the car began to slide down towards the doors.

"It *is* rather interesting," agreed Blatherwick with surprising amiability. But he did not like the sound of that word "supreme."

Greyne did not appear fully to realise, he thought, that effectual control had been handed over to a mechanism which he had certainly invented or created and set in action, but which was now independent, functioning unrestrained.

He mopped his face with the at last discovered grey silk handkerchief. Yes, it *was* getting hotter.

The trigger guard of the rifle was pressing into his leg, and the parcel of cartridges in his pocket was being forced into his hip bone.

The car was far too crowded to be comfortable, but he was not able to move.

CHAPTER IV

GREYNE appeared tortured by a gnawing impatience to see what should be seen.

Rocking from side to side, the little car picked up its skirts and hustled down the slope of a deserted street.

Only the complete absence of other traffic saved the couple from destruction, and thus indirectly preserved for the North Kensington Museum that unique collection of blurred photographic records around which such an acrimonious discussion between experts has raged for the last few years.

" Never drove an inch before yesterday ! " he boomed as the machine swerved royally and the tyres rasped against the curb.

" So ? " murmured Blatherwick, beaming. The little man's rather censorious attitude towards life had been replaced by a complacent yielding to circumstances.

The unusual antics of an unfamiliar vehicle distressed him not at all. A hot wind fidgeted along his eyebrows and pulled at the strap under his chin.

" I always say," shouted the driver, " that if you give your mind to a thing . . ." He spun the

wheel furiously, and they dropped off the opposite pavement with a joint-racking bump.

". . . if you give your mind to a thing . . . Damn ! These roads aren't wide enough," he complained, and came into the main street with a sweep which took them clear across the roadway.

His companion clutched the side of the car as they straightened out—and, z-o-o-o-m, the towering unwieldy bulk of an omnibus rushed down on them.

It appeared to come from out of nowhere, that 'bus, but must in reality have been on their number plate as they turned.

There was a menace other than the obvious about the uncontrolled bucketing fury ; and Blatherwick, catching sight of its approach out of the tail of his eye, behaved extremely oddly.

His perspiring hands fumbled at wet buttons and he twisted about in his seat.

Then he half rose and hurled his immaculate overcoat at the snorting bonnet with a whinny of excitement.

The thing raved by, engines pounding and every loose gadget beating a devil's tattoo at every bound—and with it went one of Greyne's spare knapsacks full of tinned foods, which he had lashed to their footboard.

Blatherwick, as it scraped by, caught a vague impression of a swirling cloud about the driver's seat—an impression of burning brilliancy in that cloud—kaleidoscopic.

" Empty ! " he screamed, leaning back for a last glimpse of his coat lying in the dust.

" Empty ! " he repeated, and looked ahead to see the juggernaut falter at a corner and bore into a vast plate glass window with a resounding—Brash.

" Oxygen ! " cried Greyne, and waved one hand perilously. " More oxygen in the air. I half expected this. Makes you feel drunk—irresponsible. It won't last, worse luck. Things should grow," he concluded thoughtfully, " like blazes."

Correcting a violent skid by heroic methods, he slowed the protesting machinery by the *débris*, and the ceasing of their own clamour seemed to be the signal for a series of echoing detonations up and down the street.

Half the normal packed traffic of midday, as if bent on self-destruction, swerved, collided, and hurled itself at last to a chaotic standstill.

Passengers began to descend, and formed little groups round each derelict ; others joined them.

Heated arguments sprang up between the onlookers, conducted in unnaturally high voices with a totally foreign wealth of emphatic gesture.

An itinerant organ-grinder, bronzed by the suns of Malta, began to jig to and fro in time to his tune.

A thin acid-looking female, with a face like a duck, turned from her inspection of the nearest catastrophe, hesitated, and commenced with mincing steps to gyrate in an old-fashioned dance step ; a pompous

old gentleman in a silk hat joined in, arms akimbo ; next an anæmic youth, with lack-lustre eyes, seized a total stranger, heavily befurred, and urged her from side to side after the latest manner.

Sticks and umbrellas clattered to the pavement.

The organ-grinder's monkey, seized with a desire to be conspicuous, leaped and gained a precarious seat on a rusty black hat ornamented with sweeping cock's feathers.

The duck-faced lady, taken by surprise, slipped and collapsed on her haunches into the gutter, and remained there, with the perspiration running down her face and her sad eyes fixed on some dim and distant past.

From behind her right ear the monkey gibbered delightedly, contemplating an assault on the old gentleman.

The Maltese, working himself into a frenzy, began to sing—strange harsh songs with a haunting melody.

Greyne and his friend, however, noticed but little of this scene.

They had eyes only for what was happening amidst the overturned wax models and piled up fittings of the shop window.

There was a movement somewhere in the heart of that chaos—movement and a suggestive noise of buzzing.

Abruptly a man crawled from between the motionless wheels and tottered into the sunshine.

His clothes hung in strips, but his L.C.C. badge twinkled undimmed.

He began, as he gained his feet, to beat upon himself with crimsoning hands, and all the while he skipped to and fro in the most sprightly fashion.

"Oxygen . . ." began Blatherwick, and broke off. He snatched at the rifle and swung its muzzle uselessly in a half-circle. Something was going to happen. . . .

He waited, drawing deep painful breaths. His heart pounded at his ribs.

People began to form in a half-circle—pressed tightly together.

And yet Blatherwick had, somehow, a feeling upon him of terrible loneliness, as if he had no part or lot with these gaping sightseers, over whose perplexed faces fear began to spread as ripples spread when a flung stone disturbs the calm pond.

And yet the man before them uttered never a sound, though his face was terribly contorted.

He danced about, with his feet crunching on the broken shards of glass . . . danced frantically in a street like an oven. There was something *on* him.

The sweat ran down the jutting bridge of Greyne's nose in rivulets and splashed on to the steering wheel.

He made a hopeless gesture and began to climb out, while his companion sat spellbound, frowning to hide his deep emotion.

But as the foot sought the running board the dancer stopped his measure between step and step,

stared with a sort of incredulous solemnity at the faces surrounding him, bowed himself, and crumpled all his length along the reddened highway, his face downturned upon one outflung arm.

A slow sticky wave of air drew from out of Kensington Gardens and stirred little spirals of whispering dust.

A shred of glass tumbled from somewhere with a musical tinkle, a deep hissing sigh burst from all the watchers, some one screamed, and the scream was abrupt, bitten off, as if for fear of the effects of fear.

" Look ! " whispered Greyne.

Blatherwick saw ; saw the deserted body fall in upon itself, saw for a fleeting instant a crumpled something on the ground.

And then . . . and then there was nothing there at all save an extraordinary shimmering shadow about the wooden blocks of the road.

The shadow rose up with a venomous noise like a saw-mill under pressure ; it sparkled as it rose.

The swarm of huge flies rose up, all a glitter of beauty, circled once or twice, and trailed off in a north-easterly direction, flying low over the roof tops, with little streamers of brightness hanging in wisps on either flank.

" What is it ? " bleated Blatherwick. " What is it ? "

Greyne turned upon him a rigid face. " You saw."

"Yes. But why . . . where *is* he?"

The other contemplated a moment the empty space beyond their pointed bonnet.

"He has gone back," he said gravely, "gone back to the womb of Infinity, whence he came.

"We are living in three-dimensional time," he added, striving to keep the triumph from his voice.

"It is our present—we made it so—we *know* it is so—and so we live.

"For these things, and others we may meet, it is the future"—he flung out his hand towards the northern horizon—"what they might have become had the world never altered from what it was five million years ago.

"For them that die it is the remotest past.

"Don't you see," he cried, "that people only live because they believe that they live, because to them living is a routine and the everyday sameness of things anchors them to earth?

"We have asked for and obtained a world which knew not mankind, and which could not have produced men and women as we know them. We have asked for the results that would have come from a continuation of prehistoric conditions until to-day."

He waved his hand about him. "All this is out of place now—utterly impossible."

The crowd began to break up, and Greyne watched them, studying each face intently. It was noticeable that there was an air of purpose about

each—an almost complete absence of the panic to be expected.

Here and there, it is true, was doubt on certain features amounting almost to terror, but it was checked. The general spirit of the assembly seemed to be against weakness, would not tolerate it in themselves or others.

They began to move off with brisk steps ; hardly one glanced back.

The heat grew until to touch metal was a torment.

Greyne watched them go, and turned back his head to his companion as the last stragglers turned the corner or began to tug and heave at the broken-down traffic, stripping off coats and tossing hats to one side for greater ease.

" The air's not so fresh," complained Blatherwick breaking in on the other's abstraction ; " it's stuffy —makes my head ache."

Greyne nodded absently. " If they knew who we were . . ." he began.

" They wouldn't believe you ! " snapped Blatherwick. He felt relieved at the thought.

" We're doing 'em good," declared the other, " weeding 'em out.

" The strong-minded, the people of action, the obstinate, will continue to carry on, though struggling in a nightmare. They will refuse to admit in their thoughts that the new conditions are too unbearable for them to endure.

" But I think that the ordinary slack-backed

effetes—those of time-wasting routine—the non-creative herd, will die, because they will accept the thought that they are now startlingly incredible phenomena in a world which has no knowledge of their works.

"And when they die"—he jerked his head forward—"we have seen what will happen. When the consciousness of self as an entity—the vital flame—when *that* leaves them, then swiftly they return, dust to primeval dust, to form the Eozoic ooze whence all life started in the dawn of time."

His hearer looked back over his shoulder. The Maltese was still twirling his handle, but now he had switched to a dull tune, none paid him any attention. The acid female was walking firmly away readjusting her hat.

People were removing coats and furs, looking at each other for some explanation of what had happened—talking earnestly. Some were evidently searching for that which was lost.

An omnibus began to thread its way through the obstructions, coming from the direction of Hyde Park.

Blatherwick was not satisfied.

"It's so slow," he objected. "It ought to be transformed in a flash. Those houses. . . . These cars. . . ." He pointed with the rifle at a clutter of automobiles blocking the pavement opposite a palatial hotel.

"It is being built up," interjected the other

thoughtfully. "It must be that. Yes, it is being built up. Not quite what I expected, though. When I experimented, things happened at once—like that."

The snap of his fingers startled the smaller man.

"There was your mental picture, of course, to retard action," he continued reflectively, and added: "Imagine a huge wheel, accurately poised and well oiled, the driving wheel of a power-house, for example. Have it turning at hundreds of revolutions per minute—then cut off the power.

"What happens?

"It doesn't stop at once. It goes on. But it slows down.

"At first one can't tell that it is stopping, but it is. And at last, sooner or later, it *must* stop.

"Well, civilisation to-day is like that wheel with the power cut off. It is apparently as ever, save for certain minor details, but it is slowing down.

"And when it stops the world of the new suns will be upon us at a bound.

"Already there is a change—you've seen it. Some of those 'bus drivers have gone, and minor calamities followed their disappearance; passengers, too, I've no doubt, have disappeared, and many hundreds of other folk.

"We are on the brink of a complete cessation of ordinary progress . . .

"The Inertia of Custom!" boomed Greyne. "The Inertia of Custom. It is all that keeps back

the wild. But when the wheel stops turning we shall learn that Custom by itself has not sufficient driving force to run a world, or an Empire—it needs the energy of thought."

Blatherwick put his hand on to the barrel of his rifle, and withdrew it with an exclamation. The thing was almost red-hot.

"We have imposed upon the world a new thought," ended Greyne, and now he was standing up, sweeping his lean face from side to side as if searching for new portents.

He pushed back the peak of his helmet and peered across the park.

Slowly he seated himself, slipped his hand into a glove, and reached for the brake.

". . . a strange living thought," he said half aloud, "against which I hope, for its own credit, that civilisation will prevail."

His companion wriggled down into his seat, keeping the weapon across his knees.

Suddenly Greyne straightened himself and dragged a camera from under a heap of luggage, pointing it at the omnibus which stuck grotesquely out of the shop window.

Then he took a couple of pictures of the houses in the immediate vicinity.

"There may come a time," he said grimly, as he replaced the instrument, "when a people groping in a new darkness shall ask, 'How did our forefathers do this and this?' If we destroy, we must

at least preserve the examples from which men may build up."

Blatherwick's mind was filled with a great fear—terror of that which Greyne had done and proposed to do.

"We have made ourselves gods!" he cried passionately. "We have made ourselves the Lords of Thought!"

Greyne's face darkened at the words, and it did not seem that he was angry at the title, but only at the implication of complete mastery conveyed.

"Would to Heaven that we were," he answered. "Had my organism been as perfect as I hoped . . ." He broke off.

"We are no more than Emperors of the If," he concluded, and released the brake with a savage jerk.

* * * * *

It was as they were passing the Albert Hall that a cry from one of the few people on the pavement made both look at that ponderous building.

The heat was radiating from its dome and the air quivered above it.

Yet no mere atmospheric distortion could account for the blur about its outline.

While they stared the thing happened.

The walls bulged and the roof canted sharply Arose a grinding noise of displaced masonry; the whole mighty fabric collapsed upon itself and a sullen cloud of dust welled up to the glowing sky.

"The wheel is slowing down," remarked Greyne unemotionally.

"But I hope you'll notice they aren't half so excited as you'd have expected." He pointed to three or four who alone started to run towards the pile of ruins, which smoked as the powder of its destruction welled from the interstices.

"Nor half so sympathetic," grumbled his friend. "Some one is sure to have been hurt."

"I was right," the other persisted as they passed on up the slope; "you'll see that I was right. We're dealing with a new people. They'll build up when the novelty has worn off. The slackers and hinderers are gone. No doubt there will be suffering and mourning in more than one household; but Nature herself is too great, too grand, too noble, to worry about the rights of the individual when the benefit of the species is involved.

"At least we can remember that and try to copy her in that, if in nothing else."

About half a mile further on they stopped, at Greyne's suggestion, to put up the hood.

There was no use, he said, in running the risk of sunstroke. The streets were emptying.

Every one who could was seeking refuge indoors against the rays of that sun which, greatly magnified, swung above the capital of England and flayed it mercilessly.

Near to them, as they hurled armfuls of impedimenta back on to the seats, the rear wheels of a

taxi-cab, which had crashed into the railings just by the barracks, still revolved to the staccato barking of the engine.

The tyres churned and slid uselessly on the pavement ; there was no sign of chauffeur or fare.

Suddenly, as Blatherwick paused to take off his coat and waistcoat, he saw the heavy concrete flags begin to stir as if something pressed up from underneath.

He clutched Greyne by the arm and pointed. That one, grumbling over the probable effect of the heat on his films, pushed the camera into greater security before he turned.

So he missed the sight of the first appearance in London of the *new* plants (as every one was calling them after a while, when they'd become a curse, strangling all locomotion).

It was like a conjuring trick.

First the ominous crackling of the pavement ; then the abrupt outrush of a hard purple seed case, looking somewhat like the tight head of a pickling cabbage ; last the spray of thin, thread-like waving feelers, which shot out explosively.

The whole process was unbelievably quick—and the plant had such strength !

One waving thread caught and wound about one rotating wheel, and was instantly snapped. A bunch of outflung feelers took its place—caught the moving rim ; caught and clung.

The engine wheezed once or twice and stopped.

The creeper leapt up the framework like flames up a bundle of dry shavings.

In half a minute there was but a hillock of greedy plant life, a golden hillock, where had been a work of man.

" Slowing down," muttered Greyne, who had at last seen what was happening. He dived for his camera.

Blatherwick looked from side to side, wondering what was going to come of all this.

Here and there he saw blisters spring up out of the very road.

He glanced up, and saw fat poisonous green clouds—like spiders—trailing up from the south.

" I'm rather puzzled by this," said Greyne over his shoulder as he bent to examine the glossy leaves.

" I had imagined that conditions would be rather like they were at the Upper Cretaceous or Eocene Tertiary Period ; that was the mental picture I had in my mind.

" But this . . ." He pulled a leaf and looked at it almost angrily.

" What's wrong with it ? "

" It's not the leaf so much," he explained ; " it's that seed case. There were practically nothing but gymnosperms then—naked seeds ; and this thing has a very definite case."

" I suppose it's something which would have come," put in Blatherwick, without great interest. He was wondering when they were going to turn

back and stop this experiment. Things, in his opinion, had gone on long enough.

"You told me you asked for the results of millions of years of those conditions—not the immediate sequel."

"I suppose it must be that," agreed the other. "Well, if this can be produced, we may hope for other discoveries. I'm anxious to find out what sort of men . . ."

Greyne climbed back into the car and, clad only in his shirt-sleeves, began to steer cautiously wide of the blisters, which were beginning to burst and expel dozens of the purple cabbage-like seed cases.

At the corner of St. James's Street they were held up by a tangle of omnibuses, and while they strove for a way round a workman appeared, walking slowly in the middle of the road.

"What do you think of this?" queried Greyne, nursing the vehicle slowly round the block.

The man contemplated the overloaded car, removed his pipe, and spat largely.

"Rummy show, guv'nor!" he volunteered. "Reminds me of my service in India. They say the river's over the Embankment." He gave the information in a detached sort of way, and made to pass on.

"Yes. But what do *you* think of it?" persisted his questioner.

The fellow removed his pipe and spat largely.

"Lor', it don't 'urt me!" he declared. "I'm a

road-mender up in Dover Street. 'Course it's untidy-like." He contemplated a hole in the roadway from which a crop of white threads waved reaching fingers.

" Pay'll go on as usual, I suppose," he said, after a lengthy pause. He took a step.

" Doesn't it *worry* you at all ? " boomed Greyne.

The man removed his pipe and spat ruminatively.

" Not a blasted bit, guv'nor," he remarked cheerily.

" That'll be some one else's job. The women may, though ; they're that contrary. I'm off for Parson's Green to buck up the missis." He pointed with his pipe stem back towards the Green Park.

" Leastways, if anything's running," he amended. " I've been waiting an hour for a tube. But the bloke there says the 'eat 'as twisted the tunnelling or summat."

With a brief nod he struck off, spitting accurately as he passed at a purple seed case which ripped through within a foot of him.

" What a mind ! " boomed Greyne, staring after the retreating back.

" Nothing'll disturb that sort. If some one takes on the job of organising 'em, they'll do something."

Blatherwick was regarding a pile of luggage under one of the arches of the " Ritz." He could read the initials " G. K. R." on one brown portmanteau. He speculated unhappily as to where the owner might be.

"I don't believe it *is* good—for anybody!" he flared, "all this tampering with force—upsetting people—making 'em disappear. Not our business, really."

One firm hand twisted him about to confront a beak-like nose. He drew down his eyebrows defensively.

"I tell you it *is* good!" shouted Greyne. "In the long run humanity will benefit. No doubt of it."

Blatherwick shook his head stubbornly.

"We're soft . . . soft, I tell you. Man's surrounded himself with all sorts of mechanical contrivances and, relying on them, has seized a position in the scheme of things to which he has not attained.

"Like foisting an unwanted king on to the throne of a foreign country and bolstering him up with troops—unsound."

The little man did not reply directly. "Look there!" he exclaimed.

A small procession was winding along Piccadilly towards them.

In spite of the appalling heat, the oncomers still carried huge banners, two men to each, which tautened and grew slack as the bearers shuffled along, so that the blazoned faces, crudely depicted, seemed to leer and smirk as if all this were their doing.

The group came to a halt by the car.

Now that the workmen had disappeared, they were the only signs of life in the street. Every one had been driven to shelter.

" What's it all about ? " gasped two or three, regarding Blatherwick resentfully.

Greyne answered them by a question.

" What are you supposed to be doing ? "

" We're a deputation," replied one, who wore a dirty white neckerchief about his hairy throat.

" Going to see 'im," put in another, nodding in the direction of Buckingham Palace.

Greyne stared up at the shouting capitals.

" My God ! " he boomed, " are you going to lug those damned flags about till the whole place goes up in flames ?

" What's that, John ? " he queried, leaning out to get a view of the sky.

Blatherwick shook his head. He had heard something, certainly—something which rustled and creaked in an odd sort of way—but it conveyed nothing to him. He peered out in his turn and noted the clouds, which were piling themselves vengefully into fantastic castles and green writhing shapes—rather like gaping mouths, he thought, some of them.

Silence lay upon the street like a shroud, muffling even thought.

" Isn't there anything you can *do ?* " shouted Greyne, exasperated. " What about your wives while you're fooling here ? "

"Nuffin' can't stop us now," commenced the first speaker. "'S our boast, nuffin'." He tried to strike an attitude, but the sweat trickling into his eyes from his ragged fringe of hair somewhat spoilt the accompanying look, which he intended should be haughty and indomitable.

He scrubbed his face with his grey cap and started again.

"Down . . ." he screamed in an hysterical voice. "Down wiv . . ."

The very spirit of the brooding heat erupted violently over and round them. A dry rustling sound, as of leather being violently brushed, was abruptly followed by the descent of half a dozen huge winged terrors swooping down from the direction of Piccadilly Circus.

Their wings were twenty feet across, great bat-like wings. They had long thin reptilian heads, and their armed jaws clashed hungrily as they fell earthward.

"Flying dragons—pterodactyls!" cried Greyne, and whirled the car about with a twist and wrench of suddenly engaged gears.

At that onslaught the little group about their blatant standards broke and scattered.

The two men in the car had an impression of fiendish activity, of futile, empty-handed defence, of great overshadowing wings backing to a halt.

Followed a vicious scurry on the ground.

Twice Blatherwick pulled at the trigger of his

empty weapon as the car came round, and twice he shouted, not knowing what he said. There was a violent shock.

He looked back as they swerved into Dover Street, and saw four men rise to their knees and stagger into a doorway.

He saw one huge dragon-like shape flap heavily into the air, the beating of its spread wings resounding hollowly in the empty place, saw another and another follow suit, and watched them wheel suddenly over on a slashing turn and dive at the survivors.

Came a spurt of fire from a club window, and one flying menace screamed on a high metallic note. Its wings urged it up in abrupt jerks until the summit of the roofs was reached ; then it came down over and over as falls a leaf and pitched heavily, without a quiver, and lay like a great brown blanket flung upon the ground.

Little coatless men ran into the street to pull at what the six claw-like fingers still grasped . . . there was a sound of moaning.

One by one the remainder of the brutes slid to the top of the building at the Piccadilly corner of the street and perched there, undecided—grim gargoyles looking for their chance.

" Why did you run away like that ? " Blatherwick demanded angrily.

Greyne leaned out, but did not immediately reply.

" If you'll look at the footboard," he boomed,

wheeling the machine down Bond Street, "you'll see what I did."

The smaller man craned his head. The board was twisted into shapeless splinters, and nearly a foot of it had completely gone.

"Charged 'em," announced Greyne tersely. "Nearly got caught, too—they've capable jaws. My young nephew'd love this," he added with a surprising change of thought. "He's strong on adventure stories. I have to tell them by the hundred."

As they regained Piccadilly he glanced back at the silhouettes against the sky.

"Evidently they've found nothing through the ages to contest for aerial supremacy with them," he said.

"Not successfully, at any rate. We'll have a look at the river," he decided after a pause.

Blatherwick said nothing. All over the place, he presumed vaguely, things like this were happening—perhaps worse—and they'd hardly started.

Supposing they were not able to get back? . . .

Something of what he felt he voiced as they ran through Leicester Square.

"Give 'em time," answered the driver. "Give 'em time. Just see how these houses are being swallowed up. Might almost be a tropical jungle."

A sullen crash at a great distance rolled across the roof tops like a thunderclap.

"Another building gone!" added Greyne.

" They'll have to fight, though," he went on, as if to himself. " In all other walks of life, in every pond, every river, every ordinary hedgerow, there's a constant struggle. You spoke of tampering with the rights of God, John. It's man who's done that, ' and they should keep who can ' " he quoted.

" For heaven's sake, let's have a thorough purging of civilisation ; it is crammed with traditions which traduce itself ! "

CHAPTER V

THE Embankment, when they reached it, presented an extraordinary sight. Two feet of muddy water lapped at the enclosed strips of gardens alongside the road, twenty yards from the normal brink.

A motor 'bus was working slowly through the flood, with the white foam creaming about its churning wheels.

Quite a number of people were about, for the most part gathered in the shadow of a bridge, but many were busy salving objects from the advancing tide.

"Look at their faces, John," whispered his friend. "The fear we saw in Kensington is giving place to determination—and in determination lies the germ of achievement."

But here was struck the first note of loss.

A woman came up to Greyne as he sat at the wheel with his camera, and asked a question in a low, uncertain voice, apologising for her intrusion.

"No," he replied gently; "I've only just come."

She turned helplessly and tossed her head from side to side, scanning the groups about her.

"'E was walking just behind me . . ." she commenced, "and I can't find 'im."

Her words ran into one another and blurred.

" 'E wasn't what you'd call mad, only silly-like, but 'e was all I 'ad," she whimpered, and trudged off to stop by another onlooker. " 'E was never able to look after 'imself," they heard her say in that same dull key, " but 'e was all I 'ad."

Blatherwick swore. Greyne scratched the short hair at the nape of his neck, and his mouth tightened.

" It's not good enough ! " Blatherwick cried.

The curious appearance of the surface just where he imagined the Embankment used to drop sheer to the old bed caught his eye, and he checked his outburst.

It seemed as if thousands and thousands of stumpy walking sticks were rearing themselves out of the water.

The pack and press of them was incredible.

They heaved up at the rate of inches per second, throwing out rings of little spikes at intervals of about two feet.

While Blatherwick watched they shot up to the height of a tall man.

" Calamites," declared Greyne, " what we'd call mare's tails. They'll grow to eighteen or twenty feet before they stop. They're the usual river growth."

The strange plants jostled each other, and a solid green wall began to form, stretching as far as one could see to either hand.

They resembled long umbrella handles with

the bare ribs of the frame turned upside down and inserted neatly at regular spaces up all the length.

Something pinged overhead, and a man near by let out a shout as he smashed at his arm.

He removed his hand, and a thick swollen body with long blunt wings dropped into the water with a little plash.

The object floated down and stayed for a moment by the car, slowly revolving in an eddy. It was, even in death, brilliant—as if enamelled in green and red—glittering.

" That's one of those things . . ." began Blatherwick, with a vivid impression of what he had seen early in the afternoon.

Greyne nodded. " This place won't be healthy," he said ; " they live along river banks.

" But mark you, John," he added, " the plants *must* have come first—must have. There's bound to be logical sequence in creating a new dynasty. Always the lower forms precede—it's the rule. We've missed them ; that's all. The mammals'll come later."

His companion was not worrying greatly about order, though he did not relish the hint of what was yet to be. He could not forget the woman's face. He turned his head and saw her a long way off, moving from group to group.

" Let's get back," he suggested.

At that instant a vast melancholy bellowing,

reverberating, hollow, arose from beyond the living screen of vegetation.

There was a half-caught sight of an enormous snake-like head thrown up high above the reeds, ten feet and more above their tallest spire.

Great elastic jaws opened to disclose the terrible armament. Little eyes gleamed. The thin neck arched down towards the bank ; hung over it, menacing. Moisture dripped from the corners of the mouth.

Came a surge of displaced water beneath the dun obscurity of the surface.

Again the creature roared like a fog-horn in a Channel smother.

And this time nigh on fifty feet of a slimy, dripping tubular body was flung up abruptly into sight.

The apparition turned, looping on itself, and its utterance was choked in gurgling explosions of wrath.

Followed a sinister threshing of bodies in giant conflict ; the reeds shook.

A scattered volley of cries greeted that appearance. People, abandoning their venture at salvage, began to wade towards dry land. One man tripped and, not waiting to recover his balance, ran forward in a crouching posture.

The motor 'bus, which had given up the attempt to get any further, was swiftly deserted in four feet of mud and water, the driver carrying one old lady, whose feet trailed ankle-deep.

Blatherwick remembered to feel hurriedly for his cartridges. Where had he put them when he took off his coat ?

" Damn ! the winder's stuck ! " cried Greyne, fumbling with his camera.

He gave up the struggle and peered eagerly.

" Mosasaurus princeps," he declared excitedly, " the ancestor and descendant of the fabled sea serpent. Big ones run up to four times the length of a cricket pitch. And even its palate has teeth. Look how that fool of a skipper is steering ! There . . . I thought so. Why the devil didn't he make for the side ? "

A tug with a long tow of timber-laden barges piled itself up against the partially submerged top of a bridge, like a hen with its chickens clustering round it.

" There'll be trouble now," muttered Greyne, still wrestling, between glances, with his obstinate camera.

" They'll have to learn. They've been blundering about like this too long."

Nothing happened. One or two little figures could be seen on board the steamer, working desperately in the heat. One attempted to cross by the parapet, which had still some three feet above water. He balanced there, arms out, and set himself to face the Surrey side.

Greyne slammed the camera impatiently into the car and started the engine.

After several clumsy attempts he backed for about ten yards till the wheels could grip, and headed for the direction from which they had just come.

His companion twisted about. Would that puny figure stuck up on that narrow ribbon of steel win to safety? More seemed to be involved, thought Blatherwick confusedly, than the success or failure of merely one man. He had the oddest impression of being an onlooker at a supreme test of . . . something.

Some one cried out, and Blatherwick frowned at him. It distracted his attention.

Look! He was beginning to run. Madness, that—the coping couldn't be more than ten inches wide and the water was attractively close.

How the sun sparkled on the ripples just there in mid-stream! What was making those ripples, any way? . . .

The car swung wide at a corner, and Blatherwick had to lean out till his neck ached.

There. The fellow was waving his arms—a lot of people were shouting—had he gone?

No. He was all right—all right—all right—but why was he looking *back?*

"No good wasting time there," said Greyne as the houses shut off the scene. "These streets'll be impassable in a few hours. Do you see the grass coming out of those rents the creepers have made, and the tree ferns? It'll be a swamp by to-night.

"I want to get into the country. I am convinced

paradise which doesn't exist. They'll have to find out how to protect themselves now—if they're going to continue. 'Organise! Damn it, organise!' that's the sort of war-cry they need.

"If it comes for us, shove the spout up and let her rip."

Blatherwick pushed at the bolt, which would *not* shut.

Chilcox looked at them in a puzzled manner as they drew slowly abreast of him, and then let his eyes stray up and down the unfamiliar street as if expecting a 'bus or car to come at any minute to his help.

Blatherwick decided that helmets had advantages over bowler hats—sometimes.

He waved a grimy hand reassuringly and began again to fumble with his weapon, which at last obeyed him. He heaved a sigh of relief and pushed the muzzle outside the hood.

"It's getting much cooler," he announced.

"It is!" snapped Greyne. "What I want to know is, why doesn't your friend Chilcox *do* something?"

"He's in Lloyds," ventured Blatherwick.

"He'll be in Hell in two twos!" retorted the other angrily. "Why doesn't he try to adapt himself—take off his coat, or buy or steal an umbrella?"

He had hardly finished speaking when Chilcox took a step forward. The rather flabby face with

the perplexed blue eyes, which seemed always to be asking a question of the world, was overspread by a wave of intense emotion.

At that second Chilcox appeared to struggle with some majestic and illuminating truth, as if he had at last found a clue to these new experiences.

He sagged at the knees, and his head came "bump" upon a bare portion of the pavement.

In a few moments he was gone, as if he had never been.

"'Survival of the fittest,'" quoth Greyne dispassionately as they drove on. "It's the great law of Nature which we've tried to break, and it can't be done."

A train whistled somewhere, sounding oddly out of place in the prevailing silence of streets devoid of their usual rumble of traffic.

Blatherwick felt rather ill—the air was very stagnant, not at all like the intoxicating atmosphere he had breathed at the beginning of their journey. Cautiously he undid his collar and dropped it furtively; he was not at all sure it was decent. It bounced and rolled a little way in their wake like a diminutive wheel with a gap in its circumference.

He hoped they were on their way back to the laboratory. He'd seen enough.

But Greyne headed north, and began slowly to climb from level to level through an ever-increasing luxuriance of growth. The pterodactyle was left far below, motionless still on its pedestal. Blather-

wick wondered what was its usual food. He began to look about him.

Up and up they bumped, and as they went a church bell commenced to clang ; one by one others took up the tocsin, till all London rang as Paris had done long ago on the eve of the massacre of St. Bartholomew.

" Some one's taking hold," decided Greyne. " Make no mistake, John, this'll be good for humanity in the long run. Like the war period, all working for the common benefit, no more petty bickerings and squabbles.

" The children are all right ; you must have seen that."

Blatherwick nodded. He had. The young scoundrels seemed to imagine the whole play was staged for their especial enjoyment.

Laughing parties of them were everywhere hiding in the rank grasses, stalking each other with sticks for guns, revelling in it all.

" They'll be well looked after," went on Greyne, " and they'll grow up—useful ; more self-reliant, more forebearing, too, after their experiences. I'd like to see ' Boy ' in twenty years ; perhaps I shall."

The little man said nothing. He combed at his eyebrows moodily. He performed this operation carefully, commencing at each corner in turn nearest his insignificant nose, and working outward hair by hair.

They were far up towards Hampstead, moving

always with the clamour of the church bells about them, when a long column of men, variously equipped with picks, shovels, bill-hooks, and a host of other cutting implements, wheeled out of a side turning.

The marchers had taken up a military formation, singing as they swung along, with tools clanging.

"Where to, lads?" hailed Greyne of the foremost.

"Going to clear up!" shouted one fellow, waving a hand down at the heart of the town.

With his movement the breast muscles bulged out of the enlarged armholes of the beribboned waistcoat he wore as sole clothing on the upper part of his body.

He looked extraordinarily alive, reflected Blatherwick, and searched for the right word. "Happy," that was it, he looked happy.

"Unemployed, the whole blasted lot of us, until to-day," the man called back. "Something to *do* now. No more skulking about touting toffs for tanners in the street. The kids'll get a decent meal next Saturday."

He began to troll the chorus of a topical revue. The column took hold of the refrain with a roar, and their voices floated up long after the column had been swallowed by the green foliage.

The car stopped at the top of a steep climb, and Greyne twisted in his seat for a last look. "They'll do!" he cried exultantly, and broke off.

It was then that Blatherwick noticed the bells had ceased their strident summons, except one, with an irritating cracked note, far over in the direction of the Crystal Palace.

The air was cooler now and fresher, but still tropically hot.

London, far below, gave an impression of a vast forest of verdant undergrowth, out of which thrust up black smoke stacks, and here and there the lean finger of a church spire.

The city was dying down there in the heat beneath its living green pall.

A profound silence lay upon all the mighty township. The air was amazingly clear. Away and away towards the Surrey downs a thin white moving plume indicated a train ploughing slowly through a similar world of new life.

"Clong. Clack-clong. Clong," thinly cried the bell near the Crystal Palace, which still shimmered like a diamond, though beyond it a dark veil stretching from earth to heaven seemed to be rushing on the city. "Clong. Clack-clong. Clong." At last even that was still.

"It's like a funeral," whispered Blatherwick, gazing down.

"I never knew that silence could be like this. . . ."

He saw a group of odd creatures, bat-like in flight, which flitted round and round in narrowing circles above a wide silver thread which pierced through the heart of the prevailing verdancy.

Tiny they looked. . . .

" It *is* a funeral," boomed Greyne, " the most solemn funeral of all the ages. But there will be a magnificent re-birth. A new spirit. . . ."

" Wow-wow-wow," barked a dog somewhere below them. " Wow-wow-wow." The outcry was taken up by every beast for miles round till the air would have none of it, and the green clouds above tossed back the uproar to the green waves below.

" Clong. Clack-clong. Clong," wailed the far church bell, recommencing. " Clong. Clack-clong-clong."

* * * * *

" Here it comes, John ! " cried a voice in Blatherwick's ear sharply. The little man jumped round. His finger tightened on the trigger of the rifle, which he had not released, and, " smack," the thing exploded in his hands, the bullet whining off over London.

" Silly ass ! " boomed Greyne. " I didn't mean . . ."

His voice was drowned in a world-splitting report. Splash after splash of vivid crackling lightning ran about the low-lidded sky, and lit up gloomy cloud caverns with ardent flame.

Abruptly London was wiped out in sheet on sheet of warm rain as the heavens opened themselves with a tortured yell, and their contents came down in shouting waterfalls.

And as abruptly the taller man climbed out from

the shelter of the car and stood bareheaded 'neath the lash of the storm.

He began to walk up and down, and shouted, waving his fists at the snarling canopy above.

Blatherwick, crouched upon the seat, watched his friend walk, heedless, to and fro, and saw his lips move, but what he said it was not possible to hear.

Between step and step Greyne halted and raised his hands ; so low the clouds, he seemed to touch them, to hold them off from him in their despite.

Greyne stood thus and cried proudly in a wild voice. " I have sinned ! " he cried. " I have committed the greatest sin recorded in the history of the world, for I have altered the face of the earth against Thy Will." His face was upturned and quick with the passion of his triumph.

" I have sinned," he cried again, " and Thou knowest it ! I am able to control Destiny no less than Thee. . . . Is there nothing that *YOU* can do ? "

He paused a moment as one awaiting an answer to a challenge thrown.

The earth shook to the thunder of the flaring battlements of Heaven, and in a sudden lull the man turned and came back to his friend, and his face was smooth as if he hid a secret till the time be ripe.

CHAPTER VI

GREATLY though London suffered, it was at least spared, in the commencement, those visitations from colossal flesh-eating saurians which so terribly afflicted other parts of the country.

The sleepy little Gloucestershire village of Marley-with-Totterington, to take a typical instance, was in the act of closing its shop windows, Wednesday being "early-closing," when it was plunged abruptly into a vicious warfare.

Half a dozen of the local football team, on their way to Farmer Merriman's meadow, were discussing with the host of the "Stump and Magpie" the best means of circumventing their opponents' curious four half-back defence in the coming match.

The comfortable inn porch was further crowded with a group of determined supporters sheltering from the bitter east wind while they listened in respectful silence to Landlord Farley's ponderous wisdom.

Suddenly the host, better known to his intimates as "The Corporal," though he had never been nearer to a camp than the canteen, interrupted himself and waved one large hand.

"There's an example," he said in his burring dialect, looking over their heads, "them houses.

I always told the missis steak and kidneys didn't agree with me stomach. An hoptical delusion, that's what it was. They seemed to dodge, quiver like, as if they didn't know whether to stay up or fall down.

" Now, if you boys'll try that on more with this Chagford crowd—' selling the dummy," they calls it, some places—you'll find . . ."

What actual result was to have accrued from these tactics no one of the little assembly then heard, for " The Corporal " began amazingly to curse and to swear with such a wealth of implied astonishment, and such a strange look on his solid features, that his companions, football forgotten, turned in a body to see what had occurred.

And as they moved a great gust of heat coming from the *south*, though for weeks past Squire Lambton's gilded weathercock had hardly swerved an inch from the capital E, flowed over them so that they gasped.

In Marley the whole affair was like a transformation scene—a matter of seconds.

First, the slow breath of that furnace ; and immediately following, the earth heaved to an extraordinary uprush of vegetation.

For a moment the ancient black and white half-timbered houses, with the pleasant bow windows, which lined the narrow winding main street, seemed to struggle like drowning swimmers in a golden sea —then they were practically obliterated.

A fetch of warm rain drummed across the thatched

roofs, and the choked water pipes of the " Stump and Magpie's " more modern construction spluttered and vomited two-inch jets into the four-inch mud.

When that had gone, a roaring cloud, over the hills to the north, " The Corporal " perceived with blasphemous incredulity that tufts of stiff grass were waist-high about him where he stood under the shelter of his own porch.

Nor did it end there !

So swift had been the succession of events that the most adventurous of the footballers had done no more than splash to the centre of the street, to gape vacuously in the direction of Foss Cross, when round the corner facing him, the corner where the Home and Colonial Stores had recently inserted an exceedingly up-to-date shop front, poured a most amazing torrent of close-packed dun-coloured bodies.

It is to the credit of every one, also to their advantage, that by the time the strange creatures had reached the little lane running down the side of the inn to the normally insignificant stream whence Marley draws its water supply, the original spectators had vanished and were becoming exceedingly busy.

The landlord had perhaps the first close view of the beasts, because, without an instant's hesitation they swung at a clumsy trot down the lane past his parlour window and halted on the edge of the now greatly swollen watercourse.

In " The Corporal's " opinion they resembled

nothing so much as horses with long trunk-like noses—amazing animals.

As he fumbled for his gun, which was hanging above the case of stuffed owls beside the deep fire-place, he saw them pass within three feet of his face, and particularly noted the length of their slender necks.

"The Corporal's" first impression was substantially correct, for people all over Europe were seeing these things for the first time that day, and all agreed on the near relationship they appeared to bear to the domestic quadruped.

A tapir would, possibly, have been a more scientific description, taking into account the length of the flexible nose; but Marley had not any previous experience of tapirs.

The draper's son, though, a pimply youth of eighteen, who had visited the Zoo round about Christmas time, and had subsequently read largely in books dealing with big-game hunting, made a special point of studying their tracks at the first opportunity, and came later to the admirably correct conclusion that they possessed three toes on each foot instead of those four toes on the fore-foot which is the prerogative of the animal they resembled most nearly.

Greyne, when he saw them at another place and time—saw them in herds of hundreds—recognised them for Palœotherium magnum, unassuming, dull-witted herbivores, and realised that they were con-

siderably smaller than their dim ancestors—as if they had had a hard struggle to exist at all.

The twenty or so that invaded Marley thus unceremoniously, having reached the river bank, seemed disinclined to go further.

" The Corporal," peering, gun in hand, from his bedroom window, watched them snuffing at the earth just beyond his chicken-houses, and he kept up a continuous bellowing, intended to rally the four-score inhabitants of the village to a sense of their responsibilities.

A few of the football team having followed the landlord to the first floor, somewhat to his annoyance, an animated discussion took place as to the best means of dealing with the intruders.

The talk was loud and emphatic, and interrupted at intervals by " The Corporal's " energetic dashes for his bedroom window, out of which he would thrust the greater portion of his bulk, and bawl furiously, before returning to take his part in the debate.

The back premises of those buildings whose gardens ran down to the stream, as most did on the east side of the road, became very popular with all less fortunate householders.

Windows screamed up and heads appeared in ever increasing numbers in answer to the din which issued from the " Stump and Magpie."

Shout answered to shout, and advice became as cheap as eggs in April.

Farley's chickens clucked madly, making noisy, ineffectual attempts to scale the ten-foot wire netting round their run as the flimsy buildings shook to the rubbing of alien bodies.

" 'Ow much did you pay for them pullets o' yourn, Corporal ? " yelled the baker, three houses distant.

" Two pound ten ! " shouted some one gratuitously.

" Three ! " bawled the landlord, who had hopes that the baker would be closing a protracted deal concerning them any day.

" Well, that's two pun ten lost," bellowed the questioner pessimistically, " 'cause they're a-eating of 'em ! " He leaned a little sideways so as to obtain a better view round the corner of his own greenhouse.

He felt pleasurably elated. Only that very afternoon he had decided. . . . The money was in his pocket at the moment. The baker crammed his seedy bowler hat tighter on to his bulging head and reflected piously that the ways of Providence were indeed inscrutable. He had had an idea all along that he was being " done."

" I tell 'ee," shrilled a woman, " they're a-eating of the muck . . . a-eating of it ! "

More shouts and counter-cries.

" It's a salt-lick, I tell you, a salt-lick ! " The high treble of the well-informed draper's son soared up proudly above the clamour. He proceeded to elaborate—to deaf ears.

Meanwhile the trespassers rooted about in dangerous proximity to the fowl-houses, shooting out their tongues to the rich earth, or tearing at mouthfuls of the new plant life, making great play with their abbreviated trunks.

All the time they kept up a running comment of gurgling grunts, jostling each other for tit-bits, and now and then bumping heavily into a tarred corner post, at which " The Corporal " used wicked words, and some of the heads temporarily withdrew.

They appeared to be absolutely " at home." They might have been coming to that identical spot for untold centuries, thought the Vicar, who was peeping over his privet hedge.

But though they paid not the slightest attention to the uproar which their invasion had aroused, and had no use at all for chickens as food—in which matter the baker had maligned them—they had about them an electric air of uneasiness.

It was as if they anticipated violence—more, expected it as a matter of course.

One after another they raised startled heads and stared back along the route they had come. More than once panic seized them, and they crashed heavily across the water into the depths of the bordering copse, in which, though no one noticed the fact at the moment, strange mighty trees were slowly heaving up their glossy crowns to the light. But always they came back and rooted at the soil with fury redoubled for their momentary lapse.

At last, between the landlord's broadcasted vehemence and the occasional inspiration afforded by the captain of the football team, whose heated face showed now and again above " The Corporal's " round shoulder, a plan was evolved.

A mixed body of Marleyites, variously equipped, sallied manfully from the " Stump and Magpie," and began to advance at a determined trot, keeping well together.

There was a slight delay at the outset because the goalkeeper—selected solely for his size—could not be discovered.

One swore to seeing him in the porch just before the landlord had commenced his final lecture on suitable football tactics.

It appeared that the fellow, Brymer by name, had been actually leaning against the inn door when " The Corporal " was advocating " dodging."

There was some idea that he had been holding a tankard. . . . And, yes, there was the pewter—there in the corner, lying in a pool of beer. That made the affair more mysterious—it was so unlike Brymer.

No one could be positive that they had seen him since.

Indecision began to give way to doubt, and doubt to thoughts of caution.

But the licensee, noting all this from his " look-out "—in between furious spasms of verbal activity—and fearing for his livestock, urged them on to

the attack with generous promises, being under some misapprehension as to the reason for their halt.

A straggling cheer ran up and down the houses as they came into sight. Emboldened by this, and fully aware that all Marley had its eye on them, they fell upon the gurgling, guzzling visitants like a whirlwind.

Picks flashed and spades " wumped " and bumped on sleek brown quarters. One of the party, the possessor of three prolific beehives, not finding a suitable weapon in the landlord's premises, had, with the best intentions, but with mixed recollections of his *Beekeeper's Journal*, snatched up a water can, and revolving inside this " The Corporal's " only hair brush, created a lively din, well calculated to deter any animal or insect from swarming anywhere.

Added to this, the martial implications of his name got the better of " The Corporal " as the attackers closed. He uttered a last bawl of exhortation and his gun exploded " whaump," and sprayed the vicinity of the battle impartially with No. 6 shot.

The baker's conservatory crackled musically.

" I got 'un that time for sure ! " he bawled.

There seems no doubt but that, left to themselves, the assailants would have triumphed in spite of the heat.

Hardly had the foremost ranks burst from the unaccustomed grass, which choked the lane, than hesitation spread through the attacked.

For a few moments the odd-looking beasts bunched, looking this way and that, but making no show of resistance to the vigorous blows which were falling fast on them.

A concerted surge took them to mid-stream as "The Corporal" settled to a steady, though erratic, bombardment.

Another such movement must inevitably have started them off at a lumbering gallop, when the only way of retreat open was blocked by a new and formidable arrival.

The Reverend Poulett seems to have seen it first, creeping from the trees, and the impression formed on him was of implacable ruthlessness ; it was his own word.

"Never in my life," he said that afternoon, when talking to Mr. Lambton under novel and uncomfortable conditions, "have I imagined anything so utterly"—he sawed the air, seeking for the expression he wanted—"ruthless. Wickedness incarnate," and there he dropped his voice to a whisper because of the people round him.

And this embodiment of ruthlessness, which so stealthily appeared in a little clearing across the stream, was so huge.

The draper's son estimated it as larger than the largest elephant—and his was an under-estimate.

It sat up there, with the sunlight shining on its thick hide, canted back on tremendous hind limbs, fore-paws limp against its chest, eight feet clear of

the ground, surveying the men and beasts below it out of expressionless saucer-shaped eyes.

At sight of that apparition the tapir-like animals, after one instant's hesitation, turned with a scuttering rush and stampeded, squealing miserably, into, through, and over their human foes behind, knocking down and trampling into the mire all who were unable to avoid them.

Followed indescribable confusion.

The hen-houses collapsed amid a flutter of protesting inmates. A babel of shouts went up from the onlookers.

" Whaump-whaump ! " went " The Corporal's " gun, and the Vicar, who guessed what was coming, hurled his pince-nez impotently in the general direction of the *mêlée* and swore most distinctly.

Then the beast moved.

From statuesque potential destruction it flashed to miracles of lightning ferocity.

It appeared to stoop a trifle and the armed, short fore-paws were almost on the ground ; then, without uttering a sound, it came over the stream, soaring appallingly, so that it bulked black against the sun.

That terrible five-foot head went out as it landed —that lizard-shaped head of power belonging to all the Megalosauri—and it gripped one fugitive in its jaws, about the body, with a noise like the breaking of dry faggots.

The thud of its impact hurled again to the ground those of the attackers who had risen.

It barely grazed the wall which bounded the inn garden ; yet twenty feet of brick and concrete crumbled at the touch, and there it crouched amid the *débris*, busy about its work.

A mongrel brown dog, unlicensed, which the bootmaker had frequently disowned, came in from nowhere with a snarl and leaped straight for the throat.

Up jerked the great head, and from between the sabre-shaped, saw-edged teeth ran crimson trickles.

Up came the head, and with it came the hound locked to its windpipe.

A moment thus, while all watched, and then the fore-paw swung in and sideways, and shredded the puny assailant to wet tatters.

In the hush that followed all heard the clamour of the stampede swing round the corner of the " Stump and Magpie," to die away in doleful echoes up the street. A woman screamed.

Abruptly the invader erupted into roaring rage. It roared, and the noise leaped along the houses, losing itself regretfully on the far hills. It roared, and men fled before it as it turned upon them.

It made of those trim back gardens a welter of desolation.

Raving, huge and machine-like, it swept down upon the Vicar, who stood spell-bound, turned, for no reason but its evil own, in a litter of grass and wood, and went starkly back, bounding like a kangaroo.

All the while it roared, and all the while men shouted inarticulate, broken words.

One man it took between those gleaming teeth as he peered from his first floor window, took him without a pause, with a greedy, sliding snatch as it passed, and on another it slammed one mighty hind foot.

Something, no one will ever know what, caused it to miscalculate its last leap, and with a crash which brought down half the roof, it cannoned heavily into the corner of the house across the lane from " The Magpie "—crashed, swerved and gained the shelter of the wood in two terrific efforts.

" Braump, BANG," went " The Corporal's " gun defiantly ; both barrels at once.

Within four hours the little village of Marley-with-Totterington was deserted.

It was not so much because of the more spectacular happening that people left, but because the houses were unaccountably sliding and crumbling down to destruction on all sides. No one could tell which, if any, were safe. They might have been built of salt.

Then there were curious disappearances. Allnutt and young Dayborn, a promising forward, every one could explain, but there were others . . .

It was the Vicar's opinion, shared by most, that there must be strange things about, which had not yet been discovered—a sort of invisible presence or presences, it seemed, from his guarded and stammered words.

Life at Marley became difficulty—ugly.

Luckily for them a yeoman farmer, who had come to watch the abandoned match, a man with fifteen colonial years to his credit, took charge, and temporarily saved a dangerous situation.

He hustled every one out on to the top of Cooker's Crown, a green bluff, about half a mile off, and set the men to work building a zareba round the camp, of piled thorn bushes.

Search parties were formed to rescue necessary articles from the buildings. Shops were rifled of their contents for the gain of all, in spite of protests.

It was the same man who, when things lagged, struck up hearty chanties and persuaded the Vicar to enlist the services of the choir.

That was a master-stroke. The unfamiliar business went forward much better afterwards.

People went to and fro from the dissolving township, almost eagerly, in close groups, singing as they marched.

But when the draper failed to return from one of these excursions Irwin organised a picked body of guards, who accompanied all workers outside the confines of the growing settlement. "The Corporal," a tower of cheery stability, was given command, and he burnt an amazing amount of powder.

They kept up their singing until an unnaturally early dusk put a stop to their labours, and by then the women and children, at any rate, had been provided for.

It was to the accompaniment of an extremely hearty chorus, disinterred by Irwin in one of the less reputable tropic ports, that they salved the Reverend Poulett's bust of Julius Cæsar. It was, he said, the possession he prized most.

So they bore it up the hill on a rough platform, four carriers and the guard, singing lustily through the twilight.

Something roared far and afar as they halted for the thorn gate to be opened to them. It sounded indescribably melancholy, and only the huge fires which Irwin had lit immediately darkness fell, gave anybody spirit to tackle the simple meal provided.

Their worst troubles, however, were the frequent storms which followed one another at short intervals all night. Storms of a character never experienced by most—more suited to equatorial latitudes.

These gave a great deal of bother, what with the fires and the children and the very few tarpaulins which had been found on the first day.

But, thanks to Irwin, ably backed, as he was, by every one, especially by poor Mrs. Plench, the draper's wife, they passed the night in fair condition, though towards an unexpectedly early dawn, and from then till about 7 a.m., frequent shocks of earthquake alarmed them considerably.

Apart from what might be called routine, the urgent question of water supplies had to be tackled next morning. Also, there was the matter of com-

municating with other towns if, as the Vicar feared, this was not a local visitation.

Both were satisfactorily settled. Volunteers guarded two of Squire Lambton's men who undertook, twice a day, the job of filling the huge water cart at a spot where the river, as it now was, crossed the old Foss Cross road.

Hauling it up the hill presented a serious problem, but the colonial inspanned eight farm horses like a yoke of oxen, and managed that, too, in the end.

Three more volunteers set off in a body for the market town. And Irwin was probably the first to draw up these appeals to "all able-bodied men" which, placed conspicuously at the former cross-roads and on all heights, at length attracted to these lonely outposts scattered across the countryside those people who, living by themselves, would have merely wasted their strength and resource in a single-handed combat, and were badly needed if any sort of order was to be evolved.

In time these appeals, prefaced by the name of the nearest camp and the direction, with distance in yards, fluttering at unexpected turns in the man-high grass, became one of the most familiar phenomena in England.

They were undoubtedly useful, but formed only one link in the new chain which was needful if bewildered peoples were to be bound together into comprehensive and sane communities.

* * * * *

Along the coast, as inland, changes were swift and no less catastrophic.

Extraordinary things happened, especially in the Channel.

The promenade between Hastings and St. Leonards was crowded at one o'clock on that particular afternoon, since a representative squadron of the Fleet had put into the roadstead a few hours previously *en route* for a diplomatic visit to certain imperial possessions.

In spite of the cutting north-east wind, which lashed the sea front and tortured the resisting waves, the boatmen were doing a summer season trade.

There was barely standing room in the roadway opposite the Queen's Hotel, and for a couple of miles towards the sister town.

Half the population of both places had seized the opportunity to inspect the latest engines of maritime war.

Especially were eyes directed towards a point on the far side of the ordered ranks of cruisers, battleships, and lesser craft, where, in deeper water, H.M.S. *Frobisher*, the most powerful fleet unit ever possessed by any nation, and but recently commissioned, rode, unperturbed by the jealousy of the elements, magnificently aloof.

That armed and steel-walled city represented to those land-dwellers the apex of achievement.

She was to them, as she lay there ponderous and

immovable, a symbol of lasting sovereignty—indestructible, dominant.

The sombre silhouette of her fifty-five thousand tons of worked metal dwarfed all else afloat to the category of river craft, though amongst her consorts were the battleships *Glorious* and *King Henry*, themselves no mean opponents for the mightiest adversaries.

There were also nearly a dozen destroyers, lean hounds of death, which attracted no little enthusiasm.

There was a great coming and going on their part, and it gave the worthy citizens intense pleasure to perceive the nimble way in which, having deposited some visiting dignitary at the gangway of one of their greater sisterhood, they spun about and raced again for the pier with a stack-high spray cloud aft of the cleaving forefoot.

The clock in the square showed a few minutes past the hour when, as if by common consent, people began to peel off overcoats and mufflers as hurriedly as they had put them on before.

A stir and buzz of conversation ran through the crowd. When one of the destroyers missed the pier steps on her return journey, sliding thirty feet in a curious sidelong manner as though abruptly diverted by an unexpected current, the sight was jeered loudly.

They did more.

They commenced to heap scorn and abuse on the distant lieut.-commander's head, in much the same

manner that some racing crowds will adopt if a heavily-backed favourite is beaten by a short head after a gallant struggle with some unconsidered "outsider."

They surged from side to side, shouting angrily. Fights sprang up here and there. The rails bordering the steep drop to the beach cracked warningly under the pressure.

Down in the boats plying between ship and shore similar happenings took place.

The owner of the *Beatrice Alice*, single-handed at the oars, wedged in an over-full boatload of expectant holiday-makers, acted like the remainder.

At the first onrush of the heat he allowed his oars to drop, and, grumbling profusely, unwound the knitted red scarf about his neck.

Next he proceeded to abuse all within hearing with startling ferocity. His lop-sided face was suddenly flushed.

An inoffensive matron at his side, to whom he addressed most of his remarks, at first recoiled, giving it loudly as her opinion that he was drunk. Then she rallied and, strongly supported by all who had paid their five shillings for the trip, fell upon him, both verbally and actually.

A precarious truce being at last declared, the *Beatrice Alice* proceeded, only to find that during the altercation some unfamiliar eddy had carried the antagonists nearly a quarter of a mile out of their course.

All the other rowing boats seemed to be in the same predicament. In spite of violent efforts, they were being drawn swiftly down the coast ; already St. Leonard's pier was almost abreast.

" Never knew such an 'ell of a lot of seaweed about," swore the boatman, disentangling his oar for the third time from a clump of clinging tendrils.

" Least not at 'igh tide," he amended, with a desire to retrieve his reputation for sobriety.

" 'S not high tide," remarked one of his passengers ; " look at the beach."

The fellow turned a startled face over his shoulder and saw that fifteen yards of Sussex sand shewed a full four hours too soon.

" My oath ! " he cried, and stood up, carefully balancing himself. " What the everlasting blazes," he demanded, peering under his hand, " is that blooming destroyer doing ? "

The craft answered the question in person. She had turned from the side of one of the battleships and was performing the most erratic evolutions.

Suddenly, as if abandoning the struggle, she came down upon them like a thunderbolt, missed their bows by an oar's length, and rushed on.

Hardly had those in the boat time to turn their heads to watch her progress than the slim, sinister shape, making forty knots, stopped short in mid-career—stopped as if she had run into a wall—shivered like a horse, and concertinaed into jagged slithers.

"My oath!" shouted the boatman again. "There's twenty foot of water just there. I tells you," he appealed helplessly, "there's twenty foot of water. What '*as* she hit?"

He stared at the water and saw that its surface was clotted with weed—thick stemmed weed, denoting but little depth, which leaping into evidence held everything fast against the suck of a tide like a mill race.

He looked round and discovered that they had been drawn to within ten yards of the Frobisher's towering sides.

He saw an ominous line along her flank, a wet and shining line, but did not at once realise what it meant.

The whole scene became in an instant one of furious, disorderly activity, where had been disciplined routine.

Those out in the roadstead saw some terrible panic seize on those on shore. Looking up, they perceived strange whirling bodies which fell upon the packed thousands from above.

They heard the shouts and din of a multitude in the grip of fear. They sensed the awful pressure of a crowd which battles. They saw the barriers give to that mad pressure, and saw the human stream pour over the side to where should have been three feet of lapping tide, which now was gone.

And those on shore, watching from windows along

the front, saw the first catastrophe attend the destroyer.

They shouted as she struck, and shouting perceived the unaccustomed weeds which strangled the water about her twisted framework.

They saw the sluggish surface boil far and near to the furious passage of unseen bodies.

Arose then the first whisper, like a wind in the tops of a fir wood, which grew and grew to a strident yelling.

Those who found time to watch saw incredible heads heave suddenly above the weeds, monstrous, nightmare heads, huge, ugly and malevolent.

Saw them hurl themselves on every living thing.

The scene changed again, or had added to its lawlessness a further element of carnage. Great bodies crept implacably upon the boats which could not move. Enormous, jostling creatures, eighty to ninety feet in length, with gigantic crocodile jaws, or with serpent heads on glittering, scaly necks.

The cries from those at sea mingled with the terror of those on land and went wailing up to the livid heavens. Now and then a rifle cracked, but not frequently.

And yet the final terror was not reached. And still that strident clamour of non-human throats dominated all.

The sea gave up its dead.

With a last tormented shriek the sea, the familiar lawful sea, drew away to right and left in two liquid

hills, whose crests were turned back as if striving to remain in spite of some unalterable edict.

The rusted skeletons of long drowned hulks reared themselves, weed clad, out of a brown and oozy plain which stretched as far as eye could reach, and on which strange amphibious creatures wallowed in the scattered shallow pools.

From shore to shore and far to north and south as the waters went, the land appeared from its age-long grave, and the swollen fish dropped sullenly from uncovered port-holes.

And over in front of Hastings that most tremendous instrument of a warrior nation remained for a brief second upright, with all flags aflutter, in the deep ooze to which her sisters had swiftly toppled.

Nigh on sixty thousand tons of obedient fury, the great battle cruiser tottered for a space, upheld by very reason of her weight. And as she hesitated thus, while still the crowds along the shore were rent with panic, one great turret-gun, loaded in preparation for a royal visit, roared out as if in salute to an invisible majesty.

It was the first and last time the voice of H.M.S. *Frobisher* was heard. For with the bright green flash of the lyddite she came down. Came down with the headlong, slithering fall of some mighty temple—and those in the *Beatrice Alice* saw her coming as they looked up and watched her mast heads reel across the sky. . . .

* * * * *

The more central portion of England became the focal point of ever-increasing subterranean tremors.

These culminated in the late afternoon of the first day, when, at a spot about a mile to the north of the Malvern Beacon, in Worcestershire, a great column of steam poured with terrific noise from a profound opening in the ground about fifty yards in width.

At first there were not lacking visitors to view such a strange sight. Many, braving the heat and the unfamiliar conditions, collected about the fissure and cautiously peered into the depths.

But with the swift advent of darkness the thunders grew till they astonished the inhabitants of the whole county.

With each successive convulsion a huge cloud of fine dust was spewed forth, which hung motionless above the county town.

Hour by hour the spasms waxed more and more vehement till the ground shook over a radius of fifty miles, and a terrified population choked the grass-grown roads in desperate flight.

Towards dawn the enveloping gritty darkness was luridly rent by flashes of crimson flame, and all hoped that the eruption had reached its height.

Windows in far distant Oxford, Crewe and Bristol, shook as to the continuous discharge of cannon. Fierce winds leaped up from the south, beating violently about the district, bringing drenching squalls. And this was but the rehearsal. . . .

Somewhere about six o'clock in the morning three introductory explosions were succeeded by a frightful convulsion which, in one supreme effort, attended by an unprecedented uprush of fire, tore away bodily nearly half a square mile of the earth's surface and scattered it to the winds.

The grinding shock of that final spasm was felt from Berwick to The Start.

There was no dawn in Worcestershire, and Scotland only saw the light through a veil which filtered slowly down, covering everything with ashes.

* * * * *

Other parts of the world suffered as much, or more.

Paris, with the whole of the South of France, saw in the haze of the first heat what appeared to be a fiery cloud advancing against it out of Africa.

The cloud settled down over hundreds of miles of country. A living cloud of those same huge, bejewelled flies, scattered fragments of which cloud made their way to London and further.

There was no avoiding them.

Somehow or other the chief city in France caught fire during the resultant confusion, and the smoke of the burning rolled across Belgium.

In the Far East frenzied natives threw themselves by thousands into the tepid ocean, being urged by a frantic desire to have done with fear.

America was shaken by earthquakes compared

with which the occurrence in England was insignificant and harmless.

The very bed of the great oceans was moved, here and there, up to the surface.

Far-famed and fabled Lemuria reappeared, stretching from Madagascar nearly to the island continent.

In other places the waters returned once more to cover dry land.

The Desert of Sahara became one shallow sea with the Mediterranean.

The north of Australia sunk beneath a tidal wave and did not reappear.

* * * * *

But even in face of these titanic alterations humanity turned gradually amid the destruction of their landmarks to a fresh beginning.

Without hope and with but little heart to achieve, mankind stood once more before the weary ladder leading to the mastery of the world.

CHAPTER VII

SULLENLY the storm which had broken upon London, the first of many, drifted away to the north, and the sun transformed the malevolent cloud mountains to a retreating glory of piled white and gold.

As soon as possible Greyne coaxed the engine of their car into life, and they churned off through the slush, heading, till they were clear of London, somewhat to the south of west.

After a short run a signboard, almost hidden in a wealth of creeper, attracted the driver's eye.

"Oil," he announced, stopping short, and dived for the interior of the garage in search of supplies.

Blatherwick, watching him go, thought what a desperado he looked. His once white flannel shirt had been soaked and now steamed about him, his helmet was over one ear, and his trousers were shapeless and stained. His general air was one of truculent ferocity as he halted a moment and peered to right and left before finally entering the doorway.

The smaller man, carefully nursing the re-loaded weapon, looked, had he but known it, rather pathetic.

While waiting for his friend he stripped himself

to his soiled silk shirt, wound his braces about the tops of his trousers, and in the operation catching sight of his spats ripped them impatiently from his feet.

Then he leaned against the car, looking wearily in front of him.

He remembered how his acquaintances used to say he over-acted the part of professor, and his lips twisted to a smile.

He was beginning to persuade himself that he felt extremely lawless. There seemed nothing in the way of authority remaining. Any crime, he imagined, might be committed with impunity.

Blatherwick hoped he looked as ferocious as he tried to believe he was, in spite of his fatigue. But he did not. Possibly it was his long and straggling hair which offset the menace of his eyebrows; possibly it was the bewildered expression in his eyes —he only looked pathetic.

At last Greyne reappeared, and they went on.

Rather before five o'clock by the chronometer fastened to the dashboard the sun began to wheel towards the horizon.

They were now, as far as could be calculated, some twenty miles from Hampstead, possibly in the neighbourhood of Uxbridge.

For the last two hours they had been bumping along, with the monotonous swish-swish of the grasses against the hood acting as a lullaby.

More than once they had run off the road into the

ditch, and in one of these mishaps Blatherwick lost his discarded clothes, on which he had been sitting for greater security, as in the process of reloading the mass of baggage they were overlooked.

It was extraordinarily quiet when Greyne stopped the motor ; nothing but the soft moaning of the wind broke the silence.

Suddenly Blatherwick jerked his head over his shoulder. He had a vivid impression that they were being watched, that furtive presences skulked among the wind-blown grass alongside. But nothing revealed itself.

With what seemed to the little man unnecessary haste a rough camp was formed. One roll of luggage disgorged waterproof sheets which fitted on to pegs on the outside of the framework of the hood, forming a small low-roofed tent when in position. Another yielded blankets and harsh canvas pillows, at which Blatherwick looked askance.

Thermos flasks and tins of all shapes were dug out of other hiding places.

At last everything was prepared except a fire, and Greyne decided that, as he had undertaken to do all cooking that might be needful, he could not be expected to do the menial work of scullery maid.

Later Blatherwick, scrambling through the prairie growth all round them with a huge armful of sticks, discovered there to be a reason for the hurry, for abruptly darkness overtook him and he missed his way. Only by much shouting was he at

length able to find the outfit, where he discovered his companion busy with a large notebook by the light of a flickering candle.

"Chuck it down, my son!" ordered Greyne as the dishevelled figure appeared. "You're only just in time. Won't do to be without a fire—in case. Lamp's gone 'phut,'" he concluded, scribbling swiftly. "No carbide, or else the water got at it."

For a moment his listener had an uneasy impression that at any moment the car might dissolve before his eyes, as the houses were doing in London and, for all he knew, everywhere.

After all, a car could not be said to be any more suitable than anything else to this new scenery, and rather less likely to have been invented by any human being brought up in it than houses.

The writer looked up and saw the perplexity on his face.

"Come on," he said, throwing the notebook to one side, "let's see how these patent lighters act. By the way, John," he added, "you needn't think that I've forgotten any details. I guessed what you were thinking.

"This car and stuff"—he waved his hand—"is as safe as the laboratory. I took good care of *that*.

"I've thought the mental image of these things so thoroughly into the organism that they are a part of every picture which it makes out of my suggestions.

"Of course, if *we* were to smash 'em up in any way. . . ."

He did not pursue the subject, and shortly the two were seated beside a leaping fire, chewing rather tasteless meat tablets, and occasionally sipping boiling coffee from one of the flasks.

"About a mile before we stopped," commenced Blatherwick, setting down his empty cup and adjusting himself more comfortably to a deep rut, "did you see that tree?"

The other nodded. "Looked as if it had been enamelled. I didn't like to point it out to you."

He prodded a stick into the bowl of his pipe and blew noisily before continuing.

"Some of those flies. Lucky for us they go to bed when it's getting dusk."

"Yes. But look here. When that man killed one this afternoon down by the Embankment, it didn't disappear or do anything like that. . . ."

"We created it," boomed Greyne, sitting up and throwing a handful of wood on to the fire.

"It belongs to *our* present. But those men. . . . They were beyond our control. We have nothing to do with their parts in this play. We merely give 'em the scenery and let them write their own lines."

"Ah!" muttered Blatherwick.

He looked out unhappily into the darkness, which stalked about them as the flames flickered, and the strange appearance of a newly-risen moon attracted his attention.

"It's very early for sunset," he exclaimed. "And now there's a moon larger than I ever saw before. . . ."

His companion puffed out a great cloud of smoke and turned his head.

Indeed, the sight was magnificent.

A great silver orb—at a guess, thought Greyne, twice its normal diameter—was heaving its shoulder slowly up above the trees.

It seemed luminous with a kind of wavering phosphorescence—a splendid silvery phosphorescence—and across its lower rim, as it rose, danced fantastic shadows.

"Conservation of energy, my son," he declared round the stem of his pipe. "This heat means there's a devil of a lot of energy being expended, and it's got to come from somewhere."

"Look at the steam—there against the bottom edge of it. All coming out of the earth. Put your hand down anywhere and feel."

Blatherwick did so and discovered the earth to be almost uncomfortably hot.

"Even now it's hotter than the tropics," Greyne resumed. "And then there's this swarming plant life everywhere and other things. All means energy being used up.

"If you want certain effects, John, you must have certain things to start with. No smoke without the fire first, that sort of idea."

"Ah!" replied his interlocutor, caressing his

eyebrows. "Like my poor brother used to say, 'You can't expect to live like a Bank Director unless you've got a bank balance.'"

"Exactly. Well, we're accumulating a bank balance—of heat and plants and so forth. Volcanoes, I dare say, presently, and probably dry land between us and Europe." He gestured in the supposed direction of the Continent. "It used to be so—no English Channel at all. 'Boy' 'd be in his element here," he added inconsequentially. "He's just become a scout.

"And when we've got the bank balance, so to speak," he continued, "we'll be able live like Bank Directors on our dividends. Primitive sort of life, though, and other enemies than financial worries. But devilish good for us all."

"I wish to Heaven you'd be more practical," cried Blatherwick. "How do you know . . . ? You can't be *certain* that this is what the world would have been like after an extra three million years or so of antediluvian conditions. You've nothing to go by. What sort of relation do you really imagine this all bears to the actual facts? That brain affair of yours has never been tested on a big question. You said so yourself. It may be 'making this up,' as children say."

"It's good for you anyhow," retorted Greyne angrily. "You're getting much more human. Quite lively. If your hair were trimmed a bit. . . . As for facts, I'll bet you it's much nearer the facts

than the reality is to the paradise these reformers used to promise us if we'd only give 'em a loose rein ! "

He stopped and kicked the fire into a blaze.

Now that the moon was clear of the earth her smouldering light made everything stand out nearly as in daylight, except that the long shadows had an odd thin look as if even more unsubstantial than shadows really are.

Something creaked overhead, far up, and cried unmusically. One rather podgy hand stretched out towards the rifle.

The stars were like golden oranges embedded in a dark blue velvet curtain.

" Conservation of the Moment of Momentum," boomed the voice from across the fire. " It all comes back to that. It's the supreme principle of dynamics.

" We've asked for and got things which want energy to produce and keep going, so we had to find the energy.

" That explains your early sunset and your moon, which, by the way, looks as if there might be a thin atmosphere about it—and your stars. Look at the Great Bear."

It was, Blatherwick noticed, disarranged from what he remembered. The orange globes seemed closer together. The whole constellation appeared more compact. So did every group of stars in the sky, he decided. They looked distinctly unusual.

" I should say," boomed Greyne, " that the earth

is turning on its axis now in about sixteen hours instead of the usual twenty-four.

"And the moon's closer—much. It was going away from us for millions of years.

"You see," he explained, "the earth gradually slowed down and the moon slid further and further into space as energy was lost. The world got progressively cooler and would only here and there support the luxuriant trees and ferns and animals it used to produce so plentifully, and the stars spread out.

"We've asked for a condition of affairs when there was energy and to spare—so we've got it, or are getting it. We have moved the very stars out of their courses," he boomed, "which even He cannot, or dare not, do."

Blatherwick stirred.

The speaker paused at gaze and then resumed.

"We're far nearer to-day, in effect, to the time when the earth solidified out of the original nebula. And we've certain results from that. We're turning quicker—have greater internal heat, and in consequence possess that latent force in the combination which was absolutely necessary before we *could* have our results.

"Funny how one overlooks vital details when asking for things, isn't it? I had temporarily forgotten what must follow when I pushed over that lever."

For a space Blatherwick did not answer. In fact

he was silent so long that Greyne became somewhat annoyed.

"You've a great capacity for silence," he grumbled. "I believe you don't appreciate the grandeur of it all."

"Appreciate," murmured his friend, listening uneasily to a sound which seemed to come from a long way off.

"Do you realise that we have enormous reserves of Force behind us to-day?" cried the bigger man.

"The destination of that Force has puzzled me all my life," he went on, without waiting for an answer.

"Where's it all going to? Day and night we're pouring it out. Always have been. You can't destroy, or lose, Force any more than you can destroy matter.

"We know that the visible universe is a vast machine for the dissipation of energy. We know that the process must have had a beginning in time, and that all things tend to a final and helpless equilibrium.

"Where does it all go? And whence come?

"To me," he cried, "it is one of the greatest factors arguing in favour of an unseen world . . . the hiatus might be bridged by some conception of atomic vortices of Force. I don't know.

"Why should not everything visible be due to force arrested on its way into space—eddies in

infinity taking on certain well-known shapes ? . . . It is possible."

Blatherwick threw his cigarette into the fire and lay on the broad of his back staring up at the moon. A more than usually solid shadow, with a long thin neck, drifted across it as he watched.

"We were at a disadvantage in 1926," continued Greyne, standing up and challenging the night with his great nose, "because we were evidently living during one of those times of pause in the creative work.

"Incalculable, recurrent periods when nothing new seems to be in view. . . .

"As if Nature and the Unseen were exhausted and could do no more—satisfied they could not have been !

"These times have been before, lasting for thousands upon scores of thousands of years, and always their threat of sterility has been splendidly countered.

"The idea of a final achievement with man was, and is, a fallacy.

"If we counted our lives by ages instead of years, we might attain to some faint conception of what is going on . . . the theory of the Origin of Species might be modified.

"In the twentieth century creation groaned under the tyrannous inventions of man.

"Who knows but that some disease for which humanity shall be able to find no cure will weaken

and eventually drive mankind from the earth—as the reptilian Lords of God's ways were driven after a reign of three hundred thousand years ?

" Falling birth rate and rising death rate, and all of us weaker and less able to compete with life, while we did live, eh ? It wouldn't take so very long."

The shadows climbed up and down the speaker's form as he gesticulated.

" Who dare deny," he boomed, " the possibility, nay, the probability, of the coming of a new form of life on earth—greater than man, and more merciful ? "

Blatherwick stirred and sat up. He wished his friend was not so exciting. That was the third cigarette he had thrown away half smoked, and there were very few left. It hardly crossed his mind that he should relight the charred stump.

" When we go back," said Greyne, coming to the fire—and his companion's face brightened at the words, though he did not know what would be remaining by then—" we shall see the process in operation. Man wants a flame of fire within him if his body is not to triumph over his spirit and the two be lost together in the same pit."

Long after, as Blatherwick lay on his unusual bed, he heard the unmistakable drone of a flight of aeroplanes away up towards the stars.

The moon had sunk and it was very dark.

Sleepily he turned his head to where Greyne, who

had divided the hours into watches, bulked black against the embers.

" It would be rather terrible," he murmured, " to be eternal in a finite world."

A grunt answered him.

The aeroplanes apparently swung round, for the throbbing of their engines, which had died away, was very clear once more.

" Man's first bid for the mastery," he made up his mind, and, turning on his side, at length slept.

* * * * *

" I wish you wouldn't knock so loud," growled the little man several hours later, blinking at an incredible sunrise.

His head came in collision with some pointed object, and he murmured to himself.

Then he sat up reluctantly and realised where he was. His face felt uncomfortable—prickly. He remembered he had brought nothing with him—not even a razor.

" I wouldn't mind a cup of tea," he said aloud, reverting to his waking dream.

" That," boomed Greyne from a little distance, " was an earthquake. Been going on more or less all night. You've had four hours' extremely good sleep, let me tell you, more than you'd have had at home after one of your poker parties."

Blatherwick looked at his watch, put it to his ear, looked at it again. Yes, it was going. But there must be something wrong.

"It's only one o'clock," he complained.

Greyne fiddled with an instrument which he was pointing at the sun, and made some minor adjustments before he answered.

"Eight-hour night only now," he explained. "And we'll have an eight-hour day, till about 9 a.m. old time. Then dark again till five in the afternoon, more or less, and so on. You'll have to forget the old arrangement; your watch won't be much use to you."

As he talked he knelt and blew the fire into a glow.

"Been finding out where we are," he gasped between puffs. "I think we'll strike a trifle more to the south—Piltdown way."

His companion, wrestling with his shoes, which seemed to have shrunk, did not much care where they went; Piltdown or any other down was all the same to him if they were not going back just yet.

"A sizeable earthquake," resumed Greyne, gathering various odds and ends to make a meal.

"If you take a look round that big tree, which by the way is distinctly a Sequoia, such as we used to associate only with California and the sub-tropics, you'll see some smoke.

"Somewhere in the direction of Wales, I should say. There's going to be an eruption, by the way. it's shooting up."

Blatherwick walked stiffly a few yards to one side

and saw, high up and strongly illuminated by the rising sun, a huge black cloud. It was, apparently, at an immense distance and second by second fresh balls of smoke shot up to join it after the manner of steam ejected by a train leaving a station.

" Lucky the wind's the other way," said Greyne, joining him, and added : " If you go down that slope you'll find a pool. Here's a bit of soap and a towel, but take care not to keep your head under too long ; I saw some funny things at the bottom. And take this rifle. . . ."

" I suppose," thought the small man as he dried himself after a hurried dip, " that, in a way, I *am* partly responsible for all this ! "

The idea had lain at the back of his mind ever since the beginning of their adventure, but the precautions necessary to such an ordinary operation as washing had brought it well to the front.

" If I had refused to help," he mused, but knew immediately that by no possibility could he have stood up against his friend.

Suddenly he felt he knew where he had failed. " If my will had been stronger," he complained, " it might never have happened."

" I might have made such a vivid mental picture of things as they were that his couldn't have altered them."

He beat his hands together in a spasm of self-reproach and the soap bounded into the pond.

" That's where I failed," he cried. " I had as

much creative power in my thought as he had, and I didn't exert it to the full.

"I could have stopped all this—all of it." He scrambled to his knees, an untidy figure, and watched the smoke cloud gather in the zenith.

"All these people . . . " he reflected. "My fault . . . mine . . . mine. I shirked responsibility. I didn't see where I was being led. How could I ?" he appealed to the mounting sun.

The heat was very great, and Blatherwick remembered that he had left his helmet by the car.

"Responsibility," he muttered again as he turned, and once—"the creative power of thought."

"I'll stick to him," he decided with a new determination. "At least, I may be able to stop him doing something else. I *ought* to have known," he wailed, and came late to the unappetising breakfast.

"Much fresher to-day," cried Greyne, as his companion sat down. "I don't know why you're looking so gloomy. You'd better hurry, my son. We've got to be on the move pretty soon.

"All that oxygen which upset you at the start was, to continue your brother's simile, one of our deposits in the bank.

"So was the sudden terrific heat and the rain. All preparation for a gigantic effort on the part of nature. Did you ever *see* anything like the way the stuff grew ?"

Blatherwick chewed at a lozenge affair in stubborn silence. "My fault," he reflected.

"The decay was almost as quick," continued Greyne, searching for his tobacco pouch; "had to be, in order to get the picture and the bank balance completed. That meant masses of carbonic gas in the air. I remember you said it made your headache. It made some people pretty cross, I daresay—affected their tempers. More of it by the water, of course. Damn these matches.

"Now," he concluded, "the plants are taking that all back out of the atmosphere; and the heat, having done its work, has subsided a good deal."

Blatherwick frowned at the speaker. He felt Greyne had done him an injury. He'd never be able to forget that a stronger will had led him to take part in things, to help in them, when he was all along suspicious that the whole idea was wrong. He'd always been so careful not to hurt anybody—all his life—not even their feelings.

A possible loop-hole of escape from his self-condemnation opened his mouth.

"All these people," he asked, scowling in the direction of the ominous darkness across the horizon, "and others. *They* didn't want it to happen. Why didn't their thoughts affect matters when you opened the grating over the stairs to come away. The circuit was broken then and you said it was sensitive to all waves?"

Greyne stretched himself and began to bundle things together.

"Too late by then," he declared. "That brain is like a man listening to a telephone now. But there are certain advantages after it has been once engaged. It can only listen to one conversation or a group of conversations at a time, and there's no cutting in—or off. Though I might, possibly, be able to do something; if the need was urgent enough," he concluded thoughtfully.

The bushy eyebrows descended further—so there was no hope that way. They couldn't have helped themselves. . . . He wanted some one to tell him he was wrong.

The last knapsack had been strapped to the broken footboard before Blatherwick found opportunity to say what he desperately wanted to say.

There was such a quantity of baggage, and so great a number of small articles to be squeezed into shapeless parcels that he was kept busy, with the sweat pouring down his face, until the engine was clattering to be at work with the driver seated at the wheel.

Then Blatherwick paused with one foot on the board, and wiping the back of his hand across his eyes, stared wistfully to the north-west.

"My poor brother used to say," he began, and he hoped against hope that his listener would contradict him, "that results were really more important than motives. As one was personal

and the other generally affected all sorts of people."

"Your remarkable relative—rest him in peace—is right again!" cried the taller man cheerily.

"It's not much excuse, after you've held up a post office and shot the cashier, to say that you wanted the money to endow a child's cot in a nursing home.

"Neither would the coroner laugh if you told him that you'd put some one with pneumonia and a temperature of one hundred and seven degrees into a cold bath in order to cool them down."

There should, thought Blatherwick drearily, be a place for "methods" in all this.

He was unable to come to a decision about their bearing at the moment, because, with a series of loud reports, all the tyres burst as he was wriggling down on to the cushions.

"Not a spare one to be had, either," said Greyne, after a lengthy inspection. "And, by Jove, there's no repair outfit!" he concluded.

"We *may* be near a town," he conceded to his companion's suggestion, "but there ain't likely to be a lot of it left."

Rage suddenly took the tall lean man by the throat; he kicked and kicked at the flabby india-rubber till his toe ached.

"We'll go on the rims!" he swore, and on the rims they went, jolting, banging and skidding through undergrowth reaching far above their helmets.

How many times they lost the road, if, indeed, they were even on it, neither could afterwards tell.

Hedges were gone, and in their place was either grass, which they pushed through, or woods of huge-girthed trees, which they did their best to avoid.

Some time after they had set off, a tremendous agitation of the earth brought their eyes to the westward, and they saw the night-dark horizon lit luridly from beneath.

"I think the picture is pretty well complete," announced Greyne once as they crawled over a ridge. "I can see nothing resembling anything we used to know." He seemed complacent. "That last shock brought all remaining houses down, probably. What? No. There'll be nobody hurt—unless some fools refused to take warning."

"Ah!" remarked the other. He pointed down the slope.

"That's a nice house," he said with a touch of malice. "Elizabethan, by the chimneys." He felt relieved.

"Damnation!" ejaculated Greyne as he turned his head. "Flowers," he cried, "and pigeons, or I'm drunk! And there's a tarred road!" He gazed stupidly at the extraordinary phenomena.

"Aren't you going down?" queried his companion. "I'd like a decent meal."

In silence the driver let the car feel the gradient, and came, after splashing through a brook, to

imposing iron gates guarding a trim lawn. Looking through the grill, they saw a couple of terriers running round and round in circles after numerous golf balls which some unseen person was throwing for their amusement.

CHAPTER VIII

For what appeared to Blatherwick an unnecessarily long time they waited, with the blistered bonnet of the car almost touching the ironwork.

He was impatient to discover what sort of place this might be.

It was startlingly an oasis of normality in a changing world, and the little man ached for the rest and orderly comfort which it promised.

Pigeons whirled overhead in noisy flight. The two dogs barked excitedly at their play ; it all seemed so sane, balanced and ordinary.

Suddenly he shivered. It was amazingly cold.

Yet Greyne made no move. His companion looked at him in surprise. That great hawk-like nose gave to the lean face an expression almost of resentment. Blatherwick, watching those quick piercing glances, had an idea that he did definitely resent this unexpected survival.

For an instant it looked as if he would turn the car and drive off. He began to fumble with the steering wheel, and Blatherwick found the courage to make an angry protest.

It was not, however, a very loud objection, and Greyne either did not hear, or ignored his companion.

The beat of the engine quickened and Blatherwick sighed.

Then one of the many golf balls rolled under the gate, and the puppy, in hot pursuit, knocked his tender muzzle against the metal and set up a dolorous howling.

A deep voice called out in sympathy, and a very giant of a man came swiftly round the corner of the wall.

Seeing the newcomers, he stopped abruptly, but only for a moment.

With an exclamation he ran to the entrance, his fawn-coloured "British warm," of a smooth material, billowing about him, and had the gates back in a trice.

"Come in. Come in," he called hospitably. "By Jove, you've been through it!" he added, taking in details with a glance. "Which are you from?"

Blatherwick liked him at first sight; such a vast mug of a face. As he stood there waving to them he seemed so solid and secure. Even the gaiters and riding breeches, of a large black and white check, did not offend the eye of the former "Corinthian."

Of one thing the smallest of the group of three could not help but be envious—this fellow's plump pink cheeks were so perfectly shaved. "Like a bookmaker," reflected Blatherwick, a trifle acidly, and rubbed his own bristly jowl disconsolately.

"Come in. Come in," repeated the apparent

owner of the property, and after a further hesitation Greyne obeyed the invitation, though with an appearance of regret.

"Lucky you fellows had those sun hats handy," said the man as he walked beside the clanking machinery. "There's been a lot of trouble from sunstroke—out there." He jerked his grey cap in the direction of the hill which cut off the view on one side.

"Here we are," he went on. "Leave the 'bus at the front door and come right up. I daresay you're ready for a meal."

Blatherwick agreed promptly, but his partner was staring into the panelled hall, and did not answer.

"Which are you from?" enquired the host once more, pressing a bell. "You look as if you'd had a bad time."

"I don't quite know what you mean," smiled his interlocutor. "It is extremely good of you to take us in like this," he continued, with a return to his old precise professional mannerisms. "To whom are we indebted?"

"Vandredon," replied the giant, "that's my name. Peter Vandredon, though my mother, for reasons connected with my distant childhood, usually calls me 'Threeadick.' I thought you must be from one of the camps," he continued. "Two or three have sprung up round about during the night, and they send in to us for milk and so forth. They've hardly anything to eat, poor devils! Navy

man, aren't you?" he addressed Greyne. The other shook his head.

By now the three were in the hall. It was like a distributing depôt. Piles of vegetables, cans of milk, both empty and full, blankets, baskets of eggs, and innumerable other articles were stacked on every side, and reaching up to the landing running round all four walls. About this mass of requisites people bustled continually, either adding to it or taking away what they liked.

"Jane thought of all this," said the giant, surveying the scene with a cheery smile. "It was my turn off duty; that's why I was so lucky as to be in the garden, or you might not have given us this pleasure."

He was looking at Greyne as he spoke, and Blatherwick wondered if he had noticed the reluctance he himself marvelled over.

"No, we're not from any camp," the little man began as the silence lengthened uncomfortably. "We are . . ."

"Investigating," cut in Greyne brusquely; "collecting data."

"So?" Mr. Vandredon seemed disappointed. "I imagined you were a kind of perambulating relief committee. We've got a few running, but not enough. Give us time, though. . . ."

He had turned slightly and was regarding the dilapidated vehicle by the steps.

One of those who had come in her realised that,

after all, they had an enormous quantity of food and stuff on board—sufficient for weeks.

"We are our own relief committee," remarked Greyne sharply, "and there won't be much left by the time we've finished."

Mr. Vandredon appeared puzzled, but just at that moment a servant disentangled herself from the busy crowd and approached her master. He gave brief directions and turned to lead the way up.

"There'll be something to eat very soon," he announced. "You could do with a bath apiece first, though—what?"

Abruptly Blatherwick remembered his deficiencies and made a clumsy effort to slip his braces over his shoulders. It was a failure.

"I don't understand," boomed Greyne, coming to a halt on one low, broad stair.

He gestured. "Why is all this still here? It's not safe; any way, you'd better clear them out. And why is it so cold?"

He peered down on to the heads of the workers, and more than astonishment tightened his lips.

"The last week in March," replied Mr. "Threeadick," stopping in his turn, "is often far from warm. As for being safe, I think it is—yes, I am positive it is. Jane has seen to that."

"And who's Jane?" Greyne could look very unpleasant when he wished. "Didn't anything *at all* happen yesterday afternoon? Or did Jane look after that, too?"

Blatherwick did not remember at first having seen his friend sneer before.

Then his memory recalled to him the way Greyne had talked about those who might or might not have been injured in the final earthquake shock—"fools," he had called them.

Mr. Vandredon was speaking.

"Something *started* to happen," he emphasised, "at about one o'clock. But Jane simply would not allow it. She said it was a wave of evil. She has a remarkable will, or perhaps I should say brain, as you may find out when you're ready."

"Who *is* Jane?" Greyne was growing impatient. He looked at a loss.

"My mother," replied Mr. Vandredon quietly, but his eyes carried a certain threat.

"Do you mean to tell me," boomed Greyne, with a hint of scorn, as they came on to the landing, "that your mother . . ."

Mr. Vandredon nodded. "She has many remarkable qualities," he replied. "An indomitable belief in the power of 'right' to achieve being one; and another a gift, which I do not know how to describe, of transmuting belief into results.

"But I must not keep you talking here. I will only say it is entirely owing to my mother—of that I am very sure—that we were spared the terrible catastrophe which seems to have been otherwise universal. I still hope to hear of further instances

but I fear the misery is everywhere, and everywhere as heartbreaking.

" We count ourselves fortunate indeed in being able to help the poor wretches near us."

With a courteous inclination of his head he left them.

A maid came from an archway leading to another flight and took them in charge. Within half an hour the couple, bathed, clothed in borrowed suits, and even shaved, were putting the finishing touches to their dressing before an enormous wardrobe mirror.

" It's lucky," said Blatherwick, glancing at his reflection, " that the gardener's son has such an educated taste in clothes. Vandredon's would have fitted you nicely," he complained. " I can't think why you didn't take them."

He had an intense desire to see his friend attired in everyday garments ; it would, he thought vaguely, make him seem less dangerous.

" The coachman's hard-wearing kit is good enough for me," answered the other. " But it oughtn't to be," he broke out with a great violence of gesture. " All that garden. This furniture. Everything. How *can* it be ? "

He stopped and ran his hand over his short hair, by which Blatherwick knew that he was disturbed.

" I am anxious to meet this Jane," he concluded.

" You have been an enormous help to me, John," he said, stopping, with one hand on the door handle.

"Enormous. Without you I don't know what I should have done."

The little man glowed with pride. This was unexpectedly generous. He had all along been thinking that he was looked upon as something rather foolish, but to be tolerated for the sake of old associations or necessity—to be praised by Chilton-Greyne, who had half the alphabet after his name, was to receive the accolade of knighthood.

But the glow faded, to be replaced by chill doubt. He had been indispensable, then, to all this? His responsibility was more heavy than he had known. He wished fervently Greyne had never commended him. He felt a rush of self-hatred.

"Misery," Mr. Vandredon had talked about—not "grandeur." "Misery," and Greyne had just said that he had been indispensable!

It was a very dejected little man who stood beside the great bulk of Mr. "Threeadick" some ten minutes later, waiting to be introduced to his mother.

Blatherwick was not unduly observant, and the dominant impression he recorded as he nervously inspected the little lady in the deep chair was one of extreme age.

As he bowed, very conscious of his clothes, he did notice the frail, wrinkled hands, which never ceased their occupation, and he was aware of a penetrative scrutiny. But not for a long time did he fully realise the quality of those eyes which

flicked over him and, seeming to find no great interest, turned swiftly to the poised figure in the background.

"Mr. Chilton-Greyne," announced the giant in his deep voice, and Greyne came slowly forward.

Blatherwick, standing by the wood fire in the open hearth, saw that a muscle in his friend's throat twitched as he approached and that his temples were hollow.

He walked on the balls of his feet, and about his whole appearance was an air of tense expectancy. He was at his grimmest.

Neither did the little man fully appreciate the fact that the old lady made no movement to extend her hand in greeting, either to himself or to his companion—the omission was in accordance with his own theory about these matters and he saw no significance.

"If your friend had your nose, or you had his eyebrows," said Peter in a mellow bass, "one of you would be a Force. I know something about Forces," he added; "my father was a Dane, and in his country there is still a tradition of forcefulness. I fear it is hardly followed by our generation."

He trod about the room, arranging chairs, talking genially, though at random.

Greyne stood upright, saying nothing, looking out of the window on to the garden, to where a wall of darkness stood sentinel at a little distance.

Blatherwick murmured words to which no one made any reply.

"Rather a scratch meal," announced Mr. Vandredon at last, "but the servants are over-worked. We've one hundred and fifty refugees in the out-houses—mostly children. And fifteen invalids in this building. But I expect you won't object. It's ten o'clock by our time and my first food to-day."

Blatherwick assented nervously. An idea was increasing upon him that Greyne intended some discourtesy.

He gave a glance to the still silhouette against the scanty green tracery of lilac bushes along the drive and wished he would turn round.

"Your mother?" he queried as Mr. Peter waved him to a seat.

"Jane eats nothing but fruit," smiled the big man, affectionately patting the thin shoulder under the Shetland shawl, "and not much of that."

"She will sit here close to the warmth and knit while we have our meal. I think she must have been born with a pair of wires, as she calls them, in her hands. The miles of silk and wool she must have used. . . ."

The lace cap bobbed up as the lined face smiled at her son.

"If you'll bring me my grapes, Threeadick," she said, "I shall be quite comfortable. I am

anxious to have a talk with these . . . gentlemen."

The kitting wires clicked furiously as she spoke, but no one could have overlooked the pause before the noun.

"Scotch," thought Blatherwick, listening to the faint inflections in her voice.

His hand hovered towards his forehead as Greyne went in silence to his chair. Yes. The man was going to be "difficult." Blatherwick retired behind his lowered eyebrows and hoped that hospitality would not be abused. He was unable to make head or tail of this obvious antagonism.

But from the moment he sat down Greyne made it plain that, in his opinion, the time had come for explanations.

He erupted into speech, violent, bombastic speech, with his first mouthful.

He went over in loud detail all that he had told to his companion in the laboratory on Kensington Hill. He was boastful and scornful and denunciatory by turns.

He punctuated his remarks with thumps of his clenched fist upon the carved arm of his chair, and his voice boomed about the oaken walls as he spoke of what he had done, of what he intended to do, and of the benefit which the world would garner from his actions.

Yet Blatherwick, listening in uncomfortable silence, had a queer little feeling that the speaker

argued like a counsel holding a brief for the defence, although it was patent that Greyne himself intended no such justification.

"It would be a poor look-out for the world," put in Mr. Vandredon in one of the infrequent breaks, "if every one's thoughts came true."

"It would be the greatest safeguard ever devised," retorted Greyne. "Loose thinking is the curse of this age. I have in mind an experiment which will be extremely interesting . . ."

He fell back, with the sentence uncompleted, to his old theme, and the words "grandeur" and "regeneration" and "cleansing" were often on his lips.

For almost half an hour he controlled the conversation. He was a vehement whirlwind of positiveness. "Never," thought one of his hearers, "had incredible results been so confidently prophesied—so implicitly relied upon. He must infallibly be right from mere strength of conviction."

As a background to his talk ran a constant murmur of children's voices—merry little voices most of them.

"They will grow up self-reliant," boomed Greyne at the conclusion of one of his arguments, "holding equal chances with their companions, having the knowledge and the health to *do*, where before they were led or driven."

All the while he spoke people were going in and out of the room, asking innumerable questions of the

slight occupant of the armchair, and all the while she replied to them, ordering, devising, helping. And never did Greyne permit these interruptions to interfere with his speech, and never did the metallic clicking by the fire cease or the eyes leave, for more than a moment, the speaker's face.

And on a moment it seemed to Blatherwick that an attack was being launched against his companion.

A woman's voice, clear, ringing and astonishingly youthful, was more and more frequently heard.

Greyne began to allow anger to pinch his nostrils.

"How far, then," he queried, "does this influence of yours extend?"

"Not far," the little lady admitted sadly; "about a quarter of a mile in a circle from this room. You can see over there, where the light ends just beyond the road."

"Bah!" exclaimed the man, "a speck. The whole world is altered to-day, and your tiny portion will be swallowed up inevitably. It is useless for you to struggle, and I do not know why you should try."

"It is extending," contradicted the ringing voice, "slowly—but I do not lose heart. And when some friends of mine come, as I know very well they will in time, we shall progress faster.

"And as to *why* I do it. I do it because I am convinced that what you have done is wrong. I cannot conceive of it as otherwise."

She sat up straight in her chair and leaned a trifle forward, and for once her hands were still.

Her voice flailed Greyne as he sat there staring at her. Her words seemed to crack like whips about his head.

" Evil ! " she cried. " Wickedness from Hell ! "

Blatherwick was paralysed with a great astonishment. Greyne—the idealist—evil !

" More instruments for good," she said once. " Right can achieve what wickedness can do. It is the instrument which is at fault."

" My argument," thought Greyne angrily, but she gave him no opening.

" And you," she said once, " are trebly evil, for you have seen and known the truth. You are, I suppose," she cried, and her voice was bitter, " the most powerful individual in the whole world. You have power because you have the instrument, and because—do not for a moment forget this—you have seen Truth.

" You are the sort of man people trust," she added, and looked at Blatherwick with a look of pitying scorn. " You have personality, and you have the conviction which persuades.

" You could have done anything—anything—and you *have* done—this.

" And you did it," she accused, " because of your lust for power."

" No ! " boomed Greyne. " I did it because I wished to cleanse civilisation."

"Liar!" she cried. "Liar! You did it for your own glory.

"You are inhuman," she went on, "with your talk of cleansing and disregard of suffering.

"You have led astray where you might have guided. Even your own friend, there, does he know what he has done? Does he know that he shares with you your strength?"

Greyne's face was grey and he shook to gusts of rage.

"He did nothing!" he shouted. "He was not even necessary——"

"Liar!" she interrupted. "I know what he did. I know you never told him that his power was as great as your own. The fool, the fool!" she cried.

"If he had accepted his responsibility, he might have saved the world. His power of creative thought is every whit as strong as yours or mine.

"But he accepted your implied suggestion of inferiority. He never thought what he could do—as none of them think. He trusted you, and you used him for your own ends."

"I," stammered Blatherwick, appalled, "... I."

"You held humanity for him to torture," she flashed at him.

"Without you to hold them back, mankind must have vanished at the first movement of the lever. And it should have been so, for this man has thrust his fellows into a way of life which must debase them, and to do that is to sin against The Maker.

" He lied when he told you your help was unimportant, as he has deceived you from the beginning.

" Because of your unthinking obedience, fear walks loosefoot across the hills, and the gains of centuries have been squandered in a night. Because of your very ordinariness you had the power.

" You never thought you could help it," she mocked him. " You followed—you poor sheep—like all the rest ; shirking your duty because you didn't think—until it was too late. That man saw monstrous visions, but you chained mankind to the wheel which should break them."

A tremor of Greyne's hand flung a plate crashing to the floor, but no one stooped to pick it up.

" He trusted you," she turned once more, " because of what he considered your ideals, and you *have* seen the truth," she repeated, " and you *have* turned from it, employing your knowledge to bring the greatest wickedness the world has ever known.

" I have looked into your heart . . ."

Her speech, now that her emotion mastered her, burred and broadened.

" And now you intend to hold your power," she challenged, and Blatherwick knew by Greyne's face that she had touched him. " Because as long as these conditions, which you have created, last—as long as that instrument of yours functions to your dictating, you partake of immortality. You are the world, and the world is you.

"You are afraid," she cried, "that never again may you have the necessary prerequisites. At present the instrument is obedient and you bestride the universe. You know that no one would ever help you again, you are not even certain that your instrument would work a second time, and it shall not if I can do anything. It would be better to destroy you first."

Blatherwick had jumped to his feet at her words, and leaning across the table beseeched her with his look.

"Down. Sit down," ordered Greyne. "She is right in one thing ; nothing can destroy us without in the same moment, wiping away the stars.

"We shall watch a new life peopling the world. No one can stop us, except ourselves."

His face was granite hard with determination.

"She," he cried in scorn, "she . . ." A great hand moved.

"You are not *quite* immortal," "Threeadick" said softly.

"You didn't tell me," wailed Blatherwick, still standing.

"You didn't ask," flashed the old lady. "You took his word that he meant no wrong. Or else you thought you knew him. How casually he set out on this venture—this man who thinks himself God indeed."

"I should have known," moaned the little man, and collapsed into his seat. "To be immortal in a

dying world," he wailed. "That would be hell indeed."

Greyne heaved himself to his feet and bent across to his accuser.

"I have done good," he cried obstinately. "I have removed the imbecile, the parasite and the drone."

She cried out at that sharply: "By whose authority . . . ?"

"This is the only way," he persisted, "and you are wrong to think there is another. Only by pain and suffering . . ."

"Love," rang out the voice. "*There* is the other path, and you know it. Why did you not ask 'If a man shall love his neighbour as himself—what then?' And what more noble condition in which to leave mankind? But there would have been no throne for you in that world—as you knew well.

"When the influence of right has been extended to embrace your instrument," she went on, "then it will be safe for you to be destroyed. For we shall use your opportunities as they should be employed.'

"You could never use it," Greyne jeered. "There is nothing that can loose my influence over it, and if you kill me while I am in control, the world will but plunge deeper into chaos."

"One thing is stronger," replied the shadow in the cool depths by the embers, "and, as I speak, I

believe that a final choice shall be offered even to you before long to take or leave.

" I have looked into your soul and I know that you have brought yourself to the edge.

" The never-failing hand shall be stretched out. Whether you follow or not rests with you yourself, but I tell you that right will conquer in this struggle, and if you falter on your choice, in that moment your soul goes unshriven into the pit.

" You have followed so very, very near the truth," she cried, as if doubt weakened even her iron resolve, " so very, very near, and have so diabolically distorted it. Oh, how clever you were allowed to be, and how wicked beyond words you have proved.

" I think you are yourself the anti-Christ," she whispered.

The feeble hands took up once more the knitting, and that was the only time in fifty years they had been so long idle, save in sleep.

" I cannot stay here," Greyne cried to the sudden silence, and swung to the door.

Blatherwick watched him go and was wrung with an agony of indecision.

" Must I go ? " he cried, for now his eyes were open. " Must I go ? Is it too late ? "

" It is too late," agreed the woman almost gently. " You have a part in this matter."

Perhaps she would have said more, but the other had gone, stumbling, on the heels of his friend. And as he went he heard her say, " You will know when

it is safe to do it," but to whom she spoke he did not know.

* * * * *

They camped for the remaining hours of the unnatural night on the hill above the house with the twisted chimneys.

And as they looked down they saw the windows sparkling in the sun, and heard the homely sounds of an English country house, but about them was shadow, though the hour was nearly noon.

Up on the summit the air was heavy with the heat that they had left for so short a time, and Blatherwick, spent with the effort of travel, leaned against the car, miserable beyond words.

He had no heart to aid in any sort of manner that sombre figure which moved to and fro in the neighbourhood, busy about the necessary precautions.

He hated Greyne, hated him with a violence which was intensified by his hatred for himself.

He knew that he could not oppose him even now.

It was impossible. The man dominated Blatherwick, and his domination was accepted.

"My fault!" cried the little man, and knew agonisingly that if he had been blameless he would have been free to stay and help extend the oasis of normality to which so many came for succour—would have found strength to resist.

Incuriously, he saw a little figure appear in front of the house far in the valley. With more attention

he watched it pass beyond the limit of the old order and, as he judged, go forward into the new.

Blatherwick became nearly excited. He could see a light flash suddenly on the trunk of a great oak tree which he remembered to have noticed, and knew that it was the last outpost before the wall of night. He saw the terriers turn back reluctantly.

What could it mean ? In his eagerness he ran a little way down the hill.

The sound of a great voice singing over and over again the verse of a song acted on him like wine.

That extraordinarily reassuring personality, which was Mr. Peter " Threeadick " Vandredon, was coming up the hill.

Not till he was quite sure that the lantern held on in his direction did Blatherwick allow himself to admit what he knew to be the fact.

" I couldn't have faced it out," he breathed. " Not alone. I couldn't have gone on. . . ."

A panic seized him that the visitor would not stay. " Why should he ? " thought the man, watching the approach. " He must ! " he said out aloud, " he must ! "

Nearer and nearer came the lantern, like a glow-worm, now clearly seen, now hidden behind some bush.

At last the huge bulk of Mr. Vandredon was level with the little man, and the light showed up his face.

The newcomer paused in his song.

" I'm coming with you," he announced. " Jane thinks it necessary. I warn you, I know only two songs, and I'm always singing if I haven't a dog to play with."

Blatherwick made little inarticulate noises in his throat.

Greyne met them as they reached the fire he had just kindled.

" He's coming with us," explained Blatherwick joyfully.

" The hell he is ! " snapped Greyne.

" The hell he is," agreed Mr. Vandredon, tossing a bulging sack on to the ground.

The two men stared at each other for a space ; then Greyne turned away.

" You'll have a damned long trek," he said.

" So ? "

Mr. " Threeadick " seated himself on a pile of blankets, with his feet dangling in the pool of light from his lamp.

He began to sing, beating time with one great paw. After the first few words little Blatherwick squatted at his side, feeling wonderfully secure.

The great fist swung and pounded; a darker shadow, and now and then the firelight gleamed on taut knuckles.

The great voice roared, and now and then those inside a thorn redoubt on the further peak heard him, and felt glad that there was some one who could sing, and took fresh courage for the night.

"Though friends may deride us;
Though chances be slim;
Though muscles be weary;
Though hope may be dim;
Though treachery trip us;
Though comrades despair;
Though hatred surround us;
Though none seem to care.
Come, my countrymen, join me.
Shoulder to shoulder beside me.
Shout!—tho' bitter the fight be—
'We are conquering now.'"

sang Peter, with immense fervour.

"That," remarked Peter as he completed the chorus, "is something like a song, even if home made. There's a tune to it that sticks in the memory. It always cheers me up, and a man can stretch his shoulder blades over it. And Jane doesn't mind," he added quaintly, "as long as I am well away from the house. And now, if you'll eat a bit of my cheese, we'd better get a snooze. I think we shall be rather active to-morrow or this evening, whichever you people call it." He looked down for a long time at the building below, whose roof was bathed in afternoon sunshine.

Just before he dropped off to sleep, Blatherwick, rubbing his shoulders well into a great back, found himself with something to say.

"We are conquering now," he murmured sleepily, and his eyes shut.

CHAPTER IX

It was Greyne's voice which broke in upon fantastic dreams next morning while it was yet dark, and dragged Blatherwick reluctantly back to reality.

For a moment he lay still, while the speaker flogged himself to a rage which terminated abruptly in the sound of smashing blows.

Wearily the little man turned and peered in the direction of the car, fearing that his companions wrestled there in the obscurity, not knowing what action to take.

To his surprise he heard a giant yawn from close at hand, and Peter sat up in his turn and asked a question in a sleepy tone.

But on the question the huge man leaped to his feet, and as he did so the sun bounded over the rim of the world, unheralded, and Greyne's form became a sharp-edged black shadow, which stooped and straightened and stooped again as he beat at something which gave to the twinkling weapon in his hand with metallic echoes.

"So," remarked Peter thoughtfully, as Blatherwick gained his knees. He turned, relaxing his muscles. 'It'll mean walking," said he, jerking a

great thumb, and sat down once more, fumbling for his sack.

The other stared past him and saw the open bonnet of the little car and wondered for a moment why it should be open so early.

He saw the figure leaning against it, looking in his direction, and saw the axe lying on the ground.

Heavily he stumbled up and inspected the machinery.

"Well, you've made a proper mess of it," he exclaimed fatuously. "What's the matter?"

"It wouldn't go," put in "Threeadick," munching steadily. "He was trying to steal a march on us—on me, rather."

A glance at the contents of the seat showed the truth, another at the scanty remains on the grass brought a flush of anger to the smaller man's tired face.

"You weren't leaving me much," he accused.

"You didn't bring anything, did you?" snapped Greyne. "And he's got enough for a dozen, anyway."

The man's fury seemed to have evaporated and have left him resigned. With long, loose strides he crossed to the seated figure and let himself down.

"I don't quite know what your mother can do," he began, as he filled his pipe.

"You know enough to make you afraid," interrupted the other.

"Nor do I know why you're here," went on

Greyne, ignoring his interruption. "But I was going to say, perhaps it's just as well that we've got to go together. Quite a stroke of luck, now I come to think it over."

"So?"

Greyne blew out a cloud of smoke.

"If I can convince you that I'm right," he went on, "possibly there'll be an end to this annoyance. Not that you can *do* anything."

"You admit it's annoying you?"

"I admit nothing," flashed the speaker angrily, "except that I've had about enough of both of you."

"Jane is a very hard person to stop once she's started anything," mumbled the giant. "And you'll find out quick enough what I've got to do. There's no joke about it," he said warningly.

"And there's no joke about me, either," replied Greyne. "You two are doing your best to upset something about which you know, in reality, nothing. Damn it all," he boomed. "You talk about 'right,' and you seem quite to have lost sight of the fact that 'right' and 'wrong' are comparative terms.

"The most magnificent results, of incalculable advantage to the entire world, depend on the uninterrupted progress of what I have commenced. And you two come blundering in . . ."

He broke off and glanced up at Blatherwick. "I can count on you, eh, John?" he asked.

"No," cried Blatherwick violently. "No."

The other looked at him very steadily and his mouth twitched as the little man's eyes shifted nervously.

" I think I can," he resumed. " You will realise presently that there's no turning back from what you undertook voluntarily."

He rose and strolled over to the derelict conveyance and began to unload it, whistling the while.

The work of sorting the most necessary articles into two bundles occupied the best part of an hour, and the heat was an added burden when they at length set out.

From the opening step of their pilgrimage a feverish impatience, which had never been entirely absent from Greyne since the first day, seized upon the leader with redoubled force and drove him with increasing stress till the end.

As they went a resonant voice gave two or three preliminary bellows, and then settled to an untiring repetition.

Peering up sideways for a view of the face under the shapeless grey felt hat, the smallest of the three men was filled with new hope. There was something distinctly heartening both about the regular way in which the wide, full-lipped mouth opened and shut to the words of the song, and about the expression on the whole vast expanse of feature.

" Threeadick " seemed actually to be enjoying himself.

As they rounded a shoulder of the ridge Blather-

wick halted for a last glimpse of the house quiet in the valley. It was twilight down there and the faint barking of dogs came to his ears.

He sighed and wriggled his pack into a more comfortable position. Then with his peculiar, jerky strides he went forward to catch up his companions.

The giant, he noticed, had not even turned his head. Apparently, having been told to go, Jane's word was good enough for him : Peter had no regrets.

The grass swished about his enormous boots, and the contents of the bulging sack rattled and clanged as he walked. He was swinging his body jauntily from the hips, and radiated cheerfulness.

" Sing, lad ! " he ordered as Blatherwick panted alongside. " Sing ! For it is a good thing to do. It broadens the chest, makes hills shorter, and while singing you cannot cry. And give me that bundle when you're tired," he ended.

" I'll try, ' Threeadick,' " replied the other humbly to the first part of the sentence.

So, side by side, they went forward across a wide prairie, where long grass sometimes made their way stifling green tunnels of gloom. And now there was a shrill cracked voice joining in the chorus whenever the little man found the breath.

But even at the worst moments a look at the singer beside him put new strength into tired legs.

It was not possible to despair in such company.

Greyne walked some way ahead, and left the others to follow or not, as they pleased. His burning restlessness did not affect them.

From time to time Blatherwick clutched his companion's hand, and felt as if actual courage flowed into him from the contact, and often he looked up at the streaming face with great contentment. And always Mr. Vandredon looked—jolly.

For the greater part of two weeks they travelled thus across the countryside.

The leader seemed as one oppressed by a sense of limitation—as if he knew, but would not admit to himself, that very little time remained and wished to crowd each moment to the full.

Once Blatherwick, awakening in the middle of a short night, perceived his grim outline against the fire, and saw that he was staring, staring at something which only he could see—and his lips were moving.

Discovering himself observed, the beak-like nose bent lower over his knees, and the onlooker watched the hand racing across the pages. But what was written in those days Blatherwick never knew.

The man grew thin and haggard, and his eyes gleamed ever deeper and deeper in their sockets, lit by a strange fire.

The thought came to his earliest companion that here was a man in the turmoil of a mighty battle.

He seemed racked and torn, and stumbled more often as he went, but his amazing will was in-

domitable, and he gave no sign of weakening in his resolve.

Ever now his eyes were turned towards a line of purple shadows which, after two long marches, bounded their horizon to the east of south. And as the hills grew daily more distinct the flame which was consuming him burnt more strongly, so that even Vandredon felt a pity for the man, mixed with an admiration for his courage.

Yet Greyne asked no pity either by word or action. Indeed, after the first night he went out of his way to prove that all was well with him.

He sat with the others about the evening fires, and at meal times, discussing whatever strange phenomena the day had produced, and there were strange things afoot, as if this condition of affairs was permanent or entirely dependent on his whim.

But his voice was defiant, and the lines around his mouth bit ever deeper into his flesh.

And day by day the giant sang his song, and always he watched Greyne questioningly.

"He has seen the writing on the wall," the deep voice whispered once to Blatherwick as the leader rose from inspecting some curious tracks on a patch of dust.

And the other noticed what he had often seen without giving the matter much thought, that the giant's right hand was in his pocket as he spoke, as if he was fingering something very valuable—a

heavy object it must have been, for as the days passed Peter's coat began to sag on that side.

But on this occasion Blatherwick asked no questions, because he, too, was struck by the odd markings which had become increasingly frequent about any open space.

If some one had taken a walking stick and prodded industriously with it, the results would have been similar. Little round pock marks they were, in the ground, ending in a point, as if the stick had been sharp. Thousands upon thousands of sticks it must have needed.

So, beyond throwing a glance at the bent figure ahead, the smaller man did not reply to the low-toned comment, but the words abode with him.

Other repeated incidents began to thrust themselves on Blatherwick's unwilling notice.

Always at the same hour each day his companion left him and seated himself at a distance. It almost seemed as if he did this so that he should not be disturbed in an important conversation.

His face had at these times the intent expression of one who listens—or so Blatherwick imagined.

And whenever the giant was so occupied—at about two o'clock each morning, as far as could be judged by guess, since Blatherwick's watch had stopped—Greyne also began to go apart and hold communion with an unseen audience.

But whereas Peter returned dejected after every period, the other seemed to find refreshment from

his vigil, and he grew more and more defiant, like a general who knows the conflict is at hand and has satisfied himself that his preparations are thorough.

Yet once, when both had rejoined the third about a scanty meal, Greyne leaned towards the man beside him and said in a stretched whisper, " You had better tell her to stop. I warn you I will not allow . . . I created it, and there is a great deal yet for it to do. Rather than that, I will destroy the universe, sun by sun."

He fell to biting at his nails, as the other looked calmly at him, making no reply.

So for eight days the three went to and fro beneath the nearing summits with a growing atmosphere of tension accompanying them.

In ever-increasing numbers they saw mouldering signboards with appeals for help scrawled on them in fading characters.

They visited several encampments, Greyne taking copious notes, and each time it was noticeable that a military discipline had taken the place of the old freedom of action.

Nearly always there were the neat rows of huts round four sides of a square, greater or smaller, according to the number of the inhabitants, and always there was the space in the centre, on which, when they arrived, there was, sometimes, a game in progress played with a grass ball.

The tale was ever the same—scanty food and life a precarious matter of incessant warfare.

For even the soil, as one man said, seemed to have lost its properties. Nothing useful could be grown, and the cattle, refusing to touch the coarse grass which was everywhere, became lean walking skeletons ere they died.

The faces of those they met were set and strained, and it was obvious that they were almost at the end of their hope, though they struggled bravely.

" Reminds me of rest billets in France," remarked " Threeadick " once. " Outdoor schools of instruction and everything."

But his face was grim as he saw that Greyne appeared to see nothing amiss after half a dozen of similar visits.

" You said he was once a distinguished scientist," he accused Blatherwick, as they paused a moment to look back at one camp.

" So he was."

" Well, he isn't now. He's lost his imagination or he'd be appalled at what he's done. He's a machine for gathering data. And if he can find any signs of ennoblement on a single face, which is what he pretends to want——"

" I think," put in the other, " that he is chiefly concerned with the thought that things couldn't be worse than they were."

" Exactly," Peter took him up. " He talked of men of one idea and he's the worst example of the lot.

" If he'd meant to do good, he adopted the wrong method."

"Ah," murmured his listener, reverting to his own thoughts of days past.

"These folk, even if they were to survive, as I suppose some may, would never alter.

"As they regained the supremacy they would only re-make the world as it was.

"It would be the same handwriting, even though the paper might be different."

"You think then," queried Blatherwick, astonished, "that he was right up to a point? It did want alteration."

"No doubt about that. But his method was wrong. He should have created a new hand to write on the old paper—and he could have done it. Damn him!" shouted Mr. Vandredon. "He could have done it, and have been the greatest human benefactor of all time. But this . . ." He flung out a hand. "My mother was right. He wanted to be a king and he is a king—of a dissolving nation."

"I don't see . . ." commenced his interlocutor.

"He should have sunk himself to the level of the remainder," argued the other, "and have instructed, where he merely ordered, and left them to find their own means of performance.

"He should have employed the more noble instincts instead of . . . Look there—at that woman. Look at her eyes. Well?"

Blatherwick shook his head dubiously.

"She doesn't seem to be able to keep them steady," he ventured.

"Don't you see what is her dominant emotion?" cried Peter. "Can't you even imagine? Man, I tell you she lives, as all of them live, in constant terror. Fear stalks behind her self-control, and fear is the most terrible solvent of endeavour."

"Ah!" said Blatherwick, watching.

"He should have created a new hand to write on the old pages," repeated Peter; "and have given to the brain which guided the hand new and more healthy thoughts."

"Then you believe in the power of thought?" exclaimed his listener.

"Believe? I *know*," cried Peter. "Isn't Jane fighting him by thought?"

He fell silent and, followed by his friend, turned, with a sack lighter by nearly half its contents, from the gateway leading to the last camp, in the wake of that lean, tall man whose eyes burnt ever upon the swelling curves of the hills.

Sometimes they encountered in their travels parties of men, armed with sticks, travelling from place to place.

And it was noticeable how, as these people talked, their heads were ever turning from shoulder to shoulder, scanning all sides. Also, their faces were blurred by exhaustion hardly relieved by the wavering chorus which they almost invariably raised when on the march.

"Fear," remarked "Threeadick" tersely at each meeting. But it came to him with a shock of surprise that they had seen little of which to be afraid, except the obvious suffering carved legibly on each countenance.

Increasingly it became apparent that Greyne was tortured by the need for haste. He walked, ever straining his neck forward between his shoulders, as if he would urge himself by sheer effort of will to greater endeavour.

And one night, though indirectly, he broached the edge of his desire.

As darkness fell he closed his notebook with a snap and tossed it to one side.

"Everything is much simpler," he announced, "as all really efficient organisations are simple. Very few forms of life left, apparently." He enumerated the species they had encountered on the fingers of one hand. "And nearly all birds, or what might be called birds," he went on, "and none seen close enough for a thorough classification. It is a great pity." He paused.

"I suppose," he resumed, "that it was bound to be so. Only the most formidable could survive the unceasing competition, and they presumably became larger and larger and more truculent, until they could not be withstood.

"At the same time, the things on which they preyed seem to have become progressively smaller, though I must say they, at least, are plentiful enough.

"I should estimate that herd of tapir-like palœtherium which we saw yesterday, on the hillside, at five hundred head.

"Yet the hawks appear to have continued unchanged from the old conditions," he concluded, watching a wheeling shadow above them. "That is extremely interesting."

"Something must make those tracks we find everywhere," put in Blatherwick into the gap in the conversation.

"Well, they could hardly come by themselves," retorted Greyne. He lifted himself to an elbow and looked at the hill-tops at the foot of which they were halted.

"Up there on the hill," he said, and his voice trembled with eagerness in spite of his effort to appear calm. "Up there," he said, "I have a feeling that I shall find the supreme form of life—the sublime vindication of my action. Those men and women who must be existing—who *are* existing, products of millions of strenuous testing years—they'll have the stamina," he said, "and they'll be fit to rule." He broke off, and presently walked a little way beyond the zone of firelight. But before he disappeared he stopped and said a few words which astonished one of his hearers.

"I wonder where Mary and 'Boy' are to-day?" he remarked over his shoulder.

Blatherwick stared up at him. He sounded uneasy, and it was the first time that he had

mentioned his sister's name since they had started.

" It's the young monkey's birthday pretty soon," added Greyne, half apologetically, and moved away.

Blatherwick returned to an interrupted train of thought.

" What will you do," he queried guardedly of Peter, " if there *should* be a race of men living up there "—he pointed—" and they turned out to be equal, if not superior, to us ? "

" I don't know, I don't know," muttered Mr. Vandredon perplexedly. " I'm dashed if I know. It would not be according to Jane's ideas to interfere with anything tending to the betterment of humanity. I don't know," he repeated, and frowned at the glowing ashes.

" Youth," he muttered after a while. " There might lie the solution. And yet . . . they'd have to be trained on different lines," he added. " Now if he had managed to leave us all outwardly as we were, and had taken away our capacity of certain emotions, eh ? "

" Yes ? " said his hearer interrogatively.

" Removed Hate and Greed and Fear," continued the big man ruminatively, " that would have been something pretty fine. Did it ever strike you," he queried, " that emotions are the most imperishable belongings of humanity ? "

Blatherwick's hand went to his eyebrows.

" Cities crumble into dust," went on the deep

voice. "Even the Druids' stones, holding frozen arms to the sky, vanish at the last. Whole dynasties perish and leave but little trace; religions themselves appear to suffer a decline. But the men and women who come and go through all the centuries, though they be changed outwardly in form and speech and dress, are always swayed by the imperishable changeless forces of love and hate, of greed, of sacrifice, and desire.

"I shouldn't like to be Greyne," he concluded, looking into the shadows, "when his imagination wakes up again and he sees what he's done. No, I shouldn't like to be Greyne."

"He won't let me help, either," complained the smaller man, in haste to stifle his own thoughts, aroused by the speaker's last words. "We've got plenty of food still, and there was that woman we saw the other day . . ."

"Well, it *is* his, after all," replied "Threeadick."

"He wouldn't give me time to make any preparations."

"Your own fault. You should have insisted. You took too much on chance. I suppose it's not some amazing delusion, eh?" Peter went on, with a sudden change of thought. "He did do it all?"

"I was there," remarked the other. "I wish to heaven it was!"

"H'm. I think he's beginning to feel the strain," said Peter. "He'll break before long, in spite of himself."

And the next day proved him to be correct.

It so happened that Blatherwick was resting at the time on a slope, awaiting the return of his companions, when he felt a hand clutch him roughly by the shoulder.

He turned in surprise, for he had seen the other two leave earlier, and had supposed them engaged in that daily concentration which he had not been able satisfactorily to explain to himself, and about which neither had said to him a word.

He looked up into Greyne's face, and saw it to be distorted with passion.

"Come!" ordered the stooping man, and half dragged the other to a great stone at a little distance.

"Think!" cried the harsh voice. "Shut your eyes and think. Make a picture in your mind of all this as it is now." He gesticulated widely.

"Not there. Up on that stone. Quick, quick! I tell you."

Blatherwick threw a terrified glance towards a broad back some way off, and knew he could expect no help in this crisis, desperately though he needed it.

With difficulty he lifted his body on to the rough surface and crouched there, shivering, with lids tight closed.

"Not like that," shouted Greyne once more, "as if you were in church. . . . Hurry. Hurry, I say." One hand came over the edge and shook the shrinking man like a doll.

"No! No!" whimpered Blatherwick.

The other darted a look towards the third of their number and leaped at the smaller man, forcing him to his knees.

"Now pray!" he cried. "Pray while you think—that this shall remain."

"No! No! No!"

"Pray!" raved Greyne, and menaced him with his fist. "Damn you! Pray!"

So Blatherwick prayed, with the difficult tears running down his cheeks.

But his mind was wild with misery and confusion, so that only broken sentences formed themselves.

"Please, God," he thought. "This isn't right. . . . It isn't right. . . . It isn't right. . . . Please God . . . Please, God . . ."

Came the sound of some one running; running furiously.

The kneeling man heard Greyne's snarl of anger, and half opening his eyes saw a great figure close the distance in five long strides and jerk his opponent away as if he were a child.

From where he still knelt, Blatherwick saw Greyne stumble to one knee and saw the other standing over him, one hand tugging at what his pocket contained.

He saw the expression on Peter's face and cried out at it. "Not that. Not that . . ."

Swiftly he saw the face relax and heard the muttered words of indecision.

Then a great paw reached up to him and—" Come down, lad," said the giant, and Blatherwick, very thankfully, came down. Greyne watched them go without a movement, and all he said was an echo of what Vandredon had said as he stood over him—" There will come a time."

The two went away together, the little man clinging weakly to his companion's arm. And as they walked he asked the other timidly :

" What did you mean—back there—when you said ' It was not time ' ? "

" I meant what I said," replied Peter. " Jane has not told me yet—but it will come."

His listener had known all along, but remembering his own responsibility he knew fear.

" He is particularly dangerous," said the big man after a moment, " because he realises the value and the power of prayer."

" I should hope, perhaps, it meant that he was not sure of himself," ventured the smaller man in an uncertain voice.

But the other did not reply to that. " Now," he said, instead, " would be a good moment for you to try and get that chorus right."

" Very well, Peter," agreed Blatherwick, and he struck up in a quavering voice, which strengthened wonderfully after the first line.

From that day the smaller man sat beside Vandredon during the latter's hours of silent concentration. And it seemed to him, during those periods,

that mighty forces like soundless winds beat about them.

Yet, though he watched carefully, he never saw the least tremor of the clean-edged shadows at his feet.

The grasses were still and the shadows were still, but it was his fancy that the whole universe was rocking to the beat of inaudible blows, and many times he was convinced that he had but to turn his head to see about them a crowd of dumb watchers. And many times he did turn his head ; but never was there anything there save the grass or an infrequent boulder which, to Blatherwick's imagination, seemed just that second cunningly to have assumed its present form. Magic. . . .

Amazingly, also, Greyne recovered from his discomfiture. No slightest sign of any resentment escaped him.

And, a little later, he chose his opportunity and whispered to Blatherwick, " Don't be afraid of what they can do."

" What do you mean ? " whispered back the other, hating himself for the secrecy which he felt unable to avoid.

" I have got sole control, at last," Greyne replied with a nod and a wink. " They were just too late to stop me. I can alter all this at will. It is all right now—quite all right. You and I will be able to defy them yet."

He strode off with his shoulders swinging jauntily, and " My fault. My fault . . . " thought

the other as he noted the fresh confidence about the retreating figure.

The implied partnership was a horrible thing to contemplate ; but he was bound by the stronger will as ever he had been bound.

" Threeadick " had not missed the brief scene, and he was troubled.

" He looks," he murmured to himself, " as if he possessed in reserve a most tremendous weapon, which must batter down all opposition. I hope," he continued, " Jane has not under-estimated the fellow—such a one goes down mightily—if he does fall."

He turned his head and looked long at Blatherwick, wondering if he was wise and if his mother was wise to ignore the lesser man.

That was the last day of their wanderings in the plain. For by now they were treading the shorter grass of the foothills ; and as the sun dipped into the western furnace Greyne, in the lead, swung down a beaten trail towards a row of twinkling fires.

He was walking, as usual, furiously, staring up at the crests. And as he hurried along the rays of the sun caught some metal object which he carried on his back, and it burned in the dusk like a star to lead those others toiling behind.

A red star. A red star.

* * * * *

When they had passed the thorn barriers, they

found the inhabitants to be few in numbers, and apparently the entire population was gathered round the fires, flinging piles of fuel on to them, or strengthening the walls, which in more than one place showed evident signs of having been trampled down by numerous assailants.

In silence they approached a group near one of the heaps, and Peter asked a question.

"What's that?" enquired one of the men, swinging round nervously. "This is Lewes—this is." He laughed in a flat voice. "Least it's what's left of it. What it is now I don't know. No one else either." He laughed again. "No one seems to know nothing nowadays," he ended.

Blatherwick strained his eyes round the rows of huts, and saw that the place had evidently been built to hold many more than now appeared to inhabit it.

A phrase of "Threeadick's" came to him as his eye rested on a child lying on a grass bed near a seated woman, who still retained traces of an unusual beauty. There was no expression in the young eyes, except possibly a terrible question, as the gaze was held by Blatherwick's heavy load. He could not help noticing the elbow joints and the knees. The mother's face seemed familiar somehow, but other thoughts were crowding upon him.

"Youth." The word came to him like a blow. "Youth." And for the deaths of how many was he responsible? "Starvation"—another horrible

word. He turned with a shudder to see Vandredon extracting the last of his supplies, and looked at Greyne, wondering if he dared.

But he was being watched, and he remembered Greyne's words : " We must go on if every one else dies. It is only for a while. There are new things to come, and we must be there to judge if they shall be allowed to continue."

His hand fell to his side, and he listened idly to Peter's rapid questions. The same tale was told as at all other camps.

No food. Declining energy after the first valiant attempts to start afresh. No time—because of the constant need of defending themselves against repeated attacks from nightmare enemies. No hope. That was the dreadful thing—no hope of security in which to build up.

Peter turned, and Blatherwick would not have believed that such a cheerful face could mirror such depths of passion.

" You hear ? " he accused, swinging his empty sack.

" They were not worthy," argued Greyne. " What did they do before ? Nature wants none of them. They were useless—useless, I tell you, and not worthy. There will be—may be now—a more splendid race." He was looking up, as he spoke, at the shadows. " It is a progressive disappearance of the unfit," he went on, while the group wondered what he was talking about. " But the best will yet

survive, and they will be able to learn from—and to teach those others. . . .

"These were not fit to rule," he boomed stubbornly, "or they would find a way. I look forward to a magnificent regeneration."

A woman, not the same one whom Blatherwick had already noticed, began to speak, but a shout interrupted her.

Others answered, and the knot broke up hastily. The fires began to flare more fiercely as fresh loads were thrown on.

People were leaving the huts and taking up what were evidently prearranged positions.

Figures darted from shadow to light, and were seen for a moment to be carrying some sort of arms before they were swallowed up once more on the far side of the blaze.

"What is it?" shouted Mr. Vandredon.

"It's Them again!" called back a man, stopping for an instant. "And these rotten sticks break if you look at 'em. Oh, strangers, are you!" he added, coming nearer. "Well, you'll know all about it in a minute—if you haven't had the same trouble where you come from.

"We're so few, too," he continued. "Dying like flies without all this. . . . Ah! Would you. . . ." He smashed at something low and flat, about the size of a large dog, which scuttled past like a squat shadow with furiously-working legs. "Rather," thought Blatherwick in that

split second of glimpse, "like an enormous cockroach."

"Looks bad," he ended hurriedly. "I must get off." He ran into the darkness, shouting as he went, either in self-encouragement or to frighten the attackers.

From beyond the line of fires arose rapidly a confused medley of sound. Cries and oaths; the sobbing breaths of exhausted men; a peculiar fluttering resembling the leaves of a book being swiftly turned between forefinger and thumb. And this last gave to Blatherwick an impression of urgency. Something or other was very eager . . . and extraordinarily numerous.

The pattering noise increased, and seemed to come from every point in the darkness beyond, where lay the hills. There was a half-seen movement through the flames—relentless, like the surge of a master wave on a summer's day.

The three who looked dimly saw men carried back knee deep in the froth of that wave—carried back to their fires, which were their last line of defence.

It seemed an unusual kind of wave; the upper surface shone in the flickering light as if varnished—black varnish.

The human figures strung out here and there at terribly long intervals were incredibly active—smashing at that varnish—smashing—smashing. . . .

Here and there a man sprang empty-handed

through the smoke, and flung himself to the ground straining for breath.

"Haven't you anything but sticks?" asked Blatherwick of one of them.

The fellow shook his head. "There were a few aeroplanes at first," he said, "but they seemed to break up in the air, for no reason—horrible."

Abruptly, "Threeadick" exploded into action. He seized a pole from the nearest heap and bent it across his knee—snap. It gave like sealing-wax. He bent again and clutched at a handful—six or seven of them.

With deft precise movements his great fingers whipped the useless string from the mouth of his sack. Blatherwick saw the gleam of his teeth as he bit it into suitable lengths.

More and more men were now leaping back to a precarious safety.

Beyond the fires a great wave of some sort appeared to be leaping itself up—and up—at their very edge, momentarily baffled.

Evidently a final and tremendous flooding of the camp was imminent.

Peter threw a glance at the shining, sliding mass; tested his weapon by a blow which made the air sing and hurled himself impetuously at the flames.

As he went he turned his head to Blatherwick encouragingly. The little man thought the giant had never looked so happy.

As he landed on the far side his great voice

rang out, and at the sound if it others found new heart.

Blatherwick felt himself tingling to the roaring chorus, but a lean hand gripped him by the elbow. "No," said Greyne. "No."

The night was rent by Peter's bellowed saga. They saw him for a moment—watched his arm rise and fall rhythmically—heard the stamp and ring of his heels, then he ploughed shoulder deep into the shadows.

His voice came back to them, even louder if possible.

> "Though friends may deride us;
> Though—chances—be—slim;
> Though muscles be weary" (smash);
> Though hope may (smash) dim;
> Though treachery (smash, crash);
> Though comrades" (smash, bash).

His voice was drowned in the clamour of his own violence.

Others were taking up what words they could catch. It acted like bagpipes. The defence was renewed with extraordinary vigour.

To and fro ploughed "Threeadick," and if he was bellowing before, he was maniacal now. It did not seem possible that such a volume of sound could come from one throat. His great face was streaming and he kicked when he found no time to hit.

Blatherwick saw him turn, with a small following roaring at his heels, and come raving down along the line.

Then the inevitable happened. The defenders were few and most had rallied to that rolling, berserker fury which was Peter. There was a gap—not so wide, but wide enough.

Greyne saw what was coming, so did Blatherwick, and the latter cried out shrilly.

He saw a great wave studded with tiny peeping eyes, which were red in the light of the flames. He saw it, incredulously, heap itself upon itself and mount and pile up, till it overtopped the highest fire. He caught an impression of a myriad, myriad legs scrabbling for support—hooking each to each—cementing the whole, like ants along their runways.

It came down. Heavens! It came down, curling over at the top like a comber. The flames dimmed, flickered and went out, crushed by the mere weight of bodies.

A multitude of greedy, sliding forms shot across the cooling ashes like a black squall.

They reached Blatherwick even as he tore at the restraining hand. A man near them lashed out at one and it broke like an eggshell. It was empty, horribly empty. And all the while that abominable pattering noise went on and on.

Blatherwick screamed again. What was Greyne saying? "Close? They'd be able to see something close at last." The hell they would. The man must be mad. He set his nails into the back of Greyne's fingers. This was death.

No ! He could have cried in his relief ; was crying. Astonishingly—amazingly—the wave split open at their feet and went sliding by to either hand —a shallow, black, irresistible tide of hate, with a forest of feelers waving above, and countless mocking mouths.

Blatherwick could have sworn that little eyes twinkled at Greyne as they swept past.

" Do you think a dog won't know his own master ? " exulted Greyne, supporting the other by the wrist.

" Mad," thought his companion. " Quite mad." He hadn't fully appreciated how thin the fellow had become lately. His nose was more than ever a menace.

Ah ! There came Peter. He'd put things right. Or was it too late ? There were women somewhere . . . children.

> " Come, my countrymen, join me,
> Shoulder to shoulder beside me.
> Shout !—tho' bitter the fight be—
> We—are—con—quer—ing—NOW." (Smash) (Smash) (Bash).

Lord ! What a pace he was coming at. Could he keep it up ? Yes. No, he'd slipped. He was down. They had him.

Blatherwick shouted again, " Come *on*, Peter. " Though hatred surround——" he quavered weakly. Where was his voice. What was wrong with him ? His face was all wet.

Peter was up again. Hooray ! He was across the fire.

Without knowing what he said, the little man turned to Greyne. " Anyway, they went for you at first—those dragon things—the footboard." He appeared to think he had gained a point.

" Come *on*, Peter."

" If you go for them, of course, they'll go for you ! " snarled Greyne. " I made a mistake. Shouldn't have annoyed them." He was extraordinarily calm ; didn't appear to mind what was happening.

At that moment a bulge in the even flat surface, which still flowed by to right and left, attracted Blatherwick's attention.

He was reminded of those purple seed cases which had broken through the pavement in London. A blister was forming here—something was struggling up from underneath that awful flood. What would come out of it ?

It was something white. Would it be those waving tendrils ? No ! What *were* they ?

The little man strained his eyes. They were arms—white, rounded arms—a woman's arms—waving—seeking. Abruptly the blister was agitated and split across.

" Dear life," whispered Blatherwick as he saw what appeared. " Could she possibly be alive ? What was stronger than Death ? What emotion . . . ? What . . . ? "

He knew then. Remembered the look in those tired babyish eyes which he had noted at their first entrance to the camp ; remembered the exaggerated joints at knee and elbow. " What caused it ? " He couldn't think for a moment. " Oh, yes ! Starvation, of course. Youth. *Where was the child* . . . ? " He swayed on his feet. The evil beetle-like creatures swarmed up and over the woman standing there thigh deep in their midst, standing there searching, even in the moment of a terrible ending, for her lost son. Cruel mouths caressed her. She was dragged down beneath the living stream. The ripples of her last struggles faded and were smoothed.

Blatherwick shouted aloud. He was sure he had known her. Where had he seen her before ?

But Greyne was shaking him and screaming into his ear. " Black hair. Black hair. You fool. You fool. She had black hair—hadn't she ? And the boy—*black* hair. Damn you. Oh ! damn you." Blatherwick nodded, sighed and fainted.

It must have been hours later when he recovered consciousness. They were far up the hillside. The grass was quite short here. There was a tonic smell of thyme in the air, and the sun was shining.

Blatherwick discovered he was being carried like a child, and wriggled feebly. At his movement Peter set him on his feet and regarded him gravely.

" What happened ? " he whispered, and the other, knowing what he meant, answered slowly.

" Wiped out. We did what we could, but

there were too few. The poor devils are wandering about the downs somewhere—what's left of 'em."

With a weak gesture the little man indicated his bundle, which the giant had under his arm.

They ate a while without speaking.

Suddenly Blatherwick giggled nervously. "About time we got some new clothes." Peter looked at his companion's torn stained coat, and then at his own. Tropical rain and hard usage had reduced everything to tattered rags.

"So," he said, and relapsed into a moody silence. "It was those things made those tracks everywhere," he added, and again broke off, as if speech was a burden.

"Where's? . . ." began the little man. The other jerked his head, and, twisting about, Blatherwick saw Greyne seated not far off, staring up the hillside, mumbling to himself.

"It's an obsession with him now," said Peter. "He's been talking about what he'll find up there ever since. . . ."

"Why?" whispered his interlocutor.

"Don't you *see?*" continued "Threeadick," with a note of exasperation. "All this has been a failure. Wherever we've been—failure utter and complete. They couldn't *do* anything—flesh and blood's no good by itself.

"There's no standing still in this world—unless you go forward, you must go back.

" Owing to him, humanity has gone back, and is going further. No hope for it. No possible hope."

" He always said," put in Blatherwick, in the same cautious tone, " that he was going to do good by all this. He was not satisfied with the old conditions, and meant to improve them—that was what he said."

" The method usually indicates the motive," said Peter tersely. " But we're off the point. Don't you see," he repeated, " that if he finds he's been right in this—if he *has* been the means of the creation of men and women with *souls*—don't you *see* what that will mean ? It is a prerogative of God, that, and he'll know himself then to be a god.

" He'll become on the instant a god, free of bodily embarrassments, such as the need for food and drink.

" If we find these people—and he's clinging desperately to the hope that we will—he becomes at once irresistible. Not to be overthrown."

" Your mother ? " asked Blatherwick.

Peter frowned.

" I'm afraid," he said, " something seems to have gone wrong there. She ought to have been ready days ago. She expected to be." His hand sought his pocket. " I can't understand it," he ended.

Greyne turned a haggard face towards them, and his action attracted their attention.

" Another thing," muttered Peter, " which worries me profoundly is his attitude to me.

" He's shaken, mind you, though he tries to hide it. By the way, what made you cry out like that

down there, just before I reached you?" The smaller man remained silent, and the other resumed.

"I can tell by his manner. He's badly shaken, though it's curious considering the indifference he has shown since I joined you. He knows now he's got one final stake with which to win back his self-confidence; without which he's—finished.

"If he can persuade himself that he has done any good—any good at all, mark you—I firmly believe he will go on. I am certain he will. He has failed with the old, and he is trying to ignore it, but will he succeed with the new? And he's so confoundedly friendly, that's what beats me—more so since last night. Now I come to think of it, he began to change two or three days ago. H'm. I wish I knew why."

"How does that matter?" interjected his listener, drawing down his eyebrows.

"I'd much rather he avoided me," growled Peter. "Showed actual hatred."

"Why?"

"He's too certain of victory," replied the other. "There's something up his sleeve yet. He can afford to be friendly. And his friendliness confirms my anxiety that he'll beat us."

"Why?" reiterated Blatherwick.

"Because one hates only when one fears, and he certainly does not hate me now," said Peter, looking covertly across at the seated man.

He rose and stretched huge limbs. "I see he wants us to be on the move," he concluded.

CHAPTER X

THE downs seemed altogether different to Blatherwick's recollections of them stored up from long summer days spent in the neighbourhood of Chanctonbury Ring.

They were less rounded, more savagely sheer, and many hundreds of feet higher.

In spite of the help he received from his companion, the little man found the climb almost beyond his strength. He was nearly at the limit of his endurance. His lank hair whipped lined and shrunken cheeks. He was aged and broken, and remorse walked with him.

At last, at long last, the three men, Greyne always some ten yards in advance, stumbled on to the topmost ridge, and looked about them.

Great boulders obstructed progress on every side ; a scanty grass sprawled across the infrequent level spaces ; a thin, cold wind searched the rents in their clothing and turned memories of the damp heat below into longing.

Away on the horizon a long brown bar of colour closed the view.

Peter whistled. "Where's the sea ?" he demanded, stooping to a broken lace.

"The face of the earth has been altered," cried Greyne with a new ring in his voice. "I have restored the dry land between England and France." He peered about him eagerly. "If I can do that . . . " he commenced.

But "Threeadick" straightened himself with a pucker between his brows.

"It's not much of an improvement," he announced critically.

"And 'We . . . ' thought the smallest of the group. 'We . . .' not 'I,' " and he failed to find any consolation in the thought.

Greyne was moving about from point to point now, possessed by a feverish excitement. His hands were never still, and he broke into a run as corner after corner turned revealed nothing but the same desolation of piled rock.

Once he turned with twitching lips and ran back to Blatherwick's side.

"Haven't they *done* anything ?" he mumbled, bending near. "Haven't they done *anything ?*"

The other glanced at him, and perceiving the expression in his eyes, for a fleeting moment felt pity.

"What did you expect ?" he humoured.

"Even the men that we knew had accomplished something," went on Greyne as if to himself. "They had built cities, developed art."

Then Blatherwick knew the meaning of that baffled look which had lain at the back of

his companion's eyes ever since they had left London.

Then he realised the strength of the last hope, which had urged this man to these arid heights—the strength and the slightness.

"Of course," he reflected, "these people he expects to find should not be savages living in holes; but with the results of millions of years of development around them."

He supposed, rather vaguely, that Greyne had all along been expecting to find, at any turn of the road, a new civilisation expressed in outward terms of a finer architecture, to take the place of what had disappeared.

He turned his head and the utter desolation of the scene appalled him. It was raw, it held cruelty frozen within those jagged rocks.

"It is easier to break down than to build up," asserted Peter, who had overheard part of the conversation.

"I must have time, more time," gabbled Greyne, swinging about, and ignoring the last speaker.

He commenced to run once more to and fro, peeping behind boulders, peering from side to side.

Each corner unturned held infinite hope for him; each corner passed made rage leap higher within him—rage and unacknowledged despair.

"Time," he muttered over and over again. "Time."

To keep up with that hasting figure was more

than Peter and Blatherwick were able. They could but struggle some way in the rear, tripping over stones, tearing themselves on the knife-sharp edges.

"It's a poor look-out for him," said the giant suddenly. "But I'm not satisfied. I wish Jane were ready; now would be a good moment."

His companion tripped heavily just then, and Peter bethought him of his remedy for all ills.

"H'up lad," he cried, as if to a horse, and swung the other on to his feet.

"Now shake your back teeth," he ordered, and straightway plunged into his war song.

But for a few seconds Blatherwick walked on in silence, dazed by his fall.

He saw the man ahead turn and come back towards them, still searching. He saw him come and knew that he hated him, and, recollecting with a pang what "Threeadick" had said, knew that his hatred spelled fear.

At that second he had a startling premonition of impending disaster; the solid earth appeared to tremble as if it would break asunder.

He knew it was a delusion, since not a shadow moved, and Peter was singing on, quite unperturbed.

But he was wildly certain at that moment that he could not escape his share of the responsibility. Whether for greater glory or greater dishonour, he was a partner in all which had been done, and for that he must accept reward or punishment.

"I wish," shouted Greyne as he came up to them,

" you'd start that other song of yours. I've had about enough of this one."

" With the greatest pleasure in the world," replied Peter heartily. " There are only four lines of it."

He uttered his usual preliminary bellows and broke out afresh. He had come to the end of the second line when he stopped abruptly and thrust out an arm like a flag staff.

" There's what you're looking for," he said. His voice sounded flat.

* * * * *

Greyne flung up his hands with an uncontrollable gesture of relief. Blatherwick stared.

He could see nothing ; there was nothing, except those lichened stones. He turned again to Peter to be sure. Yes, just past that rock shaped rather like a pulpit. He'd already looked there.

But wait a minute. What were those shiny pebbles stuck in that rounded boulder ? Dash it all, pebbles couldn't move ! They weren't pebbles ; then what were they . . . eyes ? He had it now ; they were eyes—watchful eyes.

There was a stirring all round the three. To right and left the landscape was in movement.

Blatherwick started. What new form of attack was coming ? He suddenly remembered that he had left his rifle at " Threeadick's " house. Still, he had never been able to use it. He took a step nearer to the great bulk of his newest friend and waited.

Those wary watchers knew they had been seen. What were they going to do? What were they, anyway?

He gasped as, one after another, things which he had taken for rocks became animated and stood up. "Why were their outlines so difficult to make out?" he wondered.

Thoughts and phrases whirled through his brain. Zebras . . . but *they* had four legs. What was that war-born word? Ah! "Camouflage." No, that wasn't quite it. "Colour protection." That seemed the mark, though Blatherwick had a hazy idea that the phrase was discredited as the inaccurate label of closet naturalists.

That was it. These creatures were marked with those wavy stripes for purposes of concealment.

Those two shades of brown would melt naturally into the weathered background when they were still. And the broken diagonal silver streaks across their bodies and faces served to break up the whole, gave them an unreal appearance. It was not easy for the eye to believe that they were solid. He could not at first make up his mind whether the colouring was natural flesh or an artificial device—painted on.

Well, but what were they? The little man's brain, after striving to reject the hypothesis, accepted the incredible truth with a gulp, as it were.

They were human beings, that was what they were. These bizarre, futuristically colour-splashed creatures were men and women.

Now Blatherwick had finally made up his mind he could see them quite clearly.

Yes, they were men and women—of a kind. But how huge ! Even Peter was overtopped by six full inches.

He jerked his head to see how Greyne was taking it. After all, these things were what he had been hoping to discover ; more than that, they represented the final triumph of his achievement, " the complete justification."

This score or so of overgrown monstrosities, in their nakedness, were the results by which he must be judged.

Greyne's expression baffled him. He took another survey of the circle about them. Oddly enough, it seemed as if the focal point of the concentrated interest was Greyne himself.

These impossibilities were looking at Greyne, and their eyes were furtive, with a sort of questioning aloofness.

They moved and became instantly real ; potential for one thing or another. They appeared strong enough. . . . A panic began to spread among them. They bunched like antelope menaced by the hunter, necks turning this way and that, preparatory to headlong flight.

Sharply Greyne roused himself and called out instinctively, " Wait ! "

He seemed to have invested himself with a new authority.

Amazingly, at the sound of his voice tranquillity was restored ; the restless movements were stilled.

But Blatherwick noted and wondered mildly at the change from the speaker's usual clipped diction. He appeared to drawl the word with broadened vowels.

" Come here ! " Again that rustic sing-song.

Miracle on miracle, they obeyed. Cautiously, with balanced footsteps, the group approached. They gathered about the trio, bulking huge. Their dark eyes regarded the speaker mournfully ; coarse raven-black hair lay upon smooth shoulders ; clear-cut features peered out from the sable curtain.

Blatherwick's last doubt was dispelled. He had heard that in some places the natives smeared themselves with multi-coloured clays for adornment. But this pigmentation, seen close, was beyond doubt in the skin, not on it—a product of slow ages of need for concealment.

He felt both fascinated and repelled ; fascinated by the magnificent muscular perfection of these greater than giants ; repelled by their grotesque livery.

But Greyne was speaking urgently, impatience manifest in every telescoped phrase. And yet he seemed almost to be pleading.

Listening, Blatherwick thought his acquaintance of more than thirty years to be talking in some foreign language.

He was lengthening his vowels and employing words of which the small man had never heard.

Amongst the spate of speech one sentence stood out, clipped, as far as Blatherwick was concerned, of its context, and barely intelligible therefrom.

" Dunnamany days I've searched fur you, an' now you're that outgate I'm fair beazled ! " cried the speaker. " What ha' ye done ? What ha' ye done, that ye be all cluttered in this bleat pleace, ye that are the salt and the salvation o' th' earth ? "

" Adone. Adone," replied one in the same sprawling, drawling manner.

" That sounds like dialect ? " thought the little man, and seized on to the word as a rock in the whirlpool of his confusion.

" Dialect." That made it all plain. Greyne's anxiety to reach the hill and the fact that he had always called it " the hill " and never " the downs."

His hope, amounting to certainty, that up here he would find what he was looking for ; up here, when he had the whole of England in which to search.

Of course, that was it.

Blatherwick, casting back along the scent, remembered what he had temporarily forgotten, that the Chilton-Greynes had been lords of Chilton Manor, in Chilton Urgfield, for centuries—cotemporaries with the Hobdens.

It was this man's grandfather, he believed, who had gamed away the birthright.

What was that saying of his own brother's ? " Raise a man's temper and you find his birthplace."

It was pretty nearly correct if one substituted "emotions" for "temper."

Ah, yes. Greyne was a Sussex man at heart. His acquired mannerisms of thirty years notwithstanding. It was the homing instinct at work, having now added to it a sudden surrender to primary instincts.

But then one of those others had replied in the same vernacular. What did that signify?

Was it possible that these folk had in the course of countless æons evolved a vocabulary identical with what was now an almost extinct argot?

No. That was too fantastic a theory.

One dirty hand commenced to comb matted eyebrows, working over them thoroughly, starting from the corner nearest the nose.

Blatherwick was badly rattled.

All this time Peter had been silent, thoughtfully looking from face to face. He had missed nothing of the excitement which had flamed across Greyne's worn features.

He had apprised the events, detail by startling detail, and had found himself hard put to it to control his feeling that he should act now, at once, before it was too late.

His hand itched to employ what he had carried so far and for such a definite purpose.

As he had once said, his father had inherited a tradition of "forcefulness." This tradition had been handed on.

Peter felt an almost irresistible urge to action where an Englishman bred and born and traditionally biassed in favour of moderation would have been amply content to wait on circumstances.

He took one ponderous step and hitched his coat so that the pocket was easier to his hand.

His eyes were upon the ragged fringe of hair above Greyne's ear, which spurted from under the stained pith helmet.

There was no particular sign of feeling upon his face, only perhaps the eyes were a trifle more placid than usual.

Neither of his two companions noted his movement. Came a sharp click in the ragged recesses of the voluminous garment and a great paw jerked at something as if what should be done must be done quickly.

Came, with the gesture, a slow, commanding motion in and of the air, yet stirring no slightest breeze. It was like an invisible hand sweeping across the downs, yet it seemed animated by no human emotion.

Blatherwick felt the abrupt, passionless impulse, as did Peter, and the latter went back a long pace against his will, and turned a bewildered look to his left.

" Physically, of course, they're perfect," remarked Greyne, becoming aware of his two fellow-travellers.

He spoke with forced enthusiasm, but both were aware of an undercurrent of uneasiness.

The smallest of the three was watching their eyes. Never, he thought, had he seen such naked bestiality peep unashamed from any countenance. They were craft, cruelty, lust and strength masquerading as men and women. At the moment their obvious strength impressed him most.

Muscular power was apparent in each limb, especially about the biceps and calves. Rather strangely, thought Blatherwick, they had well-modelled hands, with tapering, finely-formed fingers ; and, taken in the whole, were beautifully proportioned, with small waists swelling into splendid torsos.

The little man glanced once more at Greyne and saw that he was trembling violently. He was like one in the grip of a tremendous nervous reaction, and at that moment he put out a hand to steady himself against a boulder, and ran his tongue round his lips, making palpable attempts at self-control.

" But I don't understand," he complained at last in his normal tones, referring evidently to something which had gone before. " I don't understand. What have you *done* all these years ? What laws ? . . . What buildings ? . . . What material achievements ? "

The stranger who had spoken before made answer again. And astonishingly his accent now was as precise as Greyne's own. He might have been some ingenious puppet actuated solely by Greyne's changing inflections or his thoughts. The

others stood herded together, the while regarding the last speaker with dull, lack lustre, furtive eyes, hugging themselves in the icy blasts of wind.

" What have we done ? " commenced the painted caricature of a man. " You ask that . . . you ? "

A slow and sombre rage began to kindle beneath his lids, and he raised one hand in a peculiar gesture.

" What have we done, you ask, hoping to bolster up your failing self-confidence by listening to a recital of our attainments. God's curse upon you, if there be a God—we have done nothing—nothing."

His voice died away into the hissing sigh which ran drearily from mouth to mouth. Their breasts rose and fell to the breath, and they had their eyes on Greyne—accusing—tired eyes.

" What could we do ? " broke out the speaker anew. " You gave to us a tradition of fear. We lived in fear ; supped on fear ; were nurtured on fear ; and had fear for bedfellow.

" From birth to death for generation after generation we have been robbed of security, and without security there is no leisure. We had no time given us in which to achieve . . . and at last we lost the will."

Greyne licked his lips and put his other hand behind him.

" We are the most defenceless creatures of the whole earth ; an easy target for the most clumsy hunter, and our bodies bear the impress of our shame."

"Shame!" he repeated. "We are without shame, for we are too cowed for that. By the time one has conquered fear sufficiently to make room for other appetites, enter quickly hunger, lust, and again fear. The mere effort momentarily to overcome terror robs the brain of some part of its power to lift the body out of the morass. And when fear is one's very shadow . . . an ever-present enemy . . . !

"We are animals!" he cried, "but even so unable to protect ourselves against the hordes of enemies which surround us. We are animals, having their thoughts, their emotions, and partners in their insecurity; striped, as they, by the lash of a similar slavery.

"And when," he concluded in his monotone, "some one of yourselves, seeing us as we are, shall ask for what appalling and deathless crime we are condemned to go on thus from age to slow creeping age, deep sunk in our abominable desires, walking advertisements of our degeneracy—shall we answer that we have sinned so terribly against the light that our punishment can never, never be relieved? Shall we say that?

"No!" he thundered. "We shall say, and rightly, that we are as we are because an altruist, who thought himself a god, since he stumbled almost upon the truth, wished to show humanity how woefully they had failed—how magnificent they might have become."

As the words died on the wind another profound sigh parted the thick lips of the group. And now Blatherwick fancied he perceived in the depths of their pupils another emotion, which made their plight the more pitiful.

He thought he saw, here and there, a transient gleam, gone as soon as come, as if these people had seen the faint glimmer of brighter hopes, had known the bitterness of thwarted potentialities.

He felt sympathy mix with his distrust. They had been given no chance, set down in this hostile environment. For lack of opportunity they had become the lees of the wine of creation, the dregs of the primeval ooze.

Greyne pushed himself upright with an effort and asked a further question. On his face also was settling an expression of deepest horror.

" Art ? " replied the other. " If by art you mean beauty, I say that our only salvation lay in beauty. Now and then . . . at moments snatched during the hours of darkness. . . . If it had not been for that, we must have sunk even lower than we are. Yes, beauty is our only form of worship."

Greyne cried out at that loudly. " Then I have won ! It has been worth while ! Where . . . ? Where . . . ? "

For answer the spokesman turned and beckoned, and Greyne, followed by his two companions, fell in on his trail.

The remainder, still clustered together, walked a

little apart, darting sidelong secretive looks at the leader of the three, but saying nothing.

"Don't you see," gabbled Greyne, his words tripping over themselves, "that, with art as a basis, these can be taught to build anything? It is the only solid foundation that there is. Without art in one of its innumerable forms life becomes chaotic . . . a shifting quicksand."

He spoke to Blatherwick, leaning across Peter, who walked silently between them.

"These folk," he continued, "are the type of men and women whom Nature would have evolved had there been no alteration in the earth's temperature, and consequent conditions of life, during the last five million years or so. But I . . . I have created them. You must admit at least," he repeated, "that physically they could not be bettered.

"Time—more time is all I want. . . . I see where I went wrong."

They were plunging down the side of the hill by now, and the displaced rocks bounced and scuttled before them.

Once Blatherwick imagined he saw, far below, something which ran out from some hiding-place in order to avoid a hurtling rock of large dimensions.

He would have mentioned the matter, but the stranger halted the little procession with a movement of his striped and silver-slashed arm, and then sidled in between two jutting bastions of cliff.

"Chalk," remarked Greyne as he in turn squeezed into the narrow opening.

Blatherwick saw him reach and tear at a portion of the wall and crumble it between his fingers. He held it out to his companion. "No flints in that," he said. "The deposits of the Tertiary Period have not yet formed, and the denudation has not proceeded very far. No wonder they couldn't grow corn on it. This is of the Mesozoic Age."

The smaller man found time to wonder at the detachment of his tone, reminiscent of the impersonal manner in which he had discussed the most startling happenings at the outset. It was a bad augury.

The crack widened out after a few paces, giving on to a gloomy low-roofed cavern ; and as Blatherwick mechanically brushed at his knees and elbows he tried, without success, to stifle his fear that mischief was intended. It seemed a spot made for violent and bloody deeds, and he was afraid of the comforting effects of night upon natures so evidently treacherous.

But as his eyes grew accustomed he made out a glow at one point, and guessed that it indicated the remains of a fire, though where these folk could have learnt the uses of heat he was unable to conjecture. Possibly it was of a volcanic origin.

Suddenly sparks crackled, a flame sprang up, and the leader stood erect, throwing the light of a grass torch on to a roughly made ladder leading to a hole

overhead. It appeared to have just been lowered, that ladder. Blatherwick had an idea that he had seen the lower rungs of it being thrust down from above.

The first man went up nimbly as a monkey, though the crazy structure gave ominously to his weight.

Greyne and "Threeadick" followed without much difficulty, but to the smallest of the three the climb presented difficulties.

"Why," he panted as he reached the top, "don't you choose a more getatable spot?"

Behind him more and more of the painted individuals were springing on to the floor, and one of the smallest of them, as he bent to jerk the steps up to their level, answered him.

"Protection," he said bitterly. "We can avoid the bigger animals outside, with care. They can be seen and heard at a great distance, and we have learned how to deal with them.

"But those other things, like you saw last night, are everywhere and very cunning. They are so small that they can follow wherever we go, and they can climb. Even the mightiest of the beasts are afraid of them; they are always hungry."

"Ah!" ejaculated Greyne, "that explains a great deal which puzzled me."

One by one each newcomer took a torch from a heap near the entrance and lit it from his neighbour's.

In the reflection of the glare great walls took to themselves solidity uprearing to an unseen roof.

The motley crowd jostled and whispered each to each as they began to move, and in their midst the three travellers were borne round many corners and up more than one ladder, similar to the first, until at last they found themselves in a long, narrow chamber with no visible roof, whose walls, white and dazzling, were bordered at floor level with row on row of sculptured effigies.

The light of the torches fell full on them, and with an eager cry Greyne ran across and knelt before the nearest. With a sharp exclamation he rose and went to the next, and as he went the crowd moved with him, holding their hands low so that the work could be seen to the best advantage.

The material used appeared to be a hard chalk, and there was a softness of outline about the work which seemed to give a disconcerting aspect of life to the full-sized figures.

Behind Greyne came his two companions. Blatherwick, looking up from a reluctant examination of one statue, saw for the first time an expression of pleased anticipation upon the faces about him, like that upon the face of children who have merited, and expect praise.

One by one they went down the interminable line, not being allowed to omit any.

And at the end Peter drew a deep breath of relief. "*That* is not art," he said. "And as for beauty." . . .

"But it is well done," protested Greyne stub-

bornly. " Each is a masterpiece in its way. Look at the strength of it and the finish. Think of the patient work necessary. . . ."

" Nero never imagined such devilish and revolting animalism," replied the other ; " and the fact that they are well done makes them only the more beastly. They are vice frozen."

" Which of these is yours ? " interrupted Greyne, swinging round to the one who had all along acted as chief spokesman.

The great figure took a few steps aside and motioned for the lights to be brought nearer.

" This," he announced, and pointed to a life-sized group of four figures, two men and two women. " That," he said, as one who will not be contradicted, " is what has kept us from sinking lower than we are . . . Beauty and the capturing of beauty for all time." He paused expectantly.

" An Agesander might have done it," said Peter, after one swift look, " or an Athenodorus crazy from his own indulgence, but never a Lysippus or a Praxiteles. This sort of thing does not come within the province of sculpture ; it is a scene for a chamber of horrors.

" It is bad art," he continued, " as is all which seeks to immortalise anything so fugitive as intense suffering. Even death itself is beautiful and not dreadful. And the foul sentiment portrayed alongside is a reflection of the most disgusting mind which

it has ever been my ill fortune to see nakedly exposed for inspection."

"There is craftsmanship there," muttered Greyne, but the ring had gone from his voice.

"It *is* art," he said, but there was no conviction with the words.

"The supreme justification," said Vandredon, repeating Greyne's own words of a previous occasion. "You have reached your final goal, and I hope to heavens you are satisfied."

"It *is* beautiful, isn't it?" queried the artist, looking from face to face for confirmation. He read the verdict, and found no hope in Greyne either.

Swift anger gripped him by the throat, and he towered over the lean man, and seeing them thus together, Blatherwick caught an extraordinary likeness between the faces of each.

"It is you," the speaker shook the other in one mighty fist, "it is you who are responsible for this. If it is not beauty, who is to blame? We had no standards to learn from. No leisure to set them up. Fear was always with us, and when we had overcome fear we were jaded to the core of our being. I know you," he cried. "I know your innermost thought and your hidden impulses. And I know what we might have been but for you, or because of you, had you acted differently."

"Who are you?" interrupted Peter.

"I," the giant shouted, spinning Greyne about

in his grasp, "am this man's other self—what he had it in him to become—what he would have become given similar conditions. Had he lived as I do, or had I been born and lived in that world which you have wantonly destroyed, either had become the other, He and I are one. The personality of each of us is identical. Only vastly different conditions of existence have built up dissimilar bodies for us to inhabit; have played upon and emphasised different aptitudes.

"He has done the world the greatest disservice of any who ever lived.

"He has used up force and thought which should have gone to the betterment of future generations.

"Owing to the power of his thought he has created me and these others."

Blatherwick stared round him involuntarily at the motion of the hand and shuddered as he saw their eyes.

"He can never escape me now," added the speaker in a voice which grew dull and tired, "as can none of you escape your other selves which he has caused to walk alive about the earth.

"We have been with you, unseen, from the beginning, we who are what you would have been, as we must go, secretly, with each one of the teeming millions of the world until the end—a drag upon the wheel of progress, an ever-present reminder of baseness, half-forgotten and dimly seen, by which the weaker may yet be cheated of salvation.

"We are doomed," he concluded, hardly above his breath, "doomed to be an everlasting curse to humanity. By the power of his thought, transmuted, he has laid a curse upon civilisation for ever—for thought never dies." His voice whispered to and fro in the dank crypts of the gallery.

A deep and heartbroken sigh burst simultaneously from all hearers, and the shadows crept up and down the walls as their hands trembled.

A movement ran through the packed bodies, and for an instant Blatherwick was afraid.

But in silence the group turned to retrace their steps, and "Threeadick" took advantage to whisper, "He has failed—they have no souls, for they knew not good from evil until now." His voice was firm and confident.

"A chance . . . I must have another chance," blattered Greyne to himself as at length they filed out into the heat and glare of the day.

CHAPTER XI

As they set themselves again to the climb, Blatherwick, looking about him, perceived that the long-fingered shadows were drawing out fast across the hillside. And he was reminded how many of the incidents which had crowded upon them had been staged with the pregnant shades of evening for a background.

And now he was persuaded that the scene was being adjusted for the last, and decisive, struggle.

Once more the earth seemed to quiver and to tremble beneath the ceaseless impact of soundless blows, as he had imagined it to reel during those hours he had spent by Peter's side ; while the latter was wrapped in tense concentration, waiting for the message which never came.

It appeared to the footsore little man who toiled painfully among the rocks that the bruised sky rang to the tramp of innumerable feet.

To his tired mind the idea came that up there, up where the green and purple clouds trailed wearily across the western furnace, the imponderable armies of the countless dead were marshalling to some vast arena, tier on tier.

He raised his eyes and saw them. On the one

hand a great multitude, and over against them the silent, leaderless ranks . . . the heavens were dumb with anxious watchers.

He spared another glance from the ground at his feet, and it seemed to him that never before had Greyne cloaked himself with such an air of stark determination. He had the look of a man who would drag down the very pillars of the universe if need should arise. He had the look of one about to make a final monstrous demand of God. And there was about him a latent truculence, as if, though he expected the conflict would be merciless, he knew also that he possessed a weapon which could by no possibility be matched.

Yet Blatherwick was aware that, even with his knowledge, doubt, hard held and unavowed, struggled for expression on those hawk-like features.

Blatherwick was thinking. "He knows he's got to make his choice soon. It hasn't worked . . . he can't help seeing that. They've done nothing, and will do nothing. It was obvious all along. Civilisation spells security, and he's taken that away.

"Those people to-day, too . . . animals, that's all—and the more beastly because of their good looks. He's nearly lost faith in himself. . . . Art . . . my God!

"That horrible business last night brought things home. . . . What a damned fool I was to listen to him!

"Yes, he's weakening. But I wonder what he'll

do. He can't leave things as they are, in this frightful muddle ; and he won't like going back. . . ."

Greyne walked proudly, staring towards the summit, but there was a witness to his thoughts—in the tell-tale twitching of a muscle in his cheek.

So they worked gradually upward to the crest, and ever a few feet in advance trod that painted monstrosity which was Greyne's other self.

And once, catching sight of the expression in his companion's face, the observer imagined that he might have come to a wrong conclusion ; he had the idea—why he did not know—that it would be a bribe, not a weapon, which this man would employ.

Then, by chance, the smaller man, turning his head to speak to Peter, who was behind, noted in an amazed stare that the slope was crowded with men and women, who crept cautiously from rock to rock. And at the same moment the group who had accompanied the three into the recesses of the cave began to string out into a long line, as if to deny passage to those others, who were drawing steadily more near.

There was no articulate word spoken on either side until the end. Only the huge colour-splashed creatures went slowly forward as if drawn against their will, with, now and then, the sharp tapping of a displaced stone to slash the silence.

Only they who approached raised themselves a little from their crouching position, like those who prepare for the last grapple. And then the onlooker

recognised one of them for a man to whom he had spoken on the previous evening in the camp.

He uttered an exclamation, taking hold of "Threeadick" by the sleeve, and at the sound of his voice both Greyne and the leader turned.

"There's trouble coming," decided Peter, and he, too, was showing signs of the long strain.

"What are they going to do?" breathed Blatherwick.

Between step and step the leader halted and confronted Greyne, who was watching with his features set in a grimace of granite resolution.

"You have unleashed fear," he said, and it seemed that he was past showing emotion. "You have unleashed fear; and they are about to slay themselves, not knowing what they do, as you must soon destroy me, knowingly, who am not ready for immortality. It is the last and most abominable crime for which you are responsible."

"No," shouted the other at that. "No." He started forward and stumbled in the direction of the two opposing lines, which were less than five yards apart.

"No," he cried again, as he came close, and ran from man to man, gesticulating wildly. And "No," moaned Blatherwick. "No."

But not the least attention was paid to any interruption. The eyes of each man were fixed unwaveringly upon the grotesque countenance opposite to himself.

In a slow and sullen manner the ranks drew together.

It was as if they were unwilling partners in some dreary macabre dance ; or as if they looked upon the reflection of themselves in a mirror.

For should a man lift his fist, as some did ; or should one of the others wring his clenched and shadowy hands above his head, as did many in agonies of despair, making no attempt at resistance; that gesture was copied intimately by his *vis-à-vis*, and thus they came together, posturing and grinning the while, each to each.

At the last Greyne turned and went furiously away and began to hasten towards the summit, as if he knew his hour was upon him.

And one or two wrenched round their heads to watch him go, so that Blatherwick saw then their faces. . . .

As the smaller man staggered on to the comparative smoothness of the hill-top he looked back, holding to his great friend for support, and from there it seemed as if the attackers fought with phantoms.

For the bizarre colouring of their opponents mingled with the gathering dusk upon the slope, so that they could not be seen, and the others stood with outstretched hands locked upon invisibility at a height level with their passion-blotched faces.

The watcher averted his gaze, and with Peter's great arm around him hastened to catch up the other

two who were standing face to face in the midst of the desolation. As he drew near he saw the crimson disc of the sun lower itself to the rim of the earth, and he felt the fury of the unheard blows redouble, as if away in the immensity of space there were those working in a last frenzy of endeavour to shatter the familiar foundations of all things known.

Then rushed up, from where the sun sank down, a mighty column of quivering silver light, which soared to the zenith and remained undimmed as if continually replenished from below ; a shining torch through which the wan stars peered.

Then pealed a silver clarion, thin and clear, and the ringing echoes leaped from world to wheeling world, and Blatherwick knew, as he had known before, that the message was for him also ; yet he could not discover the meaning, but crouched upon the earth, hiding his face from the glory of the light.

At the sound of that trumpet, Peter abandoned his companion and went and stood very close behind Greyne, and now his hand left his pocket, armed, and what he held was almost touching the other's head.

He was staring away over the grey levels far below, and his face was calm as if he knew that indeed the moment approached.

But Greyne did not glance once behind him. He had recovered from his brief weakness. His face was dark and stern as he frowned over the shoulder of the giant striped figure before him. There was

no least hint about his bearing that he feared the outcome of what was toward.

He defied the powers visible and invisible, while overhead a myriad watchers waited on the outcome of the struggle.

Then was the battle joined.

There was no dramatic pageantry, no abrupt and splendid manifestation of irresistible wrath.

But there was a stir in Heaven as though the packed millions rose to their feet at the coming of some Great One ; there was a stir and a hush and a dawning sense of a new presence.

Yet there was no anger attendant on that coming; naught but an impression of overmastering sorrow; a brooding melancholy.

The passion and the rage were concentrated around the puny human figure on the downs—standing there in the twilight beneath the dead ; challenging for deathless power.

" So Jane is ready," sneered Greyne without turning his head. " She has been a long time."

Peeping between his fingers, Blatherwick saw a change come over the speaker with the words.

A look of perplexity spread across his face as if he had but at that moment appreciated against whom he fought.

It seemed as though the knowledge came to him with a shock of utter surprise ; as if only at that instant had he even faintly realised that he was outcast and, as such, to be opposed by all which

counted for good. He seemed momentarily bewildered ; drained of confidence.

" A man of one idea," muttered Peter, watching, and looked for his immediate collapse.

But the other rallied. He drew himself to his full height, and by the expression in his deep sunk eyes it was apparent that he was re-casting the whole of his plans, drawing on a different armoury for his weapons.

" I cannot tolerate interference by God," he muttered half aloud, and made ready for a stern resistance.

He tossed his helmet to one side and with an unconscious gesture shook his wrists clear of his cuffs. He peered intently from side to side of the grim figure before him, towards the north, as one who had foreknowledge of the quarter whence to expect attack.

His chest heaved spasmodically under the tattered shirt ; but there was a certain grandeur about his very defiance.

The earth rocked as it swung along its orbit, and the stars calamitously swooned to meet it.

And then from earth to sky leaped out, as upon a celestial canvas unrolled, a glowing picture.

Then to the three men was revealed the appalling misery of mankind ; the horror and the immensity.

Quick, against the lifeless darkness of the void, the watchers saw whole cities go screaming down to death ; saw the laborious links of civilisation parting

one by one ; saw the oppressors snatch their greedy toll ; heard the clamour of the combat, and apprised the hopelessness in the hearts of them who fought.

And as the landscape hung there, caught up 'twixt sun and sun, a great voice pealed about the three.

" By whose authority ? "

And " Mine ! " cried Greyne loudly. " Mine ! " He went forward a step and shook his fists above his head, and his other self came to meet him a long stride and waved flaccid intertwined fingers to the sky.

The colours faded and another picture grew. And now they saw the burden laid upon the whole earth—the tortured seas and the drowning of entire continents ; the flames of a great burning, and their ears were shocked by strident cries in the smoke.

And " By whose authority ? " pealed the voice. And " Mine ! " cried Greyne harshly. " Mine ! " And now he put out a hand against the chest of his other self to fend him away.

Picture after picture faded, and landscape after landscape grew, and under each might have been written the word " Despair," for of hope there was no sign.

And always the question thundered, 'twixt star and star, " By whose authority ? " And ever Greyne made the same reply, though his breath whistled between his teeth and his lips were drawn back.

But now, though he put a curb upon himself till

the sweat rolled down his face, his hands came up and were about the throat opposite to him, and about his own neck were long fingers, nerveless, having no strength.

And scene after remorseless scene hung on the air, and Blatherwick saw the faces of the children, and once he stammered, " They were not looked after " ; and he knew that it must be so, for, robbed of parents in the midst of strange enemies, how could they live ?

Impotent, while the tears rained down upon his palms, he watched them waiting in dumb perplexity for the well-remembered footfall, which never came again.

And now Greyne was calling to him urgently. " Hold him off ! Hold him off ! "

Then Blatherwick saw that the man whom he once counted friend was locked breast to breast with his antagonist, and his eyes held the first hint of fear.

The little man hesitated and looked at Peter, but that one was grimly intent upon his own business and spared no glance.

" Take him off, John," panted Greyne. " Take him off. I want a chance. One last chance. Quick ! Oh, quick ! "

Whether it was the sheer urgency of the appeal, or whether it was the use of the christian name, whether it was some unacknowledged sense of shared comradeship or a hope that all might yet be well, Blatherwick was compelled ; and he stumbled

up and flung his arms about the painted waist, straining back with all his might.

It seemed to him that what he held was cold with an iciness not of life. Yet he held on reluctantly, and heard Greyne stammer between gulped breaths, " You have a share in this, John. Hold him ! Hold him ! "

And Blatherwick set his teeth and bent his back, expecting he knew not what repentant act.

For a second, or while a man might draw a quick breath, Greyne was free. He flung his two hands aloft, and Blatherwick felt the muscles against his own cheek bunch to a similar gesture.

Then Greyne summoned all his reserve of strength and cried out, " Listen ! " And it was still.

The blows were silenced which beat upon the earth, and Blatherwick had an impression of two titanic hammer men, with suns for foothold, halting in their work where they bestrode space, leaning upon colossal mallets, with perspiration glistening on their naked shoulders, looking down towards the man.

" Listen ! " shouted Greyne once more ; and it was very still. " If Pilate had *not* released unto them Barabbas ? " he cried. " What then ? "

And the smaller man groaned, letting go his clasp, for he realised the blasphemy and the bribe.

With the relaxing of his fingers the striped and painted body lurched against the wild figure standing so very near, staring at the sky in confident expectation.

Out shot Greyne's hands, though by the fixity of his muscles it was obviously none of his wish. He gripped the other by the throat and flung him sideways with a wrench. At the touch it seemed that the shadowy outlines became more ghost-like, more unreal.

From the earth where the body lay a vague mist crept up about the attacker, and appeared to mould itself to his frame, so that Blatherwick saw Greyne through a pale nimbus of insubstantiality.

And Greyne staggered as if under an immense burden ; he went to his knees, to his face, and lay a moment all his length along. For the personality that he might have been had entered into the body that he had, and he was racked.

But he came up again, with hands clawing about him for support. He came upright, rocking as he stood, and amazement dawned upon his livid features.

For there was no least sign of any answer, and a last picture grew upon the blank veil of space.

This was a picture of the camp which they had left last night. Again they saw the fires and the groups about them ; heard the sudden outcry and watched Peter leap to the defence.

Huge and titanic, greater far than in life, the actors swarmed across the canvas, and Blatherwick began to tremble.

Minute by minute the action was unrolled before them till Blatherwick saw himself staring, frozen-

eyed, at the bubbling turmoil in the devilish swarms which boiled about them.

With a fresh recurrence of the awful horror he had felt, he watched that sinister blister break, and saw again what came out from the midst of the greedy snatching mouths.

He cried out as, in this final vision, the woman once more tore herself erect with those monstrous beetle shapes about her, hanging to limbs and cheek.

He shouted aloud as she stood up, as she had stood once before, and he wondered anew how she could live in that torment, and cast about again in his mind for an answer to the riddle of what should be able to defy death.

He had a glimpse of a child's face, and watched the hopeless, straining arms which could never bridge the gap.

Then he saw, what in the press of thronging emotions he had not realised he saw at the time, that the darkness about the distraught face was not the natural blackness of her hair, but the stains of utter weariness and the dishevelment of the last agony.

He knew then who they were, in spite of the hunger-pinched distortion of both mother and child.

He heard a voice, which was barely recognisable, mumble in despair.

Greyne turned as the landscape faded. "It was Mary and 'Boy,'" he muttered. And now he seemed beaten beyond all hope of recovery.

A last time pealed out the sonorous voice, "By whose authority?" but the man who stood below made no reply.

Yet at that moment the smouldering mist about him appeared to thicken; to solidify; and it was as if a devil of new strength entered the failing body, so that even then Greyne was able to stand erect. And for a last time: "Stop!" he cried, and there came a sighing wind which rustled about the place as though the myriads of watchers above shuffled and craned their necks to see what should now befall.

"Let me alone," he cried. "I have seen enough." Blatherwick looking at him saw that his face was haunted, as if another than he peeped out of his eyes.

The last rays of the dying sun now flamed across the hills, so that he looked as if he had been dipped in blood.

He tossed crimson arms on high and shouted, "If Pilate had *not* released unto them Barabbas? It is enough. The authority was mine. Mine! Mine! And remains to me. There is no place for You in this . . ."

He paused, and sheer hate looked from his eyes. He paused, drawing great gulps of air, and flung out a hand.

"I will make a picture of my own upon the skies for you to see," he cried, "and when I clap my hands that scene shall live. I will rip redemption from the generations unborn."

Fell an astounded silence.

Out of the corner of his eye Blatherwick saw Peter start forward and come again behind the man who peered out to the empty spaces. The great torch of silver light quivered, lifted and sank. Night surged over the hills, and the stars were hidden.

Blatherwick crumpled to his knees, hiding his face.

Then, sweet and faint in the shadows, a church bell rang. Memories of the long, long summer evenings in an English garden came to the little man ; quick in the darkness he saw again the white, dusty road leading to the village ; heard once more the footsteps of the worshippers and the slumberous voices of homely birds in the hedgerow.

The silver torch streamed up triumphant. Bell after bell took up the tale and pealed out in joyous summons.

And still the light increased, so that now Greyne appeared shrouded in a lambent luminosity which played around his limbs, but that phosphorescence was unholy.

Peter looked over at the kneeling man and nodded, tight-lipped, so that the other was aware that now had come the long-delayed message.

Next a picture was limned upon the north, where Greyne was pointing, and the music of the bells filled earth and sky with melody.

Second by second the details sprang up before the

onlookers, and Greyne, seeing them shook and shook and shook, staring in dumb amaze, for this was not the picture of his mind. This came in his despite.

Moment by moment was built up before the onlookers, the likeness of a high white wall, dazzling 'neath a tropic sun.

Beyond the walls were a multitude of white, flat-roofed houses ; and in the wall an arched doorway, a patch of black upon the radiance.

There was a crowd upon a road which led into the archway, and in their midst a man seated upon his mount.

The beginning of the road was lost in shadow, and on the other side of the city it wound away into secret depths.

There was the wall and the archway and the road ; upon the road those who thronged about the one in their midst, their faces set all towards the flat-roofed houses ; and the beginning and end of the road could not be discerned.

Seeing this, indecision fell from Blatherwick like a discarded garment. He gave one look to Greyne and knew that he was free of this man's domination. The idea came to him that he, the little, inoffensive nobody of unimportant routine, had been selected to save the world.

He knew terror of what this man, who had thought himself a god, might yet do. Broken beyond endurance, he turned and fled.

But Peter stayed and watched the dawning of the

landscape ; and when it was complete he spoke for the first time, looking askance, while he talked, at the trembling figure beside him, with his finger tense for the action.

" Now what," he said, " do you suppose that this may be ? Is it, do you think, some beggar that they seek to drive from the city ? Mark how they strike at him with staves."

But Greyne shook and shook, making no answer.

" Or would it be," resumed the other, watching him covertly, " some captain of their armies in disgrace ? Hark, how they cry out against him ! "

Then Greyne moved ; he glanced from side to side, licking his dry lips. He stepped away from Peter and was suddenly wrenched with pain. He mastered himself and answered ; and the night was as light as day.

" The scales are fallen from my eyes ! " he cried. " The scales are fallen and I see clearly. He is indeed a beggar ; He is the greatest beggar of all time, but He begs not for earthly alms. I see Him clearly, and He is indeed a Captain, the most victorious Captain of all the ages, but His kingdom is not here nor now.

" I see the face of the Man ! " he cried in a strong voice, " and I know Him. I see Him very well. He is riding into Jerusalem, seated upon an ass. And they are strewing palms of gladness in the way. For He Who comes so humbly is the Light of the World, the living Hope of all humanity."

Greyne stumbled, and rested himself upon a rock with his arms across his knees.

"I have sinned!" he cried. "I have sinned before Heaven and before Thee."

He bowed his face upon his arms and wept.

* * * * *

For perhaps the half of a minute Peter remained where he was, while the vision of the white city faded slowly from the sky and the bells ceased their song. Then, with a set face, he tossed his weapon to the ground and in his turn went over the brow of the hill to the plains below.

He looked back once after he had gone some little distance, and in the strange silver light, which was all that now remained, the silhouette of the seated man bulked black and huge against the skyline.

He sat up there as if out of jet carven, magnified against the stars, a bowed, gigantic effigy of grief.

CHAPTER XII

By the time that "Threeadick" had reached the foot of the downs Blatherwick, desperately driven by his new thought, was far ahead.

He imagined he saw at last how he could relieve the load of remorse which weighed heavily upon him.

Free at length from the compulsion of a will stronger than his own, possessed of an independence as complete as had been his former blind subjection, he was determined to put a period to the capricious workings of Greyne's dispassionate instrument.

From the moment he left the neighbourhood of his companions he seemed to be outside the influence of the struggle.

For him there was now no vision athwart the heavens; no bells in some long-forgotten downland church cheered him on his way. It was night—a night full of menace—and through that darkness he ran headlong, borne up by the urgency of his self-imposed mission.

Day after weary day he went forward through the heat of the tropical noon, enduring the misery of thirst and the worst torment that he might yet be too late.

He could not find it in him to believe that Greyne would abandon his plans. Probably, he thought, might even more terrible things be intended. He remembered the other's threat that he would plunge civilisation for ever into barbarism rather than yield to interference.

So he struggled painfully on his way, all unknowing of what had taken place since he had fled.

And the camps along his route saw only a small, dishevelled scarecrow of a man, with burning eyes under unkempt hair.

A little tortured individual, who ate and drank, unspeaking, with his eyes fixed upon a certain point on the horizon.

A man harried by a fever of impatience, who hardly stayed to sleep, but pressed on from hour to hour, staggering through very weariness.

Marvelling at such need for haste when the lethargy of despair was clogging all initiative, yet they fed him, for the law must be fulfilled that this man should not die while the earth was as it was.

So the chary inhabitants of the encampments gave to him the last of their supplies, not knowing why they robbed themselves in his favour.

And from place to place he went, keeping a certain direction, as the returning birds at springtime hold their trackless paths, undeviating.

And, as he travelled, a conviction grew in the little man's mind.

He became hourly more strongly convinced that

methods ranked equally with motives, and with results, in the scheme of matters eternal.

It came to him slowly, but with a certainty not to be dispelled, that that was the message twice given to him, and twice rejected, and that it was there that he had failed.

He became persuaded that he, the little, inoffensive nobody, had woefully failed to take upon himself the responsibility which was rightly his.

The motive, he realised, might have been, might always be, too subtle, too involved, for his plodding brain to grasp. The results also, he knew, might always be beyond his capabilities to foresee. But the methods . . . ah, there, he knew now, he could have interfered !

The motives and the results were outside his sphere to appreciate or to forecast, but he, the little unimportant nonentity, had had his misgivings of the methods, and could have influenced them on behalf of his fellow-men.

Better, he thought, had he smashed the marvellous creation of a brilliant personality than have lent his aid against his own convictions.

Lack of stamina—that was it. A too easy acquiescence ; a total failure to think for himself.

He was subconsciously aware that his punishment was not complete.

Then, on a day when he reckoned by blind instinct that he was somewhere near the neighbourhood whence they had set out, while he was for the

first time considering the appalling possibility that in the universal upheaval, of which only too evident traces were all around him, the site of the laboratory, with the building itself, might be buried beyond reach under some great landslide or *débris* of eruption, he saw the outlines of a few huge trees before him tremble in violent vibration, as if a mist of themselves enlarged them on each side.

The knowledge of what that presaged came to him in a flash. Once more, in memory, he saw Greyne stretch across the table to move the lever, saw the electric bulb vibrate like a struck string, and knew again that what had become terribly familiar was about to alter.

With the knowledge, and before he could complete his train of thought, the landscape fell away to right and left, revealing a yet more ancient crudity : the raw beginnings of a world hot from the potter's hand.

Blatherwick stood now, he saw, at the foot of a piled slide of giant boulders, balanced each on each to some hidden summit. There was neither blade of grass nor twig of tree anywhere to be seen ; there was no movement of anything in the air nor among the jagged calcined waste around him.

He was alone, dreadfully alone, in a world naked to the winds of interstellar space.

He was alone in the midst of a great silence, utterly and terribly alone, and fear took him by the heart.

Blatherwick had one final coherent thought : " It is the failure of the infallible mechanism," he reflected, reverting to Greyne's simile ; " it has forgotten a line of the poetry."

Then he leaped to a mad unreasoning activity.

He crimped his fingers into a crevice of the nearest boulder and jerked himself somehow to the top.

He flung himself upon the next obstacle and went up it, scrambling furiously with the tips of his worn boots.

Up and up he went, shouting, distraught. Up and up he went, driven by the horror of the watching silence. Up and up, lifting himself by frenzied spasms of his overstrained muscles.

Up and yet up, beating upon the crimsoning rocks with torn hands, and raving as he toiled.

There was a pale gloom descended upon the scene, and in the gloom and the silence the tiny figure of the man tore at the unyielding surface and squirmed from stone to stone.

And fear, such as Blatherwick had never imagined, was his constant companion ; so that the cold water poured from his body in streams as he lifted now and again his face to stare into the star-strewn infinity.

" My God," he wailed once, " he made me a god, and I didn't *want* to be a god ! "

He hammered at the rocks and sobbed, torn by human emotions.

A moon, of the colour and consistency of coke, ground by overhead, and from long purple wounds in that grey surface great crimson gouts of flame dripped down towards the earth.

In the light of that drying world Blatherwick looked up and saw, afar above him, the rounded upper portion of what he sought rearing itself out of the *débris*, splashed with that melancholy radiance.

And he shouted again, hurling himself anew to the assault. And, "Smash it!" he thought savagely. "Smash. Smash."

Without knowing that he did so, he grasped a nearby splinter and, thus hampered, crawled and cursed and writhed, hauling his battered body from height to height.

A rock which seemed definitely unscaleable brought him at length to a halt, and he lay there with his rags waving about him, emptied of strength.

But as he gazed down he noted that the foot of the long, long hill was shrouded in sable darkness, and even as he rested he saw a figure bound abruptly from shadow to light and come leaping up, running where he had walked, taking obstructions in great spasms of energy where the little man had wearily fought to win an inch.

He knew the hasting figure, and the thought came to him that this new development was of Greyne's own doing.

He gibbered in the extremity of his hatred and terror, finding new power to rise and start once more his task.

Somehow he overcame the obstacle before him, though twice he slipped back to fall, a crumpled, whimpering thing, and twice he rent his clothing with his teeth, infuriated by his own futility.

Yet his insane determination lifted him up and up till finally he crept, sobbing, about the concrete wall, like an unskilful fly, searching for an entrance which he could not find.

He heard the sounds of progress made by another climber, and spent precious seconds debating whether to turn and die in a last attempt to keep Greyne back or whether to continue his well-nigh hopeless search for some cranny which would give him ingress.

And all the while fear, stark fear, shook him from heel to head.

By luck, by merit of acute eyesight, or by compulsion, he came upon what he wished—a low-roofed entrance between two heaped boulders.

There was nothing to distinguish it from any other of a hundred similar openings, yet Blatherwick knew . . . and dived into the obscurity with his hand clamped about the stone he had picked up ; fear accompanying.

" Smash it. Smash it," he muttered, and felt his feet slide on dressed paving.

" Smash it," he repeated, and tottered along a

passage, as the one who followed bent to enter in pursuit.

Now he was at the steps, and now he was in the building itself, which smelt musty as if for years untenanted.

He flung himself forward in the darkness and crashed against steel barriers. He swung about panting, and spread out his hands, groping for the table, if it should still be there.

He felt his hands caught and held, and knew he was too late. He collapsed utterly as Greyne lifted his frail body without an effort and crossed the floor with sure, firm steps.

Blatherwick knew the acute bitterness of defeat as the other let him down carelessly into a chair. "Smash it . . . " he moaned as his weapon slipped from his nerveless grasp.

Followed a careful movement of capable hands ; came swift on that a sharp click. . . .

Lights sprang up in the electric bulbs, and the smaller man huddled amongst the cushions saw a pencil, a pencil which he had noticed long, long before, balancing on the edge of the table—saw it balance and saw it fall.

* * * * *

It was not thirty seconds later when Greyne, having assured himself that everything was as he had left it, seized his companion by the shoulder and jerked him to his feet.

"You saw it through," he said, and Blatherwick

wondered if he only imagined the new sadness in the usually dictatorial voice.

" You saw it through. I should like you to be present at the end.

" There is something I must be told.

" No," he replied to a stammered question. " We have not used up Time, which is unimportant, a convention. We have—I have—wasted what is far more valuable, what is vitally necessary, in fact, thought, energy, force—and the supply of force in the universe is diminishing hourly and can never be replenished."

By now the two were standing in the well-remembered stable-yard and, excepting the absence of the car, all was as it had been.

Still holding the little man firmly Greyne ran out into the street and stopped the first passer.

" Hullo ! " he called. " Oh ! it's you, Dooner, is it ? Tell me ; do you feel anything different to-day from other days . . . any *change* in yourself ? "

He fixed his eyes on the other's face, waiting eagerly.

Dooner started at the sudden interruption, and recoiled a few paces.

" Bless my soul," he exclaimed, " I didn't know you, Chilton. What a weird ' get up.' You look as if you'd had a rough time of it. And you," he continued, turning to Blatherwick curiously, " you look as if you'd been——" He stopped and

glanced up and down the road meditatively. "Now you mention it," he answered, "I do feel a little odd; I've never taken this short cut previously to my knowledge. But I feel as if I'd been walking this way, at this time, and doing everything just the same, before—ages ago maybe. You know what I mean. I believe these scientific Johnnies talk about the 'curvature of time,' what?"

"Thank you," said Greyne slowly, in dismissal. "That's all I wanted."

"By the way," added the other as he made to walk on, obviously curious as to what it was all about, "your coming out like that is rather lucky; it reminds me I want to get a tonic—these March winds seem to take it out of one; don't they? I feel jaded—'washed out,' you know."

He waved a gloved hand and disappeared round the corner.

Thoughtfully, Greyne piloted his friend between the green, sun-blistered gates.

"It'd have been a pity had you broken the instrument," he remarked with a touch of grimness, as they went down the steps, "because it would take years to replace, and there is immediate work for it to do; of a very different character. . . .

"Your motive, John," he concluded, "was doubtless excellent; but your method was extremely crude."

PART II

CHAPTER I

On a stifling August afternoon Blatherwick stood again in the domed laboratory, looking, a trifle mistrustfully, at his friend, who was seated near the heavy table.

There was no longer about the little man that former perky air of complacency ; that outward manifestation of an inward, shy superiority. He appeared more thoughtful, less inclined to act first and consider later. But he was more frail, and obviously less certain that all was for the best in a world composed of restaurants and vineyards.

" Where have you been hiding yourself this last week ? " he commenced, fanning himself with his straw hat. " There were several people I particularly wanted you to meet ; each influential in his different sphere, and all interested in the possibility of anæsthetising human emotions."

" If that's what you've been talking about at your meetings," retorted Greyne, " you've wasted your time and theirs. It was on the question of substitution, not eradication, that I wished you to sound them—the other's impracticable. Anyway, you

ought to get some women on to your committee. That leads me to the answer to your question," he interrupted himself. " I've been down to see the redoubtable Jane." He stared at the other almost angrily.

" Ah ! " murmured his companion, relieved. " What does she think about it ? " He glanced at a shaft of dusty light which danced upon a pulsing membrane, and, as always, he felt hypnotised by the steady, purposeful movement. He sat down beside the table and regarded the organism with but little less of his previous disquietude.

" It can do anything—anything," he reflected, and the knowledge that he himself could dictate to it what should be done gave him a new and pleasing sense of power.

" We must go carefully," he began. " Whether it will be better to make a clean sweep . . ."

" We mustn't ' go ' at all," interjected Greyne, drumming his fingers on the wooden surface. " That scheme is off, forbidden, replaced."

The smaller of the two jerked up his head and studied the face opposite. There were, he saw, new lines about the firm mouth. The great beak-like nose gave the old air of mastery to the man, but in the deep eyes was a light of compassion where formerly had been little room for any expression save that of intolerant, derisive contempt.

" That's a pity, rather," he remarked slowly ;

"something of the sort would be a splendid safeguard. . . ."

"Jane and I are going to work together in future," put in the taller man. He said it defiantly. "In her opinion there are too many bungling amateurs fooling about with the world. There is one thing I've got to do first, though."

Blatherwick raised his hand to his eyebrow. This indication of independent action disturbed him.

"You'll have to tell me," he declared firmly; "I'm not going to be left out in future."

"You've got to come as well," announced his interlocutor unexpectedly. "But when we have seen what we are to see I must supply the remedy by myself." His eyes turned towards the living mechanism beside him. "It is curious," he said, "to think that *this* is perfectly neutral about everything—quite dispassionate. We can use it for good or ill, just as we ordain. And just as efficiently will it work to destroy mankind or to save them."

"You lost control once," contradicted his hearer. "There's no knowing in the future. . . . What are we going to do, then?"

"Yes," Greyne replied, "I did. The details aren't quite perfect yet. And then——" He hesitated. "And then," he resumed, "I was handicapped. I had lost strength and hampered myself with what I shall never now be able to lose, the emotions and vices which might have controlled

me had I been born outside this civilisation. And I was being bitterly opposed."

His listener could almost see that strange luminosity about the speaker, which he knew was present—the clogging vaporous exhalation from his other self.

"You had better be careful yourself, John," Greyne warned. "I have learnt so much: that there are myriads of other-selves potentially about us as we walk, awaiting a favourable moment to become active influences—ennobling or debasing. You must exercise a rigid censorship over your thoughts, which are embryo actions. Mine is a dreary sort of damnation. A stultifying of my own powers through my own failings."

"Did *she* say we were to do something?"

The other nodded.

"We are to go forward and see into what kind of morass humanity will plunge itself if men and women continue to think and act as they do at present. Afterwards I have to work alone, under her direction. Only in that way can I hope to regain entire possession of myself." He spoke with unusual humility.

The listener, incongruously enough, thought it to be rather pathetic, the way in which Greyne repeated, like an obedient child, the lessons clearly taught to him by that indomitable personality who was Peter's mother. So self-reliant had he always been, so positive, brooking no contradiction.

" She and I together," concluded the taller man, " will do great things." Enthusiasm rang in his voice.

" I'm not going to allow you to do anything by yourself," announced Blatherwick stubbornly.

" You'll have to ! " flashed Greyne with a touch of his old manner. " It is her wish that you should understand where you, amongst others, are heading. Beyond that—no ! "

" Isn't there anything for me ? " cried the other.

" Only patience, and perhaps a self-training, so that you will be prepared to act as a radiating station, so to speak, for the new influences which we propose later to unloose over the earth. We shall want many like you. There will be contrary forces at work—of that neither of us has any doubt. And I should know," he ended bitterly.

Blatherwick shifted restlessly, and the sheen of an ivory knob caught his eye.

" It won't hurt any one ? " he persisted, reverting to the question of immediate action.

His friend shook his head. " We are to ask," he declared, " what will be the ultimate result *if* men and women do not alter their thoughts ? And having found out the answer, I shall possess a basis from which to strike at the root causes before it is finally too late. Jane will know as well as we," he concluded ; " she has her own methods."

" Thoughts," murmured his hearer reflectively. " Not actions, eh ? "

"Thoughts," repeated Greyne; "they are both the cause and the effect of actions, and far more important. There is no break in the chain of thought, and the results are indestructible. We shall only be able to mitigate, in any case."

"Is Peter coming?"

"No." The thin lips smiled. "I think he is busy training his Scotch puppies to retrieve golf balls. That man has an enormous faith in his mother's discretion. If she had told him to come now. . . ."

Blatherwick decided he would feel very lonely without that cheery comradeship.

"Very well," he agreed dolefully. "I suppose everything is ready?"

"It won't be necessary to take much," explained his companion. "A glimpse will be enough. Any way, a day should be sufficient."

As he spoke Greyne barred the doors and window, and hung once again a light trellis work of wires to complete the circuit.

"Don't be worrying yourself, John," he soothed kindly. "I mean no harm this time."

"Nor did you before," flashed the smaller man, unnerved by what was about to happen; "or so you said."

"I saw pictures in my mind," explained his friend, pausing with his hand outstretched, "glorious pictures of the future benefits which the world would reap. But they could never be—I see that now. I

went the wrong way to work, and may have jeopardised all that I wished to bring about. That is another curse I have called down on myself—unavailing regret.

" If you are ready ? " he hinted.

The smaller man shut his eyes tight and heard, with a thick beating of his heart, the first of the two movements of the lever necessary to transmute thought into living actuality.

* * * * *

At a touch on his hand Blatherwick opened his eyes, and found that they were in total darkness.

Gropingly he followed his companion, and as he cautiously felt for the steps cursed himself for a triple fool. Why had he again taken this man's word ? This new venture might be, in all probability was, a final attempt to put Greyne's self beyond the limitations of the body. All this apparent humility and contrition of the last five months was an elaborate device to secure immunity from interference.

As Blatherwick stumbled along the passage in the wake of his unseen leader he was certain that he had made a terrible mistake, and even as the thought crystallised into conviction came reassurance.

He heard a voice whispering at his ear, a woman's voice, clear and astonishingly youthful, delicately accentuated.

" For the good of those that may follow," breathed the voice, and the little man knew then that, whatso-

ever strange and horrible things they might see, it was necessary that he and Greyne should undergo this experience, so that, if possible, the future generations might be spared the misery which awaited them unless mankind learned to prune their mental processes of erotic offshoots.

The door leading into the stable-yard grated over rubble and jammed ; it needed the united efforts of both men to force the obstruction. A piercing wind cut them to the marrow when at length they pushed through the narrow opening into a sombre blue-grey gloom.

In silence they went forward a few steps, their feet clattering over loose pebbles, and turned to look about them.

The huge bulk of the building they had left towered out of a dead level plain at their backs. Peering to right and left, they made out no other landmark, no least sign of any break in the drab uniformity of the landscape.

Shivering in the steady current of icy air, they beat cold hands against their thighs and, taking a few paces to one side, perceived close above the western rim beyond the laboratory a sun like a red-hot cart wheel, which hung there motionless and never moved during all the time they had it under observation.

Under foot Blatherwick found they trod what might have been the beach of a long-vanished ocean. Overhead a few great stars hung, sunk far in the immensity of space.

Around them was the eternal dusk.

" It has been very quick," ventured Blatherwick, speaking, without knowing that he did so, in a hushed tone.

The other nodded absentmindedly, staring from side to side. " That is because it was already waiting in the future," he said, " consequential on man's own creative thought for ages past. Nothing except a drastic purification of the mass mind can avert the eventual coming of what we shall see.

" This is what mankind are about to bring upon themselves, as the abortive conclusion of the Creator's most magnificent experiment."

The little man blew upon his fingers for warmth and peeped guardedly under his waving eyebrows.

It was a dreary scene.

Abruptly Greyne came to some inner decision. " It doesn't seem to make much difference which way we go," he decided aloud, and started forward.

Their footsteps sounded startlingly loud in the absolute silence, which had an air of harbouring hostility as a presence. The dull sun threw no shadows before them on the pebble drifts, which stretched away to fade bluely into the near horizon.

The wind moaned across the levels and streamed past to right and left.

The silence watched their puny figures. And in the silence grew and grew, afar, a sullen whisper, which swept to a threatening roar and leaped at them

suddenly swollen, smiting them with vicious blurts of sound.

Greyne shot out a hand as the clamour rose and seized the smaller man by the shoulder. "Down!" he cried. "Down!"

Yet so very swift the passage of what approached that the two had barely time to fling themselves upon their faces than five great shapes boomed by close above them, five half-seen monstrous forms, which appeared to spin rapidly upon their own axis as they flew, sullenly, a few feet above the earth.

Greyne waited till the rearmost was well away before he moved, and he was on his knees when there came a thin, keen whistling through the twilight. Amazed, he caught a glimpse of a score of fleet dark shadows, roughly circular, he thought, which darted over at a pace compared with which the previous apparitions seemed to crawl.

He heard his companion's startled exclamation, and, watching, saw in the haze the newcomers fling themselves upon the last of the five strange shapes, like hounds on a stag.

He heard the metallic roar and ring of the impact, caught a half-seen vision of one of the five swerving abruptly to earth, sensed when by ill chance it, still revolving, touched the pebbles, and saw and heard it disintegrate into whining slivers of flung material, which zipped wickedly from stone to stone.

It was finished in a split fraction of a second. He saw the remaining four bunch even as the other

swooped to its end ; heard the grinding calamity which followed as one spinning shape brushed another by mischance, and he was blinded by the vivid green flash which the friction of the collision instantly produced as yet another dissolved on the moment to molten shards.

Three faintly perceived forms boomed away into the shade ; the strange attackers curved with incredible rapidity to and fro above Greyne's head, then, taking up a V-shaped formation, screamed off on a long climbing slant.

For a few moments after their departure there was a sound like the pattering of heavy rain which precedes the thunderstorm ; swiftly the silence rattled down once more, fold on fold, challenged but unconquered.

The last of the fragments bounced from a pebble high into the air, came down, jumped a little way to one side, and lay still.

The two onlookers got slowly to their feet. " Do you suppose," commenced Blatherwick, listening intently, " that there were men in those things ? "

" Don't be futile . . . of course there must have been. Did you ever hear of anything so patently working by method which wasn't controlled by man ? " ejaculated Greyne sharply. " Evidently they haven't stopped fighting each other," he ended.

" How long . . . ? " commenced the other.

" Oh, millions of years, I should think ! " put in Greyne impatiently. " The sun is dying and

doesn't seem to have moved at all since we first saw it ; that means the earth has stopped revolving. I don't know if we'll be here long enough to decide whether it still retains any orbital motion or not. Must have taken millions of years—millions."

"There used to be—I mean there *are* things," corrected the smaller man, "which are only indirectly under control. In our world, I mean. Ships, I believe, and aeroplanes—worked by wireless," he concluded vaguely.

"Yes. But these things showed evidence of independent thought," contradicted his interlocutor. "There *must* have been a guiding intelligence inside —poor devils !"

He kicked a long, thin splinter as he spoke ; it clanged metallically.

"It's very light," announced Blatherwick, stooping, "and hot." He uttered an exclamation and dropped it.

"Apt to be," retorted the other drily. "Motion suddenly arrested always turns into heat. You can't lose energy, must have it in some form or other. I'd like to know," he mused half to himself, "how much force remains in the universe to-day, and how the leakage during all these ages has been balanced."

His companion, who had moved to a little distance, broke in upon his thought. "I say," called the shrill voice anxiously, "I say, they're alive !"

Greyne looked about him, wondering what was meant. Then he realised. Of course, he must be

referring to the drivers, or whoever were controlling the unwieldy bulks. Lucky to have escaped—a frightful smash like that. Must be uncommonly hardy.

He took a few steps in the direction of his companion, with the pebbles scrunching to his tread, and felt something clutch him by the ankle.

Peering down, he made out a snake-like form, which writhed and coiled convulsively round his boot.

Hurriedly removing his foot, Greyne bent for a closer inspection. It gave him an unpleasant sensation of nausea to watch that long, jagged sliver beating its two ends against the ground.

It had no business to do that kind of thing. It was dead stuff—a careful forefinger proved that to Greyne's satisfaction—hard, composed of some unusually crystalline metal, almost opaque. A strip of unrecognisable matter—no more.

He lifted his head and saw that the whole place was crawling with the broken fragments. They were sliding and scraping over the stones with little fragile tinklings, drawing unmistakably closer together, joining up with one another—coalescing.

Blatherwick skipped across to his side, and they watched the extraordinary reuniting which was in progress.

"But it's dead," muttered the taller man in perplexity. "It's dead. What the devil is it?" he queried, turning sharply to his neighbour. He was

at a loss for a theory, and the unaccustomed sense of being out of his depth annoyed him.

Once more he advanced the toe of his boot, and it appeared as if the action was seen and resented. A shapeless lump of the stuff, a rough cube with twelve-inch sides, wriggled flexibly as if made of indiarubber, then came blindly tap-tapping back and struck at the object of its anger, cutting through the thick sole like a hot knife through butter.

"Better get out of this," advised Blatherwick, craning his head over his shoulder. "They're getting round us."

For once the other took his advice, and they halted at a safe distance to see that a moving heap, of large dimensions, was forming from the scattered portions. Two heaps, for, attracted by a noise like metal striking against metal a little to their right, they discovered that a similar process was going forward elsewhere.

"Lucky thing you moved your foot pretty quick," observed the smaller of the two, watching events from under his thatch of eyebrow.

The other did not reply. He was rubbing his chin thoughtfully; also listening, unconsciously perhaps, for any stealthy approach from out the inimical silence of the half-night.

"Magnetism," he said once, and repeated the word more loudly, "Magnetism." The formation of a theory, however untested, seemed to restore his peace of mind.

"If ever we find a clue to all this"—he gesticulated towards the twin hillocks of ringing motion—"you'll find I'm not far wrong. Magnetism, that's what's at the bottom of it. And there must have been some sort of man to build, if not to steer, the things. But I don't propose to stop and search for 'em. If they're about, we'll run into them before long. You couldn't hide a mowing machine here; it 'ud stick up like the Eiffel Tower in the Sahara."

"Talking of towers," replied his friend after ten minutes' difficult walking, "there are some funny-looking objects over there." He pointed.

Greyne, who had jerked his head round for a last glance at what was happening in their rear, turned sharply.

At first he could make out nothing in the prevailing obscurity; then, bit by bit, he pieced together the details of some darker shadows not far in front.

They resembled, to his mind, nothing so nearly as the tripod masts of giant battleships—three huge pillars leaning in towards each other to meet at an apex far up in the cold night; and from the junction soared a slim, tapering shaft, which plunged its summit into gloomy caverns of space whither the eye could not follow.

"Let's have a look at 'em," he said.

As they drew near more and more of the things took shape to themselves. There were dozens of them, in no apparent order; just scattered about in

clumps of three or six or ten, or strung out at irregular intervals across the plain.

The two men walked in and out amongst the mighty columns, feeling their smooth roundness, rapping with their knuckles on the polished material of their construction, which gave back a resonant organ note ; craning their necks in a vain attempt to discover whether any arrangement of wires joined one structure to another.

" Hardly wireless," announced Greyne after a while. " Of course, we can't be sure until we've seen what's on top, but there's no organisation about the arrangement. They seem to be put down anyhow. Look at these three—here, almost touching."

He struck sharply at the nearest mast, and it mouthed hollowly to itself, the voice of it surging across the dark levels, reverberating strongly in slow diminishing waves, to die after many minutes on the cold wind, muttering as it faded, " Om, omm, ommm."

" The same stuff," remarked Greyne in a subdued voice when the last organ-like note was stilled, " as those other things were made of. It's new to me."

Their feet crunched over the protesting beach as they went to and fro, dwarfed to microscopic proportions beneath the towering silent shapes of intolerable loneliness.

They walked among the shadowy aisles in the

silence, with the wind moaning and whispering overhead.

They stopped and looked up, amazed at the patience and the labour necessary for the erection of these huge dumb bulks which for ever importuned unheeding Heaven with lean accusing fingers.

Blatherwick kicked at a pebble and shivered. He peered over his shoulder uncertainly. "If they were to fall . . ." he began.

At that moment a confused outcry broke in upon his speech, coming apparently from underground.

The two started and walked forward, to find themselves on the edge of a deep gully which sloped down to stagnant pools of shadow.

Up towards them climbed a scrabbling, half-seen company, gesticulating violently and crying out in thin bird voices, though no words could be distinguished.

As the crowd drew nearer they were seen to be composed of about fifty stumpy figures, each carrying in either hand a broad flat board, of the size and shape of a thin square footstool, with thick protuberances, rather like cucumbers at first sight, stuck along the rim. The things looked exactly like milk stools.

Now and then one or more would throw themselves upon the stones and roll back in a trice as far as had taken him many painful moments to achieve; others leaped oddly into the air or seized each other and shuffled from side to side, grotesquely grinning,

waving thin pipe-stem arms—and all, without exception, kept up a weird piping noise, uttering wordless cries like birds or animals.

As the motley crew gained the crest they came shuffling and balancing around the two watchers, apparently no whit astonished to find them, though oddly furtive, as children detected by a master about some mischief.

Blatherwick was at first secretly delighted to notice that not one came even up to his shoulder. He was a giant, by comparison, among pigmies.

He stood there in the foam of them as they bubbled and danced round and about, squeaking and tossing their ridiculous arms, or pausing to embrace one another, thrusting out the boards they carried, as if for protection.

Looking more closely, he was repulsed by the squat features under low, bumpy foreheads, on which the coarse black hair mingled nearly with the eyebrows.

Finally one stopped directly before Greyne and scratched himself thoughtfully, leering up at the man who was nearly twice his height. His finger rasped up and down his leg as if on sandpaper.

Then both the watchers realised three details in a flash : that these people, if they could be called people, were stark naked, were covered with long, thick bristles like swine, and " Hands ! " cried Blatherwick. " They're not carrying anything ; it's their hands ! "

He moved abruptly back as the one who had halted pushed out his thin pipe-stem arm in his direction.

" Hands," he repeated again, noting with disgust the monstrous palm, almost two feet square, and the thick cucumber-like fingers. " Not milk stools—hands ! "

But Greyne leaned and prodded at it with his forefinger. " It's devilish hard," he announced, " like horn."

The creature thus investigated uttered a series of high harsh notes, whether of rage, apprehension, or pleasure it was impossible to say ; abandoned his temporary calm, clutched his nearest neighbour about the neck with those monstrous hands, and jumped into the air, kicking his heels together in a meaningless paroxysm of activity.

Then he broke away, clasped himself about his huge outjutting stomach, and commenced to revolve rapidly on his heels, squawking to himself the while, the others being too occupied with their own antics to give him any attention.

" Sort of pigs, I should say," remarked Greyne above the clamour. " But I'll try . . ." He called out twice sharply, and at the second repetition some dim idea that they were being addressed appeared to penetrate the dull intelligences.

The crowd stopped short in their gambols and pressed close, peeping up with small malicious eyes to discover what was wanted.

Without exception they commenced, as Greyne once more spoke, to scratch themselves furiously, the rasp and return of their horrible fingers being loud and reminiscent of the sty.

And always, as Blatherwick noticed later, when not employed in mad and wild contortional dances, they fell to their only other amusement, that of scratching—and there didn't seem any particular need even for that. . . .

But he was puzzled for some time by one thing, which caught his attention from the first.

At the moment, however, he was too bewildered to do more than watch the cunning faces about him, which peeped and pried from behind each other at his grim companion, as if wondering what the devil these strange noises could possibly mean.

With an irritable gesture Greyne abandoned his attempt to obtain a reply. He turned and glanced at the side of the descent. "They came from down there," he said, "so I think we'll have to explore it. They're the nearest things to human beings we've seen yet, and we might get some sense out of 'em later. Let's try and find out where they live."

"Do you think they can possibly have built these things?" Blatherwick jerked his head backwards.

"I don't think anything yet!" snapped the other. "Come on. I'm going." He made a movement, and, as if divining his intention, and approving it, the dwarfs broke out in a redoubled fury of unmusical cries, clustering round in a leaping, rolling,

gesticulating swarm ; and thus escorted the couple down the slope.

" I wish they weren't so inquisitive," panted Blatherwick after a little. " They've nearly pulled my clothes off me, pawing and mauling. Get out ! " He lunged at the nearest tormentor, who squealed and flung up his skinny arms with, on the ends, those appalling growths.

" Out ! " the little man shouted again, and cleared a space by vigorous use of his fists.

" They aren't much fighters," he panted, balancing himself with difficulty on the loose rubble.

" Better be careful," warned his friend ; " we've seen some things which can fight—pretty effectually. You don't know that they aren't under the control of these—maggots," he ended viciously, striving to dislodge one who had nimbly skipped on to his back.

" If they'd got necks," he continued viciously, " instead of having faces growing out of their shoulders, I'd wring 'em ! I can't stand this much longer."

Just then three or four of the escort fell to the ground in an inextricable grapple ; six or seven more joined them and, with yet others flinging themselves pell-mell on to the heap, began to roll down the hill, turning rapidly and ever more rapidly till they were swallowed up in the darkness lower down, out of which their voices echoed, weird, wordless and harsh.

" That," breathed Greyne, " is a relief. He shook

his clothes into position and mopped his face. "It's left us warm, any way," he continued. "Hullo, there's still a few left!"

But the five or six who remained seemed to have abandoned their activities. They were standing on the broad ledge which they had reached, peeping into a shallow hole scraped in the side of the hill, scratching themselves vacuously and uttering a slightly different series of squawks and pipings.

In response to their clamour another similar to themselves swung sullenly about from his absorbing employment of piling the over-abundant pebbles into heaps.

A broad, flat nose came up over a bristle-covered shoulder, and the fellow goggled at Greyne and his companion through protruding fish-like eyes.

But he was not particularly annoyed, although so unwarrantably disturbed. It was soon apparent that he could twist his features to no more amiable expression.

His thick lips opened to disclose the few jagged stumps of yellow teeth.

He spoke with stilted precision, as one who makes use of a foreign language, and all the time one monstrous hand continued to heap stone on stone mechanically.

"What—do—you—want?" he asked, with a plaintive accent on the final word.

There was another peculiarity about his speech, which was remarkable for being interlarded, plenti-

fully and unmeaningly, with murderous oaths. Yet he appeared to use them without intention to express anger, as if they were incorporated in this strange tongue, which was so obviously an effort to remember.

The creature corrected himself as one who had before unwittingly shown discourtesy through lack of idiomatic practice.

" What — the — ' *rosy* — *sunset* ' — do — you — ' *magnificently* ' — want, you — ' stuttering ' ' *beauties* ' ? " he queried politely enough.

Blatherwick gasped.

CHAPTER II

THE heap of rubble which the speaker was collecting overbalanced with a rattle, and he had replaced ten smooth pebbles, without removing his questioning eyes from the watchers, before he decided that further courtesy was needful.

So he squatted forward on his haunches, with a regretful frown at his abandoned employment, and shot out a swollen finger towards Greyne. "You 'grumbling well' can't talk, eh?" he queried suavely. He glanced at the small knot of scratching loungers near by and broke out into a turbid flow of yawks and yammers.

"Who built those things up there?" broke in Blatherwick, with some idea of switching the conversation on to more useful lines.

The fellow gave him a surprised stare out of beady eyes.

"They—of course," he stated briefly. "I thought you one of us," he explained slowly; "very 'splendidly' like—you talk, eh?"

The little man glowered angrily, ignoring the implied likeness. "Who built those towers?" he repeated with emphasis.

"They," reiterated the other, exasperated.

"Can't you hear? They. They. They." He appeared to gain in vocabulary with practice.

"Listen!" he added, holding up one enormous hand. Came, faintly heard, a familiar booming, which sprang abruptly to a grinding climax as a shadow drifted heavily across the gulley.

"They." The fellow nodded. Followed in greedy attendance three round objects, which flicked the hollow with a scream of furious haste, passed into the gloom, and were gone.

"Wait!" ordered the dwarf as Greyne opened his mouth.

Then, faint and far off, came the splintering crash of a collision. "And now there's one less," grinned the fellow, licking his lips with satisfaction.

"What the devil are they?" jerked out Greyne.

As he spoke two round globes came swerving and staggering back across the sky, sinking earthward as they flew.

Gigantic they were, seen close, like small suns.

"Them are done," announced the fellow complacently, and turned his neckless head to watch their progress.

For a moment it appeared that he was wrong. The mighty spheres regained a measure of stability in the respite of the gulley and lifted to clear the further edge, below which the group of onlookers were clustered.

They were going at a fraction of their former

speed, rolling from side to side, obviously damaged in some part or another.

They lifted heavily up, and the wind of their slow passing threw Blatherwick to his knees. They lifted up, sank, recovered, threw out huge leg-like processes to check the fall, and crumpled with a roar not eighty feet above the ledge.

"Two more of Them gone," jeered the odd-looking fellow, getting clumsily to his feet. "Let's go and kick 'em."

He made surprising progress up the steep sides, with Greyne and his companion toiling some way in the rear.

Before they caught him up he had shambled in at the hulks, and the ringing clatter of blows advertised that he was having his desire ; his friends leaping and gambolling at his side the while.

But the things weren't so helpless as had appeared.

Even in collapse they towered above the two men like a ten-storied house ; and while they watched, panting, to see what the dwarfs would do, a long, many-jointed arm shot out from somewhere above the bulge of the side and snapped one of the aggressors, screaming, into the interior.

It was an arm fitted for its possessor's bulk, about sixty feet in length, ending in two pincer-like claws—very capable and accurate.

The attackers scattered at this counter, with shrill cries, and poured back down to the ledge, huddling there, casting frightened glances at the two derelicts.

More slowly Greyne and Blatherwick rejoined them.

" So they put up those masts," mused the taller man.

" No," contradicted the only dwarf who appeared capable of recognisable speech. " Not these—They." He pushed his hand out at the opposite side of the hollow.

" They," he said again. " Them smash They—always," he concluded, nodding his ape-like head.

" I'm going to try and get this right," declared Greyne, and poured in a volley of questions.

At first the other seemed dazed by the flow of language, and reverted to his aimless heaping of stone on stone. The exercise apparently giving him time to collect his thoughts, he peered up at last and answered with fair coherence.

" Only two things left anywhere," he announced, " except us. Them and They and Us. Us slaves and the others Masters. Understand ? "

Greyne nodded.

" Them round and They square," went on the speaker, evidently pleased with the progress he was making.

" That seems easy to remember," observed Blatherwick, looking up sharply as an avalanche of pebbles slid down at a little distance. " I think they're moving," he said hurriedly.

" No ! Finished," remarked the dwarf positively. " Them'll be dead soon."

"Dead!" ejaculated Greyne. "Then they're alive?"

"You don't seem to know your history, although you wear things on your body," reproved the other.

"Naturally they're alive—Them are alive—They're alive," he corrected himself with a wealth of unnecessary adjective. "What? No. No men in them like Us." He included Greyne in the sweep of his absurdly thin arm.

"They're machines, but alive. Oh, certainly! Look here," he continued, "you don't seem to know anything. Just go up and kick 'em for me, will you?" he broke off. "Oh, well!" he squeaked at the crowd, which had grown more numerous, and a few reluctantly set off.

"When they're dead we steal the heat inside them," he explained. "Not that we feel the cold much.

Blatherwick, looking at the thick, cracked hide on each, considered that improbable.

"Well," the creature resumed, speaking much more fluently, "it was after the War they definitely took control of the World."

"That was a long time ago," commenced Greyne doubtfully. "*I* was alive then, and I don't remember . . ."

"Call me a 'fair-faced' liar," complained the dwarf impiously. "I don't know what war *you* mean. But there have been a devil of a lot of 'em. Can you see if any one's been hurt?"—he inter-

rupted himself, peeping up the hill—" because if not, it's safe to have a look. What ? Why, it's the only way we have of finding out if they're dead. Kick 'em, and if they don't hit back they're done—simple. We'll wait a little longer, perhaps.

" To start at the beginning, as you're so ignorant," he resumed, " I find from my researches that it all started with the invention of poison gas.

" Men couldn't face it, so they invented machines to fight from—gas-proof machines.

" Well, then there was the war to abolish poison gas. That must have been a pretty strenuous time, because I read that there was so much gas used that all the civilian population had to live inside machines as well as the troops. They gave up houses about that time.

" After that," he continued, checking each item off on his enormous fingers, " came the war to end the war that was started to abolish poison gas. The first symptoms of revolt on the part of machinery seem to have been noticed then.

" I rather believe," he said musingly, " that it was at the same time that the first obvious signs of the coming change in mankind became too apparent to be overlooked. They grew more and more to look like we do now. More noble and handsome and talented.

" That was about ten ' Historics ' ago. I don't know anything about how many years," he declared angrily. " We gave up counting in years ' Historics

and Historics' ago. But I can tell you that the invention of poison gas—it's a national holiday with Us still—was twenty-two Historics ago, more or less. No, we don't use it now—not effective enough.

"The machines invented something more destructive about two wars past, or it invented itself.

"Now, let me see . . ."

A high-pitched yell broke across his musing. "Ah, not dead yet!" he remarked calmly. "Where was I? After that war came the Great Revolt of Machinery," he went on. "You see how it happened? People had been working hard for ages inventing things—silly little fools! Then—suddenly, things began to invent *themselves*. There was no stopping them. It had got to such a pitch that they couldn't *be* stopped. They just went on and on and on, one thing after another. I tell you people must have been surprised. No halt—not for a day. Supposing these stones started jumping about by themselves. . . .

"Well, that, of course, led to the 'War to Regain the Mastery.' A tidy little scrap, it lasted about three of our present days—oh! I don't know exactly how many years."

Greyne interjected a question.

"A thousand days to an Historic," the speaker replied in surprise. "Didn't you learn anything?"

"Put it," whispered Greyne in an aside to his companion "at twenty-five million years for the

sun to get as cool as it has, and for the earth's motion to have slowed down to its present rate. That gives us—h'm—about three thousand years for the 'War to Regain the Mastery.' Yes. A tidy little scrap, as he says."

"Next," continued the harsh squeaky voice, "followed the 'War of Revenge,' and in quick succession, each War lasting longer and longer, 'The War of the Machines,' 'The War of the Survivors,' 'The War to Survive,' 'The War of the Two Main Divisions of Machines,' and the present one, 'The War to Decide when the Next War shall Start.' This one's been going on for quite a bit—nearly two Historics."

"Call it two million years," breathed Greyne, "and all this, these folk with bellies like dirty linen bags on a Monday morning, the wars and the slavery of mankind, and the degeneration, brought about directly by wrong thinking—if only people knew in our time the trouble they were preparing for posterity—what ?"

"Let's go and look at *They*," decided the dwarf suddenly. "It's their time for coming back, and I'm tired of talking."

He scrambled up and rolled over and over down the hill.

"I'd like to have a look at these things here !" shouted Greyne.

Another day !" called back the dwarf, who was almost out of sight, twisting rapidly.

"That means never," sighed Blatherwick. "I wonder which is going to win?"

He looked up as they slithered down the hill, and saw the twin tops of the machines, curved and threatening, against the stars.

Near the bottom, moving cautiously in nearly pitch darkness, they stumbled upon the remainder of the dwarfs—some thirty or forty, all clasped in each other's arms and asleep, moaning and groaning to themselves with eyes tight shut.

"That's all that's left of Us," explained their guide, rising to his feet. "We have to repair *They*, when *They* go wrong. There's just one little piece of mechanism, right inside, that they've never got quite to their liking. So they keep us alive to attend to it. It doesn't often get out of order."

"Which do you like best?" queried Blatherwick, trying not to listen to the snortings and gruntings of the sleepers.

"Oh, *They*," replied the dwarf. "They built those towers. I like to see somebody doing something. No! They're no use—none at all. It's a tradition, I suppose. They just build 'em and build 'em and *Them* knock 'em down again, when they feel inclined; but you'd almost think that Them were getting forgetful nowadays like Us.

"We come down here, where it's dark, to sleep," he added, changing the conversation, "and go up to play. Playtime is from eat to eat, about one hundred of your futile hours on end, as far as I can

understand you. When we are hungry we call it night—and so on. A trifle monotonous, perhaps, for those who can't appreciate the joys of independence ; I see by your face that you're one."

" No need for strikes, eh ? " commented Greyne, paying no attention to the last remark.

" Strikes," repeated the other doubtfully. " Ah, I begin to remember. No. When we want to annoy the machines we do a bit of work—you saw me. It annoys them because we can't do any repairs—or pretend we can't—while we're working at our professions. You see, even the round machines have need for us—we sometimes grease their pincers with the food the square things give.

" But it doesn't exactly work *well*," he went on regretfully, " because if either side want Us they come and take Us. Very unsatisfactory 'tis, too !

" *They* win over that, because the round machines have only claws, as you saw, and when they pick up a workman it's any odds that he's cut in two—so *They* are more often out of order than the others. But I don't think either side'll last long. I doubt if there's more than twenty of *They* left and, perhaps, twice as many of the round machines."

" What's your proper job ? " asked Greyne.

" I'm a stonemason, really. But, of course, *They* made me Librarian. Never give a fellow the work he can do—naturally. 'Twouldn't do. It meant a lot of bother, I can tell you. Luckily, my father, good old chap, was the last of the men and very keen

on the ancient language, which had nearly died out. He taught me all sorts of odd bits of folklore."

"Last of the Men," echoed Blatherwick.

"Yes. You see. Ha, ha," he laughed nervously. "They all used (the men, I mean) to think so much about women that they grew like 'em. Ha, ha, ha. Sort of half and half. Rather annoying, really. Must have taken all the spice out of things for those alive then," he chuckled wheezily.

"I see," put in Blatherwick with a sidelong glance. "That explains . . ."

"My father was the last real man, and he kept up a fine library. There it is."

The dwarf wriggled into another scraped out cave, and removing a heap of stones revealed a little spark of green light, which was enclosed in a tough envelope of the opaque metal. The apparatus was about the size and shape of a mushroom with the spark shining up from the junction of stem and top, but the nature of the light was not apparent—a kind of phosphorescence.

"Not many books," hazarded the smaller of the two men politely, failing to see anything of the sort.

"No," agreed the guide. "You see, when this unfortunate—er—transformation in our bodies took place, there was nothing of interest left to write about—and if there had been, nobody would have read the trash. Yes, there *is* one woman left, but I've not heard of her for a long time. Of course, we're dying out—but we live a good while—twenty

or thirty of our days." His speech was by now amazingly free from hesitation.

"Sixty to ninety thousand years of futile misery," whispered Greyne, "and all our fault. Yours and mine, as much as any one's."

The gross figure squatted by the feeble light rasped his fingers across his shrunken pigeon chest.

"Only yesterday's paper here, I'm afraid," he announced, removing spadefuls of pebbles with his palms. "Oh! wait a moment. To-day's is almost due, I should think. We keep one—the only one printed—for sentiment's sake. Ah! there it is. You're standing on it."

Blatherwick moved his feet.

"What silly little hands you both have," observed their guide querulously, snatching at a scrap of leathery-looking paper. "I'll show you a few other like you, later on, if you stay."

He unfolded the paper stuff and bent awkwardly over it, flashing the lamp on to each letter.

As far as the onlookers could see, the news consisted of two enormous headlines covering all the available space.

The characters were formed after a strange pattern, and it took them a considerable time to get the sense of the few words.

"*Death of the last woman*," read Blatherwick in those huge staring capitals, and lower down the buff sheet "*Sun getting brighter rapidly*."

" I heard she was ill," said the creature, wagging his totally bald head. " But I must say I never thought she'd get over it. She's made a ' stuttering ' quick recovery."

" But she's dead ! " cried Blatherwick.

The reader looked up, astonished scorn on his flat face.

" She's *well*," he contradicted. " We learnt, Historics ago, to believe just the opposite to what the paper tells us. What does it say, there ? "

" If you'd move your finger . . . ' Sun getting brighter,' " spelled out the little man.

" Dear, oh, dear," moaned the other. " I knew it'd come to that. It's going to go *out*," he shouted. " Cold. Dark. I did think it would last my time. Now it *will* be chilly, and we'll die," he wailed, and beat his milkstool hands on his protruding stomach.

" Now if it had said ' Sun going to blow up,' " he went on, recovering himself, " there might have been hope. Because naturally it wouldn't have been correct. And yet," he added in a puzzled manner, " I don't know. ' What the paper says is right,' we were told that a long while ago. It's very perplexing."

He hurled the subject of his discussion into a corner of the hole and got up.

" Nearly food time," he said. " We're given a kind of tasteless clay and some synthetic stuff once every now and then. That's what gives us such good figures. *Them* give it to us. Neither of the

machines have to eat anything, as you can imagine. We'll be climbing along, I think. I'll just hide this light first—people are such thieves."

In single file the three groped their passage across the bottom of the gulley and began to struggle up the other side.

Soon the infrequent stars glimmered as through a thick mist, which thinned as they mounted higher, until they emerged again into the twilight.

"May as well eat, anyway," said their guide, hauling himself on to the level.

"I told the others it was meal-time, so they won't come bothering along. Naturally I've told you the truth—as between gentlemen," he concluded. "But there is never enough, and they've cut it down lately. So it's as well to be early."

"What do you work at?" queried Greyne, pausing to recover breath.

"I told you I'm a stonemason. That reminds me." The guide sat down where he was and commenced feverishly to pile up the pebbles in the neighbourhood. When the stack had attained fair proportions he flattened it out with a sweep and began again.

"Must keep one's hand in," he explained. "I'm afraid of forgetting how to do it. What with the cataloguing of the library—the daily paper, you know—and all that work. Oh, the others have different trades. But it all comes to the same in the end. You see, we've forgotten all the discoveries

our ancestors made, and now there's nothing left at all except pebbles to work with—and those damned tower affairs."

Blatherwick noticed, not for the first time, that when the creature was really annoyed his speech became less and less clotted with stained adjectives.

At that moment, reaching for a particularly round stone to crown his latest edifice, the dwarf overbalanced and rolled down the side of a steep descent hitherto unnoticed in the dusk.

As he made no attempt to return, and failed to answer any shouted enquiries, the others thought it best to follow and see if by any chance he had hurt himself.

They came upon him lying on his stomach, regarding with leering contempt a knot of about half-a-dozen people gathered at the bottom round an instrument in their midst.

"H'sh!" warned their guide. "Not so much noise. I don't want them to know we're here. They might get angry." He shuddered. "They're apt to be dangerous," he added. "They're possessed of demons—horrible—horrible." He began to withdraw inch by inch.

"They don't look so terrible," said Greyne in a cautious voice. "Why, they're wearing clothes," he cried in astonishment.

"H'sh! H'sh!" pleaded the dwarf. "They're the people I told you of—with hands not much bigger than yours. Now we judge our culture by

the size of our hands ; here—we don't have much in the way of foreheads, or whatever the word is ; stupid sort of things anyway, no kind of use at all.

" I," he went on, forgetting his fears, " have bigger hands than anybody, therefore I'm a much smarter sort of fellow than the rest. Also, I've no hair on my head—none of the best people have—only the lower classes."

" Ah ! " murmured Blatherwick, and put up his hand to his own somewhat luxuriant growth.

" We were talking about *these*," interrupted Greyne with a smile. " What are those sheets made of which they've got over themselves ? "

" I haven't read about them," snapped the dwarf, angrily. " They're heirlooms—as you would say, I think—handed on from father to son kind of idea.

" I'm a very fine fellow," he added crossly, " as I'll very soon prove. Anyway, we keep these monstrosities pretty well in hand," he said viciously. " I don't know how they manage to last out. Extraordinary keen on life they must be—and we don't make it any too 'thunderingly' pleasant for them, I can tell you. Foreheads and necks as well," he grumbled to himself.

Just then the bowl of the depression was filled with strong harp-like music. It seemed to issue from the box in the midst of the unconscious group, strangely sweet in that eerie spot.

" That's how they waste their lives," broke out the dwarf crossly. " Great ugly giants, listening

to music. What did you say ? " he queried, glancing evilly at Greyne out of the corners of his eyes. " Giants I called them. They ought to be starved away. As big as you they are. Drat and bother them ! Oh, the music ? It's Star Music."

" Selenium ! " ejaculated Greyne.

" That's it," the other agreed wisely. " Selenium plates, on which the starlight falls and is transformed into sound. That fellow there—no ! the one moving his ridiculous hand—works the affair. He has an ' interrupter '—cuts off the light from each plate in turn as he wishes, and makes that ghastly noise you hear."

" I think it's rather fine," objected Blatherwick.

" Oh, do you blooming well ? " replied the dwarf. " It was owing to selenium," he continued, dismissing the subject with a heavy motion of his hand, " that our ancestors were able to make such a long stand in the ' War to Regain the Mastery,' after the ' Great Revolt of Machinery.' When they were getting pretty nearly all killed off, they used machines controlled by the action of searchlights on selenium. And if my information is correct, they almost knocked the other side out.

" But it wasn't quite good enough. You see, the *other* machines could think and reason even in those days. So they were too much for the selenium-controlled man machines—which were fatally handicapped since they possessed no energy of their own. About seven-eighths of all the men, women, and

children were killed off then, but the wasting sickness helped as well. The doctors said it was incurable, and it was, though we abolished doctors three Historics ago."

Seeing that their guide was determined to lose no more time on such evil company, the two turned reluctantly to follow him.

The depression was full of harmony ; even the stones seemed to stir and skip with life in concord. It was an oasis of beauty ; not a place lightly to be abandoned.

As the operator twisted his handle slowly, deep throbbing notes beat about them, and as he increased the pace, long runs and chords broke and mingled together, like harp strings plucked by a cunning hand.

Broke and mingled in simple melodies—an old world fantasy.

" Very standoffish they are, the idiots," said the guide, looking back as he once more levered himself on to level ground. " They've got an absurd faith in some magic or other. Say they'll reconquer the world. Mad. Quite. Men and women, there—but we won't talk about them. Never go near except by mistake. Their food is thrown down. Count 'em as dead and forget them," he advised ; " it was a morbid sight."

But glancing in his turn towards the scene below, Blatherwick caught the faint echoes of the sweet music. And it seemed to him, as he lingered regret-

fully, that one or two turned to look up towards him, and, it may have been his fancy, but he thought that a strange luminosity glowed about the place where they sat, and shone on their grave, calm faces—yes, a curious and enduring light.

" Now we," broke in their guide, " enjoy ourselves differently. There's a man somewhere, a good-looking fellow like myself, whom I'll show you presently.

" He throws mind pictures on to the sky, and we sit round and look at them. Great fun !

" Of course, most of us gave up thinking wars and wars ago. But we could all at one time make these mind pictures. And very nice it was. We used to think of all the nice things we'd like to do, or the pretty things we'd like to have ; and—there they were, in colours before us.

" It saved us *such* a lot of trouble.

" But in time it got to be too much trouble even to *think* interesting thoughts. And now, as I say, there's only one fellow left who can do it. I can tell you, though, he's worth seeing. Got some pretty good ideas, really—considering," he ended thoughtfully.

" Now there's Them," he went on ; " a good deal bigger than They, as you can see, but clumsy—too taken up with building those towers to be quite as efficient as they might be."

The friends peered in the direction indicated, and

saw a number of great square bodies grouped about the base of one of the tripods.

There was an impression of a multitude of arms like cables busy about some employment, and a distant sound of resonant hammering.

" Building, as usual," sneered their guide, talking as glibly as either of his visitors. " Not that I don't like it," he added hastily. " I can appreciate it, being a constructive worker myself. But there's no denying they are ugly."

" The round things'll win in the end," announced Greyne, after straining his eyes for a few moments. " They have the more economical shape—a question, I suppose, of evolution acting even on machinery—if you can call them that. It seems a pity."

" Shut your eyes a moment," ordered their guide unexpectedly, " or you'll be blinded."

Obediently his companions obeyed, wondering what *Them* were about to do.

Came a shuffling on the pebbles, a noise of deep excited breathing, and—" Crash ! "

Blatherwick heard Greyne's exclamation of distress, felt enormous fingers wind about his throat, and then—" Crash ! " on his own head this time.

He staggered and clutched at his toppling friend for support. On his knees, he opened his eyes and saw the dwarf leaning over Greyne's body, smashing at him with brick-hard fists.

Heard him mumble, " Wonderful thick skulls they have," and knew what he was doing.

Sick and giddy, the little man came up, clawed at a handful of stones, and blindly let them go.

One small pebble struck the attacker lightly on the shoulder, and he uttered a long-drawn squeal of indignant dismay.

As Blatherwick reached him he nimbly writhed to one side, struggled on to his feet, and turned with an ugly look of purpose.

His great hands were opening and shutting ponderously. Abruptly he hunched his shoulders about his lowered head and ran in with a sidelong action.

The gloom prevented Blatherwick from clearly seeing what was about to happen. He hesitated.

But Greyne was on his feet now, and at sight of that hawk-like face the dwarf abandoned his project.

He twisted his features into a grotesque smile and laughed unmusically, in cracked tones.

"Ha-ha-ha! A good joke—a jolly fine joke! Now I suppose you'll go for me?" he said, with a change of manner. "Two of you ought to find it pretty easy." He said this unemotionally, as if that would be the correct procedure.

"Nothing of that sort!" roared Greyne, and lifted the stumpy body two yards with a swinging kick.

"That's right. That's right," chirruped the fellow, coming back and rubbing his hands together. "That's right. Do it again."

"I will!" shouted Greyne, and did—twice.

"And now that little disagreement is over," chirped the dwarf, "I'd like to point out that you really are too big to be allowed to live. If you stay here, you'll only start messing about with us. Reforming or trying to smash the machines up. Much better wait till they can't hurt you, and then kick them. That's where I made my mistake." He shot a look at Blatherwick out of the corner of his eyes.

"Talking of reforming," he went on, "I had almost forgotten. I meant to show you that I, at any rate, have not lost sight of beauty—in spite of the difficulties of keeping an open mind.

"I'd just like to say to you a piece of poetry which I composed. It is modelled on a very, very old verse—oh, very old, dating from about your time, I should say—judging by what you tell me; not that I believe you for a minute."

The two stared at him. The murderous attack might never have taken place. He seemed to have wiped all recollection of it from his mind.

"Perhaps it's not *quite* as good as the original," he admitted, ignoring their startled faces, "but it's a little gem." He placed one hand on his shrunken chest, balanced the other on his head, and folded the fingers down the side of his face, when his nailless finger tips scraped the bristly hair on his shoulders.

"I see the pale cusps of the new moon," he squawked,
"Hanging above the earth,
Like the udders of a pure young maiden
Picking over garbage in the pig tub."

" There's beauty for you ! " he cried. " There's austerity and selection ! . . . Realism, I call it.

" Maybe it's not quite true," he admitted sadly. " We haven't any pure young maidens, for one thing, and I've never seen a moon. But I'm trying to win our folk back to the beauty which was worshipped, and rightly so, in the period you were trying to make me believe you knew all about, and I've copied the quaint old model as nearly as I could. Not that we aren't *all* lovers of *real* beauty," he amended. " If you like, I'll recite the original. It is a trifle, just a trifle, more—er—broad than mine ; a wee bit too near the verge of erotomania."

" No, no, thank you," declined Greyne, astonished by the abrupt change of atmosphere.

" Volatile sort of chap," he confided under his breath, " and he can talk. But there's something in it when you come to think. That touch about the pig tub, for instance. . . ."

CHAPTER III

"Now, what shall we do next?" demanded the poet briskly, standing before them, great hands dangling.

"You were going to take us to have a look at these machines," replied Greyne, jerking his head in the direction of the bulky shadows. "And on the way you said something about food. . . ."

"Perfectly correct," agreed the dwarf; "so I did. It's a little difficult for us to remember just what we *were* meaning to do. We make a point of being absolutely at liberty to undertake anything we fancy, even if we don't want to do it. But it hardly makes for results. We have to do a lot of things we don't really enjoy, just to show that we can do them if we like. Freedom—that's what it is—freedom. We had to cling on to it pretty tight after the machines took control. But, of course, we're not so frightfully free as all *that*."

"Supposing we start," hinted Greyne. "There doesn't seem to be much to see here."

"Very well," conceded the other. "I don't quite know what you mean, though. There's plenty going on. We do something different every twenty-five breaths in order not to get bored.

" First we roll one way, then we roll another way ; then we climb up, maybe—and then, if the fancy takes us, we slide down again. Oh, multitudes of things we do ! . . . But come on, if you're impatient. Those things are boots, aren't they ? I can't think how you manage to walk in them."

He was shuffling and shambling alongside, limping more than a little, glancing up from face to face with a kind of elfish curiosity. This was a new mood of his, and apparently as distinct as each of the preceding.

" Where do you come from ? " he queried suddenly as he walked. " You haven't escaped from down there, have you ? " he asked suspiciously. " Because if so, I'll have to tell the machines and get you pushed down again—or killed."

" You can talk to them, then ? " put in Greyne, astonished.

" Oh, not as you'd understand talking. We go and throw our arms about in front of them, and they feel the vibrations of our movements—at least that's how my dear old father explained it. Then they either understand what we want or else they don't."

" What happens if they don't ? "

" Well, it's much the same either way. They push and blunder about all over the world, making a great deal of fuss—and probably squash us flat, if we're not quick enough. I don't bother them a great deal myself."

From some distance behind the three swelled up

a sudden chorus of inarticulate noise, resembling nothing so nearly as the excited chatter of an aviary of large birds.

The babel grew, and mingling with it came the rattle of displaced stones.

Their guide halted and swung round angrily.

"They're getting very cunning," he burst out in an annoyed voice. "I very carefully told them it was meal-time. I did think that, knowing me, they would have gone on sleeping for a while.

"The meals get smaller every time—I'm sure there won't be enough." He twittered with rage.

"I'll have to tell them a lie next time, as usual; then, perhaps, they'll find out they aren't so mighty clever. Really, I don't know what the world's coming to," he concluded, wagging his head as he hurried forward.

"I'd better explain," he said, slowing down beside an enormous heap of evil-smelling, mud-coloured material, "that they don't like me very much."

"So?" remarked Greyne, feeling the top of his head tenderly.

"I'm not appreciated," went on the dwarf, eagerly ramming his arms to the elbow in the soft mound. "Too good a memory. All owing to my father, dear old chap. He used to tell me all about the good old days. What a reader that man must have been."

He stopped talking for a while to force huge

wads of the stuff into his mouth, chewing ecstatically with tears running down his bristly cheeks.

"That's good," he mumbled with difficulty. "Very good. I'll just put a little of it away. These others are so improvident they'd eat it all up and have nothing left for later on."

He peeped nervously over his shoulder, calculating how long the remainder of the tribe would be.

With quick, scooping movements he palmed out a deep hole in the beach and shovelled at least a quarter of the heap into it.

"Try a bit," he offered, holding out a piece the size of a small pea.

Blatherwick shook his head, but his companion cautiously tasted the knob and spat it out instantly.

"Tastes like the smell of paraffin and soft soap mixed," he exclaimed in disgust.

"They must be very nice," gulped the dwarf. "How wasteful you are. Good stuff. Excellent stuff." He was smoothing pebbles over his hoard as he spoke, and presently squatted on the top of them.

"Doesn't want any biting, which is an advantage," he resumed, sucking at the last fragments in sight. "Not many of us have any teeth left, as you may have noticed. I'm an exception, but then I always have toothache, so I don't know that I gain. Sometimes these brutes make the food hard just to annoy us," he ended, waving his head sadly from side to side.

"I've too good a memory," he went on suddenly. "That's the trouble. Now the others—they can never remember from breath to breath what it was they meant to do next. Of course, my brain is rather specialised. Better at some things than others ; and I'll confess that most of what I've got by heart is meaningless to me."

He glanced up to see if his listeners had noted any shortcomings.

But they were paying him very little attention. The speaker had been using the base of one of the square bulks as a back rest, and it was this which had claimed their interest.

It was vibrating ponderously to the accompaniment of a muffled roar, as if urged by internal works. Far and far and far above them a number of long whip-like arms were flashing in and out, busy about the construction of yet another of the tripod masts.

But it was the extraordinarily peculiar appearance of the walls of the machine which had particularly attracted the attention of the taller of the two men.

Greyne, looking at them, had the most curious idea that the walls were not solid. Yet that does not explain what he felt. He conceived the notion that those cliff-high sides were made of a solidified gas. And still that is not an adequate explanation.

It seemed to him that the walls were composed of myriads of pin points of solid matter, trillions on trillions of them to a square inch, embedded in a

base of clear, ice-like substance, frozen in, as it were.

He was almost convinced that the material was no more than mist ; it looked very like a fog when the drops of moisture, each clear and distinct from its fellow, stand before one in a sheer wall at an abrupt dip in a road.

He had the amazing notion that he could thrust his fist clear through the stuff—it was, as he knew very well, perfectly solid, and yet it looked " diffuse " —as though each tiny pin-point were separate from every other, touching nothing, and yet held in position by an invisible agency.

" Don't these things ever go for you ? " asked Greyne, failing of an answer to the riddle and lowering his eyes. " They could wipe you all out with no difficulty."

The other shook his head. " Too few of us to worry about," he explained. " We Wallipergurnians are useful now and then. They never know when they'll want us to put 'em in order. It isn't often—sometimes not once in a lifetime—but there's the chance. And Them—the round ones, you know—don't really mind us either. We grease the hinges of their pincers with our food when we're in a good temper. Ah, here come those greedy pigs ! . . ."

He broke off as a raffle of squeaking forms surrounded the trio, and threw themselves passionately on to the diminished store of nutriment.

He rose hastily, elbowed his way to the heap, and tore out great spadefuls of the stuff, cramming his mouth full.

"We've been done again," he said squawkingly. "There's less than ever. You can see for yourselves. I wouldn't let any one touch it till you all came." He flashed a sidelong look at the two men as he spoke, then, recollecting to whom he was talking, broke into a crescendo of wordless yells and chatters.

"No good trying to explain," muttered Greyne. "They wouldn't understand."

The noise redoubled and the first comers pulled and pushed each other frantically as a knot of stragglers loomed up in the twilight, advancing at an awkward trot.

By chance one of these latter slipped, or was flung to his face, and began, surprisingly, to sniff greedily at the pebbles.

First one and then another, turning reluctantly from the vanished store, saw and copied the fellow's manœuvre.

The guide, hopping to and fro in anxiety, suddenly made up his mind and, rushing to the defence of his hidden larder, started a squabble, which flamed into an aimless fight.

The crowd of Wallipergurnians wrangled and wrestled and screamed at each other round and about the enormous bulks towering over them.

They beat up against the sheer sides like foam as

the pressure of the struggle carried them hither and yon.

But the overlords paid them no least heed. Vast, aloof, murmuring cavernously to themselves, they went on with their self-imposed task, raising out of the sterile earth a useless column of incredible proportions.

Their flexible cable-like arms moved in and out of their interiors by dozens, adding to, smoothing and polishing the new work, which thrilled with organ notes to their touch.

They were impressive—enormously impressive—by mere reason of their size ; but Greyne, watching with uplifted head, was speculating as to what they might have achieved if controlled by a constructive intelligence fit for such giant organisms. He was wondering, again, what gave their sides that volatile appearance as of arrested motion—it was an odd conceit.

" Ah ! They've forgotten a lot of things as well as Us," said a grating voice, and the observers turned to find that the quarrel had been forgotten.

The group were squatting here and there, each hopefully licking his ten-inch fingers, or lifting over pebbles for fear something might have been missed.

Their guide, Blatherwick noticed, was sitting in his old place—he looked smug.

" Yes," the diminutive creature went on, " from what I've learnt—my father, again, good old man !—there were some wonderful discoveries in everyday

use just before the 'Great Revolution.' Every one employed them. I've often heard him say, 'Mankind must have thought then that he had reached the zenith of power. He had nothing to do but to order, and marvellous inventions of his own designing did everything for him with smooth efficiency.' The more complicated and beautiful machines were broken in the 'War of the two Main Divisions.'"

The speaker paused and mused disconsolately.

"My father, dear old fellow," he continued, "used to say that 'life must have been very enjoyable at that time. Apparently so secure; such a lovely lot of time to do nothing at all in.' Blink and blister the old fool, I've always hated him!" screamed the dwarf with sharp, malevolent rage. "Last of the men, was he? I wish I'd never been born—nor my old devil of a father—nor my grandfather—nor the one before him—nor—nor—any of 'em."

He beat heavily upon the beach each side of his spindly legs—smashing blows.

"Why did he make me different to the rest?" he shrilled. "They don't mind all this—don't know there was ever anything better. But the old swine told me about ease and comfort—and beauty, too, I suppose, and never took any steps to preserve them for me. Why? Why? Why?

"All of them the same—worse—back, far back—before the Revolution; there was a chance then. Selfish, they were. Selfish. Selfish. Selfish!"

His gnarled fists rose and fell rhythmically, while his mates watched him in dull bewilderment. In his anger he struck at the colossus at his back. The cliff-steep structure rang to the impact and began to turn with an ear-splitting roar of crushed stones.

It commenced to revolve, and sparks streamed up as it ground the beach to dust with a sullen noise like the backwash of an Atlantic swell on a dim winter's eve.

On the instant panic stalked amongst the loungers and jerked them to their feet. A moment they hesitated, then were away at a lumbering gallop, heads down, hands threshing the air—screeching and yowling dismally.

Well to the front the bald head of the guide gleamed pinkly, bobbing up and down in the froth of the runners. "Play up!" he was screaming. "Play up! Play the game!" and as he yelled he was hauling back the fugitives whom he overtook and thrusting them behind him.

Greyne leaped in pursuit. "Play up. Play up," screamed the dwarf, running desperately as the clamour rose. In a score of swift strides Greyne reached him and swung him back by an arm. "Play up. Play . . . " gasped the fellow, and stopped in dismay.

"You started it all," bawled his captor, ignoring his feeble struggles.

"That's right," conceded the dwarf solemnly as he watched his friends streaming past. "But I

didn't see any reason to wait afterwards. My poor old father's battle-cry did some good," he yelled proudly. " Did you ever see people run so fast? I didn't think they could . . . as quick as me almost.

" He got it out of some old book or from his father and used to shout it out to keep his spirits up—all over the place," he concluded, ignoring the menace hanging over them. " But I've never been able to get these idiots to understand the idea before. If you don't look out you'll have to work," he concluded, glancing under the other's arms.

Greyne swung about to see a great blot of shadow hiss down the height of the machine ; heard it jerk at the end of an eighty-foot tentacle with the deep thrum of a twelve inch manilla hawser under strain ; saw it rebound far into the air.

Blatherwick panted up to the couple as the object curved over in a mighty arc.

With a high yell of fear the dwarf threw himself on to the ground and lay there, burying his face in the stones. But the others were staring up trying to calculate its cause.

There was no time allowed them for any further movement. Hardly had Greyne decided that it would pass uncomfortably close than it rushed down at them, with the arm which joined it to the main structure looping and swirling above.

It rushed earthward, a great egg-shaped block as big as a ball-room, and as it came it split smoothly

into two halves, working on an unseen pivot, yawning over them tremendously. Peering up into the gorged outsides of the thing it resembled the two hollow halves of a titanic Easter egg—an egg that would have cradled an oast house.

The threat swooped over swallow-like bare inches above their scalps, and Greyne, turning to see what next, unconsciously dragged Blatherwick with him.

They watched the open jaws dart like the head of a striking snake upon the bunched fugitives.

Heard the ringing crash and saw the fountain of flung stones.

Came a chorus of thin yells and the ring and clash as of metal doors closing. Then the oblong bulk soared up, turned upon itself, and, snake-like, darted in at an immense embrasure near the summit.

The dwarf let out a slow breath of relief and rose reluctantly, "I was watching all the time," he declared proudly. "Not many of those will be seen again. *They* want some repairing done evidently. I ought to be used to it by now; but it always gives me a shock."

"Rather a clumsy way of collecting the workmen," said Greyne drily.

The other stared at him.

". . . How else would you suggest? You can't climb there. It's what is always done. Rough! . . . You don't suppose They care about that. If they want workmen, let 'em have as many as they

like, is what I say ; but take care not to be one yourself. How many are left ? . . . "

Blatherwick was reminded of chickens as he twisted his head to see the remaining few. Their eyes held the same senseless air of bewilderment. Chickens . . . for ever in a state of incipient panic ; whether one went to feed them, to walk quietly through them so as to get somewhere else, or to wring their necks. And, like chickens, they did not even appear to realise that fear controlled them.

That, he decided, was what they were—though not so useful. Stupid, sexless chickens, scraping about among the pebbles, for what their Masters might throw them—or running wildly in terror at their approach. And they were descended from men and women . . .

The dwarf sat down again and began to arrange the pebbles into heaps. " Better show 'em I'm busy," he breathed. " You never know. . . . "

The machine lifted clear of the ground and, rotating ever faster and faster, boomed off at the level of a tall man's eyes.

As the four corners, one after the other, shot into view, the onlookers caught a glimpse of many of the tentacles hanging loosely from openings near the top, each ending in a different kind of monstrous fist which banged and thumped its sides.

Rapidly the thing gathered way and curved round to avoid a group of the pillars. It flew like a bumble bee—heavily—and like a bumble-bee in a strong

wind it faltered from its course ; skidded appallingly, heeling over until one edge almost scraped the earth ; wobbled violently, like a slowing top, in an effort to recover equilibrium—then crashed squarely into the obstruction it was seeking to avoid.

Huge and seemingly unshakeable were the masts it struck, yet the impact of the rotating body crumpled two of the supports as if they had been built up of fragile macaroni.

A murmurous groan of protest burst from the tripod, rising to a terrible wail as the vibrations climbed towards the hidden terminal. . . . Omm. Ommm. Ommmmm. . . . From far and afar up in the gloom came a noise like the crackling of thin ice—a brittle, dangerous sound.

The remaining pillar stood to the abrupt strain for a long moment, then, as the weight of the superstructure swung past the balance, it tore free of the beach, muttering and grumbling resonantly, and the whole vast length swooped, yelling, to final destruction.

Yet the author of the calamity took no heed of the damage. As the last echoes of the collapse swept across the levels the three onlookers saw the machine come grindingly to a halt at no great distance, and peering with smarting eyes into the wind, they observed it begin immediately to work upon a column which hardly showed above the beach.

Followed a stir and rumble among the other hulks. The watchers heard them begin to move, saw the

green light shining through slits in the walls, veiled as the arms were drawn in and the portholes closed ; watched as they took the air in cumbersome flight, like blocks of ten-storied houses, and shortly disappeared, roaring, into the dusk.

Only the one which had been first to move, and so disastrously, remained working under the strange stars, a dim half-seen shape of phantasmalian ungainliness.

Greyne stared long at the fallen pillar, which lay in fractured segments, smouldering in the glare of the dying sun. " It was solid enough to do that, anyhow," he muttered to himself, remembering that he had compared the machine's walls to mist.

" What are you looking at ? " queried the guide after a while.

The taller man turned his head in surprise.

" Didn't you . . . don't you see ? "

" I saw that senseless They hit the mast and bounce off it," announced the dwarf ; " but that's nothing to stare at. The rest are going to the other side of the world to get more life, I suppose."

" You didn't see the smash ? " exclaimed Greyne, " or hear it ? "

" I don't know what you're talking about," grumbled the other. " I really think you're one of those outcasts from the bowl—music lovers."

" Come here ! " ordered the other, and walked across to the *débris*. " Now do you see ? "

The dwarf shook his head. " Just as usual," he

declared. "They finished this one last day I saw them at it."

Greyne looked at Blatherwick in astonishment. Then, an idea striking him, he strode across the hole where the tripod had stood.

"Now do you understand?" he asked. "It's gone—been knocked down."

The dwarf shook his head stubbornly. "You walked round it," he accused. "It's there all right. I don't know what all the bother is about."

"Try for yourself," urged the man.

The grotesque figure walked forward as one humouring a child and came to a halt. "Go on," said Greyne.

"I can't get any further, can I?" the guide queried angrily. "We can't walk through things—like you pretend to do."

Next Greyne led him a little distance, to where the enormous rounded spars lay along the stones. "Can you get over that?" he demanded, reaching up, unavailingly, to see if he could touch the top. "That's part of it."

The dwarf shuffled to his side crossly and went past him, swinging his fists. Blatherwick put up his hand to his eyebrows and pulled them. It was unbelievable.

"Nothing there," squeaked the creature, stopping a few yards on the other side. "I knew there wasn't. I've known this place all my life, and I've never seen anything here yet—so how could there

be anything ? And I've watched the building of that arrangement there "—he waved a fist at the empty space—" all my life, so I know it's there—I see it quite plainly."

Greyne scratched the nape of his neck in bewilderment.

" The power of thought . . ." hazarded Blatherwick.

" . . . of preconceived opinions," contradicted his friend. " Amazing. . . ."

Faint and sullen in the distance, the noise of the retreating machines came back to where they stood.

" Talking about the other side of the earth," Greyne began rather feebly, " do you mean . . . ? "

" I mean what I say—the *other* side. This one always faces the sun. . . . I really can't tell you any more about it. My father, splendid old savant, used to say the reason was that the earth revolved on its axis in exactly the same period that it took to traverse its orbit round the sun. I daresay he was all wrong. . . . But, anyway, the whole thing is very slow. That is why our days are what they are—long, I suppose you'd call them. One day equals once round the sun . . . three thousands years I think I heard you whisper."

" What do they do there ? " put in Blatherwick impatiently.

The guide laughed wheezily. " I shan't tell you ! " he declared, winking in a knowing manner. " If I did, and you were able to understand me,

which I doubt considering the shape of your head, you'd probably go and upset things. We're all very happy and friendly here; don't want any one interfering. . . .

"What's that?" he broke off. "Yes, of course, I know what They are made of—same sort of stuff as the stupid tripods, naturally. Don't you understand that They've got energy producing affairs inside 'em? Takes the place of life, you know.

"And now," he concluded, "I don't mind telling you this, that what I *haven't* told you is extremely important. If only you knew the secret, my word, what couldn't you do? We, of course, are too fond of the long traditions of our noble civilisation to wish to see anything altered. But it could be done—oh, yes! But I shan't tell you." He chuckled throatily. "No, I shan't . . ."

He choked himself to silence.

"If only you knew what happens on the other side . . ." he hiccoughed merrily.

"Haven't you any idea what those pillars are made out of?" interjected Greyne, following his own line of thought.

"None at all!" exclaimed the guide with a disarming show of frankness. "We never see any material anywhere. It's my private belief that They produce it out of their own insides."

"Like spider's webs," muttered Greyne, reverting to his question, "if one can believe you. But you're such a liar. I think we've seen enough," he added,

turning to Blatherwick. "I'd like to be getting back now."

The other hesitated. "Don't you think there's anything more to see?"

"We are using up energy all the time," warned his companion, "and there's a lot to be done yet. As I told you, we'll only be able to improve things, not entirely avoid consequences. I think we'd better go."

"As you say," agreed the smaller man slowly. "I'd have liked to see those mind pictures he spoke about."

"Most interesting they are, too," chirruped the dwarf, who had started dismally at Greyne's words. "Realistic . . . *you* know." His eyes shone with a baffled hunger of desire. Then, with one of his abrupt changes of subject, he swung his paunch in Greyne's direction.

"Directly I saw you," he began smoothly, "I said to myself, 'There's a fellow I'll get on with.' I seemed to have known you for Historics—if you understand me. Twin intelligences, eh?"

He came close and peeped furtively up at the clear-cut features above him.

"I loved you from the start," he continued. "We might be brothers—or—or—something even closer. Don't you notice the likeness?" he appealed over his shoulder to Blatherwick.

"Not in figure!" he exclaimed hastily, "and I'm glad to say so. . . . But there is something—

I'm sure you recognise it. Something about our characters I think it must be."

"God forbid!" ejaculated Greyne.

The dwarf leaped away, and an expression of absolute horror twisted his squat face.

"Don't say that! Don't say that!" he pleaded. "Not that word. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. You might start something."

He looked apprehensively over his shoulder.

"Come on!" ordered the taller man, speaking to his friend. "I've had enough of this." He seemed extraordinarily sensitive, thought the other, guessing at what was in his mind.

"There's one thing I want to have a look at on the way," explained Greyne. "I am interested to see how those machines which we saw smashed up have got on.

"Those bits were alive in themselves," he emphasised. "Each fragment appeared to possess a kind of consciousness. They could wriggle," he added ruminatively. "Now Life as I always understood it is incorporate in the whole—cut off a man's leg and it's dead. But then I had no conception of the possibility of life outside the usual forms," he ended.

"They renew their life on the other side of the world," chirped a voice near his knee importantly. "Every one knows that."

"Oh, so you're coming, are you?" complained his listener, glancing down. "You'll have to hurry."

CHAPTER IV

"WHAT an ending!" broke out Greyne suddenly, with an expressive gesture. "All this chaos, this sterility." He was taking great strides, and his companions were hard put to it to keep pace.

"Man's own thought work," he continued, sweeping his arm to and fro. "War and war and again war.

"Destruction of previous achievements. The conscious mind yielding control—yielding deliberately, mark you—while making a pretence of the necessity for concentrating on defensive aggression.

"There should never have been any call for defence. They started from a wrong thought basis, and chaos beat them—chaos and the night—as those two will always beat any who fight them with their own weapons. Civilisation has aborted," he cried, "because she was quickened with the seed of materialism!"

"Those people in the pit," gasped Blatherwick, peering in front of him through down-drawn eyebrows, "music lovers. . . . They had the faces of thinkers, to my mind. Don't you allow any hope . . .?"

"There's the whole point," boomed his friend,

stopping abruptly. "They shouldn't be in the pit. They should never have allowed themselves to be thrust down there. They should have been out and about Historics and Historics ago, as this fellow calls it, gone amongst the people—not have allowed themselves passively to be put aside. They are by no means devoid of responsibility." The tall, lean figure turned back from staring across the waste and set himself once again towards the rounded dome of the laboratory, now looming faintly in the half-night.

"They made of themselves a caste apart . . . And why? Because they were afraid of losing in battle what poor power they already had. 'When in doubt, play courage'; that's the best motto. But for 'courage' they substituted 'prudence,' and lost the world where they thought to win. Mankind wanted a fire of fanaticism to burn up the weeds—and the leaders of thought gave humanity a cold douche . . ."

By now the three, the dwarf alternately running and wheezing for breath, had come close to the twin bulks of those square machines which had been smashed in the first observed encounter.

Greyne halted near them, muttering to himself, and now and again tossed up his hand as a thought pricked him.

The two shapes had grown vastly since last seen. They were house high and from a diminishing heap of piled fragments were adding to their jagged summits moment by moment.

The process was rather peculiar. It did indeed appear as if each fragment was endued separately with life. For the pieces were leaping from ground to crest in terrific spasms, settling themselves in position, each fitting exactly as though it knew its own place, and clamping tight with no visible means of support.

Dodging a knife-edged mass, which soared like an animated chest of drawers, Greyne approached and ran his hand over a portion of the rebuilt base. It was smooth, and offering no smallest obstruction to the touch. He could discover no crack, no least sign of any join, though he searched carefully. But he did again notice that odd appearance of " diffuseness " about the material of which it was built up—though now it seemed distinctly more solid.

" Don't think They'll have enough life left to finish with," announced the dwarf critically, coming up at that moment. " Seems nearly exhausted." He indicated a twenty-foot length of material which was jerking and writhing in an attempt to raise itself from the *débris*. Once it tore clear and slashed up in a six yard leap, but it fell back with a vibrant clang, and after a few more efforts lay still.

" Have a look at it," the guide invited. " It's quite safe now."

Greyne turned with a last rub of the satin side and bent in imitation of the other.

" Why, it's melting," he cried in dismay. He put out a hand and clutched an end of the sliver.

"Crumbling, I should say," he corrected himself, straightening his back. He poured a little of the sand-like handful through his fingers ; it was of a silver grey colour and crackled to the touch as if charged with electricity.

The particles floated down, slightly luminous, and the tall man asked a question.

"Dying," replied the guide gleefully. "That's what it's doing . . . dying."

Blatherwick stood a trifle to one side. He was looking over his shoulder. He expected something but did not know exactly what. He was straining his eyes in the direction whence they had come and he half imagined he saw what he was searching for.

But he turned at the dwarf's remark. "Dying." It seemed such an unexpected word, used in conjunction with those mighty hulks. "Dying." How did they ever win life ?

They had not been intended in the scheme of things. The little man looked towards their tops, the unfinished edges threw up wild silhouettes against the stars ; grim gargoyle shapes—leering. Or had they been intended all along ; a logical development ?

Leering . . . baffled !

Greyne voiced the other's thought.

"What kind of life did these things have ?" he queried, hardly expecting an answer.

"There is only one sort," replied the guide unexpectedly. "At least only one I've ever heard of.

The manifestation of Energy—Force, my old father sometimes called it. But you're asking too many questions," he shrilled. " It's not polite to ask questions here. Sometimes I might tell you the truth by mistake. It's not fair," he protested.

" No." He shook his neckless head stubbornly. " I wasn't told what the dust is made of."

It was obvious that he lied.

" There is nothing more to wait for." Greyne addressed Blatherwick. " Everything here is following the same path—a course of progressive degeneration." He began to move away.

Silently his companion walked by his side, but he was not satisfied. It seemed to the smaller man that they had not experienced all. He was yet filled with a sense of expectancy for which he could not account. He glanced from side to side frequently, but all around them was the gloom and the icy wind which bit them to the core. He shivered and heard the guide's harsh voice with a stab of surprise.

" My dear old father," squeaked the dwarf, peeping at Greyne, " took enormous pains over me. Told me a lot of things which I can't remember, though he made me learn it all by heart. I should have liked to have had a long talk with you. I feel we are men superior to our station ; we have, I am certain, much in common."

" ' Men,' " thought Greyne disgustedly, avoiding the creature's eye. " The thing hasn't got a sex at all."

" I really think he must have been rather fond of his father," whispered Blatherwick. " That's one good trait."

" What makes you think that ? " sneered Greyne, looking sideways at their companion and clenching his fists unconsciously.

" He keeps on using such affectionate terms when he mentions him."

" You must be as innocent as Jane thought you were," replied the other. " . . . because the brute says a thing often you believe he means it, do you ? What on earth is he doing now ? "

Blatherwick looked up and saw the guide stoop and hurl adroitly a large stone at something lying on the ground, which whimpered to the dull thud of the blow.

" Stop that," exclaimed Greyne, and twisted the fellow's arm behind his back, and holding him thus came to the darker blotch which made feeble attempts to squirm away.

" Why, it's one of his own crowd," ejaculated the taller man in surprise. " Don't you ever carry out your father's motto which you were shouting about so much ? " he queried, shaking the dwarf roughly. " Play the game, eh ? Have you any idea what that means ? "

" Not the slightest," acknowledged the other promptly. " Words, that's all it is to me. How could you expect me to know ? I've never seen a ' game ' to my knowledge, and I may as well tell

you that I've had about enough of your interference."

Greyne bent over the huddled body and saw enough to know that it was beyond all help.

"Ought to be abolished," snarled the dwarf, glaring down into the eyes which stared back in fright. "It's ugly and we don't like ugly things, here. But we've got no weapons nowadays. That reminds me," he continued, "*They* had very good weapons once upon a time. It was owing to them that They, long and long ago, won the 'War to Survive!' It was, so I've heard, a method of transferring Power from place to place by means of invisible rays. They had their supply of power at one point and just laid it down wherever they liked, as if it was a beam of light."

"A form of energised searchlight," commented Greyne, straightening his back.

"Swept it to and fro, I understand," continued the guide. "And whatever it played on to was abolished—wiped out. That was how we first came to this place."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you see, this method of transferring power was invented in a crude form Historics ago, I almost think it was before the machines revolted; and in one of their small wars between themselves the men of Europa, as this was then named, killed themselves off—with very few exceptions."

"Where did you people come from? It must

have been an unhealthy spot if you left it for this."

"Africa, I think was its name. My ancestors came away because of the world collision."

His listeners stared at him. "Collision," exclaimed Blatherwick.

"Your fathers can't have taught you very much," snapped the dwarf. "'Collision' was what I said, and I'm sure that's the proper word. Did you never hear that some man or other, fooling about with a new invention, swung the moon out of its path?"

The two men shook their heads.

"Well, he did; and it struck the earth sideways and whirled off on a new orbit. Almost missed, I'm told, but pared the continents flat, from China to some sea that there used to be, near Africa—Atalanteric?"

"Atlantic," corrected Greyne.

"That's it—to the Atlantic—smoothed them as bare as the palm of my hand, and the results of the shock eventually caused the entire solar system to swing a trifle to one side, and that is why we are approaching that new sun, which I believe can be seen from the other side of the world. I daresay we'll hit it one day; but for ages it has been useful for *They* to draw energy from. I have no doubt this sun will be out long before then and we'll all be dead." The speaker commenced to cry weakly. "I've told you too much," he sobbed. "I simply

can't tell lies all the time. I'm too dishonest. And me near my death," he ended, weeping bitterly.

By now the three were in the shadow of the laboratory and Greyne slowed. "I shall have no regrets about leaving this," he exclaimed, halting and making one of his expressive gestures.

"Where are you going to?" cried Blatherwick, stopping in his turn and watching the guide, who shambled steadily forward.

"Let him go on," interrupted Greyne. "Can't he *see* the building?"

But the dwarf still convulsed with grief, went straight on unheeding, and bumped heavily into the concrete obstruction. He recoiled with blood pouring down his face and looked from one to the other in surprise.

"Whatever is the matter?" he cried. "I can't get any further."

"Try again," suggested Greyne. And again the dwarf went and obstinately banged his head against something which he obviously could not perceive.

"There's nothing there," he grumbled, wiping his face. "Can't be. There never was."

"Can you still see the sun?" queried Blatherwick, looking at the familiar curving sides which towered overhead.

"Of course I can," answered the other, staring intently at a block, twelve feet thick, on a level with his nose. "I always could from anywhere about here—so I can now. There it is."

He lifted his hand and pointed. But he stood so very close to the structure that he was unable to stretch out his arm, and the failure enraged him so that he smashed at the sides until he was forced to stop for sheer pain.

"There's nothing there at all," he whimpered, clasping his injured fingers. "How can there be?"

"Evidently these folk only see what they expect to see," put in Greyne in an aside.

"But he walked right through that fallen mast," objected his friend, "or it looked like it."

"I'm quite prepared to admit he may have done. But that was erected by something which, whatever else it could do, was unable to reason—whereas this has been built and is kept in position by the exercise of thought. This creature's thought power, miserably weak though it undoubtedly is, was, possibly, strong enough to overcome the resistance of a thoughtless production—but here it must admit defeat."

He turned and looked at the dwarf, who was sucking his hand and staring in a bewildered manner straight in front of him.

Far up in the dark vault of the heavens something screamed over, followed by a group of invisible companions, which yelled stridently as they passed—demon voices of destruction.

Blatherwick, impelled by some instinct which he could not define, turned his back upon the other two and waited. He was convinced that the gloom was

lightening moment by moment. Then he saw what he had unconsciously been expecting all along, and cried out, " There ! Look there ! " He cried out joyfully.

Greyne, impelled by the urgency of that cry, turned his head and perceived what had caused his friend's exclamation.

He looked over his shoulder up into the night. And he had an impression that they three were standing at the bottom of a vast glass bowl, a glass bowl with curving sides, which met directly overhead ; a bowl whose sphere included within itself all the suns, known and undiscovered—the nearest and the most remote.

Greyne looked up, as Blatherwick was looking, and shivered in the cold grip of the wind as the light grew.

And he saw a picture spring out quick upon the background of Infinity, as he had seen other landscapes leap to life before, and he was filled with exaltation as he watched.

And the likeness was that of a man walking—a man walking wearily with bowed back, and upon His shoulders He carried a great baulk of wood—a baulk squared as might be by human workmanship ; but this burden stretched 'twixt star and star.

Now this presentment was limned in bright colours upon the curved sides of the invisible bowl, at the bottom of which the men stood, so that the feet of the walker were hidden beneath the rim of the

earth, while His head hung directly over them at the zenith.

And the two men shouted as they watched—a loud cry, compounded of triumph and of grief—for the feet of Him who walked thus lonelily were hidden from their sight, but His face they clearly saw, and on His head was thrust a crown of thorns.

And every drop of torment wrung from Him was a flaming sun, new wrought, which flared, crimson from His brows, across the sky to plunge in hidden depths—the bitter loneliness of empty space was mirrored within His downcast eyes—and there arose a thick dust of strife, stirred by the unseen feet, which hampered Him grievously, so that He stumbled as He laboured about the world with shining galaxies of splendid stars at the nape of His neck, where the wood galled Him.

Now the two men shouted again as they saw Him, tossing up their hands where they stood on the waste of earth at the base of the building—twin microcosms of eternity.

But the third of their number, after one startled glance, turned his back resolutely upon the sight and babbled :

" Don't look at Him ! Don't look at Him ! He is often there, and never seems to get any further. Turn away—quick ! This is some magic of those slack idiots in the pit—the music-lovers. There was something about crosses, I believe, about taking them up and following somebody or other ;

a stupid sort of thing to do, if they are as heavy as that one looks. I have heard, but I forget now. It is by some such means that the fools hope to reconquer the world . . . as if they had any hope! Why, we can't understand what they say—even supposing we wished to help them. Cross your fingers . . . touch wood . . . throw gravel three times over your left shoulder with your right hand. Only don't look! Don't look!"

The dwarf stood there, yammering through blood-stained lips, trembling with fright and rage. And even as Greyne turned to silence him the colours dimmed overhead, the stars wheeled to their old position, and the night was the more melancholy for the loss.

"He looked tired," whispered Blatherwick. "Heavens, how tired He looked!"

"He'll let that thing He carries drop one day," broke in the dwarf morosely, "that's what'll happen. One way or the other, we'll be all killed off very soon. It's entirely your fault," he added vindictively to Greyne, ". . . all that swearing. I'm sick and tired of you both, and I'll answer no more of your silly questions. I want to be free to do as I like again."

The squat misshapen figure moved away from them and broke into an ungainly trot.

Before he had gone very far the remaining members of his own tribe of grotesques joined him, whooping and yelling, throwing themselves upon

the ground in meaningless paroxysms or leaping from side to side in noisy frenzy.

" You seem to have freedom enough among yourselves," called out Greyne derisively after him. " I hope you appreciate it."

The dwindling blot of shadow stopped for a moment, and for once Greyne thought he detected an accent of truth in the speaker's voice.

" Free," the dwarf called back shrilly. " Free. I tell you we're so blasted free that freedom is an intolerable oppression on us."

He swung around again and shortly both he and his yelling troop disappeared into the dusk, which now seemed Cimmerian night.

But Blatherwick, staring after them while the sounds of their progress died away, imagined he saw at a great distance a gleam of light, which held somehow in itself a quality of calm certitude—a strange, enduring radiance, shining through the gloom ; and he strained eagerly, his eyes towards the source.

And it seemed to the little man that there came also from the direction of that faint illumination a sound of music—sweet and strong as if one, unseen, plucked nimbly the chords of a harp with supreme craftsmanship.

And the light and the music came to him mingled as though, in some curious manner, they were in reality one and the same thing—not to be divided.

Now Blatherwick heard and saw those twain

harmonies gladly ; the more gladly since they brought to him their hopeful message from out such hopeless desolation—out of the blackness, out of the darkness, from out the thick and ebon night.

PART III

CHAPTER I

THE months following on the conclusion of the second experiment constituted, for Greyne, a period of strenuous mental activity.

He was present at many discussions held in the restful, oak-beamed atmosphere of a Sussex house, which stood in the midst of friendly meadows within view of the whale-backed downs.

And his friend, walking up and down the laundered turf beneath the low-silled windows, a little disconsolate at his exclusion from the group, turned often his head to watch the play of emotions upon the faces round the deep arm-chair in the corner by the old-fashioned hearth, which contained the fragile body and dominant personality of her whom Blatherwick had come long since to think of, and address, as "Jane."

And many times he looked at the great figure of Peter, who was his constant companion during those long, long walks up and down the length of the lavender-scented parterre, wondering whether the giant was as indifferent as he seemed, while he tossed the golf balls for his eager puppies, to the momen-

tous decisions which were being slowly beaten out of words by those who, so close, strove for the betterment of humanity.

But "Threeadick" was not a man who talked overmuch at any time, even less during those days while summer gave reluctant room to autumn, and autumn, burning flamelike across the quiet woods, was quenched by winter's chill.

So the smaller man was forced in upon himself for consolation. Yet, glancing through the windows as he passed and repassed, he was thankful to note that whether Greyne was one of the five or six who were sometimes of the meeting ; or whether, more frequently, he was alone with Peter's mother, he appeared more ready to take the part of pupil than of teacher—less inclined to dictate than to listen. But he could never be induced to speak of what was toward. "There is nothing to tell you, John," he declared over and over again, "until we have decided. We are searching for the correct method." And with that Blatherwick was forced to be content.

While Peter, singing his songs as he strode to and fro, noted his companion's frequent glances at the twisted chimneys, and was aware he was remembering on what occasion he had first seen them ; he saw the little man turn many times to peer across the groomed countryside and was able to apprise his undercurrent of nervousness.

Yet the giant said nothing, because he had an immense faith in his mother's judgment.

From time to time, however, " Threeadick " was able to inform the other, sandwiching the information between exhortations to his dogs, that this plan had been abandoned as too hazardous, or the other as too partial.

And, on a day, he told Blatherwick, treating the matter as one of no great importance, that a final resolve had been reached.

The smaller man stopped short at his friend's announcement and gave a quick look at the walls above them with the huge black beams, weathered by the storms of centuries, dividing their white length into neat oblongs. His hand hovered towards his eyebrows.

He had grown to be very fond of this " haven " as he termed it to himself, and he was afraid, desperately afraid, lest he should never see it more.

Nothing, Blatherwick imagined, and was angry with himself for so thinking, could ever quite make up to him for the loss—no magnificent transformation of the stage upon which mankind played out his minor part—no wonderful paradise created at the touch of a finger. It would not be the same. . . .

So he glanced up anxiously and turned slowly, very slowly, to face his friend.

" . . . this morning," Peter was saying as he watched the fruitless efforts of a puppy to discover, among the rank grass of the near-by orchard, a ball which his master had only pretended to throw, " I think you'll be glad, rather." Here he swung

about and smiled at Blatherwick reassuringly, though he could not help teasing him a little.

" Well ? " pleaded the little man.

" They're going to do nothing," continued Peter, whistling the " recall," " nothing at all. . . ." He stopped to pat the wiry body which came panting to his feet, and Blatherwick sighed.

* * * * *

It was some ten days after the discussions had been abandoned that Blatherwick, sitting by his fireside in Kensington—a morning of bleak rain—received from Greyne a telephone message which sent him frantically round to the other's house in an attempt to dissuade him from his expressed intention.

As he hastened along the glistening pavements, he recollected the look of baffled impatience which he had more than once surprised, since their return, on his companion's face.

And he was furious that he, who knew so well the obstinacy underlying that controlled exterior, had made no mention of his misgivings to one who might have been competent to interpret the meaning.

He found, as he had known he would find, the usual entrance to the domed building bolted against him, and, running in his perplexity to the entrance in the stable-yard, received no answer to his hail as he stumbled down the steps.

His footsteps echoed dismally along the passage, and though, seeing the lights were not extinguished, he felt a gleam of hope that he might yet be in time,

when he stood at last in the well-remembered room it was empty of any sign of life—save for the pulsating membrane of the organism upon the table, on which the light shone intermittently as the film throbbed to the urge of secret conceptions.

As the newcomer looked from side to side he saw, as he had feared to see, that the network around the window space was in position. He bent nearer, and perceived that the lever of the mechanism had been moved so as to connect the apparatus which was able to transmute thought.

The whole mechanism was, he knew as he stared, busy—busy building up a new world from whatever material the absent individuality might have supplied.

* * * * *

Blatherwick has never seen his friend since. Whether Greyne has removed himself to walk solitary amid scenery of personal application . . . whether he said on that final moment, " If *I* had done so and so, what would have become of *me ?* "

Or whether . . . the other cannot tell.

And when, as he ofttimes does, Blatherwick goes half-stealthily and seats himself in the wooden chair before the table, he discovers his mind in sharp alternation between confidence and despair.

For he has his memories—there is one of passionate defiance in the twilight upon a bitter ridge—there is another, of equally ardent acceptance, upon a level beach in the dusk of decay.

Often he is persuaded that the solid details of

every day are about instantly to dissolve to show a new landscape—now and again he is assured that they have indeed faded to a mist, and that through their tenuous outlines he is able to glimpse strange contours. And Blatherwick believes himself to be but a wraith treading the insubstantial labyrinth of a dream.

Greyne's phrase, "The Inertia of Custom," is often in his mind, for the little man is more than half convinced at times that only the fact that he is accustomed to see them there holds the houses and the streets steady about him for a moment. Often he is tempted to relax the strained attention which is rapidly earning from him among his numerous acquaintances the stigma of being "unsociable."

No longer do any search for Blatherwick's telephone number when in need to discover the most fashionable of the unfashionable restaurants of the moment—or kindred information.

It would really appear that he has lost all zest for the life he used to enjoy. He is absent-minded; for ever starting at shadows or staring incredulously at such natural phenomena as motor 'buses and children.

Yet dare he never stretch out his hand to move back the lever, overwhelming though the desire may sometimes be, for he has a vague impression during his lonely vigil among the crowded shelves, at which he cannot bear to look, of Greyne poised on some towering rampart of thought, on the point to

unloose the clogging bands of materialism which are the intolerable burden of mankind.

Blatherwick has a shadowy formless idea that at any moment, in the twinkling of an eye, the real values of life may stand out startlingly distinct against the shadowy background of the old, and himself be walking amongst them, one of a new brotherhood. . . .

As the light of a distant star may cleave for a million years through space, only becoming perceptible to watchers on this globe a million years after the first glory of the new sun flamed out in the dark abyss of infinity.

So Blatherwick conceives, against his doubts, of his friend as having already released, from a point immeasurably remote in thought, though neighbourly in time, a wave of a new and splendid force which shall mightily lift up humanity from the dust, which they shall greet with a loud shout of gladness —only bewailing the fact that they have but just perceived what has for countless ages been available.

And thinking, as he does, in this confused manner, the little man hesitates often with his hand upon the tiny lever of ivory—hesitates and goes away but to return.

And, on the whole, the major ingredient of Blatherwick's expectancy is . . . hope.

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