

Science Fiction Series

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THE MEN FROM THE METEOR

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The Men From the Meteor

By Pansy E. Black

IN the private offices of Mardrake and Halliday, the son of the president was staring at six sheets of what looked like a fine, thick parchment. Three of them contained letters, one a map, while the last two were pictures. They were of a region unfamiliar to the young man, though the portions of the globe on which he had not set foot were comparatively few.

Presently he pushed a button on his desk and when the door opened noiselessly, he said without looking up, "See if Mr. Halliday is busy. If not, ask him to come in."

"Yes sir."

Five minutes later Barry Halliday breezed in, took the chair Anthony indicated and looked a question. His friend pointed to the letter, "What do you think of this?" he asked.

Barry studied the sheets closely then, "Where did it come from?"

"Perth, Australia."

"I mean originally."

"It says 'The Plateau of the Jewel.'"

"Yes, my son, but where in the British Empire is the Plateau of the Jewel?"

"I should imagine Australia. Notice what it's written on?"

Barry took up a sheet, studied it, tried to tear off a corner and failed. On impulse he pulled from opposite sides and to his amazement found it slightly stretchy. Anthony smiled at his expression. "Well?" he said.

"Must be some kind of leather."

"Exactly."

"But what kind, as fine as this?"

"Bird skin."

"Why?"

"Maybe Uncle Jim couldn't get paper and he might have felt that nothing but parchment would stand the strain."

"He's pretty vague as to time," murmured Barry, reading the first line. "The Plateau of the Jewel. 458th year after the Fall."

"What fall?"

"How should I know?"

"My dear nephew," Barry read. "I suppose by this time you have entirely forgotten Jim Mardrake. Doubtless, too, my brother scientists have perfected much that I was stumbling

toward such as stabilizers for planes; helicopter airplanes; a practical method of extending motion pictures to three dimensions, television; etc."

"Sanguine old bird, isn't he? How long since he dropped out of the game?"

Anthony figured a moment, "Twenty-five years," he said.

Barry continued reading the manuscript.

"I suppose you have been told of the visit of Hal Norman to my laboratories one afternoon, to show me the opal nodule which your father still has. He offered it to me first but I couldn't buy it;—told him I had put every cent into research and was at the end of my rope. Then he laughed, 'I know a place in Australia where these things are to be had for the picking. You find the money and I'll give you a map, but I won't go with you.

"I was consumed with curiosity but I was expecting a delegation of scientists to discuss my work so asked him to come to my home that night and tell me about this place, also to show me how to open the nodule, since they would be of no use to me if I couldn't open them safely.

"That night he told me the weirdest tale I ever listened to. I didn't believe more than half of it; but I know now that he gave me only an outline. How he found out that much about these" (a phrase scratched out) "and got back to the coast I don't know. The story was only intended as a warning since the opal field was close to the Plateau, but I was soon as anxious to see it as I was the opal valley. I left him at Perth, he refusing to go inland, and of course, I haven't been out since.

"I didn't tell anybody but your father why I left so hurriedly—I fully expected to be back in a year. Well, I've never gotten beyond the woods that surround the Plateau. You may be able to understand a little when I tell you that it rises sheer from a woody plain of considerable extent; its precipices are steep and inbent, so that until very recently it was impossible for anyone to ascend save by one way, a way closely guarded. If a native came up on the Plateau he was here for life.

"The people here, the Meteormen, claim they came to earth on a meteor. They believe that one day the meteor will return again.

"They've never objected to my carrying on my research work, though I think they are a little contemptuous of the crudity of it—theirs is so much more advanced. But I've discovered a lot about them they don't dream of. They are centuries ahead of even the most advanced scientists; they know everything that is done in that line almost as soon as projected; and are plan-

ning in a few months at most to conquer us and establish themselves as rulers of the Earth.

"Of course, personally, I don't feel they would succeed, but I don't intend to let them begin if you will help me. The reason for my present writing is that they have determined to use Eldridge's twin daughters in some of their experiments. Their father suspects nothing and would be helpless if he did.

"With this letter I am sending two sunprints and a map which will guide you to us. Come prepared to stay if we can't get out.

"I've lost all track of time since I've been here, and don't know how soon this will reach you, if ever. But no matter when you receive it, our need is urgent.

James Mardrake."

"Got any idea when this was written?" asked Barry.

"It would be difficult to say. Wills estimated the tanning was done ten years ago."

"Well, what Wills don't know about that kind of thing—Where's it been all this while?"

"You tell. What do you think of the pictures?"

BARRY picked up the first and scanned it closely. It showed a tall bronzed man standing between two lovely girls. They were clothed in loose flowing garments much after the Greek fashion. At their backs and rising swiftly to the middle distance was what looked like an Oriental temple on lofty archways over some substance which glowed faintly.

"Your uncle?"

Anthony nodded and his chum picked up the second picture. It was so peculiar that he shook his head. "Joke?" he asked.

"Not unless the whole thing is a joke," slowly.

The background was against the temple but in front were three figures, vaguely human yet most inhuman. They had broad shoulders and immense chests. The head was set somewhat forward. The body below the chest tapered almost to a point from which dangled a feeble pair of legs, legs whose tiny feet barely touched the ground. They had small arms and slender hands. The things seemed wholly head and chest but the faces were handsome, the bright eyes full of power, the lips curved and comely.

"What are you going to do?"

"Tell me if the map looks familiar."

After a prolonged scrutiny of the drawing Barry shook his head. "Crystal clear to this point, but there's positively no defile

there, at least there wasn't five years ago. And you haven't answered my question."

"I don't know. If Dad were here, I'd leave in a minute, but as it is—I suppose you'll insist on going?" apparently as an afterthought.

"Try and keep me from it."

"But all joking aside, Barry, we can't both leave."

"Telegraph your father. You know his London address, don't you?"

"I'll do better. I'll telephone him."

Two hours later the elder Mardrake was listening while Tony read his uncle's letter. When the reading ended, he said, "I've gotten through sooner than I expected, son. Get ready and go. Take Barry with you and bring Jim back. I thought he was dead. Glad he isn't. *Bon voyage.*"

* * * *

Two years after the receipt of James Mardrake's letter, Anthony, Barry and six blackfellows were camped deep within the great Victoria desert. They were as far from their goal as ever. White men, familiar with the desert, examined their map and either laughed or shook their heads. No such belt of woodland as shown on the map could possibly exist in the salt, opal-crystallized desert and the thing was a joke.

Nevertheless the boys went on. Day followed day, week followed week, still the mulga shrub closed the horizon, the bunyips danced at the springs, the opal-crusting salt of the dry valleys crunched underfoot; the rocks on the higher slopes oozed tarry, evil smelling secretions—that was all. Nowhere was there sign of a trail, nor did they come to the belt of woodland.

They had found it impossible to follow the map. To be sure they found the ravine Barry had said was not there, but the rest failed them. Sandstorms, salt deserts, ridges impossible to scale barred the path. For weeks they had travelled by compass alone.

Finally a three days' sandstorm accompanied by pitch darkness drove them far off their course. It abated only at sunset of the third day, when they dropped exhausted to eat what little food remained in their knapsacks. Their blacks were shortly rejoicing over a kangaroo they had caught, but the white men lay by their campfire silent and depressed.

They looked very different from the two spruce youngsters who had talked over this adventure. Neither had shaved since they left the ship at Perth; their clothing was faded and worn by wind and sun and they were just now indescribably dirty.

Anthony whistled a dismal little tune as he examined some sapphires taken from their waterhole; Barry was smoking nearly

the last of their precious store of cigarettes. It was the end of a long discussion during which they had agreed to start back to the coast with the dawn, acknowledging themselves beaten.

It was a night of brilliant, blue moonlight, such as only Australian deserts produce, and bitter cold. Even in their sheepskin coats they shivered. To tell truth they were rather relieved that the expedition had come to nothing, though neither would have admitted it. The pictures of those eerie Meteormen had made a deeper impression than they would admit.

"I suppose Uncle Jim will think we're failing him, but I can't help it," said Anthony at length.

Barry had been staring absently at a ridge of scrub to the north of the camp. His eyes became suddenly alert, keen with interest. Now he spoke, "I'm not so sure we've failed. Look."

The moonlight had paled their campfires to insignificance, but it could not subdue what now flashed into sight beyond the ridge. A blade of intense, multicolored flame was rising slowly, carefully, searching the heavens as it came, till it reached the zenith, then stood for an incalculable length of time pouring into the depths of the sky. Finally it split and fell as though exhausted by its own weight, and vanished, nor did it appear again that night.

"The Jewel," gasped Anthony.

"And I'll bet a giant opal."

"What a stone it must be. Anyway, it proves, Barry, my son, that we're on the track at last."

Further speech was prevented by the arrival of the blacks in a panic of terror shouting, "Bunyip, bunyip!"

"Shut up, the lot of you," cried Barry waving his arms. "That's nothing but light. What's the matter, anyway? You, Johnny, you do the talking. What's it all about?"

AFTER much questioning they learned that the bunyip was not the light, but a belt of woodland surrounding the light. The boys exchanged glances, "What does it do?" asked Barry. "Blackfellow go in. Never come out."

"Just so. And you've known of this woodland the whole time and that we were looking for it; and refused to lead us there?"

A nod. "And I suppose if we hadn't seen the light, we'd have gone back to the coast none the wiser?" grimly.

"No go to wood. Never come back."

"Is that so? We start for there tomorrow morning. If you don't care to come along, you needn't."

"I think I can persuade them to put us within sight of the wood, anyway," said Anthony.

"You do?" incredulously.

"Yes," and strolled after the blacks. After considerable palaver he reported that all was arranged. They would wait on the last ridge with most of the provisions while the white men went on.

The next morning in the intense cold before the dawn, the little party started in the direction where they had seen the light.

It was evident their bearers didn't like the prospect but they said nothing. The boys, full of anticipation, hurried forward to the ridge, hoping they might see some signs of the plateau. Vain hope. The ridge disclosed the same sort of landscape they had been passing through for weeks. But on the fourth morning far on the horizon a patch of green glowed faintly under the rising sun.

Their escort refused to go on and the day was spent dividing their goods, and sorting out what they would take with them. The blacks erected rude shelters of the mulga shrub, and watched stolidly as the boys set out to what their men believed certain death.

As they walked on, the patch of green grew larger and just at sunset they dropped their packs in the shade of a great oak which stood sentinel to a close-ranked forest behind.

It was like any other forest; a whispering, bending, bowing canopy of green. The only thing strange about it was its presence in this lonely, unexplored waste.

Camp was rather a nervous business, but they finally dropped asleep lulled by the ceaseless hot wind in the trees. Barry was the first up next morning. He rose, stretched deliciously, breathed deep of the forest odor, then glanced down at his blankets with the idea of rolling them for the day's march. His exclamation of astonishment, low though it was, woke Anthony.

The wood was surrounded by a belt of white sand, and it was on this they had made camp. Now about the place where they had lain were scores of the tiniest footprints they had ever seen. Much too tiny for any but a newborn baby, yet they did not look like a baby's, but the miniature of a full grown man's.

The prints circled the camp, within six inches of where their heads had lain. As the two eyed them silently, Anthony looked about and under the edge of the nearest forest growth was the map they had brought with them.

"Meteor-men," cried Barry.

"No doubt of it."

"Shall we go on?"

"Of course."

Half an hour later guided only by their compass they plunged into the green undergrowth ahead of them.

CHAPTER II

The Plateau

IN the shade of the great trees the air was cool and moist, the undergrowth thick, yet not tropical; while the trees themselves were oaks, elms, poplars and cedars such as would have been found in a temperate zone. They swayed gently in the hot wind, which apparently had no effect on them.

The undergrowth was vines, small trees and bushes, which everywhere was alive with unseen creatures. Twittering, grunting, squealing, and once in a while, a fierce scream as of a predatory animal, made the boys look to their revolvers. In the multitude of tracks which met their gaze, however, was none larger than that of a small cat, except one that might have been made by a large deer.

But mixed with the others were innumerable tiny footmarks of the Meteormen. They glanced at each other but said nothing. As they penetrated further the undergrowth ceased altogether with the animal noises. The trees overhead grew in almost a solid canopy with only occasional flashes of sunlight coming through. But there was still noise enough. Bird calls had succeeded those of the animals and their cries of distress were so loud that the boys looked a question. Finally in one of the places where the sunlight fell to the forest floor Barry glanced up, then snatching at Anthony's arm drew him back into the shade again, pointing upward.

Anthony's eyes followed the gesture and stared, forgetting that as he could see, it was possible that he could be seen. Standing in the top of a tall oak whose branches arched over the opening was one of the figures they had seen in Mardrake's pictures. He was taking from a net spread over the treetop a number of wide winged birds and after killing them, stowed them in pouches above his waist. It was the piteous cries of the remaining captives the boys had heard. Presently these ceased; the Meteorman uttered a low musical call which was answered faintly from somewhere ahead of him. By means of some queer device strapped to his back he rose from the tree top and flew toward the east.

"And that's where your parchment came from, or I miss my guess," commented Anthony, and Barry nodded.

"I wonder if your uncle knows we're here."

"Likely, if the Meteoromen know."

They marched on in silence for a time. "That fruit looks good," Anthony said, pointing to a tree whose lower trunk bore a vine with purple fruit like plums, but larger.

"Suppose it's poisonous," suggested Barry.

"Then it'll be just too bad, because I'm going to eat some."

Shifting their bags to the ground they entered the shade where the fruit was hanging and as Anthony pulled on the first ruddy globe to detach it, a roll of parchment dropped from the vine and opened at his feet. He picked it up to read, "The time grows short. Only a few days remain. I'll meet you at the plateau. Jim."

"Well, I'll say Uncle knows we're here," mused Anthony as he bit into the cold acid fruit. Barry nodded, his mouth already full.

They ate to repletion, then taking up their packs went on. Two hours' steady march during which they found several more of the vines, with a hidden note in each, brought them to the inner edge of the forest. The branches overhead thinned, the undergrowth began again. Cautiously they made their way forward, finally on hands and knees till they reached the last of the thick-leaved bushes. Thrusting them aside they looked out.

Ahead stretched a level plain covered with grass, thick and luxuriant. Rising sheer from this was a rocky scarp, overhanging, sinister. Up and up it rose till it seemed to meet the sky. Faintly they could see figures moving on the edge and Barry pulling his glass from its case, focused it, then motioned Anthony to do the same.

Balancing delicately on their tiny feet a number of the Meteoromen were walking on the rounded edge of the cliff. As they watched two seemed to fly downward to the ground below, then all movement ceased as on the extreme lip of the precipice appeared a man who seemed to be desperately trying to regain safer ground. In vain. Some unseen force, for none of the Meteoromen were near him, pushed him farther and farther over the edge, till he plunged into space. At first he fell slowly, then more and more rapidly, but as he neared midair the watchers in the undergrowth gasped and froze in astonishment. The Meteoromen on the ground had been looking up; now they raised their miniature hands and something bright shot from between them. It encircled the falling body, which became luminous, then vanished entirely, leaving not even a film of dust to float to the rocks below.

Little exultant cries floated down from the cliff edge which

the executioners below answered, then rose and flew back to the plateau.

Anthony's hand trembled a little as he lowered his glass and looked at Barry. "What was it?" he gasped.

"I don't know. What perfect devils these fellows are. But let's circle the plateau and see what else we find."

In silence they pushed to the left, and hadn't gone fifty yards when they were obliged to halt lest their presence be discovered by two more of the Meteormen, and they were not anxious to be discovered just then.

THESE two were bending over close to the edge of the forest and pulling at something. Barry studied them a moment, then in spite of himself shook with grim laughter. Their tiny hands were wound about the stem of a wide-petalled pink flower which a child of three should have been able to snap without effort. But the creatures were exhausted when at length they succeeded in picking the blossom.

"That was certainly worth the price of admission," said Barry.

"Think so?" Anthony was smiling unwillingly. "I don't care for them."

"Neither do I. And I don't see how anybody without the contraptions they have can get either up or down."

"Probably the entrance is on the other side. Let's wait till night and see what we find."

There is no twilight in that desert country. One moment the sun blazes full, in the next moment comes darkness. It would have been complete darkness there under the heavy tree canopy had it not been for a tremulous light which overhung the plateau and faintly lit the plain beneath. The boys could not see its source but guessed it came from the jewel.

Moving cautiously, they began to circle through the brush, mindful constantly of the forest life about them. Some ceremony was beginning on the plateau for they heard music, chanting, and an almost unearthly sweet singing. They hoped that although it could not deaden the noise of their progress, it might distract the Meteormen.

The light grew brighter as they approached the opposite side of the plateau and presently they saw what they were looking for. A great stairway was flung down the cliff side, made of a material which glowed white hot in that mysterious light. At its head on the cliff was a platform surrounded by statues of strange figures, figures however, with nearly normal bodies. The stairway itself consisted of three lovely triple arches, the

last of which ended on the plain, in a massive gateway with doors which looked like polished bronze but which they afterward found were gold. These doors were carved and intricately inlaid and tightly closed. Outside stood two Meteormen in armor, motionless, with faces upturned toward the plateau. The stairway itself was deserted.

"You know," Barry spoke thoughtfully. "I don't like it."

"Nor I. If Uncle wants us on the plateau he'll have to get us up some other way. You'll notice that while the lower arches have balustrades, the upper hasn't, and a person pushed off the upper one would be going mighty fast when he struck the ground."

"Level head," admiringly. "I wonder where's Uncle."

"Right behind you," then as they sprang to their feet, James Mardrake held out a hand to each. "Welcome," he said gently. "You are just in time. We are nearly in despair. A beautiful stairway, is it not?"

"Why did they build it?" asked Anthony as they moved out toward the open and the greetings were over.

"At one time they had bodies like ours, and doubtless felt they had to have some means of using their legs. Then too, they and their slaves had to bring the material for the engines and machines up that way. Gradually as they had developed a device for flying through the air and their bodies grew light it was easier to fly than walk, hence——"

"Why not destroy it?" asked Barry. "Isn't it a source of danger?"

"Not as they use it. It lures the natives to the plateau and up to this time it has been necessary to recruit the list of slaves every once in a while," a slightly bitter smile accompanied the words. "And though the Meteormen are masters of air and plateau they would not attempt to lift a grown man up there in their arms."

"Slaves?" Anthony's eyebrow went up.

"Certainly. The Earthmen they capture from time to time do all the work on the plateau, and once there they can't get down, though some have tried——"

"Like this afternoon?" asked Anthony.

Mardrake's eyes blazed. "That was wanton murder," he said. "Eldridge had finished the death ray they made him invent, and they wanted to test it."

"On him?" Barry's lips whitened.

"Yes. You see, they've waited for it ten years." Then before they could reply, "You must get onto the plateau tonight and get the death tubes and destroy the machine that makes them

before the ceremony is over. Then we at least stand an equal chance with them. Otherwise we perish. And we must hurry."

"But we know nothing of conditions on the plateau," objected Anthony. "They'd surely spot us."

"Not if you do as I say. Follow me."

Gathering up their bundles they started at a dead run across the grassy plain, Jim's white robe flashing like a beacon before them. Straight to the cliff beside the stairway they sped, Anthony gasping a query as to the sentinels, which his uncle answered briefly, "Waiting for the Fire Ceremony."

Beneath the curve of the first arch they paused, while Mardrake took a torch from his robe, and with it searched the face of the cliff. He found what he wanted and motioned the boys to throw their weight on the shoulder of a rock jutting out toward the arch. It gave a little, then a trifle more, and all at once swung abruptly aside, precipitating the three into a tunnel. It closed as it had opened, noiselessly.

James Mardrake sat down on a projecting rock and panted a trifle. "What now?" queried his nephew.

"First up to the plateau. What's the matter?" for Barry was staring at the roof of the tunnel with dilated eyes.

"Electric light."

"Oh, yes. Feel that tremor? It is produced by a bunch of the largest electric dynamos in Australia, built years ago when the stairway was still used. They make the ray you saw by using the Jewel as a lens. The ray is their method of worship of the Great Source. They are planning a conquest of the Earth, using the plateau as a sacred city and operating from it. The first detachment of them leave in a few days to establish a base on the edge of the desert. They are at a stage of scientific development which will take earthmen another thousand years or so to attain. Armed with the death ray they are now ready. There is only one hope," he paused.

"Yes?"

"I'll tell you later."

CHAPTER III

The Death Tubes

THE boys were becoming increasingly aware of heavy vibrations which shook the rock under them. Jim smiled at their expression as they walked up the tunnel; through his workroom, as he called it, and to his cave on the plateau where the vibrations were taking on a measured swing.

Mardrake went to the door to reconnoitre. "Come," he said, "and look for a moment. Then I'll give you your directions."

They stood in the doorway of the room looking out over the great Jewel and the building which crowned its brilliant top. The Jewel glowed warmly, lighting the entire plateau, but they found it impossible to see distinctly. They could distinguish the general outlines of the place, however, and marvelled.

Behind them rose the sheer cliff wall which had been utilized, since it was some three hundred feet thick, to make the dwellings of the slaves. They found later that back of the rooms was a crypt that went round the entire semicircle of the caves, each room opening into it. In front of the rooms was a platform of metal, some ten feet across. From it the ground or rock fell abruptly to the edge of the Jewel. Closing both ends of the cliff wall was a high, golden barrier pierced with gates through which could be glimpsed airy white dwellings.

"Homes of the Meteormen," explained Mardrake. "We earth worms can't stand the blaze of the Jewel at midday so we have to retire to our caves. The Meteormen, on the contrary, bask in it."

"Are you allowed through the gates?"

"Oh, yes, under escort. However, I know how to work the locks and you must go through them tonight and secure the death tubes."

The boys surveyed the prospect dubiously. The stairways, the narrow ramps, the temple platforms, even the slope in front of them was crowded with white-robed figures, but Mardrake gave them no time to think. Drawing them inside he directed them to drop their luggage behind his cot; put on each a robe like his own, swept aside the curtain to the corridor and beckoned them to follow him.

They groped their way by the occasional light from the outer rooms, but it seemed an age before they rounded the last turn and came out into the open beside the gates. Here they paused.

Above the dome of the temple had appeared a bubble of multi-colored flame, though now it was more like fire from driftwood than anything else. Also the great Jewel's entire surface was aglow, and through the air, above the chanting and singing of the Meteormen, came a soft hiss and the throb of the engines. It was now much stronger because, Mardrake explained, the entrance of the power-house was just beyond the gates.

"I dare not come with you," he said, passing his hand over the intricate fastenings, "I must be at my post in a few minutes to lead the slaves in their worship. Here is a diagram. You will be able to understand it if you follow directions explicitly. El-

dridge prepared it for me. The first opening as you enter leads downward to the power-house." And before they could speak he was gone leaving the nearest gate slightly ajar. Another look about them showed that they were comparatively safe as long as the ceremony of the flame continued, for every face was turned to the temple, and all were bowing rhythmically in its direction.

Pushing open the gate far enough to slide through, and wedging it with a lump of metal from the tunnel mouth, they moved forward to the entrance of the power-house which lay just ahead. A swift rush and breathless dive carried them inside but only to the top of a very narrow stairway which turned and twisted downward at a perilous angle. They half fell, half ran down its length till they stood on the floor directly under the Jewel.

The entire space with the exception of very narrow paths was taken up with machinery, and they looked about with appreciation. Both had learned to appreciate fine work when they saw it, and they saw it here, though they marvelled how it could have been accomplished in this isolated place. They would have liked to examine their surroundings more closely, but a quickening of the tempo of the three big dynamos in the center of the floor reminded them of their errand and they hurriedly consulted their chart. On one side of the power-house was marked the entrance to the laboratory where Eldridge had made his discoveries and worked out his inventions. The way was plain but when they had reached the wall there was no opening visible.

Again they studied directions; then Anthony touched a projection in the floor with his foot and in the solid surface a door opened, showing a room filled with machinery of various kinds and stuffed with tools. Stepping inside they saw leading off from it a storeroom full of tubes on shelves that reached from floor to ceiling.

"These," wrote Eldridge on the chart, "are all harmless save the ten on the central table. You will note, Mardrake, that while the death-tubes have red casings the others have blue. The machine in the corner of the laboratory nearest the storeroom is the one which produces the death ray. From all indications I shall not live to talk this over with you, but I pray you find means to destroy it, for if you don't it will destroy you."

"I wonder what purpose the harmless tubes serve?" mused Barry as he picked up one of them.

"Don't know. Let's try it on the machine," answered his friend. When they had mastered the mechanism which they found much like that of an ordinary electric torch, a ray of black light flooded over the polished metal with no result whatever.

"All right, give me a death ray, then," ordered Anthony.

The result on the machine was disastrous. The metal fused and ran to the rock floor in streams. "Well, well, nice plaything," observed Barry, watching the effect. "No wonder uncle wanted us to take charge of them. By the way, there's only nine here."

"What? Count them again." A recount gave the same answer. One of the death tubes was missing. "And furthermore, if they discover the rest gone right away,—I wonder," shutting off the ray. "Can we manage to change the casings?"

Barry stared. "It's playing with fire," he suggested.

"Can't help it. It must be tried."

Before starting to experiment, however, they made a careful study of Eldridge's charts and the directions that hung over the work table. It took somewhat longer than they anticipated but inside of twenty minutes nine red tubes were on the table, and nine blue ones in the boys' pockets, and nobody without making a test could have determined which was which.

"Now, let's get out of this before somebody arrives," Anthony spoke as they slid the last tube in place. "I could bear to know who's got the other one, though."

Then as Barry still stared at the table, "Come on, go to sleep."

"No, son," he reached up and took another blue tube from the crowded shelves. "I've an idea."

He then lifted one of the red tubes from the table, laid it on the floor, trained it on the spot where the wrecked machinery stood and turned it on, murmuring "Accidents will happen in the best of regulated families." Anthony laughed silently as he caught the idea. "Brushed off when some of the bats were in here this morning. Now we know definitely that there's only ten on the plateau. We have nine, and will shortly have the other unless I miss my guess, nor will they be able to make any more for some time. *Selah!*"

"How are you going to get the other?" Anthony asked as he closed the door and started across the power-house.

"Take it away from whoever's got it."

The vibrations now were a steady rhythm and rather monotonously low; and other sounds including the loud chanting had ceased. But now rose a single voice, beautiful, clear, penetrating, with a range that made the boys stare at each other, though they did not slacken their pace.

As they sprang up the stairway, they were almost blinded by the flood of multi-colored light. And when they emerged into the open they saw why. The flame which had beckoned them from the desert was now shooting upward with a soft hiss and a roar that prevented speech. It was steady, never wavering, beautiful beyond description.

Involuntarily they looked down at the Jewel and Anthony suddenly clutched Barry's arm as he pointed, "Remember what Uncle said about some danger threatening them. There it is!" He indicated two places where in the brilliantly-hued stone great cracks were splitting upward toward the summit, and even as they looked the cracks opened wider.

But Barry only nodded. "Hurry," he said, "I don't want to get caught with these things here," he glanced fearfully at the white houses behind him. "It might call for some explaining."

There was but five feet to cross to reach the tunnel opening and they made it in record time, for as they closed the golden gate between the two halves of the plateau, the shaft of light split and fell, vanishing as it touched the temple dome. It was only the comparative darkness following which saved them from discovery.

They found Jim waiting in the cave. "Where are you going to put these things?" asked Barry, lifting his robe to show the tubes. "They'll surely look for them, if they think to test those we left behind."

"Left behind?" with a slightly puzzled frown and then the boys explained, Mardrake laughed for the first time in days. "Give them to me," he said. "I'll put them away safely," and taking all but the last one Barry had purloined he disappeared into the crypt. In a moment he returned empty-handed. "Now," he said, "I've forgotten all about it. You'd better do the same."

"Can't," answered Barry. "One of the death tubes was missing."

"Missing?"

"Absolutely."

For an instant Jim looked blank, then sighed. "I'll find out who has it," he said. "But I'm afraid we can't do anything about it. One of them is sufficient to wipe out our colony if they chose to do so."

"How many earth people are there here?" asked Barry sitting down on Jim's cot.

"About a hundred, all blacks or their descendants except Eldridge and his daughters. I'll introduce you to Althea and Athene tonight when they come from the temple."

"How did they get here?" queried Anthony.

"Eldridge and a party were travelling across Australia. They got lost in a duststorm and when it lifted he found himself with his young wife, very ill, on the edge of the forest here. Two weeks later the girls were born and his wife died. They've been on the plateau ever since."

"Have you warned the blacks of their danger?" Anthony wanted to know.

"Yes, but they only laugh at me. With them something that has always been; always will be."

"How do the girls feel about their father's death?"

"They feel nothing," a trifle grimly. "Gurnya hypnotized them last night. They have forgotten their father entirely. I said I'd introduce you to them. If they fail to acknowledge it you'll know why. He has been trying to make them complete subjects so that when they go out on their raiding parties, they can take one of the girls with them, and communicate with the plateau through them. Don't look skeptical—it can be done. Well, speaking of devils—" he rose and motioned the boys to do the same.

In the doorway of the cave had appeared a Meteorman, tall, very straight. The face was one of great dignity but it also bore more than a touch of subtle cruelty.

"James Mardrake," he said. "I came to offer you the greatest honor that could be accorded anyone, but I see you are unworthy of it."

"To what does Your Serenity refer?" asked Jim.

"I was going to honor you by offering to make you one of our Earth governors, at least for a time, but the presence of these strangers shows that you have deceived me and therefore I cannot do so."

Mardrake bowed. "I should have been obliged to decline the honor," he said.

"Do you realize the alternative?" queried Gurnya.

"Quite."

"Death—the death that Eldridge died," the slow voice had taken on a note of harshness.

"Of which I am no more fearful than was he," Jim said. "But the end is not yet, Serenity."

"True. How did you introduce these men to the plateau? They did not come up the stairway as our scouts expected they would, or I should have known."

"No, they did not."

The high priest stared piercingly at the man before him, but Mardrake met his gaze serenely, then Gurnya turned and called. He was joined almost at once by three other Meteor-men.

"Search," commanded the Ruler coldly. "When you find the means by which James Mardrake reaches the plain unseen, return and tell me and I will send Helvin to destroy it."

Barry caught Anthony's eye and had Gurnya taken the trouble to do so he might have read the message which flashed between them, but he was already leaving the cave.

"Helvin has the tube," said Barry. "We'll have to contrive to get it."

CHAPTER IV

The Destruction of the Tunnel

"UNCLE," Barry's mouth was close to Jim's ear as the Meteoromen disappeared into the workroom. "I've some chloroform in my bag. What say?"

"I've something better. Eldridge stumbled on it when he was working with rays and gases."

"How is it better?"

"Odorless, tasteless, and no bad effects afterward. In point of fact, you wouldn't know you had any except for the lapse of time."

"Just the thing. How long will it be before Helvin appears after these report?"

"Not long. Why?"

"Get me one of the death tubes."

"Why?"

"Wait. We'll show you. No time now to explain. How is your stuff distributed?"

"I've a machine in the workroom. I've never used the gas except for amusement and sometimes to forget for a while that I was a prisoner. That, by the way, is one reason I built the tunnel, to have something to do."

"Is the machine working?"

"It was yesterday."

"All right, slip in after Helvin and set it going. Can you, without succumbing yourself?"

"Certainly." Then as though continuing a conversation, "I couldn't tell you much of the origin of our Masters or how long they have been on the plateau. So far as I know they have always been as they are now. They say they came from a great world they call the Source,—further, I don't know."

All this without a change of intonation, neither boy flickered an eyelid, nor were they surprised when the searchers appeared at one doorway as Gurnya entered the other.

"Your Serenity, the slave built a tunnel which leads from his workroom to the plain. I doubt not he brought these men in that way."

"Is this true?" turning to Jim.

Mardrake raised an eyebrow. "Must I confirm what Your Serenity already knows? Certainly I did."

"Why?"

"I was lonely. One of these is my nephew, the other his friend."

"Where did they come from?"

"Does it matter? They are here."

"True, and here they will stay—forever!"

A cruel little emphasis on the last word that made Anthony stare at him before he asked. "Tell me, Serenity, why may not the Earthmen help you in your conquest? Surely those trained by you through the years might be of use."

Gurnya's great eyes flashed. "You know too much," he said. "None shall escape to give warning of our coming. All must die." Then as Anthony said nothing, "I will send Helvin immediately," and left the cave.

The moment his back was turned Mardrake vanished into the crypt, to return with a tube which he handed Barry again with the question, "Why?"

"To destroy the tunnel. We can't go through there anyway, and it is more important to recover the death tube from Helvin than to save your work. See?"

Mardrake nodded and when the Meteorman entered and passed through they were again talking of life on the plateau. But the moment he disappeared Jim rose and stole noiselessly after him. The boys heard nothing and when Mardrake beckoned them they looked about curiously. Helvin was standing bolt upright facing the tunnel, leaning slightly forward as though intent on something inside, but his open eyes were sightless. Gripped in one of his tiny hands was a red death tube.

Quickly they went to work. Anthony took the tube from his fingers and began changing the casing, swiftly, efficiently, while Barry with his own tube started the destruction of the tunnel. Beginning at the plain he backed toward the workroom, playing the deadly thing on the rock-metal either side and on top. The rock crumpled, ran, poured in streams and fell together, while the plateau above trembled with the shock as the tunnel filled. At length it was done. Even the metal door which had closed it from prying eyes was not forgotten. Ruthlessly Barry destroyed that also, till nothing but a rough rectangle remained where the opening had been.

By that time Anthony had completed his task and returned the tube to the clutching fingers of the unconscious guard, whom Mardrake had removed a little way that he might not be hurt by the work of Barry's tube. Then they set him back where he had been, and Mardrake taking the tubes from Barry hid them where he had the others.

THEY sat down to wait developments. "How long will it be before he recovers?" asked Anthony.

"About five minutes," answered his uncle. "The girls have come back from the temple, I hear them moving about, but of course we can do nothing until Helvin comes out."

"Certainly not."

"Sh! He's moving."

Presently the guard appeared in the doorway and eyed them with a keen scrutiny. They greeted him respectfully but he appeared to be bewildered, once or twice passing a hand over his eyes. Finally he said, "The passage is destroyed. There is no longer a way down to the plain," and glided from the cave as Gurnya had done a short time before.

"No," murmured Barry apparently to himself, "and you no longer have a death tube, though you don't know it."

"Hush," warned Jim. "Their ears are keen. Come and meet the Eldridge sisters."

But when he raised the curtain of the cave next his own they saw on two cots more richly furnished than his, the twin sisters in apparently sound slumber, their hands folded on their breasts. They were quite as lovely as their pictures, and the boys studied them in silence. Presently Anthony moved closer and laid a hand on Althea's wrist, bending over to listen to her regular breathing.

"It's no use, son," Jim spoke a little bitterly. "Gurnya has stolen a march on us again. You can't wake them. See," and before they could expostulate he had seized the girl, raised her to her feet and shaken her vigorously. No response. Her eyelids did not flicker nor her breathing change. Taking a pin from his robe he plunged it into her forearm. A tiny drop of blood followed its withdrawal, but otherwise he might have been making the experiment on a statue.

"Are they this way all the while?" asked Barry as Jim gently laid her back on her cot.

"No, only since I wrote that letter to you. He always has given them drugs to make their memory blank so they could not tell what the Spirit of the Jewel looked like but he has never tried to completely dominate them until the last three years."

"Is the Spirit of the Jewel the person who sings during the ceremony?" asked Anthony.

"You heard?" in amazement. "But of course you would under the Jewel. Yes, but otherwise I know nothing about her. I presume she is someone else Gurnya is practising on. Well, I wonder if the excitement is over for the night. They're not likely to discover their wrecked machinery before morning—which by the way isn't far off, and I could do with a little sleep myself. We'll

have a busy time tomorrow, or I miss my guess."

"How are we going to get away?"

"I don't know."

"Is it safe to leave the girls?" queried Anthony.

"Safe?"

"Yes, won't Gurnya take them away?"

"He will if he wants to—we can't stop him."

"I thought you called us to rescue them."

"I did, but we'll have to find a way to break their hypnosis first. Standing guard over them won't do it. If he calls they'll go. We'll see how things shape up in the morning."

But in the morning when they called at the curtain of the cave, received no answer, and finally entered they found it empty.

"**A**ND now what?" queried Barry, his lips white as they studied the room from which all signs of occupancy had been removed—even the cots were gone.

"Prepare to leave the plateau," answered Jim practically.

"And the girls?"

"At present are in the Temple. But they won't be always. They'll follow the Spirit wherever she goes."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Wait and see. Pay no attention to the Meteormen. They'll be watching us. Gather up the things we will need to reach your blacks if they stayed where you left them, and be ready to follow my lead."

"And the rest of our people?" indicating the Earthmen who were passing through the golden barriers.

Jim threw out his hands. "Nothing, they have been warned. They refuse to listen. What more can we do?"

But as they stripped the blankets from the cots and rolled up their bundles, Helvin appeared at the opening of the cave.

"Why are you not at work?" he asked Mardrake.

"My friends and I are preparing to leave the plateau," slowly.

Jim had already told the boys that Meteormen never laughed, but Helvin permitted himself to smile now. "I really believe you think you are," he said. "But you will be dead before dawn tomorrow. Come."

Mardrake winked at the boys and saluted as he said, "At once, Excellency."

All that day they worked in the engine-room, oiling and cleaning machinery, and when darkness fell they went back through the gates with the others. As they passed the edge of the Jewel, Jim pointed to the cracks they had noticed. "I wonder if they know," whispered Barry.

"One can only guess. I doubt it, however."

"What's your plan?" asked Anthony as they entered the cave.

"Get your bundles, be ready to leave on the instant. Stand at the edge of the Jewel with the rest and wait on events."

"What events?"

There was no answer. Jim had disappeared into the crypt. A moment later he came out, and the boys who had discarded their white robes stared at him in amazement for he was dressed in a somewhat more faded replica of their own costume.

"I kept it," he said in answer to their unspoken questions. "Thought it might come in handy some day."

Outside the caves a chant was beginning, which swelled and died away and swelled again in the intense quiet of the desert night. Looking from the doorway they saw that the slaves were being massed directly in front of their cave; that the Meteormen were grouped about the Temple of the Jewel which was beginning to pulsate light, light that glowed and died in time with the rhythm and swing of the chanting.

Slowly they worked their way through the packed people, till they stood near the edge of the glowing mass. They had not stood there many minutes when from the open door of the temple came four people, and every head bowed low. First were Helvin and Gurnya, then the figure of a woman, very tall, with rich, golden-brown hair that trailed on the multi-colored surface of the Great Opal. Her large blue eyes were open and fixed on some point in front of her; her curved lips were parted and from her throat poured the melody the boys had heard from the room below the Jewel.

Her hands were clasped together and holding to either one of her wide sleeves were Athene and Althea who were apparently leading her. But, though her eyes were open and her face plainly visible in the light from below there was no intelligence in either. It was a walking statue, rather than a woman, who was coming out to bless her people in their conquest of the earth.

When the girls had led her to the edge of the platform they stepped back and folded their arms. But in their eyes and on their faces was the same vacant look which was on the Spirit's.

"Isn't she a wonder?" muttered Barry in Jim's ear.

"She would be if she lived. But there is no soul behind that mask."

"Get those tubes trained on her," cried Anthony suddenly. "Gurnya has discovered us."

The high priest was looking at them and his eyes dilated then darkened in contempt as he noted the color of the tubes they

carried. He raised his arms and the chant ceased abruptly, the flame died. His voice rang over the plateau, "Why do you point those things at our Spirit? They have no power. We only have the tubes of death."

"On the contrary, old scout," answered Barry flippantly. "*WE* have them."

In reply the priest snatched a ray from his belt and flicked it over them, and they smiled at the utter dismay on his face as a breath of cold air passed around them and was gone.

He turned to his guard. "Surround and take the tubes away from them," he ordered.

"OH, I wouldn't," said Barry. "The chances are only one in ten they would succeed. And think—we could annihilate your goddess before you could move. I don't suppose you'd like that. Ah, quite so," as the priest countermanded his order, horror in his fine eyes. "Now let's talk sensibly."

"What do you want?"

"The young ladies on either side of the Spirit. Beyond that, nothing."

"They may go if they wish," tonelessly.

"Oh, no," Barry shook his head. "That sounds all right, but I know hypnosis when I see it. You will release them, or——" he did not finish the sentence but the high priest cried hoarsely, "Criminal, sacrilegious. You know not what you ask."

"Possibly, but we know what we want," Barry spoke firmly. "And what's more, we're going to get it."

After a moment's hesitation during which the priest studied his people, the slaves and the face of the Spirit, he passed in front of her bowing low as he did so, and passing a hand first over Athene's forehead and then Althea's returned to his place.

As if roused from sleep, they looked about dazedly, then in utter amazement at the woman they had served so long—if indeed woman it was. Althea even put out a hand to touch her, but Gurnya intervened.

"Your friends wish to take you away," he said coldly. "Go, until such time as the Goddess claims her own once more."

"What do you mean by that?" queried Barry.

Fury blazed in Gurnya's blue eyes. "Think you we will let you go?" he said. "When this ceremony is concluded we will pursue till we overtake and kill you. Our plans are not to be thwarted."

"All right, see you again, old top, maybe."

Barry had grasped the girls' hands and was moving backward toward the golden barriers which led to the stairway and

safety. Anthony and Jim were covering his retreat—a needful precaution. The worshippers of the Spirit, aghast at the sacrilege that these slaves had committed in daring to threaten their Goddess, surged forward to administer summary punishment, and as they flew upward and dived down, it was necessary to use the ray several times before they drew off.

Again the chanting and the light commenced, but now as they went through the gates and neared the stairway they could hear the splitting, rending noise and visibly watch the disintegration of the Great Opal.

As they reached the top of the flight Barry cried, "Quick, we've not a minute to lose."

Already the ground was rocking and swaying under them; the statues had fallen from their pedestals and great cracks were opening in the platform where they had stood. The gates at the bottom of the flight, usually so tightly locked were swinging open unguarded.

They had barely stepped through them when the end came. There was a mighty roar and a sound as of a great bomb bursting that turned the quiet night into a hell of sound. Huge fragments of the Opal were hurled into the blackness of the sky; the temple was torn asunder and scattered far and wide; columns of fire sprouted from the cave over which it had rested; explosion after explosion tore apart the engines of the ray and at length the Plateau itself split, tottered and sank inward. Only a huge dome of smoking earth remained.

"And now," Jim Mardrake swayed a little dizzily. "If your black fellows are not scared insane by this, we'd better try and reach them."

Althea laid a hand on his arm. "Where's Daddy?" she asked.

Mardrake hesitated, and before he could answer, she spoke again, "They killed him, didn't they?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm glad, glad they're dead." But Athene, as they plunged into the undergrowth, turned for a last look at the ruined plateau, kissing her finger tips toward the place where the Home of the Spirit had stood.

—THE END—