

In 20,000 AD

by Arthur Leo Zagat, 1895-1949

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Illustration:

"I'm sittin' there in that tree, spell-bound, with my mouth
hangin' open like any gapin' fool."

Chapter I

THE VANISHING WOOD

NOT all superstitions are devoid of reality. Sometimes old wives' tales come true. And then there is a grand gathering of the long-bearded clans, much arguing pro and con, and finally, perhaps, a triumphant bringing of the old wives' tale under the aegis of science.

Take the case of the "Vanishing Wood" at Blaymont. Just outside that sleepy Long Island town a little grove of scrub pine and tangled underbrush had been shunned for centuries. Peculiarly enough, the taboo seemed to affect not only the human denizens of the countryside, but even the animals. No straying cattle had ever been known to seek the cool recesses of the little copse. No wandering dog of the neighborhood ever investigated the tempting shadows of the little wood. No birds nested in its trees.

When an infrequent visitor to Blaymont, upon being solemnly warned against entering the "Vanishing Wood," made inquiry, he could elicit nothing definite. But when the natives were together, with no outsider present, old tales would be revived in shuddering whispers. Once long ago, a wild calf of old man Jones had dashed into those woods. He had never come out! And sometimes a mother would frighten her erring youngster with the story of little Abby Green. How the two-year old had wandered away one afternoon. How search had been made for her, and her footprints traced to the mysterious wood. How nothing had ever again been seen of her.

Oh, there were plenty of shuddersome incidents told with bated breath about the "Vanishing Wood" of Blaymont! But never such a tale as Tom Jenkins told when at last he unsealed his lips.

Tom was the last man one would pick for a hero of wild adventure. A great, hulking farmer lad, his schooling had barely fulfilled the none too exigent requirements of the law. His most errant thoughts, it seemed, never wandered far from the care of his widowed mother's little farm. His wildest evenings were those spent in drawling conversation round a pot-bellied stove in the general store.

It was one of those nights at the village social club that began Tom's strange adventure. The talk had turned to the "Vanishing Wood." First one, then another had spun his narrative; the tale handed down from some grandfather. As the mounting crescendo of horror had drawn the circle of chairs closer and closer to the glowing stove, Tom had become more and more excited. Some unsuspected streak of skepticism in his dull soul was being irritated by the superstitious talk. At last he could contain himself no longer.

"I don't believe it!" he had suddenly burst out, to the startled surprise of the rustic circle. "I don't believe it! It's all a pack o' lies. For two cents I'll go into that wood any day."

The others looked at him in amazement. This was almost sacrilege. "What's the matter with you, Tom?" the postmaster had questioned. "Been sampling some of Si Perkins' hard cider?"

"No, I'm just as sober as you. And I say again, I don't believe that there's anything queer about that wood. None of you have ever seen anybody disappear there. All these things you've been telling about are supposed to have happened long ago. That's just a bunch of trees, and I'm a'going to prove it. No use going out there now. But tomorrow's Saturday, and I'll be done with my ploughing about noon. After dinner I'm going in there, and I'll come out, too. I dare any of you to come with me!"

There had been long and arduous effort to dissuade Tom from his rash project. But to no avail. He was the going into the wood, and they'd have to tie him up to stop him!

And so, the afternoon of October 10, 1931 had seen a little procession wending its way up the road to the dread precincts. First came Tom, then the half dozen other nightly visitors to the forum at the general store. Then a fringe of tow-headed, barefooted youngsters whose unerring instinct had warned them something exciting was afoot. The postmaster and the village constable were still busily engaged in persuading the young farmer to give up his daring venture. That individual was obdurate however. Not that he was altogether easy about the safety of his intended deed. Perhaps there was some truth in the old tales. But to back out now would make him the laughing stock of the village.

The procession halted at last in a grassy meadow. Ten feet away was the little grove whose menace has so long cast its ominous shadow over these fair fields. A lone figure went on ahead. Tom's knees were shaking, the palpitation of his heart seemed to him to be visibly rocking his massive form. But he managed to turn at the edge of the wood, waved a cheery hand, and called back "See you in ten minutes." Then he plunged into the shadows.

The grey-bearded justice of the peace held his turnip watch so that all might see it. Five minutes, seven, dragged slowly by. Ten minutes; Tom should have been out. But no Tom appeared. With white faces the little group gazed anxiously at the dark trees. A quarter of an hour, thirty minutes passed slowly by. It seemed certain now that the lad had been swallowed up by the mystery of the wood.

All afternoon the little group kept its vigil, hopelessly. They called and called, but no answering hail came from out those dread precincts. There was none so brave as to venture into that copse in attempted rescue. At last, the fall of night sealed the death of hope. Sadly the villagers returned—each reproaching himself that Tom had not been restrained by force.

"Look at this," I said to my chum, pushing a newspaper into his face.

"What is it?" He looked at me indifferently, "another one of your newspaper yarns." Sid was tired, I guess, of having me show him my scoops. Sid was a scientist and took a superior attitude towards newspapers and reporters.

"Read it!" I urged him. And when he took the paper, the *Blaymont Courier*, and read a marked notice I read with him over his shoulder.

TOM JENKINS RETURNS—REFUSES TO TALK

Thomas Jenkins, whose mysterious disappearance in the "Vanishing Wood" six months ago will be well remembered by our readers, reappeared just as mysteriously yesterday. He was found wandering aimlessly, apparently dazed, in Brown's Meadow east of the wood.

Tom was brought to his mother's home, where he quickly recovered. The entire neighborhood gathered to welcome him, and hear the story of his adventure, but they were sadly disappointed. Jenkins refused to talk.

When the editor interviewed the returned wanderer, he could elicit nothing from him. After much effort, however, Jenkins did make this statement:

"If I told you where I've been and what I've seen I'd land in the lunatic asylum. So I'm not saying a word." And then he shut up like a clam.

"Well?" Sid handed the paper back to me. "What of it?"

"Doing anything tonight? Do you want to exercise yourself on helping me to pump young Mr. Jenkins?"

Sid's face lighted up. "You mean that your paper thinks there's something in this story."

I grinned. "No, of course not. But it'll make a good yarn."

Sid was thoughtful for a few moments. Finally he looked at me queerly. "Let's go," he said suddenly. "I have a hunch."

But Sid was wrong, he had no possible conception of the amazing truth of what we were to hear.

We had no trouble in finding the widow Jenkins' house—everyone knew its location. A little knot of curious yokels lingered at the gate. They made way for us, then closed in again. Our knock was answered by a little old lady in black. She was bowed by years of toil and tribulation, her face seamed with care. But there

was a kindly twinkle in her eye which encouraged our persistence in the face of her discouraging reply to our inquiry.

"No, you can't talk to Tom. He says he won't see nobody and won't talk to nobody. 'Taint money he wants, neither. Just wants to be let alone."

"But, Mrs. Jenkins, we've come all the way from New York to see him. Surely you won't send us away without a word."

"Well, I'll ask him."

A long wait. Apparently the old lady was engaged in persuading her son to see us. At last she returned.

"Alright. He says, being as you've come such a long way he'll see you. But it won't be no use!"

We entered the dark and musty "parlor" of the little house. We were indeed honored guests! A strapping farmer lad stood spraddled there to greet us. We introduced ourselves. A great paw engulfed our hands in turn. We sat down. I was very careful, I doubted whether my two hundred pounds might not crack through the "sofa" I had chosen as the most substantial piece of furniture in the room.

I left the talking to Sid. We had agreed that as a scientist he might succeed where a reporter would fail.

There's no use in detailing the long argument. We were early convinced that Jenkins had passed through a most interesting experience. The level look of those blue eyes assured us of his honesty. But he would not talk. He was convinced that no one would believe his tale—that the narrative would be set down as the ravings of a madman—that he would be immediately incarcerated.

At last we reached a compromise. We would report the adventures through which he had passed, but would carefully conceal his identity. This we were never to reveal. On this condition he would tell us the story.

That is why you will find no Blaymont on the most detailed map of Long Island. And Thomas Jenkins' name is something entirely different. But the rest of the strange things hereinafter set forth are just as they were told to us.

We are utterly convinced that Jenkins did see and hear the things he told about. In the first place, he has nothing to gain by lying. He has absolutely refused to touch a cent of what we shall earn with this narrative. No other motive can be ascribed to him. But the clinching proof of the authenticity of the narrative is this. Tom Jenkins *could not* possibly imagine ninety-nine per cent of what he told us. He has neither the education nor the experience. It is impossible to impute the requisite scientific knowledge to Jenkins.

Far into the night Tom Jenkins talked, and we wrote. Finally his tired voice ceased—our cramped fingers relaxed. The tale was down in black and white, the narrative of the strangest experience man ever had.

Here it is—in Jenkins' own words.

Chapter II

THOMAS JENKINS' NARRATIVE

"WELL, (said Tom Jenkins, settling himself more comfortably in his chair, the while puffing contemplatively at his pipe) it was this way.

"I couldn't for the life of me see this Vanishing Wood business at all. I had some school learning when I was a kid, and I never put any truck in superstitions. So when every one was afraid to go near the spot, it was up to me to be the brave lad.

"Up I marched to the very edge of the wood, the whole town afollowing me, every man jack of 'em opining what a big fool I turned out to be. And for all my bold front and swaggering walk, that was just what I was beginning to feel. 'You blooming idiot,' said I to myself. 'Now you've gone and done it. Supposin' there's something to it, and it gets you. Then where'll you be with your boasting.'

"For a while I was minded to turn back, but I took one look at that bunch following and I says to myself, 'Tom my lad, you'll never hear the end of it, if you quit now—they'll josh you all your born days.' So I put a bold face on't, turns to the neighbors, waves my hand as cheerful as brass, and marches into the clump of trees.

"Well sirs, I took a couple steps and nothing happens. My nerve sorta returned at that, and I began to feel chipper and scornful like. 'Ho, ho, just as I thought, it's all blarney,' I said: 'Nothing's gonta happen—this old wood's just like any other.'

"Meanwhile I'm walking further in. Another coupla steps and I come to a little clearing. It struck me as peculiar then. For on the opposite side the trees were acting funny. Instead of standing up tall and straight as honest self-respecting trees ought, I'll be hanged if these trees didn't all lean way over in a sort of a double curve. There was a path in between, and on each side the trees leaned away from it, like as though it was a funnel.

"It was a bit queer all right, and I sure felt like turning back. But my pride was up, and nothing had happened yet, so in I went."

(Tom Jenkins paused. His pipe was out. Deliberately he knocked the ashes out, very slowly he filled it to the brim with fragrant leaf, tamped it down carefully several times, lit up, and puffed leisurely until the blue smoke curled lazily overhead. And as for us, we were balancing on the edges of our chairs, wild with impatience for him to continue. In spite of my annoyance, I recognized a fellow craftsman. This farmer boy has a flair for suspense, I thought admiringly. Now that his pipe was drawing to his entire satisfaction, Tom continued.)

"As I put one foot on the path, I felt a tug on my leg. Just a little one. As the other one came in and down, I knew something had happened. I tried to jump back, but it was too late.

"I felt myself doubling up in the queerest way—my whole body was contorting like an acrobat's, and strangest of all, just the same way as the trees. I was pushed by something down the path. The trees were gettin' more and more twisted, and I was twisting with 'em till I felt all tied up in knots. The path opened a bit, and there—at the end of it—*was nothing, absolutely nothing!*"

(Gone was Tom's nonchalance now. He was leaning forward, tense with earnestness, with desperate anxiety for us to believe him.)

"Gentlemen," he averred solemnly, "as God is my witness, the trees, the land, the grass, the ground—everything had disappeared. There was no sun, no air even, nothing but nothingness. And—this nothingness seemed curved, distorted,

just like the trees, just like myself. Don't ask me to explain it, or how I saw it—I can't. Just take my word for it—I *knew it*."

(A great light dawned on me. I knew enough of science to guess at the answer. I looked at Sid—it had struck him too, and he nodded back at me excitedly. Jenkins continued.)

"I was pushed right into that emptiness. Instantly everything went dazzling white; showers of sparks danced and climbed all about me. I was falling and falling. Not straight down, mind you, but bending and twisting all the time, just like I was in the ocean and the waves was carryin' me up and down, up and down.

"It was the queerest feeling. Nothing to be seen but that blinding light, and my insides turning inside-out. How long it kept up, I don't know. It seemed though as though I was goin' on forever, fallin' and twistin'!"

(Tom paused and relit his pipe. "How would you like to feel like a blooming contortionist, with your ears where your toes ought to be?" he demanded. Meekly we replied, that we wouldn't like the idea at all. Satisfied with that, he went on.)

"Just as I was thinkin' to myself 'Tom old boy, you're a goner. You're dead and gone. Had you been a good lad back there, maybe you'da landed in Heaven; now you're in the other place'—just as I was thinkin' that, I came down with a bump that knocked me silly."

Chapter III

SEEING THINGS

"WHEN I come to, there I was lying flat on my back right in the middle of the clearing, close by the entrance to the path. There were the same queer trees leaning the same queer way. My head hurt somethin' awful, but it all cleared soon, and I scrambled to my feet.

"I didn't know whether to laugh or cry, I was that flabbergasted. I sure was tickled to find myself alive again, and back where I started. But at the same time I was a mite disappointed. All that fallin' and twistin' and I hadn't gotten anywhere. 'Musta fallen over a root and hit my head a clout,' I thinks to myself, 'and I dreamt it all while dizzy'"

"I had enough, so I turned to go out and tell the folks about it. I reach the edge o' the woods all right, but there I stop. 'What's this,' I says, rubbing my eyes, 'must be I'm dreaming yet'

"For there, where old man Brown's meadow oughta be, wi' the little brook running through it, an' the cows feeding on the grass, an' all the people watchin' for me,—was nothin' o' the sort. They was all gone!

"Instead, I'm looking at such a sight as I'd never seen in all my born days. Nor anybody else, I'll be bound. 'Twas like something out of a fairy tale. You know, the kind you read when you was kids.

"In front of me was a great big park, stretching along for miles. The grass was bright and green, just like a lawn. There were flowers and flowers—I never seen so many all together in one place. And such flowers—great big ones a foot wide—

yellow and red and purple. And the whole air was perfumed wi' the scent of 'em, like honeysuckle and roses. There were paths all through the place, and lots of fountains that threw colored water into the air, and statues—queer statues. They didn't look like anything I ever seen before. And I've been to the Museum of Art down in New York once, too.

"Tom, my boy,' says I to myself—you know I've a habit of talking out loud when I'm excited, sort o' does my thinkin' for me, 'that clout on the head, you got, must ha' been a whopper, you're still seein' things.'"(1)

"Just then I look up into the air and I get another shock. The sky is full of all sorts of airships an' aeryplanes. But nothin' like the kind we get flying over here every day from Mineola. There were some like great big ships, musta been a thousand foot long, made of a shiny white metal, and going at a terrific clip. Others were smaller, and some seemed like little specks—darned if they didn't look like people just flyin' about wi' 'nothin' under them.

"As I'm lookin' at them, sorta dazed like, I see one great big ship leave the ground about a mile off, and shoot straight up into the air. No circlin' or spiralling, or tryin' to get a start, just vertical. And it keeps goin' up at a great clip, gets smaller and smaller, and disappears in the sky. Looked like it was headed for the moon."

(He looked at us defiantly, and said. "And by Jingo, would you believe it, I found out afterwards that was just where it was goin'—*to the moon*." Evidently he feared our disbelief, so we hastened to nod our heads vigorously. A sigh of relief burst from the honest lad, and he continued more confidently.)

"I got a crick in my neck watching it, an' I looked back to earth again. Then I gets a real shock. Right in front o' me, not a hundred yards off, stands a giant, twelve feet high if he's an inch, an' staring at me as if his life depended on it. God, what a sight he was to scare one out of his wits. He had four hands, two where they usually are, and two more extending straight out sideways from his body from the hips, one on each side. And where his ears shoulda been, were large flaps, shaped just like clam shells. There was somethin' funny about his eyes too, but I couldn't make it out very clearly, what wi' the distance and the nervous state I was in. He wasn't no white man either, he was black. Not black like our colored folks, but jet black, like a hole in the ground on a dark night. He had on a close-fitting yellow jacket that left his arms free, and wide baggy yellow breeches comin' to his knees. His legs were bare.

"Well sirs, you kin just imagine how I felt. I started to say my prayers—I was so sure he was goin' to eat me up—but I got stuck in the middle (I haven't said 'em much since I was a shaver), and I had to start all over again.

"So I closes my eyes, counts ten, and opens 'em. Darned if the giant hasn't turned tail and is running away as fast as he could, boundin' way up into the air on each jump."

Chapter IV

A STRANGE ENCOUNTER

"I WAS so relieved I cried wi' joy. And make believe I wasn't a bit proud o' myself, chasin' that big feller away like that.

"But while I'm patting myself on the back, and wonderin' what to do next, what should I see but this same Jack-and-the-Beanstalk feller hot footing it back straight for me. And right in back of him there's somethin' floatin' in the air, keeping step with him. Looked like a canoe, and I could just see a head like a balloon sticking up.

"This time I got real scared, and started to run back into the wood. But I remembered what was in there, and I didn't dare. So I waited ta see what 'ud happen.

"They came to a stop about ten yards away from me, the canoe standing still in the air, about five feet off the ground. The big fellow was jabbering away in great excitement to something in the boat, and pointing at me with one of his four arms.

"The boat drops slowly to the ground, and out steps the queerest thing you ever seen. Even in my worst dreams I could never imagine such a creature. I couldn't make out whether it was human, or an animal out of a zoo.

"It was 'bout five feet tall, and all I could see at first was a great big round balloon head, bulging way out at the top. It was smooth and leathery; there was no hair on it. Its ears were flapped like the giant's.' The eyes on it were starey, and as it started to look at me, blessed if another pair of eyes didn't pop out of a pouch where the eyebrows ought to be, and drop on a framework directly in front of the first pair, like a pair of blooming goggles, and all four eyes were examining me. Enough to give one the creeps.

"The head rested on a short neck, and that on a body that was round and smooth and straight like the pillars that hold up a bank building, only much shorter, o' course. There was no hips or curves in the body and the legs were also short and dumpy.

"The chap with the balloon head was through examining me, and evidently satisfied with what he saw. His mouth widened, and he spoke. You coulda knocked me over with a feather, I was that surprised. He spoke English—leastwise it sounded a good deal like it—as though he was a foreigner. It was awfully hard to understand him—the words sounded queer, but I could make 'em out after a while. There were lots of words he used I couldn't make head or tail out of, but generally I got the sense. Afterwards, when I lived with em, I had no trouble about it. His voice, too, was sweet, like music, and it flowed along.

"He was sayin', 'You seem to be human, like this Robot here,' he pointed to the giant, 'but you are a weakling, undeveloped, inferior even to him. Where did you come from?'

"I pointed to the wood. I was that dumfounded I couldn't speak.

"He seemed startled at that. 'From there—impossible! No one has been allowed to enter the Vanishing Wood this past thousand years!'

"Then I found my voice again. 'And I'm sorry I ever went in myself, or I wouldn't be here now.'

"'You speak our tongue, but strangely, barbarously. I wonder now, looking at you again.' I could see his four eyes focussin' on me with great interest.

"'But where am I,' says I. 'Where's the meadow, an' the brook, and Blaymont? I musta fallen into Africa somewheres. This ain't Long Island, is it?'"

"He was puzzled, I could see. Blaymont, Africa, Long Island—he repeated the names with that foreign accent of his, as if he never heard of 'em before. Then he looked at me suddenly.

"'Why, I've heard of Africa and Long Island. Not the other though. Those are old, old names. This was once called Long Island, ten thousand years ago. And you, why certainly, you resemble those ancient pictures we have of primitive man.' His excitement was growing. 'Tell me what happened to you in that wood.'"

"So I told him as best I could, from beginnin' to end. When I finished, he looked at me sorta awestruck. 'What a marvelous find,' he exclaims, 'a primitive man from 18,000 years ago! Alive! Now I know why that wood was forbidden. It's an entrance from other ages and other times!'"

"'Come with me,' he says, 'I'll take you to the council at once.'"

Chapter V

IN 20,000 A.D.!

"I WAS a bit worried, but he looked peaceful; so I jumps into the boat, as he motions. I looked about it curious. There was no motor or gadgets like we have in aeryplanes; only a little metal box in front with buttons on it. Karet—that's the fellow's name—hoists himself in beside me, shoots out a funny hand, and presses a button. A blue light shines over the box, and the plane rises off the ground right up into the air. The Robot is left below. We're up about 100 feet, when he presses another button. The light changes to reddish, and off we shoot on a straight line.

"I'm too busy thinkin' to look where we're goin'.

"Somethin' he said, keeps stickin' in my mind. What was that about me bein' primitive—a barbarian. I felt kinda sore about that. I may not be a world beater, and I ain't got much book learnin', but that don't give nobody a right to call me names. Then he said some-thin' about me bein' from 18,000 years ago. That stopped me. That meant I've gotten somehow into the year 20,000, as near as I could figger. That was too much, an' I just stopped thinkin'.

"While we was flyin' along I studied this queer chap some more. I've told you 'bout his four eyes—now I saw that he had no nose, just an opening in the middle of the face—shaped like—like—what do you call it, with three sides?"

("Triangular," Sid interjected helpfully. "That's the word I meant." Tom was properly grateful.)

"Covering this tri—this three sided slit was a gauzy affair that moved in and out as the creature breathed. Below was the mouth. It didn't have no teeth, it was just a round hole that widened out flat when it talked.

"What give me a turn, though, was the chap's arms and hands. There was only two of 'em, thank God, but they was long and wavy, just like on a devilfish, and they ended in five fingers, but the fingers was also long and wavy an' could curl any which way. And the creature could pull in its arms, till they was a foot long, or

shoot 'em out for five or six feet. I never could get over that trick of theirs—it always gave me the jumps.

"And his feet were queer too. They was long and flat, and solid like a horse's hoof. They was all bone—no flesh on 'em. He didn't wear no shoes; didn't need none, I guess.

"Afterwards I saw that the other things, the Robots as the Balloon-Heads called them, had the same kind of feet, only much bigger. Oh, and they also had four eyes—only they couldn't push the extra ones back into their foreheads; they was fixed in front by a bridge coming out from the tops of their noses.

"The plane comes down to the ground, an' I looks around. I'm in a city, but what a city. I used to think New York was some pumpkins, but you can't get me to pay any attention to that, after what I've seen.

"There were buildings on buildings, all of blue tile, and all with great rose colored domes over 'em. On the blue walls was worked in little colored stones the most beautiful paintings, the same as in church windows. Each building was surrounded by a park, with fountains and lights, and great wide streets ran out from each building through the park like the spokes of a wheel.

"As we got out, I saw lots of creatures like the Robot, and a few like Karet. Karet told me that they were the Masters, who ruled the world, and the Robots were the workers.

"The Masters came up to us, and looked me over while Karet explained who I was. They seemed pretty much excited about it. The Robots crowded around, talking and jabbering, but quite a distance away. You could see they daren't come too near to the Masters.

"One of the Balloon-Heads says to Karet. 'You'll have to take him before the Jed.' And Karet says 'yes.' He turns to me and says. 'Come along.'

"So we go into the biggest building, that has a great gold sun in the blue tile over the entrance. Inside it was all open, and the walls was covered with more pictures. I happened to look up to the dome, an' half way between the top and the floor, I saw a great white ball hangin' in the air. There was nothin' holding it there, no ropes or cables or anything. Just resting on air. Over it was a platform, and two Robots was standing guardlike.

"Karet saw me look up, and says. 'That's where Jed is—he's the Superman. I'm taking you to him.'

"'But how?' I wanted to know. 'I don't see no stairs to get up there.'

"'I'll show you,' he answers, and he makes me stand with him on a little platform in the floor. He turns a knob, and the next second, we both goes right up into the air. Before I could get real scared, we land on the platform. Karet speaks to one of the guards, an' he bows, an' opens a sliding door in the ball. I had time to notice it was made o' thick glass—quartz, they tell me afterward.

"I look down into it, expectin' to see a man or a Master or somethin' sitting on a throne like a King, but I sure didn't expect what I did see.

"Jed was a tremendous brain—nothin' else, floatin' in the middle of a liquid like calf's foot jelly before it become hard. A great big gray brain, full o' lines and ridges an' deep twistings. It gave me the shivers to look at it."

(Even now, at the memory, Tom shuddered.)

"Would you believe it; thinkin' of that Jed, I can't eat calf's brains any more—it goes against me. And I used to be very fond of 'em fried in bread crumbs."

(He sighed regretfully at the lost epicurean delicacy.)

"Karet, very respectful like, tells Jed all about me, though it did seem laughable to tell things to a brain floatin' in jelly.

"Then I gets a real shock. A voice speaks in my mind clear as a bell. 'I already know of the coming of this Early American. It will be interesting to study him. Place him in the Robot barracks; treat him well. Have our scientists observe and question him. It may be that even with his limited intelligence, he can give us a valuable picture of the world in those primitive times.'"

Chapter VI

SAVAGE REVENGE

"I LOOKED all around me, ta see who was talkin'. But nobody was sayin' a word, an' how could Jed talk, seein' he was only a brain, and had no mouth nor nothing. Karet explains to me, however, that when Jed thinks, everyone can hear 'im. He's the only one can talk that way. Karet called it tele—tel—there, I do believe I've forgotten the word."

("Telepathy," suggested Sid. "That's it—sure enough. Say, you fellers know a lot, alright," Tom responded admiringly. "Well, anyways, where was I?")

"So Karet took me down again the same way, and we get in the flying car, an' start for the barracks.

"On the way, he tells me about Jed. How he is the great Ruler of the World; that 2,000 years before, one of the Masters had become so wise and knew so much that his brain didn't have room enough to expand in the skull, big as it was, and he told the other Masters to operate on him, take his brain out, put it in a certain kind o' jelly. They done that, and the brain has been growin' and growin'—all they have to do is to feed it once in a while. The brain became so wise that they made it ruler, and it's been livin' ever since. Karet said that it looked as if the Jed would live forever. An' as he says that, he fetches up a huge sigh.

"I look at him surprised, and I says to myself. 'Ho, ho, so that's the way the land lies! Friend Karet here's a mite jealous or ambitious. Bet he wouldn't mind takin' Jed's place—jelly an' all.' And I thinks how little human nature changes, even 20,000 years ahead, and these queer people so far advanced.

"All this time we been floating along over the big beautiful park where the Vanishing Wood is. At last the car floated to the ground in front of a long white building that stretched and stretched over acres o' ground. I never seen such a tremendous long building before. The place is full of those four-handed Robots, goin' in and out, carryin' queer things that resemble spades and shovels, an' all kinds o' strange tools I couldn't make out the use of.

"Karet stops one of 'em, and I recognized him as the one I saw when I came out of that plaguey wood.

"Charlie, have this Early American share your cubicle with you, until further orders. And don't forget, gather the others together to-night in your room—the time is getting ripe for action.'

"Yes, Master Karet, they are all ready—waiting for the word to go.' Charlie's voice was harsh an' jagged, not like the Master's soft smooth speech at all. It sure was funny, though, to hear this four-eyed, four-armed, big black giant called Charlie. It puts me in mind of old Charlie Jones here, and every time I think of how they would stack up against each other, I has to laugh."

(And Tom stopped in his narrative long enough to laugh heartily, slapping his knee with merriment. Then he sobered rather suddenly.)

"But something happened next that wasn't no laughing matter. It only showed that underneath all their highfalutin' civilization, they could be just as cruel an' savage as any heathen Indian in the old days.

"One o' the Robots—a great hulking awkward brute—was walking along, minding his own business. He stumbles over something, an' falls against a Master, who was walkin' t' other way, an' knocks 'im down. The little feller musta gotten an awful whack, but 'twas purely accidental. I could swear for that.

"The Master picks himself up, and the giant of a Robot backs away from him, apologizin' like mad, and all four hands waving like he was pleading for mercy. If ever I saw anyone scared to death it was that big black fellow.

"The little Balloon-Head says nothing, but takes out a little tube as big as a fountain pen outa his pocket, points it at the beggin' Robot, presses somethin', an' a little spurt o' flame comes out. The giant jus' keels over like he's been shot, crashes to the ground, and lays there quiet.

"The Master sorta brushes off his long creeper hands unconcerned like, puts the tube back in his pocket, and motions to two other Robots who were standin' there wi' no expression on their faces. They lift up the dead body, an' cart it away.

"All the while I'm standing there, dumfounded, then I gets good and sore. For two cents I'da clouted that cold blooded little squirt one on the side o' his balloon that'd a knocked him cold. But I hold myself in—for I remember where I am, an' God knows what they mighta done to me for that.

"I could see Charlie goin' white wi' fury under that black o' his, his four great fists clench up tight, an' he starts for the murderer.

"But Karet shoots out a long hand, an' stops him. 'Careful, Charlie. That won't get you anywhere, and will be fatal to our plans. Bide your time, we'll soon put a stop to that sort of thing.'

"Charlie stops himself short—it was a great job for him to do it, too,—and unclenches his fists. 'You're right, Karet, we must wait. But he'll pay for that, he will.'"

Chapter VII

A NEW CONSPIRATOR

"KARET waves a tentacle, gets into his car. 'Tonight then,' and off he flies.

"Come with me, Primitive,' says Charlie to me.

"Who're you callin' names,' I answers indignant. I was gettin' tired of the outlandish things they was sayin' about me all the time. 'I'll have you know my name's Tom Jenkins, and that's as good as Charlie any day.'

"All right, Tom. Tom it is from now on,' laughs the giant. 'Twas the first time I see any one laugh in this place. The Masters couldn't laugh if they tried, what wi' their mouths so small, no nose to wrinkle up, cold eyes that couldn't twinkle and smooth brown skin that had no puckers in it. The Robots generally were dumb sort o' creatures, no more expression on their faces than a cow has. Only Charlie and some others like 'im looked an' acted intelligent and human like.

"I'm beginning to feel friendly for this fellow—he seems a good sort—and he's the nearest to me they have around this place. An' he seems to take to me also.

"So in we goes, an' it's a sure enough barracks. It's one long room, looks like a mile long, and on each wall there's bunks built in where the Robots sleep. Just room to turn around in. No furniture, no hangings nor carpets, just bare. Some of the bunks is filled wi' sleepin' Robots; in others, they're turnin' out an' dressin'! Simple enough too, justa pair o' breeches and yellow sleeveless shirt. All about the hall are hundreds of 'em, movin' about, goin' out, coming in.

"Charlie steers me to a far corner of the place, that's partitioned off into a number of rooms. We enter one, and the giant says: 'Here's where you'll stay—over there's your bed.' And he points to a cot about 15 feet long. The room has two of them, a coupla queer looking chairs, so high I have to hoist myself up to sit on one, with my legs adangling. Nothing much else.

"But listen,' I says, 'when do we eat? Haven't had a bite since early this morning.' Only then do I realize how much has happened to me since then.

"Hungry!' the big fellow seemed surprised. 'Here, take one of these.' And he fishes outta a box a little white pill, like calomel, and hands it to me.

"What's this?' I ask, looking at it.

"Your meal,' says he.

"I take a good look at him then to see if he's kiddin' me, but no, his face is as sober as a judge.

"Then I get real angry. 'What in 'ell do you think I am, a bloomin' butterfly? I want somethin' I kin wrap my jaws around—a nice juicy steak, say.'

"He was puzzled at that. He didn't always understand my language. For that matter theirs had me guessin' too, often.

"Steak,' says he, as though he was hearin' the word for the first time.

"Yes, steak—or any kind o' meat.'

"You shoulda see his eyes all open up, and he looks at me as if I was a cannibal or somethin'. 'Meat!' he gasps, 'why, that's vile. We don't eat flesh or anything else but these capsules. They're made up by the Masters and contain concentrated food. One a day is sufficient.'

"I grumbled a bit, but seein' there was nothing else, I took it. I figured I'd have to eat a million. But when I swallowed it, all my appetite disappeared, an' I felt like I'd eaten a full meal. It was wonderful. But I can't say as I cottoned to the idea much. I like my victuals, and I like plenty of 'em.

"Then Charlie closes the door carefully after peeking out to see if anyone is watching, an' he turns to me.

"Listen, Tom, they say you came here somehow from a time 20,000 years ago. How, I don't know, but here you are. You look like one of us, too,—different of course, but not like a Master at all. Were there any Masters in your time?' he asked anxiously.

"I explained to him the best I could about us, how we live, how everybody looks alike, how there are no Masters nor slaves either; how we're all equal and one man's no better from another.

"He listens fascinated till I finish—then he jumps up in great excitement. 'So there was a time when the Robots had everything, and there were no Masters, eh. They never told us that; they keep it a secret. Well, we'll soon be free again, and wipe that damned race out.'

"He spun around on me. 'Are you with us or against us?' he asks hoarsely.

"I don't understand—against what?' I answers.

"The Masters, of course,' he says impatient.

"Well,' I said slowly, 'they haven't harmed me any, and they seem pretty smart, too, but you fellows are nearer home to me, so I'd rather trail along with you. And I don't like this idea of slaves—goes against the grain. Mind you,' I warned him, 'that don't mean I'd do anything against 'em.'

"He nodded his head. 'I think we can trust you. We're holding a meeting here soon, do you want to stay?'

"I'm a mite cautious. 'Providin' I don't have to commit myself to do anything.'

"Charlie was satisfied wi' that. 'Providing you won't give us away.' And to that I agrees. As though Tom Jenkins was the man to peach on anyone."

Chapter VIII

SEEDS OF REVOLUTION!

"THEN I starts to question him about lots o' things been puzzlin' me 'bout this world o' theirs. He didn't know much about it—said only the Masters knew everything, and they kept things to themselves.

"First off, I asked him where were all the women. Hadn't seen one around at all. Women? He'd never heard o' them. So thinking maybe they had another word for the sex, I explains them a bit. Then he brightened up. 'Oh, you mean the Mothers! They are kept in the buildings over to the east—that great structure surrounded by the high wall.'

"And don't they ever come out?'

"Oh no, that is not allowed. They must remain there, and fulfill their functions.

"I thought of my ma, and all the gals I knew, and it didn't sound right to me. Jus' try and keep 'em all locked up together. Glory, but there'd be a revolution quick enough. Tear our hair out.

"Then it all came out. There really were no women here—or men either, for that matter. Thousands o' years before, they'd stopped havin' babies in the regular

fashion, and so, since there wasn't no use for men as men and women as women, why they simply stopped being. They're all the same, what they called neuters.

"Charlie had never seen the Mothers, but he understood they were the breeders of the children. The Masters controlled what the child was gonna be—Master or Robot. Seems like they took the eggs from the Mothers 'bout eight months before they should be born an' brought them up in incubators. In Charlie's case and some others like him there musta been a mistake, for they gave 'em more brains and intelligence than they shoulda had. That's why they kin see they're slaves an' they're discontented.

"While he's tellin' me all this, in walks half a dozen Robots in a bunch. Charlie jumps up an' says hullo to them, and they answers very solemn. He interduces me around, an' tells 'em where I come from. You shoulda seen how excited they get. We chin around for a spell—these birds are some more of the mistakes—they were given more brains than the regular dumb workers.

"Then Karet walks in—an' everybody get quiet. You kin see he's their leader. Like I read in history—in the old days somewhere—a aristercrat leadin' the slaves 'gainst his own kind.

"He makes 'em a long speech—the kind you hear around election time. He tells 'em, even though he's a Master, he always felt sorry for the poor Robots, workin' day in an' day out, so his class can live in idleness. True, he says, the Masters are far advanced, an' able to do lots o' things as a result. They've learnt everything there was to be learnt, they can live on the earth, in the air, in the water, or underground; they can travel to the other stars; they know how the world come about an' when it's ending, they think great thoughts an' things I couldn't even understand, but, he says, what about the Robots? An' everybody nods their heads an' says, yes, what about them.

"They're just animals, they're bred deliberately to slave and work, they don't have ta think hard for that, so they weren't given any brains, or just enough for their purposes. You here, and he waves a tentacle around, were accidents. The injections given you in the incubator musta had some drops spilled in 'em from the Master solutions, an' you were born with real brains. Do you know, and he shook that long hand o' his impressively at 'em,—do you know, t'other Masters wanted to kill you off when they found out the mistake—they were afraid of how the presence of brains might make you dissatisfied. 'Twas only me who stopped 'em—I argued with 'em and told 'em you would be an interesting experiment. So they let you live, but no more of you can be born now, they've seen to that.

"An' who's responsible for all this, may I ask, he says, talking like a politician on the 4th o' July, who's responsible for havin' Masters an' Robots? He waits for an answer, but no one says anything. So he answers himself. 'Who but Jed,—Jed the immortal, Jed the all-powerful.'

"A thousand years ago, things were entirely different. There was two races on this earth then—one like us, and one like you. Your race came up by regular evolution from early mankind, like our visitor here,' an' he points to me. 'T'other race, mine, was a special evolution from certain wise men, 15,000 years ago, who learnt how to change their children, and their children's children, to what they called supermen. But outside a certain difference in brains in our favor, both races managed to get along together. That was because of the machines.'

"In those days, everything was done by machinery. All the work you do, and much more. No one had to work at all. But the machines were made better an' better, until they become almost human. Their acts were so intelligent they become intelligent themselves.'

"One fine day, the machines banded themselves together, an' started a revolution against the human race. It was terrible. Before they were licked, they almost wiped out humanity. 'Twas Jed who saved us, and defeated 'em. How, I don't know."

Chapter IX

READY FOR ACTION

"THEN Jed had all the machines destroyed, an' all books about 'em, so they could never be built again. So as to have someone to do the work, he changed the solutions for your race, and you became what you are to-day, and the others became the Masters. Jed was one of us in the beginning, don't forget.'

"Now here's my plan. The Robots will follow you—I've shown you already how to control them. The Masters have their ray projectors, that can kill anything within twenty-five yards. So they could wipe you out if you attacked 'em.'

"But I'm in charge of the Mothers. If we all gather in the city of the Mothers, an' seize 'em, then we can tell the Masters and Jed, unless they listen to our demands, we'll kill off all the Mothers. Then there'll be no more people born, and the world will die out. Rather than that, they'll surrender.'

"I'll take Jed's place as Ruler. We'll try an' build the machines again to do the world's work. An' we'll fix the solutions for the unborn children so everybody of both races'll have equal intelligence, an' be equal in everything.'

"The roomful starts to clap at this like mad, an' it's a funny sight to see those double sets o' hands bangin' away, not to mention the noise they make.

"Karet raises one o' his long hands for silence. 'You'll be givin' us away if a Master should happen to be around.' So they all stop, and it's quiet again.

"Tomorrow noon is the time. Get everything prepared tonight. At noon, shout the control words and march the Robots to the city of Mothers as fast as you can. That's all, now.'

"The gang gets up and is ready to go, when Karet sorta sees me again.

"Oh, I've almost forgot,' he says, 'Jed has ordered our visitor to be brought before the scientists. They will remove his brain for study. By examining its folds, they will be able to find out all he knows about the world of 20,000 years ago he lived in. It's much easier than asking him about it.

"You kin imagine how I jumped at that. Take my brain out o' my head—over my dead body,—and I tells him so in plain language.

"Would you believe it—he has the nerve to try an' persuade me. It won't hurt, he says, it's in the interest of science; they'll put it back in again after, 'n I won't even know it's been out.

"But that don't make a hit with me at all. I tells 'em flat I won't stand for it, even if I has to kill someone.

"Karet shakes his head sorta puzzled, just like he can't understand my feelin's.

"Well,' he says finally, 'they're coming for you right away.'

"Lemme outa here,'" I says wildly, 'I won't let 'em get me.'

"Where'll you go to?' asks Karet, and that stumps me. They'll sure catch me. I'm wishin' I never went in that darned wood, 'n I was safe home again. A cold sweat breaks out, all over me. Take my brain out, I should say not. I'd rather die first!

"Karet shakes his head. 'I'm sorry, my friend, I don't think they're going to ask you what you'd rather do. They'll just go right ahead without askin' any questions.'

"I was all of a shiver. I didn't like the idea at all. How'd I know that they could get my brain back? I grabs hold o' my gun, I was goin' to fight. Then, all of a sudden, I thinks of a way to make Karet and Charlie, and the gang help me.

"Listen here,' I says to Karet, brash-like, 'you say they kin read everything that's in my brain.'

"Of course,' he answers.

"Every little thing I ever seed or heard,' I insists.

"Yes.'

"Well then,' and I taps with my gun on his chest, 'how about this little cofab I just been listenin' in on. They'll read that, won't they?'

"That strikes him all of a heap. 'He's right'—he says to Charlie 'we've got to hide him somehow!'

"Just then I hear a noise outside, the sound of people comin'.

"It's the guard,' says Karet, excited, 'they're coming for you.'

"I'm trapped, no mistakin' that. 'Tom my lad,' says I to myself, 'you're through; you'll never see your poor old mother again, but you're not givin' up without a scrap.' So I pulls the gun an' get ready to shoot the first one that comes in the door.

"I could see the crowd in the room lookin' at the pistol curious. They'd never seen one before. The footsteps gets louder. The guard's almost at the door. My finger's on the trigger, ready ta shoot.

"Just then Karet jumps up. 'I've got it. Charlie,' he orders rapidly, 'take him through the trap over to the City of Mothers. Hide him in the top Tower. Quick!'

"Someone presses a button, Charlie shoves me through a door that slides open in the wall, and closes it behind us just as the outside door opens. I hear 'By order of Jed, we've come for—' an' we're runnin' in a tunnel. Soon we come out in the open. It's night, an' the whole place is lit up beautiful. The buildings are all glowin', the fountains are playin' wi' colored lights, the stars are shinin', but Charlie jerks me impatient. 'Come, we'll have to move fast. It's quite a ways.

"Why don't we take one of those air cars,' I says.

"Because I don't know how to handle them—not allowed.'"

Chapter X

REVOLT!

"SO we walks rapidly. I'm havin' a hard job to keep up wi' the giant; ducking every time we see a Master. About an hour, and we come to the place.

"It's a tremendous big structure, lit up with a golden light; there's a center tower 'bout ten stories high, an' there's a wall all around the place, twenty-foot high.

"There's an entrance through the wall but a big savage-looking Robot stands on guard. We walks up to him, me shiverin' like a leaf. Charlie says some word to him I don't catch; he looks at us dumb, and lets us in.

"We hotfoot it for the tower, lucky not to meet anyone. Inside there's a sort of airshaft leadin' all the way to the top. Charlie looks at it puzzled.

"I forgot to ask Master Karet how to work it,' he explains, 'there's some way of getting up there.'

"I remembered how I was brought up to Jed, and I looks around for the platform and button. Sure enough I found 'em, and shows 'em to friend Charlie.

"'You go up and hide on the top,' he says relieved. 'I daren't stay around; I'd be killed if a Master should find me in here. It's forbidden. Goodbye—see you tomorrow at noon when things start humming.'

"I shook one of his big hands, stood on the platform, pressed the button, and up I shoot into the air, up to the top where I land in a sort of entrance hall. Lots of doors leading out, all closed.

"I take a chance an' open one just a little bit. Peeking in, I see a great white room, with one o' the most beautiful women I ever did see. Pretty as a picture, golden haired, but tall—ten feet easy. There was a Master in the room, and he was carryin' a dish filled with somethin' to a tank.

"I closed the door very quietly, an' tried another door at t' other end. This one was empty, so I eased into it, and closed the door.

"For the first time, I felt dead tired. What a lot I'd been through since the morning. It didn't seem possible. Felt like months since I walked into the Vanishing Wood. And what was goin' to happen to me? Would I ever get back? And as I'm wondering and worrying, my eyes jus' naturally closed, and I fell fast asleep on the floor.

"When I wake up, the sunshine is streaming in through a window. I look around a bit dazed, and wonderin' where I am. Then it dawns on me, as I hear a great shouting, but faint as if coming from far off.

"I jumped up and ran to the window. Way below I see a great sight. Thousands 'n thousands of Robots—tiny enough they looked from where I was—were marching towards me. They were yelling, and what a hullabaloo it made.

"I seen Masters runnin' up, an' off in the distance aeryplanes skooting along towards 'em. From the Masters I see tiny flames adarting, and down fall Robots. Some make a rush for the Masters. Most drop before they reach 'em, but every once in so often one or two manage to break through, and when they do—you see little bits of the poor Balloon-Head go flying through the air. Powerful brutes—those Robots.

"The main body keeps marching fast to the gate, not stopping to fight. I prays for 'em to hurry, for I see the airships comin' along fast.

"They're at the gate as the first ships reach. The little flashes dart down among the mass, and the Robots are droppin' like flies. I shut my eyes and groan. This is the end.

"When I opens 'em again, a great bunch of 'em have scrambled thro', an' are rushing helter skelter into all the buildings. The next minute, there's a racket out in the hall, and I grabs my gun.

"The door bursts open, and in tumbles Karet, Charlie, an' a dozen others. I almost shoots in my nervousness.

"We've got 'em now,' gasps Karet, exultant. 'They daren't use their tubes on the City of Mothers—they know they'd wipe out the race.'

"They're all excited and happy. I grabs Charlie and asks him what's happened. He can't hardly stand still in his excitement, but he tells me that there wuz so many of the Robots, and the Masters wuz so surprised, that Karet's side has got control of the City of Mothers, as this place is called. I'm kinda glad too.

"Karet gets a little calmed down. From somewheres he brings out somethin' that looks like one of them French telephones I seen in the Bank in Mineola. There's a coil of wire hangin' onta it. He unrolls this and throws it out o' the window. Then he talks into the dingus.

"Give me the general channel,' he says. Then he waits a minute, and then talks again.

"Master Karet speaking. To all Masters of Earth. I have captured the City of Mothers and hold it secure. Unless I receive word from you in ten minutes that you will bow down to me and obey my commands, all the Mothers will be killed, and all the eggs now here destroyed. As you know, that will mean the end of the race. If you surrender to me I promise that I shall make good terms. I await your reply.'

"Then he puts down the telephone and begins giving orders to Charlie and the other Robots. He tries to look calm, but I can see he's all nervous. The rest o' the gang is jumping around and jabberin' away at a great rate.

"At last there's a kind of a whistle from the dingus and Karet grabs it quick. 'Karet listening.'

"The gang gets quiet, and waits. I'm all worked up, too, and I'm shivering all over. All of a sudden Karet gives a great shout.

"They've given in!' he yells. 'We've won! Run, tell them all!'

"With that the gang rushes for the door, Karet after them. Pretty soon I hears a lot o' shoutin' and yellin' from the mob below. I know that they've heard the news. So I goes below too, to see what's goin' to happen next."

(Tom's pipe again needed replenishing. I seized the opportunity to shift to a chair whose seat was softer than the one I had been filling with my bulk.)

Chapter XI

TENSE MOMENTS

"WELL, sirs, after the mob got done hollering over this easy success, Karet got 'em all together out in the park in front of the City of Mothers. They was thousands an' thousands of them, and they was all happier than they had ever been before. Poor fellows, their happiness didn't last long.

"I'm tryin' to figure out how I could get out of the whole thing. Somethin' told me things was going too easy, I was sure somethin' terrible was going to happen.

"Karet floated in his canoe up where everybody could see him. He had some kind of contraption in his hand, somethin' like a telephone an' megaphone combined. He stood up and began to talk in it.

"I was far away from where he was, way out on the edge of the crowd, but I could hear every word he says, just as if he was talking right to me.

"He talked nice and smooth, and he got right down under the skin o' them Robots. He told them what a wonderful victory they had won, and how they had showed themselves the equal o' the Masters. An' he told them that he would keep his promises, and free them like he had said he would, and would give them each a part of all the good things that the Masters had always had.

"That went over big, and the mob howled and cheered. And some o' the poor fellows cried with joy. But I kept feelin' that something terrible was agoin' to happen.

"Then Karet went on. He said that they wasn't done yet, that they had only done half o' what was necessary. And he spoke about Jed, and reminded them that it was the Jed that was the real Master, and that the Masters that had always kept them down was only doing what Jed told them. And he talked about that cold, unhuman Brain, and as how it had lived for hundreds and hundreds o' years, and as how it would go on living forever so long as the jelly it floated in was kept just right."

(As we listened to Tom's unschooled rendition of the speech of the rebel leader I could picture the scene, and realize how this Superhuman was swaying the recently freed slaves with his eloquence.)

"And then Karet told them that so long as Jed still lived, they wasn't safe. That they must kill him—and then the world would surely belong to the Robots.

"The crowd kind o' fell silent when their leader first mentioned Jed, and they was awful uneasy. But as he went on—and he was a wonderful talker, almost as good as our preacher down in Blaymont—they began to yell and shout. Somebody yelled 'Down with Jed, kill him!' and the whole crowd took up the cry, 'Kill! kill! kill Jed!' But I was thinking to myself—'So that's your game. You're goin' to get these poor fools to kill *your* Master, and then you're agoin' to take his place, and God pity these poor Robots then.' For I didn't trust the fellow, nohow. And more and more I felt that somethin' awful was goin' to happen, and I was trying to figure out how I could get out of the mess. But somethin' kept me there. I just *had* to see what would happen next."

(Sid muttered to me, "I couldn't have left that scene myself," and I nodded in agreement. Tom was stuffing his pipe again, and I was on tenterhooks to hear what the next incident in the strange story would be. Through the window a faint lightening in the sky spoke of approaching dawn, but none of us felt in the least sleepy. The room was hazy with smoke, and fetid with the odor of burned tobacco.

Around our chairs, Sid's and mine, were scattered oceans of cigarette butts. At last Tom had finished replenishing his briar and began again.)

"While the shoutin' was at its height, I felt a touch on my arm. I turned, and saw Charlie standing there. In one o' his hands he had something I had never seen before. It looked like a book, not very thick but very long and wide. But it wasn't paper, it looked like some metal. Charlie's eyes was kind o' sad, all his excitement seemed to have died down. I asked him what he wanted. 'Tom,' he says, 'I've got a feeling that I won't live long. This here's a record o' the past that I've been takin' care of. We Robots have hidden it from the Masters for many, many years. No one knows how old it is, and no one can tell what it says. But we have an idea that it's older than Jed. I have sworn to see that it comes to no harm. Will you take it, and give it back to me if Jed is killed and I am still alive? If not, you keep it safe.'

"Well, sirs, I didn't know what to make o' this queer favor he was askin', and I didn't much like the idea, but the poor fellow looked so sad and begged so hard that I couldn't say no. So I took the book and shoved it inside my shirt and buckled my belt around it. It wasn't very comfortable, I'll tell the world."

(Sid had gripped my arm as Tom told of the book, so hard that I could hardly refrain from crying out. Now he burst forth. "Where is it, have you got it?" Imperturbable as ever, Tom replied, "I'll tell you about that later." With this we had to remain content. We had learned that Jenkins must be permitted to tell his story in his own way.)

"I never saw Charlie again!

"By this time the crowd had started rushing toward the other end of the park, where Jed was. They was still yelling, 'Kill! Kill!' and they was waving all their arms in the air. Have you ever seen the ocean in a storm, when the waves are rushing up on the beach? That's how that mob looked."

Chapter XII

THE DREAD WORDS OF JED

"I DIDN'T want to go along. I was scared. But before I could get out I was mixed up in that rushin' crowd, and I was carried along with it. They ran through that beautiful park; over the grass and the flowers, and everything, trampling it all down. They even threw down the fountains. I kept hangin' back as much as I could, but I couldn't get out of that crazy gang until we was in sight of the big building where the Jed was.

"When I found myself free I began to run back. I had been getting scarer and scarer, and I had made up my mind I was goin' back to the Vanishing Wood to see if maybe I could get back to my own days. I was so scared of what I could feel was coming that I didn't care what happened to me so long as I wasn't in that park any longer.

"But I hadn't run more'n a hundred yards when I heard a terrible sound. It was like a groan, but like no groan that I'd ever heard, 'cause it came from all o' them

thousands and thousands o' black creatures that was shouting and running to kill Jed.

"I turned around to see what had happened. I saw that the whole o' that big crowd was standing stock still and looking ahead o' them. Again my wanting to know what was going on got stronger than my being scared, so I stopped too. I couldn't see what they was looking at, so I climbed a tree.

"I wish I hadn't!"

(Tom paused, and put one huge hand over his eyes, as if to shut out some terrible sight. Sid and I looked at each other. What horror could have brought that look of terror into the eyes of this phlegmatic farmer? A long pause, and then he spoke to us.)

"I disremember if I told you about the Jedauds. Did I?"

(I answered in the negative.)

"Well, at certain times o' the year the Masters from all over the world would come to this place to bow down to Jed. There was too many of them to all get inside the building so they would all stand in the big open space around it. And the building where Jed was would open out, so that there was nothing but a great roof floating up in the air, and the big white ball floating under it.

"That's what the crowd was lookin' at. The sides of the building were gone, an' there was that rosy roof ahangin' way up in the air, and under it the big white ball in which Jed lived!

"But, gents, that ball wasn't still. No. Even from far away where I was, I could see that it was spinnin' round and round. When I first see it, it's turning very slow like, but as I watches, it goes faster and faster till it seems like it's still again, it's going so fast.

"Meanwhile the sky's gettin' darker and darker. I don't know what time o' day it was, but it seems to me that the darkness was unnatural. It's getting cold too, and a wind like ice blows towards me.

"As it gets dark, that spinnin' ball begins to shine. It's white at first, and then different colors begin to come and go over it. Pretty colors. Like you see when you spill oil on the water in a swamp to kill skeeters. Only these colors keep coming and going all over. There's a word for that kind of colors."

("Iridescence," Sid supplied.)

"That's it! Then all of a sudden I hears that sweet voice of Jed's atalkin' in my brain. Kinda faint, I'm a long ways off. But those words is burned into my brain, I'll never forget them as long as I live."

(That look of horror had been deepening in Tom's eyes. His pipe had gone out, and he had visibly paled. As he talked he had been staring at the flame in the oil lamp on the table, staring fixedly, unblinkingly. Now, as he spoke of the Jed, expression seemed to drain from his face, his eyes became glassy. He seemed to speak by rote, his unschooled locutions vanished. We seemed to hear the very voice of Jed.)

"There was no emotion in that voice, yet somehow I felt an unutterable disdain, an abysmal contempt in its tones. I felt small, very small, and insignificant.

"So you came to kill Jed! Karet, you and your dupes! And you think that you can succeed. Know you not that Jed is immortal? Aye, immortal not only against

the natural processes that age and decay your paltry carcasses, but against violence and accident!

"You, traitorous Karet, would kill Jed and take his place. Before you can do that, before you can hope to match your paltry wits against my wisdom, you must live and learn, as I have, for ten thousand years.'

"Think you that you, in your paltry span of three hundred years, with your circumscribed brain, body hampered, could hope to know a thousandth of what I know? You would wrest the world from me! For the first time since the invaders from Jupiter matched their puny might against mine, I am amused. Why, the Machines in their revolt were more potent by far than you!

"You and the other Masters, as you loved to style yourselves, dreamed that I lived at your sufferance, that I ruled by your good will. What presumptuous ignorance.'

"I need not you, nor any other being on this earth. Were it not that I cared not to exert myself, I should have long ruled alone, to carry out the destiny of this fair planet. While you were faithful servants of my will I tolerated you. Now, that you delude yourself, I shall make an end of you, and of all your dupes. Prepare to meet your doom!"

(With this last dread sentence the voice fell silent. Tom's eyes closed, he seemed asleep. Sid shook him, he woke with a start. "Where was I, what happened?"

"You had just told us what Jed said, begin again where he stopped," I said, soothingly.)

Chapter XIII

THROUGH 18,000 YEARS

"AS Jed stopped talking in my head, (Tom went on) I saw a shiver run over that crowd in front of me. They seemed to be tryin' to get away, but they couldn't move. I could see Karet, and he was pushing the buttons on the box in his flyin' machine, but it didn't do no good. I hope never to see a look on any man like what was on his face then.

"All this time the pretty colors had been runnin' and flowin' over the ball. But now they all flowed together, and they all became violet. Not a pretty violet like the flowers, but a deep dark color. And the color got darker and darker till all of a sudden there wasn't any light at all. I couldn't see the ball, but I *knew* it was still there.

"For a minute it was pitch dark, and I couldn't see nothing at all. Then sudden like, I could see the crowd, and Karet floatin' there above them. There wasn't no light shining on them, they was shining themselves! They looked like ghosts, *red* ghosts, stretching away there, close together, as far as I could see. The light that was shining from them was a red light, an awful deep red.

"They were shining brighter and brighter—now they all looks like red-hot iron just out of the forge. And they *are* hot, too, I can *feel* that heat coming to me like

from a blazin' furnace. The trees around begin to shrivel in the heat, and the grass.

"I'm sittin' there in that tree, spell-bound, with my mouth hangin' open like any gapin' fool. But when they begins to *melt* I've had enough. I lets out a shriek and falls out of my tree. I don't know why I didn't get hurt falling, I don't even remember hitting the ground. All I could think of was the Vanishing Wood. I wanted to get away, to get out of that terrible place.

"I run till my lungs are bursting, and at last I see the blessed wood ahead of me. I don't stop to look if the trees are twisted as before, and I don't look behind me, but just plunges right in. There's the path, and as I step on it I feel the same thing pulling me. I get into that Nothing again, all twisted up like I was at first; and there I am, lying on the ground, way back there in the Vanishing Wood.

"I lay there for a long time, trembling. I was awful scared. I was scared for fear that I hadn't gotten out of the time I had run away from, and I'm scared for fear I landed in some other terrible time.

"At last I pull myself together and walk slowly down the path. When I get to the edge, I hide behind a tree and stick my head out, fearful o' what I should see.

"Thank God! There's old man Brown's meadow, an' the cows, an' the little brook. I'm saved from those terrible things—I'm home again!"

Tom's tired voice ceased, his head drooped wearily. We too slumped back in our chairs, terribly tired by the tense strain of the long listening. Amid the ashes and the half-burned cigarettes were strewn the white sheets on which we had scribbled the story of the strangest adventure man has ever had.

The man to whom all this had occurred straightened. A challenge was in his eyes.

"Do you believe me?" he demanded.

In one voice we assured him we did, and we were not lying.

"'Cause if you don't," he went on, still unconvinced, "there's the Vanishing Wood out there, and you can go and see for yourselves!" He pointed to the window, bright now with the new day.

Sid and I looked at each other. Then we shook our heads.

"No, Tom, we'll take your word."

We gathered our papers, donned our hats and coats, turned to thank Tom again and say goodbye. Suddenly Sid started.

"My God, I almost forgot! The book, Tom, what happened to the book?"

"Why, I've got it right here. It was still inside my shirt when I got back." He went to a cupboard, opened it, and came back carrying something.

Eagerly we seized the volume. The size and shape of the old school geographies, it was made of some light metal. The leaves were thin, almost as thin as gold leaf. On them we could make out many symbols, closely written.

"What are you going to do with this, Tom?"

"Take it. I don't want it around. I want nothing that'll remind me of that terrible trip."

All our protests; our offers to pay well for the volume, were useless. Either we'd take it as a gift or he would destroy it.

We have been studying that book. It appears to be a compilation of epochal events in the history of the world, for some thousands of years in what is to us, the future. Each event is narrated by a participant or eyewitness. As we translate, we grow more elated at our find.

But a great fever seizes us. We want to see that strange world of the future. We talk about it, Sid and I, and speculate on what we shall find. And perhaps some day we shall quietly step into the Vanishing Wood and bridge the gap that separates us from the year 20,000 A. D.!



⁽¹⁾ Jenkins had evidently fallen into a warp in space. The Vanishing Wood was a pucker—a fault, we might say, borrowing a geologic term—in the curvature of space. Through this warp he had been thrown clear out of our three dimensions into a fourth dimension. There he slid in time over the other side of the ridge or pucker, into the same spot in the three-dimensional world, but into a different era in time. Notice that he had not traveled an inch in space; all his journeying had been purely in time.