Planetoid 127

Wallace, Edgar

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About Wallace:

Richard Horatio Edgar Wallace (April 1, 1875–February 10, 1932) was a prolific British crime writer, journalist and playwright, who wrote 175 novels, 24 plays, and countless articles in newspapers and journals.

Over 160 films have been made of his novels, more than any other author.

In the 1920s, one of Wallace's publishers claimed that a quarter of all books read in England were written by him. (citation needed)

He is most famous today as the co-creator of "King Kong", writing the early screenplay and story for the movie, as well as a short story "King Kong" (1933) credited to him and Draycott Dell. He was known for the J. G. Reeder detective stories, The Four Just Men, the Ringer, and for creating the Green Archer character during his lifetime.

Source: Wikipedia

Also available on Feedbooks for Wallace:

- *Four Just Men* (1905)
- *Room 13* (1924)
- *The Door with Seven Locks* (1926)
- *The Clue of the New Pin* (1923)
- *Mr J G Reeder Returns* (1932)
- *The Avenger* (1926)
- *The Angel of Terror* (1922)
- *The Daffodil Mystery* (1920)
- *The Mind of Mr J G Reeder* (1925)
- *The Joker* (1926)

Chapter 1

"Chap" West, who was never an enthusiast for work, laid down the long pole that had brought him from Bisham to the shade of a backwater west of Hurley Lock, and dropped to the cushions at the bottom of the punt, groaning his relief. He was a lank youth, somewhat short-sighted, and the huge horn-rimmed spectacles which decorated his knobbly face lent him an air of scholarship which his school record hardly endorsed.

Elsie West woke from a doze, took one glance at her surroundings and settled herself more comfortably.

"Light the stove and make some tea," she murmured.

"I'm finished for the day," grunted her brother. "The hooter sounded ten minutes ago; and cooking was never a hobby of mine."

"Light the stove and make tea," she said faintly.

Chap glared down at the dozing figure; then glared past her to where, paddle in hand, Tim Lensman was bringing the punt to the shore.

Tim was the same age as his school friend, though he looked younger. A good-looking young man, he had been head of the house which had the honour of sheltering Chapston West. They had both been school prefects at Mildram and had entered and passed out on the same day.

Tim Lensman was looking disparagingly at the tangle of bush and high grass which fringed the wooded slope.

"Trespassers will be prosecuted," he read. "That seems almost an invitation—can you see the house, Chap?"

Chap shook his head.

"No; I'll bet it is the most horrible shanty you can imagine. Old Colson is just naturally a fug. And he's a science master—one of those Johnnies who ought to know the value of fresh air and ventilation."

Elsie, roused by the bump of the punt side against the bank, sat up and stared at the unpromising landing-place.

"Why don't you go farther along?" she asked. "You can't make tea here without—"

"Woman, have you no thought before food?" demanded her brother sternly. "Don't you thrill at the thought that you are anchored to the sacred terrain of the learned Professor Colson, doctor of science, bug expert, performer on the isobar and other musical instruments and—"

"Chap, you talk too much—and I should love a cup of tea."

"We'll have tea with the professor," said Chap firmly. "Having cut through the briars to his enchanted palace, we will be served in crystal cups reclining on couches of lapis lazuli."

She frowned up at the dark and unpromising woods.

"Does he really live here?" she addressed Tim, and he nodded.

"He really lives here," he said; "at least, I think so; his driving directions were very explicit and I seem to remember that he said we might have some difficulty in finding the house—"

"He said, 'Keep on climbing until you come to the top,'" interrupted Chap.

"But how does he reach the house?" asked the puzzled girl.

"By aeroplane," said Chap, as he tied the punt to the thick root of a laurel bush. "Or maybe he comes on his magic carpet. Science masters carry a stock of 'em. Or perhaps he comes through a front gate from a prosaic road—there must be roads even in Berkshire."

Tim was laughing quietly. "It is the sort of crib old Colson would choose," he said. "You ought to meet him, Elsie. He is the queerest old bird. Why he teaches at all I don't know, because he has tons of money, and he really is something of a magician. I was on the science side at Mildram and it isn't his amazing gifts as a mathematician that are so astounding. The head told me that Colson is the greatest living astronomer. Of course the stories they tell about his being able to foretell the future—"

"He can, too!"

Chap was lighting the stove, for, in spite of his roseate anticipations, he wished to be on the safe side, and he was in need of refreshment after a strenuous afternoon's punting.

"He told the school the day the war would end—to the very minute! And he foretold the big explosion in the gas works at Helwick—he was nearly pinched by the police for knowing so much about it. I asked him

last year if he knew what was going to win the Grand National and he nearly bit my head off. He'd have told Timothy Titus, because Tim's his favourite child."

He helped the girl to land and made a brief survey of the bank. It was a wilderness of a place, and though his eyes roved around seeking a path through the jungle, his search was in vain. An ancient signboard warned all and sundry that the land was private property, but at the spot at which they had brought the punt to land the bank had, at some remote period, been propped up.

"Do you want me to come with you?" asked Elsie, obviously not enamoured with the prospect of the forthcoming call.

"Would you rather stay here?" asked Chap looking up from his stove.

She gave one glance along the gloomy backwater with its weedy bed and the overhanging osiers. A water-rat was swimming across the still water and this spectacle decided her.

"No; I think I will come with you," she said; and added, "I don't like rats."

"That was a vole," said Tim, shying a stone in the direction of the swimming rodent.

Her pretty face puckered in an expression of distaste.

"It looks horribly like a rat to me," she said. Chap poured out the tea and the girl was raising it to her lips when her eyes caught sight of the man who was watching them from between the trees, and she had hard work to suppress the scream that rose to her lips.

"What is it?"

Tim had seen her face change and now, following the direction of her eyes, he too saw the stranger.

There was nothing that was in the slightest degree sinister about the stranger; he was indeed the most commonplace figure Tim had ever seen. A short, stout man with a round and reddish face, which was decorated with a heavy ginger moustache; he stood twiddling his watch chain, his small eyes watching the party.

"Hello!" said Tim as he walked toward the stranger. "We have permission to land here."

He thought the man was some sort of caretaker or bailiff of "Helmwood."

"Got permission?" he repeated. "Of course you have—which of you is Lensman?"

"That's my name," smiled Tim, and the man nodded.

"He is expecting you and West and Miss Elsie West."

Tim's eyes opened wide in astonishment. He had certainly promised the professor that he would call one day during vacation, but he had not intended taking Chap nor his sister. It was only by accident he had met his school friend at Bisham that morning, and Chap had decided to come with him.

As though divining his thoughts, the stout man went on: "He knows a lot of things. If he's not mad he's crook. Where did he get all his information from? Why, fifteen years ago he hadn't fifty pounds! This place cost him ten thousand, and the house cost another ten thousand; and he couldn't have got his instruments and things under another ten thousand!"

Tim had been too much taken aback to interrupt. "Information? I don't quite understand… ?"

"About stocks and things… he's made a hundred thousand this year out of cotton. How did he know that the boll-weevil was going to play the devil with the South, eh? How did he know? And when I asked him just now to tell me about the corn market for a friend of mine, he talked to me like a dog!"

Chap had been listening open-mouthed. "Are you a friend of Mr. Colson?" he asked.

"His cousin," was the reply. "Harry Dewes by name. His own aunt's child—and his only relation."

Suddenly he made a step towards them and his voice sank to a confidential tone.

"You young gentlemen know all about him—he's got delusions, hasn't he? Now, suppose I brought a couple of doctors to see him, maybe they'd like to ask you a few questions about him… "

Tim, the son of a great barrister, and himself studying for the bar, saw the drift of the question and would have understood, even if he had not seen the avaricious gleam in the man's eyes.

"You'd put him into an asylum and control his estate, eh?" he asked with a cold smile. "I'm afraid that you cannot rely upon us for help."

The man went red.

"Not that exactly," he said awkwardly. "And listen, young fellow… " he paused. "When you see Colson, I'd take it as a favour if you didn't mention the fact that you've seen me… I'm going to walk down to the lock… you'll find your way up between those poplars… so long!"

And turning abruptly he went stumbling through the bushes and was almost at once out of sight.

"What a lad!" said Chap admiringly. "And what a scheme! And to jump it at us straight away almost without an introduction—that fellow will never need a nerve tonic."

"How did Mr. Colson know I was coming?" asked Elsie in wonder.

Tim was not prepared with an answer. After some difficulty they found the scarcely worn track that led up through the trees, and a quarter of an hour's stiff climb brought them to the crest and in view of the house.

Tim had expected to find a residence in harmony with the unkempt grounds. But the first view of "Helmwood" made him gasp. A solid and handsome stone house stood behind a broad stretch of shaven lawn. Flower beds bright with the blooms of late summer surrounded the lawn and bordered the walls of the house itself. At the farther end, but attached to the building, was a stone tower, broad and squat, and on the top of this was erected a hollow structure—criss-crossed without any apparent order or method—with a network of wires which glittered in the sunlight.

"A silver wire-box aerial!" said Chap. "That is a new idea, isn't it? Gosh, Tim! Look at the telescope!"

By the side of the tower was the bell-roof of a big observatory. The roof was closed, so that Chap's "telescope" was largely imaginary.

"Great Moses!" said Chap awe-stricken. "Why, it's as big as the Lick!"

Tim was impressed and astounded. He had guessed that the old science master was in comfortable circumstances, and knew that indeed he could afford the luxury of a car, but he had never dreamt that the professor was a man wealthy enough to own a house like this and an observatory which must have cost thousands to equip.

"Look, it's turning!" whispered Elsie.

The big, square superstructure on the tower was moving slowly, and then Tim saw two projecting cones of some crystalline material, for they glittered dazzlingly in the sunlight.

"That is certainly new," he said. "It is rather like the gadget they are using for the new beam transmission; or whatever they call it—and yet it isn't—"

As he stood there, he saw a long trench window open and a bent figure come out on to the lawn. Tim hastened towards the man of science and in a few minutes Chap was introducing his sister.

"I hope you didn't mind my coming, sir," said Chap. "Lensman told me he was calling."

"You did well to come," said Mr. Colson courteously. "And it is a pleasure to meet your sister."

Elsie was observing him closely and her first impression was one of pleasant surprise. A thin, clean-shaven old man, with a mass of white hair that fell over his collar and bushy eye-brows, beneath which twinkled eyes of deepest blue. There was a hint of good humour in his delicately-moulded face. Girl-like, she first noted his extraordinary cleanliness. His linen was spotless, his neat black suit showed no speck of dust.

"You probably met a—er—relative of mine," he said gently. "A crude fellow—a very crude fellow. The uncouth in life jars me terribly. Will you come in, Miss West?"

They passed into a wide hall and down a long, broad corridor which was lighted on one side by narrow windows through which the girl had a glimpse of a neatly flagged courtyard, also surrounded by gay flowerbeds.

On the other side of the corridor, doors were set at intervals and it was on the second of these that Tim, in passing, read an inscription. It was tidily painted in small, gold lettering:

PLANETOID 127.

The professor saw the young man's puzzled glance and smiled. "A little conceit of mine," he said.

"Is that the number of an asteroid?" asked Tim, a dabbler in astronomy.

"No—you may search the Berlin Year Book in vain for No. 127," said the professor as he opened the door of a large and airy library and ushered them in. "There must be an asteroid—by which, young lady, is meant one of those tiny planets which abound in the zone between Mars and Jupiter, and of which, Witts D.Q.—now named Eros—is a

remarkable example. My Planetoid was discovered on a certain 12th of July—127. And it was not even an asteroid!"

He chuckled and rubbed his long white hands together.

The library with its walnut bookshelves, its deep chairs and faint fragrance of Russian leather, was a pleasant place, thought Elsie. Huge china bowls laden with roses stood in every possible point where bowls could stand. Through the open windows came a gentle breeze laden with the perfume of flowers.

"Tea will be ready in a minute," said Mr. Colson. "I ordered it when I saw you. Yes, I am interested in asteroids."

His eyes went mechanically to the cornice of the room above the stone fire-place and Tim, looking up, saw that there was a square black cavity in the oaken panelling and wondered what was its significance.

"They are more real and tangible to me than the great planetary masses. Jupiter—a vapour mass; Saturn—a molten mass, yielding the secret of its rings to the spectroscope; Vulcan—no planet at all, but a myth and a dream of imaginative and romantic astronomers—there are no intra-mercurial planets, by which I mean"—he seemed to find it necessary to explain to Elsie, for which Chap was grateful—"that between Mercury, which is the nearest planet to the sun and the sun itself, there is no planetary body, though some foolish people think there is and have christened it Vulcan—"

An elderly footman had appeared in the doorway and the professor hurried across to him. There was a brief consultation (Elsie suspected a domestic problem, and was right) and with a word of apology, he went out.

"He's a rum bird," began Chap and stopped dead. From the black cavity above the fireplace came a thin whine of sound, and then a deafening splutter like exaggerated and intensified "atmospherics."

"What is that?" whispered the girl.

Before Tim could answer, the spluttering ceased, and then a soft, sweet voice spoke:

"'Lo… Col—son! Ja'ze ga shil? I speak you, Col—son… Planetoid 127… Big fire in my zehba… city… big fire… "

There was a click and the voice ceased abruptly, and at that moment Professor Colson came in.

He saw the amazed group staring at the square hole in the wall, and his lips twitched.

"You heard—? I cut off the connection, though I'm afraid I may not get him again to-night."

"Who is he, sir?" asked Tim frowning. "Was that a transmission from any great distance?"

The professor did not answer at once. He glanced keenly and suspiciously at the girl, as though it was her intelligence he feared. And then:

"The man who spoke was a man named Colson," he said deliberately; "and he spoke from a distance of 186 million miles!"

Chapter 2

They listened, dumbfounded.

Was the old professor mad? The voice that had spoken to them was the voice of Colson… ?

"A hundred and eighty-six million miles?" said Tim incredulously "But, Mr. Colson, that was not your voice I heard?"

He smiled faintly and shook his head.

"That was literally my alter ego—my other self," he said; and it seemed that he was going to say something else, but he changed the subject abruptly.

"Let us have tea," he said, smiling at Elsie. "My butler brought the alarming news that the ice cream had not arrived, but it came whilst we were discussing that tragedy!"

Elsie was fascinated by the old man and a little scared, too. She alone of that party realised that the reference he had made to the voice that came one hundred and eighty-six millions of miles was no jest on his part.

It was Chap who, in his awkward way, brought the conversation back to the subject of mysterious voices.

"They've had signals from Mars on Vancouver, sir," he said. "I saw it in this morning's papers."

Again the professor smiled.

"You think they were atmospherics?" suggested Elsie; and, to her surprise, Colson shook his head. "No; they were not atmospherics," he said quietly, "but they were not from Mars. I doubt if there is any organic life on Mars, unless it be a lowly form of vegetation."

"The canals—" began Chap.

"That may be an optical illusion," said the science master. "Our own moon, seen at a distance of forty million miles, would appear to be

intersected very much as Mars seems to be. The truth is, we can never get Mars to stand still long enough to get a definite photograph!"

"From Jupiter?" suggested Chap, now thoroughly interested.

Again Mr. Colson smiled.

"A semi-molten mass on which life could not possibly exist. Nor could it come from Saturn," he went on tantalizingly, "nor from Venus."

"Then where on earth do these signals come from?" blurted Chap, and this time Mr. Colson laughed outright.

As they sat at tea, Elsie glanced out admiringly upon the brilliant-hued garden that was visible through the big window, and then she saw something which filled her with astonishment. Two men had come into view round the end of a square-cut hedge. One was the man they had seen half-an-hour previously—the commonplace little fellow who had claimed to be a relative of the professor. The second was taller and older, and, she judged, of a better class. His long, hawk-like face was bent down towards his companion, and they were evidently talking on some weighty matter, to judge by the gesticulations of the stranger.

"By Jove!" said Chap suddenly. "Isn't that Hildreth?"

Mr. Colson looked up quickly; his keen blue eyes took in the scene at once.

"Yes, that is Mr. Hildreth," he said quietly. "Do you know him?"

"Rather!" said Chap. "He has often been to our house. My father is on the Stock Exchange, and Mr. Hildreth is a big pot in the City."

Colson nodded.

"Yes, he is a very important person in the City," he said, with just a touch of hidden sarcasm in his voice. "But he is not a very important person here, and I am wondering why he has come again."

He rose quickly and went out of the room, and presently Tim, who was watching the newcomers, saw them turn their heads as with one accord and walk out of sight, evidently towards the professor. When the old man came back there was a faint flush in his cheek and a light in his eye which Tim did not remember having seen before.

"They are returning in half-an-hour," he said, unnecessarily it seemed to Elsie. She had an idea that the old man was in the habit of speaking his thoughts aloud, and here she was not far wrong. Once or twice she had the uncomfortable feeling that she was in the way, for she was a girl of quick intuitions, and though Professor Colson was a man of

irreproachable manners, even the most scrupulous of hosts could not wholly hide his anxiety for the little meal to end.

"We're taking up your valuable time, Mr. Colson," she said with a dazzling smile, as she rose when tea was over and offered him her hand. "I think there's going to be a storm, so we had better get back. Are you coming with us, Tim?"

"Why, surely—" began Chap, but she interrupted him.

"Tim said he had an engagement near and was leaving us here," she said.

Tim had opened his mouth to deny having made any such statement, when a look from her silenced him. A little later, whilst Chap was blundering through his half-baked theories on the subject of Mars—Chap had theories on everything under and above the sun—she managed to speak with Tim alone.

"I'm quite sure Mr. Colson wants to speak to you," she said; "and if he does, you are not to worry about us: we can get back, it is down-stream all the way."

"But why on earth do you think that?"

"I don't know." She shook her head. "But I have that feeling. And I'm sure he did not want to see you until those two men came."

How miraculously right she was, was soon proved. As they walked into the garden towards the path leading to the riverside, Colson took the arm of his favourite pupil and, waiting until the others were ahead, he said: "Would it be possible for you to come back and spend the night here, Lensman?"

"Why, yes, sir," said Tim in astonishment. In his heart of hearts he wanted to explore the place, to see some of the wonders of that great instrument-house which, up to now, Colson had made no offer to show them. What was in the room marked "Planetoid 127"? And the queer receiver on the square tower—that had some unusual significance, he was certain. And, most of all, he wanted to discover whether the science master had been indulging in a little joke at the expense of the party when he claimed to have heard voices that had come to him from one hundred and eighty-six millions of miles away.

"Return when you can," said Colson in a low voice; "and the sooner the better. There are one or two things that I want to talk over with you—I waited an opportunity to do so last term, but it never arose. Can you get

rid of your friends?" Tim nodded. "Very good, then. I will say good-bye to them."

Tim saw his companions on their way until the punt had turned out of sight round the osiers at the end of the backwater, and then he retraced his steps up the hill. He found the professor waiting for him, pacing up and down the garden, his head on his breast, his hands clasped behind him.

"Come back into the library, Lensman," he said; and then, with a note of anxiety in his voice: "You did not see those precious scoundrels?"

"Which precious scoundrels? You mean Dawes and Hildreth?"

"Those are the gentlemen," said the other. "You wouldn't imagine, from my excited appearance when I returned to you, that they had offered me no less than a million pounds?"

Tim stared in amazement at the master.

"A million pounds, sir?" he said incredulously, and for the first time began to doubt the other's reason.

"A million pounds," repeated Colson, quietly enjoying the sensation he had created. "You will be able to judge by your own ears whether I am insane, as I imagine you believe me to be, or whether this wretched relative of mine and his friend are similarly afflicted. And, by the way, you will be interested to learn that there have been three burglaries in this house during the last month."

Tim gaped. "But surely, sir, that is very serious?"

"It would have been very serious for the burglars if I had, on either occasion, the slightest suspicion that they were in the grounds," said Mr. Colson. "They would have been certainly electrified and possibly killed! But on every occasion when they arrived, it happened that I did not wish for a live electric current to surround the house: that would have been quite sufficient to have thrown out of gear the delicate instruments I was using at the time."

He led the way into his library, and sank down with a weary sigh into the depths of a large armchair.

"If I had only known what I know now," he said, "I doubt very much whether, even in the interests of science, I would have subjected myself to the ordeal through which I have been passing during the last four years."

Tim did not answer, and Mr. Colson went on: "There are moments when I doubt my own sanity—when I believe that I shall awake from a dream, and find that all these amazing discoveries of mine are the figments of imagination due, in all probability, to an indiscreet supper at a very late hour of night!"

He chuckled softly at his own little joke.

"Lensman, I have a secret so profound that I have been obliged to follow the practice of the ancient astronomers."

He pointed through the window to a square stone that stood in the centre of the garden, a stone which the boy had noticed before, though he had dismissed it at once as a piece of meaningless ornamentation.

"That stone?" he asked.

Colson nodded.

"Come, I will show it to you," he said, rising to his feet. He opened a door in what appeared to be the solid wall, and Tim followed him into the garden.

The stone stood upon an ornamental plinth and was carved with two columns of figures and letters:

E 6 O 1
T 2 D 4
H 4 L 1
A 1 N 3
W 1 U 1
R 2 B 1
I 3 S 2

"But what on earth does that mean?"

"It is a cryptogram," said Mr. Colson quietly. "When Heyghens made his discovery about Saturn's rings, he adopted this method to prevent himself from being forestalled in the discovery. I have done the same."

"But what does it mean?" asked the puzzled Tim.

"That you will one day learn," said the professor, as they walked back to the house.

His keen ears heard a sound and he pulled out his watch.

"Our friends are here already," he said in a lower voice.

They went back to the library and closed the door, and presently the butler appeared to announce the visitors.

The attitude of the two newcomers was in remarkable contrast. Mr. Hildreth was self-assured, a man of the world to his finger-tips, and greeted the professor as though he were his oldest friend and had come at his special invitation. Mr. Dawes, on the contrary, looked thoroughly uncomfortable.

Tim had a look at the great financier, and he was not impressed. There was something about those hard eyes which was almost repellent.

After perfunctory greetings had passed, there was an awkward pause, and the financier looked at Tim.

"My friend, Mr. Lensman, will be present at this interview," said Colson, interpreting the meaning of that glance.

"He is rather young to dabble in high finance, isn't he?" drawled the other.

"Young or old, he's staying," said Colson, and the man shrugged his shoulders.

"I hope this discussion will be carried on in a calm atmosphere," he said. "As your young friend probably knows, I have made you an offer of a million pounds, on the understanding that you will turn over to me all the information which comes to you by—er—a——" his lip curled—"mysterious method, into which we will not probe too deeply."

"You might have saved yourself the journey," said Colson calmly. "Indeed, I could have made my answer a little more final, if it were possible; but it was my wish that you should be refused in the presence of a trustworthy witness. I do not want your millions—I wish to have nothing whatever to do with you."

"Be reasonable," murmured Dawes, who took no important part in the conversation.

Him the old man ignored, and stood waiting for the financier's reply.

"I'll put it very plainly to you, Colson," said Hildreth, sitting easily on the edge of the table. "You've cost me a lot of money. I don't know where you get your market 'tips' from, but you're most infernally right. You undercut my market a month ago, and took the greater part of a hundred thousand pounds out of my pocket. I offer to pay you the sum to put me in touch with the source of your information. You have a wireless plant

here, and somewhere else in the world you have a miracle-man who seems to be able to foretell the future—with disastrous consequences to myself. I may tell you—and this you will know—that, but for the fact that your correspondent speaks in a peculiar language, I should have had your secret long ago. Now, Mr. Colson, are you going to be sensible?"

Colson smiled slowly.

"I'm afraid I shall not oblige you. I know that you have been listening-in—I know also that you have been baffled. I shall continue to operate in your or any other market, and I give you full liberty to go to the person who is my informant, and who will be just as glad to tell you as he is to tell me, everything he knows."

Hildreth took up his hat with an ugly smile. "That is your last word?" Colson nodded.

"My very last." The two men walked to the door, and turned.

"It is not mine," said Hildreth, and there was no mistaking the ominous note in his tone.

They stood at the window watching the two men until they had gone out of sight, and then Tim turned to his host.

"What does he want really?" he asked.

Mr. Colson roused himself from his reverie with a start.

"What does he want? I will show you. The cause of all our burglaries, the cause of this visit. Come with me."

They turned into the passage, and as the professor stopped before the door labelled "Planetoid 127,"

Tim's heart began to beat a little faster. Colson opened the door with two keys and ushered him into the strangest room which Tim had ever seen.

A confused picture of instruments, of wires that spun across the room like the web of a spider, of strange little machines which seemed to be endowed with perpetual motion—for they worked all the time—these were his first impressions.

The room was lined with grey felt, except on one side, where there was a strip of fibrous panelling. Towards this the professor went. Pushing aside a panel, he disclosed the circular door of a safe and, reaching in his hand, took out a small red-covered book.

"This is what the burglars want!" he said exultantly. "The Code! The Code of the Stars!"

Chapter 3

Tim Lensman could only stare at the professor.

"I don't understand you, Mr. Colson," he said, puzzled. "You mean that book is a code… an ordinary commercial code?"

Colson shook his head.

"No, my boy," he said quietly; "that is something more than a code, it is a vocabulary—a vocabulary of six thousand words, the simplest and the most comprehensive language that humanity has ever known! That is why they are so infinitely more clever than we," he mused. "I have not yet learned the process by which this language was evolved, but it is certain that it is their universal tongue."

He turned with a smile to the bewildered boy.

"You speak English, probably French; you may have a smattering of German and Spanish and Italian. And when you have named these languages, you probably imagine that you have exhausted all that matter, and that the highest expression of human speech is bound up in one or the other, or perhaps all, of these tongues. Yet there is a tribe on the Upper Congo which has a vocabulary of four thousand words with which to voice its hopes, its sufferings and its joys. And in those four thousand words lies the sum of their poetry, history, and science! If we were as intelligent as we think we are, we should adopt the language of the Upper Congolese as the universal speech."

Tim's head was swimming: codes, languages, Upper Congolese and the mysterious "they."… Surely there must be something in Dawes' ominous hints, and this old man must be sick of overmuch learning. As though he realised what was passing through the boy's mind, Colson shook his head.

"No, I am not mad," he said, as he locked the book away in the safe and put the key in his pocket, "unless this is a symptom of my dementia."

He waved his hand to the wire-laden room, and presently Tim, as in a dream, heard his companion explaining the functions of the various instruments with which the room was littered. For the most part it was Greek to him, for the professor had reached that stage of mechanical knowledge where he outstripped his pupil's understanding. It was as though a professor of higher mathematics had strolled into the algebra class and lectured upon ultimate factors. Now and again he recognized some formula, or caught a mental glimpse of the other's meaning, but for the main part the old man was talking in a language he did not comprehend.

"I'm afraid you're going a little beyond me, sir," he said, with a smile, and the old man nodded.

"Yes, there is much for you to learn," he said; "and it must be learnt!"

He paused before a large glass case, which contained what looked to Tim to be a tiny model of a reciprocating engine, except that dozens of little pistons thrust out from unexpected cylinders, and all seemed to be working independent of the others, producing no central and general result.

"What is that, sir?"

Colson smoothed his chin thoughtfully.

"I'm trying to bring the description within the scope of your understanding," he said. "It would not be inexact to describe this as a 'strainer of sound.' Yet neither would it be exact."

He touched a switch and a dozen coloured lights gleamed and died amidst the whirling machinery. The hum which Tim had heard was broken into staccato dots and dashes of sound. He turned the switch again and the monotonous hum was resumed.

"Let us go back to the library," said the professor abruptly.

He came out of the room last, turned out the lights and double-locked the door, before he took his companion's arm and led him back to the library they had recently vacated.

"Do you realise, Lensman," he said as he closed the door, "that there are in this world sounds which never reach the human brain? The lower animals, more sensitive to vibratory waves, can hear noises which are never registered upon the human ear. The wireless expert listened in at the approach of Mars to the earth, hoping to secure a message of some kind. But what did he expect? A similar clatter to that which he could pick up from some passing steamer. And, suppose somebody was

signalling—not from Mars, because there is no analogy to human life on that planet, but from some—some other world, big or little—is it not possible that the sound may be of such a character that not only the ear, even when assisted by the most powerful of microphones, cannot detect, but which no instrument man has devised can translate to an audible key?"

"Do you suggest, sir, that signals of that nature are coming through from outer space?" asked Tim in surprise. And Mr. Colson inclined his head.

"Undoubtedly. There are at least three worlds signalling to us," said the science master. "Sometimes the operators make some mechanical blunder, and there is an accidental emission of sound which is picked up on this earth and is credited to Mars. One of the most definite of the three comes from a system which is probably thousands of light-years away. In other words, from a planet that is part of a system beyond our ken. The most powerful telescope cannot even detect the sun around which this planet whirls! Another, and fainter, signal comes from an undetected planet beyond the orbit of Neptune."

"But life could not exist beyond the orbit of Neptune?" suggested Tim.

"Not life as we understand it," said the professor. "I admit that these signals are faint and unintelligible. But the third planet—"

"Is it your Planetoid 127?" asked Tim eagerly; and Colson nodded.

"I asked you to stay to-night," he said, "because I wanted to tell you something of vital interest to me, if not to science. I am an old man, Lensman, and it is unlikely that I shall live for many years longer. I wish somebody to share my secret—somebody who can carry on the work after I have gone into nothingness. I have given the matter a great deal of thought, passing under review the great scientists of the age. But they are mainly old men: it is necessary that I should have an assistant who has many years before him, and I have chosen you."

For a second the horrible responsibility which the professor was putting upon him struck a chill to the boy's heart. And then the curiosity of youth, the adventurous spirit which is in every boy's heart, warmed him to enthusiasm.

"That will be topping, sir," he said. "Of course, I'm an awful duffer, but I'm willing to learn anything you can teach me. It was about Planetoid 127 you wanted to speak?"

The professor nodded.

"Yes," he said, "it is about Planetoid 127. I have left nothing to chance. As I say, I am an old man and anything may happen. For the past few months I have been engaged in putting into writing the story of my extraordinary discovery: a discovery made possible by the years of unremitting thought and toil I have applied to perfecting the instruments which have placed me in contact with this strange and almost terrifying world."

It seemed as though he were going to continue, and Tim was listening with all ears, but in his definite way the old man changed the subject.

"You would like to see round the rest of the house?" he said; and the next hour was spent in strolling around the outhouses, the little farmery which formed part of the house, and the magnificent range of hothouses, for Mr. Colson was an enthusiastic gardener.

As Tim was shown from one point of interest to another, it began to dawn upon him that there was truth in Hildreth's accusation, that Mr. Colson was something of a speculator. The house and grounds must have cost thousands; the renovations which had been recently introduced, the erection of the telescope—when Colson mentioned the cost of this, the sum took his breath away—could only have been possible to a man of unlimited income. Yet it was the last thing in the world he would have imagined, for Colson was of the dreamy, unmaterial type, and it was difficult to associate him with a successful career on the Stock Exchange. When Mr. Colson opened the gates of the big garage the boy expected to see something magnificent in the way of cars; but the building was empty except for his old motor bicycle, which was so familiar to the boys of Mildram.

"No, I do not drive a car," said Colson, in answer to his question. "I have so little time, and I find that a motor-bicycle supplies all my needs."

They dined at eight. Neither during the meal nor the period which intervened before bedtime did Mr. Colson make any further reference to his discoveries. He disappeared about ten, after showing Tim to his room. The boy had undressed and was dozing off, when there came a tap at his door.

"Come in, sir," he said, and the professor entered. From his face Tim guessed that something had happened.

He set down the electric lantern he was carrying and came slowly towards the bed.

"Lensman," he said, and there was a sharp quality in his voice. "Do you remember somebody speaking… the wireless voice? I was not in the library when the call came through, so I did not hear it distinctly."

Tim recalled the mysterious voice that had spoken in the library from the aperture above the fireplace.

"Yes, sir; you told me, it was Colson—"

"I know, I know," said the professor impatiently. "But tell me how he spoke?" His tone was almost querulous with anxiety. "I only heard the end. Was it a gruff voice, rather like mine?"

Tim shook his head.

"No, sir," he said in surprise; "it was a very thin voice, a sort of whine… "

"A whine?" The professor almost shouted the question.

"Yes, sir." Colson was fingering his chin with a tremulous hand.

"That is strange," he said, speaking half to himself. "I have been trying to get him all the evening, and usually it is simple. I received his carrier wave… why should his assistant speak… ? I have not heard him for three days. What did he say?"

Tim told him, as far as he could remember, the gist of the message which had come through, and for a long time the professor was silent.

'"He does not speak English very well—the assistant, I mean—and he would find a difficulty in putting into words… you see, our language is very complicated." And then, with a smile: "I interrupted your sleep."

He walked slowly to the door and stood for a while, the handle in his hand, his chin on his breast.

"If anything should happen, you will find my account in the most obvious place." He smiled faintly. "I'm afraid I am not a very good amateur mason—"

With these cryptic words he took his departure. Tim tossed from side to side and presently dropped into an uneasy doze. He dreamt that he and the professor were stalking through black, illimitable space. Around, above, below them blazed golden suns, and his ears were filled with a roar of whirling planets. Then suddenly the professor cried out in a terrible voice: "Look, look!" And there was a sharp crash of sound, and Tim sat up in bed, the perspiration streaming from every pore. Something had wakened him. In an instant he had slipped out of bed, pulled on his dressing-gown, thrust his feet into his slippers, and had raced out into

the corridor. A deep silence reigned, broken only by the sound of an opening door and the tremulous voice of the butler.

"Is anything wrong, sir?"

"What did you hear?" asked Tim quickly.

"I thought I heard a shot."

Tim waited for no more: he ran down the stairs, stumbling in the darkness, and presently came to the passage from which opened the doors of the library and the room of Planetoid 127.

The library was empty: two lights burned, accentuating the gloom. A quick glance told him that it was not here the professor was to be sought. He had no doubt that in his sleep he had heard the cry of the old man. He turned on the light in the corridor, and, trying the door of the Planetoid room, to his consternation found it was open. The room was in darkness, but again memory served him. There were four light switches near the door, and these he found. Even as he had opened the door he could detect the acrid smell of cordite, and when the light switched on he was not unprepared for the sight which met his eyes. The little machine which Colson had described as the "sound strainer" was a mass of tangled wreckage. Another instrument had been overturned; ends of cut wires dangled from roof and wall. But his eyes were for the moment concentrated upon the figure that lay beneath the open safe. It was Professor Colson, and Tim knew instinctively that the old man was dead.

Chapter 4

Colson was dead!

He had been shot at close quarters, for the hair about the wound was black and singed. Tim looked over his shoulder to the shivering butler who stood in the doorway.

"Get on the telephone to the police," he said; and, when the man had gone, he made a brief examination of the apartment.

The destruction which the unknown murderer had wrought was hurried but thorough. Half a dozen delicate pieces of apparatus, the value and use of which Tim had no idea, had been smashed; two main wires leading from the room had been cut; but the safe had obviously been opened without violence, for the key was still in the lock. It was the shot which had wakened the boy, and he realised that the safe must have been opened subsequent to the murder.

There was no need to make an elaborate search to discover the manner in which the intruder had effected his entry: one of the heavy shutters which covered the windows had been forced open, and the casement window was ajar. Without hesitation, lightly clad as he was, Tim jumped through the window on to a garden bed. Which way had the murderer gone? Not to the high road, that was certain. There could only be one avenue of escape, and that was the path which led down to the backwater.

He considered the situation rapidly: he was unarmed, and, even if the assassin was in no better shape (which he obviously was not) he would not be a match for a powerfully built man. He vaulted up to the window-sill as the shivering butler made his reappearance.

"I've telephoned the police: they're coming up at once," he said.

"Is there a gun in the house—any kind?" said Lensman quickly.

"There's one in the hall cupboard, sir," replied the man, and Tim flew along the corridor, wrenched open the door, found the shot-gun and, providentially, a box of cartridges. Stopping only to snatch an electric

hand-lamp from the hall-stand, he sped into the grounds and made his way down the precipitous path which led to the river. His progress was painful, for he felt every stone and pebble through the thin soles of his slippers.

He had switched on the light of the hand-lamp the moment he had left the house, and here he was at an advantage over the man he followed, who was working in the dark and dared not show a light for fear of detection. That he was on the right track was not left long in doubt. Presently the boy saw something in his path, and, stooping, picked up a leather pocket-case, which, by its feel, he guessed contained money. Evidently in his hurry the murderer had dropped this.

Nearer and nearer to the river he came, and presently he heard ahead of him the sound of stumbling footsteps, and challenged his quarry.

"Halt!" he said. "Or I'll shoot!"

The words were hardly out of his mouth when a pencil of flame quivered ahead in the darkness, something "wanged" past his head and struck the bole of a tree with a thud. Instantly Tim extinguished his lamp. The muzzle of his gun advanced, his finger on the trigger, he moved very cautiously in pursuit.

The man must be somewhere near the river now: the ground was falling more steeply. There was no sound ahead until he heard a splash of water, the hollow sound of feet striking the bottom of a boat, and a faint "chug-chug" of engines. A motor-launch! Even as he reached the riverside he saw the dark shape slipping out towards the river under cover of the trees. Raising his gun, he fired. Instantly another shot came back at him. He fired again; he might not hit the assassin, but he would at any rate alarm the lock-keeper. Then, as the little launch reached the opening which brought it to the river, he saw it slow and come almost to a standstill. For a second he thought the man was returning, and then the explanation flashed upon him. The backwater was choked with weeds and the little propeller of the launch must have caught them. If he could only find a boat! He flashed his lamp vainly up and down the bank.

"Plop!"

The bullet was so near this time that it stirred the hair of his head. Hastily extinguishing the light, he waited. Somebody was working frantically at the launch's propeller, and again raising his gun, he fired. This time his shot struck home, for he heard a howl of fury and pain. But in another few seconds the launch was moving again, and had disappeared into the open river. There was nothing for Tim to do now but to

retrace his steps to the house. He came into the room of death, hot, dishevelled, his pyjamas torn to ribbons by the brambles through which he had struggled, to find two police officers in the room. One was kneeling by the side of the dead man; the other was surveying the damaged apparatus.

"This is the young gentleman, sir," said the shivering butler, and the officers turned their attention to Tim.

In a few words he described what he had seen, and whilst one of the policemen went to telephone a warning along to the lock-keepers, he gave an account to the other of the events of that night so far as he knew them.

"There have been several burglaries here," said the sergeant. "I shouldn't be surprised if this is the same fellow that tried to do the other jobs. Do you know anything about this?"

He held a sheet of paper to the boy, and Tim took it. It was covered with Colson's fine writing.

"It looks almost as though it were a message he'd been writing down. He'd been listening-in—the receivers are still on his ears," said the officer. "But who could tell him stuff like that?"

Tim read the message:

"Colson was killed by robbers in the third part of the first division of the day. Nobody knows who did this, but the correctors are searching. Colson said there was a great earthquake in the island beyond the yellow sea. This happened in the sixth division of the day and many were killed. This place corresponds to Japan, but we call it the Island of the Yellow Sea. The great oilfields of the Inland Sea have become very rich, and those who own the fields have made millions in the past few days. There will be—"

Here the writing ended.

"What does he mean by 'Colson was killed in the third division' or whatever it is?" said the dumbfounded policeman. "He must have known he was going to be killed… it beats me."

"It beats me, too," said Tim sadly. "Poor old friend!"

At eleven o'clock came simultaneously Inspector Bennett, from Scotland Yard, and Mr. Colson's lawyer: a stout, middle-aged man, who had some information to give.

"Poor Colson always expected such a death. He had made an enemy, a powerful enemy, and he told me only two days ago that this man would stop at nothing."

"Did he give his name?" asked the detective.

Tim waited breathlessly, expecting to hear Hildreth's name mentioned, but the lawyer shook his head.

"Why did you see him two days ago? On any particular business?"

"Yes," said Mr. Stamford, the lawyer. "I came here to make a will, by which this young gentleman was named as sole heir!"

"I?" said Tim incredulously. "Surely you're mistaken?"

"No, Mr. Lensman. I don't mind admitting that, when he told me how he wished to dispose of his property, I urged him against leaving his money to one who, I understand, is a comparative stranger. But Mr. Colson had great faith in you, and said that he had made a study of your character and was satisfied that you could carry on his work. That was the one thing which worried him, the possibility of his life's work being broken off with no successor to take it up when he put it down. There is a clause in the will which makes it possible for you to operate his property immediately."

Tim smiled sadly. "I don't know what 'operating his property' means," he said. And then, as a thought struck him: "Unless he refers to his speculations. The Stock Exchange is an unknown country to me. Has any discovery been made about the man in the motor-launch?"

Inspector Bennett nodded.

"The launch was found abandoned in a local reach of the Thames," he said. "The murderer must have landed and made his way on foot. By the way, do you know he is wounded? We found traces of blood on the launch."

Tim nodded. "I had an idea I winged him," he said. "The brute!"

Late that afternoon there was a sensational discovery: the body of a man was found, lying amidst the weeds three miles down the river. He had been shot with a revolver.

"He is our man undoubtedly," said the inspector, who brought the news. "There is a shot wound in his shoulder."

"But I did not use a rifle or a revolver," said Tim, puzzled.

"Somebody else did," said the inspector grimly. "Dead men tell no tales."

"Where was he found?"

"Near Mr. Hildreth's private landing stage—" began the inspector.

"Hildreth?" Tim stared at him open-mouthed. "Has Hildreth got a property near here?"

"Oh, yes; he has a big estate about three miles down the river." The detective was eyeing the boy keenly. "What do you know about Mr. Hildreth?"

In a few words Tim told of the interview which he had witnessed, and the detective frowned.

"It can only be a coincidence that the man was found on his estate," he said. "Mr. Hildreth is a very rich man and a Justice of the Peace."

Nevertheless, he did not speak with any great conviction, and Tim had the impression that Bennett's view of Hildreth was not such an exalted one as he made out.

Borrowing the old motor-bicycle of the science master, he rode over to Bisham and broke the news to Chap West and his sister. The girl was horrified.

"But, Tim, it doesn't seem possible!" she said. "Why should they do it? The poor old man!"

When Chap had recovered from the shock of the news, he advanced a dozen theories in rapid succession, each more wildly improbable than the last; but all his theorising was silenced when Tim told him of Colson's will.

"I'm only a kid, and absolutely unfitted for the task he has set me," Tim said quietly; "but I am determined to go on with his work, and shall secure the best technical help I can to reconstitute the apparatus which has been destroyed."

"What do you think is behind it?" asked Chap.

Tim shook his head. "Something beyond my understanding," he replied. "Mr. Colson made a discovery, but what that discovery was we have to learn. One of the last things he told me was that he had written out a full account of his investigations, and I am starting an immediate search for that manuscript. And then there is the stone in the grounds, with all those queer figures and letters which have to be deciphered."

"Have you any idea what the nature of the discovery was?" asked Chap.

Tim hesitated.

"Yes, I think I have," he said. "Mr. Colson was undoubtedly in communication with another planet!"

Chapter 5

"Then it was Mars!" cried Chap triumphantly.

"Of course it was not Mars," interrupted his sister scornfully. "Mr. Colson told us distinctly that there was no life on Mars."

"Where is it, Tim?" he asked.

"I don't know." Tim shook his head. "I have been questioning his assistants—there were two at the house—but he never took them into his confidence. The only hint they can give me is that when poor Mr. Colson was listening-in to these mysterious voices he invariably had the receiving gear directed towards the sun. You know, of course, that he did not use the ordinary aerial, but an apparatus shaped like a convex mirror."

"Towards the sun?" gasped Chap. "But there can't be any life on the sun! Dash it all, I don't profess to be a scientific Johnny but I know enough of physics to see that it's as impossible for life to exist on the sun as it would be to exist in a coke oven! Why, the temperature of the sun is umpteen thousand degrees centigrade… and anyway, nobody has ever seen the sun: you only see the photoscope… "

"All this I know," said Tim, listening patiently, "but there is the fact: the receiving mirror was not only directed towards the sun, but it moved by clockwork so that it was directed to the sun at all hours of the day, even when the sky was overcast and the sun was invisible. I admit that the whole thing sounds incredible, but Colson was not mad. That voice we heard was very distinct."

"But from what planet could it be?" insisted Chap, pushing back his untidy hair and glaring at his friend. "Go over 'em all: eliminate Mars and the Sun, of course, and where is this world? Venus, Mercury, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune—phew! You're not suggesting that it is one of the minor planets, are you? Ceres, Pallas, Juno, Vesta… ?"

Tim shook his head.

"I am as much puzzled as you, but I am going to spend my life onwards looking for that world."

He went back to the house. The body of the old man had been moved to a near-by hospital, and the place was alive with detectives. Mr. Stamford was there when he returned, and placed him in possession of a number of names and addresses which he thought might be useful to the young man.

"I don't know that I want to know any stockbrokers," said Tim, looking at the list with a wry face.

"You never know," said Mr. Stamford. "After all, Mr. Colson expected you to carry on his work, and probably it will be part of your duties to continue his operations. I happen to know that he paid minute attention to the markets."

He indicated a number of financial newspapers that lay unopened on the table, and Tim took up one, opened it and glanced down the columns. In the main the items of news were meaningless to him. All he saw were columns of intricate figures which were so much Greek; but presently his eye caught a headline:

"BLACK SEA OIL SYNDICATE. CHARLES HILDRETH'S GLOOMY REPORT TO THE SHAREHOLDERS.

"A meeting of the Black Sea Oil Syndicate was held at the Cannon Street Hotel yesterday afternoon, and Mr. Hildreth, Chairman of the Company, presiding, said that he had very little news for the shareholders that was pleasant. A number of the wells had run dry, but borings were being made on a new part of the concession, though there was scarcely any hope that they would be successful."

Tim frowned. Black Sea Oil Syndicate… ? Hildreth? He put a question to the lawyer.

"Oh, yes," said Mr. Stanford. "Hildreth is deep in the oil market. There's some talk of his rigging Black Seas."

"What do you mean by 'rigging'?" asked Tim.

"In this case the suggestion, which was made to me by a knowledgeable authority," said Mr. Stamford, "is that Hildreth was depressing the shares issuing unpromising reports which would induce shareholders to put their shares on the market at a low figure. Of course, there may be nothing in it: Black Sea Oils are not a very prosperous concern. On the other hand, he may have secret information from his engineers."

"Such as—?" suggested Tim.

"They may have struck oil in large quantities on another part of the property and may be keeping this fact dark, in which case they could buy up shares cheaply, and when the news was made known the scrip would go sky-high and they would make a fortune."

Tim read the report again. "Do you think there is any chance of oil being found on this property?"

Stamford smiled. "I am a lawyer, not a magician," he said good-humouredly.

After he had gone, Tim found himself reading the paper: the paragraph fascinated him. Black Sea Oil…

Suddenly he leapt to his feet with a cry. That was the message which Mr. Colson had written on the paper—the Oilfields of the Inland Sea!

He ran out of the room and went in search of Stamford.

"I am going to buy Black Sea Oils," he said breathlessly. "Will you tell me what I must do?"

In a few moments the telephone wire was busy.

Mr. Hildreth had not been to his office that day, and when he strolled in to dinner, and the footman handed him his paper, he opened the page mechanically at the Stock Exchange column and ran his eyes down the list of quotations. That morning Black Sea Oils had stood in the market at 3s. 3d., and almost the first note that reached his eye was in the stop-press column.

"Boom in Black Sea Oils. There have been heavy buyings in Black Sea Oil shares, which stood this morning in the neighbourhood of 3s., but which closed firm at 42s. 6d."

Hildreth's face went livid. His great coup had failed!

In the weeks which followed the death and funeral of Professor Colson, Tim found every waking minute occupied. He had enlisted the services of the cleverest of scientists, and from the shattered apparatus one of the most brilliant of mechanical minds of the country was rebuilding the broken instruments. Sir Charles Layman, one of the foremost scientific minds in England, had been called into consultation by the lawyer, and to him Tim had related as much as he knew of Professor Colson's secret.

"I knew Colson," said Sir Charles; "he was undoubtedly a genius. But this story you tell me takes us into the realm of fantasy. It isn't possible

that life can exist on the sun; and really, young gentleman, I can't help feeling that you have been deceived over these mysterious voices."

"Then three people were deceived," said Tim firmly. "My friend Chap West and his sister both heard the speaker. And Mr. Colson was not the kind of man who would descend to trickery."

Sir Charles pursed his lips and shook his head.

"It does seem most extraordinary. And frankly, I cannot understand the functions of these instruments. It is quite possible, as Colson said, that there are sounds come to this earth so fine, and pitched in such a key, that the human ear cannot catch them. And I am pretty sure that what he called a 'sound strainer' was an amplifier on normal lines. But the mysterious world—where is it? Life in some form may exist on a planetoid, but it is almost certain that these small masses which whirl through space in the zone between Mars and Jupiter are barren globules of rock as dead as the moon and innocent of atmosphere. There are a thousand-and-one reasons why life could not exist on these planetoids; and of course the suggestion that there can be life on the sun is preposterous."

He walked up and down the library, smoothing his bushy white beard, his brows corrugated in a grimace of baffled wonder.

"Most scientists," he said at last, "work to the observations of some pet observer—did the Professor ever mention an astronomer whose calculations he was endeavouring to verify?"

Tim thought for a moment.

"Yes, sir, I remember he spoke once or twice of Professor Watson, an American. I remember once he was lecturing to our school on Kepler's Law, and he mentioned the discoveries of Mr. Watson."

"Watson?" said Sir Charles slowly. "Surely he was the fellow who thought he found Vulcan, a planet supposed by some people to revolve about the sun within the orbit of Mercury. As a matter of fact, what he saw, during an eclipse of the sun, was the two stars, Theta and Zeta Cankri, or, more likely, the star 20 Cankri, which must have been somewhere in the position that Watson described on the day he made his discovery."

Then he asked, with sudden interest:

"Did Professor Colson believe in the existence of Vulcan?"

Tim shook his head. "No, sir, he derided the idea."

"He was right," nodded Sir Charles. "Vulcan is a myth. There may be intra-Mercurial bodies revolving about the sun, but it is extremely unlikely. You have found no data, no photographs?"

The word "photograph" reminded Tim. "Yes, there is a book full of big enlargements, but mostly of a solar eclipse," he said. "They were taken on Friday Island last year."

"Would you get them for me?" asked Sir Charles, interested.

Tim went out and returned with a portfolio, which he opened on the table. Sir Charles turned picture after picture without speaking a word, then he laid half a dozen apparently similar photographs side by side and pored over them with the aid of a magnifying-glass. They were the conventional type of astronomical photo: the black disc of the moon, the bubbling white edges of the corona; but evidently Sir Charles had seen something else, for presently he indicated a speck with a stylo.

"These photographs were taken by different cameras," he said. "And yet they all have this."

He pointed to the pin-point of white which had escaped Tim's observation. It was so much part of the flame of the corona that it seemed as though it were a spark thrown out by one of those gigantic irruptions of ignited gas that flame up from the sun's surface.

"Surely that is a speck of dust on the negative?" said Tim.

"But it is on all the negatives," said Sir Charles emphatically. "No, I cannot be sure for the moment, but if that is not Zeta or Theta Cankris—it is too large for the star 20 Cankris—then we may be on the way to rediscovering Professor Colson's world!"

At his request, Tim left him, whilst, with the aid of charts and almanacs, he plunged into intricate calculations.

When Tim closed the door and came into the corridor he saw the old butler waiting.

"Mr. Hildreth is here, sir," said the man in a low voice, as though he also suspected the sinister character of the financier. "I've put him in the blue drawing-room: will you see him, sir?"

Tim nodded and followed the servant.

Hildreth was standing by a window, looking out upon the lawn, his hands behind him, and he turned, with a quick, bird-like motion as he heard the sound of the turning handle.

"Mr. Lensman," he said, "I want a few words with you alone."

The young man dismissed the butler with a gesture.

"Well, sir?" he asked quietly.

"I understand that you have engaged in a little speculation. You are rather young to dabble in high finance," drawled Hildreth.

"Do you mean Black Sea Oils?" asked Tim bluntly.

"I had that stock in mind. What made you buy, Mr. Lensman—or rather, what made your trustee buy, for I suppose that, as you're under age, you would hardly carry out the transaction yourself."

"I bought because I am satisfied that Black Sea Oils will rise."

A slow smile dawned on Hildreth's hawklike face.

"If you had come to me," he said coolly, "I could have saved you a great deal of money. Black Sea Oils to-day stand at fifty shillings: they are worth less than fivepence! You are little more than a boy," he went on suavely, "and I can well understand how the temptation to gamble may have overcome you. But I was a friend of Colson's, and I do not like the thought of your money being wasted. I will take all the stock off your hands, paying you at the price you paid for it."

"That is very generous of you," said Tim drily, "but I am not selling. And as for Mr. Colson being a friend of yours—"

"A very good friend," interrupted the other quickly, "and if you tell people that he and I were enemies it may cost you more than you bargain for!"

There was no mistaking the threat in his tone, but Tim was not to be brow-beaten.

"Mr. Hildreth," he said quietly, "nobody knows better than you that you were bad friends with Mr. Colson. He was constantly spoiling your market—you said as much. You believed that he was possessed of information which enabled him to operate to your detriment, and you knew this information came by wireless, because you had listened-in, without, however, understanding the language in which the messages came. You guessed there was a code, and I believe that you made one or two efforts to secure that code. Your last effort ended in the death of my friend!"

Chapter 6

Hildreth's face went white.

"Do you suggest that I am responsible for Colson's death?"

"You were responsible directly and indirectly," said Tim. "You sent a man here to steal the code-book—a man who has been identified this afternoon as a notorious criminal. Whether you told him to shoot, or whether he shot to save his skin, we shall never know. The burglar was killed so that he should not blab."

"By whom?" asked Hildreth steadily.

"You know best," was the curt reply.

Tim opened the door and stood waiting. The man had regained some of his composure, and, with an easy laugh, walked into the corridor. "You will hear from me again," he said.

"Thank you for the warning," was Tim's rejoinder.

After he had seen his unwelcome visitor off the premises, Tim went in search of Stamford, who, with his two assistants, was working in a little study getting out particulars of the old man's investments. The lawyer listened in silence while Tim narrated what had passed.

"He is a very dangerous man," said Mr. Stamford at last; "and, so far from being rich, I happen to know that he is on the verge of ruin. There are some queer stories about Hildreth. I have had a hint that he was once in an Australian prison, but, of course, there is no evidence to connect him with this terrible crime. What are your immediate plans?"

"The voice amplifier has been reconstituted," said Tim. "The experts are making a test to-day, though I very much doubt whether they will succeed in establishing communication."

A smile fluttered at the corner of the lawyer's mouth.

"Do you still believe that Mr. Colson was in communication with another planet?"

"I'm certain," said Tim emphatically.

He went back to the blue drawing-room, and had hardly entered before Sir Charles came in.

"It is as I thought," said the scientist; "neither Zeta nor Theta! It is, in fact, a distinct body of some kind, and, in my judgment, well outside the orbit of the hypothetical Vulcan. If you look at the back of the photograph—"

He turned it over, and Tim saw that, written in pencil in the microscopic calligraphy of the Professor, were a dozen lines of writing.

"I knew, of course, that this was a dead world, without atmosphere or even water. There can be no life there. I made an enlargement by my new process, and this revealed a series of flat, rocky valleys."

"What the deuce his new process was, heaven only knows!" said Sir Charles in despair. "Poor Colson must have been the most versatile genius the world has known. At any rate, that disposes of the suggestion that this planetary body is that whence come the signals—if they come at all."

Sir Charles waited until the experts had finished the work of reassembling two of the more complicated machines; but, though experimenting until midnight, they could not establish communication, and at last, with a sense of despair, Tim ordered the work to cease for the night.

The whole thing was becoming a nightmare to him: he could not sleep at nights. Chap and his sister came over in the morning to assist him in a search, which had gone on ever since the death of Professor Colson.

"We can do no more," said Tim helplessly, "until we have seen the Professor's manuscript. Until then we do not know for what we are searching."

"What about that stone in the garden? Won't that tell you anything?" asked Chap. "I'd like to see it."

They went out into the courtyard together and stood before the stone in silence.

E 6 O 1

T 2 D 4

H 4 L 1

A 1 N 3

W 1 U 1

R 2 B 1

I 3 S 2

"Of course, that isn't as difficult as it appears," said Chap, to whom cryptograms were a passion. "There is a sentence written there, containing so many 'e's', so many 'h's', etcetera, and perhaps, when we find the sentence, the mystery will be half solved."

He jotted the inscription down in a notebook, and throughout the day was puzzling over a solution. Night came, and the two were on the point of departure, when Chap said suddenly: "Do you think you were wise, Timothy, to tell the reporter Johnny all you did?"

(Tim had given an interview to a local newspaper, which had described more fully than he had intended—more fully, indeed, than his evidence at the inquest—what had happened immediately preceding Colson's death.)

"Because, y' know, it struck me," said Chap, "that the poor old Professor's manuscript would be very valuable to a certain person. Does it occur to you that our friend might also be searching for this narrative?"

This was a new idea to Tim.

"Why, yes," he said slowly; "I never thought of that. No; that didn't strike me. But I don't know where he would find it. We've taken out every likely stone in the building; I've had the cellars searched—"

"What makes you think it's behind a stone?" asked Chap.

"His reference to a mason. My guess—and I may not be far wide of the mark—is that Mr. Colson, having written his manuscript, hid it in one of the walls. But so far I have not been able to discover the hiding-place."

He walked to the end of the drive to see his friends off, and then returned to the study. He was alone in the house now, save for the servants. Sir Charles had gone back to town by the last train, and Stamford had accompanied him.

The butler came in to ask if he wanted anything before he went to bed, and Tim shook his head.

He had taken up his quarters in a spare room immediately above the library, and for an hour after his visitors had departed he sat on the broad window-seat, looking down into the courtyard, now bathed in the faint radiance of the crescent moon. The light shone whitely upon the cryptogram stone, and absent-mindedly he fixed his eyes upon this, the

least of the old man's mysteries. And then—was his eye playing tricks with him? He could have sworn he saw a dark figure melt out of the darkness and move along the shadow of the box hedge.

He pushed open the casement window, but could see nothing.

"I'm getting jumpy," he said to himself, and rising with a yawn, took off his coat preparatory to undressing. As he did so, he glanced out of the window again and started. Now he was sure: he could see the shapeless black shadow, and it was moving towards the cryptogram stone.

His pulse beat a little quicker as he watched. There was no doubt about it now. In the moonlight the figure in the long black coat and the broad sombrero which shaded his face, stood clearly revealed. It was touching the stone, and even as Tim looked the little obelisk fell with a crash.

In a second Tim was out of the room and speeding along the corridor. As he came into view of the figure, it stooped and picked something from the ground.

The manuscript! What a fool he had been! That was where the old man had concealed the story of his discovery! But there was no time for regret: the mysterious visitant had already disappeared into the shadows. Was he making for the river? Tim was uncertain. He was halfway down the slope before he realised that he had made a mistake. Behind him he heard the soft purr of a motor-car, and, racing up the slope, he came into view of a red tail-light as it disappeared down the broad drive towards the road. The great iron gates were closed, and that would give him a momentary advantage, though he knew he could not reach the car before they were open.

Then he remembered Colson's motor-bicycle: he had left it leaning against the wall and had forgotten to bring it in after the trip he had made to Bisham that morning. Yes, there it was! He had hardly started the machine going when he heard a crash. The unknown had driven his car through the frail iron gates and was flying along the road to Maidenhead.

Tim came out in pursuit and put his machine all out. The car ahead gained until it came to the foot of a long and tiring hill, and then the gap between them closed. Once the driver looked back, and a minute later something dropped in the road. Tim only just avoided the spare tyre, which had been thrown overboard to trip him.

The car reached the crest of the hill as Tim came up to its rear, and, heedless of danger, stretched out his hand, and, catching hold of the hood, let the motor-bicycle slip from between his knees.

For a second he held on desperately, his feet swinging in the air, and then, with an effort, he threw his leg over the edge of the hood and dropped breathlessly on to the seat behind the driver. At first the man at the wheel did not realise what had happened, and then, with a yell of rage, he turned and struck blindly at the unauthorised passenger.

The blow missed him by a fraction of an inch, and in another second his arm was around the driver's neck. The car swayed and slowed, and then an involuntary movement of the man revealed the whereabouts of the manuscript. Tim thrust into the inside-pocket and his fingers touched a heavy roll of paper. In a flash the packet was in his hand, and then he saw the moonlight gleam on something which the man held.

The car was now almost at a standstill, and, leaping over the side, Tim plunged into the hedge by the side of the road. As he did so, he heard the "zip!" of a bullet and the patter of leaves. He ran on wildly, his breath coming in short gasps. To his ears came the blundering feet of his pursuer. He was out of breath and in no condition to meet the murderous onrush of his enemy.

And then, as he felt he could not go a step farther, the ground opened underneath his feet and he went down, down, down. For a second he lost consciousness. All that remained of his breath was knocked from his body, and he could only lie and gape at the starlit sky.

Chapter 7

Looking up, he saw a head and shoulders come over the edge of the quarry into which he had fallen. Apparently the man was not prepared to take the risk of following, for presently the sound of his footsteps died away and there was silence.

He lay for half-an-hour motionless, recovering his breath. Although his arm was bruised he could move it and no bones were broken. At the end of his rest he rose cautiously to his knees and explored the position so far as it was revealed by the moonlight.

He had fallen twenty or thirty feet down a steep, chalky slope; but he was by no means at the bottom of the quarry face, and he had to move with the greatest care and circumspection. Presently, however, he found a rough path, which seemed to run interminably upwards. It was nearly half-an-hour later when he came to the road. The car was gone, and he walked back the way he had come, hoping that he would be able to retrieve his motor-bicycle intact, though he had his doubts whether it would be usable. To his delight, when he came upon the machine, he discovered it had suffered little damage other than twisted handlebars. His run home was without event.

Apparently his hasty exit had been heard, for the house was aroused and two manservants were searching the grounds when he came in.

"I heard the gate go smash, sir," said the butler, explaining his wakefulness. "Lord! I'm glad to see you back. Somebody's thrown over that stone in the courtyard… "

He babbled on, and Tim was so glad to hear the sound of a human voice that he did not interrupt him.

There was no sleep for him that night. With successive cups of strong coffee, brought at intervals, he sat poring over the manuscript, page by page, almost incredulous of his own eyes and senses. The sunlight poured in through the windows of the little study and found him still sitting, his chin on his palms, the manuscript before him. He had read it

again and again until he knew almost every word. Then, locking the papers away in the safe, he walked slowly to the instrument room, and gazed in awe at this evidence of the dead man's genius.

Something within him told him that never in future would human speech pulsate through this network of wires; never again would that queer little amplifier bring within human hearing the thin sounds of space. Even the code was gone: that vocabulary, reduced with such labour to a dictionary of six thousand words.

He turned the switch and set the little machine working; saw the multicoloured lights gleam and glow. This much the mechanics had succeeded in doing. But the words that filtered through light and charcoal would, he thought, be dead for everlasting. He turned another switch and set something working which Sir Charles had described as a miniature air pump, and stood watching absent-mindedly as the piston thrust in and out. If he only had one tenth of Colson's genius!

His hand had gone out to turn the switch that stopped the machine, when:

"Oh, Colson, why do you not speak to me?"

The voice came from the very centre of the machine. There was no visible microphone. It was as though the lights and the whirling wheels had become endowed with a voice. Tim's heart nearly stopped beating.

"Oh, Colson," wailed the voice, "they are breaking the machines. I have come to tell you this before they arrive. He is dead—he, the master, the wizard, the wonderful man… "

The servant! Mr. Colson had told him that it was the servant who had spoken. The astral Colson was dead. How should he reply?

"Where are you?" he asked hoarsely, but there was no answer, and soon he understood why. Presently:

"I will wait for you to speak. When I hear you I will answer. Speak to me, Colson! In a thousand seconds… ."

A thousand seconds! Colson had told him once that wireless waves travel at the same speed as light. Then he was a hundred and eighty million miles away, and a thousand seconds must pass—nearly seventeen minutes—before his voice could reach through space to the man who was listening.

How had he made the machine work? Perhaps the mechanism had succeeded before, but there had been nobody at the other end—wherever the other end might be. And then:

"Oh, Colson, they are here… goodbye!"

There came to him the sound of a queer tap-tap-tap and then a crackle as though of splintered glass, and then a scream, so shrill, so full of pain and horror, that involuntarily he stepped back. Then came a crash, and silence. He waited, hardly daring to breathe, but no sound came. At the end of an hour he turned off the switch and went slowly up to his room.

He awoke to find a youth sitting on the edge of his bed. He was so weary and dulled that he did not recognize Chap, even after he spoke.

"Wake up: I've got some news for you, dear old bird," said Chap, staring owlishly through his thick, heavy glasses. "There's a Nemesis in this business—you may have heard of the lady—Miss Nemesis of Nowhere. First the burglar man is killed and then his boss is smashed to smithereens."

Tim struggled up. "Who?" he asked. "Not Hildreth?"

Chap nodded.

"He was found just outside Maidenhead, his car broken to bits—they think his steering-wheel went wrong when he was doing sixty an hour. At any rate, he smashed into a tree, and all that's left of his machine is hot iron!"

"Hildreth! Was he killed?" Chap nodded.

"Completely," he said callously. "And perhaps it's as well for him, for Bennett was waiting at his house to arrest him. They've got proof that he employed that wretched burglar. Do you know what time it is? It's two o'clock, you lazy devil, and Sir Charles and Stamford are waiting to see you. Sir Charles has a theory—"

Tim swung out of bed and walked to the window, blinking into the sunlit garden.

"All the theories in the world are going to evaporate before the facts," he said. Putting his hand under his pillow, he took out the Professor's manuscript. "I'll read something to you this afternoon. Is Elsie here?"

Chap nodded. "I'll be down in half-an-hour," he said.

His breakfast was also his luncheon, but it was not until after the meal was over, and they had adjourned to the library, that he told them what had happened in the night. Bennett, who arrived soon after, was able to fill in some of the gaps of the story.

"Hildreth," he said, "in spite of his wealth and security, was a crook of crooks. It is perfectly true that he was tried in Australia and sent to penal

servitude. He had got a big wireless plant in his house, and there is no doubt that for many years he has made large sums of money by picking up commercial messages that have been sent by radio and decoding and using them to his own purpose. In this way he must have learnt something about Mr. Colson's correspondent—he was under the impression that Colson received messages in code and was anxious to get the code-book. By the way, we found the charred remnants of that book in the car. It was burnt out, as you probably know. That alone would have been sufficient to convict Hildreth of complicity in the murder. Fortunately, we have been saved the trouble of a trial."

"None of the code remains?" asked Tim anxiously. The detective shook his head.

"No, sir, none. There are one or two words—for instance, 'Zeiith' means 'the Parliamentary system of the third decade,' whatever that may mean. It seems a queer sort of code to me."

"That is very unfortunate," said Tim. "I had hoped to devote my time to telling the history of this strange people, and the book would have been invaluable."

"Which people is this?" asked Sir Charles puzzled. "Did our friend get into communication with one of the lost tribes?"

Tim laughed, in spite of himself. "No, sir. I think the best explanation I can offer you is to read Mr. Colson's manuscript, which I discovered last night. It is one of the most remarkable stories that has ever been told, and I'll be glad to have you here, Sir Charles, so that you may supply explanations which do not occur to me."

"Is it about the planet?" asked Sir Charles quickly, and Tim nodded.

"Then you have discovered it! It is a planetoid—"

Tim shook his head. "No, sir," he said quietly. "It is a world as big as ours."

The scientist looked at him open-mouthed.

"A world as big as ours, and never been discovered by our astronomers? How far away?"

"At its nearest, a hundred and eighty million miles," said Tim.

"Impossible!" cried Sir Charles scornfully. "It would have been detected years ago. It is absolutely impossible!"

"It has never been detected because it is invisible," said Tim.

"Invisible? How can a planet be invisible? Neptune is much farther distant from the sun—"

"Nevertheless, it is invisible," said Tim. "And now," he said, as he took the manuscript from his pocket, "if you will give me your attention, I will tell you the story of Neo. Incidentally, the cryptogram on the stone reads: 'Behind the sun is another world!'"

Chapter 8

Tim turned the flyleaf of the manuscript and began reading in an even tone.

"THE STORY OF NEO."

"My name" (the manuscript began) "is Charles Royton Colson. I am a Master of Arts of the University of Cambridge, science lecturer to Mildram School, and I have for many years been engaged in the study of the Hertzian waves, and that branch of science commonly known as radiology. I claim in all modesty to have applied the principles which Marconi brought nearer to perfection, when wireless telegraphy was unknown. And I was amongst the pioneers of wireless telephony. As is also generally known, I am a mathematician and have written several textbooks upon astronomy. I am also the author of a well-known monograph on the subject of the Inclinations of the Planetary Orbits; and my treatise on the star Oyonis is familiar to most astronomers.

"For many years I engaged myself in studying the alterations of ellipses following the calculations and reasonings of Lagrange, who to my mind was considerably less of a genius than Professor Adams, to whom the credit for the discovery of Neptune should be given… "

Here followed a long and learned examination of the incidence of Neptune's orbit, as influenced by Uranus.

"… My astronomical and radiological studies were practically carried on at the same time. In June, 1914, my attention was called to a statement made by the Superintendent of the great wireless telegraph station outside Berlin, that he had on three separate occasions taken what he described as 'slurred receptions' from an unknown station. He gave excellent technical reasons why these receptions could not have come from any known station, and he expressed the opinion, which was generally scoffed at, that the messages he had taken came from some extra-terrestrial source. There immediately followed a suggestion that these mysterious dashes and dots had come from Mars. The matter was lost sight

of owing to the outbreak of the European War, and when, in 1915, the same German engineer stated that he had received a distinct message of a similar character, the world, and particularly the Allied world, rejected the story, for the credibility of the Germans at that period did not stand very high.

"A year later, the wireless station at Cape Cod also reported signals, as did a private station in Connecticut; whilst the Government station at Rio de Janeiro reported that it had heard a sound like 'a flattened voice.' It was obvious that these stories were not inventions, and I set to work on an experimental station which I had been allowed to set up at the school, and after about six months of hard toil I succeeded in fashioning an instrument which enabled me to test my theories. My main theory was that, if the sound came from another world, it would in all probability be pitched in a key that would be inaudible to human ears. For example, there is a dog-whistle which makes no sound that we detect, but which is audible to every dog. My rough amplifier had not been operating for a week when I began to pick up scraps of signals and scraps of words—unintelligible to me, but obviously human speech. Not only was I able to hear, but I was able to make myself heard; and the first startling discovery I made was that it took my voice a thousand and seven seconds to reach the person who was speaking to me.

"I was satisfied now that I was talking to the inhabitants of another world, though, for my reputation's sake, I dared not make my discovery known. After hard experimental work, I succeeded in clarifying the voices, and evidently the person at the other end was as anxious as I to make himself understood and to understand the nature of his unknown correspondent's speech.

"You may imagine what a heart-breaking business it was, with no common vocabulary, invisible to one another, and living possibly in conditions widely different, to make our meaning clear to one another. We made a start with the cardinal numbers, and after a week's interchange we had mastered these. I was then struck with the idea of pouring a glass of water from a tumbler near to my microphone, and using the word 'water.' In half-an-hour I heard the sound of falling water from the other end and the equivalent word, which will be found in the vocabulary. I then clapped my hands together, and used the word 'hand.' With these little illustrations, which took a great deal of time, began the formation of the dictionary. In the Neo language there are practically no verbs and few adjectives. Very much is indicated by a certain inflexion of voice; even the tenses are similarly expressed; and yet, in spite of this,

the Neothians to whom I spoke had no very great difficulty, once I had learnt the art of the inflexion, in supplying the English equivalent.

"All the time I was searching the heavens in the vain endeavour to discover the exact location of this world, which was, from the description I had, exactly the same size as ours, and therefore should have been visible. I had maps of the southern hemispheres, reports from the astronomers of Capetown and Brisbane, but they could offer me no assistance. It was certain that there was in the heavens no visible planetary body as big as Neo.

"The chief difficulty I had lay in the fact that the voices invariably came from the direction of the sun; and it was as certain as anything could be that life could not exist on that great golden mass. Notwithstanding this, unless my mirror was turned to the sun, I received no message whatever; and even in the middle of the night, when I was communicating with Neo, it was necessary that I should follow, the sun's course.

"Then came the great eclipse, and, as you know, I went to the South Sea Islands to make observations. It was our good fortune to have fine weather, and at the moment of total eclipse I took several particularly excellent photographs, some of which you will find in the portfolio marked 'L.' In these and photographs taken by other astronomers, you will see, if you make a careful observation, close to the corona, a tiny speck of light, which at first I thought was my world, but which afterwards I discovered was a dead mass of material upon which it was impossible for life to exist.

"One night, when I was turning over the matter in my mind, and examining each photograph in the study of my house on the Thames, the solution flashed on me. This tiny speck, which was not a star, and was certainly not Vulcan, was the satellite of another world, and that world was moving on the same orbit as our own earth, following exactly the same course, but being, as it was, immediately opposite to us behind the sun, was never visible! On whatever part of the ellipse we might be, the sun hid our sister world from us, and that was why the voice apparently came from the sun, for it was through the solar centre that the waves must pass. Two earths chasing one another along the same path, never overtaking, never being overtaken, balancing one another perfectly! It was a stupendous thought!

"I conveyed to my unknown friend, who called himself Colson, though I am under the impression that that was due to a misconception on his part as to what Colson meant—he probably thought that 'Colson'

was the English word for 'scientist'—and I asked him to make observations. These he sent to me after a few days, confirming my theory. It was after we had begun to talk a little more freely, and my acquaintance with the language had increased so that I could express myself clearly, that it occurred to me there was an extraordinary similarity both in our lives and our environment. And this is the part in my narrative which you will find difficult to believe—I discovered that these two worlds were not only geographically exact, but that the incidents of life ran along on parallel lines. There were great wars in Neo, great disasters, which were invariably duplicated on our earth, generally from two to three days before or after they had happened in this new world. Nor was it only the convulsions of nature that were so faithfully reproduced. Men and women were doing in that world exactly as we were doing in ours. There were Stock Exchanges and street cars, railways, aeroplanes, as though twin worlds had produced twin identities; twin inspirations.

"I learnt this first when my friend told me that he had been seeking me for some time. He said that he had had a broken knee some five years ago, and during his enforced leisure he had pointed out the possibility of his having another identity. He said he was frequently feeling that the person he met for the first time was one in reality whom he had seen before; and he was conscious that the thing he did to-day, he had done a week before. That is a sensation which I also have had, and which every human being has experienced.

"But to go back to the story of his having been laid up with a broken knee. He had no sooner told me this than I realised that I also had had a broken knee—I had a spill on my motor-bicycle—and that I had spent the hours of my leisure pondering the possibility of there being another inhabited planet! There is a vulgar expression, frequently met with amongst neurotic people, that they have twin souls. In very truth this man was my twin soul: was me, had lived my life, thought my thoughts, performed every action which I performed. The discovery staggered me, and I began to fear for my reason; so I went to London and consulted an eminent Harley Street specialist. He assured me that I was perfectly normal and sane, and offered me the conventional advice that I should go away for a holiday.

"Then one day my astral friend, Colson, incidentally mentioned that there was great excitement in his town because a man had bought some steel stock which had since risen considerably in price—he mentioned the name—and, glancing through a newspaper, I saw the name of a stock which sounded very similar to that of which he had told me.

Moreover, the price was very much as he had mentioned it; and the wild idea occurred to me that if happenings were actually duplicated, I might possibly benefit by my knowledge. With great trepidation I invested the whole of my savings, which were not very considerable, in these shares, and a few days later had the gratification of selling out at a colossal profit. I explained to my friend at the next opportunity what I had done, and he was considerably amused, and afterwards took an almost childish delight in advising me as to the violent fluctuations in various stocks. For years I have bought and sold with considerable benefit to myself. Not only that, but I have been able to warn Governments of impending disasters. I informed the Turkish Government of the great Armenian earthquake, and warned the Lamborn Shipping Company of the terrible disaster which overtook one of their largest liners—though I was not thanked for my pains.

"After this had been going on for some years, I was prepared to learn that my friend had incurred the enmity of a rich man, whom he called Frez on his side, and that this had been brought about unwittingly through me. For this is a curious fact: not everything on this new world is three days in advance of ours. Often it happened that the earth was in advance, and I was able, in our exchanges, to tell him things that were happening here which had not yet occurred in Neo, with the result that he followed my example, and in the space of a year had become a very rich man.

"Colson, as I called him, had a servant, whose name I have never learnt; he was called the equivalent to 'helper,' and I guess, rather than know, that he is a much younger man than my double, for he said that he had been to school as a pupil of Colson's. He too learnt quickly; and if there is any difference in the two worlds, it is a keener intelligence: they are more receptive, quicker to grasp essentials.

"There are necessarily certain differences in their methods of government, but these differences are not vital. In Neo men are taught the use of arms, and receive their guerdon of citizenship (which I presume is the vote) only on production of a certificate of proficiency. But in the main their lives run parallel with ours. The very character of their streets, their systems of transportation, even their prison system, are replicas of those on this earth. The main difference, of course, is that their one language is universal. I intend at a later date writing at greater length on the institutions of Neo, but for the moment it is necessary that I should set down particulars of the machines and apparatus employed by me in communicating with our neighbours… "

Here followed twenty closely-written pages of technical description. Tim folded the manuscript and looked around at the astonished faces. Stamford was the first to break the silence.

"Preposterous!" he spluttered. "Impossible! Absurd!… It's a nightmare! Another world—good God!"

"I believe every word of it." It was Sir Charles's quiet voice that stilled the agitated lawyer. "Of course, that is the speck by the side of the corona! Not the world which poor Colson found, but the moon of that world."

"But couldn't it be visible at some time?"

Sir Charles shook his head. "Not if it followed the exact orbit of the earth and was placed directly opposite—that is to say, immediately on the other side of the sun. It might overlap at periods, but in the glare of the sun it would be impossible to see so tiny an object. No, there is every possibility that Colson's story is stark truth."

He took the manuscript from Tim's hand and read rapidly through the technical description.

"With this," he said, touching the paper, "we shall be able to get into communication with these people. If we only had the vocabulary!" he groaned.

"I am afraid you will never hear from Neo again, sir," said Tim quietly, and told of that brief but poignant minute of conversation he had had before the cry of the dying servant, and the crash of broken instruments, had brought the voice to an abrupt end.

After the lawyer and the scientist had departed, he went with Elsie into the instrument room, and they gazed in silence upon the motionless apparatus.

"The link is broken," he said at last; "it can never be forged again, unless a new Colson arrives on both earths."

She slipped her arm in his.

"Aren't you glad?" she asked softly. "Do you want to know what will happen to-morrow or the next day?"

He shivered. "No. I don't think so. But I should like to know what will happen in a few years' time, when I'm a little older and you're a little older."

"Perhaps we'll find a new world of our own," said Elsie.

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