

THEAKER'S

QUARTERLY FICTION

Spring

Issue One

2004

Editorial	2
PROFESSOR CHALLENGER IN SPACE, PART I	3
‘This Time He Has Outdone Himself!’	3
A Most Audacious Mechanism	7
A Surprise Visit	10
Farewells to Mrs Challenger	12
Inside the Spaceship	16
Three Englishmen and an Irishman in an Interplanetary Spacecraft	19
The King of Ell Ka-Mar	23
The Strangest Mechanical Creature	29
The Coming of Master Zangpan	32
Zangpan’s World	34
Some Unpleasantness	38
Reparations and Preparations	42

Published by
Silver Age Books



Editorial

Stephen William Theaker
Editor

This first issue of *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction* is dedicated to anyone who ever cried because they felt sad.

Being sad is a feeling, and the stories in this magazine will often be about feelings. Feelings. The way people feel, and the way that some people don't. If you have ever had a feeling you will understand what I am talking about. If you have never had a feeling maybe the stories in this magazine will awaken one in you. That feeling might be disgust, boredom or ennui, but it might just as well be desire, excitement or amity. We shall find out together.

In this first issue of *TQF* I am pleased to present the first portion of my second-favourite ever novel, *Professor Challenger in Space*. It is not the first time it has seen publication, having previously seen print as a special folderback edition, then as a paperback, and then as a rocket ebook. But I make no apologies for recycling the same old material – this is after all one of three issues of *TQF* being produced retrospectively for the year of 2004, in order to bed down the format and give us all a running start at the first issue proper.

I could have course have pretended that these issues had been produced at the appropriate points of the year gone by, and thus given myself the opportunity to be regarded as a great prognosticator in the mould of Arthur C Clarke. For example, in this Spring issue, I could predict that, against all the odds,

the European Championships this year will be won by footballing minnows Greece. But I won't, because the theme of this issue is honesty – honesty and trust – and feelings.

I have another excuse for re-using my crusty old Professor Challenger novel, and that is that it finally went out of print last year, and so is at the moment only available second-hand (there are usually a couple of copies available via Amazon.co.uk).

I will not go into too much detail here about the aims of this magazine – that should really be saved for the first bona fide issue – but this issue might still be the first for someone, and to that person I say, "Hello. This is a slightly silly magazine, full of stories which may not be to your taste, and for that I make no apology. The only true purpose of *TQF* is to make me smile. If it makes anyone else smile (for whatever reason), that is wonderful. Smiling and happiness are good things, as long as they are not at another's expense. But I make no allowances for you, either in my writing or in my editing of the stories selected for publication herein."

One might hope that the person in question has the patience for long expository speeches, but that would of course be to set us on the road of making the allowances proscribed by my own exposition. Perhaps I have been too harsh.

The Editor

Professor Challenger in Space, Part I

‘This Time He Has Outdone Himself!’

‘This is astonishing,’ exclaimed McArdle, the red-headed old news editor of the Daily Gazette. ‘Who would ever have expected the old goat to have quite so much gall left in him.’

‘What is it?’ I enquired, in the secure belief that I could never be surprised by the gall of Professor Challenger, my erstwhile colleague in certain well-documented adventures.

‘Take a look at this.’

He showed me the copy of an item which was apparently to appear in the next edition, the surprising text of which was as follows:

The Most Honoured and Admired
Scientist of Our Time
PROFESSOR GEORGE EDWARD
CHALLENGER Wishes to Announce
That Following His Coronation and
Popular Acclamation He Is Now to Be
Called
KING GEORGE I
Beneficent Ruler of Ell Ka-Mar, Its
People, and All Related Properties

‘Well, what do you make of that, Malone?’ One eyebrow rose as if to say that Challenger had finally and indubitably crossed the fatal line between genius and insanity. Although in the light of such evidence it was difficult to disagree, I bore in mind the fact that most of Fleet Street had considered the scientist unhinged for some time – although I knew that not to have been the case. ‘We received this an hour ago, to be placed in the next possible edition, and, let me

add, Professor Challenger-’

‘King George,’ I interjected with a smile.

‘Professor Challenger,’ he repeated, ‘demands that a full page be given over to it.’

I read the announcement once again, saying, ‘It would be unwise to judge a man of Challenger’s quality too harshly or hurriedly.’

‘Ah, loyal to the bitter end, are you?’

‘It hardly seems bitter. If he is on the way out, at least he seems cheerful.’

‘In Challenger’s case, that’s rare enough to immediately show that something is not quite right with him,’ answered McArdle. ‘However, you are right to be loyal: Challenger has provided both you and the paper with some excellent stories over the years. It seems to me that the old boy may yet have one final story to tell.’

I could not help a wry smile as the instincts of the news editor came to the fore. ‘Even if it should prove to be his epitaph?’

‘We understand each other very well,’ he answered. ‘In all the years of Professor Challenger’s notoriety only one journalist has entered his home without being forcibly ejected in a matter of seconds.’

‘Almost true,’ I pointed out. ‘I was ejected, but I found my way back in.’

‘Uniquely! You should now return once again, and discover the meaning of this information.’

I looked him sternly in the eye.

‘It could be dangerous, you know.’ He received the information in good humour.

‘A bonus shall await your return.’

I laughed and looked one final time at the advertisement.

'I am sure that there is a perfectly good explanation for this behaviour. Presumably some native tribe of Africa or the South Americas that he has discovered has begun to worship him, or something of the sort. Though, admittedly, Ell Ka-Mar does not sound familiar, and his various journeys have been described to me in excruciating detail over the years.'

'Naturally that was my first thought.'

He indicated a pile of documents on the table, clippings from scientific journals and popular newspapers among them, as well as transcripts of the speeches made by Challenger to various gatherings, scientific and otherwise. Of late he had often found a more agreeable audience outside the scientific establishment, one which aided him in the funding of expeditions if it did nothing to stimulate his fiery intellect.

'The file on Challenger has been thoroughly searched, and nowhere is there record of the name 'Ell Ka-Mar'. Needless to say, neither is that designation to be found in any atlas or dictionary.'

'A recent expedition, then?'

'I'm afraid not. As far as we can establish, it has been at least a year since last the Professor left these isles.'

'If he had left the country, why would he have done so in secrecy? And if this 'kingdom' stems from an earlier voyage, why has he chosen to conceal it until now?'

'Those are the very questions that I want you to ask him. However, my personal feeling is that this whole thing is a product of some whim, a middle-aged fancy of a man who has never been one for modesty.'

'For all he's done,' I told McArdle, 'any civilised country would already have made him king. Perhaps he has grown tired of waiting for the fall of the House of Windsor and has begun to set the foundations of a new abode for the nation's sovereignty.'

'I certainly hope so, as that would make for a most interesting series of articles.'

'So do you intend to publish the announcement?'

'I don't see why not,' he replied. 'Challenger has paid in advance, and it will certainly make for more interesting reading than the usual. Yet again the Professor will make the *Gazette* the talk of London!'

McArdle returned to his office and I gathered together the tools of my trade. I donned my hat and overcoat and went out into the fog. Within five minutes I was in a hansom cab on the way to Enmore

Park, Kensington, the home of England's newest monarch. The household had but recently returned from the place in Rotherfield where we had experienced the adventure of the Poison Belt.

I was not inclined to share the pessimism of McArdle as regarded Professor Challenger, a gentleman who had partaken of many apparent insanities over the years but who had rarely been counted among the fools when all was said and done. If Challenger had seen fit to pronounce himself King, then until I was in possession of evidence to the contrary I would assume he had good reason to do so.

Of course, it had been a matter of some months since last I had encountered my old friend, so I must admit that it was with a slight – and no more than slight, I hasten to add – feeling of trepidation that I laid a hand upon the Challenger knocker and signalled my presence.

I saw the handle begin to move. As a precaution I took a step back. It was not without the bounds of possibility that Challenger had arranged some contraption designed with the specific aim of warding off members of the press. Happily, the door opened slowly to reveal the gentle form of Mrs Challenger, and, it seemed, she was happy to find that it was I at the door, and not some more venomous specimen of Fleet Street fauna. And yet I felt she would have been somewhat happier had there been no one at all at the door, and happier still had there been no reason for anyone to be there.

The bellowing voice of that reason bullied its way past Mrs Challenger in order to make assault upon my eardrums.

'Crawl back to the cesspool that spawned such abominations as yourself,' Challenger cried, 'and endeavour to ensure that your brother pond-swills do not follow you in laying siege to my home! Shall it forever be my lot as a man of science, Mrs Challenger, to put up with these harassments? When will old Austin be back? He knew how to deal with these blasted ragamuffins.'

She smiled and I relaxed at this proof evident that Professor Challenger had not strayed too far from his norm.

'The King must learn patience with his witless subjects!' I called as Mrs Challenger let me pass by. Going through that door was akin to going into the British Museum through the back entrance and finding yourself among the strangest artefacts of all, the items that had not yet been, and perhaps never would be, classified or explained. Mrs Challenger took my coat and hat and hung them upon what might once have been the totem of a South American

tribe, and I remain convinced of the fact that there was the brooding sarcophagus of some unknown pharaoh in an alcove of that most bizarre of entry chambers.

'I see that the Professor has been re-arranging the furniture.'

Mrs Challenger sighed. I know of no woman who has better played the role of nursemaid to unruly genius – and it was a mere role for her, of that I was sure, for in the course of my researches into the Professor certain scientific papers had been unearthed under the name of Anna Smith. The last of Miss Smith's well-received papers had been published shortly before that person's transformation into Mrs Challenger. One who had never met her might have believed it a case of the butterfly becoming once more a caterpillar, but I say this, I never saw her unhappy with Professor Challenger. Perhaps the unhappiness came when the professor left on his expeditions. At the back of her mind, I might go so far as to suspect, there came sometimes the thought that if she had never married him, Challenger might have consented to the company of Miss Anna Smith on his most perilous voyages. As it was, she was required to keep the home fires burning, a task she fulfilled with a measure of contentment and, possibly, a touch of resignation.

'Is his announcement to be published, then?'

'I'm afraid so,' I informed her. 'A full page is to be devoted to this astonishing news.'

'I rather think he has outdone himself this time.'

'It would appear so, but then that is a king's prerogative.'

'Will there be an editorial?'

'That depends upon McArdle. He is usually off the mark quite quickly, but I believe that he might wait for my verdict.'

'And what is your diagnosis, Doctor Malone, you Irish scandal-sheet merchant!'

Professor George Edward Challenger roared into the room, immediately dominating it as if the very air we breathed had been designed with him in mind. Oh foolish deity, that created a world with any thought of placing such a man upon it! To see him is to be at odds with him and to hear him is to be insulted by him in the most colourful manner. He has often been described as a cave-man in a lounge suit, and that rings true in more than one way. Without doubt the Neanderthal is not a distant cousin of the Professor, and then also, as well as resembling the men who once lived in the cave, he is not at all dissimilar to the cave itself. His is a yawning cavern of a personality, a crack in the face of the mountain that is the world,

an abysmal threat to the sanity of the rational modern man as he stares right back into your rational modern eyes and demands the attention of your most irrational ancient fears. 'I am here!' he cries, finding echo in the darkest realms of your soul. 'I am here! Deny me if you can!' He is the bear-cave, the warm cave, the cave that you always needed and were always afraid of! He was always the staunchest of companions, and finally I found him to be the warmest of friends, yet even I should be dismayed to find that maelstrom of activity and restless intellect unchained. To put it another way, Professor Challenger was an ambush of a man. Make of that what you please.

'Does Irish ancestry place me outside the jurisdiction of his Majesty?' I bowed my head in mock respect.

'If I said it did not, your blood would doubtless lead you into fruitless combat with me upon that point!'

He kissed his wife and took me by the arm, leading me into the study, a room as full of strange and unfathomable objects as the entry chamber. The items in this room tended to be made of yellowing wood pulp and cloth as opposed to the other room's products of carved bone, stuffed animal and chiselled rock. Many of the books in that study would doubtless have amazed the clerks of the British Library – not least because a number of volumes had been smuggled out of that august establishment in the Professor's trousers. Challenger called for whisky and cigars before setting me right, as he put it.

'Malone, my dear fellow, when the time is right, you shall be fully informed as to the exact nature, dimensions, &c of my little kingdom, but in the meantime,' – here he gave what was doubtless intended as a conspiratorial wink, but which upon his simian visage appeared instead as a threatening leer – 'you should be ashamed of yourself, for assuming that my kingdom can be described in terms of the mundane geography with which you are acquainted! There is no doubt in my mind that the intelligence and certainly the imagination of the average reporter has long been on the decline, yet I had hoped a little more of my companion on the journey into Maple-White Land!'

At this point Mrs Challenger brought him a glass of whisky and a large cigar. He gulped down half of one and placed the other in his mouth with an irritatingly smug expression upon his face.

'Sometimes, Professor, it seems you enjoy nothing better than to be in possession of a great secret while being considered a madman by the better half of

London.'

'And which half is that?' He deigned to remove the magisterial cigar in order to reply. 'The half which resides beneath the ground, as opposed to above it? That portion of the population, in my humble opinion, is often the half with the most wits, the best behaviour and the most interesting things to say.'

'I see that monarchy has mellowed you.'

'By God I hope not!' He flung his cigar on the floor to indicate his feelings upon the matter. 'The fact that I have now attained high office does not mean that my work is over – though such a reward, of course, is much less than I am due for my various services to the particular development of swamp slime that it pleases us to call humanity!'

'In the pursuit of scientific advancement there is always work to be done-'

Challenger cut me off before I had even reached my full flow.

'So much is obvious, even to a journalist, I should imagine, but at the present time more pressing work requires attention. My kingdom...'

Challenger paused to see if he had my attention. I humoured him, as not to do so might have involved a cuff about the head and ejection from the premises of the most erudite ape-man of our time.

'Yes?'

'My kingdom is in trouble.'

I nodded in what I endeavoured to make a sympathetic manner. I fear that I was less than successful. The professor leapt from his chair like a bear from a trap. (If anyone should wish to argue my simile, let me assure them that Professor Challenger was as unlike a greyhound as it is possible to be.) He grabbed my shirt collar and pulled my face unpleasantly close to his.

'You think me deranged? Pah!' His voice was like a tidal wave and he held me full in its course. I struggled to prevaricate.

'Perhaps if I had some idea of the location of Ell Ka-Zar..?'

He pushed me back into the chair with an expression of disgust and returned to his original position. The whisky glass was again lifted to his lips and this time it was completely drained.

'I am of the honest and frank belief that the construction of the first domestic building sounded the death-knell of our species! Once able to surround himself with apparently solid and comforting walls, Man did his utmost to banish the world of the exterior from his thoughts. It was the death of courage, of

that species of imagination which led people to make plans for the difficult times and confront them as an immovable force, and the birth of the craven fear of the unknown that paralyses modern man whenever he is exposed to anything and anyone that is in the least bit surprising!'

I waited for him to proceed to more relevant subjects, and after a number of minutes spent berating me for both my failings and those of all other modern men (the sovereign Challenger naturally being excused from the charges) he returned to the subject of his kingdom.

'The name of the place, as you would know if proper attention had been paid to my communication, is Ell Ka-Mar, and where you err, Mr Malone, is in assuming my kingdom to be of the earthly variety!'

Though I made every attempt to conceal it, something within me gave way. It seemed that the worst was true, and that Challenger, Professor George Edward Challenger, that name recited as a mantra by journalists when they wanted to crack the head of a charlatan or unpick the stuffed shirt of an obdurate establishment man, had finally broke.

'Professor Challenger,' I said, trying to affect the old heartiness, 'a heavenly kingdom is the reward of all good men. Do you mean to say that you have received your part of it in advance of the final curtain?'

He smiled a wicked smile and got to his feet. I have never known a man so happy to follow his own route, regardless of how infrequently it has previously been trod. I, who have made more than one unusual journey with him, have often thought that he would prefer always to travel alone, were it not for the fact that it was often convenient to have both witnesses and pack-carriers at hand.

'You are entirely correct,' he said with a clench of one meaty fist, 'in what you say if not in your assessment of an old colleague who believed himself to have earned your trust and respect.'

He uncurled his fist and held it out to me.

'Come along, Malone. My kingdom is indeed of the heavenly sort, and if you step with me into the garden I shall reveal to you the means by which one may attain it.'

What could I have done? Fearing somewhat for my life if I accompanied him, and fearing for it more if I did not (for if Challenger did not do for me it was certain that McArdle would), I took Challenger's hand and went with him into the garden.

A Most Audacious Mechanism

How can I begin to describe the object that confronted my eyes in the garden? The first sensory information that I managed to digest informed me that it was large – of a size to fill the best part of what was quite a large garden. It was roughly cylindrical, the end to my left (which I assumed to be the front end of the apparatus) tapering to a point. It was apparently built from a mixture of metals and wood. Along the side which faced me was a large fin, growing from left to right, and I later learned that an identical fin ran along the opposite side.

‘What is it?’ As I made the enquiry I struggled to take in more details.

The end which I choose to describe as the back was not in my view, and I walked round to examine it as Professor Challenger began to discourse upon the object.

‘This, my dear Malone, is, as I believe to have made perfectly clear, the means by which one can attain the kingdom of Ell Ka-Mar! Is further explanation necessary? Even a journalist cannot be so dense as to require additional elucidation!’

‘I fear that I am so dense, and quite possibly denser still,’ I admitted, ‘for I am still in the dark as to the nature of this mechanism.’

The back of the ship, or the base of the cylinder, revealed itself to have three large holes, though I could not make out what lay beyond them.

‘Is it some engine of war, an impregnable vehicle to take upon the battlefield? With such a mechanism you could win any kingdom.’

I was not convinced that such was the case, and Challenger only confirmed my opinion.

‘Did I not say that my kingdom is not earthly?’ He took a few steps towards the machine. ‘Perhaps you are of the opinion, Malone, that through creating such an engine of war to serve the English monarch some God has seen fit to award me a heavenly kingdom? Which God would that be? Thor? Ares? Or perhaps that fellow from the Old Testament? Come now, young man! You will have to do better than that! For one thing, has the matter of the disintegration machine slipped your insufficient mind?’

‘Of course not,’ I said indignantly, because – need

I say? – it had, temporarily. ‘Poor Mr Nemor. Is he still..?’

‘Yes,’ answered the Professor brightly, ‘he is still... as you so delicately put it. Or as *I* might put it, he remains in a state of permanent disassembly! Ha ha! Though I might occasionally have recourse to a reliable rifle, or even a sturdy battle-axe, I have no truck with the invention of engines of war! Would that all wars were still conducted with fist and foot!’

‘Such an arrangement would doubtless be to your benefit,’ I observed, ‘in view of your impressive physique.’

‘You are too kind, Malone.’ The look on his face was less than grateful.

He gave the mechanism a hearty slap on the side, and it let out a mighty boom. His construction was plainly hollow. ‘Now listen to me,’ he ordered. ‘When I said that my kingdom was heavenly, I meant it!’ He pointed upwards and I looked in that direction. It was a foggy day, as I have already indicated, and this meant that my gaze was blocked by a thick and dark ceiling. However, for one solitary moment, the fog dissipated and the clouds above that cleared, and I found myself looking at blue sky.

I turned to Challenger, who stood with one hand upon the contraption as another man might pose with a prize bullock or a family. I opened my mouth slowly, and allowed the words to form in their own time.

‘Does it fly?’

Professor Challenger let out a mighty cry. ‘Hurrah! The boy has finally got it! Now at last we shall begin to move along at a decent rate of knots.’

‘It does fly!’

‘Not a step forward, yet neither is it a step back! But hurry, time is of the essence. The starter must be quickly finished, as the main course is yet to come!’

‘A flying machine!’

‘Yes, yes.’ Challenger had begun to show distinct signs of irritation and I apologised.

‘You must understand how incredible this is to me, how incredible it will be to everyone!’

Professor Challenger nodded gravely, though I could see that he was struggling to contain his impa-

tience.

I ran forward and threw my arms around his stout torso. 'Professor, you are not insane! I understand everything now!'

With a slight movement of his shoulders he shrugged me away. 'In that case,' he said, 'write it all down before you forget.'

'No, I see it all. With this flying machine-'

He interrupted me, saying, 'I call her the *Rocket*.'

'The *Rocket*! With this flying rocket you have conquered the kingdom of the air! Which, I presume, you have ventured to name Ell Ka-Mar. Let me inform you most sincerely, Professor Challenger, the fact that you remain sane is of the greatest moment to both Edward Malone and the readers of the *Gazette*.'

Challenger could hold himself back no longer. With all the force at the disposal of those mighty lungs he bellowed, 'Get in! At once! And stop jabbering like some idiot politician!' He took hold of a handle which had previously gone unnoticed, at least by this ever-observant correspondent, and wrenched open a door. He put his arms around my body, in grotesque imitation of the affection with which I had earlier embraced him, and bundled me into the stygian darkness of the vessel's interior.

'Professor Challenger! I must protest your treatment of my person!'

There was no reply, and as I attempted to escape from my supine position I saw what little light entered through the door blocked out by a huge and monstrous form. Professor Challenger slammed the door shut behind him – the reverberations through the vehicle's structure made my teeth rattle – and I heard movement towards what I shall term the 'nose' of the vessel.

Abruptly, the lights were on.

I found myself in a tangle of machinery, a spider's-web of pipes and tubes wrapping around me as if to choke the life out of the human foolish enough to have fallen into their grasp. I was dead and buried in an iron coffin. The engine held me and I would not – dare not – escape, for in doing so I would only encounter its likeness in every factory, every mill, every pocket watch and every pair of steel-rimmed spectacles. The floor began to shake; though I outdid it in trembling. I felt the power building and I felt my own drain away. I had fallen into its lair, its place of power, and there...

And there was Challenger.

He was looking at me with the strangest expression. 'Tell me, Malone, do you suffer from the fear of enclosed spaces, known to the so-called savants as

claustrophobia?'

I desired to regain my dignity, but for the moment I had considerable trouble finding my voice.

'Ah, no,' I answered, stumbling over those difficult syllables.

Challenger frowned with disappointment, then turned his back on me. 'A pity,' he said, 'as the next hour would have provided me with the opportunity for a most rigorous and intensified case study of said condition.' He appeared to be fiddling with some controls, though I could not possibly have attributed any purpose to them at that point in time.

Suddenly I felt much better. However unusual might be the situation and vessel in which I found myself, *it was under the control of a man*. Do not demand that I justify how I felt. There are times when we react to events at a level more fundamental than that of mere rationality. Perhaps for one moment I reverted to the cave-man of the type my fathers once were, and it saved me to see a fellow cave-man at the controls.

The machinery, the pipes and the tubes, and the very walls themselves, retreated from my new-found self-control, and I began to get to my feet.

'Challenger, you presume too-'

I fell over. The floor of the *Rocket* seemed somehow unsteady. Challenger looked back over his shoulder and let loose a hurricane of laughter. 'Still looking for your air-legs, eh, Malone? Better be quick; you're going to need them!'

I tried again, and this time managed to steady myself against a fearsome-looking array of cogs and flashing lights. I peered at the lights, attempting to make a determination of their provenance, but injured pride soon returned me to my primary task.

'Professor Challenger, I demand an explanation! You presume too much of our long-standing and possibly soon-to-be-ended friendship. Kidnapping is somewhat beyond the pale, even for you. And I insist that you keep this contraption on the ground until one is provided!'

'Oh, I presume, do I!' he laughed, like a house being torn from the ground. 'And a kidnapping is to be provided?' I scowled; he knew what I meant. 'Malone, prepare yourself for some news. Are you ready?'

I straightened my tie and re-tucked my shirt. 'I am ready.'

'Are you sure?'

'Enough, Challenger – I had but a moment of weakness. I am a newsman, now give me the news!'

'We are in the air!'

'We are-'

‘We are flying!’

‘Ah! Of course we are!’

‘What a scoop for the *Daily Gazette*!’

He was right of course, and the most basic aspect of my personality began to reassert itself. I am a journalist, and if one day I am required to report on Armageddon, after a moment of readjustment I shall do so, though there be no office left in which to file the article. It was time to stop boggling and time to start collecting the facts regarding this most extraordinary machine.

I made to question Challenger on the subject, but he was more close-mouthed than ever, saying nothing but that soon all would be revealed. That much more remained to be revealed made me stagger a little, though it was typical of him to retain information until the potential force of its impact had reached an optimum level.

As nothing more was apparently to be gained from the inventor, I essayed to fathom the secrets of the invention. I was wholly unsuccessful. Perhaps Professor Summerlee, our sceptical colleague in previous adventures, might have made some sense of the mess of panels and pipes – I suspect that even Lord John Roxton would have discerned more than myself – but for the moment I had to content myself with the knowledge that Challenger was apparently at the controls and that we were apparently in the air. I could have verified the latter by opening the door by which we had gained entry to the machine, but I elected against this course of action, for fear that the means of egress might fulfil its purpose rather too eagerly at this dangerous height. There is a similar problem upon fast-moving trains. The only thing to catch my attention was the fact that the holes visible from the rear of the craft were not to be seen from the interior. A wooden wall, littered with the usual mechanical odds and ends (I call them that, though presumably in the scheme of the *Rocket* they had some part to play) separated us from those strange openings.

At length I sat back down on the floor. Nothing could be gained in this situation except a little rest, and I wondered if my shaken nerves would even allow me that much.

True to form, when Challenger realised that I had

given up he provided me with further mystification.

‘Stand up,’ he began, and I followed his instruction. ‘Now you see that panel to the left... No, the other panel, you foolish fellow. Yes, that one. Now pull the first lever from the left and take a look at the far end of the room.’

I had done as he said and before my eyes a portion of the wooden wall slid back to reveal a cubby-hole of sorts. There was a washing bowl, taps and a toilet, and I looked back at Challenger in wonder.

‘This is astonishing.’ He seemed unimpressed with my observation.

‘The journalist is flying through the air at a good many number of miles per hour, and he is impressed by a toilet! I did not intend to shake you up to quite such a degree. Steel yourself for further marvels, then, as if you pull the next four levers of that panel, different sections of the wall will reveal in turn a hammock, a range of nutritious and tasty foods (prepared at my behest before your arrival by my good lady wife), a medical kit and a decanter of whisky with four matching glasses.’

‘What is revealed by the sixth lever?’

‘I see that your usual inquisitiveness begins to return. Whether that is a good thing remains to be decided! The sixth lever will reveal something of the greatest import, and I shall decide when that should occur.’

‘Did you mention four glasses?’

‘I believe that four was the figure mentioned. Now be so good as to make use of the bathroom facilities. We are soon to rendez-vous with that man on whose opinion you once placed so much worth as to collaborate in making him – in the eyes of the public, at least – the judge of my integrity.’

‘Professor Summerlee?’

‘One and the same, though I shall be the last to complain if he has changed.’

‘But he is in South America!’

‘That is correct, Mr Malone. Now kindly prepare yourself, as we are due to meet him in’ – he consulted a set of revolving wheels on the console to his right – ‘approximately five minutes.’

I gave up trying to understand and did as I had been told.

A Surprise Visit

Mr Summerlee, Professor of Comparative Anatomy, was at that moment lying behind an upturned rowing boat and attempting to avoid the worryingly well-aimed arrows of the Sh'Amon tribe of darkest Peru. Unfortunately for he and Mr Herando, the last surviving members of the expedition, they had not even the protection of darkness, as the only light in the jungle came from above the river at their backs, where the trees and plants had been gracious enough to leave a small clearing in the green roof that kept everywhere else in bizarrely-coloured twilight.

'We are experiencing proof positive,' he told his companion, 'that the eyesight of this tribe has singularly failed to atrophy.' He paused to consider the matter as another arrow whistled mere inches over his head. 'Of course, there remains the possibility that other senses have developed to a higher level to compensate.' Another arrow passed over, sliding off the top of his beige tropical hat. 'Hearing, for example.'

Mr Herando seems unusually quiet, he thought to himself, for a man of his notably strong opinions where the biological mechanisms of the South American jungle are concerned. Twisting his head to the left, he noted with sadness that the baritone voice of Mr Herando would never again rumble through the humid corridors of the University of Buenos Aires. An arrow had pierced him through the eye.

Summerlee examined the feathered flight of the arrow with interest. 'Really,' he said out loud, 'this shall have the most interesting consequences for the study of the South American pygmy!'

The sound of his voice evidently aided his assailants in finding their range, as the next arrow pierced the pith helmet and carried it off into the river behind him. Summerlee did his best to burrow down into the mud, but as a virtual rain of arrows began to fall around him, he was forced to recognise that this might very well be the end. He had considered actually crawling under the boat, but it was obvious that to do so would remove all inhibitions of the Sh'Amon, leaving him trapped like a beetle under a chamber pot, whereas at present they preferred to keep their distance, just in case the Englishman revealed himself, under closer examination, to be in possession of certain death-dealing objects of which they were in great awe.

Unfortunately for Professor Summerlee, he was in possession of no such objects, due to their having been kept in the pack carried by the hired hand Santos, who had been the first man to succumb to the less than tender attentions of the pygmies. He had fallen into the river with an arrow through his heart and sweet Amazon had borne him away.

If only, thought Summerlee, I had some means to convey my findings to my colleagues in England. Challenger himself would be forced to admit that I had made quite a find!

But at that moment, as my esteemed companion prepared somewhat prematurely for death (Naples was still some way off) he found himself cast into darkness. A more suggestible man might have suspected that Indian magic was at work, but Professor Summerlee took the more commonsense view that one of the arrows had finally found its target.

Oh well, he thought, here I go.

Within a second the darkness was answered by the screams of the Sh'Amon pygmies, doubtless in jubilation at the death of one they considered their enemy, thought he.

The deductions he made from this thought were twofold. Firstly, that as he did in no wise believe in the continuation of the mind after the death of the body, the body must still be alive. And secondly, that if he was still alive, the darkness of his surroundings must come from a source other than the failing of his own light, so to speak.

From the screams he could hear, the pygmies were dashing in the opposite direction as quickly as their legs could take them. Their eyes, he believed, were probably more attuned to the darkness than his own. What natural cause could effect such darkness? A thundercloud? An erupting volcano? Or had some mighty dinosaur somehow escaped from Maple-White Land? He turned onto his back, visions of flashing teeth and claws running through his mind.

It was none of these things, and yet it did seem alive, spewing steam as it dived towards the river like some terrible iron dragon.

At least, so Summerlee told me, once we had taken him on board.

Once the *Rocket* had passed below the level of the jungle roof the sunlight was able to pass once more through the gap, and it found a most worthy subject

of its illumination in Professor Challenger's astounding machine.

Summerlee cried out, 'It is beautiful!' He got to his feet and tried to clean off the muck in anticipation of being greeted by a gentleman. 'I was able at once,' he later told me, 'to distinguish the fine work of our English foundries.' Sadly he was to be disappointed in one respect, as after the *Rocket* came to rest upon the bank of the river (squashing a number of trees as it did so, which bent as if matchsticks under its weight) the door opened to reveal none other than his old rival Professor Challenger.

I fear this came as quite a blow to Professor Summerlee, but he took it on the chin and moved forward to shake Challenger's hand.

'Professor Challenger,' he began, 'I have made the most remarkable discoveries in the sphere of tribal development.'

'So I see,' replied Challenger, examining the remains of the expedition.

Summerlee pursed his lips, then proceeded. 'I had feared for my success in bringing this information back to England, and... ' He trailed off.

Challenger prompted him. 'Yes?'

In the face of opposition Summerlee's strength returned. 'I am pleasantly surprised to find that I shall, in fact, be able to do so.'

Challenger's face had begun to turn a deep shade of red, and as I exited from the vessel my concern grew that he might finish the job that the pygmies had abandoned.

'For crying out loud,' I told Summerlee, 'ask him about his precious rocket!'

'Your arrival was most propitious,' said the worthy professor after a minuscule pause, 'and I confess to some scientific interest as to how it was effected.'

That was as far as he would go, but Challenger clearly regarded it as a victory. With a smile he said, 'Summerlee, you shall be told everything when the time is right! However, firstly I wish to add Lord John Roxton to our party.'

Before we left Peru, Challenger led us in clearing up the destruction left by the pygmy attack. The rowing-boat was turned right way up, and Summerlee and I were assigned to lifting the bodies of the dead into it. One time while Challenger was back inside the vessel, Summerlee leant over to me and whispered, 'The confounded man is worse than

ever!'

'Are you afraid to say it aloud?' asked I mischievously.

He dropped Mr Herando's feet in the mud and raised himself to his full height.

'How dare you say that! I am afraid of no man! And if I was' – at this point he began to yell – 'that man would not be the infernal Challenger! I demand satisfaction, Malone.'

'And you shall have it,' I replied with evident contrition, 'but for now Mr Herando requires your attention. Do you accept my full and sorrowful apology?'

'I do,' answered Summerlee as he picked up the feet of his former travelling companion. 'Farewell, Mr Herando.' On a count of three we tossed the Argentinian into the boat. We went back to pick up another of the dead. 'And in view of the fact that you have seen fit to retract your shameful accusation, I shall admit that while I feel no fear, I would be unhappy should Challenger, with his infamous temper, decide to leave me behind.'

'You would have a wonderful chance to study the pygmies should he do so.'

'That is quite true,' he concurred. We had finished with the dead, and were now collecting numerous specimens of Sh'Amon technology. He picked up a particularly fierce-looking arrow, the head of which was a furious explosion of iron barbs. 'And yet, I believe that for the moment I shall be content to consider what I have already learnt of them.'

'No time for that!' bellowed Challenger as he emerged from the *Rocket*. 'Adventure awaits us!'

'I feared as much,' said Summerlee. Then to me, 'It is not my imagination – he is definitely worse.'

'You must make allowances. He is a king now, you know, or at least so he tells us.'

Professor Summerlee's reaction does not require description.

Finally Challenger brought a pair of thick ropes out from the *Rocket* (where he kept them hidden I do not know) and had us tie one to each end of the boat. For his part, he tied the other ends of the rope to the nose and the back of the *Rocket*. Then he ushered us inside and we lifted off, carrying the boat as a ghastly gondola beneath us. I wonder what the pygmies made of this bizarre sight. In my nightmares I dream of them worshipping an idol of Challenger and his ship. If that really occurred, let us hope the unholy religion does not spread.

Farewells to Mrs Challenger

The grisly rowing boat had been deposited in Buenos Aires and the *Rocket* had returned to the Challenger residence, stopping *en route* in Kenya to pick up Lord John Roxton, who had been waging a guerilla war against certain unprincipled big game hunters. Though initially he loosed a few rounds upon seeing us in the distance – we all have nightmares of the pterodactyls of Maple-White Land – he was soon gathered unto our collective bosom. He behaved with his usual aplomb upon seeing us emerge from the ship, and he was more than pleased to hear the promise of adventure to come.

Mrs Challenger welcomed us home with a fine spread of food upon the dinner table, and all thought of discussion was banished for the moment as we luxuriated in the finest tastes and smells that all England has to offer. Mrs Challenger made a few polite enquiries of Lord John and Professor Summerlee regarding their respective adventures, but their replies were necessarily quite perfunctory, and the good lady took this not as impoliteness, but as testament to the quality of her kitchen.

After the meal the four of us gathered in the study – a number of volumes had to be transferred upstairs to create enough room – and settled in our upholstered chairs with whisky and cigars. All told, it had been less than five hours since last I had sat there with Challenger.

At first we discussed old times, patted each other on the back over adventures, ribbed each other mercilessly over misadventures, and generally waited for Professor Challenger to decide it was time to give us an explanation. However, he chose to keep his own counsel until shortly after six thirty, at which time the evening edition of the *Gazette* arrived. Mrs Challenger brought it in to us.

‘I thought that you might like to see this,’ she said to her husband. She passed him the folded newspaper then retreated, obviously in fear of an explosion of the type often seen in that household. As she left, she whispered to me, ‘No editorial, indeed!’

For the five seconds that it took Challenger to unfold the newspaper, three of the men in that room did not breath. Indeed, as a precautionary measure

Lord Roxton removed the whisky decanter from Challenger’s reach. I looked at Lord John, he looked at me, and Summerlee looked Challenger dead in the eye as the newspaper was straightened.

Finally, Challenger broke eye contact with Summerlee and regarded the front page.

Then he laughed, and the atmosphere cleared. We all smiled. ‘Who would have thought McArdle would run quite so far with the story! And with his finest bloodhound still out on the trail!’ In a matter of seconds he had read the story and he passed it over to me.

Not possessing Challenger’s facility with the printed word it took me a little longer than him to read the article, but it read as follows:

CHALLENGER THE LUNATIC?

Editorial by McArdle, News Editor

Shocking as it may seem to those who have always regarded him as one of the finest minds of our generation, and unsurprising as it may be for those who have always thought him the most dangerous type of madman, this paper, despite a long-standing and fruitful relationship with Professor George Edward Challenger, famed explorer of Maple-White Land and one of the few men who managed to avoid the general fate as the planet passed through the poison belt (though even to this day there are those who dispute the credibility of these events, despite all evidence to the contrary), is duty-bound to report that said individual appears to have finally gone the way of many of the greatest minds of our age. He claims to be the King of Ell Ka-Mar, and while this paper takes no position on the validity or otherwise of this claim, it must point out that this ‘kingdom’ is not to be found on any map, in any atlas or in any dictionary. Professor Challenger’s extraordinary announcement is to be found on the third page of this very newspaper. ‘The strain of living and working on the very frontier of scientific advance-

ment,' said the noted brain specialist, Professor Quigg ...

There was a good deal more of the same. In fact, it appeared that a major proportion of the newspaper had been devoted to the story.

'Well,' I said to the topic of discussion as I passed the *Gazette* onto Lord John, 'what do you make of that, Professor Challenger? I must say that to find myself so described in a national newspaper would hardly cause me amusement.'

'What do I think of it, Malone?' He gulped down his whisky, giving me opportunity to notice that his face was of a colour which would normally have occasioned a modicum of alarm in me. Thankfully, for once the redness was the result of hilarity rather than ferocity. 'I think the title unusually apt. I think that it has been some time since McArdle last wrote a leader article – he would never have allowed any other journalist to ramble so. Finally, I think it is amusing to see them so ready to write me off! It shows that I have disturbed them to a most agreeable level in the past!'

Lord John had digested the article and examined Challenger's announcement before speaking. Now he handed the newspaper to Professor Summerlee.

'I must say, old boy, you are taking all this extraordinarily well. So is the advertisement a joke or what? Own up, there's a good fellow!'

'I own up to the fact that the advertisement itself was something of a ruse, as I knew it would get Malone down here faster than a Frenchman heading for a romantic tryst, or an Italian fighting a duel.'

'So it is a joke,' said Summerlee. Although he did not think it was, that did not stop him hoping. Challenger had already made too many discoveries for one day, in his opinion. 'You just wanted to get Malone down here sharpish to take a ride in your mechanical Pegasus.'

'I am afraid not,' said Challenger with sincerity. 'Ell Ka-Mar is absolutely real, and we shall travel there in the morning.'

The rest of us looked at each other and shrugged our shoulders. For the moment there was little we could do but play along with his game.

Once each of us had finished his cigar we hailed two hansom cabs and went back to our respective lodgings. I imagine that quite any other inhabitants of the homes of Summerlee or Roxton were more than surprised to find returned men who that very morning had been in Peru and Kenya respectively. It is fervently to be hoped that Mrs Summerlee and Lady Roxton – if such personages existed, as neither man was wont to talking about his domestic life –

were not engaged in dalliances with their gardeners when the husbands returned.

The two other men shared one cab, as they were heading in the same direction. I took the other, and though originally fatigue led me to bid the driver take me home, within a few minutes duty bade me instead travel to the offices of the *Gazette*. Upon my arrival I was pounced on by McArdle and several of the paper's other luminaries, but I was forced to follow Challenger's example in requiring them to wait for the explanation (or as much of it as I was able to give them). Much piqued by my mention of the fact that on the morrow I was to make a most unusual journey, it was all I could do to prevent them reading the article describing the day's astonishing events over my shoulder as I wrote it. In fact, I swear that once, having an uncanny feeling of being watched, I turned to see McArdle at the top of a convenient flight of stairs trying to read my work with the aid of a pair of binoculars!

My report finally complete, I threw it to the wolves and found myself an empty room. I was lying on a couch with the door locked before the baying began. I ignored it and attempted to snatch as many winks as were possible under the circumstances. The noise outside the door died down once they realised that I would not be stirred, but as they moved away I heard arguments begin to spring up as they fought over the significance of my article.

When dawn broke through the disreputable grimy



windows of the office I awoke immediately. In all truth, I had not slept well, with thoughts of what was to follow. In view of the possibly fatal consequences of an extended adventure with Professor Challenger my first action upon waking was to write a short will, leaving the contents of my desk to McArdle, the copyright of my books to my mother (each of them so far had met with reasonable, though not outstanding, success; I had yet to try my hand at fiction), and what money I had in the bank to Mrs Challenger, as I suspected that Challenger himself had probably spent every penny he had on his beloved rocket-ship. Little was I to know that the following day, my will would be held up as proof – on the front page of the *Gazette*, no less – that I had gone to my certain death on a suicide mission. Luckily, my mother has more sense than to believe everything she reads, however sensational.

My second action was to unlock the door and then rush to the bathroom – a wake of eager reporters formed behind me as I passed through the office. ‘No comment,’ I said as I went to wash my face. One person did ask a pertinent question for which I had an answer, concerning the fact that Challenger’s wonder ship had never been spotted by the populace of London. ‘When you walk through London, even on the rare occasions that the fog clears, do you not take a great deal of care as to where you put your feet?’

After confirming with McArdle that I was going on a journey with Challenger and getting confirmation from same that I would be paid for the time I was away, I grabbed my coat and hat from the room where I had slept and set off once more to Challenger’s house.

It was actually Professor Summerlee who opened the door for me. As I stepped into the house and walked through to the study I saw Mrs Challenger deep in discussion with Lord John Roxton in an ante-room full of dust-covered documents. She noticed my looking and gave me a wave, turning my face crimson with the thought that my gaze might well have been thought accusatory.

‘Come into the study, Malone,’ ordered Summerlee. ‘Challenger is in the garden with his blessed rocket. Everything is all set – he wants us to be off before the press is here in force. We have heard from the *Gazette* that your article is expected to well and truly set the cat among the pigeons!’

‘That’s true,’ said Lord John, coming up behind us. We remained on our feet because our usual chairs had been removed from the study. ‘Challenger’s already had one telegram from the Prime Minister and three from the Minister of Defence! They want

us to stop everything while they take a look at his flying boat.’

I laughed. ‘I can imagine Challenger’s reaction!’

Summerlee became grave. ‘His reaction was as one might have expected – had the Prime Minister himself been there he would surely have received the kick delivered in the actual event to the telegram boy. However, the matter may be more serious than expected. This morning I heard a rumour from a member of my club that the Defence Minister might even go so far as to send the army down here to grab the thing.’

‘Hence the rush to get going.’

‘Exactly,’ said Summerlee. ‘If you have yet to eat breakfast-’ I indicated that such a luxurious interlude had yet to open up in my schedule. ‘Mrs Challenger has some bacon and eggs ready in the kitchen. Then clean yourself up’ – I was not aware that I was so ruffled as his tone indicated – ‘and be ready to lift by seven.’

I nodded and followed his orders with no small enthusiasm, at least as far as breakfast was concerned. The food provided by Mrs Challenger was of the usual wonderful quality, tasting exquisite enough to satisfy the most committed gourmand and being filling enough to prepare the boldest adventurer. I do not lay claim to those titles personally, but Professor Challenger and Lord John Roxton would be justified in doing so, and they seemed to be fully prepared for the wildest adventures that might befall us.

By seven I was in the *Rocket*. Professor Challenger had made use of the hours since dawn to secure our four upholstered chairs inside the vessel.

‘A capital idea,’ I declared, and Challenger graced me with a smile.

‘I thought that the place could use a little comfort after I saw you down on the floor the other day.’

‘It was fully as uncomfortable as it looked. These chairs shall be a boon to all who travel in the good ship *Rocket*!’

‘That is more true than you might have thought,’ said Challenger with a crafty wink. ‘The next journey of this bird will last a little longer than its last.’

‘I hardly think so!’ My error in contradicting him was proven by the traditional reddening of his face. Undeterred, I soldiered on. ‘On our last voyage, we travelled to Peru and back, stopping off at Argentina and Kenya on the way. It took less than five hours. I cannot conceive of a voyage that could possibly be appreciably longer!’

‘That is correct,’ he thundered. The floor of the rocket-ship trembled in sympathy. ‘You cannot con-

ceive of such a voyage. Indeed, you can conceive of nothing! That, Malone, is why you are a reporter! You cannot conceive for yourself, and so you report upon the conceptions of others!

I exited sheepishly from the ship, and found Summerlee, Roxton and Mrs Challenger waiting outside. Summerlee was sitting on a hamper of freshly prepared concoctions from the Challenger kitchen, while Roxton and Mrs Challenger were once again deep in conversation. As Summerlee was evidently out of earshot of their low voices he made a conspicuous show of ignoring them. I made a mental shrug, and addressed the whole party.

‘Professor Challenger appears to be ready.’

‘Well, this is it, then,’ said Mrs Challenger sadly, half-turning to me. ‘Off you go again.’

Roxton made eye contact with her once again, but broke it embarrassedly when he realised that Summerlee and I were also watching. ‘Off we go,’ he said to her, flushing under his collar. He entered the ship, taking pains to avoid our curious eyes.

‘Goodbye to you both,’ said Mrs Challenger to the two of us that remained. ‘Good luck on your journey, and remember that it may prove to be more dangerous than my husband suspects. Caution is not his strong point, and at times you may need to provide it for him.’

‘Despite his most fearsome roars,’ answered Summerlee, ‘I shall endeavour to follow your wise counsel. Farewell, Lady Challenger!’

‘No Lady I,’ she laughed, ‘but merely a humble queen.’

Summerlee paused for a second and lifted his ear to the wind. ‘Do you hear that?’

I confessed that I did not.

‘I shall inform Challenger that it is time to depart.’

He followed Lord John.

‘Farewell, then,’ I said to Mrs Challenger. She was about to reply when the wind brought to both of ears the sound of a multitude of horses clattering their way along the roads in our direction. A further few seconds and we could here the shouts as infantry men were brought forward to cover the front of the house.

‘Goodness me,’ said Mrs Challenger with irritation, ‘do they expect George to fly his rocket out of the front door!’ There was the sound of knocking at the door, and a loud voice began to make itself heard over the noise of the soldiers and horses. I presume it was a bailiff of some kind, come to detain the *Rocket* at His Majesty’s pleasure. ‘I suppose I should go and ready some cakes and tea for them. They will be so disappointed to find that the bird has flown.’

‘Goodbye, Mrs Challenger.’

‘Wait, there is one more thing.’ I confess to my readers that I felt slightly ill at ease, worried that some confession regarding Lord John was in the offing. She reached into a concealed pocket and took out a ring. The band itself was thin and narrow, though it was made to fit an enormous finger. No stone was mounted upon its diameter, but instead a strange set of intertwining metal spirals, like a minuscule brooch. ‘Please give this to my husband.’ I agreed and moved towards the ship.

She called after me. ‘Give my love to Professor Challenger.’ I assured her that I would, and then I was once more within Challenger’s flying womb. Summerlee and Roxton had already taken their seats and I followed suit.

Challenger looked back at us. ‘Prepare for lift-off!’ he shouted, and then we were on our way. The journey into adventure had begun!

Inside the Spaceship

'Gentlemen,' announced Challenger, 'we are on our way to the Moon!'

If any other man had made such an announcement, we would have laughed.

'Jolly good,' said Lord John Roxton. 'Luckily we've brought plenty of sandwiches.'

Professor Summerlee appeared to be equally unshaken. 'Shall I have the opportunity to exercise my skills in comparative anatomy once we arrive?'

'Well!' said I. I may not have laughed, but I was certainly surprised.

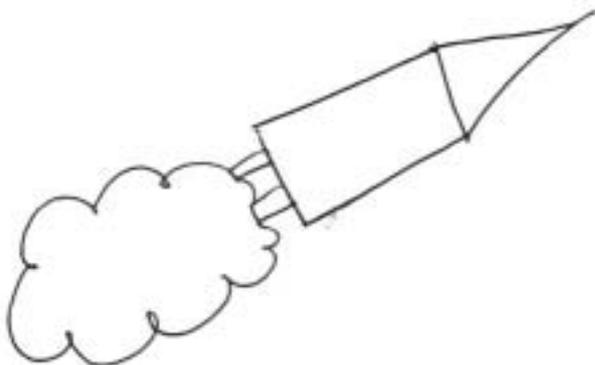
Professor Challenger seemed rather disappointed that the reaction to his statement had been so muted. 'For goodness' sake, you fellows, we're not talking about a walk in the woods!' He had come away from the controls – apparently the course had been set – and had turned his upholstered chair to face our three. He reclined as far as he was able and eyed us suspiciously. 'Did you sneak into my laboratory and consult my notes?'

'I did nothing of the sort,' said Lord John. 'Professor, if you produce a dozen marvels a day the twelfth will always receive less rapturous applause than the first. You must learn to pace yourself.'

'And besides,' continued Summerlee, 'your good lady wife saw fit to inform us of the fact this morning. She thought it unfair that we should be taken off to the Moon without having any say in the matter.'

'Well, this is a fine conspiracy! What about you, Malone, were you with the plotters?'

Summerlee answered for me. 'He was not. Mrs Challenger was persuaded that the reactions of the journalist should be honest and natural.'



'Her desire was not to deprive you of your enjoyment.'

'Even so,' said Challenger, still far from placated.

'King George,' I declared, 'consider my surprise to stand for the surprise of my co-travellers, and console yourself with the thought that it is the movements of my heart that shall be a matter of public record. In these circumstances Professor Summerlee and Lord Roxton may be dismissed as irrelevant.'

'Why, many thanks for your consideration,' said Lord Roxton.

Summerlee took up the thread. 'To dismiss us at this point would probably involve a fall of several hundred feet. I cannot add the weight of my opinion in support of this proposition.'

'That only makes it more attractive!' Challenger took the opportunity to gleefully make adverse comment upon the weight or otherwise of Summerlee's opinion.

When the chance arose, I made to say my piece. 'We are on our way to the Moon, you say?'

'I apologise,' said Challenger, and it was rare to hear those words issue from that fearsome throat. 'I allowed these poltroons to divert my attention away from the divulgence of necessary information. How much did she tell you?' This last was aimed at Summerlee.

'Not a great deal,' he replied. 'She simply informed us that this evening we would stand upon bright Luna. The rest is yours to tell.'

Challenger was much heartened by this news, and he prepared to sermonise on the adventure to come.

'You do not need to stand, you know,' said Professor Summerlee. 'This is not the British Biological Society.' To me he said, 'He is insufferable, is he not? Give him five words to say and he turns them into a speech.'

'You are correct,' said Professor Challenger, declining to re-seat himself, 'in stating that this is not the Biological Society. However, it might as well be, for all that the others are worth in comparison to we two.' He made a full, deep bow in Summerlee's direction. That modest and dedicated scientist rolled his eyes while Roxton and I cheered. 'Malone, we are indeed on our way to the Moon. In particular (and it is necessary to be particular, as the Moon is a world not unlike our own, though everything there happens

to be grey in colour, with various and differing areas and countries), we are on our way to the kingdom of Ell Ka-Mar – the country of which, you may have heard it said, I am the reigning monarch.’

‘I apologise for speaking of more mundane matters,’ said Summerlee, ‘but is there any chance of our learning how this contraption of yours works? I confess to a great deal of curiosity on the matter.’

‘The details are too technical to go into at the present time, as we shall soon reach our initial destination, but-’

‘Surely the Moon is not so close already!’ exclaimed Lord John.

‘I am afraid not. First we are making a short hop to a much closer locale. But to continue, the motor of the *Rocket* utilises certain advances I have made in the realm of atomic physics, which allow the ship to be propelled at high speeds. Certain other devices, by producing waves of sound which interfere with the noise of the engine, ensure that flight is virtually silent.’

‘Congratulations on a fine piece of engineering,’ I said to the inventor. ‘Why have you not published anything with regard to your atomic physics? Surely such an advance would be of the greatest interest to the whole world!’

‘It already is,’ said Professor Summerlee drolly. ‘Did you not hear the army laying siege to the Challenger residence?’

Challenger nodded in vigorous agreement. ‘They are ignorant of the physics of the atom, but they know that whatever engine powers this first lady of flight must be worth having. They shall never have it!’

‘But Professor, this atomic power of yours could change the world! It could feed the hungry and heat the houses of the poor! Why must you keep it hidden?’

‘Because it is too dangerous. Was it the Home Office that sent the Army to knock on my door? Was it the Salvation Army? No, it was the Ministry of Defence. Atomic power can all too easily be turned to destruction. Let me explain-’

‘Here he goes again,’ sighed Summerlee.

I shushed him. ‘You have no interest in the matter?’

‘This is the newspaper report of his invention. I shall wait for the scientific journal.’

Professor Challenger cleared his throat and Summerlee waved for him to go on.

‘Thank you,’ said Challenger. ‘We know from our own experience that the Earth has a core of molten lava. Now, imagine this if you can: everything

around us, the chairs we sit on, the air we breathe, and the wood and steel that separate us from the clouds (we are now hovering above London, by the way) is made up of tiny atoms, everything. Think of each of these as being like the Earth. When a hole is pricked in the Earth a volcano erupts, a vital outpouring of that long-withheld kinetic energy. The atom is the same – open it up and all the energy contained within is released. This is the principle on which my space rocket operates. However, it is also the principle upon which a bomb could be devised. A mass outpouring of such energy could incinerate entire cities!’

All of us were silent for some minutes as we contemplated the possible result of Challenger’s invention. ‘Hence your decision to keep quiet.’

‘Hence. Perhaps if one day a more enlightened government ruled at Westminster, things might change.’

‘You realise, of course,’ piped up Summerlee, ‘that once people are aware that such a process is possible, it is only a matter of time before it is rediscovered.’

‘Yes I do, and I have chosen to let the matter rest with the conscience of the next man who discovers it. However, if I am still around, and he makes the wrong decision, I might well decide to take a hand in changing his mind!’

‘Well said, old man!’ Lord Roxton led us in a cheer. ‘Hip hip!’

‘Hooray!’ shouted Summerlee and I.

Professor Challenger held out his hands and quieted us. There was a drop of water on his cheek. On any other man I would not have hesitated to call it a tear. ‘My friends,’ he said, ‘- and I feel that after all our adventures, I may call you that – I thank you for your support.’

We all cheered again.

‘Now,’ said Challenger. ‘Before we continue on our journey to the moon I have a little surprise for you, Malone.’

‘Surprise is now my closest companion,’ I answered. ‘He is an old bedfellow, and it would be churlish to begrudge him another visit.’

Challenger smiled and raised himself out of his chair like a mountain pulling itself up from the roots. ‘Come with me,’ he said. The three of us removed ourselves from our chairs and followed Challenger to the front of the cabin. We stood there a moment while he fiddled about with the controls. ‘Usually this panel would remain in place, as to have it open during interplanetary flight might prove dangerous, due to the effect of cosmic rays and such.’ We three

listeners nodded wisely. 'Look at this!'

And look we did, as a wooden panel of three metres in width and two in height (I intend to use the European measurements here, due to their having always found favour with Challenger) drew aside to reveal a window onto the outside world. What did we see there but the offices of the *Daily Gazette*, the windows full of excited and frightened faces, photographers hastily setting up their equipment, artists sketching for all they were worth and my fellow journalists scribbling away in shorthand? This last group seemed less motivated than the others (although this may be my vanity speaking), because they knew full well that a certain colleague of theirs was getting the full 'scoop'. I assumed one particularly animated figure to be McArdle himself, doing his utmost to pass on some last minute instructions. Of course I could hear nothing of what he might have been saying.

However, though I previously wrote 'What did we see there but...?', it soon became apparent that the members of my trade were not the only occupants of the *Gazette* building. We realised this upon a clouding of the Challenger brow – and a clouding of that brow had been known in the past to result in thunderbolts and lightning in the vicinity. Following his gaze, we saw that upon the topmost level of the building, in the chambers of the newspaper's owner, Lord Rample-Smith, no less, servants in His Majesty's Army were preparing to launch an artillery round at our beautiful *Rocket*!

'Disgraceful!' said Summerlee.

'Absolutely, old fellow,' said Lord John Roxton. 'How do they expect to bring down a bird this size with such a low-calibre cannon! I wouldn't want those fellows along on a rhinoceros hunt!'

For a moment Challenger was lost for words. Then he opened a little drawer in the console and took out what appeared to be a cannibalized telephone mouthpiece which was attached to the console by a long and curling wire. He flicked a switch mounted on the side of the mouthpiece and began to speak as if he were using a telephone. Though we heard nothing but his unamplified voice, the effect was soon visible

as the people in our view, soldiers and journalists both, put their hands tight over their ears.

'Put aside your puny weapons,' ordered Challenger. 'There comes a time to put aside childish things. Hear my words! End all war! Cease the exploitation of others! Forget foolish religions and devote your lives to the study of science! As I, Professor George Edward Challenger, speak, so shall it come to pass!'

With that, he switched off the speaking-machine, closed the window panel and pulled half a dozen levers. He turned back to us and said, 'We are on our way, gentlemen.'

'Challenger, really...' I said.

'What?' he thundered.

'You laid it on a little thick back there, don't you think?'

'Of course he did,' said Professor Summerlee. 'Kingship would never be enough for this megalomaniac, I knew it from the start. Challenger will not be satisfied until they make him God!'

His professorial rival disagreed and tried to maintain his dignity after what had, after all, been a rather odd thing to do. 'Nonsense. I simply gave them food for thought. It cannot do any harm.'

'He could be right, you know, fellows,' said I. 'Perhaps in the storm of indignation that will doubtless follow some bright spark might pipe up and say, "Well, maybe it isn't such a terrible idea, after all."'

'Even so. It smacks too much of the actions of the Vernian crazy-man for my liking.' That was Summerlee's final word on the matter, which did not bode well for the voyage to come. Roxton and I did our best to make him accede to the view that it was nothing but a harmless prank, but to no avail, and it looked like the large cabin area might prove too small after all, with two such personalities in conflict within it.

'Here we go again,' said Lord John.

'Off to the moon!' shouted Challenger, trying to inject proceedings with rather more enthusiasm. Let it be recorded that his efforts met with much more success when he brought out the whisky and cigars.

Three Englishmen and an Irishman in an Interplanetary Spacecraft

Challenger was always prone to showboating, although I suppose that in the circumstances it was quite justified.

‘What do you think of that!’ he cried, as irritatingly pleased with himself as ever.

‘I’m reminded of nights spent in Africa,’ said Lord John, taking the cigar from his mouth, ‘with her shining above, the monarch of the skies, with the stars her handmaidens...’ He raised the whisky glass to his lips, turned it bottom up, closed his eyes, and let the golden fluid slide down his throat. ‘And now,’ he continued, tipping his head back as we all looked at him in bewilderment, ‘I am reminded of nights spent with the monarch of Denmark’s wife, a charming lady...’

He fell silent. We waited. Was he to resume his story? The answer was no, as we realised when the cigar began to fall from his hand. Challenger leapt forward with all the alacrity he had previously demonstrated when being pursued by the beasts of Maple-White Land, but was unable to catch the ill-intentioned tobacco stick before it touched down. He scooped it up in one great hand, scowling at the ashen mark upon the polished floorboards.

‘He’ll pay. Oh how he’ll pay!’ laughed Summerlee, earning himself a look from Challenger which might have been used to tan cow-hides.

‘And yet,’ I said, ‘the whisky glass remains in his hand.’

Challenger saw fit to allow a pause in his glowering at Summerlee and informed me, ‘The first thing a gentleman learns is to never drop his whisky glass! The second thing-’ he began, but what would surely have been a most accurate observation on the upper classes was interrupted by Summerlee, never willing to let pass a chance to exacerbate the friction between them.

‘Is not to split his infinitives, dear Challenger! You realise that you’re setting Malone a bad example – and the nation’s journalists need no further encour-

agement to mangle the King’s English!’

Challenger smiled, and although I continued to listen, I returned my gaze to the window.

‘You are a professor in comparative anatomy, are you not?’

‘You know I am,’ replied Summerlee, rather haughtily. I could imagine how he would be pushing back his shoulders and lifting his nose in the air. ‘However, that does not mean-’

‘Ah! Ah! Ah!’ said Challenger, doubtless wagging a finger.

The Moon was beautiful.

‘In comparative anatomy, I repeat, and thus, one would assume, unless you are a complete nincompoop – a condition from which I have, though lacking hard evidence as yet, suspected you to suffer – a believer in Charles Darwin’s theories on evolution. Would you concur?’

A halo surrounded her, caused by the fact that Challenger had taken the *Rocket* to a position which placed Lady Moon between ourselves and Master Sun. Thus, he explained, we were protected from the harmful effects of cosmic rays emanating from our local star. To benefit my readers, I had asked Challenger what those harmful effects might be. His answer, once I had sifted through sackfuls of verbiage disguising the fact that he wasn’t quite certain, seemed to be that anything might happen. We could be fried like sausages! Or we might find our bodily chemistries strangely altered, turning we four into beings that would be regarded as fantastic upon our return to Earth.

‘This line of questioning is-’

‘Ridiculous. Yes, I know,’ said Challenger.

Why, one might ask, did Challenger bring us halfway around the Moon in order to approach with the window open? Well, that takes us back to my initial point, i.e. that Challenger was a showboater. He wanted to show off. Need I confess that I’m glad he did? The Moon was beautiful beyond human



words, with her dark heart and her golden halo. If Challenger's Moon-dwellers truly existed – a fact by no means yet proven (although in view of the fact that he did possess a Moon-rocket, we were all prepared to believe him in other Moon-matters, pending further data) – their poetry, if they wrote any, must have been lovely. On the other hand, they would never see her like this, with starshine on her shoulders and a twinkle in her eye. In fact, I considered, the Earth would probably play a large part in their poetry, hanging in their sky as it must. I wondered what they had to say about us? Nothing good, in all likelihood, I smiled to myself. After all, the only Earthman they had met was Challenger!

'I merely want to draw your consideration to the idea that evolution applies not only to the kingdom of animals, but also to that of language. To boldly split,' he paused there, probably to grimace his best approximation of a smile, 'the infinitive is no crime, if it aids comprehension! Language lives, no less than any animal, and it must grow, change or die!' I imagined him folding his arms and sitting back in his chair with an air of triumph.

The Moon seemed larger than before.

'A very interesting hypothesis,' replied Summerlee, a little calmer now that Challenger had turned to more civilised methods of debate, 'and yet a simplistic one. Firstly, you must consider that evolution, as I see it, does not take place within a single organism. Through mating choices, certain characteristics are passed on to the next generation, while others are not. How, then, does this apply to a language? The process is more complex than you indicate.' Challenger pshawed. 'Secondly, if one ignores

the rules of a language, whatever the short term benefits might be, comprehension in the long term could only be impaired.'

I realised that I could no longer see the stars.

'Your mistake,' responded Challenger, 'is in believing that speech conforms to-'

'Challenger!' I shouted. 'We're crashing!'

'There,' said Summerlee, 'his utterances were perfectly grammatical and we understood them perfectly. Down your route lies chaos, Challenger!' I heard him get to his feet. 'Incidentally, Challenger, are we, indeed, crashing?'

The groaning of wood and a subsequent heavy thud announced that Challenger had thrown himself to his feet.

'Of course we're not,' he said with a rumble. As Summerlee moved to stand at my shoulder, Challenger rushed to the control panel. He pulled one lever, pushed another and twisted a third till it fell right off. 'Of course we're not.'

We were still moving. Something Challenger had done had switched on an enormous torch, evidenced by the cone of light which now emanated from the *Rocket's* nose. With horror I realised I could discern that light's termination upon the surface of the Moon. The diameter of that circle's termination was growing exponentially. No longer our sweetheart Mistress Luna was she, but rather a cold-hearted Milady, eager to crush us to her bosom! We were going to crash!

'Do not become alarmed, my friends,' said Challenger, frowning at the control panel, 'but I think you had better hold onto something.'

The crash was not as bad as it might have been. I awoke to the sound of Challenger slapping me in the face. A few seconds later the pain from his blows reached me and I cried out, 'Stop! I have woken!' I took my first conscious breath of the thin, dry Moon-air.

'Thank goodness,' said the brute, 'I wondered if we'd lost you for a moment!' He helped me get to my feet. My surroundings were quite astonishing. 'Sorry to wake you like that, Malone old boy. You know how much I hate to hit a journalist!'

I tried to smile. 'All your practice was not in vain.'

I have now reached the most astonishing part of my story. Well, at least the most astonishing part of my story so far – let me assure you that there is much – worse or better? – let us just say, *more* to come. While on Earth I had many amazing adventures with Professor Challenger, Lord John Roxton and Professor Summerlee, but our exploits once we headed into space were even more incredible. I am

sure that when this account is published, there will be many who ask why I delayed so long in making these journeys a matter of public record. The convenient answer would be that I was following the instructions of Challenger, naturally cautious in light of government attempts to steal his invention. Hold to that explanation if you are the kind of reader who chooses not to confront the unknown, who would rather content oneself with a pat solution rather than learning the terrible truth – and the truth *is* terrible. The actual reason for this account being written and released at such a late date will be revealed before this tale ends. There will be many among you who will remember the article I filed with the *Gazette*. Was not that the full story? Obviously not, as that piece of journalism took our group from the Earth to the Moon, around her serene majesty, and then back again, without further incident. For reasons which will become clear, I described our outward journey and our return home, but neglected to mention what happened in between. (Even so, I believe McArdle got a pretty good story out of the whole affair! People don't go to the Moon every day! Or at least people from our planet don't...)

I was standing on the Moon, looking at the Earth. An odd irony, that Earth never looks so beautiful as when you are three hundred and eighty thousand kilometres away from her – a fact that has become progressively more true as this twentieth century has progressed. While this view of my home was amazing, my surroundings were no less so. I was a few metres away from the crashed *Rocket* – I presume that Challenger had pulled me out before trying to revive me. The ship appeared to be relatively undamaged, and had come to rest on its side. When I questioned my rescuer, he explained that at the last minute he had brought the *Rocket* under some semblance of control and brought her in to land suddenly and at a very sharp angle. The forces caused by such rapid turning and deceleration had caused the less hardy of us to black out – it was an exaggerated version of the effect you might have felt when a steam train turns a corner at high speed, whereby you are slightly pressed to the left or right. Professor Summerlee had now received the slightly unkind attentions of our gorilla-like nurse, and was rubbing his eyes a metre or two away from me. As Challenger switched his attentions to Lord John Roxton – who had, in any case, slept through the whole approach – Professor Summerlee opened his eyes and became the third man from our third rock from the sun to see the surface of the Moon close up.

As Professor Challenger and I had done before

him, he looked to the Earth, he looked to the *Rocket*, and then he looked at the landscape around us. The ship had landed at the bottom of a wide valley, or perhaps a dell, the sides of which rose up to form our horizons on each side.

'We've landed in a crater!' said Summerlee, and when he said it, it made perfect sense. We had indeed ended up at the bottom of one of the many craters on the Moon's surface, some of which are visible from the Earth. 'The ground, like dust!' Still sitting, he was letting a handful of the moondust trickle between his fingers. 'Is the whole planet like this, Challenger?'

'Not to my knowledge,' answered Challenger, who had wearied of slapping Lord Roxton's face. He released his hold upon his patient's shirt-front, and I watched as the unconscious head fell slowly towards the ground. 'The rest of the planet is much like our own Earth, with grassy fields, swamps, icy wastes, cities and everything one might wish for, except, as I have said, for the fact that everything is grey. This fine dust,' he bent down to examine it more closely, 'is unfamiliar to me. Finer than sand,' – he caught up a little in his hand, stuck out a tongue which wouldn't have shamed the mother of Grendel, and dipped it in the stuff – 'and tasteless. Dead. Hmm.' One mighty paw stroked his impressive chin. 'Probably the result of the special conditions existing within the crater. Perhaps the remains of the impacting meteor which caused the crater in the first place.'

Professor Summerlee nodded in agreement. 'Very interesting, Challenger, but this is hardly the stuff kingdoms are made of, is it?'

'As I said, dear Summerlee, the rest of the world is as bountiful and glorious such as must cause even the coldest fish among men to cry with joy! And the people, so full of boundless happiness and welcome!



You will be astonished!

Professor Summerlee, stung by the insult, was all set to make a pithy rejoinder, but I cut him off at the pass, observing that Challenger's welcome must have been very warm indeed, if they made him their king, before asking, 'Could one of you explain why Lord Roxton fell so slowly to the ground?'

'Certainly,' said Challenger, getting to his feet. Summerlee, realising that his position on the floor might be considered less than elegant, followed suit. 'It is quite simple. A large magnet holds a pin more firmly than a small magnet. Planets, from my experience, exert a similar force upon anything in their vicinity. The Moon is a smaller planet than our Earth, therefore it holds us less firmly.'

'That seems clear enough,' I replied.

'Of course it does,' said Summerlee, 'although it doesn't explain why the Moon remains in place, spinning in a circle, rather than being dragged towards the Earth.'

'The theory needs refining,' replied Challenger, 'but this is not the time for idle chit-chat. A new world awaits you, gentlemen!'

We heard somebody mumbling behind us. 'Not now, your highness, I must go to the Moon...'

Professor Challenger strode over and gave him one good, healthy slap across the face. 'Wake up, Roxton,' he yelled. The echoes made Summerlee and I put our hands over our ears, but either the slap or the yelling did the job, and Lord John Roxton got somewhat unsteadily to his feet.

'Thanks for that, old man. Might have been lying there for hours, otherwise.'

'You would have deserved no less!' said Challenger with feeling. 'The whisky you drank was to have lasted us the entire trip!'

Lord John looked at his feet rather sheepishly. 'I'm sorry about that.'

Challenger scowled at him, then turned to me and

said quietly, 'Fortunately, I saw fit to install a small distillery in a secret compartment in the *Rocket*, so there's no fear of going short.'

I laughed and clapped him on the back. 'Three cheers for foresight!'

Professor Summerlee agreed. 'A man without whisky is a sorry creature indeed.'

'Now it is time to introduce you to the true marvels that our new-found mistress has to offer,' proclaimed Challenger. 'Let us hope that our mutual spouse, lovely Earth, does not learn of our promiscuity!'

'Does Mrs Challenger know about all the ladies with whom you are keeping company?' I enquired of him.

'Follow me!' he cried, beckoning us on with one trollish arm. 'To Ell Ka-Mar, the city on the Moon!'

'We are already there?' asked Lord Roxton.

'I would not say so if it were not true,' said Challenger gruffly. 'Although we held our position relative to the Sun and the Moon as we approached, the Moon was still moving in its course around the Earth. Thus, the surface of the Moon was turning, from our perspective. Although our final landing was somewhat sudden, I had timed our approach accurately.'

'To Challenger's kingdom!' I cried, and Roxton endorsed those sentiments with a cheer (cut short when he realised how much it hurt his head).

Professor Challenger began to climb up the hillside, and we followed. The dusty nature of the ground made the going difficult, but the low gravity of the Moon compensated, and soon we reached the ridge along the top of the crater-hole. Our ascent had thrown up a lot of dust, and until it settled we saw nothing. When it settled, what the four of us saw was so horrible that not even Summerlee thought it appropriate to make a joke at Challenger's expense.

The King of Ell Ka-Mar

‘This is my fault,’ said Professor Challenger, sitting among the ruins with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. The fine grey dust covered him from head to toe.

After the dust had slowly fallen to the ground, leaving our view from the crater’s rim unimpaired, we had seen a dead city. ‘Ell Ka-Mar!’ had cried Challenger, but with anguish instead of joy. We had stood sadly by while he leapt down the side of the crater, bellowing with rage. Within three or four bounds, because of the Moon’s relatively low gravity, he had reached the nearest of the ruined buildings, and we watched, powerless to help, as his first touch caused what little remained of it to crumble away.

‘That can’t be true,’ Summerlee was saying to reassure him. ‘You could never have known.’

Challenger shook his head. With his pale coating and mournful features, he looked for all the world like the spirit of the souls lost when the city died.

‘I knew – they had asked for my help, you see. But none of us thought the danger so imminent! If only we had returned sooner! But now they are dead, all dead, and I’m to blame. A whole city died with the name Challenger the curse upon its lips!’

He fell silent for a moment, before a new horror came to mind. ‘From what they told me to expect, the rest of the Moon is probably just as devastated.’

Consoling somebody in such a situation is impossible. Worse than impossible, it is insulting, but I had to try, and it was not as if Challenger was incapable of taking a few insults on the chin. ‘We haven’t found any bodies,’ I pointed out.

Challenger merely looked at me dolefully, and left it to Summerlee to reply. ‘Look at the state of the city, Malone! It’s been completely destroyed, every brick in every building annihilated, till nothing is left but dust! Do you think anybody could have survived that?’

I shrugged, and for a few moments more, there was silence. Lord Roxton was the next to speak.

‘Challenger – George.’ The use of his Christian name provoked a response from the Professor, but even that scowl was heart-breakingly lifeless. ‘I think it’s about time you gave us the full story, old boy. Straighten everything out before we head back to Earth.’

Challenger sighed deeply, causing a tiny hurricane in the dust clouds about him, but he got to his feet. ‘Yes, I suppose you’re right. The time for secrecy and showmanship is gone. But let’s go back to the ship first. There’s nothing to be done here.’

‘And in any case,’ said Summerlee, ‘we could all use a glass of whisky.’

‘Whisky?’ said Roxton, perking up a little, then remembering himself. ‘Sorry.’

‘I began working on the *Rocket* shortly after the episode of the Poison Belt,’ said Challenger, as we all sat back in our upholstered chairs. Each of us had a glass of the whisky freshly produced by Challenger’s high-speed distillery, except Lord John, who contented himself with some coffee. Summerlee was filling his pipe with tobacco from his pouch, but nobody else had elected to smoke. This was no time for cigars. ‘If such an event could happen once, there is every chance that it could happen twice, thrice or four times every Wednesday! Imagine if the Earth entered a poison belt which, instead of rendering the people of Earth unconscious, killed them outright! And poison belts are by no means the only astral calamity lurking in wait for the Earth as she sails in apparent serenity through the cosmos. Evidence of this we have seen outside, though I wish we had not.’

‘Knowing that others could not be relied upon to rise to the challenge, I made it my own duty to develop a space-craft, which, in case of emergency, could be used to carry people away from the dying Earth.’ He paused, seeing that I had a question.

‘But the *Rocket* is so small. Though you know I would not wish to belittle this wonderful ship, she could carry only six or seven in comfort, perhaps as many as twenty in a pinch. Does that mean you had planned to hand your invention over to the government after all, in the end, for mass production?’

‘Hmm, rumbled, aren’t I? The fact of the matter is, Malone, that the *Rocket* is a prototype, and that, yes, it was my intention to give construction plans to the government in case of emergency. But you have seen the government’s reaction to news of my invention. It has left me in a quandary. If I gave the plans to the British government now, there is no doubt in my mind that they would not hesitate to use them to selfish ends. However, if I keep the plans to myself until some critical day, how could the required

number of ships ever be built in time?

'The ideal solution would be to release the plans to an international organisation, a league of nations, but as yet no such entity exists. I have spoken to certain political and international figures of my acquaintance, but I've yet to find a man worth trusting with such a secret. Perhaps one day I will be able to share my knowledge with the whole world, but I doubt it. Our world, too, will die. London, like Ell Ka-Mar, will be incinerated, and Mrs Challenger with it.'

Summerlee interrupted his increasingly melancholic discourse. 'Events here on the Moon seem to indicate that the need for your ships may come sooner rather than later.'

'That's right!' declared Lord Roxton. 'Challenger!' he said abruptly. 'Pull yourself together, man! Tell us what happened when you came here before, tell us what you learnt! Maybe we can't save the Earth, but four friends such as we, with a spaceship, four rifles and a mobile distillery, can have a blasted good try!'

'That's the spirit,' I agreed. 'Don't give up now, Challenger, not after all we've been through!'

'You're correct, of course,' said Challenger, jolted from his most un-Challenger-like self-pity by our heartfelt appeals to his better side. 'There's always a chance, however slim, and if anyone can take hold of that chance and wring it for every scrap of opportunity, it is we four! Lucky am I, to be blessed with such companions!'

'And you didn't even have to kidnap us,' said Summerlee. 'You're far from being a Vernian crazy-man, and this submarine doesn't have to finish its voyage at the bottom of the sea, crushed under the pressure and springing leaks at every joint! We'll rise to the surface, after all!'

'Quite,' said Challenger with a quizzical look and a raised eyebrow. 'Perhaps Roxton – *John*,' (he said the name with as much sarcasm as it would bear) 'is not the only one over-indulging in the complimentary whisky.'

Summerlee harrumphed, but it was noted that when he finished his drink, he poured himself coffee in the *Rocket's* miniature kitchen. Yes, that is correct, a kitchen! Challenger had revealed his craft's latest marvel, a fully functioning *salle de cuisine*, which would have done justice to many an English home if it had not been so tiny! 'Will wonders never cease?' I had asked. 'Not while we travel with Challenger,' Lord Roxton had replied. Challenger had revealed it upon our initial return to the ship, once it became clear that the sandwiches provided by Mrs Challenger were running low. They were so deli-

cious, we had not been able to stop ourselves from eating them continuously during the entire voyage to the Moon! (Excepting breaks for whisky and cigars, of course.) It is a wonder that, full of bread and ham as our stomachs were, we were able to perceive the Moon's lower levels of gravity at all!

'I shall start at the beginning,' said Challenger, a new fire in his voice now. 'I built the *Rocket* in response to the affair of the Poison Belt. Once it was finished, I decided to take it on a test run. It wasn't my intention to fly to the Moon, but after a few hours of flying around, the Earth began to seem rather *passé*. There's only so much you can take of flying over the same old cities and deserts and jungles. If you have read *Robur Le Conquérant*, you'll know what I mean.'

'Then, hovering above Timbuktoo, I poked my head out of the top hatch-'

'There's a top hatch?' Roxton asked.

'Unless I'm losing my mind, I believe I just said so.'

'Sorry for asking,' said Roxton. 'But I can imagine how a top hatch might be useful on a ship like this.'

'Kindly leave the imagining to me in future, Lord Roxton! If I want you to hang out of my spaceship blasting at comets with your rifle, I'll tell you.'

'If there are no further interruptions, I'll continue.' We all shook our heads, slightly cowed by the return to what passed for normality with him. 'I opened the top hatch and stuck out my head, to take in the night air. It was cool and breezy. Then I saw the Moon, and I was struck by the notion of travelling there. At first I dismissed the idea, much like yourselves when first informed of my journey. Although my aim in building the *Rocket* had been to create a means by which men might leave the planet, I had not planned to do so on the first excursion. But the idea returned to bother me over and over, like a pesky gnat buzzing around my head, until finally I afforded it serious consideration. Why shouldn't I go? Well, I had little in the way of rations and the hull integrity of the *Rocket* had not yet been tested for its airtight qualities. The first point would not become a problem if I didn't spend too long on the Moon, and the second point could be dealt with immediately. I closed the hatch and flew down to the Niger, and then along it until I reached the Gulf of Guinea and the Atlantic, where I immersed the *Rocket* in water, before lowering her to the bottom of the sea, where the pressures are greatest. There were no leaks. So you see, despite the irritation caused to me by Professor Summerlee's inane comparisons with the *Nautilus*, my ship can indeed function as a submarine, should it be neces-

sary.'

'Or should she require a good wash,' I said brightly, before realising that the reason she might require a good wash right now was because she was coated with the incinerated ashes of a dead civilisation. Challenger pursed his lips, bringing to my mind the image of two duelling walruses.

'Having proved that the *Rocket* was airtight, I was almost ready to go where no one had gone before – space!'

'How galling it must have been to find someone already there,' said Summerlee wryly.

Challenger ignored him. 'As it was night in Africa, I flew the *Rocket* over to Australia, where it was able to dry off in the sun. I didn't want to risk the potential hazards of water freezing on the ship once I headed out of the Earth's atmosphere. I spent twenty minutes bathing myself and the ship in the sun on the top of Ayers Rock – can you see the tan? – before getting back inside and setting the controls for the Moon. The ship is piloted using readouts which combine the results provided by two main sensing machines, or sensors, as I choose to call them. One sensor emits sound impulses, like a bat, and from monitoring the rate at which they return it provides valuable information about what is up ahead. The other sensor monitors attraction rates of various cosmic bodies, such as the Earth, the Sun, the Moon, Mars and Venus, allowing you to plot your position according to them.'

'That is very impressive,' said Summerlee, speaking for all of us.

'Thank you. And, so that I can see where I'm going when the window is shut, there's a specially shielded peephole on the instrument panel.'

'The journey to the Moon was uneventful. Where we were busy eating sandwiches and bickering on the second journey, I concerned myself with monitoring the *Rocket's* performance and taking measurements of the void beyond the ship. My conclusions in that regard are that space is, as I expected, not entirely a vacuum, although it has many of the qualities which we might associate with one. For example, if Lord Roxton were to amuse himself, after having imbibed large amounts of my whisky, by leaning out of the top hatch, he would be subject to explosive decompression.'

'What does that mean?' I asked, in my role of journalist and straight man.

'His eyes would pop out. Followed by his brain and the rest of his innards. Strictly speaking, space cannot be regarded as an 'ether', as the substances within it are discrete, but substances within it exist –

dust clouds, for example. Who knows what else?'

'Approaching the Moon, I was of course astounded by her beauty. Manoeuvring to an appropriate position, I opened the viewing portal, and slowly approached.' He noticed that Lord John was about to ask a question. He held up one hand and put his whisky down with the other, before pressing his fingers to his temples. 'Were you about to ask why I could not control our approach this time?' Roxton nodded, impressed, and Challenger picked his whisky back up. 'I could have made quite a living in the music halls, you know. I'm not certain of the reason, but I would speculate that it might have been down to a sudden surge in the Moon's gravitational powers, possibly caused by the aftermath of this widespread destruction.'

'When we return to Earth,' said Summerlee, 'we should search for any evidence of strange occurrences at sea – tidal waves, whirlpools, flooding, that kind of thing. That would support your theory, Challenger.'

'It may be my imagination,' I said, 'but I feel much lighter now than I did when we arrived.'

Challenger nodded sagely. 'That would correspond with what I was told to expect. Before long it will be impossible to breath on the Moon without special apparatus, as she loses her grip on the little air she presently has. I will come to that soon.'

'When I was close enough to the Moon, the most astonishing scene appeared before my eyes. I wish you could all have seen Ell Ka-Mar in her full glory as I did. No city on Earth could compare to her, least of all smelly, dirty London! Tall, thin buildings, graceful, elegant and made of wondrous materials! Shining domes and lustrous arches! Wide open parks and sinuous walkways! That the Moon had a low hold on them meant that the people could travel easily from place to place without resorting to trains or horse-drawn carriages (not that there were horses on the Moon), and it meant they could build their buildings tall and their monumental artworks taller still. The tallest construction of all, the first to resolve itself clearly in my viewing portal, was an enormously grand and slender portrayal of the leading scientist of their age, erected within his lifetime! Would such a thing ever happen on our grubby little planet?'

'Thus I had my first glimpse of the Moon-dwellers other than as tiny dots moving around the city beneath. I brought the *Rocket* to a halt and regarded the statue. From what I could glean from it, the Moon-dwellers were remarkably similar to us in shape. Evolution had carried us in similar directions,

although it was hard to see why, conditions being so different on the two worlds. The statue itself was grey, but as everything else on the surface was too, that was not particularly conclusive as regards the colouring of the natives. In all likelihood, they had materials available in no other colour.'

'That is quite bizarre,' said Professor Summerlee. 'My reading of anthropological articles – there are many places where anthropology and comparative anatomy meet, as you know – has given me the impression that one of the earliest skills learnt by primitive humans was to make colours, even if only by scraping a leaf along a rock. How these aliens had the ability to create enormous statues but were so backward that they were unable to generate any colours whatsoever is beyond me. If there was no colour on the planet at all, they could at least have generated some through the refraction of light to brighten up their city!'

'Maybe they just liked their city that way,' I said helpfully. 'Or perhaps they were colour blind.'

'That may well be the case,' said Challenger, although Professor Summerlee was unsatisfied. Even Challenger seemed unconvinced, ruminating over it a moment before he continued with his story. 'After having considered the statue, I prepared myself mentally and flew the *Rocket* down to the ground. My arrival had already attracted much attention, although while examining the statue for clues I had not been able to see the crowd gathering beneath my feet. As the *Rocket* approached, they bounded out of the way with their thick, strong legs.

'I closed the portal as I landed – when I opened the door our two races would meet each other for the first time, and I felt it would be ungentlemanly to gain the upper hand by first examining them from within the vessel (though that might have been considered the wiser course).

'The rest is quite straightforward. I opened the door and the mayor of the city came to meet me. Like her fellow Moon-dwellers, she was powerfully-built, with lean muscles and thick-set bones. I had anticipated that their skin would be grey, but it was not. It was a rich, brown colour, which left them looking like exceptionally strong specimens of the Hindoo people, excepting of course their dark blue hair and the prehensile tentacles which served them as ears. We got along famously, and as it turned out that their food was perfectly edible, I decided to stay a while. I spent the following two weeks being tutored in their language by their very best teachers. Soon I was fluent and able to converse with my hosts on many matters. I learnt much from them regarding mathe-

tics, the sciences and the arts, although they were unforthcoming in many ways about themselves. In response to this, I reserved my right to hold back about matters pertaining to Earth, but this was never an issue between us until shortly before I left. I believe that both parties considered it to be nothing but simple caution, entirely appropriate when representatives of different worlds came together. During all of my time there I found them to be the most amiable hosts one might wish for. They were always friendly, always ready to talk, and always ready to share a bottle of wine and exchange a few choice drinking songs, and yet I felt there was always an undercurrent of sadness in their discourse. Though I tried to discover the cause of this sadness, I could not. Strangely, as the constant parties and merry-making that surrounded me wherever I went in Ell Ka-Mar grew in intensity, so did the sadness. This is a mystery which I was unable to fathom until the day before my return to Earth.

'As usual, I was awoke by my two attendants, Malsoe and Julia – did I mention that, like us, the Moon-dwellers were divided into two sexes, male and female? Well, such was the case, although there seemed to be more women than men, and remarkably few children. The children I did see tended to be very young – barely more than babes in arms, at most. Presumably most of the other children were at school. There is a sign of the superior nature of their society for you – all the children were at school, not just those whose parents could afford it, with the rest left to steal for their living on the streets!

'Malsoe and Julia woke me with song, before laying my clothes for the day on the bed. I thanked them, but that day they did not leave. "I believe," said Julia, "that you will require our assistance to attire yourself today, Professor Challenger." She was quite right. When I got up and looked at the clothes, they seemed to be nothing but a jumble of unrelated pieces of cloth. However, once they had dressed me the garments made perfect sense. I looked fully as handsome as the day I married Mrs Challenger, although Julia and Malsoe complained about the lack of ear tentacles for hanging the *wardwuffs* on. Apparently my ears just weren't large enough to have kept them up.

'When I was ready, the two ladies led me from the bed-chamber, through the city and to one of their many great plazas. This, in fact, was the plaza on which I had landed, all those days ago, and there, indeed, was my beloved *Rocket*, just visible over the heads of the crowd. To my eyes, it looked as if the whole of Ell Ka-Mar had congregated there on that

day. When they spied my approach they all began to applaud and wave their tentacles in the air. I found this very gratifying, but as Jula and Malsoe led me through the crowd towards a stage that had been erected beside the ship I felt sure that I saw tears in the eyes of some of the people. I tried to ask my guides about this, but either I couldn't make myself heard above the noise of the crowd, or they just didn't care to answer.

'Once I was upon the stage, the people cheered, and I waved, though I had no idea what was happening. For a moment I felt slightly chilled, as I realised how similar all this was to certain Aztec rituals of which I had heard stories. This feeling soon fell away, as I could not believe the gentle and friendly Moon-dwellers capable of such atrocities.

'The Mayor approached me, and we smiled at each other. Had I not been so happily married, romance might have blossomed in that unlikely quarter, but it was not to be. She spoke to me, then, saying this, although my translation is somewhat loose. "Professor Challenger, you came to us from Earth, in your mighty star-spanning craft, and we have been happy to welcome you to our world."

"Thank you," I replied. "It has been entirely a pleasure."

'The people cheered for me once more.'

'Weren't their throats sore by now?' asked Summerlee.

'The Mayor continued, without, I will point out, interruption. "Professor Challenger, we, the people of Ell Ka-Mar, would like to bestow upon you our greatest symbol of recognition. It is but an honorary title, our society being entirely egalitarian, but the honour in that honorary is no small thing. We wish you to become the monarch of Ell Ka-Mar, the protector of the realm, and, therefore, because Ell Ka-Mar is the capital and largest of our settlements, the King of the Moon!"

'Unusually, you will agree, I was at a loss for words. But finally I managed to stammer out my acceptance, and there was much rejoicing as the coronation ensued. It was no crown, but instead a golden ring with which they presented me. As far as I could tell, it was the only thing on the planet (apart from the people) which was not grey. I should have it here somewhere, in my pockets.'

As he searched his jacket, a sudden thought came to me – hadn't Mrs Challenger given me a ring to give Challenger? I had a look in my own pockets and, sure enough, there it was. 'Is this what you're looking for, Professor? Your wife gave it to me shortly before we set off – I'm afraid that in all the

excitement of the journey I forgot to pass it on to you.' I handed it over for his inspection.

'Yes, yes, that's it,' he said. 'Don't worry – I got it from you in the end, that's what counts.' He passed it on to Lord Roxton for his examination, and he in turn passed it on to Professor Summerlee. 'I remember now,' said Challenger. 'It had been chafing my finger a bit, and Mrs Challenger took it away to have it adjusted.' He took it back from Summerlee and placed it upon the ring finger of his right hand. 'There, fits like a dream. Now, where was I again, Malone?'

'I think he knows,' I said to the others in a mock-weary fashion. 'He just wants me to say it out loud. I believe, Challenger, that you had just been crowned King of Ell Ka-Mar.'

'That's right, my boy. Ha, ha! I doubt if McArdle will ever print it!' In the event, McArdle was never given the option. 'After the coronation, things returned much to normal for the rest of the day, or as normal as they ever were on the Moon. However, something had changed for me. The title they had bestowed on me may have been honorary, but it was nothing to be sneezed at, and if they had done so much for me, the least I could do for them was to try and root out the cause of the trouble which had brought sadness into their lives.

'I may have determined to try and help them, but they were hardly open in discussing the matter with me. After I had made enquiries of everyone I knew, from Jula and Malsoe to the Mayor herself, I found myself summoned into the presence of that great scientist whose impressive statue I have already described. I had previously met him only at social events, and I had never really had the chance to speak to him for very long. In fact, I had often had the impression that we had been deliberately separated. His name was Aikor.

'He welcomed me to his laboratory, and as he showed me around we began to talk. "They tell me that you're trying to help us," he said to me, while holding up a peculiar grey compound for my inspection.

"Something's wrong here," I said. "I can tell from the sadness in people's eyes, from the way their tentacles droop when they think I'm not looking."

"You're very perceptive. But what makes you believe that you can help? How can you save a whole world?"

'I was dumbfounded by his words. "Is it that bad?"

"My liege, it is that bad and much, much worse. Soon a force will strike this planet, a force that we

cannot stand against. We will be gone. Our gravity machines will be destroyed and our atmosphere will evaporate into space. Our little grey world will die.”

‘I searched for something to say. “Is there nothing I can do?”’

““You could remember us, hopefully with a smile. You can tell your fellow Earthmen about us – let us live in your memories.”

‘I turned from him, feelings of anger and hurt boiling inside. His resignation to his fate made me feel foolish and immature – strange, but then, for all I know he might have been a thousand years old. I began to walk away, but turned back again. He was replacing the grey compound. “I have my ship. I could ferry you to Earth! I couldn’t save you all, but at least some would survive.”’

‘He shook his head. “We have our own ships, George. That isn’t the point. If we went to Earth, the force of which I spoke would follow us there, and your people would needlessly die. Running is not an option for us.”’

‘Challenger,’ I said, ‘this is terrible, but you cannot blame yourself. How could you be to blame?’

‘Before I left, I spoke to Aikor once more. He looked tired and feverish as he dashed up to the entrance of the *Rocket*. “Challenger,” he said, “you were right. There is a chance, but it is so desperately slim! We need your help, but there is great risk. I would not say a word to you of this, if I didn’t know you to be the kind of man who would consider it an insult to his honour if I did not.”’

‘I grasped his hand firmly. “Speak, Aikor! What can I do?”’ Quickly he told me that according to his calculations there might still be up to a month before the evil force arrived on the Moon. That would, he believed, be more than enough time for me to return to Earth, collect my comrades and come back to the Moon, where he would have told me of our desperate mission into the unknown.’

‘But it wasn’t enough time,’ said Summerlee sadly.

‘No. If I had hurried, if I had collected Malone in the *Rocket*, eschewing secrecy, if I had done this or that, we might have got here in time.’

I shook my head. ‘You can’t blame yourself, Challenger. You were back here within two days.

That should have been plenty of time. It wasn’t your fault.’

The others agreed with me. ‘You offered to put your life on the line for them,’ said Lord Roxton. ‘Nobody could have asked more of you.’

Even Summerlee spoke up, and there was no sign whatsoever of the words sticking in his throat. ‘Under the circumstances, Challenger, no-one could have acted more nobly or shown more compassion.’ Perhaps for his own sake he should have stopped there, but on the other hand, perhaps not, for his next words did much to break the melancholic mood that had once more taken hold of Challenger as he reached the end of his story. ‘Though you have the aspect of a brutish gorilla-man, within you beats the heart of an altogether gentler creature.’

Challenger growled and leapt up from his seat. ‘Why, I ought to break every bone in your body!’ Summerlee held his head high and Challenger walked over to the kitchen where he began to prepare himself a sandwich. ‘But I know you’re only insulting me to make me feel better! The effort’s much appreciated!’

We all laughed, and Summerlee winked at Roxton and I.

‘I should stop feeling sorry for myself,’ Challenger continued. ‘Perhaps we could still have a look around, analyse the dust for clues as to what happened, &c. If the Earth is ever threatened with this force that destroyed the Moon, it would help if we had previously gathered all the available information.’

None of us disputed his assertion, and as he sat back down with his sandwich we began to discuss the possible nature of this mysterious force. We had precious little to go on – was it a natural phenomenon or a fleet of intergalactic warships? We had no way of knowing, but perhaps we would after searching the Moon for clues.

‘We’ll have to get started soon,’ said Challenger, ‘because my instruments show that within three or four hours the air-’

He fell silent, and none of us took up the conversation, because we had all heard the knock at the door.

The Strangest Mechanical Creature

To say the knocking at the door gave us a fright would be more than an understatement. We were on a dead world, the inhabitants disintegrated by who knows what, and there was somebody at the door!

We had all turned to regard the door, wishing we had x-ray vision, or at least a spyhole, to let us see who was out there.

‘Could it be a survivor?’ asked I.

‘A survivor of that?’ said Challenger with scepticism. ‘Not bloody likely, is it? But I suppose one of the Moon-dwellers *could* have hidden at the bottom of a cave or something.’

‘More likely it’s one of the aggressors,’ said Lord Roxton. ‘Where do you keep the rifles, Challenger?’

The leader of our expedition looked around the room at our resolute faces. ‘It’s good to travel with such companions. But please consider the fight you might be getting into. This may be the most dangerous thing we’ve ever done!’

‘Don’t you mean to say,’ said Summerlee, ‘that this might be the most exciting adventure we’ll ever have!’ Roxton and I applauded his sentiments.

‘You are good men all,’ said Challenger. ‘But you are mistaken in one respect. This will not be the most exciting adventure we’ll *ever* have, because the next adventure to come will always be more thrilling yet!’ With our acclamation ringing in his ears, Challenger went to the control panel, where the twisting of a knob or two caused part of the wall opposite the entrance to fall away, revealing four rifles. Each of us picked one up, although we allowed Lord John to make his selection first.

By the time the knocking came again we were ready, the four of us spread out with our guns trained on the door. Challenger, his vast meaty hand holding the rifle as if it were a pistol, nodded to us. He reached the other hand to the little drawer in the console and pulled out the mouthpiece of his speaking-machine. After using his thumb to adjust a small dial on its side, which presumably turned the volume down from the deafening levels he had employed in London, he flicked the switch which turned it on. At the time I could not understand what he said, but he later provided us with a translation of the Ka-Marian

he used.

‘Who goes there?’ he said.

There was no reply.

‘Move around to the front of the ship.’

‘Challenger,’ I said. ‘Will we be able to hear their answer?’

He switched off the speaking-machine. ‘Yes – there is a second mouthpiece embedded in the outer hull of the ship. It will pick up any vocalisations they make, and transmit them to us. Of course, if they shouted, there’s a good chance we’d hear them anyway.’ He frowned. ‘Let’s see if they understood.’ He repeated the process which had previously opened the viewing panel upon a scene of raucous London, and the wooden panel drew aside.

At first we could see nothing but the dusty inner wall of the crater, but then, inching into view, came one of the most peculiar beings I have ever seen. It seemed to be a woman, or at least fashioned in the shape of a woman. Her hands were up in the air, in the traditional human gesture of surrender, and she was facing us as she edged sideways onto the screen. She wasn’t human. She wasn’t one of the Moon-dwellers – a moment’s glance at Challenger’s astonished expression was enough to prove that beyond question. *She seemed to be made entirely of metal!*

‘A metal woman!’ I exclaimed. ‘Look at her pinafore! The pockets full of cleaning instruments! The bizarre gleaming hair! She’s so beautiful, but so strange!’

Professor Summerlee had just two words to say on the matter. ‘Quite remarkable!’

Challenger had more to say. ‘It seems to be some kind of mechanical housewife.’ Quite naturally, we had by now ended our guarding of the entrance to regard the peculiar vision upon the screen. Challenger stood before the screen as we gathered behind him. Dragging his eyes away from her, he turned to say, ‘One can easily imagine the advantages over the flesh and blood type!’

I wondered if he would ever learn to appreciate his spouse before it was too late.

‘I think we should let her in,’ said Summerlee. ‘She seems friendly enough.’

'We can't be sure,' I said. 'For all we know, she might have been the agent of the Moon's destruction.'

Challenger and Roxton scoffed, but foolishly I credited Professor Summerlee with a little more caution. 'We should take Malone's warning seriously,' he said. 'She might have dusted them to death.' He began to laugh, then realised no-one else had joined in. He looked at Challenger's face, then thought for a moment. 'Oh, I see. Dusted them to death.'

'A pun to die for, so to speak,' said Challenger. 'However, it is my opinion that this woman is friendly. But I am not being recklessly incautious, in my opinion. Consider this, Malone: if she destroyed the land of Ell Ka-Mar, could this ship stand against her? I sincerely doubt it. If we keep her locked out, what do we gain? Our only option will be to return to Earth having learned nothing. She may offer us important information.'

'And you never saw her in Ell Ka-Mar?' asked Roxton.

'No,' confirmed Professor Challenger. 'She may have been there but I never encountered her, or, indeed, any other mechanical humanoid of that type.'

Professor Summerlee chose this as his moment. 'This is obviously the problem for the solving of which you have brought me with you, Challenger. As a professor of anatomy, it is my considered opinion that the mechanical housewife is not of Ell Ka-Mar.'

'How can you be so sure?' I demanded, playing my part as well as ever. Challenger put his rifle down and scratched his chin, trying to figure out the answer before his rival spoke.

'It is really quite simple,' Summerlee said. 'She has been created to look like a woman-'

Challenger managed to steal his thunder. 'But she has no ear tentacles!'

'Quite. Therefore, she has most likely been created in imitation of earthly life.'

'Impossible! If anyone could do such a thing, I would know about it!' blustered Challenger. 'And in any case, she is here on the Moon, and we are quite definitely the first men on the Moon!'

'The alternative is that there is human life, akin to ours, elsewhere in the cosmos.'

We were all dumbfounded by his statement. The ramifications were incredible. Had she been left there by human destroyers? Was Earth some forgotten colony of a star-spanning empire? As we all got over the initial shock of Summerlee's words, the cabin began to ring with the noise of the thousand and one questions which each of us had to ask. In the

end, Challenger brought a stop to the discussion, which was taking us nowhere.

'Gentlemen,' he said, banging his fist against the console for emphasis. He barely batted an eyelid as injudicious placing of his bang caused four whisky glasses to be thrown out of the wall and onto the floor, where, quite naturally, they shattered. 'Gentlemen! There is only one way to get answers to our questions, and that is to invite our strange visitor into our ship. My sensors show that the atmospheric loss outside has not yet reached a critical level, and so I shall now open the entrance.'

Within five minutes the mechanical housewife was inside with us, and Challenger was closing the door behind her.

In perfectly good English she thanked us for welcoming her to our spacecraft. Challenger told her to think nothing of it, and offered her a drink.

'Some oil would be nice,' she said.

Challenger went to the back of the cabin to look for some.

'So,' I began, 'you are a mechanical woman.'

'That's correct,' she said. 'I am a Mark One Mechanical Housewife, designed to serve the needs of my master – or mistress, of course – without delay or fuss. Thank you,' she said, as Challenger offered her a glass of oil.

He raised his eyebrows to us, before commenting, 'I believe the rest of us could use some lubrication too.' He poured each of us a glass of whisky and we all sat in the upholstered chairs, except Lord Roxton, who, ever the gentleman, gave his up for the mechanical housewife. Challenger told him to stamp on the floor in a certain place, and lo and behold, a stool rose up for him.

'It's a nice ship,' said the woman of metal. 'I can see you have put a lot of work into it. Nicely spick and span, too.' Then she noticed the broken whisky glasses, which we had all forgotten. 'Dearie me!' she said, before getting out of her chair and walking over to her discovery. She held out her left arm, which telescoped out as the hand curled up, forming a cylinder. The offending pieces of glass were sucked up into her hand, and then presumably up her arm and into her body.

Challenger smiled at us. 'What Mrs Challenger wouldn't give for an arm like that!' We all laughed, and he then asked our visitor what would happen to the glass.

'I will digest it,' she replied. 'The atoms forming the glass will be smashed, providing me with the energy I need to perform my functions. If I ate too much, I would simply eject some into a suitable

receptacle.'

I found myself liking this strange woman, with her forthright talk of ejecting and receptacles. There was no false modesty about her. She was very engaging, and despite her unusual appearance, I felt myself becoming quite smitten with her. Before my readers throw their copy of my book down in disgust, let me just ask them to compare the mechanical housewife with one of my other loves, Gladys Hungerton, who entreated me to pursue a life of excitement, before abandoning me for a solicitor's clerk when I took the time to do so! There was a sweetness about the mechanical housewife that went beyond her programming, and to this day, I cannot think of her golden locks and shiny face without fondness.

She returned to her chair, where she continued to drink her oil.

'Tell me,' she said, 'how you came to be on the Moon.'

'We were thinking the same about you, as a matter of fact,' said Lord Roxton. Now we were getting down to business, our faces had hardened a little. Hers, of course, did not need to, being apparently made of steel.

'Oh, my master sent me,' she said casually. 'He wanted me to look things over. He'll be here soon.'

We Earthmen looked at each other. Who was this master of hers, asked Challenger.

'You'll find out,' she said. 'Why are you here?'

By mutual consent, arrived at through a sequence of nods, frowns and shrugs of the shoulders, we elected to leave this part of the conversation to Challenger, what with his being the King of Ell Ka-Mar.

'I am here in my official capacity,' he replied, 'as the King of Ell Ka-Mar.' He waited to see her reaction, but predictably nothing showed upon her face. However, I should make clear that although her face was made of metal, it was not immobile. Her black eyes moved around in much the same manner as a human's, she had little copper eyebrows which she raised or lowered to indicate certain moods, and her golden lips moved with a beautiful softness which entranced us all.

'You were the King? Did they crown you at the

last minute and send you off on a desperate mission?'

'Why, yes,' he said. 'How did you know?'

'The Master knows all. He is supremely wise and supremely enlightened, and sometimes he chooses to trust me with his knowledge. You must prepare yourselves for his arrival. Soon he will be here.'

'Certainly,' said Challenger. 'Would he like a glass of whisky?'

'You react with typical human flippancy,' she said with a smile. 'But that is not a problem. Were you not human the Master would have no interest in you.'

'Is your master human, like us?'

'The Master is unclassifiable. He simply is.'

'Do you know what happened to Ell Ka-Mar?'

'The Master knows, and if he chooses, he will tell you.' She was still smiling, but Challenger was not. He clenched a fist behind his back, but he made a commendable effort to maintain his composure. His beard was fairly bristling with frustration.

'Is there nothing you can tell us? What is your name, for example?'

'You can call me the Mechanical Housewife,' she replied, but before she could go on, there was a palpable change in the atmosphere. Outside the ship we could hear the first rumbles of a great thunderstorm. The smile fell away from the Mechanical Housewife's face and she flew to her feet, standing to the sharpest attention any of us had ever seen.

'I am the Mechanical Housewife,' she announced, in strident tones quite different from the gentle manner in which she had addressed us before. 'I am the herald of he who is to come!'

The thunderstorm outside broke with a crashing sound that could not have been equalled by a dozen earthbound volcanoes. Challenger jumped from his comfortable chair and rushed to the control panel. 'It's the air – it's exploding off the planet! No one will ever breath on the Moon's surface again!'

Roxton, Summerlee and I had taken up our rifles once more, although I can't say to what purpose we were expecting to use them.

'Prepare yourselves, humans,' shouted the Mechanical Housewife, 'for the Coming of Master Zangpan!'

The Coming of Master Zangpan

We would have prepared ourselves, if we'd known how. We had no idea of what we were supposed to be preparing ourselves for. Challenger took the wise step of closing the viewing portal – the storm raging without was doing its best to get within, and it was unlikely that the glass would have resisted its attentions much longer. We were all on our feet once again, our guns in hand, and we backed up until we had our backs pressed against the back wall of the cabin, as far away as possible from the entrance, the now-concealed viewing portal and the Mechanical Housewife, who had started to glow and crackle with a blue electric light.

'Should I give her a blast of the old Winchester fury?' asked Lord Roxton.

He was addressing Challenger, but I answered first. 'No! We have no right!'

'She could be endangering the ship,' said Challenger.

'You didn't have to let her in,' I said, 'and what you said then still applies!'

'Besides,' interjected Professor Summerlee, 'if you shoot her she might just explode.'

'Jolly good point,' acknowledged Roxton, although he didn't lower his rifle. 'But I'll keep her in my sights, just in case.'

I found myself fervently hoping that he wouldn't need to fire.

The shocking blue fire around her was intensifying – it seemed to be reaching a climax – then suddenly a tongue of flame flickered out from the level of her belly to the centre of the cabin, where a blue sphere of light developed into a man-sized cocoon, still attached to the Housewife by the crackling umbilical. From her mouth emerged the first truly inhuman sound we had heard her make, a metallic scraping of iron against steel, and then the light died, leaving us to regard the strange, strange man who now stood inside the *Rocket*.

'Sorry about the racket,' he said, blithely oblivious to our stupefaction as he examined the cabin. 'And sorry about all that Prepare for the Coming of Master Zangpan stuff! I'm still trying to get that old programming out of her system. She used to work for

some guy called Cosmosus, Galacto, something like that. What was his name, Housewife?'

'You programmed me to forget, sir.'

'That's the spirit, Housewife!' He now turned his full attention to us, after having fully examined the interior of Challenger's craft. 'However, don't mistake the antipathy I feel towards the Mechanical Housewife's melodrama for a willingness to be taken lightly. Far from it, take me very seriously indeed, at peril of your lives.'

I was trying my best to follow his instructions, but it must be said that Master Zangpan, for all his impressive talk and the astonishing way in which he arrived in the *Rocket*, was a less than imposing figure. He *was* tall, about five feet eleven inches, with impressively handsome oriental features, but in other aspects, notably his clothes and hair, he was quite peculiar.

His black hair was straight and extraordinarily long, parted in the middle and falling in waves down to his shoulders. I had never seen a man with such long hair outside of an art gallery. In fairness to him, although its style looked odd to my eyes, it was very clean and well-coiffured. His moustaches were as long as Lord Roxton's were short, lushly lounging across his upper lip before dropping down to hang like curtains beside his firm chin. When he moved his head they swung to and fro like dancers in the royal ballet. As for his clothes; well, they require a paragraph of their own!

He wore a smoking jacket, nothing out of the ordinary there, you might think, but this particular smoking jacket was fabricated from velvet – purple velvet, no less – with silver stitching! The buttons, each of them the size of a penny farthing, were also silver. The collars of the jacket were wide enough to moor a boat upon, and embroidered upon them, as upon the cuffs, were the oriental symbols for yin and yang, contained within a ring of minuscule writing. His shirt, unbuttoned at the neck, shimmered in the light, refusing to stay a single colour. It had the same quality as oil floating in water beneath the sun. His tie, fastened but loosely about his neck, was purple, matching his jacket. Now I come to the most bizarre

part of all – the trousers (if one can call them that in decent company – and I do like to regard my readers as decent company). Vertically striped with red and black, they were improperly full and loose, and very long, stretching down to cover his feet entirely (except when he moved around, thus revealing a pair of emerald sandals).

As I said, it was difficult to take him seriously, but by God we tried, given the circumstances!

Challenger, probably feeling for once that he was not the worse-dressed man in the room, took it upon himself to be the first of us to speak. ‘Master Zangpan, I presume?’

‘Right on the nose!’ said the strange fellow. ‘Whether you’re right as to the rest of me, I’m afraid I’d have to check!’

‘Why are you here?’ asked Challenger, ignoring all but the essential substance of Master Zangpan’s reply.

‘I’m here to help, George! What do you think I’m here for? I’m here to help you save your planet!’

He took a seat while we pondered his words. He chose the chair with the plushiest upholstery, the most comfortable cushion and the strongest springs, i.e. he chose Challenger’s chair, but somehow Challenger kept the display of his irritation to a slight growl. I resolved to take the initiative.

‘I suppose you had better have a drink, then,’ I said.

‘Thank you, Ned, that’s very decent of you. Come on George and John, sit with me. I love this gentlemanly stuff. Do you have cigars, by any chance?’

I indicated that we did, and prepared new drinks for everybody, including the Mechanical Housewife (who whispered to me that she should be careful – earth oil always made her tipsy). Challenger stamped the floor in a certain place, causing another stool to spring up. I was about to return to my chair, when he reminded me of the cigars. I turned to get them, but what greeted me upon my return but the fact that Challenger had appropriated my chair! As I handed out the cigars he studiously avoided my eye. I then retreated to the vacant stool, sending an accusing look towards Lord John, who shrugged. I scowled in return. Maybe it would have been difficult for him to stop the mighty Challenger taking my upholstered chair, but he could have at least warned me! For all I knew, I might now have to travel across the galaxy on that uncomfortable wooden seat. (Future travellers in space would do well to bear in mind the irritation that can be caused by the understocking of comfortable chairs.)

Apparently ignorant of the tiny drama going on

around him, Master Zangpan was taking his first sip of the whisky. Ever so slightly the glass was tipped and a trickle of golden fluid passed between his lips. Almost immediately he spat it out in disgust. ‘My goodness,’ he said, as the Mechanical Housewife dashed forward to wipe it from the floor and his trousers. It didn’t stain. I briefly considered taking her seat. ‘That must be the most revolting whisky I’ve ever tasted!’

Professor Summerlee reached out and placed a restraining hand on Challenger’s forearm. (Although one can imagine how little effect it would have had in the event of Challenger actually launching in Master Zangpan’s direction!)

‘It is from Professor Challenger’s own distillery,’ I pointed out. ‘Possibly it has not had enough time to mature.’

‘Yes, well,’ said Master Zangpan with a frown, ‘that could be it.’ He brightened up again as he remembered the cigar in his hand. ‘At least I still have this to enjoy!’ Declining to use the cutter offered by Lord Roxton, he bit off one end of the cigar and stuck the other end in his mouth. He clicked two fingers to produce a flame with which he lit the cigar. Taking one puff, he threw the cigar at the Mechanical Housewife, who caught it and swallowed it whole.

‘You didn’t like my cigar?’ said Challenger, with barely repressed fury. ‘You didn’t like my whisky!’ The fury was not so repressed now. He got to his feet



(thus proving the inadequacy of Summerlee's restraint) and pointed one hamburger finger at Master Zangpan. 'Well, I've got news for you, Mister Zangpan! I don't like you! I don't like your ridiculous clothes, I don't like your long hair and I don't like your drooping moustaches!'

Challenger's ill-kept facade of civilisation was rapidly disintegrating, as he devolved before our eyes into the mud-fighting ape-man who persists within each of us. In a similar situation, would we all have behaved so? Probably not – most of us would probably have been too frightened – but we would all have wanted to. To disparage a man's whisky and cigars is to strike at his very soul!

Master Zangpan seemed impervious to Challenger's aural assaults. 'Do you know what?' he asked, when his assailant paused for breath. 'The

upholstery in this chair is very lumpy – do you have another?' At this point the redness of Professor Challenger's face communicated to him that something was amiss. He watched with amusement as Professor Summerlee, Lord John Roxton and I attempted to hold Challenger back. 'I can see that you are not happy here, either, George. I think we should all go to my pad now. Housewife?'

'Your pad?' I panted. Holding Challenger back was a challenge fit to have earned the Professor his name. 'What do you mean?'

As I spoke, blue electrical fire swept out from the Mechanical Housewife and enveloped us all. Shocked by this, the three of us released our hold on Challenger, and as the cabin of the *Rocket* faded from existence I saw him put his hands around Master Zangpan's throat.

Zangpan's World

'Let go of him, Challenger!' Master Zangpan's face was becoming as purple as his jacket, and those sausage-shaped fingers remained locked around his throat, despite my pleas. The Mechanical Housewife took up the argument.

'Professor Challenger, I think I need to remind you that in comparison to you and your friends, Master Zangpan is virtually a god! What you are doing is grossly disrespectful!'

Thus far, she met with as little success as I had.

'It seems,' said Challenger through gritted teeth, 'that sometimes even a god needs to breathe!'

At this point the Mechanical Housewife lost patience with the Professor and delivered a blow to his neck with the edge of her hand. He sank to the ground as Master Zangpan gasped for breath. While the Housewife administered to the wounded throat and pride of her master, I checked over my colleague. He seemed to be fine – his pulse steady and his breathing regular – save for the fact that he was not conscious. Seeing my concern, his unlikely conqueror informed me that he would awake within a few minutes. This left me at ease to join Professor Summerlee and Lord John Roxton in considering the destination to which my mechanical sweetheart had

transported us – what Master Zangpan had called his pad.

My first guess had been that the moustachioed mystic had used the word 'pad' mistakenly to indicate his home. Perhaps English was not his first language – in fact, despite his appearance, there was as yet no reason for any one of us to believe him human at all, except possibly Challenger, who had looked into two frightened eyes as his strangling grip tightened. Alternatively, perhaps Zangpan was using 'pad' in some new sense, because 'home' hardly seemed adequate for the place in which we found ourselves.

Shall I describe it to you? I know my readers – yes, you'll cry, unwary of the consequences! But sometimes even a reader should be wary, lest they learn of something so terrible that it invades their dream-world, makes an ungodly nest there and prevents them from ever sleeping soundly again! The dank stench of nameless horrors, the indescribable obscenity of bawling creatures from the dark underbelly of the universe, the monstrous gibbering insanity of certain rotting otherworlds – all these things haunt the dreams of men and women who *probed too far*.

On the other hand, sometimes a reader should be wary lest they learn of something so wonderful that it makes their own life seem tawdry and threadbare in comparison.

Zangpan's World belongs to the latter category.

I stood on a rectangular plain, the area of which I judged to be about one square kilometre. It was covered with richly green lawn grass, much as one might find on any village green in England. A few gentle hillocks were dotted here and there to provide variety, and to create little dells into which we could see people going. Though some readers may not be pleased by this revelation, not all of those people were fully clothed. Those offended by this will probably feel modesty to be saved by the fact that those people were not human.

Beside me lay Professor Challenger, to my left were Master Zangpan and the Mechanical Housewife, to my right stood Professor Summerlee and Lord Roxton. The six of us were roughly in the middle of the plain. It was very pleasant – the air was fresh and fragrant of newly mown grass, the weather was warm but not sultry. Thankfully, though, there was no one playing cricket. That might have been too much for us in such bizarre circumstances.

Bizarre? Yes, dear reader, bizarre, for I have not come to the most incredible part. When I said that the plain was a rectangle with an area of one square kilometre, did you wonder what lay at the edge of that plain? In your imagination, perhaps you placed there a small country road, a green-leafed wood or a row of quaint cottage houses. You would have been wrong to do so, because at the edge of that plain there was nothing – literally nothing. The plain was floating in the air!

Now consider this: without moving my head one whit I could see at least fifty more floating landscapes in the sky, dancing about one another like playing cards being blown in a delicate hurricane. If I did move my head, I could see five hundred more, and even if I didn't, the slow spin of the ground beneath my feet would bring bright new slivers of land into my sight. Each of them was different – some were green with Earth-style trees and grass, others seemed to be blue with rippling water, yet others still were profligate with unexpected combinations of colour of which I could make no sense – but all had one thing in common. They were truly beautiful. Even the buildings which I spotted on many of the slivers were of breath-taking beauty, seeming to grow naturally from their settings and glittering with light. As I watched the near side of one sliver tip up and away from us, revealing a new

and equally lovely landscape beneath, I realised that each of these slivers had two wondrous sides. Within my view there was enough living space for everybody in London.

Blasphemous the thought may have been, but it crossed my mind that Heaven would be a disappointment after this.

One of the many baffling things about the dancing slivers was that I could not place them in any context. We were not in space, as far as I could tell – all the slivers seemed to share one atmosphere, a fact demonstrated as yellow beings on one patch of spiky land called across to some similarly coloured fellows on our patch. But then neither were we on a planet, quite clearly. If I squinted enough to see past all of the slivers, right at the back of them there seemed to be a solid wall of dark blue. Looking around, and waiting for the slivers to move enough to leave gaps, I came to the conclusion that the entire system was enclosed by a gigantic blue sphere. Perhaps we were actually inside a hollowed-out planet! I resolved to consult Master Zangpan on the matter as soon as he came to his senses.

I doubt if I need to describe the conversation held by Roxton, Summerlee and myself at that point – you can imagine how the three of us were completely flabbergasted, barely able to string a few words together to make a sentence. Eventually Professor Summerlee said something worth reporting.

'Do you see over there?' Roxton and I followed the line of his pointed finger until our eyes came to rest on a pleasant looking piece of land a couple of kilometres above our heads. 'I do believe that those fellows are human.'

Squinting as best I could, I was unable to come to any firm conclusion. 'In these surroundings I am unwilling to discount any possibility,' I said. 'They might be men like us, or members of Zangpan's race, whatever that may be.'

'We do not yet know that he is not human,' pointed out Summerlee.

'Oh, I'm human, all right,' said a weary and sore voice. Master Zangpan had awoke. 'More than that, I'm from Earth – and not all humans do come from Earth.' He got to his feet, rubbing his tender throat. 'The people you can see around you in Zangpan's World are the citizens of time and space! They are all beautiful – on the inside, that is – people who I have allowed to share the wonders of my domain! Do you like it?'

'Like is hardly an appropriate word,' I said. 'This place is incredible.'

I would have continued in a similar vein, but

Summerlee showed more interest in getting to the bottom of the whole thing. He made me feel somewhat guilty – I am the journalist of the group after all! ‘Where are we?’ he asked. ‘What is this place? We have a lot of questions, Master Zangpan.’

‘If your friend hadn’t tried to strangle me, Professor Summerlee, I would already have begun to answer them. Speaking of that brutish man, is Challenger awake yet, Housewife?’

She went over and gave him a gentle kick, producing a groan from the supine investigator.

‘Good, good,’ said Zangpan. ‘Give him another kick if you like – that would certainly make me feel better.’ It seemed the Housewife could tell he was joking, as she didn’t take him up on the offer. ‘Would all of you like a drink? Personally, I need to wash the taste of Challenger’s abominable whisky out of my mouth.’ Without really waiting for an answer, he clicked his fingers, causing what would best be described as a cake trolley to appear beside us. I hesitated in calling it a cake trolley for two reasons. The first is that it bore no cakes, or at least nothing that I recognised as cakes. It did, however, bear a wide selection of colourful drinks. The second reason is that it had a mechanical head at one end and seemed to be self-powered.

‘Master Zangpan, sir! Welcome back, sir, we all missed you very much here!’ I suppose I should have been surprised to encounter a talking cake trolley, but as Roxton said to Challenger, the twelfth marvel of the day always impresses less than the first. Of course, when calculating the impression made by a new marvel, one must take account of what preceded it, and I’m afraid that a talking cake trolley seemed sorry indeed in comparison with the floating plains of Zangpan’s World.

We selected our drinks with the trolley’s help, although we four travellers all elected for non-alcoholic beverages – we had all drunk enough for one day, and even Summerlee and I were starting to feel the consequences. Professor Challenger was now on his feet again and had happily refrained from once more attacking Master Zangpan (striving to comprehend the nature of his surroundings was occupying all his attention, although he did take the time to distance himself from the Mechanical Housewife).

‘Would you like food?’ asked Master Zangpan. ‘I don’t mean to be rude, but you all look like you could use it.’

I was beginning to feel very tired – in fact, it struck me at that point that almost twenty-four hours must have passed since we took off from Challenger’s back garden. It had been a very long

day, and only Roxton had slept in that time – unless you count Challenger’s enforced unconsciousness as sleep. Having a good round meal and then dozing off on the oh-so-soft ground seemed like a very attractive proposition.

Seeing that all of us would like food very much, Master Zangpan pointed at the ground. ‘Eat the grass.’

The four of us answered in bewildered unison. ‘Eat the grass?’

‘Certainly,’ answered Zangpan. ‘The grass has been specially engineered, not only for comfort and fragrance, but also for nutritional value and taste. Believe me, you’ll find it most delicious.’ To demonstrate, he reached down, plucked a handful of green blades, and placed them in his mouth. There was silence for a moment as we watched him take his time over his grass – he was obviously determined to savour every mastication. Eventually he swallowed, with pleasure written all over his face. ‘I know you have many, many questions, but right now you all need to eat and sleep. I’ll leave the Mechanical Housewife with you for the night, to help with any problems and to keep the sightseers away.’

‘Sightseers?’ asked Challenger, suspiciously.

‘Yes,’ answered the Zangpan with amused frankness. ‘Sightseers. You and your friends are celebrities here. In terms of Earth’s chronology, you are the first men to walk on the Moon! The first men to even leave the planet! And certainly the first men to visit Zangpan’s World!’

‘But what about you?’ I asked. ‘You said that you were from Earth.’

‘And so I was, dear Ned, originally, but I’m from the future so I don’t count.’

With that parting shot he left us with the Mechanical Housewife and the talking trolley. She encouraged us to fill our bellies with the grass, and after overcoming our initial reluctance we did so. It probably isn’t necessary for me to attempt to describe the felicitous textures and tastes that greeted my tongue with every mouthful. In fact, I would be committing a grand disservice to you, for without wishing to give offence to the hard-working housewives, kitchen staff and chefs of Great Britain, I can say in total confidence that you will never eat anything so good.

After eating we stretched ourselves out on the grass, which revealed itself as a bed the equal in quality of the meal it had earlier been. The light around us seemed to dim, and Challenger and the others soon dropped off. But I found myself lying on my side, peering through the darkness at the lovely

(to my eyes) form of the Mechanical Housewife. I felt a twinge of jealousy as I watched the trolley offering her a glass of his oil, but I felt bizarre joy as she shooed him away and said for him to return in the morning.

I closed my eyes, feeling that in general matters were in a state of equilibrium, even if they were not positively in my favour. Then the balance shifted. I heard mechanical footsteps approaching me, a mechanical body lying down next to mine, and eventually I felt – not mechanical – but soft, warm lips kissing mine. I opened my eyes and looked into the expressive black ones of the Mechanical Housewife.

‘Your lips, they aren’t cold,’ I whispered. I hoped the others were asleep.

‘They are composed of gold heated to a semi-liquid state. Special programming ensures that they are warm, but not too hot, and flexible enough to provide emphasis when I speak-’

‘And softness when you kiss?’

‘That’s right, Malone.’ She did it again.

‘You can call me Ned.’

‘Are you sure? I have observed that the use of first names seems to cause irritation among the members of your group. Especially when Master Zangpan does it.’

‘I suppose you’re right,’ I laughed (quietly, of course). ‘That’s because we prefer to reserve the use of our first names for more intimate relations.’

She was puzzled now. ‘But you’ve known me for less than a day. Professor Challenger and the others have been your companions through so many adventures. How can you be more intimate with me than with them?’

I lifted myself up on one elbow, angry. ‘What are you trying to say about me? Just because the four of us travel without women aboard doesn’t mean-’

‘Ned, shush! You’ll wake your friends!’ It was true – Challenger was beginning to groan threateningly – but I felt very upset with her. ‘Lie back down. This is very silly of you.’ I followed her instructions, and she placed one hand upon my brow. It was warm, but hard. ‘There is no reason for sensitivity in such matters here. Last time anyone counted, more than fifty races were represented on Zangpan’s World, and between them they make use of every bi-polar gender combination you could imagine!’

‘Well, you should still respect our sensitivity in the matter.’ The stroking of my brow and the way she

kissed me at the end of each sentence were doing much to mollify me, but I still felt somewhat prickly. ‘In any case, I can’t imagine very many combinations. And I’ll stick to the one I’m familiar with, if that’s all right with you.’

‘Oh Ned, you silly Earthman, it was you that brought sex into this in the first place, not me.’ I tried to disguise the fact that her frank use of such an explicit term had rather startled me, lest she think me an incorrigibly backward type of fellow. ‘I’m talking about friendship. Why do you all keep each other at arm’s length? Why are you all so formal with each other?’

I tried to give the matter serious consideration, but her delightful kisses were taking up rather too much of my brain-space. ‘It’s not just a question of formality – it’s also a matter of dignity and respect for each other. It permits us to work together without embarrassment.’ That was as far as I could go before giving up to her embraces. Unfortunately, intrigued by what I had said, she chose that moment to cease her attentions and lie back on the grass.

‘I think I understand what you mean. By working your problems and arguments out within a formalised framework, which is, one might say, a symbolic arena, you are able to fight your battles and resolve your conflicts without causing wounds or hurt to each other’s fundamental being. Very interesting.’

‘Mmm,’ I agreed, wishing she’d get back to the job she had abandoned.

‘But does it really work?’

‘I suppose so,’ I said musingly, as I ventured to kiss her on one shiny cheek. ‘We’re all still friends.’

‘You must be right,’ she said. ‘Otherwise Master Zangpan would not have chosen you for the mission.’

Before I was able to ask what she meant by that she pulled me to her and kissed me languidly. When that kiss ended, she got to her feet, helped me to rise and led me to one of the dells I had previously noticed. I was a little hesitant in following her, although I honestly believe that fear was not an issue. For one thing, I really did need to sleep, but the meal of grass had pepped up my energy somewhat, and in any case the others, I reasoned, wouldn’t mind if I slept late in the morning – in view of the circumstances.

Some Unpleasantness

'Listen up,' said Master Zangpan. 'I shall begin by answering a few of your inevitably tedious and mundane questions about myself and my world. When your brains catch up with your bodies I shall tell you of the quest on which you must embark. And embark upon it you must. Or I shall kill you.'

By the time I had opened my eyes the following morning, the Mechanical Housewife was gone. I presumed that not requiring sleep she had become bored while I partook of it. Hearing the Challenger bellow on the other side of the hill, I pulled my clothes back on and ran over to rejoin the group. Challenger stood there, hands on hips, while Summerlee and Lord John sat on the ground, idly chewing on grass as they waited for the Housewife to turn up. I fancied that a dark look passed between the three of them as they saw me approach.

'Enjoy yourself?' asked Challenger.

'A gentleman shouldn't ask that of a friend,' I replied.

'Whoever said I was a gentleman?' he replied, and the others laughed.

'In that case, I'll say that a gentleman will not answer.'

'In my opinion,' said Professor Summerlee, 'a gentleman marries before behaving in the manner you did last night.'

I offered him a clenched fist. 'Show me a church that will marry me to the Mechanical Housewife and I'll have the banns read tomorrow!'

'Don't get so indignant,' said Lord Roxton. 'He's only jealous, young fella-my-lad! She's a very sweet lady, and I think every one of us has a soft spot for her.'

He was trying to make light of the little confrontation, but I felt that the smiles of Challenger and Summerlee were not particularly sincere.

The lady in question arrived before long. Ignorant, wilfully or not, of the knotty atmosphere that surrounded our little gang of irregulars, she bid us good morning and took us straight to a place where we were able to shower and groom – special cleaning machines even washed and pressed our suits as we did so. She then brought us to this place.

'As you have discovered this morning, transportation between the slivers is virtually instantaneous. You need merely resolve to travel, and mentally-

attuned robots will sense and take action upon your decision.'

'What the devil is a *robot*?' demanded Challenger.

'It, or he, or she, is a thinking machine,' replied the Mechanical Housewife. 'Such as myself, for instance. The word was first used by a Czechoslovakian writer, Karel Capek, after being invented by his brother. Devils do not enter into it.'

I mentioned that I had not heard of the writer – surprisingly, as I fondly imagined myself a connoisseur of the European literatures.

'He created the term in 1920,' smiled Master Zangpan, 'when the lovely play Rossum's Universal Robots made him famous. I imagine that your puny human minds are confused in no slight fashion by my mysterious talk of the future. Like a doctor of the soul, I can alleviate your derangement, the tonic I prescribe for your bafflement being an explanation of the nature of Zangpan's World! However,' said the mysterious Master, 'you must return the gobstoppers when we are done!'

Summerlee and Lord John shrugged at each other, while Challenger and I partook of frowning.

The room in which we sat was one of many in a complex housing the work of two of Master Zangpan's friends – a pair of engineers by the names of Klothe (pronounced Klo-Ter, though he said that if we wished to say it differently there was no reason why we should not) and Melenkius. The former was tall and thin, the latter short and chubby, but both looked reasonably human. They wore matching habits, akin to those of the monk, but with deep pockets overflowing with technical gadgets. They nodded in jolly confirmation of Zangpan's words.

'His words are incontrovertible,' said Klothe.

'And wholly unbelievable, you may think,' said Melenkius.

'And yet, they *are* true,' continued Klothe. 'Let me expand.'

He waved us to the seats. and his partner elected to remain standing. This particular room was quite small, although it accommodated all eight people easily. It was only small in comparison to the other rooms in the complex, some of which could have accommodated Challenger's *Rocket* three times over, if they had not been full to the rafters with electrical and mechanical junk! Having selected a seat which

looked friendly enough, I was surprised to find it squirming beneath me as I lowered myself into it. However, once I was sitting, it stopped moving around and proved to be quite comfortable. Master Zangpan explained that the chairs automatically adjusted themselves to suit whoever or whatever sat in them. Professor Challenger noted with glee that they were not actually as comfortable as our own upholstered chairs in the *Rocket*, and the taller of the two engineers explained that to be the price the chairs paid for their adaptability. Neither he nor Roxton nor Summerlee seemed very comfortable with the situation, never mind the chairs. They seemed to be whispering to each other and exchanging nods and frowns in a conversation from which I was excluded. Their comportment had certainly changed since I had left them the previous evening, and it couldn't be put down entirely to jealousy. I had the very strong feeling that prior to my awakening the morning had seen a conversation of some significance.

Once all were settled Klothe resumed his explanation.

'Zangpan's World is like the blind idiot god Azathoth, in that it is co-terminous and co-existent with all points in time and space. Don't ask how that works exactly, because, to be frank, it is a bit of a mystery to us all. However, what it means is this: from this domain it is possible to exit to anywhere in time and space. Isn't that incredible!?!'

Melenkius took up the story with equal enthusiasm. 'In theory, that's fine, but in practice it would be a bit awkward, with people meeting their grandmothers and so on. Therefore, although the Doors of Time exist, for the sake of convenience Master Zangpan keeps them locked.'

Master Zangpan now spoke himself. 'This place was created in the later part of the twentieth century as a result of certain tantric experiments I had been conducting. It is a dimension unto itself, or unto myself, as it stems from my godlike abilities. Once I had opened up what I call the Zang Dimension the internal chronology of the place kicked off and I let folks come to visit.'

'We were among the first to arrive,' said Melenkius. 'We set up the slivers and created the atmosphere. After that, there was plenty of room for everyone.'

A question came to mind, though Challenger sneered as I asked it. 'What lies beyond the blue sphere?' I didn't understand his attitude. Surely he was as interested in the answer as I?

Klothe replied, 'More of the same. This realm is

infinite, as is the number of slivers within it. The blue sphere simply marks the edge of the inhabited area. Its purpose is purely psychological, to stop people worrying about what is *out there*.'

'When, of course,' said Melenkius, 'there's nothing out there at all, except undeveloped slivers. When there are new arrivals, slivers beyond the wall are programmed to their specifications. When the people are ready to move in, we expand the sphere to enclose their new homes.'

'Most of the inhabitants on Zangpan's World, like the divine Master Zangpan, are from the late twentieth century, but there are a few exceptions.'

To me Klothe's words seemed innocuous enough, but they had an extraordinary effect upon Challenger.

'You make occasional exceptions, you say! When it suits, you pluck innocent travellers from their rightful place in time and space!'

'Professor Challenger,' said Melenkius, his round face showing concern, 'surely no one is here but of their own accord?' When his only reply was a contemptuous snarl, he turned to Master Zangpan. 'Is this true?'

The Zangpan shrugged. 'It is of no consequence. Or rather, the fact that they had no choice is of no consequence. The fact of their being here, as you know, is of very great consequence indeed.'

'Even so,' said Klothe, 'we must protest.'

'Be my guest,' said Master Zangpan to them, before loosing a grim smile upon the rest of us. 'And of course, that applies to all of you. Literally.'

At his words, a shadow fell across my heart. Had I misjudged our hosts so terribly? It had become quite clear that my companions believed so, to the point where they had neglected to include me in their counsel. For one horrible moment, as I watched my friends spring into action on a nod from Challenger, I was forked upon the horns of a dilemma.

But it *was* just *one* moment, and the very next saw me putting all my strength at the disposal of the British cause. As Challenger leapt upon Master Zangpan I rushed to the Mechanical Housewife to prevent her from taking a part in the conflict. Doubtless she could have brushed me aside had she wished, but not without doing me injury. Our night together had evidently meant as much to her as it still did to me.

In the meantime, Summerlee and Roxton had seized hold of the two engineers, who were flustered and rather shocked by the sudden violence of our actions. They calmed down once it became clear that Challenger wasn't actually attempting to kill Master

Zangpan.

'Summerlee,' said Challenger. 'Leave those two to Lord Roxton and help me tie up this rascal.' Together they tore strips from Master Zangpan's jacket and bound him to the chair. This caused a solitary tear to trickle down his cheek.

'You ruffians,' he said bitterly. 'What a waste of a beautiful jacket! You couldn't use Melenkius's habit, could you? Oh no, it had to be my favourite purple smoker!'

'Be quiet!' ordered Challenger, waving a meaty fist in the finely cut face. The Mechanical Housewife made a move, but I responded in kind, holding my ground.

'It's all right,' I assured her. 'No one will be hurt. We just want to sort everything out. I'm sure there's been a terrible misunderstanding.'

Soon Klothe and Melenkius had also been tied to chairs, and Challenger made sure that the Mechanical Housewife knew that if she tried to make a move he'd get to Master Zangpan first. But in all honesty, she didn't seem particularly distressed by the unpleasantness. I told myself that it was because she knew us all to be decent and honourable men.

Finally, Challenger was satisfied with the new seating arrangements. He paced up and down before his captives, obviously undecided on the next step.

I was first to break the silence. 'What's this all about, Challenger?'

'Don't you understand, Malone?' A pair of eyes that would have paused Beowulf did not hide their suspicion. I half-expected him to have me bound with the others. 'Are your eyes so closed to what has happened? Love is truly blind, then.'

'No, I do *not* understand. Maybe if you had invited me to your conference this morning I would.'

'Your invitation was destroyed at your own tawdry hands when you spent the night cavorting with the enemy!'

'The enemy?' I looked at the grim faces of my companions. 'Do you go along with this, Lord Roxton?' If the Mechanical Housewife had seemed undistressed before, that was not now the case. Her flexible features showed hurt.

He shrugged. 'Let Professor Challenger explain. It makes pretty good sense.'

Master Zangpan chose this moment to speak. 'Yes, let Professor Challenger explain. Let him explain why he is abusing my hospitality so! Let him explain why he is acting like such an oaf! And let him explain why he ruined my best purple jacket!'

'Don't listen to him, Malone,' said Challenger. 'That's the way they work, lulling us into a sense of

false security. That's why he sent his mechanical whore to you last night!'

I saw red at his words and would have landed a punch upon his gargoyle face if Professor Summerlee had not placed himself between us. 'Come on,' he said to Challenger, 'don't you think that's a little strong? Apologise to Malone *and* the Mechanical Housewife.'

'I stand by my words,' said Challenger staunchly. I swear that in my life I had never hated anyone more, but I forced myself to consider his words. After all, we were in unfamiliar territory and he was our leader. Summerlee saw that I was ready to listen.

'Just get to the point,' he said to Challenger. 'Tell him what you told us.'

Challenger met my cold hard stare for a moment before commencing. 'Why are we here, Malone? They brought us here, didn't they? We have already established that we were, in fact, kidnapped. The question is why. Why was the Mechanical Housewife on the Moon? Why did Master Zangpan come there? Why did they kidnap us? Do you have an answer?'

I indicated that I did not. I suppose that I had put it all down to coincidence.

'The answer is quite clear to me – we were kidnapped because we were the only people in the normal universe to know of one of the most heinous crimes of the century! We were kidnapped because we were about to search for clues regarding the destruction of Ell Ka-Mar. Dear Malone, we were kidnapped because, and I do not say this lightly, we were going to discover that *Master Zangpan destroyed the Moon!*'

I gaped in astonishment.

'He has confined us here to ensure that no one ever bears witness to his villainy! In all probability, when we arrived the Mechanical Housewife was searching for survivors, to finish them off. A cleaning-up operation, so to speak. The Housewife persona is nothing but a sick joke.'

Summerlee saw that I was shaken. He put a hand upon my shoulder. 'You have to admit it makes sense, son.' It certainly did, except for one thing – I couldn't believe my steel-worked sweetheart capable of such atrocity. Master Zangpan, on the other hand... well, one should never trust a man whose trousers are wider than his head.

I turned to the Mechanical Housewife and looked into her eyes. 'Is it true?'

A trickle of oil ran from one steel eye's span. 'How can you ask that of me?'

'Ask yourself this, Malone, and then ask her,' said

Challenger. 'Why did she seduce you? And it was a seduction, I have no doubt. She came to you in the night, despite the fact that you had hardly spoken to her – and you had certainly made no confession of love.'

It was a valid question, I realised. I had never questioned her affection before. Perhaps it was because she was mechanical. I had assumed it was part of her programming to be friendly.

'You think your questions are so profound,' she said angrily to Challenger. His apparently ironclad accusations had pierced her steel heart. 'But the answer is actually quite simple. I fell in love with you years ago, Malone, when I read your novels.'

'Is it possible?' I was dumbfounded, not for the first or the last time that week. 'I have not written any novels.'

Klothe piped up, 'She's from the future, remember.'

'That changes nothing,' maintained Challenger. 'Master Zangpan must answer the charges I have placed before him.'

'Very well, Challenger,' said Master Zangpan. 'Those charges will be answered. But not by me. I would have preferred to keep this from you, so that you could have performed your mission with clear conscience-'

'The mission!' I said, remembering the Housewife's slip the night before.

As Master Zangpan spoke, we watched in amazement as his moustaches lengthened, assuming the aspect of two strange black sinuous tentacles. They extended until they reached the bonds which held him in the chair, and untied him.

'A skill I learnt from a great-uncle of mine, Master Longbrows,' he said to our amazed expressions. 'A lovely old man, he used to fight demons with his eyebrows near the Mystic Mountains.' He got to his feet, shrugging off his shredded jacket and looking regally resplendent in his shimmering shirt and enormous trousers. He walked up to Challenger and stared him in the eye.

'By your arrogant and boorish behaviour you have forced this upon me, though foolish compassion had made me wish to spare you the pain. I no longer believe I owe you that level of consideration. You will have to live with your crimes.'

'What do you mean by that, you preposterous buffoon?' said Challenger, raising himself to his fullest height. 'Your ridiculous attempts to confuse the issue are pointless. I am guilty of nothing but pride and excellence! You are a mad dictator and a vicious killer, and though it should take my life to do it I will make you pay!'

'On the contrary,' said Master Zangpan, with sadness despite the invective piled upon him. 'Professor George Edward Challenger, King of Ell Ka-Mar, by the powers vested in me as ruler of Zangpan's World I charge you with the murder of the Moon!'

Challenger looked to us in horror. 'This cannot be! I did nothing, I was their King! I loved them, as they loved me!' There were tears in his eyes, and as he fell to his knees in despair we rushed to his side. Could it be true? Challenger's grief-stricken reaction made me wonder. I looked to the Mechanical Housewife for assistance. She passed me a handkerchief for Challenger.

'I'm sorry,' she said softly, 'but it is true. Challenger was responsible for the annihilation of Ell Ka-Mar.' I couldn't believe my ears.

'No!' screamed Challenger, like a wounded bull protesting against the sword through its heart.

I looked to Klothe and Melenkius – even they had freed themselves from Challenger's carefully tied knots. 'You showed concern for us before, when you learnt that we were kidnapped. Is this true?'

They regarded each other, nodded, then turned back to me. It was Melenkius who spoke. 'I'm very much afraid that it is, Mister Malone.' I shook my head in disbelief. Was there no escape from this nightmare?

'What's more, my dears,' said Klothe, 'Challenger must pay for his crime in blood.'

Reparations and Preparations

'Now that the sailboats of anger lie becalmed upon the ocean of your passions,' said Master Zangpan, 'I shall explain why you're here. Something, note you, that I was in the middle of doing when you so rudely assaulted us. That wasn't cool, guys, but I'll forgive you this time.'

We had all sat back down, even Challenger having regained his composure (though he was clearly still an unhappy man), while our host had stepped before us to deliver his lecture. The drinks trolley had finally turned up, full of apologies about not being there when we woke and going on about 'some rowdy Dra-wak-oos', whatever they were. With a glass in my hand, whisky in my belly and the Mechanical Housewife starting to smile at me again, things weren't looking quite so bleak. The matter of Challenger's crime and punishment still concerned me, of course.

Master Zangpan asked Challenger to tell him all he knew about Ell Ka-Mar, and my friend meekly did as he was told, describing his arrival there, his stay and his coronation. Master Zangpan nodded sagely throughout.

'As I suspected,' he pronounced, once Challenger had finished. 'They told you nothing of their imminent doom until the last minute, and even then all you learnt was that a force of some kind was coming for them.'

'I think it's time for all you old-time Earthmen to learn something of the true history of Ell Ka-Mar. This may shock you, but it was a colony of escaped slaves. They established themselves there about one hundred years before you discovered them, Challenger. Everything on they created on the Moon was grey for one reason – camouflage. They knew they were lost if anybody noticed them. For the same reason they lived a manifestly low-tech existence. Their erstwhile owners were monitoring your solar system, among others, searching for signs of Ell Ka-Mar. Unfortunately, Challenger my friend, you led the villainous bunch of no-good slavers straight to the kindly Ka-Marians! As soon as you arrived on their world they knew the game was up. Their calculations had indicated that the first humans would not

reach the Moon until the 1960s or the 1970s – your precocious intelligence cost them their home!'

'Damnation!' said Challenger. 'What a fool I've been. I should have known. The sadness in their eyes when they looked at me – I thought it was an appeal. It was not. It was the sadness of one who regards his executioner and forgives him for what he does.'

Professor Summerlee spoke up. 'But there is no reason to punish Challenger for those events! He could not possibly have known the consequences of his actions. In fact, why didn't they just shoo him away, instead of making him welcome?'

'Shooing him away would have done no good at all. They knew that their slave-masters would routinely investigate any interplanetary travel whatsoever, and they knew it was the end of their little dream of freedom. They made Challenger welcome and they made him their King so that somebody would remember the peaceful life they had enjoyed.'

'So why punish Challenger?' asked I.

Master Zangpan shrugged. 'Punishment is not really the word. Challenger created a very heated atmosphere just now, and my response to that was ill-befitting. I was carried away by a lust for verbal vengeance! However, there is something he can do for the people of Ell Ka-Mar. Remember the quest of which your friend Aikor spoke? Fellow humans, you may yet make the attempt!'

'I would have done anything for them. I still will,' said Challenger sadly. He sighed profoundly. 'You were not right to keep the knowledge of my guilt from me – though it will weigh heavily upon my conscience, that is only just. Nevertheless, your motives were pure. I apologise most fully for my suspicions of you. You are a generous and noble man, with, if I may say so, the most incredible moustaches. I will replace your fine jacket at the first opportunity. And what can I say to you, Mechanical Housewife? I know that nothing will ever make up for the slanderous and despicable things I said about you and your relations with Malone. The shame of my words will always haunt me, but please accept my apologies and my promise that if you should ever choose to marry my young friend I should be proud to be best man.'

His hangdog eyes ached with sincerity, and she received his bow with gratitude.

‘Don’t get carried away,’ said Lord Roxton to Challenger. ‘There would be two other candidates for that position, you know!’

We all laughed, until Challenger spoke sadly once more. ‘Indeed you are right, Lord John, for I do not feel at all like the best man among us at this moment. The death of a world, the suspicion of a gentleman and the slander of a lady all hang upon me. Master Zangpan, you said there remained an action which I could perform for my people. Pray tell of its nature, though I wish so powerfully that I had been able to do something before they died, rather than now, as they lie incinerated among the ashes of their home.’

‘Before they died?’ said Master Zangpan. ‘Forgive me for what may seem an insensitive question, but are you under the impression that the people of Ell Ka-Mar are dead?’

‘But of course,’ said Challenger. ‘You saw the wreckage of their world, or least your proxy, the Mechanical Housewife, did.’

‘Challenger, I think you had better pour yourself another glass of whisky! Your people are not dead. Their home has been destroyed, and will never be the same, but they survive! Their masters would not have destroyed such valuable property – they reclaimed it, and took the Ka-Marians back to their home-world!’

‘My God!’ said Summerlee.

‘Can it be true?’ said Challenger, his overcast features clearing to let the sun shine through.

‘I swear that it is,’ said Master Zangpan gravely. ‘They live, but they are returned to a state of bondage, treated as little more than cattle. Their culture and their science is ignored as they are sent into dangerous mines or used in grotesque experiments.’

Lord John Roxton got to his feet. ‘Challenger, it is your duty to lead us in their rescue!’

Challenger pursed those lamb-chop lips, frowned and then nodded, ‘I know my duty better than any of you. When I announced my assumption of the throne to the people of London, they regarded it as at best a joke, at worst the ravings of a deluded madman. Yet to me the matter was never less than serious. And now we have learnt of the part I played in my people’s downfall, my actions must lend their support to my good intentions. However, this could be extremely dangerous, a virtual suicide mission, and I cannot ask you to come with me.’

It was bizarre to see Challenger, a man who had always been at odds with everyone and everything

on his home planet, demonstrating such an emotional attachment to an alien people. If he took all his responsibilities so seriously, why did his wife spend so much time with no one but the butler for company? Perhaps in Ell Ka-Mar, for the first time in his life, he felt fully at ease with himself and with others, appreciated for his intelligence, rather than derided for it.

‘If you don’t ask us to accompany you,’ said Lord Roxton to Challenger, ‘you should prepare to fight a duel this very instant! Dare you belittle the courage of your comrades by refusing to lead us into a little bit of danger?’

‘Quite right,’ said Professor Summerlee drily, ‘and it’s not as if you ever hesitated to land us in trouble before.’

The preparations for the flight went quickly. Master Zangpan and the Mechanical Housewife briefed us on what we could expect to encounter on our journey and upon our arrival. As we were attempting to absorb all that information, Klothe and Melenkius were working night and day on the *Rocket*. They transported her from the surface of the Moon to one of their many gigantic workshops, where they proceeded to strip her down to the bare bones. Challenger expressed a few reservations as they began, but a few choice intimations of the rebuilt ship’s abilities were enough to reassure him. Soon the day came for us to leave. Master Zangpan and the Mechanical Housewife would not be accompanying us, due to the danger of messing up the time-stream, and so on the night before there had been much drinking of whisky and singing of songs. Later into the night, the Housewife and I had bid each other many tender farewells. When I awoke she was still there, having spent the night recording my sleep for future recollection.

‘Take good care of yourself,’ she said as I dressed.

‘I’ve got a good reason to.’

A few minutes later we were with Challenger and the others on the launch-pad. This was a sliver with a firm surface, ideal for landing and taking-off. At one end was a small building, which Klothe explained to contain the apparatus required for getting spacecraft into and out of Zangpan’s World. The plan was for us to power up on the launch-pad and get all the systems up and running, before being transported into real space.

‘Good luck to you all,’ said Master Zangpan. ‘You have a dangerous time ahead of you.’

‘It’s a shame you can’t drop us off a little closer to our destination,’ I said.

‘Agreed,’ said Zangpan, ‘but our reasons for not

doing so are excellent. At present your enemies know nothing of Zangpan's World, and I don't want that to change, at least for the moment. More important, though, is the question of my role in the cosmos. I'm not a god, I'm a man with some funky powers and a groovy pad, and I don't want to over-reach myself. I have reached a level of cosmic awareness which permits me to realise that although my home gives me virtually infinite power, my wisdom is not far from being finite. I can't just move people around in real space as if they were chess pieces, much less do so in my own historical past.'

'But you did make an exception for us,' said Professor Summerlee. 'You did interfere.'

'Yes,' replied Zangpan. 'Against my own better judgement, I decided to take the risk. As for changing history, well, I learnt at school that the first man on the Moon was an American, Neil Armstrong. Once the Mechanical Housewife found you there, I knew that either the time-stream had changed as a result of somebody else's intervention, or, more likely, that the history I knew was not the full story. I felt that there was an opening for a bit of creative assistance.'

'We're very grateful,' said Challenger. 'The changes you've made to our ship will make our task merely difficult, where before it would have been impossible.'

'Will we ever see you again?' I may have been asking Master Zangpan, but my eyes were on the Mechanical Housewife.

'I dare say you will,' said he. 'She wouldn't forgive me if you didn't. And when you next drop by, bring the Ka-Marians with you. I imagine they'll be needing a place to stay.'

Professor Challenger reached out and shook his hand. 'Your heart is as large as your trousers,' he said solemnly. I don't think he intended to make everybody laugh, but that was the way it worked out.

Challenger led the way into the *Rocket*, which despite all the marvellous modifications we'd heard about, looked pretty similar to the way she had two and a half weeks ago in Challenger's garden. Professor Summerlee and Lord Roxton followed him

inside, bidding farewell to our friends from Zangpan's World. I was the last to get on board, after saying a fond goodbye to the Mechanical Housewife.

Back inside the spaceship all of us save Challenger settled into our comfortable upholstered chairs. Our fearless leader was at the console, waiting for a signal from Klothe and Melenkius.

'It's good to be back,' said Lord Roxton. We all agreed heartily. Though I would miss the Mechanical Housewife, it really was pleasant to return to familiar surroundings. What a contrast to the first time I entered the ship! Zangpan's World had been beautiful, but all that spinning around did make me dizzy at times! (The Mechanical Housewife had told me to stop being silly – did I realise how quickly Great Britain spins around? At a rate of about seventeen hundred kilometres an hour. So it's psychological, I said to her. Point taken – but please take the trouble to inform my stomach next time it tries to do a double flip!)

The signal must have come, because Challenger switched on the engines. He turned to us and asked if we were ready to go.

Confirmation of readiness was given by all. As the portal into normal space began to open up before the spacecraft, I asked Challenger, 'Don't you need to close the viewing window?'

'Previously that would have been the case,' he replied. 'However, you have drawn attention to one of the many improvements made by those master engineers, Klothe and Melenkius, to the ship. The reinforced glass of the window has been replaced with a material concocted in their laboratories which provides us with protection from cosmic rays and the glare of the sun, as well as a beautiful view.'

'So long as we are in a beautiful place,' observed Summerlee.

A few seconds later we were, after Challenger set full steam ahead and took the *Rocket* into the space between the stars. To one side was the Moon, to the other the Earth, and dead ahead was the glittering and treacherous star which honour made our destination.