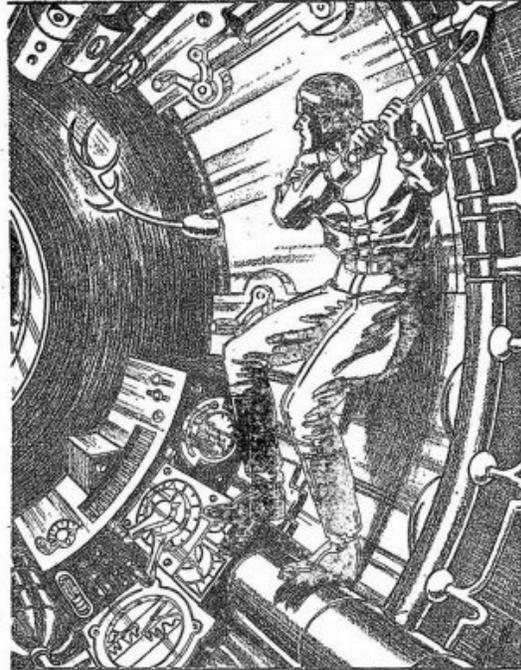


DEATH DIVES DEEP

A Complete Novelette
of Weird Thrills

By **PAUL ERNST**

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"Blood of Witches," etc.



Street caught up a sledge hammer and crashed it down.

CHAPTER I The Metal Cylinder

THE dome building, like an overgrown igloo, secretively placed here in the mountains and woods, could scarcely be seen against the black sky. Professor Ogden had hidden it well... But if it looked bleak and forbidding from the outside, it did not from within.

Inside, a great arc light shed white beams over scientific paraphernalia, machine shop equipment—and the thing these elaborate devices had produced. That was a great metal cylinder, perhaps ten feet through and twenty-five long, set up on end in the center of the dome building.

"It looks like a great big tin can, sitting upright," Ria Marquis, laughed.

She and John Street stood in the doorway of the dome building looking at the cylinder. "So this is the reason I haven't seen

you all these weeks," she added.

"This is the reason," Street said.

He stared at the cylinder with dreams in his grey eyes, and with a certain tensing of the muscles of his big body.

"That thing has to be guarded day and night. And I've been elected to do the guarding, since I was the only one Professor Ogden allowed to help him build it."

"But what is it?" asked Ria, wrinkling her small straight nose in bewilderment.

Street gazed at her piquant face under its coppery hair, at her deep blue eyes, at her red lips.

"Well?" she smiled.

"Oh, pardon me! I was thinking of something more important than inventions. What is this thing? Well, it's an atom compacter. In plainer language, it digs holes."

"Digs holes," echoed Ria disappointingly. "That doesn't sound so mysterious. If that's all it does, why should the professor hide it out here in the wilderness

and watch it day and night as though it were made of gold?"

Aren Rawl, a dark, tall young man who had been lounging wordlessly beside them, listening to the roar of the waterfall nearby, spoke up.

"It's more precious than gold, Miss Marquis. With it, if you liked, you could find many times its weight in gold. For with it you could sink shafts in a few hours to the deepest of metal deposits. Or you could build commercial tunnels at a rate of many miles a day. Or it could be used as a war instrument: You could sink in it behind your own lines, burrow forward through solid earth till you were under the enemy capital, and there lay mines to be exploded when you were far on your way home again."

"It sounds to me as though you had invented a kind of metal earthworm," sniffed Ria. "And I still can't see why it should be kept such a secret from the world."

"You were the first person besides Aren and Ogden and myself who has ever been in this building," Street said soberly. "You see—Gregor Cunao is after it."

"Gregor Cunao?" Ria exclaimed.

"Yes. The utilities magnate himself," Street said bitterly. "He has millions already, but with this he could possess billions! So he wants it."

"But the patents—"

"Darling, you don't patent a thing like this. It is too revolutionary. And it couldn't be protected from the looting foreign nations."

FAR below them on the mountain leading to the dome building, an automobile's headlight shot into sight.

"The professor," Aren said. And, an instant later: "He's certainly coming fast, John. Look!"

The car was coming fast! At a rate in excess of a hundred miles an hour it bored up the steep lane, though fifty should have been

the limit there and even that would have been impossible without pneumatic springs Ogden had invented two years before, in 1947.

"Something's wrong," Street said quickly. "He'd never drive like that if—"

Behind the first set of headlights, two more pairs abruptly showed. At an equal speed, the two bored through the darkness after the first. Then a far-off, tiny red streak could be seen, and another, and a third. Then three reports sounded in the ears of the two men and the girl.

"They're shooting at him! My God, something has gone wrong!" Aren gasped.

The two men looked at each other, white lipped.

"Cunao," Street said at last. "He has trailed Ogden here. It's to be a showdown fight!"

He grasped Ria's arm and rushed her inside the doorway of the dome building.

"I'll get this door ready to bar as soon as Ogden comes," he said tensely. "Aren—get to the power house. See that the camouflage there is all right—and stay in there! Don't come out for anything."

"Right," Aren clipped.

He started on a dogtrot through the woods, his path leading toward the roar of the waterfall.

"He'll—he'll be all right?" Ria faltered.

"I hope so," Street said somberly. "The power house is underground. Earth and shrubs conceal its door."

Many more shots burst out from the two cars speeding after the one in which Street guessed Ogden to be. The first car went even faster. They could hear the scream of its motor, see the wabbling of its lights over the uneven road.

"John! What will you—we—do?" begged the girl, blue eyes wide.

Street shrugged. "Bar the doors. Try to defend ourselves from Cunao. and his hired

killers the best we can.”

The speeding car in the lead skidded around the last long turn. It began to brake three hundred yards from the dome building, and slid with a scream of tires almost all that distance in the gravel before stopping. From it leaped a tall, spare figure who darted to the doorway without bothering to turn the motor off or set the brakes. The car rolled slowly, unheeded, into a tree.

The two cars behind, both capable of holding ten people, swept toward the last turn.

“Professor!” cried Street, holding the door open. “Here!”

The tall, spare figure ran into the building. Professor Ogden, coal black eyes blazing, lean, powerful face working, helped Street slide home the bolts. The last one shot into place just as the crackle of machine-gun fire burst forth and the steel door leaped and clanged as though a devil’s sledgehammer played taps there.

“Cunao?” asked Street, tight-lipped.

Ogden, the world’s best-known inventor, nodded his iron grey head.

“In person. With fifteen men. We’re trapped, John—Miss Marquis!”

Ria put her hand on his arm.

“I—shouldn’t be here, should I, Professor?”

OGDEN sighed. “From the point of view of our secrecy, of course you should be here. You’re to marry John. You’re one of us. But from the point of view of danger—” He bit his lip.

Suddenly the big steel door buckled and clanged.

“They’ve got a battering ram!” exclaimed Street. He looked at Ogden in dismay.

The professor nodded, face grim and bleak.

“We’re caught, John. There’s no way out. The very fact that we hid our laboratory so far

from other people militates against us. No one lives near enough to hear the shooting and comes to help us.”

“Then what—”

Ogden cleared his throat. His voice was a little husky as he spoke.

“I thought pretty fast while Cunao and his men trailed me,” he said. “The only answer I could see was to escape in the atom compacter, immediately.”

“But,” gasped Street, “we’ve never tested it! We don’t know how it will work.”

“No, we have never tested it.” A second clang of the door punctuated his words. “I thought we’d test it now—with our lives forfeit if our work has been unsound. But I don’t know what to do about Miss Marquis.”

Ria looked from the young man to the elderly one,

“How could you escape from this windowless stone building, with only one door and that one being attacked by fifteen men?”

Street nodded to the giant cylinder, set on end in the center of the building.

“I told you that bored holes? Well, Professor Ogden’s idea was that we get in it, bore down through the floor of the laboratory and underground for several miles, then come up again.”

“All right,” Ria said quickly. “Why does my presence stop that plan?”

Ogden shook his head.

“It might not work, Miss Marquis. It might leave us entombed deep in the earth. It might kill us before we got started.”

“Professor,” she interrupted steadily, “if we stay here till the men outside break in, we’ll be killed anyway, won’t we?” At Ogden’s reluctant nod, she hurried on: “Then there’s no argument. I’ll get in the cylinder with you, of course, and share whatever fate you go to!”

The door was bending and buckling badly under the battering of the band outside. Ogden stared at Street, then started on a run

for the big cylinder.

"Come on—it's our only way out!"

He pressed at a section of the magnesium alloy beside a hairline oblong in the wall of the cylinder. A door appeared. Swiftly the three stepped inside the cylinder.

Inside, it was like the cabin of a submarine. There were a few padded bunks, a few chairs, also padded, and bolted to the metal floor. The rest was machinery and engines and tanks in a bewildering array.

Street sprang to a metal bench on which stood a radio set. He switched on the power, then began to speak.

"Aren't John talking. Cunao's men have us trapped in the dome building. They're about to break in. We're in the cylinder. Ria and the professor and I. We're going to bore down in the cylinder and tunnel up again a few miles away."

Ria could hear the gasp of the man hidden in the secret power house near the waterfall. Then:

"Right, John. There's power in plenty. I have the wave length set for its radio transmission to you. Try it—and God be with you!"

DIMLY, as though from a far distance, they heard a door slam down.

"They're in the building," Street said to Ogden.

The professor nodded. He stepped to a gigantic power switch near the radio bench. Beside the big switch was a smaller one. He threw the smaller one first. Ria saw him moisten his lips.

"God help us if the protective screen doesn't work," he whispered.

There was a savage clanging against the metal walls of the cylinder. Ogden stared at Street, then at the girl.

"Hang on!"

He pulled down the big power switch.

There was a blinding arc as the switch

made contact. An angry scream sounded from the end of the cylinder on which they were resting. The cylinder lurched wildly, then steadied.

Ria could feel motion. It was not rapid but it was distinct. They were going down, sinking.

Street gazed at Ogden with his grey eyes shining.

"Success so far, sir," he said, in an awed tone. "The protective screen works, and we're settling down in the earth."

"Yes," said Ogden somberly. "Down—in the earth—but I hadn't dreamed of trying it without more preliminary work. I'm praying nothing goes wrong."

The sinking motion continued evenly. Inside the cylinder three white-faced people stared at each other.

Outside—

In the dome building a group of furious but half frightened men with a big, stocky man at their head, futilely watched a great cylinder sink through a solid concrete floor and continue to sink into solid rock, as a hot penny through butter, leaving a smooth round hole its own size behind it.

"Fire!" the stocky man, Gregor Cunao himself, cried savagely. "Damn them—"

Machine guns and automatics roared salvos. Bullets clamored against the blunt metal rear end of the cylinder. But they didn't even dent the alloy; and in a moment the cylinder could not be seen. It had vanished, leaving behind it a ten foot hole, the walls of which were a gleaming vitreous black. Down and down that hole led, as though it went straight to the dark depths of Hell itself.

CHAPTER II

To the Center of the Earth

"WOULD you say five miles, sir?" Street said

to Ogden.

The professor nodded. "That should be ample. Then we'll head for the western flatlands, go for another five miles or so, and come up. We can do it in two hours, three at the most."

Ria Marquis gazed at him with her red lips parted.

"You mean to say you can dig down all that distance in this thing in a few hours?"

Street smiled. Ogden nodded more soberly.

"We are sinking at a rate of about five miles an hour. John, explain it to her while I look over the controls."

Street pointed to the floor of the ten foot space, like a round room about them. Ria saw a quartz glass trap door. She could see nothing but blackness through the glass, however.

"This floor is the upper part of a sort of false bottom," Street said. "The real end of the cylinder is five feet farther down. Only there isn't any end that you can see. The end seems to be open."

"Seems to be?" Ria echoed.

"The real end of the cylinder, Ria," Street explained, "is something invisible. It is a tremendously powerful rotating magnetic field. And it is the secret of the cylinder. That field, acting on substance before it, disrupts its atoms and then whirls the components to the rim of the field. There, the atoms are compacted and condensed. A cubic foot of rock, for example, is compacted to a cubic inch, but retains all its original weight, of course, in spite of its shrinkage. Look."

He switched on a light, which lit the space under the glass trapdoor. Ria saw a whirling, furious mist, and, nearer to the glass, a sleek black wall, like black glass.

"The compacted matter, whirled to the rim of the hole the atom compacter is forcing for itself, is denser than any substance yet known and more than diamond hard. It makes

a better tunnel lining than concrete, don't you think?"

The girl nodded, wordless.

"Which is one reason why Cunao would kill to get it!" Street said grimly. "With this cylinder he could corner the world's subterranean building contracts. He could bore tunnels at a rate of five miles an hour, leaving them perfectly lined. Or he could sink shafts to mines, or be an underground pirate—"

He glanced swiftly toward Ogden, who was near the radio bench.

"The first rift, sir!" he said tensely.

Ogden nodded. He spoke into the transmitter.

"Rawl, is everything all right above?"

"All right, sir," came Aren Rawl's anxious voice.

"Plenty of power?"

"Plenty of power."

Ogden touched another switch.

"Watch this," Street said. "And—we'll hope it works!"

Ria, looking through the glaze, saw no more whirling mist, which represented the disrupting and then reassembling and compacting of solid rock and earth. The searchlight beam showed vacant space beneath. A cave, of unguessable extent.

Then she saw four things like metal fishing rods extend down from the cylinder. She saw them stop, saw that they rested on the uneven floor of the deep cave.

THE cylinder lowered itself on the four supports, like four legs, lurched a little as it touched the rock of the floor, then steadied as once more it began to sink through rock, leaving a hole behind it like the hole an earthworm leaves as it goes blindly through dirt.

"I think I understand," said Ria, a little shakily. "The whirling field beneath us breaks up all substance into its smallest units, crowds the units to the side, and compresses them

there. The cylinder sinks into the space made, and then does it all over again. But John, what keeps the field from acting both ways? Why doesn't it compact things behind it as well as ahead of it?"

Street nodded toward the smaller switch beside the big main one.

"You heard the professor speak of a protective screen? That switch controls it. When it is thrown, an invisible screen of electrical force is made between the cylinder proper, and the open end where the field operates. If anything goes wrong with that screen—" He shook his head. "Well, we'd be reduced to tiny things like little dolls, an inch high, weighing a hundred and eighty pounds—in my case, that is—made of substance harder than any metal!"

Ria shivered. "And you hadn't tested any of this equipment before now?"

"None, save in miniature and under laboratory conditions which are quite unlike real ones. Cunao forced our hand badly tonight."

"But we seem to be doing all right."

"So far," admitted Street. "But there are so many things that can go wrong! And being in a twenty foot tin can, pointed straight toward the center of the earth, is not so secure if something does pop!"

"But it was that, or die with Cunao's bullets in us," sighed Ria. She was very pale, but composed. Street was filled with pride in her. Any other girl would have been mad with hysteria.

"John, how will you come up again? You can't point straight up and rise as you came down."

"No. We have to ascend on a slant. We can go straight down, but not straight up. When we go down as far as desired, we turn the cylinder slowly till it is horizontal, extrude retractable wheels from the cylinder's walls, and start slanting up. The whirling field opens a tunnel for us as before, and plenty of power

applied to the wheels forces us upward along the slant. Power comes to us by radio transmission."

Again Street's voice broke tensely, harsh with excitement as he made an announcement to Ogden.

"Water ahead, sir."

The searchlight beam played on water, in which pallid blind things swam. An underground pool of God knew what size and depth.

"This may be the end," Ogden said quietly, "Well, there is nothing for it but to go straight ahead. We can't back up the tunnel—Look! John, my theory of the atom compacter was right!"

Breathlessly the three peered down through the quartz glass panel. Ria didn't know what Street and Ogden were looking for, but she saw a change.

The cylinder had been sinking soundlessly into a self-fashioned bore the circular walls of which were black and sleek like wet glass. Now a new type of wall was showing up.

"EXTENDING down into the water she saw what, appeared to be a ten-foot, milky shell that trailed off to nothingness just beyond the open rim of the cylinder. The milky shell thickened and became more opaque.

"Thank God!" said Ogden with a ragged sigh.

"We're boring a hole in water?" Street cried tensely. "Our last and most serious worry about the practicability of the compacter is set aside! Don't you see?" he said to Ria who was gripping his arm, gazing at the opaque tube which the cylinder was forming for itself in the water and down which it was sliding. "The atom compacter compresses and whirls to the side all the minerals in the water. More water flows in, more salts are compacted. A wall, or skin of minerals is formed. Professor Ogden always

held that this would occur, while I always feared that the condensed substance would simply sink to the bottom. He was right. The compacted minerals are formed swiftly enough to adhere to each other before they have time to sink. On this point rested much of the success of the compacter: if it did not 'bore holes in water' the pressure of any subterranean pool tapped by the cylinder would send us flying back up to the earth's surface on top of a geyser."

Professor Ogden put an arm around each of them in a burst of satisfaction rare to him.

"Success!" he whispered. The whisper was heartfelt. "Our forced test is completely successful."

Street gazed at the depth gauge near the panel. The walls of the endless bore the cylinder was forming were black and sleek again. The compacter had sunk through the underground pool and was once more boring through rock.

"Five miles down, sir," he said. "Shall we start slanting up to the west?"

Ogden nodded. "Throw the switch while I make the adjustment that enlarges the diameter of the whirling field so we'll have room to turn gradually ... John! John! *Look!*"

Both men saw it at the same time, with appalled faces.

Around the control board in which the master power switch was set, blue flame licked and played.

"A short!" Street gasped. "We can't touch that switch! It's electrocution to the man who touches it!"

Ogden's jaws clicked shut.

"Call up to Rawl to shut the power off while we find the short and repair it."

Street leaped to the radio, turned the switch. His breath hissed from between set teeth.

"The set's gone! The short has burned it out. We can't get in touch with Rawl!"

Both men stared with stunned eyes at the control board. Ria's hand touched Street's shoulder.

"What's wrong, John?" she said. "Tell me."

Street hesitated, then faced her.

"All right. It wouldn't be a kindness to try to conceal it from you. Because of a short on the control board, we've lost all control of the cylinder. We can't turn or stop because we can't shut off the power to do either. We can't order Rawl, five miles above, to shut off the generators, because our radio transmitter is useless. Meanwhile—" His arm went around her. "Meanwhile, darling, we're sinking powerlessly down into the earth at a five mile an hour rate. God knows where we'll end. The center of the earth, if it is possible the power could be transmitted that far; a few hundred miles if it can't. But we won't be alive to see what's down there!"

CHAPTER III The Black Pit

THE three lay on the floor of the cylinder, panting with the weight of the air column in the interminable bore above the cylinder.

Ria's eyes were closed and she looked as though she might be sleeping, worn out with the hours of nerve-racking suspense. Professor Ogden's deep-set eyes were riveted on the control board, over which blue flame still arced and hissed like deadly serpents. His thought could be read in his face. It was one of bitterness that so intricate and marvelous a machine as the atom compacter could be rendered unmanageable by a thing that any electrician's apprentice: could have fixed, if he could have reached it. A simple short circuit.

Street lay watching the depth-meter. The cylinder had been sinking for twenty hours. The meter gave their depth as a

hundred and seven miles. Over a hundred miles down in the earth! Neither he nor Ogden dreamed they would be alive at that depth.

At ten miles they had struck the peril they had thought would mean, death. Heat! The thermometer read a hundred and twenty-five. They had panted helplessly in the metal cylinder. Ogden had asbestos suits, provided for their first test for just this emergency. They had put them on, wondering if it was worth the effort.

At a twenty mile depth the temperature had gone to two hundred and forty. Ria and Street had lain holding hands, while Ogden bitterly gazed at the unapproachable control board. They were going to be cremated alive!

But—they had not been!

At thirty miles the temperature was down to a hundred and fifty, and at forty-five miles it was a little over ninety, which was approximately the temperature right now.

They didn't know what had caused the change. Ogden thought it was because they had gone through the outer crust of comparatively loose rock which, pressing in on itself, caused heat by pure friction. He thought they had entered the lower strata, that great mass of nickel iron which according to some theories forms the entire ball of earth save for the outer skin of rock and dirt. The metal mass would be denser and more compact than the outer crust, and would resist the push of its own pressure to a point where insupportable heat vanished.

Anyhow, it was tolerable now, where it had not been before. They had missed that form of death. But still the cylinder was sinking, uncontrollable.

The depth meter registered one hundred and eight miles down. Street glanced idly down through the quartz glass trapdoor. He stiffened in astonishment so great that it could pierce even the lethargy with which they were all awaiting sure death.

"A rift, sir!" he said.

"A rift?" Ogden repeated sharply. Ria sat up and looked at Street. "You're mistaken! It isn't possible for a rift to exist at this depth!"

"I know," Street said. "We haven't passed through any since the twenty-eight mile level. So much pressure here that any open space in the rock would be squeezed flat—so much that even the bore we make, lined with compacted substance, is squeezed oval behind us. Nevertheless, there's a rift ahead, sir! We have just poked our bow into it"

OGDEN scrambled to the glass panel and looked down, as did Ria.

In front of the cylinder's nose, with the searchlight beam, streaming into it, was an opening in the solid stuff, through which they'd been squeezing. Far down they could see the floor of the great rift, or cave. It looked like a telescopic picture of the moon, pitted and rough.

The cylinder moved relentlessly down into the opening.

"Extensions—full length!" snapped Ogden. "A rift here is impossible—but it is a rift just the same. And I don't think our extensions will reach."

The metal bars at the sides of the cylinder flashed out and down to their fullest opening, a hundred and fifty feet. Stretched and did not touch bottom.

And the cylinder slid through the hole it had tapped in the ceiling of the rift, and shot downward.

"*This is it!*" Ria heard Street breathe. His hand was clutching hers so tightly that the clasp was agony, but neither of them noticed it.

The cylinder stopped with a thundering jar as it lit on the far extended ends of the bars. It swayed there, on lofty, spindling stilts, did not quite crash sideways, then finally started to sink downward as the extensions

automatically retracted back into the cylinder walls.

Street clutched Ogden's shoulder.

"It's our chance!" he shouted. "Do you understand? Our chance to stop this endless descent! None of the other rifts have been deep enough for the maneuver. But this one is!"

Ogden stared at him, eyes dull with weariness.

"We can stop going down, here!" Street repeated. "We can check the retraction of two of the extension bars just before we get to the floor of this rift. That will leave two of them short under us. The cylinder will fall to that side—and we'll no longer be pointing downward. We can simply lie there till Rawl, above, shuts off the power on his own initiative, and we can repair the radio and the control board and then call up to him again."

"John," sobbed Ria, "do you mean we're saved?"

A little of Street's savage tenseness left his face.

"It means we have a chance, anyhow, a ghost of a chance. We hadn't even that before."

"You're right," snapped Ogden. "Watch the panel, John! I'll handle the extension controls. Fortunately they're pneumatic and have nothing to do with the electric control board."

Hastily, John Street bent over the panel. Beneath the cylinder, the floor, of the rift was rising steadily toward him as the extension bars telescoped. The floor, he thought, was of nickel iron, but he couldn't be sure. It was pitted and seared as if by fire, but fairly level. He couldn't see much beyond the sides of the open end of the cylinder, couldn't tell how far the rift stretched on either side of them.

"Shorten!" he called to Ogden.

Two of the bars stopped telescoping. The cylinder slanted more and more as the

other two compressed beneath it. It swayed, sickeningly.

"This will be a bad fall," Street called to Ria. "Try to hang on to something—*Here we go!*"

THE cylinder toppled. With a thunderous clang it fell on its side on the flinty floor of the rift, rolled a little, and was still.

There was silence in the shell as the three, stunned and bruised by their shaking in the cylinder, struggled back to consciousness. The lights were still on; they had not been broken by the fall. Street sat up first.

"Ria! Professor!"

His voice was wild with the fear that he was alone, now, to face the hideous future. But the other two stirred on the floor, which was now the curved side of the atom compacter.

"John!" Ria choked.

"Are you all right, darling?"

"I hurt my arm. That's all, I think."

Street's eyes widened suddenly.

"Look! The control board!" he shouted.

Ogden exclaimed aloud. The blue flames were no longer playing over it. The rocking fall had jerked the switch from its socket. The short circuit could be repaired, now; also the radio. If the latter was repairable.

They leaped to the board, found the short—a circuit with a cable bared by faulty insulation. They taped it heavily, and went to the radio.

"A new condenser and two tubes," groaned Street.

Ogden smiled a little. "You'll find them in that cabinet over the radio bench," he said, "along with enough other spare parts almost to build a new set. You can put them in, now, without having them instantly blown by the short."

With Ria tensely watching over his

shoulder, Street repaired the set. A muscle twitched along his jaw as the burr of power sounded when he threw the switch.

“Rawl! Aren Rawl!” he called.
“Aren—”

A voice leaped back.

“John! What has been wrong in the compacter? I’ve been calling and calling, at three-minute intervals! Hours—I don’t know how many hours! And now that I’ve got you, it’s too late!”

“What do you mean, too late?”

“Cunao’s gang! They’ve found the power house in spite of the camouflage. Found it over an hour ago! They’ve been hammering to get in ever since. Where are you? On the surface again?”

“On the surface?” A bitter grin came to Street’s lips. “We are, at this moment, exactly one hundred and eight miles under your feet! Couldn’t get at the control board to throw the power switch. But we’re all right now!”

“You’re not all right! Didn’t you hear when I said Cunao had located the power house?” There was a staccato explosion, then two more. “They’ve broken in, damn them! I got two with those three shots. The rest are behind the first generator! They’ll get me in a matter of seconds! What they’ll do then I don’t know—with you over a hundred miles down—”

There was the roar of another shot in the far world over their heads. Then, with stunning abruptness, the radio went dead.

“Either Aren is shot, or the set in the power house was shattered by a bullet,” Street said to Ogden. “If I could get my hands on Cunao—”

Ogden threw the big power switch on.

“Come! We’ll get as far on our way upward as we can! Cunao will probably cut off the power, thinking we have long since come to earth again and that he can find the compacter where we are forced to leave it powerless.”

THE light in the shell, and the searchlight, dimmed as the power hummed to the whirling magnetic field, brightened again as the load was absorbed.

“Extrude the wheels,” Ogden called.

Street pulled the lever that dropped wheels through slots in the cylinder wall, and another lever that raised the compacter up on the wheels.

“Forward,” said Ogden. “We’ll start upward as soon as we get to the end of the rift—”

The lights clicked out, and the faint roar of the motor geared to the wheels stopped. In pitch blackness and utter silence, the three gripped convulsively at whatever was nearest them.

Then Professor Ogden spoke, putting into words what all knew had happened. In his voice was a resignation more grim than any wild outcry.

“Cunao has cut the power. We’re stranded in this rift, a hundred and eight miles below the earth’s surface.”

CHAPTER IV

Mother of Pearl Monsters

FOR the first time, Ria’s nerve cracked. She began to laugh and cry. Street found her in the blackness, and his arms comforted her. They heard Ogden moving behind them, heard his fingers fumble with a catch.

Ria drew a shuddering breath, and controlled herself.

“I’m all right, darling,” she said. “I won’t do it again. Hysterics don’t help, do they? Professor, what do you suggest we do now?”

There was a tiny click, and a little beam of light split the abysmal, incredible blackness which obtained at that great depth in the bowels of the earth. Ria cried out with

tremulous gladness at the sight of it.

“Flashlights,” said Ogden. “I have several more in this locker. I suggest we get out of the shell and search for water in this rift. I’ve put many things in the cylinder, but food and water are not there. Naturally! I never dreamed they would be needed for the short test I’d planned to make in a month or so. We haven’t had anything to drink for over twenty hours. We’ve been too preoccupied to think about it. But we’ll have plenty of time to think from now on!”

“You hope to find water? A hundred miles below the earth’s surface?” said Street bleakly.

Ogden shrugged. “It sounds fantastic. But then, a rift is impossible here, too. Yet we have a rift.”

He opened the heavy metal door in the cylinder wall. The door opened sideways, on account of their prone position, instead of up and down.

They crawled out, stood on the pitted floor of the great underground rift.

“Nickel iron, all right,” said Ogden, studying the floor. “Here is mankind’s future supply of metal, if the infinitesimal deposits in the outer crust ever run out.”

He took from his pocket another flashlight, clicked it and set it on end next to the atom compacter. Its beam shot up until it lost itself toward the roof of the great cave, acting as a beacon.

“We might as well go this way,” said Ogden, starting toward the front of the cylinder. “We’ll walk till we find water, or till we can’t see the beacon light any more. Then we’ll come back and try a new direction.”

RIA’S scream broke into his words. Street jumped to her side. She was trembling violently.

“Ria! What’s the matter?”

“Look! Look!” she sobbed, directing her flashlight to her feet. “OH, look! I nearly

stepped on it!”

Ogden and Street stared at the white circle the beam of her flashlight made on the pitted, metallic floor. They saw a tiny figure there, on a sunken spot in front of the cylinder where the magnetic field had rayed out before the power was cut off.

“A child’s plaything!” Ria sobbed wildly. “There are people down here! A doll!”

Grimly Street bent downward. He seized the little figure, which was about two inches long and vaguely manlike, and tried to lift it. He couldn’t, as he had guessed before trying. With a shoulder cracking heave, he got the tiny thing over on its side.

It seemed to be made of glittering white gold, and it looked like a deformed little man in armor, with jointed rings at various parts of its body. Small as it was, it was singularly hideous. There was terror inherent in it that gave Street the creeps.

“That’s no doll, Ria,” he said gently.

“But it must be! So little—”

“That thing,” Street said, with a quiver in his voice, “was something alive that got in front of the whirling magnetic field before the power was cut off! Something that came, attracted by the crash of our fall, and was caught by the atom compacter! You’re right, there are people down here, mad as it sounds. At least there are live things. Like this tiny, compacted figure, only heaven knows how much larger! And if they are anything like this figurine—”

His voice broke off into a whisper. The three stared again at the sinister, tiny thing, like a crude doll of white metal on the dull, pitted metal of the cavern’s floor.

Ogden’s voice sounded a little hoarse, but calm and quiet.

“We still need water,” he said. “That may have been a live thing a few minutes ago; or it may have lain here for millions of years. Probably the latter. It’s insane to think there is life of any kind down here at this late age—”

He stopped, his words blasted in his mouth by the sound the other two had heard at the same time—the sound of something moving stealthily over the pitted metallic floor—in their direction.

It had come from behind them. And for perhaps ten seconds the three stood frozen, their flashlights pointing at the dread thing at their feet. Then Street turned his flashlight in the direction of the sound.

“Ria! Professor! I’ve gone mad!” he heard his own voice, high and tinny, shut off to sudden silence as he stared, with the others at the things his light revealed.

There were perhaps fifty of them—things that moved on two legs like men but were two feet taller than any normal man. They seemed to be made of a sort of dull mother-of-pearl, or at least to be covered, like hard-shelled insects, with an armor of the stuff. They moved slowly but inexorably toward the three humans, with eyeless blind heads faced squarely their way. They moved in ranks, like trained soldiers; or rather, more like socialized insects with the instinct to move and work together in mass movement.

THEY had traces of features; but where noses should have been, there were shallow pits; and where mouths should have been there were footling tubes, which also seemed to be made of the hard stuff like mother-of-pearl.

In a nightmare circle the things surrounded the three humans and the cylinder they had come in. They pressed closer. Flexible pincers, at the ends of stringy lengths like arms cased in pearl, came out. The pincers clattered and rattled as they opened and closed investigatively. They touched the bodies of the two men and the girl.

Street cried out hoarsely as the claws feeling at him closed hard over his thigh. The claws instantly opened, and the monstrous thing that owned them stepped back on stiff, armored stumps of legs. They had no eyes,

and there were no openings for ears. But they could at least hear, it seemed. Probably because of sound’s vibration.

Ria screamed, the sound piercing the limitless black cavern like a ragged knife. Street jumped forward. He swung his fist, blindly at the thing that hurt her. His knuckles cracked on substance harder than bone. Pain streaked up through his arm—and he had not even staggered the being he had hit.

The monster turned its featureless face from the girl to him, and then moved a little toward the right of the cylinder. The others pressed against the three humans.

“They’re taking us some place!” gasped Ogden, as the meaning of the moves became clear. “Hang onto your lights!”

Too appalled to speak, Ria and Street moved with the professor in a nightmare march ahead of the pushing, blind, adamant armored monsters they had stumbled across here where by all laws of logic and science no living things could be.

They did not go far. About five hundred yards from the cylinder, still able to see the tiny dot of light which was their beckoning hope, they felt the press of the horrible herd against them relax. They stopped, still with no idea of the extent of the great rift. It might be a hundred miles long; it might extend only a few yards farther.

They looked around them with their flashlights. Crude, irregular cubes from eight to fifteen feet high surrounded them. They seemed to have been made of blocks of the metallic stuff under their feet, roughly sawn and placed without cement or other binding substance to hold them in position.

“Dwelling places!” exclaimed Street. “Shelters! But why? There’s no wind or rain or cold to beat at such cave things here.”

Ogden pointed to the nearest wall. It was seared and pocked with furious heat.

“Somehow, at some time, heat must flare up here from the earth’s core. Probably

these shelters are to shield the—they against those blasts.”

After milling around a little like hesitant cattle, the monstrous figures began to herd them away again. They went toward a cleared spot in the center of the cluster of heat seared cube shelters. They looked more than ever like insects, with articulated, rocky joints clattering, and rounded backs like the backs of turtles. They gathered in a circular crowd in the clearing, around one that was taller than the rest.

That is, all but one of the nightmare things went to the clearing. One stayed behind. It spread armored, clanking arms, with pincers clashing threateningly, and moved toward Ria and Street and Ogden.

SLOWLY they backed away from it, found they had been backed against the nearest of the metallic cubes, one of the bigger ones, perhaps fourteen feet high. There was a rough opening that, was probably a kind of doorway, but no other openings. Escape from the threatening, clanking arms and claws led them through this doorway.

As soon they were inside, the thing stopped in the opening. It stood there, stonily. There was no mistaking the pantomime: this thing was a guard, stationed over them while the rest met in conclave.

To do what? Discuss their captives in some queer, mute way?

“There can’t be communication where there is no sound,” Street burst out. “Professor, what are these things? How do they happen to be here—how is any life conceivable here—a hundred miles underground with no growing plants or anything else to feed them?”

Ogden was silent for some time, looking at Street in the light of his flash.

“It’s fantastic even to theorize,” he said. “And it seems futile to waste a thought on it, in our position. But—I’d say we are

looking at a hitherto undreamed of manifestation of evolution. Hundreds of millions of years ago, perhaps, these things were surface creatures, of flesh like other surface things. I imagine now you’d find a little gritty stuff, like flesh, deep under the calcium armor they have evolved to protect them. They must have penetrated deeper and deeper into the earth as the millions of years went by, till now they are almost things of rock themselves, and of course have no sight or hearing, and not much feeling.”

“But how do they live? What do they eat?”

Ogden spread his hands. “Who knows? Perhaps they have herds of some sort of creatures, armored like themselves, which feed on minerals instead of herbage, and which they slaughter now and then. Excess of lime and calcium, of iron and silicon, absorbed through millions of years, would make them things almost of solid rock themselves.”

“They are discussing us!” Ria burst in suddenly, with a high, ragged edge to her voice. “And I think they’ve decided what our fate is to be!”

Street and Ogden looked toward the clearing.

The group of incredible figures there had been huddled close. Now they spread wider apart, and all kept turning featureless faces toward the cubicle in which were the three mortals; three lonely human beings.

At a sort of soundless signal, the creatures clanked and rattled toward one of their number. This one, smaller than the rest, began to strike out with its terrible stone clubs of arms. Chips flew from the heads and bodies of the rest, that were crowding around the fighting one with grim purpose. They held it helpless at last. They threw it to the metallic floor, where the tallest of the group stood as though expectantly.

The clatter of the fight ended in

silence. The lights of the three humans formed a dim circle around the leader of the subterranean things and the prone monster at its feet.

The light glistened on moving, rocky forms in their next move. And that next move was—to take the fallen monster apart.

IT was, too grotesque to be shocking. It was too much like seeing a jointed wooden doll dissected, arm by arm and leg by leg, with the head coming off last.

Deliberately, with no sign of passion, the things did that to their overpowered comrade. They wrenched its legs and arms from their sockets, twisted off its head. Then they pounded the shell of its body apart, as though it were a walnut.

And finally they all faced toward the cubicle in which were their three captives—and began walking that way.

“Do you suppose,” Street said, his words coming from pale, numb lips, “do you suppose those damned things are—aren’t they—thinking of trying that dissecting act on us?”

Ogden’s slowly dimming flashlight trembled in his hands. But his voice was steady as he said: “I’m afraid there isn’t the slightest doubt of it, John.”

Ria’s quickly stifled cry rang out. Her hand was cold in Street’s hand.

“The things have a dim sense of purpose, undoubtedly,” Ogden went on, still calmly. “They have dissected one of their number. I’d say that now they were going to dissect one or all of us for purposes of comparison.”

CHAPTER V Monsters To Midgets

“GOD, if we could only get back to the cylinder!” grated Street. “We might at least

last a while in there. That magnesium alloy is strong. It might keep them out permanently. We’d starve. But anything would be better than—that!”

He stared at the advancing phalanx of flint armored beings. The group was within fifty yards of their cubicle, and clattering rapidly over the rough floor of the rift. The towering thing guarding the opening stood silent and unmoving while its comrades tramped nearer.

“If we could only get out of here!” again groaned Street.

“John, I think we could,” Ria said suddenly. “It’s worth trying, anyhow. This thing—and the rest—seem to hear only when the noise is fairly loud and near them, don’t they?”

“They ‘hear’ by vibration, I guess,” nodded Street.

“Then why can’t we steal out past this guard, just by moving very slowly and very noiselessly? It couldn’t hear us. The guard might hear any of its own kind trying to get past, but we can move more silently.”

Street shrugged and nodded toward the guard, whose back was like dull mother-of-pearl in the beams of their failing flashes.

The thing had its legs apart and its arms out so that it made a living barricade from side to side of the opening.

Ria drew a long, shuddering breath.

“We might creep out—between the thing’s legs,” she said. The two men set their jaws. The suggestion was somehow infinitely horrible. Go between those two stumpy, rocklike pillars? But there was life in them, of a kind! And presumably, feeling! Suppose one of them just chanced to graze one of the legs—and suppose the two rocky pillars clamped together? It would be like trying to slide through a hair-trigger trap, with death in the spring of its iron jaws if it were touched in the least.

Street sank to hands and knees. Death

waited them anyhow, if that crowd, now only thirty yards away, got them. He moved, very quietly, toward the opening.

With their hearts thudding in their throats, Ogden and Ria watched him. He got his head and shoulders through the terribly small opening available to him. He got his body through. One of his legs almost touched the flinty substance of the stiffly erect guard—almost touched it_

He was through! And the thing in the opening did not move.

“You next,” Ogden whispered to the girl.

SHE too got through. And Ogden followed. “We’re going to make it!” whispered Street, clutching the girl’s hand as Ogden wormed between the dread rock pillars. “We’ll get to the cylinder!”

His voice stopped, with his words clamped off by horror.

Ogden had touched one of the thing’s legs with his left foot as he was almost through. And, even as they had dreaded, the stumpy, flintlike legs rasped together.

Ogden screamed in agony as the constriction on his crushed foot tightened. And—the approaching group of nightmare beings began to clatter forward at a swifter pace.

Street breathed a curse that was like a prayer. He leaped back toward the thing in the doorway. He hit it with all the power of his bunched shoulders and sent it reeling backward.

It swayed, tried to keep its balance on its stumpy rock columns, then fell. It fell backward into the cubicle the three had just left, with the thunder of four hundred pounds of rock thudding to the metallic floor.

Ogden crawled free, face white with torment.

Street got his arm around the older man’s shoulders, and began helping him

toward the cylinder.

“Run!” he shouted to Ria, who had stood there with terror glazed eyes.

They ran toward the cylinder. But the tiny beacon light was far away, and Street could not go fast with Ogden limping on an almost useless foot in the circle of his helping arm. Too, they could not guard against noise, now. And the rasp of their feet on the metallic floor of the rift guided the pursuing horde infallibly toward them.

The slow march ahead of the monsters to the cubicle in which they’d been held for a short time had been like a march in a nightmare. This flight was more than ever nightmarish—like the dreamed flight in the night’s black reaches where one tries to run on leaden feet; with something unbelievably horrible behind and gaining with every step.

With torturing slowness the light by the atom compacter drew nearer. With appalling swiftness the clattering monsters behind lessened the lead the three had when they had begun the desperate race.

“We’ll never make it!” gasped Ogden. “You two go on, I’m only in the way—”

“Shut up,” panted Street, “and run.”

Now the cylinder showed in the dancing beam of Ogden’s light, which he had clung to through everything. Street’s was gone, dropped in his attack on the guard. Ria’s had slipped from her terror numbed fingers. But the professor had his.

“We’ll never make it—”

There was a grating crash behind them, like an avalanche echoing in the unseen confines of the great cavern. Street looked over his shoulder and exclaimed aloud.

One of their dread pursuers had fallen in his haste. And he saw now why the things had seemed to move a little more slowly than their stumpy legs could bear them. The thing that had fallen had cracked one of its arms squarely off at the point corresponding to a human shoulder. Armored against attack like

any man-made tanks, they were not invulnerable against their own mishaps. That mother-of-pearl shell that cased whatever sort of flinty flesh they were made of was brittle. They dared not risk falls!

“Faster!” panted Street.

BUT Ria, unencumbered, was at the door now, and waiting for them with horror whitening her lips. She slid through, and the next instant Street literally hurled Ogden after her and slithered in himself. He slammed the door.

A claw, clashing savagely, caught in the crack between door and shell. Street caught up a sledgehammer and crashed it down. The claw broke from the flinty arm, snapped open and shut once like a thing with volition of its own, then was still. The stump it had broken from was jerked back, and Street got the door shut and shot the bolts home.

He sagged against it for a minute, then wiped great drops of sweat from his forehead. He looked at Ogden, who had sunk to the floor to relieve his mangled foot of his weight; and at Ria, who was staring with fainting eyes at the claw.

“Saved,” Street grated, with a harsh and hopeless laugh. “Saved—for slow starvation in this shell, while the things outside stand guard over it!”

He stopped as Ria’s sudden gasp sounded. Then he gazed at her in an alarm that overcame all his bitterness as she pressed the back of her hand against her lips to stifle the screams that bubbled past the barrier anyway.

“Ria!” he cried, stepping toward her. “Don’t look like that—act like that! We’ll do something, darling! We aren’t dead yet!”

He stopped as, once again, storms of laughter and tears swept over her.

“John! John! We’ve been in here two or three minutes—and we haven’t even noticed that *the lights are on!*”

Street stared at the incandescent globes

set in the metal of the cylinder. It was true. They were on! And in their emotional chaos they hadn’t noticed the thing which was, after all, a commonplace normally.

“My God, that means the power is on!” breathed Street.

He stared at the radio bench. The tubes were faintly glowing. He sprang to the transmitter.

“Rawl! Somebody—” He shook the bench in his eagerness. “Is there anyone listening in? Anybody—”

A voice interrupted, a faint, exhausted voice, scarcely recognizable, scarcely audible.

“John—this is Rawl. I’ve been calling and again you—didn’t answer.”

“Rawl!” Street calmed a little. “You’ll never know how glad I am to hear that unmusical croak of yours! But, Cunao—what of him and his men? The last I heard you were fighting them off.”

Rawl’s weary voice came back: “They won’t bother us again. Won’t bother anybody again! You know the powder room off the main power house?”

“Yes,” said Street, with his flesh beginning to turn a little cold as he guessed the answer.

“They locked me in there. There’s a concealed back door to it, you know. I went out of the way, set a fuse, and locked the door after me. Then I banged on the closed door. They crowded in to find what had become of me, and the fuse caught—” Rawl was silent a moment. “The explosion unroofed the power house and cracked number two generator. But the other three are in good shape and should give you all the juice you need.”

“Give it to us!” snapped Street. “Power! All the power you can get out of those three generators!”

HE jerked off the headphones and stepped toward the main switch. Ogden already had the cylinder moving slowly forward on its

clumsy retractable wheels.

The searchlight sprayed the blackness ahead of the cylinder. They could see the grim, sightless monsters waving their clashing pincers as they massed in front of the moving thing and tried to stop it.

“And now watch this,” said Street, teeth bared a little in a savage grin.

He shot home the power switch. Up in front, beyond the protective screen, the whirling magnetic field began to build up that mighty power that could disrupt atoms and fling their elements to its rim, where they united in a condensed form such as probably existed nowhere in the universe outside of Sirius’ small but mighty companion.

And in the beam of the searchlight a fantastic thing happened. The mass of things before the cylinder stopped moving. They became as rigid as inanimate instead of animate stone. Then—they began to shrivel in

size like wraiths of mist.

Ria cried out, and hid the sight from her eyes. But she could not shut out the feel of the cylinder’s wheels crunching slightly as they passed over tiny figures, like two-inch dolls made of white gold. Tiny dolls that an instant before had been eight foot monsters with flinty armor to make the horn armor of the ancient dinosaurs seem frail by comparison.

“There, darling,” said Street, taking her in his arms, “it’s all right now. Everything’s all right now.”

He lifted her face and gently kissed her. And with clumsy steadiness the retractable wheels bore the cylinder toward the nearest rock wall, where the atom compacter could enter the solid substance which was its native element, and begin the long slant up to outer earth.