

## **If the Sun Died**

**By R. F. Starzl**

By our system of time we would have called it around 65,000 A. D., but in this cavern world, miles below the long-forgotten surface of the earth, it was 49,889. Since the Death of the Sun. That legendary sun was but a dim racial memory, but the 24-hour day, based on its illusory travel across the sky, was still maintained by uranium clocks, by which the myriads who dwelt in the galleries and maze of the underworld warrens regulated their lives.

In the office of the nation's central electro-plant sat a young man. He was unoccupied at the moment. He was an example of the marvelously slow process of evolution, for, to all outward appearances he differed little from a Twentieth Century man. Keen intelligence sat on his fine-cut, kindly young face. In general build he was lighter, more refined than a man of the past. Yet even the long, delicately colored robe of mineral silk which he wore could not detract from his obvious virility and strength.

His face flashed in a smile when a girl suddenly appeared in the middle of the room, materializing, so it seemed, out of nowhere. Her tinkling, silvery voice was troubled as she asked, "Have I your leave to stay, Mich'l Ares?"

The look of adoration he gave her was answer enough, but he answered with the conventional formula, "It is given." He rose to his feet, walked right through the seemingly solid vision and made an adjustment on a bank of dials. Then he walked through the apparition again and, standing beside his chair, looked at her inquiringly.

"You haven't forgotten, Mich'l, this is the day of the Referendum?"

Mich'l smiled slightly. It would be a day of confusion in Subterranea if he should forget. As chief of the technies he was in direct charge of the tabulating machines that would, a few seconds after the vote, give the result in the matter of the opening of the Frozen Gate. But the girl's concern sobered him instantly. On the decision of the people at noon depended the life work of her father, Senator Mane. And it was now nine o'clock.

"I am sure they will order the Gate opened," he said instantly. "All the technies are agreed that your father is right, that the Great Cold was only another, more severe ice age—not the death of the Sun. The technies—"

Just as the girl had seemingly materialized, a young man now stood beside her. In appearance he was a picture of pride, power, arrogance, and definite danger. His hawk-like, patrician features were smiling. This olive-skinned, dark young rival of Mich'l was Lane Mollon, son of Senator

Mollon, ruthless administration leader and bitter opponent of Senator Mane's Exodus faction.

Lane looked at Mich'l insolently.

"Have I your leave to stay, Mich'l Ares?" he asked.

"It is given," said Mich'l without enthusiasm.

"I'm not calling on you of my own will, Mich'l," the apparition of young Mollon said contemptuously, "but Nida had the telucid turned on as I stepped into the room."

"It's as well for you that you're not here personally," Mich'l replied promptly. "The last time we met I believe I was obliged to knock you down."

Lane Mollon flushed, with a sidelong glance at Nida. The girl gave Mich'l a frightened look.

Lane interpreted her concern rightly.

"Ordinarily it's not safe to try anything like that with me. I could have you executed in half an hour. But I don't have to call on the State to punish you. Nida, you'll admit I'm taking no unfair advantage of him?"

"Oh, I do, Lane, but—"

Lane reached out his hand to the dial, invisible to Mich'l, which operated the telucid apparatus, and immediately the apparitions vanished. Mich'l looked at his own telucid, its great unwinking eye set in the wall. But he did not project his own illusory body to the girl's home. He was a technie—one of the pitifully few trained men and women who kept the intricate automatic machinery working. On them rested the immense, stupid civilization of the caverns, and there was work to do. Mich'l felt that on this morning of her father's greatest trial Nida would pay scant attention to Lane.

Mich'l was testing some of the controls when Gobet Hanlon came in. Gobet was also a technie, and Mich'l's special friend. Like Mich'l, he wore the light robe that was universal among the civilians in the equable climate of the caverns. He walked with the light, springy step that was somehow characteristic of the specialized class to which he belonged, as distinguished from the languid gait of the pampered, lazy populace. Attached to his girdle of flat chain links was a tiny computing machine about as large as the palm of a man's hand. For Gobet did most of the mathematical work.

"You'll want me at the tabulating section?" Gobet stated inquiringly.

"It may be well," Mich'l smiled. "For the first time in centuries, I believe, the general public is going to vote."

"Flos Entine wants to come along."

Mich'l's smile changed to a grin. He knew the pretty, willful little sweetheart of Gobet's. If she wanted to be at the tabulating plant she would be there.

"In fact," Gobet confessed somewhat sheepishly, "she is in the car."

The car was waiting in the gallery. It had no visible support, but hovered a few inches above the floor above one of two parallel aluminum alloy strips that stretched, like the trolley tracks of the ancients, throughout all the galleries. The ancients well knew that aluminum is repelled by magnetism, but the race had lived in the caverns for centuries before evolving an alloy that possessed this repulsive power to a degree strong enough to support a considerable weight.

Under Mich'l's guidance the car moved forward silently, through interminable busy streets with arched roofs, lined on either side with doors that led to homes, theaters and food distributing automats. Occasionally they passed public gardens, purely ornamental, in which a few specimens of vegetation were preserved. They passed multitudes of people, most of them handsome with a pampered, hot-house prettiness, but betraying the peculiar lassitude which had been sapping the energies of this once dynamic race for millennia. Yet to-day they showed almost eagerness. The name of Leo Mane, prophet of deliverance, was on every tongue. And what was the Sun like? Like the great vita-lights that were prescribed by law and evaded by everyone, except possibly the technies? Those technies—they seemed to delight in work! Curious glances fell on the gliding car. Some work in connection with the Referendum? What must one do to vote? Oh, the telucid!

Arriving at Administration Circle, the car entered a vast excavation half a mile in diameter, possibly a thousand feet high at the dome. Here were the entrances to some of the principal Government warrens. Here also centered the streets, like radiating spokes of a wheel, on which many of the officials lived. Here the emanation bulbs were more frequent than in the galleries, so that the light was almost glaring. Guards of soldier-police, the stolid, well-fed, specialized class produced by centuries of a static civilization, were everywhere. Not in the memory of their grandparents had they done any fighting, but in their short, brightly colored tunics, flaring trousers and little kepis they looked very smart. Their only weapon was a small tube capable of projecting a lethal light-ray.

Mich'l led his party to the audience hall. It was only a few hundred feet in diameter. At one end was the speaker's rostrum. Senator Mane was already there. He was tall, purposeful, but withal tired and wistful looking. His graying hair was cut at the nape of his neck, sweeping back from his

swelling temples in a manner really suggestive of a mane. His large, luminous eyes lit up.

“Is it nearly time?”

“Yes, Senator,” Mich’l said. “The nation will soon assemble.”

“You have met Senator Mollon?”

“I have had the pleasure,” Mich’l acknowledged with polite irony, “since Senator Mollon gives me practically all my orders.”

Mollon acknowledged the tribute with a quick smile, without rising from his chair. He, too, was different from the average Subterranean in that he was forceful and aggressive, like Senator Mane. He was still youngish looking, of powerful, blocky build. His dark hair was carefully parted in the middle and brushed down sleekly. The Twentieth Century had known his prototype, the successful, powerful, utterly unscrupulous politician; and in a different sphere, that type of extra-Governmental ruler which the ancients called “gangster.” It was casually discussed in Subterranea that certain of the state soldier-police were responsible for the mysterious assassinations that had so conveniently removed most of the effective resistance to Mollon’s progress in the Senate. The once potent body had not held a session in ten years: didn’t dare to, a cynical and indifferent public said. And a strange reluctance on the part of qualified men to accept the Presidential nomination had left that office unfilled for the past three years. Mollon, as party dictator, performed the duties of President provisionally.

Flos, mischievous as usual, rounded her great blue eyes and gazed at Mollon with an expression of rapt admiration.

“Oh, Senator,” she thrilled, “I think it’s wonderful of you to give Senator Mane an opportunity to debate with you. You are so kind!”

Mollon failed to detect any mockery, luckily for Flos. He looked at her with half-closed eyes.

“The public must be satisfied,” he rumbled. “Senator Mane has aroused in them great hopes. A small matter might be adjusted, but only a Referendum will satisfy them in this.”

“But Senator, the race is going to ruin. If we could get into the Sun again—wouldn’t you want that?”

“I don’t believe there is a ‘Sun’,” Mollon replied; then, with the candor of one who is perfectly sure of himself, added:

“If Mane were right, I still couldn’t permit the Frozen Gate to be opened. I can control the people for their own good, here; it might not be possible Outside.”

A deep musical note sounded. Suddenly the myriad inhabitants of Subterranea seemed to be milling around in the room. Actually their bodies

were in their dwelling cells, but their telucid images filled the hall. By a simple adjustment of the power circuit, their images, instead of being life size, were made only about an inch high, permitting the accommodation of the entire nation in the hall. Their millions of tiny voices, mingling, made a sighing sound.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mane rose and stepped forward, raising his hand.

“Citizens of Subterranea,” he began in powerful, resonant tones, and then went on to put into his address all the fervor of a lifetime of endeavor. He told them of those times in the dim past when the human race still dwelt on the surface of the earth. Of the Sun that poured out inexhaustible floods of life and light; of the green things that were grown, not only to look at, but for food for all living things before food was made synthetically out of mined chemicals. Of the world overrun by a teeming, happy, dynamic civilization.

“Then something happened. The Sun seemed to give less light, less heat. Perhaps we ran into a cloud of cosmic dust that intercepted the Sun’s rays. Perhaps the cause was to be found in some change in the Sun’s internal structure. But the effects could not be doubted. Ice began to come down from the poles. Ice barriers higher than the highest towers covered the world, wiping out all life but the most energetic.

“Our ancestors, and many other advanced nations, began to burrow toward the hot interior of the earth. We to-day have no idea of the labor that went into the digging of our underground home. We are becoming degenerate. More and more of us, even those who still use the vita-lights, are becoming pale and flabby. There are hardly enough technies to keep the automatic machinery in order. What will happen when those technies also deteriorate, and lose the will to work? For deteriorate they must, just as Senator Mollon and his still active allies will. Just as I will, if I live long enough. There is a great force that we never know here. It is called the cosmic ray. It never penetrates to our depth. And our vita-lights do not produce it.”

He then spoke of the proposed Exodus, argued, pleaded, painted a rosy picture of the outer world, of a Sun come back, a world of brightness and life. At the conclusion of his speech a sigh arose from the assembled millions—a sigh of hope, of half belief. Had the vote been taken then the Frozen Gate would have been opened.

But Senator Mollon was on the rostrum, holding up a square, well manicured hand for attention. In his deep rumbling bass he tore the

arguments for the Exodus to shreds. With the whip of fear he drove away hope.

“If our savage ancestors lived on the inhospitable outer shell of the earth,” he shouted, “is that a reason for our taking that retrograde step? Read your histories. What happened to our neighboring nation of Atlantica only a short 15,000 years ago? They did just as this man is urging—opened their outer gate. It promptly froze open, and liquid air, the remnant of what in primordial days was an outer atmosphere, poured down the tunnels. The whole nation died, and we saved ourselves only by blasting the connecting passages between them and us with fulminate.”

A wave of fear passed over the tiny massed figures. For centuries the race had been rapidly losing all initiative, except for those few leaders who, through superior stamina and religious devotion to the artificial sun-rays, had maintained something of their pristine energy.

Now they were hysterical with fear of the unknown. Even as Mich'l Ares adjusted the parabolic antenna of the thought-receptor vote-counting machine, he knew what the verdict would be. In a moment the vote was flashed on a screen on the ceiling: 421 in favor of the Exodus and 2,733,485 against it. There was an eery cheer from the people, and they began to dissolve like smoke. Mollon rose, bowed politely and smilingly, and walked out to where his magnetic car awaited him.

It was with a feeling of deep depression that Mich'l Ares went to work the next morning. His despair was shared by the technicians under him with whom he talked. At the telestereo station he found a bitter young man broadcasting a prepared commentary on the election ordered by Senator Mollon. It was congratulatory in nature, designed to confirm popular opinion that the nation had been saved from a great catastrophe and to glorify the principles of Mollon's party.

“... And so once more this great nation has demonstrated its ability to govern itself, to protect itself against dangerous and unsocial experiments. The voice of the people is the voice of God. The Government claims for itself no credit for this momentous decision. Each citizen has done his share toward the continuation of our safety, our prosperity....”

The young man finished the document, smiled a charming smile, and turned off the switch. Then he grimaced his disgust and lapsed into a glum meditation.

“What say, Kratz?” Mich'l asked.

“Trouble again on the west sector. Had trouble getting power enough. Generators ought to be overhauled.” He made a helpless gesture.

“How about conscripting a little labor?”

“Tried it this morning. Most of the people are still in a daze from chewing too much merclite. Those that’re sober are too busy preening themselves for voting on the winning side.”

Kratz informed Mich’l that Mollon had that morning given up all pretense of constitutional government, had preempted the treasury, and was consolidating his position as avowed dictator.

“He probably wanted to do that a long time,” Mich’l commented. “He didn’t quite dare till that Referendum yesterday gave him the real measure of the public. Well, I’ve got to be going.”

Mich’l took one of the small mechanical service tunnels back to his office. This latest news had hardly affected him, so keen was his disappointment over the defeat of the Exodus. But he wanted to be alone. He walked through vast halls full of machinery, abandoned and rusting, through dark corridors that had once roared with industrial life. What would happen when the present overloaded machinery should break down; wear out? The remnants of the great technical army could hardly serve what was left. Each passing year these silent, useless hulks became more numerous. The specter of famine was stalking amid the dusty pipes and empty vats of the chemical plants; the horrors of darkness lurked amid the tarnished compression spheres and the long, hooded monstrosities of the power plants, inadequately served by harassed and overworked technicians.

In the middle of his office Mich’l found the telucid counterpart of Mila, sister of Nida Mane. She was younger than Nida, hardly more than sixteen. Her eyes were wide with terror as she sought Mich’l. Her cheeks were wet with tears, and her silken brown hair fell in careless disarray.

“Mich’l!” she cried, as soon as she saw him. “Lane Mollon has taken Nida!”

“Taken her!”

“And Father is under arrest. Lane came this morning, crazy with merclite gum. He had four or five soldiers with him. When Nida refused to see him they broke down the door and went to her room. They dragged her out to Lane’s car, and he took her to his warren near the Presidential quarters.”

“She there now?”

“Yes. Father followed Lane’s car. Guards kept him out of Lane’s warren, so he went to see Mollon. That devil only laughed at him, offered to call another Referendum. Father had a small pocket needle-ray and—”

“Good! He killed Mollon?”

“No. But he managed to burn a hole through his arm. He was rushed off to one of the cells. And Mollon says he will call a Referendum to decide Father’s fate.”

“It would be just like that devil’s sense of humor to let the people decree their only friend’s death.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“They’ll do it, too!” Mila exclaimed tragically. “Oh, how I wish Mother were alive!”

“And each one will feel deep within him that he has done a great, commendable and original thing!” Mich’l added, with keen insight.

Mila sank to the floor.

“Go to your room,” Mich’l said, gently stern. “Mollon and his gang have reckoned without the technies.” A woman’s image appeared, stooping commiseratingly over Mila—a friend of the family. Mich’l ordered her to care for Mila. Then, he took a deep breath. Gone was his feeling of helpless sorrow, leaving only an overwhelming, steady, satisfying anger. He flung the telucid switch, barked cracking orders.

In half an hour every technical man of Subterranea was in a large storeroom near Mich’l’s office. They were mostly young, keen and alert, their skins red or brown from the actinic lights, their hair showing more or less bleaching from the same cause. As Mich’l talked they became intent: they listened with a cold, deadly silence that would perhaps have made the smug millions of Subterranea quake with fear.

This affront put upon the only man in the Government who could speak their language, who could comprehend their ideals: the peril of the girl they all knew and loved: these things set their long-repressed resentment flaring to white heat. They were ready for desperate things. A turn of a valve and water would thunder through the maze of galleries; a mishap far, far down toward the earth’s hot core, and steam would rush up—

But Mich’l steadied them. After all, Subterranea was their country. Anarchy was far from the technie ideals. He had a plan.

“Nothing is to be done until we have Senator Mane and Nida,” Mich’l instructed them. “Remember that! Do nothing until you hear from me. Each of you go to your station. Set all adjustments so that they will not need attention for some weeks, at least. Those of you who have families, tell them to be ready to move to another residence. Say nothing about any trouble—understand?”

There were nods of assent.

“You will proceed to your posts and keep busy. When I come it’ll be by telucid. I will say nothing. I will simply wave my hand. That means you are to take your wives, your families, your sweethearts, to Substation No. 37X.”

There were audible gasps.

“Not 37X!” exclaimed one of the older men. “Why, that’s twenty miles up, near the Frozen Gate!”

“Yes!” Mich’l smiled with tight lips. “You men willing?”

There was an instantaneous shout of approval. Curiously enough, seizure of the Gate by force had not occurred to any of this law-abiding, well-disciplined group. But Mollon’s lawless seizure of the Government had removed all inhibitions of that sort. Seizure of the Gate would bring at one stroke the realization of the dream that the technies had tried for generations to win by political means. Surely, when the Gate was open, and they could see the glorious, half-mythical Sun for themselves, the people would consent to the Exodus!

For the technies, even in the bitterness of defeat, were not anti-social. They hoped and worked for the devitalized races of Subterranea, for the betterment of their condition, more than for their own. The technies were the fittest; they had demonstrated their ability to survive unchanged under adverse condition. They would be least helped by the Exodus. Yet they had worked for it all their lives, as had their fathers before them, out of unselfish love for humanity. There have always been such men. Through the murk of history we see their lives as small, steady lights, infrequent and lonely. With the opening of the Frozen Gate suddenly a possibility, the technies forgot their exasperation with the stupid mob.

“The Gate is guarded,” said an elderly man dubiously.

“A small guard,” Gobet Hanlon remarked quickly, “and probably dazed with merclite. Nothing to fear.”

“Stay away from the Gate,” Mich’l instructed. “Give no cause for alarm. If an emergency arises while I’m gone, see Gobet.”

“Don’t go alone, Mich’l,” Gobet begged. “A few of us with ray-needles can storm the detention cells. We can clean out Lane’s warren.”

“We might, but the Senator and Nida would be gone. The alarm would be given. In a few minutes there’d be a mob.”

The technies were already dispersing eagerly. Mich’l pressed his friend’s hand, saying:

“I’ll take my needle-ray, and I know every way to get around there is. Alone, I’ll attract no attention. Till later, Gobet!” And he was gone.

Mich’l’s way was through the smaller, less frequented communication passages used principally by the technies. Occasionally he did meet citizens,

still light-headed after their election victory celebration, and lost, but he paid them no heed. He came to the ventilation center of that level.

For ages no air had entered Subterranea from the outside. All of the air had to be regularly reconditioned, and so was returned, through a systematic network of air ducts, to a vast, central chemical plant. It was a latter-day Cave of the Winds, where the north, south, east and west winds of that buried empire regularly returned for a brief few minutes of play amid chemical sprays, condensers, humidifiers, oxydisers, to be again dispatched to their drudgery. This hall was truly colossal, filled to the shadowy ceilings, a thousand feet high, with gigantic pipes, tanks, wind-turbines.

The technie in charge had not yet returned, but Mich'l consulted the distribution plan, and soon located the duct that led to Lane Mollon's warren. In a few minutes he was running, helped along by a strong current of fresh air. The map had shown the warren to be about a mile away. For the benefit of the technies who had to work there, the duct was plainly marked; and the lighting, by infrequent emanation bulbs, was adequate, though dim.

Mich'l had made no plans for a course of action after arriving at his destination. He felt reasonably sure that if he could get into the warren he would have a good chance to escape with Nida. In the confusion he could hide her nearby, and perhaps effect the release of the senator also. He had no doubt about his fate if he were caught. Lane's pose of good sportsmanship having failed to impress Nida, he had adopted simple, brutal coercion. Mich'l's fate, if caught interfering, would be summary execution.

Mich'l found the grating which he sought. It bore the key number of Lane's establishment. The key which would unlock it was of course in the hands of the police; but the bars were badly corroded, and Mich'l managed to bend them enough to permit the passage of his body.

He found himself in a small chamber, from which ducts led to all parts of the warren. These ducts were too small to permit passage of his body, however; it would be necessary to come into the open. A small metal door promised egress. Mich'l climbed out, and faced a surprised cook in the kitchen, engaged in flavoring synthetic food drinks. Mich'l said explanatorily:

"Inspection, air service."

The cook did not know the regulations about keeping the air tunnels locked. Moreover, he, like all other servants of the mighty, worked unwillingly, being conscripted. He only grunted.

Mich'l made a pretense of testing the air currents. Presently he stepped into one of the communicating corridors. The warren was planned

something like a house of the Surface Age, with luxuriously furnished rooms, baths, dining halls, and all the appurtenances of wealth. Arriving at a rotunda, in the center of which was a glowing fountain, Mich'l encountered a guard. Boldly he asked him:

“Where is Mr. Mollon? I wish to see him.”

The guard looked surprised.

“About Nida Mane, sir? I would hardly dare.”

Mich'l looked at the man sharply, but there was no hint of recognition in the stupid, phlegmatic face.

“What about Nida Mane? It is about her I wish to speak.”

There was a slight stirring of interest in the soldier's face.

“He will be glad to see you, sir, if you bring news of her.”

“Eh, yes? Perhaps what I have to tell will be of no interest to him.”

“If you can tell him where she is he will ask no more of you.”

“She made good her escape then?”

Slow suspicion was dawning at last.

“For one who brings news you ask a lot of questions,” the guard remarked heavily, as his hand slipped to the needle-ray weapon at his side. “Show your pass!”

Like a flash Mich'l was upon him, his hand at the thick throat, the other grasping the wrist. Although the soldier, like the majority of the populace, lacked the intense vitality of the technies, he had stubborn strength, and he fought effectively in the drilled, automatic way of his kind. Mich'l was further handicapped by the necessity of maintaining silence. One shout, and a dozen needle-rays would no doubt perforate his body with holes and slash his flesh with smoldering cuts.

Grunting and sweating, they fought all around the rose-colored curb of the fountain. At last Mich'l succeeded in forcing his adversary over the low stone, and they went over together with a resounding splash. The straining body of the guard suddenly relaxed, and a spreading red cloud in the water disclosed that he had struck his head against the first of the terraces that rose in the fountain's mist-shrouded center.

Up one of the corridors a door opened, and an angry voice shouted:

“Gurka! Gurka! I'll have you in bracelets! Captain of the guard!”

“Sir!” From another of the corridors came a sound of running feet. A command rang out:

“On the double!”

An officer, followed by four soldiers, dashed around the corner and flashed by the fountain. Peering over the curb, Mich'l saw them, some hundred yards away, come to a halt before an opened door. With a thrill of

exultation Mich'l recognized the tall figure of Lane Mollon, looking like a slightly damaged satyr of the better class, for his head was bandaged, and he was in bad humor.

"Captain!" he stormed. "I want you to put that louse in solitary confinement for a year. Hear?"

"Yes, sir." Like a megaphone the long corridor carried the low, respectful words to Mich'l's ears.

Lane continued to storm:

"And if you put another merclite-crazy blunker<sup>1</sup> on guard in this place I'll have your commission. Hear?"

"Yes, sir."

A quick decision was necessary, and Mich'l acted without hesitation. The guard had rolled over on his back, so that his face was out of the water, and he was breathing with quick, painful gasps. Mich'l dragged him up under the concealing shelter of the fountain spray, and there changed clothes with him. In the meantime the flowing water washed away the red stain of blood. When the captain returned with his guard, Mich'l was lying realistically in the pool, apparently deep in drugged sleep, the little kepi tilted rakishly over his face.

He was roughly seized and dragged out of the water to the accompaniment of much cursing. A fist crashed into his face.

Suddenly the soldiers felt the supine figure under their hands explode into energy. Elbows and fists seemed to fly from all directions at once. A needle-ray appeared, and before they could draw their own weapons they were howling with pain as searing welts drew over their bodies. With one accord they plunged into the pool. Only the officer remained, and he fell to the mosaic floor, his weapon half raised, the small black hole in his chest giving off a burnt odor.

Mich'l appropriated the officer's brassard of rank, and, menacing the cowed guards, forced them to herd into a nearby room, carrying the body of the officer with them. Mich'l locked the door and looked around. He saw no one observing him, and could count on carrying a pretty good bluff in his uniform, which was rapidly shedding its water. With a firm step Mich'l walked to Lane Mollon's door, threw it open, and entered.

Lane sat up on his couch, his feet striking the floor with an angry thump. But when he recognized Mich'l he paled slightly.

"Where is she?" Mich'l demanded roughly, "before I burn you down!"

---

<sup>1</sup> *blunker* a blunderer, an oaf. Mechanical recording had preserved the language in much of its original form, but new words did creep in.

“You said once,” Lane began sneeringly, “that you wanted to fight me. Now, if you’ll just put down that—”

“Not now,” Mich’l dissented with deadly coldness. “Where is Nida? Speak fast.”

Lane did so.

“She isn’t here. The little short<sup>2</sup> crowned me with a chair, and slipped out. How did I—”

“When? Hurry up!”

“Hardly an hour ago. She walked down the corridor, showed a thick-witted guard my own executive pass, and got away. But I got that guard—”

“Never mind what you did to the guard—”

Suddenly the image of an officer strange to Mich’l stood in the room and saluted smartly.

“Has Captain Ilgen Mr. Lane Mollon’s leave to stay?” he asked.

Mollon started forward, but before he could disclose his predicament Mich’l had sidled over to him and thrown one arm affectionately over his shoulder. In his hand, concealed by the rich folds of Lane’s robe, Mich’l held his needle-ray, and it was pressed firmly against Lane’s ribs.

“Mr. Mollon will be glad to hear you,” Mich’l said smoothly.

He fancied that the eyes of the officer’s image dilated slightly, but it lost none of its military rigor. But some explanation of his presence there in his still damp uniform must be given Ilgen, so he growled, in a voice that he tried to make a bit thick, as if he had chewed too much merclite:

“At ease, Captain. At ease! You don’t have to be so military. You’re among friends!” And he towseled Lane’s dark hair affectionately.

Captain Ilgen looked his disgust.

“Sir,” he said to Lane, “we recaptured Nida Mane as she tried to board a public car near the Executive Mansion.”

The black lens at the end of Mich’l’s needle-ray pressed hard, and Lane said naturally:

“You have her in custody?”

“Sir, we have.” And to Mich’l’s dismay, Nida, defiant, her lovely form half revealed by rents in her garments, seemed to materialize beside the officer. Her wrathful eyes were fixed on Lane, and then she saw Mich’l.

The technie put all his will into the pleading stare which he returned, and she understood. She gave no sign of recognition, but favored both Lane and Mich’l equally with the chill of her disdain.

“Sir, what are your orders?”

---

<sup>2</sup> *Short* trouble-maker, spitfire. A colloquialism probably growing out of the once frequently used electrical term “short-circuit.”

Lane glanced aside at Mich'l, acutely conscious of the lethal pressure in his ribs.

"Sall right with me, old fellow," Mich'l squawked good-humoredly. "This your girl that got away from you? Let's both go over and bring her back."

Lane nodded assent. The soldier saluted, and his vision and that of the girl disappeared.

"And we're going to do just that!" Mich'l added in an entirely changed voice. "Get up, you. Act right, speak right, do right, and you may live to see another day."

So the two left the warren in apparent amity, and walked the beautiful street, with its richly formed, brightly colored arches, its seemingly illimitable vistas, its luxuriant, pampered decorative vegetation, its blazing lights—until at last they came to Administration Circle, and entered the ponderous gates behind which lay the very heart of the Government.

They were challenged at once. Although the officer of the guard knew Lane, usage required the showing of the daily pass. Many high officers of the Government had in years past fallen from grace overnight.

This formality complied with, Lane and Mich'l, the latter with his ray-needle ever ready, sat down to wait in the guard room. And Lane, under Mich'l's quiet prompting, ordered that Nida and her father be brought to him.

"We shall bring the girl, yes," the astonished officer protested, "but not Senator Mane. He is a prisoner of state."

"Perhaps you don't know, Captain," Mich'l suggested smoothly, "that it is not wise to disregard the orders of the Provisional President's son?"

"It would cost me my commission, perhaps my life!" the officer said.

"Neither would be worth much if you disobey!" Mich'l countered, a wire edge creeping into his voice.

The officer looked into Lane's stormy face, then with great reluctance retreated to carry out the order.

In about ten minutes he was back, with four guards and his prisoners. He explained that Captain Ilgen was detained on official duty.

"You may go," said Lane, prompted by a jab in the ribs.

"A written receipt, please, sir, for the senator."

Glowering, Lane wrote out the desired document. At last they were alone.

"Our program," Mich'l announced briskly, "is simple. You will conduct us to one of the Government cars, and will ride with us to such places as we

may direct, and I shall release you when it pleases me. If you then want to fight, I will accommodate you.”

“I would be willing to fight you, as head of the technies,” Lane countered sullenly, “but I wouldn’t be bothered with a rebel and a traitor. You’ve overstepped yourself this time, my fine bolthead, and all I ask is a front seat at your execution!”

They stepped into the brightly lighted hall, and in that instant Mich’l felt a searing heat on his shoulder. Without a moment’s pause he hurled Senator Mane and the girl back into the room. At the same moment he flung an arm around Lane’s neck and pulled him back into the doorway, where he could use him as a shield while he cautiously peered out into the corridor. His shoulder throbbed painfully, but his movement had prevented the needle-ray from penetrating deeply in any one place.

A short distance up the corridor was a wider space, in the center of which stood a large bronze urn filled with exotic plants. Behind this urn were several soldiers, and Mich’l recognized the sharp-eyed Captain Ilgen. So that officer had recognized the true state of affairs, or had strong suspicions! But in his haste and eagerness he had overlooked one important fact. In the guardroom, were riot-rays, heavy replicas of the ordinary hand weapons. They had not been needed for many years, but the technies had always kept them fully charged and in order.

“Nida!” Mich’l called, not removing his eye from the doorway.

“Yes?” She was standing beside him, and Mich’l thrilled to the admiration and positive affection in her intonation.

“Notice those short tubes mounted on light wheels over against the walls? Those are riot-ray projectors. Wheel me over a couple.”

Nida did as directed. Mich’l stuck the stubby muzzle of one of the nearest weapons into the corridor, pulled the lever and swung the ray in an arc toward the ambushed soldiers. There was a sharp crackling noise and the heat chipped myriads of flakes off the stone walls, leaving a gray path across the rich murals, and the air was filled with flying particles. The heat was terrific. It beat back into the doorway.

Captain Ilgen gave a short, sharp order, and he and his men retreated before the bronze urn began to wilt and drip melted metal. He could not be accused of cowardice, for his hand weapons were puny compared to the riot-rays.

“Quick, before he gets in touch with the outer guard!” Mich’l urged his prisoner forward, Senator Mane following. The grave patriarch of rhetoric made a striking picture as he dragged the second riot-ray along. The other one was abandoned, locked with full power on. It was converting that

corridor into an inferno, and there would be no pursuit through that avenue.

Mich'l pushed open the metal door suddenly. Two guards on duty were just coming in, their hand weapons ready. They never knew what struck them for there was no time for compunction. But even as their bodies sank to the paving there was the harsh clangor of alarm bells. Soldiers dashed from everywhere and came running, their needle-rays menacing.

"In there!" Mich'l shouted. He pointed to the doors, at the dead guards. As they hesitated, he added:

"Revolution! They're storming the President's office! Hear the rays?"

Through the doors came a faint humming, an acrid smell of heat, of stone and metal fumes. A corporal saluted Mich'l, recognized Lane's haggard features, and Lane again felt that cogent persuader in his ribs.

"That's right, Corporal!" he said bitterly.

"Is the guard room occupied, sir?"

"Not now, you fool!" Mich'l snapped at him. This resolved the last of the corporal's misgivings. Giving an order, he led his men in, gasping.

"Now we'll run!" Mich'l ordered, giving Lane a shove. "Coming, Nida?" She was dragging her father along joyously. They crossed the broad pedestrian walk, and in the street found an official car nestling on one of the tracks.

"Heave in the riot-ray, will you, old fellow?" Mich'l requested jovially, and Lane did. Then the listless chauffeur turned a controller, and the big car rose a few inches, lightly as a feather, and sped away swiftly through the maze of traffic.

Sometime later they were in a service lift; not one of the great public lifts that carried their hundreds at a trip, but one of the small lifts used mostly by the technies, and known to few outside their ranks. Mich'l, standing blissfully close to Nida and her father, enjoyed his moment of relaxation. Many things had been attended to. Lane had been released at last, in one of the catacomb cemeteries. It would take him at least two hours to find his way out. They were discussing the riot-ray, which they had with them.

"I hope we won't have to exhaust it in a fight before we get out," Senator Mane said anxiously. "It would be a splendid weapon if we encounter a hostile environment Outside."

"The Gate is guarded," Mich'l said practically, "but we expect to surprise them. No use worrying."

The lift came to a stop at an air-lock. The great elevator shafts were closed by airlocks every 2,000 feet. The reason is obvious. If the air of the

great, spheroid subterranean nation were allowed to freely obey the laws of gravity, it would be oppressively dense in the lower levels, and excessively rarified in the upper ones. While the airlocks were operating Mich'l stepped to a telucid and gave the agreed-on signal.

In another half hour they were at 37X. The great, dusty, and little-used storeroom was only poorly lighted; it was dank, and had an uncomfortable chill. Technies and their families were coming in from all sides, and it was not long before some five hundred persons, men, women and children, were assembled. Many of them were pale and frightened looking, for they were staking everything on an ideal, a theory. There would be no coming back. The statute books of Subterranea decreed only one penalty—death—for even the merest tampering with the Frozen Gate. It was not like this that they had visioned the opening of the Gate. Under properly controlled conditions, it would have been possible to open the gate for preliminary explorations. But not now. They were outside the law.

Nida, standing beside Mich'l, shivered and pulled her over-robe closer around her. There was sadness in her voice as she said:

“These children.... They remind me of the thousands of children we must abandon with our people. If I could, I'd steal a few to take with us.”

Mich'l grinned without mirth.

“And be damned as a kidnapper of a particularly horrible sort, as long as Subterranea lasts!”

“I know. I know. But what will happen to them all when the automatic machinery fails?”

“They may learn to run it, if they have to. Or if we succeed in establishing ourselves in the outer world we can tunnel back to them around the Gate in a year or so. Don't worry about them too much. We're taking the big risk, not they.”

Gobet Hanlon, accompanied by Flos Entine and Mila Mane, approached. He was loaded down with a huge case of concentrated food.

“I've given orders to bring with us all the cold resisting fabrics we could carry. Got 'em loaded down, eh?”

“All here?”

“Every last one.”

“Let's go, then.” Mich'l stepped to a small door that led into the main corridor close to the Gate. This door had not been used by the technies when assembling. Through a tiny hole the guard, four soldiers, could be seen about a blanket, tossing sixteen-sided dice. Mich'l opened the door, his needle-ray pointed.

“Don't move, or you burn!” he commanded harshly.

The guards, taken completely by surprise, did not move. In a few moments they were bound, gagged, and dumped into a corner of 37X. Eager technies were swarming over the complicated mechanism that they had dared to touch, before, only for inspection and maintenance. The Frozen Gate was like a huge stopper in a bottle, made of chromium steel. It was thirty feet in diameter, and thirty feet thick from its well insulated inside face to that enigmatical Outside that had been a grisly mystery to the race for some five hundred centuries.

There was a flash of sparks, and the quiet hum of motors. With a shuddering groan the great plug freed itself from the grip of millennia; turned a few inches in its hole. The supporting gimbals took the load now, and slowly the great mass moved inward, carried by an overhead traveling crane whose track was bolted to the rock roof. The rate of movement was slow, not much over three or four inches a minute.

An excited murmur filled the cavern—almost hysterical joy. But Mich'l, watching that widening margin for the dreaded gush of liquid air, only trembled with relief. At least the calamity that had visited rash Atlantica would not be repeated here.

A young technie, one of the heat distributors, climbed up the heavy bosses on the gateway's face.

"I'm going to be the first to see the Sun!" he shouted joyously. His challenging gaze roved over the waiting crowd, and suddenly his face turned ashen. For at the turn of the corridor, some hundred yards away, he had seen men. No mistaking those uniforms; they were soldiers. And Mich'l, following his gaze, saw a riot-ray being wheeled into place. His own riot-ray already commanded the corridor, but he dared not use it. The soldiers, under the partial protection of the turn, could incinerate the helpless technies with little danger to themselves.

"Wait!" Mich'l shouted, running into the open.

An officer came to meet him. He then recognized Captain Ilgen, whose exceptional shrewdness had almost undone him before. Ilgen could not see the slow movement of the gate, and Mich'l, himself weaponless, counted only on parleying for time.

They met midway between the two forces, and the small black lens of the captain's weapon pointed steadily at Mich'l's chest.

"Mich'l Ares, I arrest you." It seemed that the captain's fine gray eyes looked out of the lean face with real sympathy. "It may be there will be executive clemency for these people of yours, but for you—"

Mich'l, tense and deadly, saw the captain's vigilant attention leave his face for a second; saw his eyes widen in consternation. He could not know

that Ilgen had seen a slender crescent of green light appear in the Frozen Gate, but he did not lose the opportunity. His fist crashed on the captain's jaw, so that the soldierly figure reeled and the needle-ray fell to the ground. Mich'l leaped after him, picked him up, held him. The riot-ray was turned full on him, and a soldier's hand trembled on the lever. But it did not pull.

"You'll kill him!" Mich'l shouted. And then he ventured to turn his head to look at the Gate. He saw the first of the fugitives struggle into the narrow crack. The gate seemed to have stuck, and there was barely room to pass. Ilgen, half conscious, was trying to rain blows on Mich'l's back, compelling him to stop and pass the officer's hands through the belt of his tunic and to manacle them with a pair of bracelets which he found in his pocket. As he staggered toward the Gate with his burden, he saw Gobet beside him, the stolen riot-ray menacing the soldiers, who would otherwise have rushed in.

Suddenly Ilgen struggled upright.

"Fire," he commanded in stentorian tones.

"They'll kill you too, you fool!" Mich'l exclaimed angrily.

"I am a soldier!" Ilgen answered with contempt. His legs barely supported his weight, and he was struggling to free his manacled hands. He threw himself into the narrow crevice of the Gate, to obstruct the stream of fugitives. He started to shout again:

"Fi—" Crack! Again Mich'l's fist caught him. He hooked the officer's elbows over two of the bosses, so that he was supported in plain sight of his men, and turned to urge haste. The last two stragglers were hurrying through, and with relief Mich'l turned to follow. But he set the closing mechanism in motion before he leaped for the narrow opening that was becoming still narrower, though very slowly. Now for that green crescent of light, and hope!

He felt a wave of heat. Glancing back, he saw the irresolute guards scattered by the enraged charge of a square, blocky man in civilian robe—the usually smiling Provisional President, Senator Mollon. Mollon himself was fumbling with the lever of the riot-ray. Ilgen had evidently reported where he was going before starting in pursuit of the technies.

Again that withering flash of heat, and Mich'l saw Captain Ilgen, still semi-conscious, suddenly turn red-faced. Mollon would burn him up without compunction, in the hope of catching one of the fugitive technies. And now a figure in uniform leaped forward at Mollon's angry gesture, and bent purposefully to the sighting tube.

The crescent was now so slender that Mich'l had to turn sideways to squeeze back into the corridor. And slowly, inexorably, it was growing

smaller still. With desperate haste the practiced, uniformed man was adjusting his range.

Captain Ilgen struggled when Mich'l seized him.

"I arrest—"

Mich'l thought for a sickening moment that he was caught in the closing gate. Then he was free in the cylindrical tunnel into which the plug was creeping. Luckily, Ilgen was slight. His body squeezed through with little more difficulty than Mich'l's own. Now the opening was too small for any man's body. A red glow illuminated that narrowing slit; an acrid wave of heat, and the smell of burnt metal came with the strong current of air that blew out of Subterranea.

Mich'l dragged his captive down the rocky tunnel, the floor of which dipped gently away from the Gate; for drainage, no doubt. Around a bend, the source of the greenish light was apparent. The fugitives were in an ice cavern. The light seemed to emanate from roof and walls. The air was uncompromisingly chill, for the blast of warm air from Subterranea had stopped.

But the cold of the air was nothing to the icy chill that settled on the heart of Mich'l Ares, and the hearts of Senator Mane, and the other leaders of this desperate enterprise. So this, this was the Outside! A cavern of ice—small, hemmed-in! Those ancient folk-legends of a Sun—

"I arrest you, Mich'l Ares!"

Mich'l laughed shortly. What a single-minded fellow this Captain Ilgen was! Still groggy, of course. Didn't know where they were. He left the soldier with the red, blistered face.

"Mich'l! Mich'l!" a voice echoed shrilly from the ice walls. It was a high-pitched voice, and an excited one. A boy came flying out of a narrow crevice, his short robe flying, his cloth-wrapped legs twinkling.

"Mich'l!" he shouted. "I saw it! I saw the Sun, the beautiful Sun!"

Lucky it was that in the rush no one was hurt. The small cleft opened into a wide tunnel, a low-roofed cave through which milky-white water flowed. The cave opened upon a vista of blue sky and towering mountains whose tops were burdened with snow and upon whose sides glaciers slid down and melted; and the milky-white stream brawled down into a green valley, far, far below. On a mountain meadow, not far from the glacier that still buried the Frozen Gate, they rested....

And so came a new strain of humanity upon the surface of the earth—a strain tempered and refined by the inexorable process of evolution and environment. Already animal life had reappeared, drastically changed and

ruthlessly weeded out by the most severe Ice Age the world had ever known, and now Man stood once more on a new threshold of time.

Something of this may have passed through the minds of the refugees luxuriating in the strong sunlight of this mountain meadow, and in active and alert brains the foundations of a new civilization were already being built.

They were preparing to go into the valley below when there was a dull concussion. The glacier over the Frozen Gate rose slightly, then disappeared completely out of sight, leaving a yawning hole in the mountainside. Ice and rocks slid down, filling the hole. The refugees gazed at the scene in fear and wonder.

“They have blown up the gate! And the chambers leading to it!” Senator Mane—now only Leo Mane—said slowly. “There goes our last chance to save them!” His tones were deeply sad. He could not look upon these people as an experiment that Nature had abandoned, although he knew that history is thronged with the shadows of vanished races, culled by the process of natural selection.

But Youth looks only ahead. The majority of the rescued technies were young, and with eagerness and anticipation, they followed Mich'l and Nida Ares down into the valley to build their first homes.

Source:

Public Domain Text #33016