

THRILLING WONDER STORIES

Vol. XXVIII, No. 3

Every Story Brand New

Summer, 1946



A Complete Novel

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By STANTON A. COBLENTZ

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Cover Painting by Earle Bergey—illustrating "Titan of the Jungle"

Published every other month by STANDARD MAGAZINES, INC., 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Copyright, 1946, by Standard Magazines, Inc. Subscription (12 issues) \$1.80, single copies, 15c. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. Entered as second-class matter May 21, 1936, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence.

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

June, 1946, issue

Read Our Companion Science Fiction Magazine—STARTLING STORIES



"Telsor!" the girl called—but the young man was too preoccupied to notice her

TWILIGHT PLANET

By **POLTON CROSS**

A young scientist shatters the atom and releases energy that destroys his planet—but reveals the secret of life!

THE great corridors of the master-city laboratories were deserted as Liana Fonray fled softly down them. She had slid past the none too watchful attendant in the entrance hall. She hurried with the easy grace of youth, a lightly-clad symphony in curves, her long yellow hair swept away from her lovely face by the breeze from the great ventilator shafts.

She had no right to be in here at all. Not

because she was a woman, but because she was not a scientist. The fact that she was the daughter of the Chief Physicist made no difference, for it did not make her one as well. If she were found, the law would not be lenient.

At a massive bronze-colored door she hesitated and glanced about her—still nobody in sight. The calm of the night was on the place. The staff had gone home except

for one man—the one she sought with such recklessness.

For a moment she hesitated at the bronze door, then tried her gentle strength against it as she moved the catch. She was glad that it opened easily. It would not be necessary to disturb the room's inmate. Gracefully as a cat, she glided through the opening and closed the door behind her.

She stopped, her blue eyes wide in amazement at the immensity before her. She had never seen inside the main experimental hall of the physical laboratories before. Its mighty engines of science were somehow terrifying. The criss-crossing aisles and raised balconies made the place a gigantic, metallic spider's web.

For a moment the girl was confused. Then, at a distance, she caught sight of a solitary figure bending intently over a crackling electrical apparatus. Now and again great tubes filled with a myriad of colors—or, instead, a blaze of naked electrical light flared in blinding brilliance.

"Telsor!" the girl called. But the young man in the tunic and shorts was too preoccupied to notice her—or else he did not hear.

Liana went forward silently, keeping close to the machines so as not to make her appearance too sudden and disturb him. She watched the dark head bending over the equipment, the bronzed and muscular forearms working busily. Then a bewildering brilliance blazed forth with such intensity she clapped her hands to her eyes and screamed.

Her cry was sufficient to bring the young man to her side. As his arm went about her shoulders she lowered her hands, and for a while the great space swam in a blazing sea of red and green. Then gradually her eyes adjusted themselves and she saw Telsor Rolf's serious young face, his dark eyes concerned. Blue goggles were pushed up on his wide forehead.

"Liana, what are you doing here?" he demanded, with unmeaning roughness. "Do you realize you might have been blinded? Why did you come? You know it isn't allowed!"

"I just had to come," she answered simply. "A woman's place is beside the man she is going to marry, and I couldn't have you working here night after night, when working hours are over, without knowing what you are doing. Father has hinted at some

great experiment. What is it?"

"I don't think you'd understand it," he answered, doubting. Then as he saw the look of disappointment on her face, he added with a smile, "I am trying to isolate an electron so that it can be viewed in a subatomic microscope."

"Oh! And would that be a—a useful thing to accomplish?"

"It would solve many problems of science, Liana. You see, by its very nature, the electron, as we understand it at present, cannot be viewed because the impact of light waves turned upon it are sufficient to deflect it. We know it is there, but science likes proof, something more than the mere probability that an electron exists in a given space."

FROM her expression the girl betrayed her lack of knowledge. But because Telsor had told it to her, and because Telsor was acknowledged to be a brilliant physicist despite his youth, she tried to evince interest. Going to the apparatus, she studied it.

"I'm trying first to isolate a carbon atom," Telsor added, joining her. "The isolation of the electron itself will follow that. I've chosen carbon because it has certain exceptional qualities."

"Such as?" she asked curiously.

"Well, it is more than probable that life only exists at all because of the carbon atom. Life without carbon isn't even possible. Its atom consists of six electrons revolving around the nucleus.

"It differs from its nearest neighbors in the Periodic Table—boron and nitrogen—in that it has one electron more than the former and one fewer than the latter. That is why I am trying to isolate the solitary electron without, I hope, causing a total breakdown of the carbon atom itself."

The girl gave a little sigh and smiled faintly. Then, womanlike, she forgot all about the intricacies of science and strolled to the window. Even young Telsor Rolf was not so absorbed in his experiment that he could not appreciate how attractive she looked, standing there gazing out over the city. He joined her, put an arm about her shoulders.

The city was lighted brilliantly and the day-lamps had been extinguished. Normal daylight from a sun was unknown. The sun was a remote tennis ball blazing in a sky of stars and swirling planets.

The two young people did not look out on the universe from Earth, but from a world which had as its nearest neighbours, a small planet with two active moons, and a giant cloud-girt world which poured its heat and ultra-violet radiations down upon them and so made up for everything the distant sun lacked—except light.

And this the scientists had overcome by devising energy lamps. For twelve hours they glowed in simulated daylight. Then, for another twelve, they were extinguished and recharged.

Telsor Rolf and Liana lived on a twilight planet, the only world they had ever known. Science, achievement, peace—all these things were present. But there still remained much to be discovered, how much they could not even guess unless the uncommon genius of Telsor Rolf could make an electron stand still.

"Funny," the young man murmured presently, his eyes on the starlit heavens, "to think that we are alone in the universe. We of this planet, I mean."

"Are we—alone?" The girl took the prodigious statement with amazing lightness.

"Alone on our little grain of sand," Telsor whispered. "We fight and struggle and die in the core of vast and meaningless distances, always aware that there are in those heavens as many worlds and suns as there are grains of sand on all the seashores of the world.

"And life alone came here—because of carbon, because of the blind play of inexplicable forces, because of the chemical reaction set up by naked cosmic rays pouring in from space. Sometimes—sometimes it's terrifying."

"Yes!" The girl's voice became awed and her blue eyes peered up into the incomprehensible mists of the Milky Way. "Yes, it is terrifying! And there is no life anywhere?"

"Not as far as our instruments can detect."

"Not even on that remote green star there, next to that reddish one?"

"Behind the reddish one," Telsor corrected, smiling. "It is much further away, third planet from the sun. No, there is no life even there. We are the fifth planet in order from the sun, and behind us stretch five more planets, four giants and one heavy pygmy.

"Yet we possess life. Probably, if it became necessary, we could exist equally well

on the third or fourth planets from the sun. Our eyes could stand the glare of the much nearer sun. Evolution, artificial light and the always present glow from the giant world nearest us have rendered that possible."

The girl turned from the window, reflecting.

"It is a wonderful thing—life," she mused.

"When I look at you, I am conscious of carbon atoms in their most enchanting link-up." Telsor laughed. Then he administered an almost boyish kiss and patted her rounded arm. "But you'll have to go, Liana. I must carry on my experiment. I dare not leave it now. In these tubes and apparatus elemental forces are at work and if I stop them heaven knows what may happen."

"But—surely I can stay and watch?" she pleaded.

HE HESITATED. "I'm afraid for you to. There might be an explosion. In trying to isolate an electron of carbon I am using the atomic force of hydrogen for my energy. It's deadly unless rightly handled. A mistake might destroy this entire planet!"

"Then you would die, and I'd die with you," the girl murmured. "It is no more dangerous for you than for me. I'm staying! We can go home together later."

"Well—all right," Telsor agreed. Turning aside, he pulled up a heavy lead shield with a deep purple glass sunk in its center. "Stand behind this," he ordered. "I'm taking no chances with so precious a spectator."

Liana obeyed eagerly and thereafter stood with her eyes glued to the glass and her slim body tensed in excitement as Telsor handled switches and buttons on his apparatus with the skill of a master.

She had not the remotest conception of his aims, even though she was a witness to his movements. Filigrees and spiders' webs of pure electrical energy writhed at times between polished balls; bolts of furious power slammed into transformer chambers.

Earthing rods glowed under sudden huge electrical loads—and, now and again, that withering intensity of pure energy light gushed forth, turning the ceiling floodlamps to dirty yellow by comparison with its unholy glare.

Then, unexpectedly, came something different! There was a riot of electrical discharges which clearly had no place in the experiment. Telsor began to work like a man possessed, obviously aware of some flaw in

his experiment.

But he was not quick enough. There was an abrupt electric disturbance of immense power which momentarily turned the apparatus pale green—then it went dead and smoky black, charred out of all shape. The glass in the tubes melted from inconceivable heat, the anode and cathode globes were useless as circular cinders on top of their corroded poles.

Telsor staggered backwards, wiping perspiration from his face. Liana crept from behind the shield and caught at his trembling arm.

"What—what happened?" she asked, wide-eyed.

"Too much power!" His voice was shaken. "I should have stepped down a bit—but I wanted maximum. I hammered the hydrogen atoms too much. They changed into helium. The sudden overload of energy due to the change in atomic makeup caused that sudden seize-up." He rubbed his naked forearms vigorously. "I got an unpleasantly large blast of cosmic rays from it, too!"

They were silent for a moment, rather terrified by the blind malignancy of natural forces. Then in a rather wondering voice the girl asked a question.

"What's that there? A diamond?"

She bent down to pick up a glittering object from the shattered equipment, but Telsor dived and snatched her hand back. His lean, tense face was beside hers, peering down.

"It's—energy!" he whispered incredulously. "Atomic energy! Not the kind the scientists use for light and power but the real thing. One atom breaks down and releases its energy, and immense sub-atomic disturbance produced thereby sets up ripples in the next nearest group of atoms. Then that too starts to break down. It's—progressive!"

They both straightend up slowly, searching each other's eyes.

"This is the thing scientists have dreaded for ages," Telsor said mechanically, his face suddenly old. "So far, chance has been kind. We've skirted the edge of unthinkable forces and tamed them, but a slip was always possible—and now I've made it!"

"But can't you extinguish it?" the girl asked, surprised. "It—it looks rather pretty, I think."

For a moment her ignorance of the tragic portent enraged Telsor, but with an effort he held himself in check.

"How can one extinguish the collapse of matter itself?" he demanded. "It'll grow—and grow—my God!" Stunned with the shock of foreseeing what might happen, he raced for the visiphone and switched to a number. In a moment the stern face of Liana's father merged onto the teleplate.

"Hallo, Telsor!" he greeted, rather surprised. "Anything wrong?"

"I—I think so, sir," the young scientist stammered. "I want you to come to the main laboratory right away. I'm scared!"

He switched off and looked blankly at the girl.

"What do I do," she asked helplessly. "I can't let father find me here."

"He'll have more things to worry about than your presence here, believe me," Telsor interrupted. He began to pace up and down anxiously as he waited for the expert to arrive. All the time he moved, he was conscious of vicious little prickings in his skin, both on the exposed and unexposed parts. It was hardly attributable to electrical static. It was too sharp—like a thousand needles plunging deep.

THEN at last there were quick footsteps in the corridor outside and Elvan Fonray, the girl's father, came hurrying in. He was a tall, spare man with muscular legs and sinewy hands. High-cheekbones and taut lips revealed both thinker and man of action.

He glanced at his daughter, hesitated. Then whatever he was going to say evaporated as he caught sight of the intense little spot of light amidst the wrecked equipment. He frowned at it. Snatching up a blue shield for his eyes, he went down on his knees and peered at the phenomenon closely. Real alarm was on his face when he stood up again.

"In the name of science, boy, what have you done?" he demanded, clutching Telsor's shoulder. "This is disintegrative atomic force! Matter cancer! It can bring the whole world down around our ears!"

Tremblingly, Telsor told of his experiment and the lean-jawed physicist listened in concentrated attention.

"So you changed hydrogen into helium, did you? Hmm! That means that every four hydrogen atoms crushed together to form a helium atom would discharge a radiation of o-point-o-three, a surplus mass from the helium atom. Pure cosmic rays must have

been generated for a brief instant, too, existing in the same form as in the free cosmos. Didn't you feel them?"

"I still do," Telsor muttered uneasily. "But I'm not unduly worried about myself. What do we do with—that?"

"Obviously the violent interchange of energy started it," Fonray said, frowning perplexedly as he stared at it. "And I don't know how to stop it—but it has got to be stopped, if we work night and day until we accomplish it."

He broke off and swung to the attentive girl.

"What are you doing here, Liana?" he asked brusquely.

"I only came to see Telsor."

"Then you had no right! Go home immediately, and don't ever let me find you here again. Telsor will come and see you when he is free to do so."

Liana did not reply, but there was no resentment in her attitude. She knew that she had transgressed, and she knew too, that her father was unmeaningly harsh in his anxiety. She gave Telsor a smile, then turned and went silently towards the door.

"This is serious!" Fonray declared, still frowning.

"It was a sheer accident, sir, and—"

"Yes, yes, of course it was an accident. All these damnable flukes of Nature are accidents—that is why we never have time to prepare a remedy. Bring me that neutralizer."

Telsor obeyed, and from then on he was only too glad to let his superior take charge of the situation. But his efforts with the neutralizer, a device for short-circuiting escaping energy into freer paths, were of no avail. The glowing spot became a larger glowing spot, consuming metal and stone as it expanded.

In half an hour of frantic effort, trying every scientific trick he knew, the physicist was no nearer a solution. The spot became a hole, radiating a light so intense that the two could no longer study it without shields before their eyes.

Fonray did not admit that he was beaten, even though inwardly he felt almost sure that he was.

"I'll have to consult the other scientists," he said finally, wiping his greasy face. "This is more than one man's brain can handle. You'd better go home. You look all in."

"I am," Telsor confessed. "I don't think

that burst of cosmic rays did me any good since I had no protection suit on."

"In the pure, undiluted state they couldn't have. Off with you and get some rest!"

Telsor Rolf did not quite remember how he got home. He was in a peculiar state in which he was neither ill nor well. It was as if he was perfectly normal part of the time, then some inner disturbance would knock him off balance and he would become slightly delirious.

Certainly he had little consciousness of crossing the gulf of lighted city in an elevated monocoar, even less of entering his apartment on the city's outskirts.

The thought of supper nauseated him. Instead he poured himself a glass of essence, then sat thinking for a while, as the gentle exhilarating fluid surged into his bloodstream.

He began to feel better, less conscious of the accidental wrong he had done. That glowing hole devouring the heart of a fabulously costly physical laboratory no longer troubled him quite so much.

BUT it was only a brief reprieve from harassment, caused by the essence. In half an hour, as he prepared for bed, the effect had worn off and he was, if anything, more worried than ever.

It was as he stripped off his clothes and prepared to don his pajamas that he stopped, staring at his legs and arms. They were covered with myriad little pimples, each with a dull red top, like tiny boils about to come to a head.

The sight of them stirred a deep inner feeling of uncleanness; the pain of them was manifested in those myriad needle pricks still grinding away so persistently at his body that he had become numbed to them.

When he looked in the full length mirror, he saw that his face was in a similar condition. For several minutes he stood, wondering what he ought to do—then more from desperation than aught else he flung himself on the bed and drew the coverlet over him.

He closed his eyes—then opened them again abruptly. A sensation of the vilest headlong falling was upon him the moment he lowered his lids. It made him clutch the bed for support.

Again he tried, and again, forcing himself to have the courage to see where the fall would end. But it did not really end any-

where. It was as if he were falling endlessly through space itself, while past him, so prodigious was his speed, stars and suns streaked in ghostly, blazing splendor.

At last he groaned and sat up. Everything was normal the moment he opened his eyes. He switched on the light and stared blankly at the wall for a moment, rubbing his aching face. It was something in the quality of his hand as he rubbed that made him forget everything else. It was not the strong, yet withal spotted hand to which he was accustomed, but—

It was clawlike! Startled, he lowered it and stared.

The very bones of the hand itself had somehow retracted and the nails had shrunk to microscopic size. Even as he watched they vanished altogether under swift contraction of the skin. He did not actually feel the incredible metamorphosis. It was as if he were one mass of indescribable aches and pains, so that one more made little difference.

Dazed, he looked at his other hand, and found it had behaved the same way.

The shock was terrific. He scrambled from the bed and went again to the mirror, but so far nothing was wrong with the rest of his body—except for the spots, and these now were showing signs of disappearing. His face had indeed become normal—as far as the spots went—but either it was his imagination or else his beard line was vanishing and giving his cheeks an almost girlish softness. It looked as though he had never had hair on his face at all!

Bemused, he stumbled back to the bed and sat on the edge of it, thinking, flogging his brain. That sense of earlier confusion was less noticeable now; it was more as if something were trying to gain access to his consciousness.

"Carbon," he whispered, and he did not know why he said the word. "Carbon! Carbon!"

Like a flash from a sparkgap, his hazy conjectures leapt into clear realization. He jumped up and began to talk to the empty room.

"Carbon! I have carbon atoms. Everything has carbon atoms! Cosmic rays, in the beginning, caused life. Because of them constant mutations are occurring, especially in man. Life only exists in the universe at all because carbon has the power to come in with other elements in endless variety.

"I was exposed to pure cosmic rays for a

brief space. They affected the carbon atoms in my makeup. I am *evolving*! And evolving fast! Mutation upon mutation, even as the minutes pass by."

He paused, his face deathly white. He had spoken truth, and he knew it. He could feel the warmth of accelerated metabolism flowing through him. He had no thermometer handy, but he guessed his temperature to be well above normal already.

His readiness to believe in his own discovery started a new train of thought. First and foremost he was a scientist, and even if he himself were the victim of science's deadly power he wanted to know the why and wherefore.

A LITTLE calmer, he sat down again and studied his hands, his mind rippling under new conceptions.

"I am evolving—that is established," he muttered. "In that case my brain must keep pace with it. The body cannot evolve without the brain doing likewise.

"If cosmic rays reacting on carbon atoms produced the fluke of life on this world, what produced intelligence? To knit together the chemical aggregates of life did not give them the power to think! Whence came that?"

But he was asking himself an impossible question. Though he could sense the gradual expansion of his conceptions as his brain underwent mutational changes, he was still not ready to solve this greatest of all scientific problems.

Far more settled in his emotions now that he knew he was tackling an incredible scientific fortuity he turned and went back to bed. That sense of deadly falling was absent now and he realized it had probably been caused by the changing action of the fluid of balance above his ears. But if the falling was absent, weird mental visions were not.

He could feel himself alive with conceptions—advanced ideas of what he had already learned, for even brain mutations could not tell him what he did not know. It was simply that his known knowledge was able to expand vastly, where formerly it had been limited.

He remembered the soft buzzer of the synchroclock announcing four in the morning—then he fell asleep.

The city day-lights were on as usual when he awoke, but with their radiance was mixed a pallid, steady glow that had no right to be there. For several minutes he lay trying to

assimilate things—then he remembered.

He jerked up his head, then let it fall back again with a gasp of anguish at a wrenching pain in his neck. It was as though his head had become too heavy for him to raise it.

It was because his head had become too heavy! His thin, wizened hands went over its huge, bulging pate. His hair had gone. He could feel bony eyebrow ridges, the distension of veins on the taut skin of his skull. His vision, however, was undisturbed, in fact it was unnaturally clear.

His legs had shrunk even as his arms, his chest and hips too. Breathing was difficult. Gently he eased his hands under the back of his head and so, after some effort, got himself into a sitting position, supporting his egregious dome in his cupped hands, elbows on his knees.

The mirror caught his reflection as he turned towards it. For some reason he was not shocked. He had expected it. Science had said evolution must produce something like this—a wild travesty of a man, a baroque, with a brain-case so big his neck could not support it—a body so delicate it was fed by force of will alone.

He was still Telsor Rolf. He realised that. But gone were the thoughts of the previous night—of the desirability of marrying Liana Fonray, of youth together, of conquering the secrets of Nature. Such things no longer interested him. Still holding his head he got up and looked through the window. That light added to the day-globes was immediately explained.

FROM the center of the city was emanating an irresistible blinding glare—the blaze of pure devouring energy, where matter was being consumed with a speed proportionate to the area of the disturbance. The heart of the city must have been eaten away during the night, and no doubt there was a mine in the ground of corresponding depth. End of the planet? Well, perhaps.

Telsor turned clumsily and staggered towards a chair. Then, supporting his head against the edge of the metal table he began to unscrew the chair legs from the seat and used them as a rough cage. This he fixed on his shoulders and under his chin and the back of his head. Now he had a support he could learn to walk all over again.

He was just getting along nicely when his apartment door bell rang. He hesitated, then with considerable effort lurched across the

room and gazed out upon his visitor.

"Telsor, you've got to come—"

Liana stood on the threshold, her gush of words stopped. She fixed her eyes on the incredibly dwarfish figure with the mighty cranium—then her legs gave way and she sprawled on the carpet.

Telsor stood looking down at her, baffled. Then he shut the door and tried to lift her in his arms. She was far too heavy. All he could do was seize her under her armpits and drag her to the divan, against which he propped her head and shoulders.

After a few minutes she began to recover. Telsor stood watching her intently, saw again that look of incredible horror sweep over her face.

"I know," he whispered, his voice reedy and cracked. "I know what you are thinking, Liana. But I am Telsor Rolf, just the same. I have evolved. In fact I am still evolving. I don't know where it is going to end."

"Evolved?" she repeated huskily. "But how?"

"Those cosmic rays—last night. They mutated me several centuries ahead. The last men on this planet will look as I do now."

Realization seemed to strike her. Her horror of the discovery was clearly outweighed by something else.

"There won't be any last men on the planet!" She scrambled to her feet as she spoke. "The planet's being eaten up! That atomic force is eating it away! We're evacuating everybody from the area."

"To where?" Telsor asked tonelessly. "Space travel is an art we have not yet mastered—and that is the only way out."

The girl stared at him fixedly, dumb horror in her blue eyes.

"I know," she said, in a dead voice. "It's just cheating death until it catches up, I suppose. But dad sent me to tell you that there might be a way if you'll come and help."

"There is no way, Liana, take it from me, I have gained knowledge centuries ahead of the present, and no power of man's devising can conquer devouring atomic force. But the space travel problem I can work out—and quickly.

"The best thing is for all of you to evacuate as planned. In the meantime I'll work out a means of traveling space. Now go! Please!"

Liana turned towards the door, looked

back at him once more in horrified wonder—then she went.

Space travel—of course he could conquer it! The theories he had had as the normal Telsor Rolf were now expanded with his brain's mutations into absolute knowledge. He went to the table and pulled a sheet of foil from the drawer, held the sylo-pen in his unaccustomed claw.

Carbon? Intelligence? Carbon? Intelligence?

The two problems and the missing link between danced in his brain as he forced himself to think on the profoundest riddles of science. What gave intelligence to carbon atoms to make them thinking beings?

He nearly had it—then the answer slipped by him again and he began to wrestle with the complexity of space travel. But even as he made the first awkward notations with his clumsy hand he realized that the end of his evolution was not yet. Further anguishing changes swept through him and there came a weird foreshortening of vision. With it a swift alteration of his limbs.

HE WAS shrinking at an incredible speed—shrinking like a rubber man with the air escaping from him. The stylo became too ponderous for his minimizing hand. His head slipped inside the rough cage. The table seemed to swell and grow away from him.

He did not lose consciousness during his descent into remote smallness. Rather his brain seemed to be sharpened. How long it lasted he did not know, but he did realize that when the evolution was finished he was not seeing with his eyes or hearing with his ears.

Both states were mental, and what body he possessed was a long barlike creation floating gently in the breeze of the apartment. The apartment itself seemed nearly as big as a planet, and the open window was the sky.

Bacteria! He realized it suddenly. The evolution beyond evolution. Scientists had averred that life would finally pass into the form of indestructible bacteria, the toughest form of life in creation—able to resist the boiling of water and the frigid cold of space. Man must become bacteria—finally.

He had become that—intelligent beyond anything he had ever known, but was it finality? He suspected other things were to happen even yet before the mutations of atomic structure came to an end.

Dimly he was aware of the disaster of the happening. He knew how to conquer space, yet he had not the physical means of passing on his information.

As he drifted through the window, entirely invisible, and floated amidst the rocks of dust in the atmosphere, he saw below him the planet he was powerless to save. It was vast to his mental eyes—incredibly vast—seared in the center by a gaping, blinding hole of intense white.

From it he could see people milling in ever thickening crowds, spreading away from the scene of the disturbance like the tentacles of an octopus. Flight, to stave off the evil hour—flight, while they waited for him to solve the problem!

He would have felt sorrow, but emotion was dead.

It was some time before he realized his will power was such that he had no need to rely on the driftings of the wind to guide his course. So he hovered and watched and the awful flame of energy was powerless to blind him. The thunder of collapsing rock was unable to deafen him. He had gained a brief but magnificent immunity to the forces of Nature gone mad.

Perhaps it was hours—weeks—years. He could not be sure. His sense of time had gone. But he saw the whole panorama below him drag to its awful end. There came a time at last when the consuming fire had spread so far from the center that the people were round the edge of the dying planet in a black and jagged fringe.

He pictured them cowering before the glare, seared by the awful heat. He pictured Liana, her sightless eyes staring helplessly into the gulf, her lovely form lashed by the first awful flames of the devouring fire. She would be wondering why he had not kept his word.

Then came the incredible vision of a world collapsing, of a whole planet exploding into whirling fragments of blazing rock, shooting outwards as myriads of separately burning fragments, doomed to consume themselves and leave, perhaps, tiny burned-out husks in which atoms would form again. Meteorites, maybe—even a band of asteroids. For some of the trapped people, there had been the more merciful death of space cold.

The planets moved and swung majestically under the gravitational changes as their tortured brother died. Then it was all over—but not for Telsor Rolf.

A GAIN the mutational surge was passing through him. He realized it even as the swingings of gravity fields forced him through the black void against his will. And the void held energies and cosmic rays in their pure form.

They were ripping at him, battering apart his bacterial make-up. He was moving with terrific speed, down at last towards a green world, slowly swinging to a standstill as the changes subsided.

He went through cloud, down and down into a world of steam and dank warmth. Then came sudden agony through his body as though it were being split into a million fragments, as though he were in a million places at the same time.

He seemed to be in the dark now, moving majestically round a sun. There were six of him moving round the sun. There were six suns! Twice times six—a million of him revolving round a million suns—two million—three. . . .

He had split into electrons, was going

round the nucleus.

There were six—carbon! And the truth came to him. Life had come to his world because just such an accident as this had happened there too. Why not, if Time were a circle?

A thinking being had been split into carbon atoms, and each atom had retained the power of thought! With the processes of life, the thought-power—the life energy as some scientist had called it—would be handed down to the otherwise lifeless molecular build-up.

Carbon had the power of thought!

And life would come here—to this world man would call Earth. Man would wonder how life had arrived, even more so what made it think. They would count four planets and then gaze at a belt of asteroids and wonder how it came to be there.

As Telsor Rolf had done, they too would wonder.

But for Telsor Rolf wonder was no more. He knew.