

EVOLUTION'S END

Thrilling Wonder Stories April by Robert Arthur (1909-1969)

Aydem was pushing the humming vacuum duster along the endless stone corridors of the great underground Repository of Natural Knowledge when Ayveh, coming up quietly behind him, put her hands over his eyes.

He whirled, to see Ayveh's laughing face, mischief dancing on it.

"Ayveh!" he exclaimed eagerly. "But what are you doing here? It is forbidden any woman—"

"I know." Ayveh threw back her head, her long hair, richly golden, rippling down her shoulders to contrast with the pale apple-green of the shapeless linen robe she wore—a robe identical to Aydem's, the universal garb of the human slaves of the more-than-human Masters who ruled the world. It was an underground world. Generations since, the Masters, their great, thin-skulled heads and mighty brains proving uncomfortably vulnerable to the ordinary rays of the sun, had retreated underground.

"But Dmu Dran wishes to see you, Aydem," the girl Ayveh went on, "and he sent me to fetch you. There are visitors arriving, and you must convey them from the tube station to his demonstration chambers. They are very important visitors."

"But why did he not transmit the order to me by directed thinking?" Aydem asked, puzzled. "He knows that even out here, in the Exhibit Section, I would receive it."

"Perhaps he sent me because he knew I wished to see you." Ayveh suggested happily. "And because he knew you hungered for the sight of me. There are times, Aydem, when Dmu Dran actually seems to understand what feelings are."

"A Master understand feelings?" Aydem's tone was scornful. "The Masters are nothing but brains. Great machines for thought, which know nothing of joy or sorrow or hunger for another."

"Shh!" Frightened, Ayveh put her fingers to his lips. "You must not say such things. Generous as Dmu Dran is, he is still a Master, and if his mind should chance to be listening, he would have to punish you. It might even mean the fuel chambers."

Aydem kissed the fingers that had stopped his speech. Then, seeing the mingled fear and longing in her face, he drew her close and kissed her savagely, tasting the sweetness of her lips until a pulse was beating like a hammer in his throat.

Shaken, Ayveh freed herself and looked about, fearful that someone might have seen. There was no one. The corridors of the exhibit chambers of this tremendous museum of natural history of which their Master, Dmu Dran, was curator, wound endlessly away in darkness except for the tiny lighted area that enclosed them.

"There is no one to see," Aydem reassured her. "I alone tend the exhibit chambers, and only I am permitted to leave the Master's quarters without orders. And if any did see, who would tell?"

"Ekno," the girl whispered. "He would tell. He would like to see you sent into the fuel chambers, because he knows that we—that we—"

Her voice faltered and trailed off at the look of grimness in the man's face. Aydem stared down at her, at her loveliness, before he spoke. He himself stood nearly six feet tall, and his dark hair was a shaggy mane dropping almost to his shoulders. He was beardless, for all facial hair had been removed by an unguent when he was a youth—a whim of Dmu Dran's, though many Masters were less fastidious.

His body held the sturdiness of the trunk of an oak—which he had never seen. And though his duties were light in this mechanized, sub-surface world to which man's life on Mother Earth had retreated with the evolution of the Masters, muscles corded his body and were but lightly hidden by the green robe that swathed him.

And there was a tension in those muscles now, as if they would explode into action if only they had something to seize upon and rend and tear.

"Ayveh," he said, "I have seen the mating papers. I took them from the machine to the Master a period ago. Our request to be assigned as each other's mate has been denied. On the basis of the Selector Machine rating, I have been assigned to Teema, your assistant in overseeing the Master's household, and you to Ekno, who tends to minor repairs."

"That ugly hairy one?" Horror almost robbed Ayveh of her voice. "Who smells so bad and is always looking after me when I pass? No! I—I would rather kill myself first."

"I"—there was savagery in Ayden's words—"would rather kill the Masters!"

"Oh, no!" the girl whispered in terror. "You must not speak it. If you harmed Dmu Dran—if it became known even that you wished to—we should all be destroyed. Not in the fuel chambers. We should go to the example cells. And we would not die—for a long time."

"Better that," Aydem said stonily, "than to be slaves, to be mated to those we despise, to keep forever our silence and obey orders, to live and die like beasts!"

Then, at Ayveh's sudden gasp of terror, Aydem whirled.

His own features paled as he drew himself to attention. For Dmu Dran, their Master, had come silently up behind them as they spoke, the air-suspended chair which carried him making no sound.

And Dmu Dran, his great round face blank, his large popping eyes unreadable, stared at Aydem with an unusual intensity. Yet no thoughts were coming from the mind within the huge globular, thin-walled skull over which only a little wispy hair, like dried hay, was plastered.

Had Dmu Dran heard? Had he caught the emanations of violent emotion which must have been spreading all over the vicinity from Aydem? Was he now probing into their minds for the words they had just spoken? If he knew or guessed them, their fate would be a terrible one.

But when Dmu Dran spoke—for mental communication with the undeveloped slave mind was fatiguing for a Master—his voice was mild.

"I fear," he said, in a thin piping tone, "that my servants are not happy. Perhaps they are upset by the mating orders that have arrived?"

Aydem of course was supposed to know nothing of the contents of the orders, having in theory no ability to read. But since Dmu Dran evidently knew he could read—he had been taught in his boyhood by a wise old slave long dead—boldness seemed the only course.

"Master," he said, "the girl Ayveh and I hoped to be mates. It is true we are not happy, because we have been assigned to others."

"Happiness." Dmu Dran spoke the word reflectively. "Unhappiness. Mmm. Those are things not given us to feel. You are aware emotion is not a desirable characteristic in a slave?"

"Aye, Master," Aydem agreed submissively.

"The selector machine," Dmu Dran went on, "shows both you and the girl Ayveh to be capable of much emotion. It also indicates in both of you a brain capacity large for a slave. It is for these reasons you have been denied each other. It is desired that slaves should be strong and healthy, intelligent, but not too intelligent, and lacking in emotion so they will not become discontented. You understand these things, do you not?"

"Aye, Master," Aydem agreed in some astonishment. Ayveh pressed close to him, frightened by the strange conduct of Dmu Dran—for no Master ever spoke so familiarly with a slave.

Dmu Dran was silent, as if thinking. While he waited, Aydem reflected that Dmu Dran was not exactly as other Masters were. To an untrained eye, all Masters looked much alike—a great, globular head set upon a small neckless body, the neck having disappeared in the course of evolution of the great head, so that the weight might be better rested on the stronger back and shoulder muscles.

But Dmu Dran was perceptibly taller than other Masters Aydem had seen. Aydem had not seen many—there were only some thousand of them, and they

lived in small groups in far-flung underground Centers, if not entirely alone, as did Dmu Dran. Dmu Dran's cranium was also slightly smaller in diameter.

Now an odd expression touched the flat countenance of the Master.

"Aydem," he said, "You have seen the contents of these halls many times. But Ayveh has not. So come with me now, both of you. We have a little time, and I wish to view some specimens. It is many years since I last examined them."

He turned his chair, and Aydem, exchanging a look of puzzlement with Ayveh, followed him down the corridor between the great, glass-enclosed, hermetically sealed exhibits.

As they went, light sprang on alongside them, activated by the heat of their bodies on thermocouples, and died away behind them. The Master led them several hundred yards, and halted at last in a section devoted to ancient animals of the Earth's youth.

There were here many beasts, huge and ferocious in appearance, reproduced in their natural environment, seen, save by Aydem, not more than half a dozen times a year. Only six or eight Masters were born each year, just enough to keep the total of a thousand from dwindling. They visited the Repository of Natural Knowledge in the course of their educational studies.

In the glass cases that lined the miles of corridors were exhibits, many of them animated so cunningly that the artificial replicas of man and animal of the past seemed endowed with life, encompassing all the natural history of the world from the mists of the unknown, millions of years before, to the present day. But since the great brains of the Masters needed to be apprised of a fact but once to make it theirs forever, there was never really occasion for a Master to come here twice.

Now Dmu Dran, Aydem and Ayveh stood before a great, orange-colored beast with black stripes, a snarl frozen upon his features, huge fangs, many inches in length, protruding from his jaws. Even though he was but a model of a beast dead many millennia, Ayveh instinctively drew closer to Aydem, as if the creature were indeed about to leap, and as if they were part of that group of men and women, much like themselves, that faced it in desperation with long, pointed sticks in their hands.

"The saber-tooth tiger," Dmu Dran said. "When it reigned on this Earth uncounted years ago, it was Master of Aiden, the world above, a scourge feared and hated by all other animals. For many thousands of years it grew more and more powerful, its dominance contested by few. By its great teeth it was known—terrible weapons for rending and tearing its prey. But in the end it ceased to be. Why did a beast like that, which no natural enemy could oppose, die, think you?"

"It must indeed have been a fearful opponent that conquered it, Master," Ayveh ventured uncertainly.

What might have been a smile, had a Master known smiling, rippled over the pale moonface.

"Nature killed it," Dmu Dran informed them. "Nature destroyed it by her very generosity. Those tusks you see that gave it its name—Nature continued to add to their length and strength. But, alas! In her enthusiasm, she made them so long in the course of time that their possessor could not close its mouth, could not eat, and so eventually starved to death. Aye, Nature evolved her great and dread child right out of existence."

"That was indeed strange." Aydem frowned. "I do not understand. Why did she do so?"

"Nature has curious ways." Dmu Dran shrugged. "And having an infinity of time, she can afford an infinity of experiments. What she is not satisfied with, though she has made it supreme, she destroys."

Dmu Dran shot his chair a few yards to the left.

"And here," he said, "is another great beast that was once master of

the world when it was young."

The creature he now indicated stood far above a man's head, even a slave's. Three times, four times, five times higher than a slave did it tower.

"The great dinosaur of the Earth's infancy," Dmu Dran told them. "The hugest beast ever to shake the world with its tread. That one"—he pointed—"the largest land animal ever evolved. The enemies that could conquer it were few or none. Unmolested by the lesser denizens of the day and the night, it ruled the Earth by its very bulk. Yet it too passed. Why, think you?"

Aydem and Ayveh were silent, so Dmu Dran explained.

"Again Nature was overgenerous. To this creature whose bulk made it sovereign, it added still more bulk. Mack! In time she so increased the size of the beast that it could not get enough to eat, though it fed twenty-four hours of the day. It simply could not ingest fuel enough for its huge body. So in the end it too passed."

The man and the girl were still silent, their eyes wide with wonder. Dmu Dran abruptly shot his air car a hundred yards down the corridor and stopped again, the lights coming on automatically the moment he paused.

He was now before the section devoted to the evolution of man himself, beginning with a creature half man, half beast, and rising to a reproduction of the Masters who now ruled the world.

Uneducated though they were, Aydem and Ayveh saw and understood the procession of figures, each more erect, each less hairy, each larger-headed than the one before it.

Near the end of the line was an upright figure which caused Ayveh to gasp, it was so like Aydem.

"Man of the Early Machine Age"

Dmu Dran read the inscription on the imperishable metal plate at the foot of the figure. "Aye, your Aydem does look like him. For it was man of that period, balanced between ignorance and knowledge, that we Masters thought it best our slaves should resemble. But here is the exhibit that I have most pondered upon."

He moved a few feet, and they stood before the last half dozen figures.

"There"—and Dmu Dran, with one short arm, indicated a figure as tall as Aydem, but differing from the one just before it in that its head was half again as large—"there is the first of the Masters. A mutant, with a brain-weight double anything ever known in man before. John Master, his name was, and it was appropriate. For in the last ten thousand years, all humankind save slaves have been his descendants—not men now, but Masters. I have often speculated upon the chance that saw him born, and wondered if, had he never been conceived and brought to issue, the human species might not have turned in quite another direction."

Dmu Dran was silent, thinking, and the two slaves did not intrude upon his thoughts. Instead they studied the figures following this John Master of the large head. Each was larger-headed than the one before it, each smaller-bodied, shorter-necked, until the last figure might have been Dmu Dran himself.

"It is an interesting point on which to wonder," Dmu Dran said after a time. "How would mankind have evolved had not my ancestor been born? The old records show that he was a cold and ruthless man, without sentiment. That by the power of his logical mind, and with the aid of his children, he seized the rule of the world and made his descendants supreme forever. Forever? Well—supreme ever since. So that now we Masters, the highest species of animal ever to evolve, are despotic rulers of the world, and if we wished, of the Solar System—even of the Universe.

"But we do not wish. The Solar System, save for this world, is lifeless, and it has never been worth our while to consider whether the stars beyond were worth reaching. We feel nothing, we enjoy nothing, for the capacity for those things has been bred out of us—evolved away in

the course of yesterday's eons. We merely think, with our almost perfect brains, here in the bowels of the Earth, served by our slaves in a world almost effortless even for them.

"We are, so far as we know—and there is little we do not know—the Masters, nature's final product, evolution's end!"

Abruptly Dmu Dran's piping voice ceased, leaving tiny echoes rustling in the corridors. Aydem and Ayveh were alarmed and uneasy. Could Dmu Dran by chance be mad? Madness did sometimes afflict a Master, though rarely one of Dmu Dran's age. Usually they were much younger or much older, when the unexplainable insanity that was the only ailment the Masters had not conquered, took them.

"I sometimes think," Dmu Dran said after a moment, in a quieter tone now, "that though we consider ourselves the last step in evolution's chain, we may be wrong. Who knows what plans nature has for us? None of us. But we shall. I am going to put it to the test, the momentous test that may decide the whole future of the world, aye, of the Universe itself. For know, my servants, that my visitors today are the Masters of the Supreme Council, come at my invitation to examine a machine that I have made my life's work.

"It is a matter of electricity and rays that will stimulate the latent change that lies in all plants and animals. So that in one generation, an animal may progress from the form it was born with to the form its descendants a thousand generations away would have. Aye—in less than a generation, in a few periods!

"And I am going to propose to the Supreme Council that a chosen few of us Masters subject ourselves to the influence of this machine, that we may know what we are to become, in Nature's hidden scheme, in the persons of our grandchildren many times removed. I shall propose to them we raise ourselves now to the glories of the final form destined to the Masters, and I think they will agree.

"For we Masters, the favored children of nature, will hardly be loath to rise to the final position scarcely lower than gods that our philosophers have foreseen as ultimately ours!"

Excitement shone in Dmu Dran's popping eyes. But in a moment it died. He gestured.

"Return to your quarters, my servants. I shall meet my visitors myself, Aydem. Say nothing to anyone, and worry not for the moment concerning the mating assignments. Nothing will be done about such matters until I-know."

With that cryptic remark, he shot away down the corridor in his air-chair as Aydem and Ayveh stared at each other in perplexity and mounting hope.

In the periods of waiting that followed, there was tension in the slaves' quarters. All knew of the unprecedented visit of the Supreme Council, and somehow word got about that the mating assignments had come, but had not yet been announced by Dmu Dran.

Curiosity regarding these matters, however, was not as strong as it might have been had not slaves been for so many generations bred for docility and lack of emotion. Aydem and Ayveh's fellow servants exhibited only mild curiosity about any occurrence, and when not working, for the most part contented themselves with eating, sleeping, and playing simple games.

Only Ekno, the hairy one who coveted Ayveh, had a brain that busied itself with affairs outside its immediate concern. And Ekno, hatred in his face as he watched Aydem covertly, knew that something of great import was transpiring. He could scarcely contain himself to know what, and even took the great risk, unthinkable to the others, of snooping about Dmu Dran's private quarters under the pretense of making repairs, hoping to pick up some scrap of information.

In time, after many secret sessions in Dmu Dran's demonstration chambers, the Supreme Council left, each Master boarding his private

air-car and being shot away through the great maze of tunnels that honeycombed the earth to his home center. With the President of the Council, the oldest living Master, went a large, heavy package which Aydem transported to his car with great care, little dreaming that the destiny of himself and Ayveh and countless millions of their unborn descendants lay within those careful wrappings.

After this, for some periods more, nothing happened. The other slaves almost forgot anything unusual had occurred. Only Ekno still watched Aydem's every move, eager for some evidence of wrong-doing he could present to Dmu Dran, or even to the Board of Slave Mating, supreme authority in regard to all slaves.

But with Dmu Dran's strange words ringing in his mind, Aydem made no move Ekno could seize upon. Save when outside the living quarters, to which Ekno by the nature of his duties was usually confined, Aydem and Ayveh did not even exchange words.

But Aydem's chief duty was to keep the interminable corridors of the exhibit section free from the natural rock dust that gathered, and only he was permitted to enter it. Ekno dared not follow him there, so it was there he and Ayveh met.

It was a great risk Ayveh took, for no woman was permitted to leave the living quarters at all. But Dmu Dran's words had given them courage. And it was possible for her, since she was chief of the women, to slip away from her duties for stolen moments from time to time.

On these occasions they exchanged few words. Their hearts spoke for them, and their tongues could be silent. Aydem eagerly showed the girl through the multitudinous exhibits that traced man's life on the planet.

Long years these had fascinated him. Countless periods he had spent studying them, and scanning the engraved metal placards that explained each detail of what he saw.

Though Ayveh could not read, he could interpret for her. And many of the exhibits spoke for themselves. Almost all were animated. A touch of a button set them in motion, and countless replicas of countless types of men who had walked the world and vanished, went through the acts of life again.

In engrossed silence, Aydem and Ayveh watched hairy men of the Earth's infancy defend themselves with fire and spear and arrow against the attacks of wild animals. They saw other men, higher in the scale of evolution, build simple dwellings, strike fire from flints or produce it from spun sticks, hunt, plant seed, weave cloth, cook, and do all the multitudinous acts that were necessary to existence.

Most of all, Aydem was fascinated not by the exhibits showing the machine world just before the coming of the Masters, but by the reproductions of man in his younger days. Haltingly he tried to explain to Ayveh that he felt within himself a kinship to those long dead men who had made bows and arrows, planted and reaped their crops with their hands, had tamed wild horses and on their backs ridden down the wild boar and the wolf, had, with spear and arrow, defended themselves against their enemies.

He stretched his arms, and his mighty muscles coiled and knotted.

"Sometimes in my sleep," he told Ayveh, his eyes burning, "I am no longer within these underground dominions of the Masters, but am free upon Aiden, the Earth's surface. I know what it must be like, for I can see it all in my dreams. I can feel the warm touch of what they call the sun, and underfoot the roughness of the growing things called grass. Animals, not artificial like these, but alive, roam the land, and in my dreams I combat them."

"It must be a wonderful place," Ayveh whispered wistfully. "So strange and different from this."

"Sometimes I feel as if I were going to burst, forever locked away within these walls of rock where the Masters choose to live!" Aydem burst out. "I wish to work, to fight, to conquer—"

Somewhere nearby there was a scraping noise. Ayveh gasped with terror, and Aydem whirled instantly. The sound of running footsteps sprang up several corridors away. Aydem dashed in that direction, caught a glimpse of a man running toward the living quarters.

He put on a burst of speed, but the other outdistanced him and ducked through a door before Aydem could get close to identify the spying one.

"But it was Ekno," he said, his voice grim, as he hurried back to take the frightened Ayveh to her quarters. "It was Ekno, and he was spying on us. He overheard. He will report to Dmu Dran."

"But the Master," Ayveh faltered, "he did not mind before—"

Aydem took her hand.

"There is no telling what a Master will do," he growled. "He may have been amusing himself. We must be prepared. Do not sleep this period. Wait for me behind this door that leads from the quarters to the exhibits. Come if I call. Have food with you."

"But Aydem!" Ayveh exclaimed, wide-eyed. "You would not question the decree of a Master?"

"If Dmu Dran condemns me to the fuel chamber," Aydem answered, "I will kill him and we will try to escape. See?"

From beneath his tunic he withdrew a knife with a long gleaming blade and a heavy handle.

"I have had this long," he boasted. "It is part of an exhibit that became out of order. I fixed it under Dmu Dran's direction. And stole this unnoticed. I will kill Dmu Dran with it if I must. There are many tunnels that may have been abandoned leading out from this center. I have heard it whispered, by old Temu who taught me when I was young, that one leads to the world above. We will seek it. We will seek escape. If we must, we will die. But I will not go to the fuel chambers."

He looked at her white face.

"But I can go alone—" he began.

Ayveh flung herself into his arms.

"No, Aydem, no!" she whispered. "Where you go, I will go. If you live, I will live. If you die, I will die."

He kissed her then strongly, passionately. And as he kissed her, the command came. By directed thinking. To report at once to Dmu Dran.

With unfaltering stride Aydem entered Dmu Dran's personal quarters. As he went in, he passed Ekno, and there was a smirk of triumph on the hairy one's features. Aydem did not deign to glance at the other. He closed the door behind him, and was in the presence of Dmu Dran.

The flat, pop-eyed face of the Master was as blank as ever.

"Aydem, my servant," he piped, "a charge has been placed against you. A serious charge. You merit punishment. If I do not punish you, the charge may come to the attention of the Board of Slave Mating. It will wish to know why. It will send for you, and when you are placed beneath the instruments, it will know I have been guilty of a crime too. It will know that you are far above the allowed intelligence quotient for a slave, and that I have falsified your records since childhood, as I have falsified those of the servant Ayveh."

Aydem stared at him in speechless astonishment.

"You are startled, Servant Aydem," the Master said. "But it is true I, a Master, have violated one of the most rigid rules of the few that Masters must observe. I have deliberately preserved from destruction in the fuel chambers a man and a woman of as high a physical and mental level as the world has known since the days of the first Master."

"I have done this for reasons of my own. I think we shall soon know whether I have been right to—"

He did not finish, for behind him a section of the wall grew luminous, and a figure began to appear, seemingly within it.

Dmu Dran made a gesture. Aydem withdrew quickly to one side, beyond the seeing range of the communicator panel, and the Master turned. A voice, piping but stern, spoke from the wall:

"Dmu Dran! Nalu Tah, president of the Supreme Council, speaks."

"Dmu Dran listens."

"Dmu Dran! Of the ten subjects upon whom the Supreme Council has been testing the apparatus devised by you for the precipitating of evolutionary change, the last has just gone mad. The brain capacity of all increased by fifty per cent, and the skulls enlarged during their subjection to the rays of your apparatus. Each, however, after reaching an increase of approximately fifty per cent in brain size, was afflicted by the dread madness. All have been destroyed. Dmu Dran, you are ordered to report at once to Judicial Center to make explanation, and be judged."

"Dmu Dran hears."

The glow in the wall died. The great-headed figure of the president of the Supreme Council vanished. Dmu Dran let out a little sigh.

"Mad," he whispered. "All went mad. As some are going mad already, and as in a hundred thousand years all will, the entire race of Masters. So that they will be no more. In a hundred thousand years, the supreme creation of Nature, the mightiest thinking machine she has ever produced, will be destroyed. By the irresistible force of Nature herself, adding always to the gift she has given, until the weight of it crushes us out of existence. Yes, crushes us literally out of existence."

He turned, faced the wondering Aydem.

"Aydem, my servant," he said, "I have been right. I have feared a certain thing, and I have learned that my fears are well founded. I have concentrated the evolutionary development of a hundred thousand years in certain selected Masters, and all have gone mad. The reason I can easily guess. Their brains grew in size, until the very weight of the brain crushed many of its own cells. The very multiplicity of the cells piled layer upon top of layer destroyed the more delicate. The process can already be seen at work occasionally now. In time it will encompass all.

"The bulk of the dinosaur, which made it supreme, killed it. The teeth of the saber-tooth tiger destroyed it. And the brain of the Masters, which has made them supreme, is foredestined to destroy them just as utterly.

"Aydem, you are a man as men were before the sudden branching that produced the Masters. A branching that I now know was but another experiment on Nature's part, leading nowhere. Hark you—the ultimate evolution of man is yet to come. Yes, yet to come.

"Yet, if the Masters live out their existence, Nature may well be foiled, or at the least, set back a thousand million years in her plans. For in a hundred thousand years, when the Masters are gone, man may well be gone too.

"Yet, if the Masters were to vanish now, while you and Ayveh lived, from your loins might spring the line that will yet reach upward to the stars."

Dmu Dran's voice piped off into silence. But he was not finished speaking, for after a moment he shook himself and continued.

"What man will be like in the end I do not know. He will not be a great-headed thinking machine, I am sure. He will have a mind, yes, but soul too, and body, all balanced into a whole that will far surpass us, the Masters.

"What I am going to do is hard. Yet perhaps I am but a tool of Nature's too. Perhaps she designed me for this very purpose—to put evolution back upon its proper track.

"Aydem, you may never understand. That does not matter. These are my last orders. Take Ayveh. Go to the very end of the exhibit section. There, in a section where the rooms have been crushed by falling rock, you will find one stone perfectly round and seemingly too great for a thousand men to move. Upon one side is a red spot. Push at this spot. The rock will roll aside and you will see an entrance. Descend. A

passageway will lead you upward and in time you will come out upon Aiden, the surface of the Earth above—a region into which we Masters have not chosen to venture save but fleetingly for a thousand years.

"You will have the half of one period in which to do this. Then I will press a button here beside me. The details you would not understand. But when I do, every inch of these vast tunnels that we Masters have created throughout the Earth's interior will collapse. Every Master will die at the same instant. And every slave—for there are none living save yourselves whose blood may go into the lifestream of the Man to come. It would take centuries for them to evolve again as a group to your level. So you two, Aydem and Ayveh, will be, to all historical appearance, the first man and woman. The gap between you and your ancestors will be broken when I press this button.

"You will not understand my reasons, I say. But you will survive above, for you have long studied the great exhibit chambers and know what you must do to wrest a living from Nature. In time you will forget that such things as Masters ever existed. And your kind will mount upward toward the stars, on a true course which has been sidetracked for only a little while."

Dmu Dran fell silent, as if musing, and his pale round face seemed sad. Aydem, in truth, understood but little. Yet he understood Dmu Dran's instructions, and his heart leaped within his breast.

Dmu Dran looked up.

"Go now," he ordered.

Aydem forced his way through the tangle of weeds and roots that choked the entrance of the cave, in which the long tunnel he and Ayveh had traversed for an interminable time ended. He stood upright, and drew Ayveh after him.

They had emerged upon the surface of the Earth at night. The moon, a thing of wondrous beauty to them, rode the heavens low in the east, a great orange ball. A summer night's wind breathed through the great masses of tangled vegetation that surrounded them, and the scent of flowers was carried by it.

The man and the woman breathed deep, speechless with wonder and joy. Somewhere near a nightbird was trilling, and from farther away came the cry of an unknown animal. Both sounds alike were music to their ears.

"Free!" Aydem whispered exultingly. "Ayveh, we are free! We are slaves no more!"

Bathed by the moonlight, caressed by the night breeze, they stood close together, his arm about her, and feasted their eyes and ears on the world.

"The knife I stole," Aydem said, "I will keep. With it we will make what we need, kill what we need. Ayveh, Ayveh—"

His words broke off. Of a sudden the very earth beneath them had begun to tremble. It seemed to shudder. One long-drawn puff of air, like a hollow death-gasp, seemed forced from the cavern before which they stood, and the ground under them shook, Ayveh was thrown into Aydem's arms, and he held her close until the violent tremor had passed.

"Dmu Dran has pressed the button," he said, understanding. "The Masters are no more. Ayveh, my mate, the Masters are no more! We are free, and there is no one to come after us. We will know struggle and conflict and labor, but we are free!"

He held her close and kissed her. Then at last, hand in hand, they set out together into the world Dmu Dran had given them. Aydem—the first man. And Ayveh—the first woman.