

NOON

By Henry Kuttner

NOON

When he looked up from the pool, the garden was—different. In the water Weston had seen the reflection of blue sky and sunset clouds, and the shape of a plane going over. The deep buzzing of the engines had suddenly died. It had been sunset; now it was noon—and he was no longer in Versailles.

It had taken months. But the miracle was that it had happened at all. People who search for miracles seldom find them. Yet John Weston, perhaps because he was idle and footloose and wealthy enough to indulge his impulses, had come searching for a phantom, and had found it. Dunne had been right, and the theory of serial time could be right, and the authenticated tales of temporal apparitions in the Versailles garden were more than merely tales.

The first day he had come here he had sensed a shifting and a strangeness, but it had passed quickly. Still, it was enough to anchor him here, strolling through the old paths, not quite believing that he would ever again see that face he had glimpsed momentarily through a shimmer of spray. Time-traveling was nothing you could weigh and balance. It either happened or it didn't.

And now it happened.

Weston stood without moving, looking around. The trees had moved and changed, and not far away were low blue buildings with conical roofs. Underfoot was a thick, soft moss instead of grass. The pool was still at his feet.

After the initial shock of incredulous amazement had passed, he began to walk toward the cone-roofed buildings.

Then the second miracle happened. Three people came out of one of the structures and began to walk toward him. One of them was the girl whose face he had already seen. The others were young men, thin, wearing tunics of shining bronze-green, like the girl's, and a curious vitality seemed to shimmer from them as they walked.

As Weston looked at them, he felt certain that this was another world or a far-distant era in time. They were almost unbelievably slender, but not awkward or angular, nor were their thin, pointed faces sharp. Bronze-green eyes looked at him.

Weston opened his mouth. The impossibility of communication occurred to him. But they were waiting.

“Hello,” Weston stuttered almost at random.

The three smiled at him and repeated his greeting. It might have been merely a friendly echo. Weston, slightly stunned, tried again.

“Where am I?” he asked. “What place is this?”

“This is Jekir's,” the girl answered.

“Oh. W-what year is this?”

But this time they looked at him, still smiling, but waiting for something. It was very quiet; leaves rustled somewhere.

One of the men turned and walked softly away.

“He has work to do,” the girl said. “Have you finished yours for a while? My name is—”

It sounded something like *Serena*.

Weston had not expected this placid acceptance. He began to explain and question, but the girl interrupted him.

“I must get back to my work, too.” She turned, and Weston, hesitating, glanced helplessly at the other man.

There was no help there.

Weston went after Serena, feeling baffled. She had gone into one of the buildings. It was an amazing place, Weston found. There were corridors and little irregular rooms and floors like balconies, and all the partitions were translucent, like the walls. Lights came in green, deep blue, and ocean-purple.



The glass globe Serena carried was translucent and glowed with a strange greenish light

When Weston caught up with the girl, he saw that she was carrying a globe of glass. Not until they emerged in the daylight did he see that it was apparently full of smoke, a trickle of it escaping through an opening in the top and drifting back as Serena walked.

She put the sphere down on the moss and began her work, totally ignoring Weston. She made fires spring up—Weston was completely puzzled by the method—and simply sat, and looked at the flames. That seemed to be all there was to it.

Twice Weston spoke to her, but she did not answer. He finally began to explore the buildings. In the end, he was no wiser than

when he began, and he had not encountered either of the two men. Whatever he had expected, it wasn't this.

He thought: Why aren't they surprised? Had time-traveling become common or was there another answer?

The noon passed into afternoon and the beginnings of blue evening, while Weston moved like a ghost through that strange, incomprehensible place that was too alien for him to understand. Finally he saw Serena and the men sitting on the moss before one of the buildings. He went out to them, and saw that they were eating. He joined them.

It was the strangest meal Weston had ever had. The earth served him! A little pool opened in the lawn at his feet, exactly like an opening mouth. It was full of something like jelly. Weston, watching the others, scooped up some of the stuff in his palms and tried it. It was palatable enough.

Then, around the pool, a ring of small green plants pushed themselves up, budded without blossoming, and put out round fruits like little balloons which swelled as he watched. Serena plucked one and ate it. Weston closed his mind temporarily to questions and—had dinner!

When they finished, the pool closed, and the tiny plants fell to bright pink dust that sifted into the moss. The three aliens sat back, paying little attention to Weston, and talked.

“The fires were burning well today,” Serena said. “It was easy to handle the clay.”

“I had a little trouble,” one of the young men murmured.

“Will you finish soon?” Weston asked, and they looked at him with odd eagerness.

“I shall. I think I shall,” Serena answered. “How far along are you?”

“That isn’t my job,” Weston found himself saying. “I’m from a different time. This isn’t my world at all. I—I—”

He stopped, because they were looking at him with polite inattention. Then they went on with their talk as though he hadn’t spoken.

It grew darker. Time in that world was different. Weston had left Versailles at sunset and stepped into noon. Finally Serena stood up and led the way back into a grove of tall trees. Four branches were hanging low, and at the end of each branch was an enormous folded flower. The flowers opened slowly.

Serena stepped into the soft trough of the nearest and stretched out. The petals folded about her, and the branch rose. The two men also relaxed in similar fantastic hammocks. One flower remained.

Weston hesitated, alone in the gathering darkness. He had not had a single question answered satisfactorily since he came here. He had met only acceptance. Even this world accepted him without an inquiry. There were now *four* flowers—perhaps last night there had been only three.

Serena and the men were invisible in their blossom-hammocks above Weston’s head. He drew a long breath and turned away. He went to the pool that was that gateway back to his own time, but something stopped him from making any definite move toward return. This opportunity might never come again. He had what he

had wanted. He was in another time-world—but such a world! How could he find out?

In the end, he returned to the fourth flower and lay down. The petals folded around him. There was a sweet, cool scent in his nostrils, a warm rocking—and that was the last thing he remembered. The next day—

The next day the two men tried to kill him.

The flowers opened at dawn, and the four bathed in a pool of glowing water that felt like silk. And another tiny crater opened in the moss to feed them all. Afterwards, ignoring Weston's futile questions, Serena went away to her work. The two men watched Weston follow her, their eyes coldly interested.

By now Weston knew he must leave very soon. If he did not get his questions answered quickly, they would never be answered. So he kept interrupting Serena at her work, asking what it was she did, what this world was like, a thousand other queries that apparently meant nothing at all to her. Sometimes she spoke, but only once did she give Weston any real help. Once she said:

“You must ask The Knowledge about that.” And she gave Weston directions.

Perhaps it was merely to get rid of his annoying presence.

At any rate, he followed Serena's instructions, feeling like an ignorant child in a place of inconceivable maturity. Yet The Knowledge sounded very helpful. A library of talking books or pictures, or a radio-atomic brain. Weston began to feel rising excitement as he searched in the building Serena had indicated.

At first he couldn't find it. The room looked ordinary, insofar as any of those rooms of deep, cool light and color could ever seem ordinary. But after a while one of the men brushed past Weston in the doorway and crossed the floor to stand before the far wall.

In the wall an oval of shining light dawned. The man seemed to listen. Then he turned and went softly out by another door. The bright oval faded.

When Weston stepped in front of it, the panel came to life again. It was The Knowledge, all right. And it was the equivalent of a super-library. A machine—yes, a radio-atomic brain, a mechanical colloid that was the culmination of the thinking machines of Weston's own time. It could answer questions. Serena's race had come to need a radio-atomic brain, because they had lost a certain human factor, over the long, long ages.

They had lost intelligence.

They had initiative. So has a plant. So has a flower. And their's was the force that activates unreasoning things. The Knowledge explained that, in answer to Weston's silent questioning.

But it was only a machine—it didn't know all Weston wanted to learn. He found himself looking for some human understanding to go with the more than human wisdom it seemed to have—some friendliness!—behind that shining panel, and of course there was nothing like that at all. A radio-atomic brain, keyed to perform certain functions, but without initiative, to give the humans knowledge as they needed it.

Weston got his answers at last.

After a time he stepped outside to get some fresh air. He felt stifled. He could see Serena and the others working away at their unearthly fires, and overhead was the burning sunlight of mankind's long noon.

Yes, it was noon. It had been noontide for a millennium!

What Weston had expected to find in the future was problematical. But he had not expected this—what The Knowledge had told him. He stood there, sweating and curiously unwilling to move. Around him were tiny rustlings in the moss. He could hear the flames roar up, and twice he heard a very deep sighing, like a giant drawing the first breaths of life.

It was noon. That was the answer. A noon that might have lasted for a million years. Weston tried to comprehend it. But he was used to flux. He found it hard to realize that when you reach perfection, by the definition of that term you can't go up or down.

Serena's race had achieved perfection. It had stopped at mankind's midday. There would never be afternoon or twilight but, Weston thought coldly, in the end, there would be night!

It had happened before, he knew. Ants and bees were found in fossil form a million years old, exactly like ants and bees today. And the ordinary cockroach is a hundred million years old in its form. When it achieved perfection, absolute adaptation to its environment—it stopped. As the human race had stopped, too.

Noon....

Weston looked for Serena. He still couldn't quite believe that she was—what she was. He saw her working with the two men, and

amid the fires a giant figure stood motionless. Weston called to the girl.

Noon!

He knew now the kind of work they did, and why it absorbed them so utterly. He knew that they were creating—life. Creating it endlessly, hopelessly, in unstable forms that flickered out or were destroyed as they sprang flawed from the fires. He knew a little of the myriad experiments they had tried and found useless. And perhaps, in a way, he guessed why they worked, and why they failed.

It was clear to him too, by analogy, what had happened to the human race in the interval between his own time and this. He went looking for Serena presently. He wanted to gaze on her strange, vibrant, otherworldly brightness and try to convince himself that she was—what she was.

For already he was finding something almost hypnotic about the girl. Such brilliance, such dazzling perfection, such incredible sureness in all she did, without a wasted motion or a moment of indecision. Of course that was possible to her—as it is impossible in ordinary humans—because she was what she was. Still, he had to look at her.

He found her working with the two men and among the fires he saw a giant figure stand motionless, looming above them.

“Serena!” he called.

He thought: If I could tell her, make her believe what has happened, perhaps she’ll really notice me.

She came forward, wiping the flames from her hands like water. There was a look even brighter than usual on her glowing face.

“We will succeed this time,” she said, and Weston went cold. “Now that you’ve come, a new factor is made available for us. You! We need you. The Knowledge has just told us that if we use your mind-factor, we have a better chance to succeed.”

He looked into her eyes and read the emptiness there. Her hand was suddenly on his arm, tightening. And she was strong—terribly strong. The two men had left their fires and the giant figure, and were moving toward Weston.

He tore free and went running across the moss, running as hard as he could toward the time-door by the pool, under the bright, timeless noonday sky.

Then out of the moss a subtle rustling stirred again, and suddenly Weston felt his feet caught and held. He pitched forward and slid along the ground.

When he sat up, he was looking around at a ring of incredible tiny beings—not human or insect or animal. Brightly tinted little beings that shimmered around their edges with an unreal glimmer. As he looked, two of them seemed to dissolve and vanish upon the air. The others, low down in the moss, stood watching with hard, jewel-bright eyes.

Experiments. The failures ... He closed his mind to the thought. Serena and the two men stood above him, looking down with polite, waiting eagerness—waiting, he thought, to feed him into the flames and remould his flesh into—

Serena smiled and held out her hand.

If he could make her understand! Deep panic chilled him. He must play for time!

It could be done. They were not really intelligent. He knew that now.

He stood up. “Wait,” he said. “I’ll go with you, but let’s make quite sure first. There’ve been mistakes enough already. Come back with me to The Knowledge, and listen to what it says when I question it.”

They came quite willingly. The flock of tiny bright things rolled after them, unreal, shimmering. Weston thought of Eden.

The oval window opened in the wall. Weston asked a question, and in his mind and in the minds of the others an unexpected answer took shape.

“Yes,” said The Knowledge, “You have a factor of the mind that could mean success. A factor I have sensed in the Golden Light itself, which is the essence of perfection. But the woman here has more. It is recessive in her brain, but far stronger than the dominant factor in yours.”

Weston spoke to gain time.

“The Golden Light? What is that?”

“I am not capable of answering. That is unknown.”

Serena had not listened.

“Will we succeed if I use myself as material in the work?” she said tranquilly.

“Serena, you can’t do that,” Weston said.

She didn’t hear. She turned and went out, the men after her. One of the men looked back briefly at Weston, and the cool deadliness was gone from his eyes. For Weston didn’t matter any more. Not to them.

He could tell that the personal danger to him had passed. And now that he could have made his way to the time-door without hindrance, he did not. He had to see what was happening to Serena. So he followed the three.

This time he had a better look at the figure being moulded in the flames. It was a man, a giant, more than eight feet high, beautiful as a god and quivering with half-sentient life. But its eyes were blank.

The three humans were busy around a new fire they had kindled. Weston stood watching. They completed their preparations. Serena steadied herself on one of the men’s arms and prepared to step into the fire. Weston found himself lunging forward—in time.

He got her by the shoulders and pulled her back. The men glanced at him calmly, incuriously. The fires seethed up.

“Serena, you can’t!” Weston said. “I won’t let you!”

She didn’t answer. His words meant nothing. He could feel the continuous steady pressure of her body as she leaned toward the fire, ready to enter it the moment he let her go.

One of the men seized his wrist and tried to free her. Weston was glad for an excuse for explosion; he was on surer ground there. He swung around and struck once at the man, very hard, hitting him

on the corner of the jaw. The man was lightly built. He went down in a heap and lay there looking at Weston without surprise or anger, but with a clear intent in his eyes.

Weston swung Serena off her feet and started away at a heavy run, carrying her. When he reached the corner of the buildings he paused to look back. The men had returned to the other fire where the giant figure stood, and they were working on that, deftly and fast, wasting no motions. Twice they pointed after Weston.

He put Serena down, keeping hold of her wrist. She didn't resist, though once when his grip slipped she turned instantly and began walking back toward the fires. Weston caught her again and hurried her away toward the time-door that led to Versailles and the Twentieth Century.

He couldn't find it. And, quite soon, around one of the domed buildings the giant came walking, unsteadily, tentatively, his eyes fixed on Serena. He was tremendous. He was unsteady, because he had just been created, Weston knew, but he came on relentlessly.

The enormous hands gripped Serena gently, pulled her free and started to carry her back to the waiting men.

Weston jumped on the giant's back and got a judo hold. Serena fell free, but Weston found he couldn't hurt his opponent. The giant didn't try to fight; he merely strove to escape, and he was tremendously strong. It was even possible to feel, under that satiny, pallid skin, that the muscles weren't normal human tissue; they were tougher, like heart-muscle. The only reason Weston could cope with him at all was that the monster was so new. He hadn't learned to coordinate yet. He had only that single drive, Weston

thought—to get Serena. Nothing in the world could turn him from that.

And Serena was walking back toward the fires. It was a nightmare. Weston let go of the giant and ran after her, lifting her in his arms. She lay there lax. There was no use trying to find the time-door now; he simply ran. And the giant came slowly after them.

Weston knew that he had to increase his lead fast, so that he could circle back and hunt for the time-door before the giant learned to coordinate. It was burning noon. Time seemed to be playing queer tricks. He let Serena down after a while, but he kept tight hold of her wrist. She had a sort of homing instinct, though the fires were out of sight by now.

After a few hours Weston lost his bearings completely. The world of that time was a park. Nothing changed. The whole world, indeed, seemed to be a highly developed machine for the support of the human race....

When he was hungry, the moss fed Weston. When he was thirsty, pools opened. And in all that desperate flight, with the giant looming sometimes on the horizon and sometimes out of sight beyond it, there was nothing except the undulating mossy hills, and one other thing.

The Golden Light. Weston hadn't understood when he saw it. That happened later, when he was exhausted. Serena was untiring. He tried to talk to her. She answered when he touched the right chord and she had a response to give, but it didn't mean anything. But Weston couldn't put away the thought that if he could only make her understand, force her to comprehend the fantastic motivations behind her life, she might awaken.

The giant was gaining. He wasn't half a mile behind them now. The sun was dropping. It would be dark soon.

There's no twilight here, Weston thought. Only burning daylight, and then the darkness. As it will be for man!

He talked to her.

“Serena. Listen to me. The Knowledge told me—listen! I know you're not—not intelligent; you have a different instinct. But if I could make you realize that—”

They plodded on. He kept glancing at her placid, lovely face.

“Call it tropism, Serena. Tropism that makes plants turn toward light. Or taxis, that guides insects. Insects have a perfect life, in a way. Instinct tells them exactly what to do and they can no more resist doing it than they can help being alive. A stimulus registers, on them, and they act as their taxis commands. Listen!

“That's what's happened to the human race—your race! You haven't any powers of reason. You can respond only to certain stimuli, like automata. Like The Knowledge itself. If I ask you questions you're geared to answer, you'll answer. Ask you anything else, and you won't even hear. Do you hear me now?”

It was growing dark. There was no moon. But far away was a golden glimmer of light on the horizon. Weston turned toward it. He didn't know, in the darkness, how close the giant was. But he could still make speed, for there were no obstacles and the moss was resilient and level. The golden shining brightened as they neared it. But Weston was exhausted. His mind went around in circles. After a time he began to talk to Serena again.

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