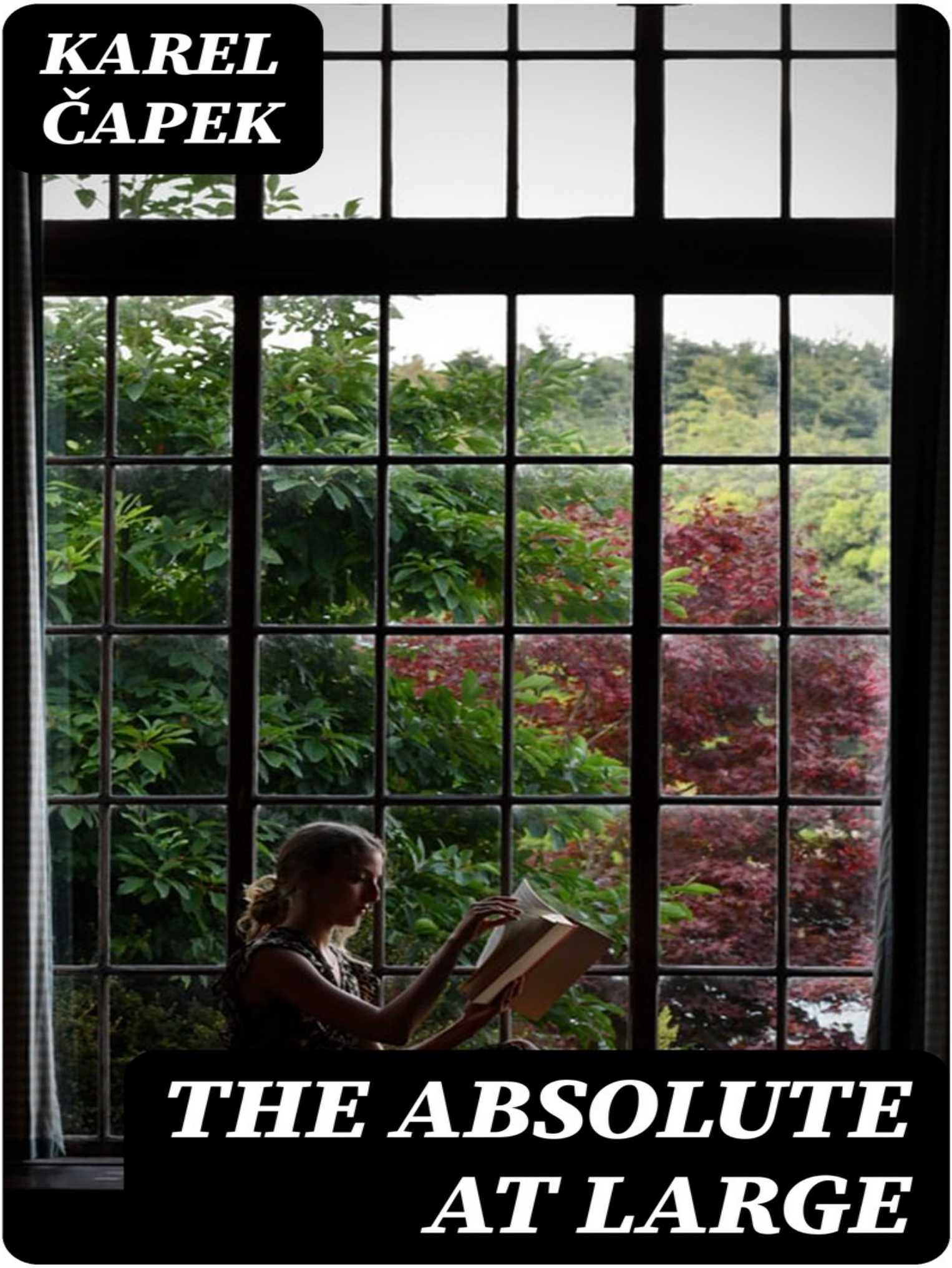
KAREL ČAPEK



THE ABSOLUTE AT LARGE

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The Absolute at Large

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CHAPTER I

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THE ADVERTISEMENT

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On New Year's Day, 1943, G. H. Bondy, head of the great Metallo-Electrical Company, was sitting as usual reading his paper. He skipped the news from the theatre of war rather disrespectfully, avoided the Cabinet crisis, then crowded on sail (for the *People's Journal*, which had grown long ago to five times its ancient size, now afforded enough canvas for an ocean voyage) for the Finance and Commerce section. Here he cruised about for quite a while, then furled his sails, and abandoned himself to his thoughts.

"The Coal Crisis!" he said to himself. "Mines getting worked out; the Ostrava basin suspending work for years. Heavens above, it's a sheer disaster! We'll have to import Upper Silesian coal. Just work out what that will add to the cost of our manufactures, and then talk about competition. We're in a pretty fix. And if Germany raises her tariff, we may as well shut up shop. And the Industrial Banks going down, too! What a wretched state of affairs! What a hopeless, stupid, stifling state of affairs! Oh, damn the crisis!"

Here G. H. Bondy, Chairman of the Board of Directors, came to a pause. Something was fidgeting him and would not let him rest. He traced it back to the last page of his discarded newspaper. It was the syllable T I O N, only part of a word, for the fold of the paper came just in front of the T. It

was this very incompleteness which had so curiously impressed itself upon him.

“Well, hang it, it’s probably IRON PRODUCTION,” Bondy pondered vaguely, “or PREVENTION, or, maybe, RESTITUTION.... And the Azote shares have gone down, too. The stagnation’s simply shocking. The position’s so bad that it’s ridiculous.... But that’s nonsense: who would advertise the RESTITUTION of anything? More likely RESIGNATION. It’s sure to be RESIGNATION.”

With a touch of annoyance, G. H. Bondy spread out the newspaper to dispose of this irritating word. It had now vanished amid the chequering of the small advertisements. He hunted for it from one column to another, but it had concealed itself with provoking ingenuity. Mr. Bondy then worked from the bottom up, and finally started again from the right-hand side of the page. The contumacious “tion” was not to be found.

Mr. Bondy did not give in. He refolded the paper along its former creases, and behold, the detestable TION leaped forth on the very edge. Keeping his finger firmly on the spot, he swiftly spread the paper out once more, and found——Mr. Bondy swore under his breath. It was nothing but a very modest, very commonplace small advertisement:

INVENTION.

Highly remunerative, suitable for any factory, for immediate sale, personal reasons. Apply R. Marek, Engineer, Břevnov, 1651.

“So that’s all it was!” thought G. H. Bondy. “Some sort of patent braces; just a cheap swindle or some crazy fellow’s pet plaything. And here I’ve wasted five minutes on it! I’m

getting scatter-brained myself. What a wretched state of affairs! And not a hint of improvement anywhere!”

He settled himself in a rocking-chair to savour in more comfort the full bitterness of this wretched state of affairs. True, the M.E.C. had ten factories and 34,000 employees. The M.E.C. was the leading producer of iron. The M.E.C. had no competitor as regards boilers. The M.E.C. grates were world-famous. But after thirty years’ hard work, gracious Heavens, surely one would have got bigger results elsewhere....

G. H. Bondy sat up with a jerk. “R. Marek, Engineer; R. Marek, Engineer. Half a minute: mightn’t that be that red-haired Marek—let’s see, what was his name? Rudolph, Rudy Marek, my old chum Rudy of the Technical School? Sure enough, here it is in the advertisement: ‘R. Marek, Engineer.’ Rudy, you rascal, is it possible? Well, you’ve not got on very far in the world, my poor fellow! Selling ‘a highly remunerative invention.’ Ha! ha! ‘... for personal reasons.’ We know all about those ‘personal reasons.’ No money, isn’t that what it is? You want to catch some jay of a manufacturer on a nicely limed ‘patent,’ do you? Ah, well, you always had rather a notion of turning the world upside down. Ah, my lad, where are all our fine notions now! And those extravagant, romantic days when we were young!”

Bondy lay back in his chair once more.

“It’s quite likely it really is Marek,” he reflected. “Still, Marek had a head for science. He was a bit of a talker, but there was a touch of genius about the lad. He had ideas. In other respects he was a fearfully unpractical fellow. An absolute fool, in fact. It’s very surprising that he isn’t a

Professor," mused Mr. Bondy. "I haven't set eyes on him for twenty years. God knows what he has been up to; perhaps he's come right down in the world. Yes, he must be down and out, living away over in Břevnov, poor chap ... and getting a living out of inventions! What an awful finish!"

He tried to imagine the straits of the fallen inventor. He managed to picture a horribly shaggy and dishevelled head, surrounded by dismal paper walls like those in a film. There is no furniture, only a mattress in the corner, and a pitiful model made of spools, nails, and match-ends on the table. A murky window looks out on a little yard. Upon this scene of unspeakable indigence enters a visitor in rich furs. "I have come to have a look at your invention." The half-blind inventor fails to recognize his old schoolfellow. He humbly bows his tousled head, looks about for a seat to offer to his guest, and then, oh Heaven! with his poor, stiff, shaking fingers he tries to get his sorry invention going—it's some crazy perpetual motion device—and mumbles confusedly that it should work, and certainly *would* work, if only he had ... if only he could buy ... The fur-coated visitor looks all round the garret, and suddenly he takes a leather wallet from his pocket and lays on the table one, two (Mr. Bondy takes fright and cries "That's enough!") three thousand-crown notes. ("One would have been quite enough ... to go on with, I mean," protests something in Mr. Bondy's brain.)

"There is ... something to carry on the work with, Mr. Marek. No, no, you're not in any way indebted to me. Who am I? That doesn't matter. Just take it that I am a friend."

Bondy found this scene very pleasant and touching.

“I’ll send my secretary to Marek,” he resolved; “to-morrow without fail. And what shall I do to-day? It’s a holiday; I’m not going to the works. My time’s my own ... a wretched state things are in! Nothing to do all day long! Suppose I went round to-day myself.”

G. H. Bondy hesitated. It would be a bit of an adventure to go and see for oneself how that queer fellow was struggling along in Břevnov.

“After all, we were such chums! And old times have their claim on one. Yes, I’ll go!” decided Mr. Bondy. And he went.

He had rather a boring time while his car was gliding all over Břevnov in search of a mean hovel bearing the number 1651. They had to inquire at the police-station.

“Marek, Marek,” said the inspector, searching his memory. “That must be Marek the engineer, of Marek and Co., the electric lamp factory, 1651, Mixa Street.”

The electric lamp factory! Bondy felt disappointed, even annoyed. Rudy Marek wasn’t living up in a garret, then! He was a manufacturer and wanted to sell some invention or other “for personal reasons.” If that didn’t smell of bankruptcy, his name wasn’t Bondy.

“Do you happen to know how Mr. Marek is doing?” he asked the police inspector, with a casual air, as he took his seat in the car.

“Oh, splendidly!” the inspector answered. “He’s got a very fine business.” Local pride made him add, “The firm’s very well known”; and he amplified this with: “A very wealthy man, and a learned one, too. He does nothing but make experiments.”

“Mixa Street!” cried Bondy to his chauffeur.

“Third on the right!” the inspector called after the car.

Bondy was soon ringing at the residential part of quite a pretty little factory.

“It’s all very nice and clean here,” he remarked to himself. “Flower-beds in the yard, creeper on the walls. Humph! There always was a touch of the philanthropist and reformer about that confounded Marek.” And at that moment Marek himself came out on the steps to meet him; Rudy Marek, awfully thin and serious-looking, up in the clouds, so to speak. It gave Bondy a queer pang to find him neither so young as he used to be nor so unkempt as that inventor; so utterly different from what Bondy had imagined that he was scarcely recognizable. But before he could fully realize his disillusionment, Marek stretched out his hand and said quietly, “Well, so you’ve come at last, Bondy! I’ve been expecting you!”

CHAPTER II

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THE KARBURATOR

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“I’ve been expecting you!” Marek repeated, when he had seated his guest in a comfortable leather chair. Nothing on earth would have induced Bondy to own up to his vision of the fallen inventor. “Just fancy!” he said, with a rather forced gaiety. “What a coincidence! It struck me only this very morning that we hadn’t seen one another for twenty years. Twenty years, Rudy, think of it!”

“Hm,” said Marek. “And so you want to buy my invention.”

“Buy it?” said G. H. Bondy hesitatingly. “I really don’t know ... I haven’t even given it a thought. I wanted to see you and——”

“Oh, come, you needn’t pretend,” Marek interrupted him. “I knew that you were coming. You’d be sure to, for a thing like this. This kind of invention is just in your line. There’s a lot to be done with it.” He made an eloquent motion with his hand, coughed, and began again more deliberately. “The invention I am going to show you means a bigger revolution in technical methods than Watt’s invention of the steam-engine. To give you its nature briefly, it provides, putting it theoretically, for the *complete utilization of atomic energy*.”

Bondy concealed a yawn. “But tell me, what have you been doing all these twenty years?”

Marek glanced at him with some surprise.

“Modern science teaches that all matter—that is to say, its atoms—is composed of a vast number of units of energy. An atom is in reality a collection of electrons, i.e. of the tiniest particles of electricity.”

“That’s tremendously interesting,” Bondy broke in. “I was always weak in physics, you know. But you’re not looking well, Marek. By the way, how did you happen to come by this playth ... this, er ... factory?”

“I? Oh, quite by accident. I invented a new kind of filament for electric bulbs. ... But that’s nothing; I only came upon it incidentally. You see, for twenty years I’ve been working on the combustion of matter. Tell me yourself, Bondy, what is the greatest problem of modern industry?”

“Doing business,” said Bondy. “And are you married yet?”

“I’m a widower,” answered Marek, leaping up excitedly. “No, business has nothing to do with it, I tell you. It’s combustion. The complete utilization of the heat-energy contained in matter! Just consider that we use hardly one hundred-thousandth of the heat that there is in coal, and that could be extracted from it! Do you realize that?”

“Yes, coal is terribly dear!” said Mr. Bondy sapiently.

Marek sat down and cried disgustedly, “Look here, if you haven’t come here about my Karburator, Bondy, you can go.”

“Go ahead, then,” Bondy returned, anxious to conciliate him.

Marek rested his head in his hands, and after a struggle came out with, “For twenty years I’ve been working on it, and now—now, I’ll sell it to the first man who comes along!

My magnificent dream! The greatest invention of all the ages! Seriously, Bondy, I tell you, it's something really amazing."

"No doubt, in the present wretched state of affairs," assented Bondy.

"No, without any qualification at all, amazing. Do you realize that it means the utilization of atomic energy without any residue whatever?"

"Aha," said Bondy. "So we're going to do our heating with atoms. Well, why not? ... You've got a nice place here, Rudy. Small and pleasant. How many hands do you employ?"

Marek took no notice. "You know," he said thoughtfully, "it's all the same thing, whatever you call it—the utilization of atomic energy, or the complete combustion of matter, or the disintegration of matter. You can call it what you please."

"I'm in favour of 'combustion'!" said Mr. Bondy. "It sounds more familiar."

"But 'disintegration' is more exact—to break up the atoms into electrons, and harness the electrons and make them work. Do you understand that?"

"Perfectly," Bondy assured him. "The point is to harness them!"

"Well, imagine, say, that there are two horses at the ends of a rope, pulling with all their might in opposite directions. Do you know what you have then?"

"Some kind of sport, I suppose," suggested Mr. Bondy.

"No, a state of repose. The horses pull, but they stay where they are. And if you were to cut the rope——"

“—The horses would fall over,” cried G. H. Bondy, with a flash of inspiration.

“No, but they would start running; they would become energy released. Now, pay attention. Matter is a team in that very position. Cut the bonds that hold its electrons together, and they will ...”

“Run loose!”

“Yes, but we can catch and harness them, don’t you see? Or put it to yourself this way: we burn a piece of coal, say, to produce heat. We do get a little heat from it, but we also get ashes, coal-gas, and soot. So we don’t lose the matter altogether, do we?”

“No.—Won’t you have a cigar?”

“No, I won’t.—But the matter which is left still contains a vast quantity of unused atomic energy. If we used up the whole of the atomic energy, we should use up the whole of the atoms. In short, *the matter would vanish altogether*.”

“Aha! Now I understand.”

“It’s just as though we were to grind corn badly—as if we ground up the thin outer husk and threw the rest away, just as we throw away ashes. When the grinding is perfect, there’s nothing or next to nothing left of the grain, is there? In the same way, when there is perfect combustion, there’s nothing or next to nothing left of the matter we burn. It’s ground up completely. It is used up. It returns to its original nothingness. You know, it takes a tremendous amount of energy to make matter exist at all. Take away its existence, compel it not to be, and you thereby release an enormous supply of power. That’s how it is, Bondy.”

“Aha. That’s not bad.”

“Pflüger, for instance, calculates that one kilogramme of coal contains twenty-three billions of calories. I think that Pflüger exaggerates.”

“Decidedly.”

“I have arrived at seven billions myself, theoretically. But even that signifies that one kilogramme of coal, if it underwent complete combustion, would run a good-sized factory for several hundred hours!”

“The devil it does!” cried Mr. Bondy, springing from his chair.

“I can’t give you the exact number of hours. I’ve been burning half a kilogramme of coal for six weeks at a pressure of thirty kilogrammetres and, man alive,” said the engineer in a whisper, turning pale, “it’s still going on ... and on ... and on.”

Bondy was embarrassed; he stroked his smooth round chin. “Listen, Marek,” he began, hesitatingly. “You’re surely ... er ... a bit ... er ... overworked.”

Marek’s hand thrust the suggestion aside. “Not a bit of it. If you’d only get up physics a bit, I could give you an explanation of my Karburator[1] in which the combustion takes place. It involves a whole chapter of advanced physics, you know. But you’ll see it downstairs in the cellar. I shovelled half a kilogramme of coal into the machine, then I shut it up and had it officially sealed in the presence of witnesses, so that no one could put any more coal in. Go and have a look at it for yourself—go on—go now! You won’t understand it, anyway, but—go down to the cellar! Go on down, man, I tell you!”

[1]

This name which Marek gave to his atomic boiler is, of course, quite incorrect, and is one of the melancholy results of the ignorance of Latin among technicians. A more exact term would have been Komburator, Atomic Kettle, Karbowatt, Disintegrator, Motor M, Bondymover, Hylergon, Molecular Disintegration Dynamo, E.W., and other designations which were later proposed. It was, of course, the bad one that was generally adopted.

“Won’t you come with me?” asked Bondy in astonishment.

“No, you go alone. And ... I say, Bondy ... don’t stay down there long.”

“Why not?” asked Bondy, growing a trifle suspicious.

“Oh, nothing much. Only I’ve a notion that perhaps it’s not quite healthy down there. Turn on the light, the switch is just by the door. That noise down in the cellar doesn’t come from my machine. It works noiselessly, steadily, and without any smell.... The roaring is only a ... a ventilator. Well, now, you go on. I’ll wait here. Then you can tell me ...”

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Bondy went down the cellar steps, quite glad to be away from that madman for a while (quite mad, no doubt whatever about it) and rather worried as to the quickest means of getting out of the place altogether. Why, just look,

the cellar had a huge thick reinforced door just like an armour-plated safe in a bank. And now let’s have a light. The switch was just by the door. And there in the middle of the arched concrete cellar, clean as a monastery cell, lay a gigantic copper cylinder resting on cement supports. It was closed on all sides except at the top, where there was a grating bedecked with seals. Inside the machine all was darkness and silence. With a smooth and regular motion the cylinder thrust forth a piston which slowly rotated a heavy fly-wheel. That was all. Only the ventilator in the cellar window kept up a ceaseless rattle.

Perhaps it was the draught from the ventilator or something—but Mr. Bondy felt a peculiar breeze upon his brow, and an eerie sensation as though his hair were standing on end; and then it seemed as if he were being borne through boundless space; and then as though he were floating in the air without any sensation of his own weight. G. H. Bondy fell on his knees, lost in a bewildering, shining ecstasy. He felt as if he must shout and sing, he seemed to hear about him the rustle of unceasing and innumerable wings. And suddenly someone seized him violently by the hand and dragged him from the cellar. It was Marek, wearing over his head a mask or a helmet like a diver’s, and he hauled Bondy up the stairs.

Up in the room he pulled off his metal head-covering and wiped away the sweat that soaked his brow.

“Only just in time,” he gasped, showing tremendous agitation.

CHAPTER III

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PANTHEISM

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G. H. Bondy felt rather as though he were dreaming. Marek settled him in an easy chair with quite maternal solicitude, and made haste to bring some brandy.

“Here, drink this up quickly,” he jerked out hoarsely, offering him the glass with a trembling hand. “*You* came over queer down there too, didn’t you?”

“On the contrary,” Bondy answered unsteadily. “It was ... it was beautiful, old chap! I felt as if I were flying, or something like that.”

“Yes, yes,” said Marek quickly. “That’s exactly what I mean. As though you were flying along, or rather soaring upward, wasn’t that it?”

“It was a feeling of perfect bliss,” said Mr. Bondy. “I think it’s what you’d call being transported. As if there was something down there ... something ...”

“Something—holy?” asked Marek hesitatingly.

“Perhaps. Yes, man alive, you’re right. I never go to church, Rudy, never in my life, but down in that cellar I felt as if I were in church. Tell me, man, what did I do down there?”

“You went on your knees,” Marek muttered with a bitter smile, and began striding up and down the room.

Bondy stroked his bald head in bewilderment.

“That’s extraordinary. But come, on my knees? Well, then, tell me what … what is there in the cellar that acts on one so queerly?”

“The Karburator,” growled Marek, gnawing his lips. His cheeks seemed even more sunken than before, and were as pale as death.

“But, confound it, man,” cried Bondy in amazement, “how can it be?”

The engineer only shrugged his shoulders, and with bent head went on pacing up and down the room.

G. H. Bondy’s eyes followed him with childish astonishment. “The man’s crazy,” he said to himself. “All the same, what the devil is it that comes over one in that cellar? That tormenting bliss, that tremendous security, that terror, that overwhelming feeling of devotion, or whatever you like to call it.” Mr. Bondy arose and poured himself out another dash of brandy.

“I say, Marek,” he said, “I’ve got it now.”

“Got what?” exclaimed Marek, halting.

“That business in the cellar. That queer psychical condition. It’s some form of poisoning, isn’t it? …”

Marek gave an angry laugh. “Oh, yes, of course, poisoning!”

“I thought so at once,” declared Bondy, his mind at rest in an instant. “That apparatus of yours produces something, ah … er … something like ozone, doesn’t it? Or more likely poisonous gas. And when anyone inhales it, it … er … poisons him or excites him somehow, isn’t that it? Why, of course, man, it’s nothing but poisonous gases; they’re probably given off somehow by the combustion of the coal