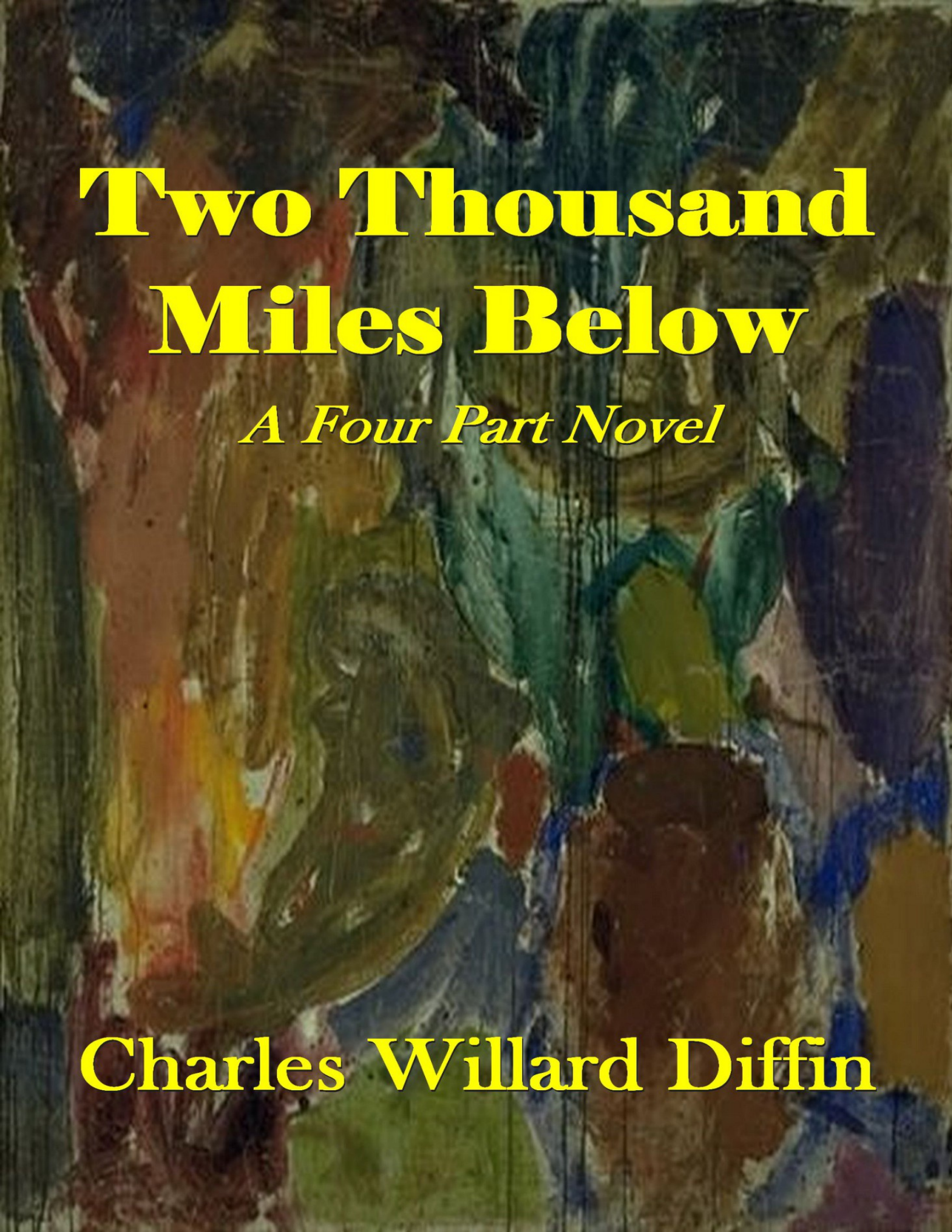
Two Thousand Miles Below
A Four Part Novel
Charles Willard Diffin

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By Charles Willard Diffin

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XXVI Power!

PROLOGUE

IN the gray darkness the curved fangs of a saber-toothed tiger gleamed white and ghostly. The man-figure that stood half crouched in the mouth of the cave involuntarily shivered.

Rawson learns to his cost that the life-spark of a fabled race glows in the black heart of a dead, Western volcano.
"Gwanga!" he said. "He goes, too!"

But the man did not move more than to shift a club to his right hand. Heavy, that club, and knotted and with a head of stone tied and wrapped with leather thongs; but Gor of the tribe of Zoran swung it easily with one of his long arms. He paid only casual attention as the great cat passed on into the night.

One leathery hand was raised to shield his slitted eyes; the wind from the north struck toward the mouth of the cave, and it brought with it cold driving rain and whirling flurries of frozen pellets that bit and stung.

Snow! Gor had traveled far, but never had he seen a storm like this with white cold in the air. Again a shiver that was part fear rippled through his muscles and gripped with invisible fingers at his knotted arms.

"The Beast of the North is angry!" he told himself.

Through the dark and storm, animals drifted past before the blasts of cold. They were fleeing; they were full of fear—fear of something that the dull mind of Gor could not picture. But in that mind was the same wordless panic.

Gor, the man-animal of that pre-glacial day, stared wondering, stupidly, into the storm with eyes like those of the wild pig. His arms were long, almost to his knees; his hair, coarse and matted, hung in greasy locks about his savage face. Behind his low, retreating forehead was place for little of thought or reason. Yet Gor was a man, and he met the threat of disaster by something better than blind, terrified, animal flight.

A scant hundred in the tribe—men and women and little pot-bellied brown children—Gor gathered them together in the cave far back from the mouth.

"For many moons," he told them by words and signs, "the fear has been upon us. There have been signs for us to see and for all the Four-feet—for Hathor, the great, and for little Wahti in his hole in the sand-hill. Hathor has swung his long snout above his curved tusks and has cried his fear, and the Eaters of the Dead have circled above him and cried *their* cry.

"And now the Sun-god does not warm us. He has gone to hide behind the clouds. He is afraid—afraid of the cold monster that blows white stinging things in his breath.

"The Sun-god is gone—now, when he should be making hot summer! The Four-feet are going. Even Gwanga, the long-toothed, puts his tail between his legs and runs from the cold."

THE naked bodies shivered in the chill that struck in from the storm-wrapped world; they drew closer their coverings of fur and hides. The light of their flickering fires played strange tricks with their savage faces to make them still uglier and to show the dull terror that gripped them.

"Run—we must run—run away—the breath of the beast is on us—he follows close—run...." Through the mutterings and growls a sick child whimpered once, then was still. Gor was speaking again:

"Run! Run away!" he mocked them. "And where shall the tribe of Zoran go? With Gwanga, to make food for his cat belly or to be hammered to death with the stones of the great tribes of the south?"

There was none to reply—only a despairing moan from ugly lips. Gor waited, then answered his own question.

"No!" he shouted, and beat upon his hairy chest that was round as the trunk of a tree. "Gor will save you—Gor, the wanderer! You named me well: my feet have traveled far. Beyond the red-topped mountains of the north I have gone; I have seen the tribes of the south, and I brought you a head for proof. I have followed the sun, and I have gone where it rises."

In the half light, coarse strands of hair waved as hideous heads were nodded in confirmation of the boast, though many still drooped despairingly.

"If Gor leads, where will he go?" a voice demanded.

Another growled: "Gor's feet have gone far: where have they gone where the Beast cannot follow our scent?"

"Down!" said Gor with unconscious dramatic effect, and he pointed at the rocky floor of the cave. "I have gone where even the Beast of the North cannot go. The caves back of this you have seen, but only Gor has seen the hole—the hole where a strong man can climb down; a hole too small for the great beast to get through. Gor has gone down to find more caves below and more caves below them.

"Far down is a place where it is always warm. There is water in lakes and streams. Gor has caught fish in that water, and they were good. There are growing things like the round earth-plants that come in the night, and they, too, were good.

"Will you follow Gor?" he demanded. "And when the Beast is gone and the Sun-god comes back we will return—"

THE blast that found its way inside the cave furnished its own answer; the echoing, "We follow! We follow!" spoken through chattering teeth was not needed. The women of the tribe shivered more from the cold than from fear as they gathered together their belongings, their furs and hides and crude stone implements; and the shambling man-shape, called Gor, led them to the hole down which a strong man might climb, led them down and still down....

But, as to the rest—Gor's promise of safe return to the light of day and that outer world where the Sun-god shone—how was Gor to know that a mighty glacier would lock the whole land in ice for endless years, and, retreating, leave their upper caves filled and buried under a valley heaped with granite rocks?

Even had the way been open to the land above, Gor himself could never have known when that ice-sheet left. For when that day came and once more the

Sun-god drew steamy spirals from the drenched and thawing ground, Gor, deep down in the earth, had been dead for countless years. Only the remote descendants of that earlier tribe now lived in their subterranean home, though even with them there were some who spoke at times of those legends of another world which their ancestors had left.

And through the long centuries, while evolution worked its slow changes, they knew nothing of the vanishing ice, of the sun and the gushing waters, the grass and forests that came to cover the earth. Nor did their descendants, exploring interminable caves, learning to tame the internal fires, always evolving, always growing, have any remote conception of a people who sailed strange seas to find new lands and live and multiply and build up a country of sky-reaching cities and peaceful farmlands, of sunlit valleys and hills.

But always there were adventurous souls who made their way deeper and deeper into the earth; and among them in every generation was one named Gor who was taught the tribal legends and who led the adventurers on. But legends have a trick of changing, and instead of searching upward, it was through the deeper strata that they made their slow way in their search for a mystic god and the land of their fathers' fathers....

CHAPTER I

A Man Named Smith

HEAT! Heat of a white-hot sun only two hours old. Heat of blazing sands where shimmering, gassy waves made the sparse sagebrush seem about to burst into flames. Heat of a wind that might have come out of the fire-box of a Mogul on an upgrade pull.

A highway twisted among black masses of outcropping lava rock or tightened into a straightaway for miles across the desert that swept up to the mountain's base. The asphalt surface of the pavement was almost liquid; it clung stickily to the tires of a big car, letting go with a continuous, ripping sound.

Behind the wheel of the weatherbeaten, sunburned car, Dean Rawson squinted his eyes against the glare. His lean, tanned face was almost as brown as his hair. The sun had done its work there; it had set crinkly lines about the man's eyes of darker brown. But the deeper lines in that young face had been etched by responsibility; they made the man seem older than his twenty-three years, until the steady eyes, flashing into quick amusement, gave them the lie.

And now Rawson's lips twisted into a little grin at his own discomfort—but he knew the desert driver's trick.

"A hundred plus in the shade," he reasoned silently. "That's hot any way you take it. But taking it in the face at forty-five an hour is too much like looking into a Bessemer converter!"

He closed the windows of his old coupe to within an inch of the top, then opened the windshield a scant half inch. The blast that had been drawing the moisture from his body became a gently circulating current of hot air.

He had gone only another ten miles after these preparations for fast driving, when he eased the big weatherbeaten car to a stop.

ON his right, reaching up to the cool heights under a cloudless blue sky, the gray peaks of the Sierras gave promise of relief from the furnace breath of the desert floor. There were even valleys of snow glistening whitely where the mountains held them high. A watcher, had there been one to observe in the empty land, might have understood another traveler's pausing to admire the serene majesty of those heights—but he would have wondered could he have seen Rawson's eyes turned in longing away from the mountains while he stared across the forbidding sands.

There were other mountains, lavender and gray, in the distance. And nearer by, a matter of twenty or thirty elusive miles through the dancing waves of hot air, were other barren slopes. Across the rolling sand-hills wheel marks, faint and wind-blown, led straight from the highway toward the parched peaks.

"Tonah Basin!" Rawson was thinking. "It's there inside these hills. It's hotter than this is by twenty degrees right this minute—but I wish I could see it. I'd like to have one more look before I face that hard-boiled bunch in the city!"

He looked at his watch and shook his head. "Not a chance," he admitted. "I'm due up in Erickson's office in five hours. I wonder if I've got a chance with them...."

FIVE hours of driving, and Rawson walked into the office of Erickson, Incorporated, with a steady step. Another hour, and his tanned face had gone a trifle pale; his lips were set grimly in a straight line that would not relax under the verdict he felt certain he was about to hear.

For an hour he had faced the steely-eyed man across the long table in the Directors Room—faced him and replied to questions from this man and the half-dozen others seated there. Skeptical questions, tricky questions; and now the man was speaking:

"Rawson, six months ago you laid your Tonah Basin plans before us—plans to get power from the center of the Earth, to utilize that energy, and to control

the power situation in this whole Southwest. It looked like a wild gamble then, but we investigated. It still looks like a gamble."

"Yes," said Rawson, "it is a gamble. Did I ever call it anything else?"

"The Ehrmann oscillator," the man continued imperturbably, "invented in 1940, two years ago, solves the wireless transmission problem, but the success of your plan depends upon your own invention—upon your straight-line drills that you say will not wander off at a tangent when they get down a few miles. And more than that, it depends upon you.

"Even that does not damn the scheme; but, Rawson, there's only one factor we gamble on. No wild plans, no matter how many hundreds of millions they promise: no machines, no matter what they are designed to do, get a dollar of our backing. It's men we back with our money!"

Rawson's face was set to show no emotion, but within his mind were insistent, clamoring thoughts:

"Why can't he say it and get it over with? I've lost—what a hard-boiled bunch they are!—but he doesn't need to drag out the agony." But—but what was the man saying?

"Men, Rawson!" the emotionless voice continued. "And we've checked up on you from the time you took your nourishment out of a bottle; it's you we're backing. That's why we have organized the little company of Thermal Explorations, Limited. That's why we've put a million of hard coin into it. That's why we've put you in charge of operations."

He was extending a hand that Dean Rawson had to reach for blindly.

"I'd drill through to hell," Dean said and fought to keep his voice steady, "with backing like that!"

He allowed his emotion to express itself in a shaky laugh. "Perhaps I will at that," he added: "I'll certainly be heading in the right direction."

UNDER another day's sun the hot asphalt was again taking the print of the tires of Rawson's old car. But this time, when he came to the almost

obliterated marks that led through the sand toward distant mountains, he stopped, partially deflated the tires to give them a grip on the sand, and swung off.

"A fool, kid trick," he admitted to himself, "but I want to see the place. I'll see plenty of it before I'm through, but right now I've got to have a look; then I'll buckle down to work.

"Thermal Explorations, Limited!" The name rang triumphantly in his mind. "A million things to do—men, crews for the drills, derricks.... We'll have to truck in over this road; I'll lay a plank road over the sand. And water—we'll have to haul that, too, until we can sink a well. We'll find water under there somewhere. I've got to see the place...."

The black sides of the mountains were nearer: every outcropping rock was plainly volcanic, and great sweeping slopes were beds of ash and pumice; the wheel marks, where they showed at all, wound off and into a canyon hidden in the tremendous hills that thrust themselves abruptly from the desert floor.

The mountains themselves towered hugely at closer range, but the road that Rawson followed climbed through them without traversing the highest slopes. It was scarcely more than a trail, barely wide enough for the car at times, but boulder-filled gullies showed where the hands of men had worked to build it.

HE came at last into the open where a shoulder of rock bent the road outward above a sea of sand far below. And now the mountains showed their circular arrangement—a great ring, twenty miles across. At one side were three conical peaks, unmistakable craters, whose scarred sides were smothered under ash and sand that had rained down from their shattered tops in ages past. Yet, so hot they were, so clear-cut the irregularly rimmed cups at their tops, that they seemed to have pushed themselves up through the earth in that very instant. At their bases were signs of human habitation—broken walls, scattered stone buildings whose empty windows gaped blackly. This was all that remained of New Rhyolite.

Rawson looked at the "ghost town" which had never failed to interest him,

but he gave no thought now to the hardy prospectors who had built it or to the vein of gold that had failed them. His searching eyes came back to the fiery pit, the Tonah Basin, a vast cauldron of sand and ash—great sweeps of yellow and gray and darker brown into which the sun was pouring its rays with burning-glass fierceness.

But to Rawson, there was more than the eye could see. He was picturing a great powerhouse, steel derricks, capped pipes that led off to whirring turbines, generators, strings of cables stretching out on steel supports into the distance, a wireless transmitter—and all of this the result of his own vision, of the stream he would bring from deep in the earth!

Then, abruptly, the pictures faded. Far below him on the yellow, sun-blasted floor, a fleck of shadow had moved. It appeared suddenly from the sand, moved erratically, staggeringly, for a hundred feet, then vanished as if something had blotted it out—and Dean Rawson knew that it was the shadow of a man.

THE road widened beyond the turn. He had intended to swing around; he had wanted only to take a clear picture of the place with him. But now the big car's gears wailed as he took the downgrade in second, and the brakes, jammed on at the sharp curves, added their voice to the chorus of haste.

"Confounded desert rats!" Rawson was saying under his breath. "They'll chance anything—but imagine crossing country like that! And he hasn't a burro—he's got only the water he can carry in a canteen!"

But even the canteen was empty, he found, when he stopped the car in a whirl of loose sand beside a prone figure whose khaki clothes were almost indistinguishable against the desert soil.

Before Rawson could get his own lanky six feet of wiry length from the car, the man had struggled to his feet. Again the little blot of shadow began its wavering, uncertain, forward movement.

He was a little shorter than Rawson, a little heavier of build, and younger by a year or two, although his flushed face and a two days' stubble of black

beard might have been misleading. Rawson caught the staggering man and half carried him to the shadow of the car, the only shelter in that whole vast cauldron of the sun.

From a mouth where a swollen tongue protruded thickly came an agonized sound that was a cry for, "Water—water!" Rawson gave it to him as rapidly as he dared, until he allowed the man to drink from the desert bag at the last. And his keen eyes were taking in all the significant details as he worked.

The khaki clothes earned a nod of silent approval. The compact roll that had been slung from the younger man's shoulders, even the broad shoulders themselves, and the square jaw, unshaved and grimy, got Rawson's inaudible, "O. K.!" But the face was more burned than tanned.

HE introduced himself when the stranger was able to stand. "I'm Rawson, Dean Rawson, mining engineer when I'm working at it," he explained. "I'm bound north. I'll take you out of this. You can travel with me as far as you please."

The dark-haired youngster was plainly youthful now, as he stood erect. His voice was recovering what must have been its usual hearty ring.

"I'm not trying to say 'thank you,'" he said, as he took Rawson's hand. "I was sure sunk—going down for the last time—taps—all that sort of thing! You pulled me out—the good old helping hand. Can't thank a fellow for that—just return the favor or pass it on to someone else. And, by the way—you won't believe it—but my name is Smith."

Rawson smiled good-naturedly. "No," he agreed, "I don't believe it. But it's a good, handy name. All right, Smithy, jump in! Here, let me give you a lift; you're still woozy."

Rawson found his passenger uncommunicative. Not but what Smithy talked freely of everything but himself, but it was of himself that Rawson wanted to know.

"Drop me at the first town," said Smithy. "You're going north: I'm south-bound—looking for a job down in Los. I won't take any more short cuts; I

was two days on this last one. I'll stick to the road."

They were through the mountains that ringed in the fiery pit of Tonah Basin. Smooth sand lay ahead; only the shallow marks that his own tires had ploughed needed to be followed. Dean Rawson turned and looked with fair appraisal at the man he had saved.

"Drifter?" he asked himself silently. "Road bum? He doesn't look the part; there's something about him...."

Aloud he inquired: "What's your line? What do you know?"

And the young man answered frankly: "Not a thing!"

DEAN sensed failure, inefficiency. He resented it in this youngster who had fought so gamely with death. His voice was harsh with a curious sense of his own disappointment as he asked:

"Found the going too hard for you up north, did you? Well, it won't be any easier—" But Smithy had interrupted with a weak movement of his hand.

"Not too hard," he said laconically; "too damn soft! I don't know what I'm looking for—pretty dumb: got a lot to learn!—but it'll be a job that needs to take a good licking!"

"'Too damn soft!'" Dean was thinking. "And he tackled the desert alone!" There was a lot here he did not understand. But the look in the eyes of Smithy that met his own searching gaze and returned it squarely if a bit whimsically —that was something he *could* understand. Dean Rawson was a judge of men. The sudden impulse that moved him was founded upon certainty.

"You've found that job," he said. "The desert almost got you a little while ago —now it's due to take that licking you were talking about. I'm going to teach it to lie down and roll over and jump through hoops. Fact is, my job is to get it into harness and put it to work. I'll be working right out there in the Basin where I found you. It will be only about two degrees cooler than hell. If that sounds good to you, Smithy, stick around."

He warmed oddly to the look in the younger man's deep-set, dark eyes, as

Smithy replied:

"Try to put me out, Rawson—just try to put me out!"

CHAPTER II

Gold!

"Ten miles down, drillers!
Hell-bound, and proud of it!
Ten miles down, drillers!
Hark to what I say:
You're pokin' through the crust of hell
And braggin' too damn loud of it,
For, when you get to hell, you'll find
The devil there to pay."

FROM the black, night-wrapped valley, far below, the singer's voice went silent with the slamming of a door in one of the bunkhouses. The song was popular; some rimester in the Tonah Basin camp had written the parody for the tormenting of the drill crews. And, high on the mountainside, Dean Rawson hummed a few bars of the lilting air after the singer's voice had ceased.

"Ten miles down!" he said at last to his assistant, sprawled out on the stone beside him. "That's about right, Smithy. And maybe the rest of the doggerel isn't so far off either. 'Pokin' through the crust of hell'—well, there was hell popping around here once, and I am gambling that the furnaces aren't all out."

They were on the outthrust shoulder of rock where the mountain road hung high above the valley floor. Below, where, months before, Rawson had rescued a man from desert death, was blackness punctured by points of light —bunkhouse windows, the drilling-floor lights at the foot of a big derrick, a single warning light at the derrick's top. But the buildings and the towering steelwork of the derrick that handled the rotary drills were dim and ghostly in the light of the stars.

"We've gone through some places I'd call plenty warm," said Smithy, "but

you—you craves it *hot*! Think we're about due?" he asked.

Rawson answered indirectly.

"One great big old he-crater!" he said. His outstretched arm swept the whole circle of starlit mountains that enclosed the Basin. "That's what this was once. Twenty miles across—and when it blew its head off it must have sprayed this whole Southwest.

"Now, those craters"—he pointed contemptuously toward the three conical peaks off to the right—"those were just blow-holes on the side of this big one."

ON the ragged ring of mountains, the throat of some volcanic monster of an earlier age, the three cones towered hugely. Their tops were plainly cupped; their ashy sloping sides swept down to the desert floor. At their base, the gray walls of stone in the ghost town of Little Rhyolite gleamed palely, like skeleton remains.

"I've seen steam, live steam," Rawson went on, "coming out of a fissure in the rocks. I know there's heat and plenty of it down below. We're about due to hit it. The boys are pulling the drill now; they cut through into a whale of a cave down below there—"

He broke off abruptly to fix his attention on the dark valley below, where lights were moving. One white slash of brilliance cut across the dark ground; another, then a cluster of flood lights blazed out. They picked the skeleton framework of the giant derrick in black relief against the white glare of the sand. From far below; through the quiet air, came sounds of excited shouting; the voices of men were raised in sudden clamor.

"They've pulled the drill," said Rawson. "But why all the excitement?"

He had already turned toward their car when the crackle of six quick shots came from below. His abrupt command was not needed; Smithy was in the car while still the echoes were rolling off among the hills. Their own lights flashed on to show the mountain grade waiting for their quick descent.

THE sandy floor of this part of the Tonah Basin was littered with the orderly disorder of a big construction job—mountains of casing, tubular drill rod, a foot in diameter; segmental bearings to clamp around the rod every hundred feet and give it smooth play. Dean drove his car swiftly along the surfaced road that was known as "Main Street" to the entire camp.

There were men running toward the derrick—men of the day shift who had been aroused from their sleep. Others were clustered about the wide concrete floor where the derrick stood. Clad only in trousers and shoes, their bodies, tanned by the desert sun, were almost black in the glare of the big floods. They milled wildly about the derrick; and, through all their clamor and shouting, one word was repeated again and again:

"Gold! Gold! Gold!"

The big drill head was suspended above the floor. Dean Rawson, with Smithy close at hand, pushed through the crowd. He was prepared to see traces of gold in the sludge that was bailed out through the hollow shaft—quartz, perhaps, whose richness had set the men wild before they realized how impossible it would be to develop such a mine. But Rawson stopped almost aghast at the glaring splendor of the golden drill hanging naked in the blinding light.

RILEY, foreman of the night shift, was standing beside it, a pistol in his hand. "L'ave it be," he was commanding. "Not a hand do ye lay on it till the boss gets here." At sight of Rawson he stepped forward.

"I shot in the air," he explained. "I knew ye were up in the hills for a breath of coolness. I wanted to get ye here quick."

"Right," said Rawson tersely. "But, man, what have you done with the drill? It's smeared over with gold!"

"Fair clogged wid it, sir," Riley's voice betrayed his own excitement. "You remimber we couldn't pull it at first—the drill was jammed-like after it bruk

through at the ten-mile livil. Then it come free—and luk at it! Luk at the damn thing! Sent down for honest work, it was, and it comes back all dressed up in jewelry like a squaw Indian whin there's oil struck on the reservation! Or is it gold ye were after all the time?" he demanded.

"Gold! Gold!" a hundred voices were shouting. Dean hardly heard the voice of the foreman, made suddenly garrulous with excitement. He stared at the big drill head, heaped high with the precious metal. It was jammed into the diamond-studded face of the drill; it filled every crack and crevice, a smooth, solid mass on top of the head and against the stem. A workman had brought a singlejack and chisel; he was prying at a ribbon of the yellow stuff. Riley went for him, gun in hand.

"L'ave it be!" he shouted.

"But, confound it all, Dean," Smithy's voice was saying in a tone of disgust, "I thought we were working on a power plant. Not that a gold mine is so bad; but we can't work it—we can't go down after it at ten miles."

"Gold mine!" Rawson echoed. "I'll say it's a gold mine—but not because of the gold. Do you notice anything peculiar about that, Smithy?"

His assistant replied with a quick exclamation:

"You're right, Dean! I knew there was something haywire with that. Solid chunk—been cast around that stem—melted on. And that means—"

"Heat," said Rawson. "It means we've found what we're after. Give the gold to the men; tell them we'll divide it evenly among them. There's more down there, but there's something better: there's energy, power!"

He snapped out quick orders. "Get the temperature. Drop a recording pyrometer. Let me know at once. There'll be plenty doing now!"

DRILL rods and cables, all were made of the newest aluminum alloy. The long tube that held the pyrometer was formed of the same metal. Smithy sent it down to get a recording of the temperatures of that subterranean cave into which their tools had plunged.

He adjusted the recording mechanism himself and stood beside the twenty-inch casing that held back the loose sand from the big bore. Then he watched ten sections of cable, each a mile in length, each heavier than the last, as they went hissing into the earth.

From the cable control shed the voice of Riley was calling the depth.

"Fifty-two thousand." Then by hundreds until he cried: "Fifty-two-seven. We're into the big cave! Now another hundred feet."

The cable was moving slowly. In the middle of Riley's call of "Fifty-two-eight," a jangling bell told that the bottom of the pyrometer carrier had touched.

"Up with it," Smithy ordered. "Make it snappy. We'll see if we've got another cargo of gold."

There was an undeniable thrill in this reaching to a tremendous distance underground, this groping about in a deep-hidden cave, where molten gold was to be found. What had they tapped?—he asked himself. He saw visions of some vast pool of hot, liquid gold. Perhaps Dean would have to change his plans. They could rig up some kind of a bailer; they could bring out thousands of dollars at a time.

He was watching for the first sight of the metal carrier, far more interested in what might be clinging to it than in the record of the pyrometer it held. He saw it emerge—then he stared in disbelief at the stubby mass at the cable's end, where all that remained of the long tube he had sent down was a dangling two feet of discolored metal, warped and distorted. The lower part, a full twenty feet in length, had been fused cleanly off.

Dean Rawson was there to watch the next attempt. Again Riley's roaring bass rolled out the count, but this time the call stopped at fifty-two-seven. The jangling bell told that the carrier had touched.

"Divil a bit do I understand this," Riley was calling. "We're right at the point where we dropped through into the clear. Right at the roof of the big cave—fifty-two-seven, it says—and no lower do we go. The bottom of the hole is plugged!"

RAWSON made no reply. He was scowling while he stared speculatively at the mouth of the twenty-inch bore—a vertical tunnel that led from the drilling floor down, down to some inner vault. "Molten gold," he was thinking. "It melted a cylinder of the new Krieger alloy—melted it when its melting point is way higher than that of any rock that we've hit. And now the bore is closed...."

He was trying vainly to project his mental vision through those miles of hard rock to see what manner of mystery this was into which he had probed. He shook his head slowly in baffled speculation, then spoke sharply.

"Drill it out!" he ordered. "We're into a hot spot sure enough, though I can't just figure out the how of it. But we'll tame it, Smithy. Send down the drill. Clean it out. Then we'll poke around down there and get the answer to all this."

Five days were needed to send down the big drill with a new drill-head replacing the other too fouled with gold for any use. The tubular sections, a hundred feet in length, were hooked together and lowered one by one. Each joint meant the coupling of the air-pipe as well. Air, mixed with water from the outer jacket, must come foaming up through the central core to bring the powdered rock to the surface.

Five days, then one hour of boring, and another five days to pull out the drill before Rawson could hope for his answer. But he found it in the severed shaft of the great drill where the head had been melted completely off. The big stem that would have resisted all but electric furnace heat, and been cut through like a tallow candle in the blast of an oxy-acetylene flame.