

*Many a writer owes his initial impetus to the inspiration given him by the work of some older author whose writings have stirred an irresistible desire for emulation. Reading over *The Metal Man*, which was the first story to be sold by its author, we can immediately recognize the source of inspiration as the immortal A. Merritt. Unquestionably Jack Williamson must have been moved to authorship by the impact of Merritt's remarkable novel, *The Metal Monster*. Yet this short tale is not just a weak imitation, but original enough and striking enough to have called forth such acclaim for the youthful writer as to launch him on what has become a highly successful career—rising to the top in fantasy reader estimation. A couple of decades after *The Metal Man*, Williamson's first hard-cover book novel has appeared, *The Legion of Space* (Fantasy Press, Reading, Pa.), and soon will be followed with a collection of his best short stories—of which the leader and title-story will be *The Metal Man*.*

The Metal Man

by Jack Williamson

THE METAL MAN stands in a dark, dusty corner of the Tyburn College Museum. Just who is responsible for the figure being moved there, or why it was done, I do not know. To the casual eye it looks to be merely an ordinary life-size statue. The visitor who gives it a closer view marvels at the minute perfection of the detail of hair and skin; at the silent tragedy in the set, determined expression and poise; and at the remarkable greenish cast of the metal of which it is composed, but, most of all, at the peculiar mark upon the chest. It is a six-sided blot, of a deep crimson hue, with the surface oddly granular and strange wavering lines radiating from it—lines of a lighter shade of red.

Of course it is generally known that the Metal Man was once Professor Thomas Kelvin of the Geology Department. There are current many garbled

and inaccurate accounts of the weird disaster that befell him. I believe I am the only one to whom he entrusted his story. It is to put these fantastic tales at rest that I have decided to publish the narrative that Kelvin sent me.

For some years he had been spending his summer vacations along the Pacific coast of Mexico, prospecting for radium. It was three months since he had returned from his last expedition. Evidently he had been successful beyond his wildest dreams. He did not come to Tyburn, but we heard stories of his selling millions of dollars worth of salts of radium, and giving as much more to institutions employing radium treatment. And it was said that he was sick of a strange disorder that defied the world's best specialists, and that he was pouring out his millions in the establishment of scholarships and endowments as if he expected to die soon.

One cold, stormy day, when the sea was running high on the unprotected coast which the cottage overlooks, I saw a sail out to the north. It rapidly drew nearer until I could tell that it was a small sailing schooner with auxiliary power. She was running with the wind, but a half mile offshore she came up into it and the sails were lowered. Soon a boat had put off in the direction of the shore. The sea was not so rough as to make the landing hazardous, but the proceeding was rather unusual, and, as I had nothing better to do, I went out in the yard before my modest house, which stands perhaps two hundred yards above the beach, in order to have a better view.

When the boat touched, four men sprang out and rushed it up higher on the sand. As a fifth tall man arose in the stern, the four picked up a great chest and started up in my direction. The fifth person followed leisurely. Silently, and without invitation, the men brought the chest up the beach, and into my yard, and set it down in front of the door.

The fifth man, whom I now knew to be a hard-faced Yankee skipper, walked up to me and said gruffly,

"I am Captain McAndrews."

"I'm glad to meet you, Captain," I said, wondering. "There must be some mistake. I was not expecting—"

"Not at all," he said abruptly. "The man in that chest was transferred to my ship from the liner *Plutonia* three days ago. He has paid me for my services, and I believe his instructions have been carried out. Good day, sir."

He turned on his heel and started away.

"A man in the chest!" I exclaimed.

He walked on unheeding, and the seamen followed. I stood and watched

them as they walked down to the boat, and rowed back to the schooner. I gazed at its sails until they were lost against the dull blue of the clouds. Frankly, I feared to open the chest.

At last I nerved myself to do it. It was unlocked. I threw back the lid. With a shock of uncontrollable horror that left me half sick for hours, I saw in it, stark naked, with the strange crimson mark standing lividly out from the pale green of the breast, the Metal Man, just as you may see him in the Museum.

Of course, I knew at once that it was Kelvin. For a long time I bent, trembling and staring at him. Then I saw an old canteen, purple-stained, lying by the head of the figure, and under it, a sheaf of manuscript. I got the latter out, walked with shaken steps to the easy chair in the house, and read the story that follows:

"Dear Russell,

"You are my best—my only—intimate friend. I have arranged to have my body and this story brought to you. I just drank the last of the wonderful purple liquid that has kept me alive since I came back, and I have scant time to finish this necessarily brief account of my adventure. But my affairs are in order and I die in peace. I had myself transferred to the schooner today, in order to reach you as soon as could be and to avoid possible complications. I trust Captain McAndrews. When I left France, I hoped to see you before the end. But Fate ruled otherwise.

"You know that the goal of my expedition was the headwaters of El Rio de la Sangre, 'The River of Blood.' It is a small stream whose strangely red waters flow into the Pacific. On my trip last year I had discovered that its waters were powerfully radioactive. Water has the power of absorbing radium emanations and emitting them in turn, and I hoped to find radium-bearing minerals in the bed of the upper river. Twenty-five miles above the mouth the river emerges from the Cordilleras. There are a few miles of rapids and back of them the river plunges down a magnificent waterfall. No exploring party had ever been back of the falls. I had hired an Indian guide and made a mule-back journey to their foot. At once I saw the futility of attempting to climb the precipitous escarpment. But the water there was even more powerfully radioactive than at the mouth. There was nothing to do but return.

"This summer I bought a small monoplane. Though it was comparatively slow in speed and able to spend only six hours aloft, its light weight and

the small area needed for landing, made it the only machine suitable for use in so rough a country. The steamer left me again on the dock at the little town of Vaca Morena, with my stack of crates and gasoline tins. After a visit to the Alcalde I secured the use of an abandoned shed for a hangar. I set about assembling the plane and in a fortnight I had completed the task. It was a beautiful little machine, with a wing spread of only twenty-five feet.

"Then, one morning, I started the engine and made a trial flight. It flew smoothly and in the afternoon I refilled the tanks and set off for the Rio de la Sangre. The stream looked like a red snake crawling out to the sea—there was something serpentine in its aspect. Flying high, I followed it, above the falls and into a region of towering mountain peaks. The river disappeared beneath a mountain. For a moment I thought of landing, and then it occurred to me that it flowed subterraneously for only a few miles, and would reappear farther inland.

"I soared over the cliffs and came over the crater.

"A great pool of green fire it was, fully ten miles across to the black ramparts at the farther side. The surface of the green was so smooth that at first I thought it was a lake, and then I knew that it must be a pool of heavy gas. In the glory of the evening sun the snow-capped summits about were brilliant argent crowns, dyed with crimson, tinged with purple and gold, tinted with strange and incredibly beautiful hues. Amid this wild scenery, nature had placed her greatest treasure. I knew that in the crater I would find the radium I sought.

"I circled about the place, rapt in wonder. As the sun sank lower, a light silver mist gathered on the peaks, half veiling their wonders, and flowed toward the crater. It seemed drawn with a strange attraction. And then the center of the green lake rose up in a shining peak. It flowed up into a great hill of emerald fire. Something was rising in the green—carrying it up! Then the vapor flowed back, revealing a strange object, still veiled faintly by the green and silver clouds. It was a gigantic sphere of deep red, marked with four huge oval spots of dull black. Its surface was smooth, metallic, and thickly studded with great spikes that seemed of yellow fire. It was a machine, inconceivably great in size. It spun slowly as it rose, on a vertical axis, moving with a deliberate, purposeful motion.

"It came up to my own level, paused and seemed to spin faster. And the silver mist was drawn to the yellow points, condensing, curdling, until the

whole globe was a ball of lambent argent. For a moment it hung, unbelievably glorious in the light of the setting sun, and then it sank—ever faster—until it dropped like a plummet into the sea of green.

"And with its fall a sinister darkness descended upon the desolate wilderness of the peaks, and I was seized by a fear that had been deadened by amazement, and realized that I had scant time to reach Vaca Morena before complete darkness fell. Immediately I put the plane about in the direction of the town. According to my recollections, I had, at the time, no very definite idea of what it was I had seen, or whether the weird exhibition had been caused by human or natural agencies. I remember thinking that in such enormous quantities as undoubtedly the crater contained it, radium might possess qualities unnoticed in small amounts, or, again, that there might be present radioactive minerals at present unknown. It occurred to me also that perhaps some other scientists had already discovered the deposits and that what I had witnessed had been the trial of an airship in which radium was utilized as a propellent. I was considerably shaken, but not much alarmed. What happened later would have seemed incredible to me then.

"And then I noticed that a pale bluish luminosity was gathering about the cowl of the cockpit, and in a moment I saw that the whole machine, and even my own person, was covered with it. It was somewhat like St. Elmo's Fire, except that it covered all surfaces indiscriminately, instead of being restricted to sharp points. All at once I connected the phenomenon with the thing I had seen. I felt no physical discomfort, and the motor continued to run, but as the blue radiance continued to increase, I observed that my body felt heavier, and that the machine was being drawn downward! My mind was flooded with wonder and terror. I fought to retain sufficient self-possession to fly the ship. My arms were soon so heavy that I could hold them upon the controls only with difficulty, and I felt a slight dizziness, due, no doubt, to the blood's being drawn from my head. When I recovered, I was already almost upon the green. Somehow, my gravitation had been increased and I was being drawn into the pit! It was possible to keep the plane under control only by diving and keeping at a high speed.

"I plunged into the green pool. The gas was not suffocating, as I had anticipated. In fact, I noticed no change in the atmosphere, save that my vision was limited to a few yards around. The wings of the plane were still distinctly discernible. Suddenly a smooth, sandy plain was murkily revealed below, and I was able to level the ship off enough for a safe landing. As I

came to a stop I saw that the sand was slightly luminous, as the green mist seemed to be, and red. For a time I was confined to the ship by my own weight, but I noticed that the blue was slowly dissipating, and with it, its effect.

"As soon as I was able, I clambered over the side of the cockpit, carrying my canteen and automatic, which were themselves immensely heavy. I was unable to stand erect, but I crawled off over the coarse, shining, red sand, stopping at frequent intervals to lie flat and rest. I was in deathly fear of the force that had brought me down. I was sure it had been directed by intelligence. The floor was so smooth and level that I supposed it to be the bottom of an ancient lake.

"Sometimes I looked fearfully back, and when I was a hundred yards away I saw a score of lights floating through the green toward the airplane. In the luminous murk each bright point was surrounded by a disc of paler blue. I made no movement, but lay and watched them. They floated to the plane and wheeled about it with a slow, heavy motion. Closer and lower they came until they reached the ground about it. The mist was so thick as to obscure the details of the scene.

"When I went to resume my flight, I found my excess of gravity almost entirely gone, though I went on hands and knees for another hundred yards to escape possible observation. When I got to my feet, the plane was lost to view. I walked on for perhaps a quarter of a mile and suddenly realized that my sense of direction was altogether gone. I was completely lost in a strange world, inhabited by beings whose nature and disposition I could not even guess! And then I realized that it was the height of folly to walk about when any step might precipitate me into a danger of which I could know nothing. I had a peculiarly unpleasant feeling of helpless fear.

"The luminous red sand and the shining green of the air lay about in all directions, unbroken by a single solid object. There was no life, no sound, no motion. The air hung heavy and stagnant. The flat sand was like the surface of a dead and desolate sea. I felt the panic of utter isolation from humanity. The mist seemed to come closer; the strange evil in it seemed to grow more alert. . . .

"Suddenly a darting light passed meteor-like through the green above and in my alarm I ran a few blundering steps. My foot struck a light object that rang like metal. The sharpness of the concussion filled me with fear, but in an instant the light was gone. I bent down to see what I had kicked.

"It was a metal bird—an eagle formed of metal—with the wings outspread, the talons gripping, the fierce beak set open. The color was white, tinged with green. It weighed no more than the living bird. At first I thought it was a cast model, and then I saw that each feather was complete and flexible. Somehow, a real eagle had been turned to metal! It seemed incredible, yet here was the concrete proof. I wondered if the radium deposits, which I had already used to explain so much, might account for this too. I knew that science held transmutation of elements to be possible—had even accomplished it in a limited way, and that radium itself was the product of the disintegration of ionium; and ionium that of uranium.

"I was struck with fright for my own safety. Might I be changed to metal? I looked to see if there were other metal things about. And I found them in abundance. Half-buried in the glowing sands were metal birds of every kind—birds that had flown over the surrounding cliffs. And, at the climax of my search, I found a pterosaur—a flying reptile that had invaded the pit in ages past—changed to ageless metal. Its wing spread was fully fifteen feet—it would be a treasure in any museum.

"I made a fearful examination of myself, and to my unutterable horror, I perceived that the tips of my finger nails, and the fine hairs upon my hands, *were already changed to light green metal!* The shock unnerved me completely. You cannot conceive my horror. I screamed aloud in agony of soul, careless of the terrible foes that the sound might attract. I ran off wildly. I was blind, unreasoning. I felt no fatigue as I ran, only stark terror.

"Bright, swift-moving lights passed above in the green, but I heeded them not. Suddenly I came upon the great sphere that I had seen above. It rested motionless in a cradle of black metal. The yellow fire was gone from the spikes, but the red surface shone with a metallic luster. Lights floated about it. They made little bright spots in the green, like lanterns swinging in a fog. I turned and ran again, desperately. I took no note of direction, nor of the passage of time.

"Then I came upon a bank of violet vegetation. Waist-deep it was, grass-like, with thick narrow leaves, dotted with clusters of small pink blooms, and little purple berries. And a score of yards beyond I saw a sluggish red stream—El Rio de la Sangre. Here was cover at last. I threw myself down in the violet growth and lay sobbing with fatigue and terror. For a long time I was unable to stir or think. When I looked again at my finger nails, the tips of metal had doubled in width.

"I tried to control my agitation, and to think. Possibly the lights, whatever they were, would sleep by day. If I could find the plane, or scale the walls, I might escape the fearful action of the radioactive minerals before it was too late. I realized that I was hungry. I plucked off a few of the purple berries and tasted them. They had a salty, metallic taste, and I thought they would be valueless for food. But in pulling them I had inadvertently squeezed the juice from one upon my fingers, and when I wiped it off I saw, to my amazement and my inexpressible joy, that the rim of metal was gone from the finger nails it had touched. I had discovered a means of safety! I suppose that the plants were able to exist there only because they had been so developed that they produced compounds counteracting the metal-forming emanations. Probably their evolution began when the action was far weaker than now, and only those able to withstand the more intense radiations had survived. I lost no time in eating a cluster of the berries, and then I poured the water from my canteen and filled it with their juice. I have analyzed the fluid and it corresponds in some ways with the standard formulas for the neutralization of radium burns and doubtless it saved me from the terrible burns caused by the action of ordinary radium.

"I lay there until dawn, dozing a little at times, only to start into wakefulness without cause. It seemed that some daylight filtered through the green, for at dawn it grew paler, and even the red sand appeared less luminous. After eating a few more of the berries, I ascertained the direction in which the stagnant red water was moving, and set off down-stream, toward the west. In order to get an idea of where I was going, I counted my paces. I had walked about two and a half miles, along by the violet plants, when I came to an abrupt cliff. It towered up until it was lost in the green gloom. It seemed to be mostly of black pitchblende. The barrier seemed absolutely unscalable. The red river plunged out of sight by the cliff in a racing whirlpool.

"I walked off north around the rim. I had no very definite plan, except to try to find a way out over the cliffs. If I failed in that, it would be time to hunt the plane. I had a mortal fear of going near it, or of encountering the strange lights I had seen floating about it. As I went I saw none of them. I suppose they slept when it was day.

"I went on until it must have been noon, though my watch had stopped. Occasionally I passed metal trees that had fallen from above, and once, the

metallic body of a bear that had slipped off a path above, some time in past ages. And there were metal birds without number. They must have been accumulating through geological ages. All along up to this, the cliff had risen perpendicularly to the limit of my vision, but now I saw a wide ledge, with a sloping wall beyond it, dimly visible above. But the sheer wall rose a full hundred feet to the shelf, and I cursed at my inability to surmount it. For a time I stood there, devising impractical means for climbing it, driven almost to tears by my impotence. I was ravenously hungry, and thirsty as well.

"At last I went on.

"In an hour I came upon it. A slender cylinder of black metal, that towered a hundred feet into the greenish mist, and carried at the top, a great mushroom-shaped orange flame. It was a strange thing. The fire was as big as a balloon, bright and steady. It looked much like a great jet of combustible gas, burning as it streamed from the cylinder. I stood petrified in amazement, wondering vaguely at the what and why of the thing.

"And then I saw more of them back of it, dimly—scores of them—a whole forest of flames.

"I crouched back against the cliff, while I considered. Here I supposed, was the city of the lights. They were sleeping now, but still I had not the courage to enter. According to my calculations I had gone about fifteen miles. Then I must be, I thought, almost diametrically opposite the place where the crimson river flowed under the wall, with half of the rim unexplored. If I wished to continue my journey, I must go around the city, if I may call it that.

"So I left the wall. Soon it was lost to view. I tried to keep in view of the orange flames, but abruptly they were gone in the mist. I walked more to the left, but I came upon nothing but the wastes of red sand, with the green murk above. On and on I wandered. Then the sand and the air grew slowly brighter and I knew that night had fallen. The lights were soon passing to and fro. I had seen lights the night before, but they traveled high and fast. These, on the other hand, sailed low, and I felt that they were searching.

"I knew that they were hunting for me. I lay down in a little hollow in the sand. Vague, mist-veiled points of light came near and passed. And then one stopped directly overhead. It descended and the circle of radiance grew about it. I knew that it was useless to run, and I could not have done so, for my terror. Down and down it came.

"And then I saw its form. The thing was of a glittering, blazing crystal. A great-six-sided, upright prism of red, a dozen feet in length, it was, with

a six-pointed structure like a snowflake about the center, deep blue, with pointed blue flanges running from the points of the star to angles of the prism! Soft scarlet fire flowed from the points. And on each face of the prism, above and below the star, was a purple cone that must have been an eye. Strange pulsating lights flickered in the crystal. It was alive with light.

"It fell straight toward me!

"It was a terribly, utterly alien form of life. It was not human, not animal—not even life as we know it at all. And yet it had intelligence. But it was strange and foreign and devoid of feeling. It is curious to say that even then, as I lay beneath it, the thought came to me, that the thing and its fellows must have crystallized when the waters of the ancient sea dried out of the crater. Crystallizing salts take intricate forms.

"I drew my automatic and fired three times, but the bullets ricocheted harmlessly off the polished facets.

"It dropped until the gleaming lower point of the prism was not a yard above me. Then the scarlet fire reached out caressingly—flowed over my body. My weight grew less. I was lifted, held against the point. You may see its mark upon my chest. The thing floated into the air, carrying me. Soon others were drifting about. I was overcome with nausea. The scene grew black and I knew no more.

"I awoke floating free in a brilliant orange light. I touched no solid object. I writhed, kicked about—at nothingness. I could not move or turn over, because I could get a hold on nothing. My memory of the last two days seemed a nightmare. My clothing was still upon me. My canteen still hung, or rather floated, by my shoulder. And my automatic was in my pocket. I had the sensation that a great space of time had passed. There was a curious stiffness in my side. I examined it and found a red scar. I believe those crystal things had cut into me. And I found, with a horror you cannot understand, the mark upon my chest. Presently it dawned upon me that I was floating, devoid of gravity and free as an object in space, in the orange flame at the top of one of the black cylinders. The crystals knew the secret of gravity. It was vital to them. And peering about, I discerned, with infinite repulsion, a great flashing body, a few yards away. But its inner lights were dead, so I knew that it was day, and that the strange beings were sleeping. . . .

"If I was ever to escape, this was the opportunity. I kicked, clawed desperately at the air, all in vain. I did not move an inch. If they had chained me, I could not have been more secure. I drew my automatic, resolved on a

desperate measure. They would not find me again, alive. And as I had it in my hand, an idea came into my mind. I pointed the gun to the side, and fired six rapid shots. And the recoil of each explosion sent me drifting faster, rocket-wise, toward the edge.

"I shot out into the green. Had my gravity been suddenly restored, I might have been killed by the fall, but I descended slowly, and felt a curious lightness for several minutes. And to my surprise, when I struck the ground, the airplane was right before me! They had drawn it up by the base of the tower. It seemed to be intact. I started the engine with nervous haste, and sprang into the cockpit. As I started, another black tower loomed up abruptly before me, but I veered around it, and took off in safety.

"In a few moments I was above the green. I half expected the gravitational wave to be turned on me again, but higher and higher I rose unhindered until the accursed black walls were about me no longer. The sun blazed high in the heavens. Soon I had landed again at Vaca Morena.

"I had had enough of radium hunting. On the beach, where I landed, I sold the plane to a rancher at his own price, and told him to reserve a place for me on the next steamer, which was due in three days. Then I went to the town's single inn, ate, and went to bed. At noon the next day, when I got up, I found that my shoes and the pockets of my clothes contained a good bit of the red sand from the crater that had been collected as I crawled about in flight from the crystal lights. I saved some of it for curiosity alone, but when I analyzed it I found it a radium compound so rich that the little handful was worth millions of dollars.

"But the fortune was of little value, for, despite frequent doses of the fluid from my canteen, and the best medical aid, I have suffered continually, and now that my canteen is empty, I am doomed.

Your friend, Thomas Kelvin"

Thus the manuscript ends. If the reader doubts the truth of the letter, he may see the Metal Man in the Tyburn Museum.