

MIRACLE

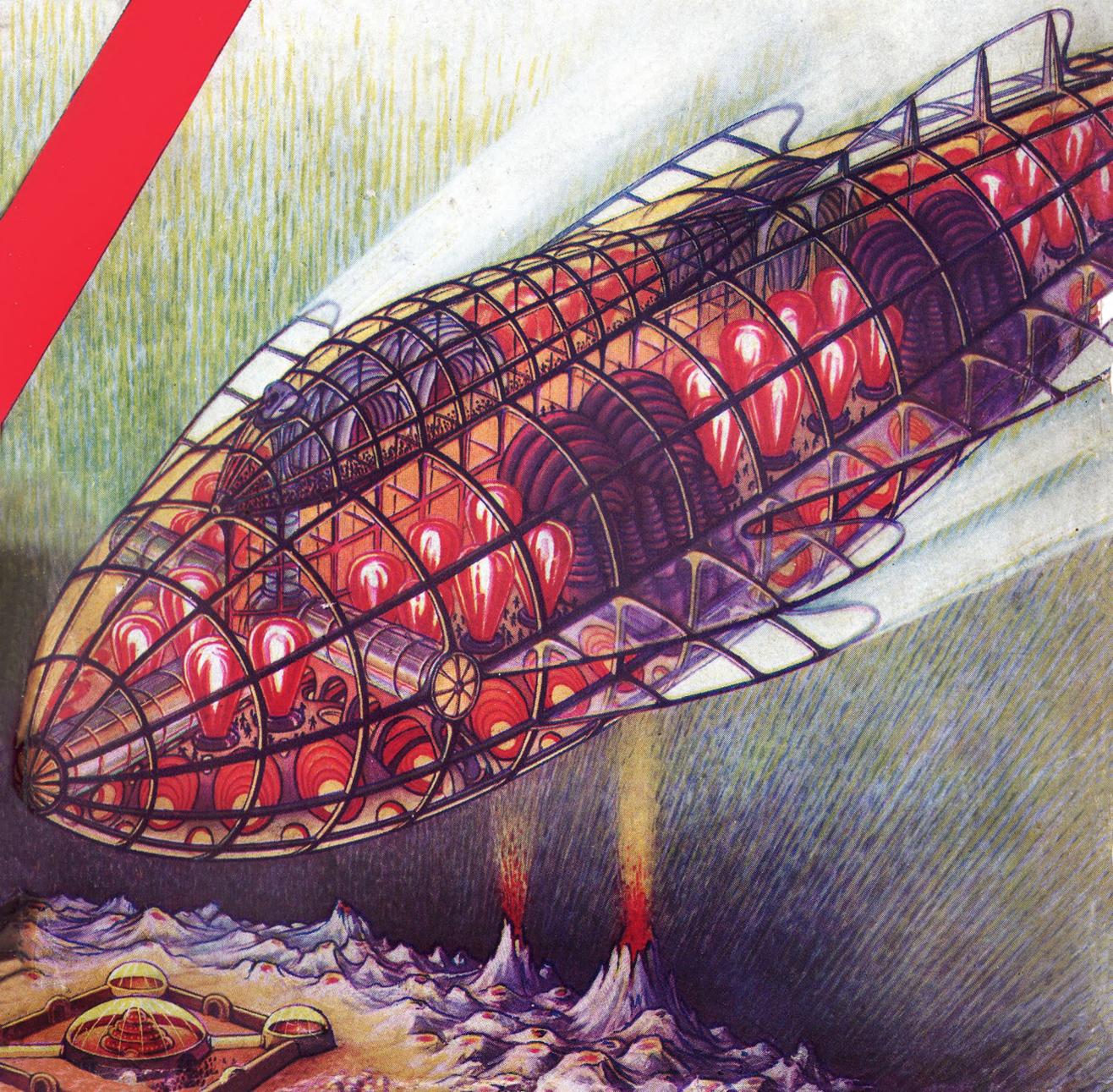
SCIENCE AND FANTASY

STORIES

JUNE-JULY

EVERY STORY COMPLETE

20¢
25¢ IN CANADA

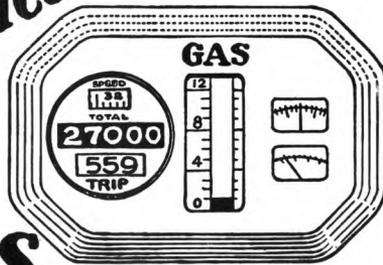
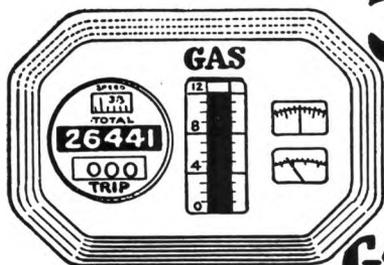


Over the Mountains from Los Angeles

559 Miles

on 11

Gallons of GAS



Think of it! FIVE HUNDRED FIFTY-NINE MILES over rough mountainous country burning only ELEVEN GALLONS OF GASOLINE. Imagine more than FIFTY MILES to the GALLON. That is what the WHIRLWIND CARBURETING DEVICE does for D. R. Gilbert, enough of a saving on just one trip to more than pay the cost of the Whirlwind.

THE WHIRLWIND SAVES MOTORISTS MILLIONS OF DOLLARS YEARLY

Whirlwind users, reporting the results of their tests, are amazed at the results they are getting. Letters keep streaming into the office telling of mileages all the way from 22 to 59 miles on a gallon, resulting in a saving of from 25% to 50% in gas bills alone.

Mark H. Estes writes: "I was making 17 miles to the gallon on my Pontiac Coupe. Today, with the Whirlwind, I am making 35 5/10 miles to the gallon. Am I glad I put it on? I'll say so!"

P. P. Goerzen writes: "I made an actual test both with and without a Whirlwind, getting 13 1/2 miles without and 34 6/10 miles with the Whirlwind, or a gain of 21 miles to the gallon. The longer the Whirlwind is in use on the machine the better the engine runs, has more pep and quicker starting. It makes a new engine out of an old one, and starts at the touch of the starter button."

R. J. Tulp: "The Whirlwind increased the mileage on our Ford truck from 12 to 26 miles to gallon and 25% in speed. We placed another on a Willys-Knight and increased from 12 to 17 miles per gallon."

Arthur Grant: "I have an Oakland touring car that has been giving me 15 miles to the gallon average, but I can see a great difference with the Whirlwind, as it climbs the big hills on high and gives me better than 23 miles to the gallon of gas, which is better than 50% saving in gas."

W. A. Scott: "I had my Whirlwind for three years. Winter and summer it gives the same perfect service, instant starting, smoother running, and what I have saved in gasoline these last few years has brought other luxuries which I could not have afforded previously."

Car owners all over the world are saving money every day with the Whirlwind, besides having better operating motors. Think what this means on your own car. Figure up your savings—enough for a radio—a bank account—added pleasures. Why let the Oil Companies profit by your waste? Find out about this amazing little device that will pay for itself every few weeks in gas saving alone.

GUARANTEE

No matter what kind of a car you have—no matter how big a gas eater it is—the Whirlwind will save you money. We absolutely guarantee that the Whirlwind will more than save its cost in gasoline alone within thirty days, or the trial will cost you nothing. We invite you to test it at our risk and expense. You are to be the sole judge.

FREE OFFER COUPON

WHIRLWIND MANUFACTURING CO.
Dept. 550-A, Station C, Milwaukee, Wis.

Gentlemen: You may send me full particulars of your Whirlwind Carbureting device and tell me how I can get one free. This does not obligate me in any way whatever.

Name

Address

City

County State

Check here if you are interested in full or part time salesmen position.

FITS ALL CARS

In just a few minutes the Whirlwind can be installed on any make of car, truck or tractor. It's actually less work than changing your oil or putting water in the battery. No drilling, tapping or changes of any kind necessary. It is guaranteed to work perfectly on any make of car, truck or tractor, large or small, new model or old model. The more you drive the more you will save.

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AN ILLUSTRATED MAGAZINE
M I R A C L E
Science and Fantasy Stories

PUBLISHED BY HAROLD HERSEY

VOL. 1

JUNE-JULY

NO. 2

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Immediate opening for you to tell your friends about Carlton's national whale-of-a-sale! New merchandise plan sweeping the country from coast to coast. Big Cash Pay for you starts at once. Sales experience unnecessary.

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32x4	2.48 1.15	32x4.50	2.45 1.20
32x4 1/2	2.58 1.15	32x4.96	2.90 1.25
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32x4 7/8	2.78 1.15	32x5.25	2.95 1.25
32x4 7/8	2.80 1.45	32x5.25	3.10 1.25
32x4 7/8	2.85 1.45	32x5.77	3.20 1.40
32x5	2.90 1.75	32x6.00	3.20 1.45
32x5	2.95 1.75	32x6.00	3.50 1.55
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Send only \$1.00 deposit for each tire ordered.
Pay balance 1. O. D. 5% discount for cash with order. Tires falling to give 12 months service will be replaced at half price.

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\$45 First 2 Days
That's Ducat's record. Mrs. Hackett made \$33 in 7 hours. Van Allen cleared \$125 in a week. This shows wonderful possibilities. Earnings start at once. Be your own boss—work full time or spare time. Ford Tudor Sedan offered FREE to producers as extra bonus—in addition to big cash profits. Write quick for details.

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"VAN" the man who is loved by thousands who have used his almost magical plan to get money to pay their bills.

if you will look after my business in your locality. No experience needed. Pleasant, easy work, can be handled in spare time or full time. Work pays good money by hour or week.

No Capital Needed

I have money enough for both of us. I furnish all capital, set you up in business, advertise you, and do everything to make you my successful and respected "partner" in your locality. I will divide with you—give you part of every dollar we take in—yet I don't ask you to invest a single penny in a stock of merchandise. Everything is furnished without risk to you. You simply call on old and new customers and prospects, give them a message from me, follow my trial order instructions, take care of mailing their orders and you make a profit on every one.

Money Comes Quick

Money comes quick this way. If you are in debt today or need money for food or clothes or rent or for any other bills here is the quickest way I know of for you

and have a **STEADY INCOME** the rest of your life

to get as much as you need. I send you a plan by which you either make \$15 cash the very first day you work for me, or else I pay you cash for the time it took you to try.

Either Man or Woman

Doesn't make any difference about your age or whether you are a man or woman. Both have made lots of money with me. All that I ask is that you will be honest with me with the merchandise I send you—that you be ambitious enough to deliver the little message I send to people in your locality and mail me their trial orders. The products are high grade everyday necessities—used in every home—such as teas, spices, extracts, groceries—things people must have to live.

Your Groceries at Wholesale

As my "partner" you can choose all your own groceries at wholesale from a big list of over 300 items. And the quality of every product is backed by a \$25,000 bond.

Four BIG THINGS I DO for YOU AT ONCE

DO I MAKE GOOD? READ THESE!

You Paid the Mortgage on My Home

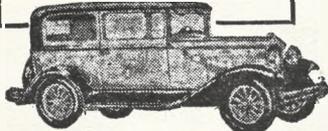
Says Rev. C. V. McMurphy of Alabama. McMurphy got "Van's" offer. The first afternoon he made \$38. He writes, "The notes on the house have been burned—we have a new car—I no longer fear financial problems." He has made as high as \$300 in a week.

Wether Makes \$2,000 Spare Time
Mrs. S. M. Jones of Georgia, mother of four, says "First hour and half made \$86.47." She could only work on Mondays and Saturday afternoon. But with this easy work she has made over \$2,000 in a few short months.

\$1,457 in Prize
Besides big earnings every day, says Wilbur Skiles, Pennsylvania. He says, "It is easy to make \$15 a day—I have made as much as \$15.23 in two hours."

Big Money in Spare Time

C. C. Miner, Iowa, made \$74 his first four days—part time. His first 15 days (part time) he made \$200! He writes, "Van, I thank God for the day I signed up for you."



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I give you a car to use in business and for pleasure just as soon as you qualify as one of my steady producers. No contest.

1. I Send You \$18 Worth of Food Products [Retail Value]

To start you right I send a big case of my products—over 45 full size packages—which you can turn into money at once if you wish.

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You simply say these words to ten ladies—give them a message from me—give them the groceries free—and allow them to pick a trial order from your samples.

2. I Give You 10 Packages of Groceries for you to

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These groceries are absolutely Free. You pay nothing for them. You give them away with no strings—just hand them out as I show you how.

4. Then if you Don't Make \$15 Cash the Very First Day I Will Pay You a Cash Penalty for your Time

AND I go one step further—for I let you give credit to our customers and give you a part of every dollar we take in.

I don't let you take any chances. I have started over 30,000 men and women on the road toward ending their money worries. And I give you my solemn promise that I'll give you the same operation and the same plan that enabled them to earn from \$3.00 up to \$15.00 a day—and some have made as high as \$100.00 in a day. I give my "partners" premiums of furniture, clothing, household furnishings and even give Cars to those who stay with me and satisfactorily build up their territories.

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C. W. Van De Mark, Pres.,
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Health-O Building, Cincinnati, O.

Without cost or obligation to me send full details of your amazing big Four-Point partnership plan, \$18 worth of groceries and 10 Extra Packages to give away Free. This costs me nothing.



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City State.....

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10 First Prizes of \$700.00 Each!



CAN YOU FIND THE TWINS?

Of course, you've watched the funny screen capers of Walt Disney's Mickey Mouse who has climbed the steps to "movie" fame in Columbia Pictures. Recently, Mickey was acclaimed one of the world's most popular movie features. His name and fame are spreading everywhere as more and more movie fans get to know him.

He appears here now, dressed in his very best attire, ready to help you find success through a difficult test of observation which will qualify YOU for the opportunity to win fame and fortune for yourself and win one of these Ten Equal First Prizes. Here is the test. Above are eleven poses of Mickey Mouse. He appears to be dressed differently in each pose, but here's the trick Mickey Mouse plays on you, for in two of the poses he is dressed exactly the same. There really are two alike—identical twins. These are the twin poses in which Mickey Mouse wears the same identical clothes—shirt, gloves and trousers. Study the pictures carefully, and if you think you have found the twin poses of Mickey Mouse, send their numbers on a post card or mark them with an X and send by letter, but be quick.

10 Extra Prizes of \$100.00 for Promptness

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W. C. DILBERG, PUBLICITY DIRECTOR.

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High Pressure Cord	Size	Subst.	Price	BALLOON CORDS	Size	Tires	Price
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30x3½	2.25	1.00		28x4.50	2.40	1.15	
31x4	2.35	1.10		30x4	2.45	1.20	
32x4	2.95	1.15		30x4.95	2.90	1.35	
32x4	2.95	1.15		32x5	2.95	1.35	
32x4½	3.20	1.45		31x5.25	3.10	1.35	
32x4½	3.20	1.45		32x5.00	3.20	1.40	
32x5	3.45	1.65		30x5	3.05	1.35	
30x5	3.60	1.75		32x5.50	3.50	1.65	
32x5	4.45	1.75		33x5.75	4.75	1.75	
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GIVEN WE Trust You

SEND No Money GIVEN

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Speedy Coaster Wagon—will carry ¼ ton weight easily. 10-inch roller bearing wheels, brakes, two-bar, nickel-plated bumper, balloon tires and 16-inch x 36-inch hardwood body.

GIVEN

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THE WILSON CHEMICAL CO., Dept. MS-87, Tyrone, Pa.

GIVEN

Send No Money, We Trust You, Simply Send Name and Address, Celebrated Hamilton Rifle, 22 Caliber. GIVEN. Wonderful for small game and target practice. Merely Give Away 60 beautiful greeting post cards with 12 boxes of our famous WHITE CLOVERINE SALVE at 25c each (giving 5 post cards Free) and remitting as per plan in big premium catalog. Our 35th year. We are reliable. The Wilson Chemical Co., Dept. MS-87, Tyrone, Pa.

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THEY HOOTED when I offered to play —

but after the first piece..



LOIS was almost in tears. It was her first big party. And —of course, the radio had to pick just that night to go on a vacation!

Poor Lois! The whole room-full of people sitting around, bored, hardly knowing what to do with themselves.

"Oh, Jack," she told me, "I'm nearly sick. Everybody is having a terrible time. We can't dance or anything."

"Well," I offered, gathering my courage, "I'll play for them to dance."

"You!" she exclaimed. "Why, you can't play, Jack. It's awfully sweet of you, but . . ."

"Watch me," I said. I faced the room and called out: "Folks, I'm going to play."

There was a chorus of good-humored hooting.

"Did anybody else hear what I did?" Ed laughed. "Jack's a magician," Bill announced. "It's all done with mirrors."

I played up to the farcical mood, swept my hand over my hair and made a few grotesque flourishes. There was a gale of laughter.

Suddenly I swung into the joyous notes of "Happy Days." This was real playing, and suddenly the laughter ceased. At last I felt

the thrill of being able to entertain, of contributing to the party.

When I stopped there was a moment of silence, and then I was deluged with questions. *When had I learned to play? Where had I studied? Who was my teacher? Where had I been hiding my talent all these years?*

How I Learned to Play

I told them the whole story, how I had always longed to be able to play the piano but had never had the patience to sit down for hours and practice. Besides I could not have afforded to pay a private teacher.

But one day, while looking through a magazine, I saw an advertisement of the U. S. School of Music. The ad offered to send a Free Demonstration Lesson to prove how easy it is to learn to play at home, without a teacher, in one's spare time.

"When that demonstration lesson came I saw at once how really easy and interesting the course was, and so I sent for it. Learning to play was actually fun —no finger-twisting exercise—no long hours practicing scales. It was as easy as A.B.C. But I didn't tell you folks because I wanted to be sure of myself first."

They could hardly believe me. But in a few minutes they begged me to play more, and everyone danced. Lois was happy and grateful. She said later that I had saved the party. And now that people

know I can really play I have invitations out practically every night.

This is a typical story. More than 600,000 people who couldn't read one note from another have become good players by using the clear, simple method originated by the U. S. School of Music. The course is so graphic, so easy that a child can understand it. First it tells you what to do—then it shows you how in pictures—then you do it yourself and hear it.

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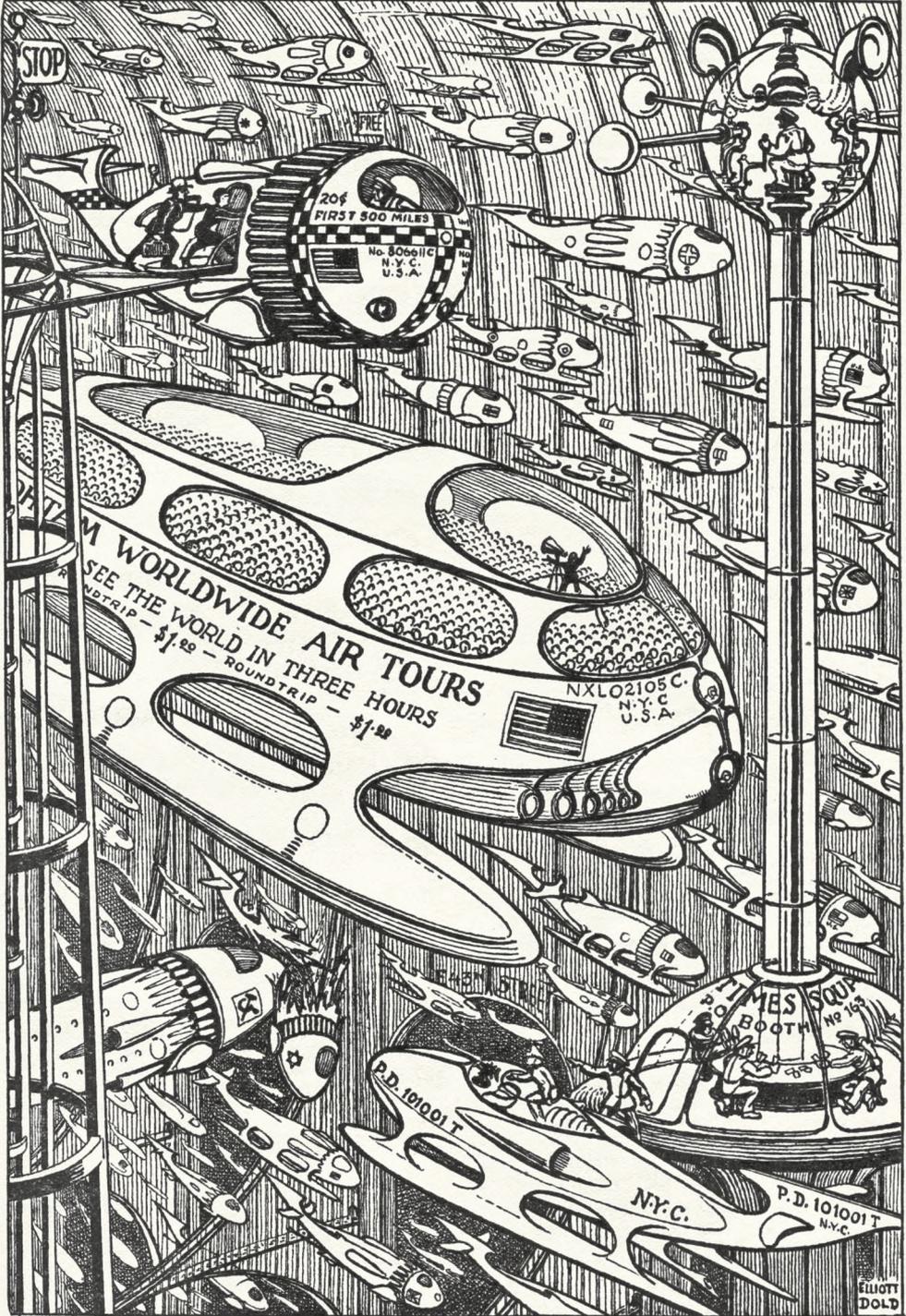
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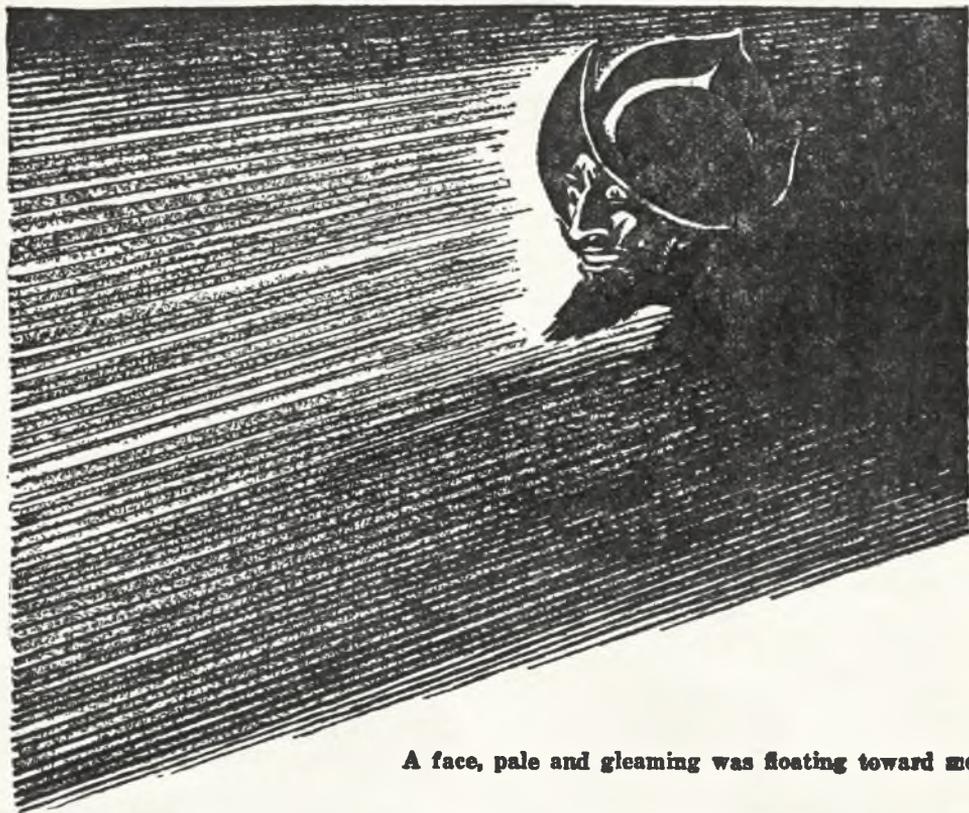
CHAPTER I

THE RIDDLE OF THE RED RANGE

WOUNDED and half delirious, I sagged over the controls in the cramped cockpit of my plane as it sliced through the searing waves of heat that surged

up from the baked Mexican desert below.

Thirst tortured my parched throat. The bullet crease on my leg was a throbbing agony of fevered flesh. Through aching eyes, I stared past the line of ragged machine gun holes in my battered windshield toward a



A face, pale and gleaming was floating toward me.

A bright god—a bowl of death, and waters of oblivion. That is what one man met face to face when his plane crashed on the rocks of an unknown land.

fantastic red range of mountains that reared themselves from the desert to the north.

Like a sudden blow, the stark truth struck at my numbed brain.

I was lost!

Abruptly, the meager hope I'd clung to all day was shattered. The hope of reaching the United States border and safety.

Safety!

A crazy chuckle rasped through my cracked lips as I turned my throbbing head to stare back across the wavering, heat distorted desert. The no-man's-land I'd just crossed.

Nothing!—Nothing in sight but the hot hell of sand and sky.

I'd fooled them. Fooled all those

Federal flyers. They were lost too, just like me in my Rebel plane. They thought they had me. The one I'd shot down in flames, after he'd creased my leg, thought he had me too but I'd fooled him that time, and I'd keep on fooling them. Wasn't my rear cockpit loaded with tins of gas just to fool them? Yes! I'd seen to it myself. I'd keep flying north and fool them, fool them, fool them.

The staccato clatter of the engine seemed to snatch up my thoughts and hurl them back at my throbbing brain in a fiendish rhythm—a rhythm that suddenly faltered, broke, then clattered on.

My wandering mind was jerked back to the present.

Something was wrong with the motor.

There it was again.

The engine was choking, missing—dying of thirst just like me.

The chuckle died in my throat, I cursed instead.

How far off were those mountains? Could I reach them before my engine conked out? Before the burning sand down there could trap my plane? Back in California the mountains had cool springs and running brooks.

My aching eyes, filled with a new hope, focused on the sullen barrier of red rock that now seemed to tower close before me, desolate and sinister. Fantastic, unreal towers and battlements that rose and fell in the dancing waves of heat, changing shape and distance as I watched.

The motor coughed and missed again.

I felt the plane falter.

The danger began to steady my whirling brain.

Abruptly, I kicked on right rudder and headed for a long, narrow bench of rock that cut along the frowning cliff about a third of the way up its rugged face.

The motor had commenced to spit and sputter again. The plane seemed to hesitate, began to slow down.

Below me lay certain death.

Could I make that narrow shelf of rock and safety?

My clamped jaws ached. I concentrated every atom of my failing strength on the job before me.

Suddenly, the seamed red rock of the bench flashed into sight just below me.

I cut the motor.

The ground seemed to leap up toward me. Close to my left wing, the jutting cliff streamed past, a flying blur of red ruin.

Then both wheels struck.

The plane bounded high, struck again and shot along the narrow bench, grazing a boulder here, jolting

over a crevice there. To my strength-drained senses, the world seemed spinning round in dizzy circles that ended in an abrupt lurch to finally come to a sickening stop. The plane tipped forward, dipped its nose as if tired out and I slid limply across the controls.

HOW long I lay there half unconscious I don't know. The next thing I clearly remember is that I opened my eyes and stared down into a hollow, shadowed by the cliff wall, where a seepage of water glistened against the rock.

My eager glance fastened greedily on that patch of moisture. My dry tongue licked at my cracked lips as I crawled down from the cockpit. But that animal thirst made me too eager.

As my feet struck the ground, my shaking knees buckled under me and I pitched headfirst down the sharp slope of the hollow in a small avalanche of rocks, shale and dust.

As I landed at the bottom half choked and dizzy, a loud crash sounded on the wall above me. Instinctively I rolled aside in time to escape a good sized rock that, loosened by the landslide, had bounded from a ledge of the hollow, hit the wall directly above me and dropped.

I looked up from where I lay, trembling with weakness and saw that a large oval boulder imbedded in the cliff above had been struck and partially turned in its rocky bed by the stone which had so narrowly missed me. Stranger still, I made out what appeared to be the opening of a hollow that gaped darkly behind the dislodged boulder.

Somehow, the thing seemed odd and I wondered vaguely how a rock of that shape had become imbedded in the face of the solid cliff and why it should turn so easily. Then, forgetting my slight curiosity, I crawled to my knees, and the next minute my swollen tongue was greedily lapping

at the trickle of moisture on the cliff wall. The few drops were maddening and seemed only to whet my thirst as I crouched there licking the rough stone.

Finally some measure of sanity returned to me and I realized a cool draft of air was blowing down from the dark hollow behind the oval boulder in the cliff.

I staggered to my feet and stared up as a faint, liquid tinkle struck my ears.

Was there water in there? Real water, that could be drunk in satisfying mouthfuls?

Slipping and panting, I scrambled up to the curious oval boulder and peered into the black cave-like opening behind it.

There was water. I could hear it dripping, trickling, tinkling tauntingly, but the narrow opening was too small to squeeze my big body through. With sudden thirst-crazed strength I threw myself against the stone.

For a moment it hesitated, then quivered, grated and swung smoothly around.

Taken by surprise, I pitched forward into the black opening, stumbled and fell flat on the rocky floor. My outflung hands splashed into a trickle of cold water that rippled through my dried out, clutching fingers.

Heedless of any possible danger, I dragged myself forward, plunged my burning face down and drank, drank as only a man dying of thirst can drink.

Minutes slipped by unheeded while new life and strength flooded through me. A blessed relief began to steal over me. Nothing else mattered. I lay and let the cool moisture soak into my heat-drained body.

As my physical longing grew less intense, a lazy curiosity began to stir in my mind.

Why had that boulder turned so easily? Did it rest on a pivot like a revolving door? Only clever human

hands could have engineered such a thing. What was this place I'd stumbled into? What might not lie concealed in the gloom around me?

My eyes had grown used to the darkness. Perhaps I could see where I was.

I rolled over, started to rise and stopped, rigid with horror at sight of the "THING" that faced me.

Dim, menacing, barely visible in the faint ray of light that struggled through the narrow opening, a face, pale and gleaming seemed floating toward me. A human head whose body, if it had a body, was lost in the surrounding gloom. Deep shadowed eyes stared at me—dead eyes that wouldn't close. The dead lips stretched in a sneering smile that was still a snarl.

Dead!—Was it dead?

I LEAPED back. My right shoulder struck the revolving boulder. I felt the stone tremble under the sudden impact, then it grated, turned and crashed shut.

I was trapped! Trapped here in the dark, with what?

The hideous truth struck me like a blow and drove all other thoughts from my brain. Tense and rigid, I stood there in the smothering darkness, facing the spot where that ghastly thing had been. That seemingly disembodied head I'd just seen floating before me. Would it try and strike me down, tear at my throat, leap at me?

It was useless to turn and try to force open the boulder behind me. That would leave my back unprotected. I had to face the thing.

The heavy beating of my heart sounded loud as the strokes of a muffled drum in my straining ears. Cold sweat gathered on my forehead. The hot breath hissed through my clenched teeth. My finger nails dug into my palms. If the Thing would only make some sound—do something—anything.

The suspense was slowly breaking my already overstrained nerves. I began to sense a faint musky odor floating about in the clammy air. Was that the smell of the thing? Had it come so close? For a moment that seemed an age, I stood rigid, staring straight before me.

Suddenly my self-control broke.

A snarling cry burst from my dry throat. My right hand clawed into the pocket of my leather coat for my automatic.

The gun was gone.

My frantic fingers touched something else, closed on the metal tube of a flashlight. I wrenched it out. At least I'd see what I had to face and then die fighting.

I pressed the switch.

A shaft of white radiance stabbed the gloom. For an interminable moment I stood dazzled and stared while a spectacle, such as I'd never dreamed could exist, slowly took shape before me.

Propped among a pile of golden ingots that were built up in the form of a great seat sat the armored corpse of a man. A white man grasping a naked sword.

I'd braced myself to face something supernatural, some disembodied horror, not this perfectly preserved corpse before me. It had been that dim ray of daylight that had deceived me. It had rested only on the white features and so caused the head to appear bodyless.

For a moment the sudden reaction held me stupefied and I stood there staring foolishly at the mysterious black-bearded, dead-white face, whose somber eyes peered back at me so arrogantly across the high-bridged nose.

A white man, perfectly preserved, seated on a pile of solid gold ingots out here in the heart of the Mexican desert. An armored corpse that glittered under a transparent coating of some thin glass-like material that in-

cased it completely. What could it mean?

As I moved closer, my eager eyes noted the intricate gold chasing of the half armor, the gleaming steel morion on his head, the worn leather jack boots that reached well above his knees. The searching beam of my flashlight moved higher and touched a spot of scintillating brilliance that stood out against the steel breastplate.

It was a jeweled crucifix.

I bent forward eagerly. This was the clue I needed. Now I understood.

That mysterious figure sitting so arrogantly before me had been one of the roving Conquistadores sent to the new world by Spain under the command of Cortes. Perhaps this man had been one of Cortes' own captains.

One of the breed, who, centuries ago, had conquered the Aztecs here in this very region. Everything I'd seen went to prove me right. Those piled up ingots of gold had always been the lodestone of Spain's desire in the Western world.

Why, the man's very features betrayed him, they were typically Spanish and his arms were of finest Toledo steel. Even the crucifix gleaming there before me was proof enough in itself.

Suddenly, my tumbling thoughts were checked abruptly. I steadied the wavering beam of my flash and limped forward, all my weakness forgotten in the excitement of my new discovery.

Under the white disc of light gleamed a casket of carved gold, while three more lurked in the lesser gloom. How they had escaped my notice so long I don't know. One was set close above the Spaniard's head, another at his feet, the third and fourth at each steel-cased elbow.

I stooped, and gingerly raised the lid of the casket set at the Spaniard's feet, then started back as a splendor of unset jewels flashed up at me.

One after the other, I opened the

other three caskets, and for the first time fully realized I'd stumbled into a vast treasure house, the fabled hoard of the Aztecs, the hidden treasure that the Emperor Montezuma had died by torture rather than reveal.

Vividly, I recalled the nights I'd spent in the Mexican Rebel camps listening to the Indian soldiers as they sprawled around their smoldering fires and told weird tales of the ancient race of Aztecs, their ancestors.

Of battles, torture and a vast treasure, which legend claimed had been concealed no one knew where, to save it from the conquering Cortes and his Spanish adventurers. Exaggerated fairy tales, I'd thought them at the time, but now—

The lid of the last casket dropped from my fingers and I rose, determined to know what further mysteries lay hidden in this evil place. A burning curiosity urged me on. I limped past the massive seat of gold ingots and saw that the rear of the cave tapered off into the black mouth of a narrow tunnel.

As I slowly advanced, the sense of something evil all about me grew stronger. The strange, charnel house odor of the place oppressed me. I shivered, tried to laugh and shivered again. Before me, the white beam of my flashlight swept from side to side. Slicing through the solid gloom it touched the right hand wall, passed on and settled on something—a shape—what was it?

I STEADIED my shaking hand with difficulty and focused the light.

There, outlined in the circle of white radiance, stood a gleaming human body, rigid, ghastly.

I stopped.

What new horror faced me now?

I limped closer and saw the truth.

The figure was that of a man, another Spaniard and, like that other, back in the cave, he was sheathed in

the same transparent coating of glassy material. But, unlike the first, this corpse stood upright and perfectly rigid, with his back pressed against the rock wall.

On his head rested a steel morion. A plain breastplate, worn jack boots and rough clothing covered his body. In his hand he gripped a short pike or halberd. Evidently he had been an ordinary soldier but why was he here standing an eternal guard?

Perplexed, I turned and swept my light up the tunnel, then, started back aghast.

I'd stumbled into a veritable house of the dead.

Ranged at regular intervals along both walls, a double rank of gleaming shapes stood stiffly at attention. All bearded Spaniards. All armed and clothed similarly.

A chill passed along my spine. Where did this tunnel of the dead lead? What awful mystery lay at its end? I knew that the answer, if answer there was, lurked in the shadows somewhere ahead and if I was to solve it there was no time to waste.

As I started to limp up the slightly sloping way, past those regularly spaced corpses, I felt the first warning symptoms of a physical reaction begin to steal over me. Up to this time the life-giving water I'd drunk, together with the stimulating effect of my intense mental excitement, had carried me forward.

Now, however, I began to feel an overwhelming lassitude. My head throbbed. Hot stabs of pain shot through my wounded leg. A feeling of nauseous weakness was increasing. The sense of some age-old evil oppressed me. That sweetish, musky odor I'd first smelled in the cave was growing stronger, almost stifling. It haunted me but still I couldn't place the faintly familiar scent.

A stealthy scraping sounded behind me, as if something was dragging itself along the floor.

Startled, I turned about and began to stumble back.

Then I stopped.

There, full in the white brilliance of my flashlight, and blocking my retreat, lay three huge snakes, fifteen to twenty feet in length. Their scabrous scales scraped faintly as the sinuous bodies, palely colorless, glided toward me. Their forked tongues darted from the evil flat heads while they stared at me un-winking from oddly filmed eyes.

A wave of repugnance enveloped me as I saw a fourth and fifth monster reptile glide from holes in the rocky walls and join the others in their slow advance. That stale, musky odor had grown overpowering, but now I recognized it as the snake smell which I hadn't been able to place before.

Filled with a sudden loathing, I turned and dashed up the tunnel, away from those filmy-eyed, gliding monsters. My lassitude had dropped away, sheer horror lent me strength. As I rushed forward, the beam of my flashlight fell on other pale, scuttling shapes whose glowing eyes reflected back phosphorescent gleams. Huge albino rats, large as fullgrown bloodhounds, had joined the chase and now added their vicious squeaks to the echoes of my pounding feet.

How far I ran before I dared to turn my head and stare back I don't know. But, just at the moment I looked around, the rocky floor fell away from under me. My feet struck empty air and I shot into space.

As I pitched headlong into a well of darkness, the flashlight flew from my hand. Then, with a jarring shock, my shoulder struck against stone and I rolled down an invisible flight of steps that ended abruptly and I came to a violent stop against a rocky wall.

For a moment I sat there, bruised and shaken. Then I staggered to my feet as the sounds of scuttling feet, squeaks and hisses mingled with the

scraping rasp of dragging bodies sounded close above me.

There was no time to lose. Every precious second counted. This was the end of the tunnel and there must be some exit, if I could only locate it in the dense darkness. My flashlight was hopelessly lost.

I began to claw through the pockets of my coat in search of a match. A single flicker of light might show me the way of escape before that stinking horde of giant vermin now surging down the stairs could reach me.

There it was at last.

MY GROPING fingers had found a match. It was caught in the pocket lining. I tried to drag it out, while the noise of the floundering pack grew closer each second.

The match tore loose.

I jerked it from the pocket and with the same motion struck a light against the rock. The faint flame spluttered, grew stronger. I stood in rigid suspense, while the meager flare slowly drove back the denser gloom and disclosed a blank stone wall.

Where was the way out? What was the secret? Was the guess I'd staked my life on right?

Eagerly, my eyes flashed along the rocky barrier.

Thank God!—My guess was right.

There it was. An oval boulder, lying embedded in the rough surface before me.

I flung myself against it. Felt it start, then jam. Simultaneously, I glimpsed an intermingled mass of struggling rats and snakes surging toward me.

The flame of the match scorched my fingers, dropped and flickered out. Darkness closed in around me.

Again I leaped at the boulder. My shoulder struck the obstinate stone squarely. I felt it tremble, crunch and slowly begin to turn. At the same instant, the scrambling horde of ani-

mal horrors struck the floor at my feet.

The nauseous stink of their bodies rose in sickening waves about me. Their phosphorescent eyes glowed hungrily. A huge rat struck against my heavy boot, squealed and bit at the tough leather.

With a final, mad heave, I forced the stubborn rock around.

A slender shaft of crimson light stabbed the darkness and I dived through the opening.

As I shot forward, the crunch of the closing boulder echoed gratefully in my ringing ears. Then my body fell on a narrow rock ledge and I was conscious only of a hot red light that struck full into my eyes and dazzled me.

For a time I lay there, content with the knowledge that I'd escaped from that cavern of nightmare horrors and waited for my expanded pupils to accommodate themselves to the strange crimson glare around me.

Very soon, however, a sensation of sticky warmth, spreading on my leg, warned me that my wound had opened again. A feeling of contented weariness was beginning to steal over me and I realized the urgent need of discovering where I was before I became too weak to move.

With an effort of will, I crawled to the weathered edge of the narrow ledge and peered over.

What my startled eyes saw, I couldn't, I wouldn't believe.

Was I already delirious? Had those subterranean horrors turned me mad? Or was it the effects of the strange perfume I smelled, floating up past me in billows of pungent incense? Something in the odor exhilarated me, stimulated my exhausted senses as I stared about, wide-eyed and incredulous.

Nearly a hundred feet below me lay a valley, long and narrow. An underground valley. Flooded by a raw vermilion light, it stretched before

me like a titanic fold in the living rock. Such a scene as only the diseased mind of a drug-crazed scientist could have conjured up.

A valley of tortured red rock, that bored its way between overhanging walls of writhing, wind-worn stone. Walls carved by the blowing sand of centuries into fantastic columns, arches and massive fluted buttresses.

My eyes followed the mighty sweep of the southern wall as it reared up and up, then arched across the valley to form a titanic rocky roof that passed beyond my sight and over the top of the northern wall, which it did not quite touch.

The thing was unbelievably stupendous. But even more awe-inspiring was the monster hole that pierced the valley's western end, and through which the red rays of the setting sun now poured to flood the place with that angry crimson glare.

I looked below me.

Drowned in hot shadows, sprawled a matted mass of giant plant life. A leprous, greenish white in color, it stood out vividly against the surrounding red rocks and sand in grotesque forms such as I'd never dreamed could exist.

Great patches of fleshy cactus that sprawled in bloated masses of squat confusion, shouldered others that shot distorted, skeleton-like arms a hundred or more feet in the air. Everywhere sharp-spined creepers writhed, like monster serpents through the confused tangle. Each plant seemed battling grimly for the right to exist, to choke those around it and carry on its own monstrous life.

I SHIVERED. There was something terrible about all this, something ghastly. A suggestion of furtive movement concealed under the matted growth. Did this horrible place also breed some abnormal species of beast life or possibly, even, some perverted

form of human monsters? Nothing could surprise me now, and, to make matters worse, a single glance had convinced me that there was no escape except by the way I'd come in.

My whirling thoughts were rudely interrupted by a low, moaning note, scarcely a sound, that began to vibrate through the air. It gradually grew louder. Swiftly the wild wailing rose higher, stronger.

Then, abruptly it swelled to a deep volume of distorted harmony that rose in wave on wave of enveloping chords, only to fade as it had come and softly sink to the vibrant ghost of a haunting discord, like the music of a titanic aeolian harp gone mad.*

Suddenly, shattering the muted half tones of those echoing chords, I heard a sullen, earth-shaking rumble. An ominous sound that pulsed through the air and drew my eyes to the western end of the valley.

There, just below the gigantic round aperture in the rock, through which the last rays of the sun straggled, lay an immense circular hollow, scooped like a giant cup in the valley floor, from the center of which puffs of iridescent vapor were billowing up.

The angry rumblings slowly died away giving place again to that music and I found my eyes following the course of a small stream that crept from the rock at the side of the cup-shaped hollow. Red as a coiling ribbon of blood, it wound through the matted growth of the valley toward

the spot where I lay, weak and wondering.

As I peered down from my ledge to see how close the stream passed, my eyes fell on the tunnel-like entrance of a narrow trail opening in the jungle of giant cactus below me.

A trail!

That might mean human beings, help and companionship. The mere thought set my heart pounding. I dragged myself forward until my shoulders hung far over the edge of the crumbling ledge and stared down. The crimson light had been failing rapidly and on the valley floor it was even darker but I could still make out objects.

Suddenly, a shadowy something, slipping along the trail, caught my eye. Something that looked like a fitting human form. My reeling senses steadied abruptly.

Had I seen an actual shape or was it all imagination?

There it was again. Plainer now. A human figure, running toward me.

My fingers clutched the crumbling rock beside me. I stretched further over the ledge and stared down eagerly. The hurrying shape disappeared under a matted mass of overhanging vegetation.

Had it seen me? Would it steal away in fear, before I could even see what it was like? Why was the light failing so rapidly, just when I needed it most? Something in that pungent perfume was drugging me. My senses were spinning in a whirling vertigo.

With an intense effort I fixed my aching eyes on the next open stretch of trail where I knew the figure must pass and waited.

Suddenly it flashed into sight.

A girl! A girl holding something in either hand and running at top speed with her head turned across one shoulder, staring back as if in fear of pursuit. As the trail twisted I saw her face. Only a single glimpse,

*In all probability, the harmonic disturbance observed in this remarkable valley was due to the fact that a great amount of heat having been absorbed by the rocks during the day, this same heat was rapidly released into the much cooler temperature of the evening. This, of course, would tend to set up a series of intense vibrations in the fabric of the stone walls and these vibrations would in turn be translated into the varying volumes of sound.

The Singing Stones of Egypt are perhaps the best known example of this phenomenon, although many other cases are recorded from various points throughout the torrid sections of the Earth.

The strong flow of warm wind encountered at the same time may be easily explained by the fact that heated air, being lighter than cool air, rises and in this manner a continual circulation in the atmosphere of any confined space is produced. The warmer the air, the more rapid the circulation.

but enough to tell me she was white, beautiful.

Instinctively, I jerked myself forward.

The rotten stone of the ledge crumbled under me and, with a smothered cry, I pitched headlong down the smooth cuplike slope of the wall and rolled across the path of the advancing girl.

Before unconsciousness claimed me completely, I heard a scream, caught a fleeting glance of the girl as she leaped back in terror and swung a club high above her head.

Then, the world went black and I felt myself going down through whirling layers of darkness.

CHAPTER II.

THE PLACE THE WORLD FORGOT

DIM consciousness and a flood of new vitality were stealing through my battered body. A pungent, stinging liquid moistened my dry lips. I groaned, and a few drops trickled into my mouth. Something rough and moist was being rubbed rapidly across my temples, which created an exhilarating sensation of tingling heat.

My heavy lids opened. I looked up.

Two shadowed eyes, filled with amber lights, were staring down at me anxiously. The pale, ivory oval of a face framed in a cloud of copper hair shot with golden glints bent close above me. It was the strange girl of the trail.

As she saw eager recognition kindle in my eyes, a rising flush spread over her perfect features. An unconscious sigh of relieved anxiety parted her lips, red as opening rose petals. Then, with a lithe grace, she turned her head and looked down at my bleeding leg.

A shudder shook her, but she bent swiftly and tore a great piece of sheer material from her dress. This she folded and after moistening it with

sap, squeezed from a large root bulb in her hand, she turned and pressed it firmly on my wound.

An intense pain shot through my leg, keen as the bite of white hot iron. The burning torture seemed to sear into my inflamed flesh but I clenched my teeth and lay still while the agony increased until it became almost unbearable.

Presently, the racking anguish began to subside, slowly at first, then more quickly and soon I felt rising waves of vitality surging through me.

Turning my head, I tried to see the mysterious girl's face but failed and, for the first time realized that the swift twilight was gliding into night. My uneasy mind, mutely questioning our next move, was answered by a quavering howl, that rose to a haunting wail and ended in a snarling bark.

As if in answer to a preconcerted signal, a swelling chorus of beast voices shattered the quiet of the night and filled the valley with an echoing pandemonium of elemental savagery.

Swiftly the girl leaped to her feet and peered through the darkness in the direction of the growing clamor. Then she stooped over me and I saw a look of sheer terror stamped on her face as she clutched my arm and pointed toward a section of the cliff wall about fifty yards away.

I struggled to my knees just as a great swooping shadow, fully six feet across, flitted close over our heads. The girl saw it too and screamed, then snatched up her double-edged club.

She struck desperately at the monstrous bat-like shape that had turned and darted down toward us. With a rasping chitter, it dodged the blow and sheered away, leaving a tainted odor of putrid filth in its wake.

It was high time for me to take a hand.

As I seized the club from the girl's weakening hands and whirled it

round my head I felt new power surge up in me together with a sudden determination to protect this mysterious stranger who had so unselfishly risked her life for me.

My chance came immediately.

One of the great bats darted at the girl and I struck it with all the weight of my body behind the blow. I heard the hard wood rip through the tough membrane of a wing and felt the crunch of breaking bones.

As the body whirled back, broken and bleeding, an eager flock of its pale, furry fellows swooped down and seized it before it could drop to the ground.

An abrupt tug at my arm drew my attention to the chorus of mad howls rapidly drawing nearer. The girl was again pointing toward the face of the cliff, where I could just make out the dark oblong of an opening, black against the paler stone.

Without a word she seized my hand, snatched up her basket and began pulling me forward. We broke into a run and had covered perhaps a hundred feet when a heavy blow on my shoulder spun me around.

The bats were on us again. More of them, and now mad with the taste of blood.

I SMASHED my club through their thick, furry ranks and again that cannibal orgy started in the air. While we gained another twenty yards I wondered why these huge vermin died so easily, a mere tap seemed to kill them. But I had no time for thought, as they were back again.

I whirled my club in sweeping arcs of death while around us a multitude of shining eyes glittered through the darkness. A circle of phantom shapes that snarled and snapped had closed our path.

Suddenly, out of the spectral pack, a pale, hairy form, larger than a full-grown mastiff, leaped at us. The girl screamed and flung herself against

me. My club crashed down on the huge wolf's skull.

To my amazement the great beast dropped like a toppling tenpin, snapping and kicking weakly. Instantly a pale mass of intermingled bats and wolves surged over the writhing body and began tearing at the still quivering flesh and each other.

Together, the girl and I ran toward the black opening in the cliff, now only a short way ahead. Simultaneously, the bats darted after us, chittering and gritting their teeth as they came. The vicious circle of green-eyed wolves closed in again—we were cut off.

I heard the girl moan, felt her stagger and clutch me. Flinging my left arm around her I drew her close against me.

At the first touch of her a red mist gathered before my eyes and I went blood mad.

With a yell, I leaped at the slinking greedy-eyed horde that tore and bit at my booted legs. As I plowed into the packed mass, swinging my club like a flail, I felt flesh and bone rip and crunch at each stroke.

The mingled smell of hot blood and torn animal bodies rose and filled my nostrils. Shouting, striking, screaming, but always clutching the girl's limp body close against me, I pushed on toward the black opening in the cliff.

Behind me, a struggling swarm of hairy ghouls closed over the twitching brutes I'd left lying in my bloody path. Just before me gaped the black door, but now I felt that strange spurt of strength which had carried me so far was failing and realized the stimulating power of the girl's drug had worn itself out. Worse still, the hot patch of moisture spreading rapidly down my leg warned me that my wound had opened again. I clenched my jaws. I'd make the door somehow.

A great bat darted at my face and

I felt the girl shudder as I smashed its ratty face into its shoulders. A huge wolf leaped, fell short and tore at my thick boots. I drove the heavy handle of my club down on its head.

I staggered forward blindly. My whirling head seemed bursting, my legs shook with growing weakness. The hot breath hissed through my clenched teeth. My last ounce of strength was flowing from me. I knew the door must be just ahead but I couldn't see it. With a final mad effort I swung my club in a sweeping circle and reeled forward.

My foot struck against a rock sill. I felt my precious burden slipping from me. My knees crumpled and I pitched headlong through a rocky doorway into the blackness of a room.

Simultaneously, a crash echoed through the thick gloom, followed by a glad cry. Dimly, I knew the girl had slammed shut some protecting barrier.

I was content. My aching eyes closed and the world went out, smothered in whirling darkness.

I AWOKE with a checkerboard of hot red light streaming into my face. It filtered through a heavy woven grill of thick stems that formed a stout gate set in a massive stone doorway.

What had happened to me? Where was I? Why was my aching leg banded in thick layers of spider web?

For a time my tired mind groped feebly, trying to recall how I had come into this great, square room cut from the solid red rock.

At length, I gave up the effort and slowly opened my eyes.

There, silhouetted against the intense light, I saw the kneeling form of a girl. A young girl stirring something in a gourd. The slim outline of her body was vividly etched through the gossamer thin folds of silvery spider web that fell shimmering about her.

Who was she? Where had I seen her before?

That massive headdress of jewels and chased gold, with its interwoven coils of carved leaves and feathers that glowed above the streaming copper hair seemed strangely familiar. I knew that broad gilt girdle, set with gleaming stones which circled the slender waist and dropped to the floor in a graceful pendant.

Why couldn't I remember?

As if sensing my puzzled stare the girl turned her head. With a glad cry, she rose and glided toward me, carrying the gourd with her.

Suddenly I knew her. Memory flooded back and I tried to speak. A harsh croak was all I could manage.

The next instant she was kneeling beside me. One cool hand smoothed my brow, with the other she lifted my head and placed the gourd to my eager lips.

I gulped down the last drop and croaked in harsh English:

"Who are you?"

A puzzled frown furrowed the girl's broad white brow as she answered:

"Quien sabe, Cabalero."

Her hesitating "I don't understand, sir," came in rich contralto accents of pure but halting Castilian, with an odd, archaic pronunciation that perplexed me. Who could this amazing girl be?

I looked up and, in my mongrel army Spanish blurted foolishly:

"Are—are you Mexican?"

This time she understood.

A sudden smile flashed over her face, then again gave way to the puzzled look.

"No, Cabalero, no!" she answered. "Not a what you call Mexican, but Xalia, the Holy Priestess of the Mictli, the Hidden Ones."

"Mictli? Priestess? Hidden Ones?—I don't get you—What do you mean? Who are they, the Hidden Ones?"

A quick look of loathing spread over Xalia's features as she answered:

"The true Mictli rest in death—all but me, Xalia."

Then she lifted her arm and pointed a tapering finger down the valley.

"There dwell the false Mictli, the forgotten of the bright God Quetzalcoatl, under the Eye of Taotl, close to the Bowl of Death, where the Eternal Waters of Oblivion are born and where the false ones dare not venture."

HER arm dropped in a pathetic gesture of hopelessness. Tears flooded her eyes.

My brain was whirling.

A bright God? Bowl of Death? Waters of Oblivion? Had the girl gone stark mad, living all alone in her rocky cell?

A flood of eager questions crowded to my lips, but Xalia seemed to read my thoughts, for she stooped and gently pressed her soft palm over my mouth.

"Cabalero," she interrupted, in a low, almost crooning tone, while she stroked my forehead with soothingly hypnotic finger tips, "for me, Xalia, you must now rest and speak no more.

"Only do this, and Xalia will soon tell all. Oh, very soon. Aye, from the first to the last. Then will thy strength be drawn back into thee through rest and the potent power of the sacred Nahuatl Peyotl. The divine caterpillar shalt accomplish its healing work and thy wounds be no more."*

*The Aztecs believed in a supreme Deity known as Quetzalcoatl, frequently shortened to Taotl. Under his leadership flourished a pantheon of thirteen lesser patron Gods and two hundred inferior Divinities, chief of whom was Huitzilopochtli, the frightful God of War. Legend tells us that Quetzalcoatl eventually disappeared from Anahuac, the Empire of the Aztecs by way of the Gulf of Mexico but with the assurance that he would again return at some indefinite time when the country most needed him.

See: Humboldt's, "Vues des Cordilleres."
Lord Kingsborough, "Antiquities of Mexico."
"Codex Chimalpopoca" discovered by Abbe Brasseur de Bourbourg.

As though hypnotically impelled against my own will I nodded, while a queer, unreal sense of detachment began to steal through me. The combined effect of Xalia's soothing voice and stroking fingers, together with the drink she called by that outlandish name, were doing something to me.

Something strange. I felt like a disembodied mentality whose past is slowly fading, but with a mind otherwise intact and abnormally keen as her rich voice ran on—

"While thou sleepest shalt thou learn of the curse that hath fallen on the Mictli, and likewise of Xalia, their Priestess who is one of them and still not one of them."

She paused and a pathetic look of sadness stole over her face.

Involuntarily I blurted out the only thing I could think of to show her my sympathy.

"Xalia—my name is Dale—Roger Dale. Won't you call me that?"

The shadow of distress passed from her face. She smiled and answered.

"I thank thee for thy sympathy, Don Roger, and now rest and be still, for then the divine Nahuatl Peyotl, which only I, the Priestess, now possess the secret of mixing shalt work its healing magic and all wilt be well with thee."

"But—"

I half started up. There was something, something I wanted to know—why couldn't I remember?

I sank back as Xalia's cool fingers passed lightly over my brow, stroking from the center toward the temples.

Why should I struggle? Weren't we two together? What else really mattered?

I watched her eagerly. At first she seemed to recede into shimmering coils of colored mist as though about to disappear. Then she slowly re-



A great bat darted down. I smashed its ratty face into its shoulders.

turned and grew until she seemed to envelop me. My body felt numb, inert, but my brain, now vividly alive, seemed to be reaching out, becoming part of Xalia's own mind.

What had she done to me? Well, no matter—I didn't care.

Then, my whole sense of feeling, the past, the future, all seemed to drop swiftly away. I lived only in the moment, each second more vibrantly intense than that before.

Xalia's face, mysteriously beautiful under its burden of burnished hair, had stopped moving. She was speaking—no, not speaking but crooning in that soothing contralto.

What was the tale she was murmuring in her pure, archaic Spanish through which ran fantastic words I'd never before heard? For a moment my mind groped to grasp the thread of the story then my senses drifted off lightly on the flowing stream of her words.

CHAPTER III

THE STORY OF THE MICTLI

“AND so, Don Roger, these strange white lords, clothed in bright metal, came to the land of Anahuac. And among them journeyed the forefather of my forefathers, Don Valdes, a man of power and high command.

“And they came from a strange land called Castile, that lieth far across a mighty lake of bitter waters. In floating castles of wood they journeyed and so commanded the four winds that they were carried where they willed.

“Many times the number of my fingers did the bright God Tonatiuh rise from rest, cross the heavens and sink again to slumber, ere these venturesome cabaleros reached the shores of this, the land of Anahuac.

“Then did the great Montezuma, the ruler of the Aztecs, give these cabaleros welcome. Aye, with a friendly

heart and rich gifts did he greet them. And in return he perished by torture, done to death by the hands of these very white lords, the forefathers of the Mictli.”

Xalia's voice faltered. I thought she had stopped, but she went on—

“Then Don Valdes, leading a band of followers, was dispatched to the far mountains to search out the precious yellow metal that was the curse of the Aztecs.

“Many days of hardship passed. Further and further did they wander in their fruitless search till at length they came to a parched waste of sand, where nothing lived or moved. Don Valdes and his lieutenant, one Romero, drove their men on, ever on toward a far range of mountains that they could just discern.

“Three waterless days of fiery heat passed over the heavens. Mad with thirst, the band struggled toward those beckoning mountains, but many fell to the scorching sand and never rose. The others plodded on.

“The morning of the fourth day found the straggling few close to the foot of the range. But now the merciless sun beat them down more and more swiftly. One by one they dropped and lay where they fell until only Valdes and Romero were left. Finally Romero staggered and went down.

“Don Valdes was alone.

“Doggedly he pushed ahead until he, too, fell. But not before he saw the opening of a green valley that lay spread before his hungry eyes. A valley in which a fair town nestled.

“With a final mighty effort he dragged his tortured body to a place where watchful sentinels spied him. And so Don Valdes was saved.

“The wondering guards swiftly carried him to the town. The astonished people had never seen a white face before nor had they yet heard of the cruel conquerors ravaging their land. They thought this stranger was

the Supreme God Quetzalcoatl, at last returned from his long wanderings.

"By the priests, Don Valdes was brought to the great pyramid of the Sun, and gently attended, while a force of swift runners set out to succor those who still might cling to the spark of life in the desert. And so some three times the number of my fingers lived to set eyes upon Japaxlan, the hidden treasure city of the Aztec nation.

"In this secluded Valley of Japaxlan, the wise priests of Quetzalcoatl had found a plant from which they made a potent drug that held the twin power of great good or great evil. And they called it the sacred Nahuatl Peyotl, the Divine Caterpillar, because of its downy heart.*

"And the secret was held by the priests alone. This drug, when wisely

brewed and used, was a medicine that held marvelous healing powers. For it caused the sufferer to lose all bodily pain, all worries of the mind by its soothing qualities.

"It even had the power to separate the body from the soul of the sick for a certain space of time and during that period the body, unburdened by the fretful spirit, found strength to recover its former health.

"This secret drug then, the Priests of Quetzalcoatl carried out on the desert to those dying white wanderers.

"Through the power of the sacred drink all but three of the helpless ones lived and were carried back to the city Japaxlan where they recovered. Swiftly they and their leader Don Valdes, grew strong and arrogant. They saw that the yellow metal they had come for was here in their grasp.

"Then the wise Priests of Quetzalcoatl grew fearful of these strangers, and after a council, the High Priest commanded that more of the sacred drink be given the wanderers. And so it was done, even as the Wiyatao ordered and the Spaniards straightway lost all remembrance of their past, why it was they had come, and all else concerning themselves.

"But this proved their salvation rather than their loss as they also forgot their greed for the yellow metal and their lust of power. One by one, they found mates among the Tlatoani, the nobles of the land, and soon came to hold high places and were honored by all.

"Then, one fatal day, a runner, more dead than alive, staggered into the valley bearing a tale of bloodshed and ruin. The message carried by this man commanded the Tlatoani, the guardians of the city, to conceal the great treasure of the Aztec nation in this secret valley, already prepared for it, and likewise commanded that the city Japaxlan be deserted.

*Nahuatl Peyotl, commonly called Peyote (Spanish derivative from the Nahuatl Peyotl, "caterpillar" referring to the downy center of the "button"). A species of small cactus, variously classified as *Anhalonium* or *Lophophora* (Coulter), found in the arid hills along the lower Rio Grande and southward in Mexico; formerly and still much used for ceremonial and medicinal purposes by all the Indian tribes between the Rocky Mountains and the Gulf of Mexico, from Arkansas r. southward almost to the City of Mexico. Among the various tribes it is known under different names, as *seni* (Kiowa); *wokowi* (Comanche); *hikori* or *hikuli* (Tarahumare). By the whites it is commonly but incorrectly known as "mescal," from a confusion with the *maguay* cactus of the southwest from which the fiery intoxicant mescal is prepared. In appearance the peyote plant resembles a radish in size and shape, the top only appearing above ground. From the center springs a beautiful white blossom, which is later displaced by a tuft of white down. North of the Rio Grande this top alone is used, being sliced and dried to form the so-called "button." In Mexico the whole plant is cut into slices, dried and used in decoction, while the ceremony is also essentially different from that of the northern tribes. The Indians firmly believe the plant is of divine origin and only certain chosen members of a community are allowed to gather it after being duly prepared by a qualified priest, doctor or medicine man of the tribe at a special ceremony. From ten to forty buttons are swallowed by one individual during the Peyote Rite, the effects of which produce a form of spiritual exaltation and marvelous dreams without any unpleasant reaction. The United States Government is conducting tests to determine whether the plant contains narcotic constituents. If this is found to be the case, the Peyote will be classed as a drug and prohibited. Results thus far indicate that the Peyote possesses varied and valuable medicinal properties, tending to confirm the idea of the Indians, who regard it as a universal panacea.

See Bulletin 30, Bureau of American Ethnology, Washington, D. C.

Lumboltz, 1. Tarahumari Dances and Plant Worship.
2. Symbolism of the Huichol Indians.
3. Unknown Mexico.

Mooney, *The Mescal Plant and Ceremony*, and Prentiss and Morgan, *Therapeutic Uses of Mescal Buttons*.

"These were the orders and the spent runner showed the great seal of the sun as his authority.

"Then came Don Valdes at the head of his men to see what the disturbance might be. And when the runner saw them he threw up his hands and screamed:

"These be the demons who have betrayed and slain our people. Give them to the God of War, Huitzilopochtli, before it be too late.' And screaming he fell forward dead.

"It was an omen, a sign that the white wanderers should live. And so the people would not believe that these strangers were of those who had done this great wrong.

"Again the Tlatoani took council among themselves and it was agreed that all the wanderers, together with their wives and children, be hidden in this very valley, where they should abide until the danger was past or proved false. And so it was done.

"AND the great treasure was brought here to this secret place, this very valley in which we now are. Then the wanderers, with their families, followed and the hidden way was securely sealed. Since that day no human has passed in or out of this valley."

Xalia's soothing monotone stopped. I sensed her moving toward me and felt the gourd pressed to my lips. I drank eagerly. Again the pungent liquid sent waves of pleasant vitality flooding through me and strangely enough I recognized the drink for the Nahuatl Peyotl that Xalia had just told me of.

Again, my mind seemed to glide off on the low-voiced stream of Xalia's words, as she went on—

"Years passed and with the passing years hope of release grew dim. Children were born, grew strong, and chose mates. Then, one by one, the

bearded wanderers were claimed by Mictlanteuctli, the dread Lord of Deadland.

"Their bodies, clad for the last time in the long unused metal coverings, and preserved by the mysterious powers contained in the Waters of Oblivion, disappeared,—no one knows where. At length, only one of the Wanderers still clung to life.

"And when he, too, ceased to breathe his body was placed in the Bowl of Death close to the Eternal Waters of Oblivion and with him perished the secret of the hidden way that leads from the sealed valley, for only he, the last of the strangers, knew of its existence.

"Year piled upon year, the children of the Wanderers' children mated and bred. And always there was a high priest or priestess of Quetzalcoatl the Good, who was descended from a Valdes, and held the secret of the sacred Nahuatl Peyotl. And always there was a Romero who was Tlatoani or captain of the people but only under the command of the high priest or priestess who ruled all.

"Then the great evil fell upon my people. The Eternal Crimson Flower of Flame that had ever burned on the altar of Quetzalcoatl died of neglect, and with it half the virtue of the holy drug passed, as it could not be properly prepared without the heat of the flaming flower.

"So, against the teachings of the sacred rite, many of the Mictli followed the lead of the Tlatoani Romero and ate of the Nahuatl Peyotl, which, even in its raw state, holds the power of inducing vivid dreams of marvelous beauty.

"And soon, like the beasts, these defilers of the holy law lost what few virtues they still possessed and fell to the level of the wild things they had formerly despised. Slowly, their bodies grew gross while their minds shrank, they became stupid, then de-

generate. The dread curse of Quetzalcoatl had fallen upon them."*

Xalia passed one hand over her eyes in a gesture of utter weariness and went on—

"At the command of the Wiyatao Valdes, those of the Mictli who had held true to the sacred teachings drove the traitors from their midst. And so, for the first time, was good ranged against evil, Valdes against Romero. Into the exile of the middle valley were the faithless ones driven, where in ancient caves they found shelter from the beasts they now feared.

"But ever, as the years rolled by, the numbers of the accursed grew greater and those of the faithful less, till at length, only a scattered handful of the true Mictli still clung together and dwelt in the Sacred City of Taotl, that tunnels the rock above the Bowl of Death where the traitors dared not venture.

"And soon this handful deserted their ancient home and crossed the valley to live here in this lesser place, for the spirits of the dead had haunted them out.

"**T**HEN was I, Xalia, the last of the Valdes, born. A child strangely different from those about me, for I was like unto those first Mictli whose glittering forms crowd the central space surrounding the Bowl of Death.

*The abnormal size of the human, animal and plant life encountered in the valley forms a perplexing problem, the causes of which may have been either of the following points or even a combination of both. 1st. The unnatural hot-house atmosphere in the valley would tend to produce a more rapid and greater growth in all forms of life. But, with this abnormal state of affairs gradual deterioration of the finer and stronger qualities would inevitably occur. Human standards would tend to retrograde, both physically and morally. Animal life would degenerate through lack of effort in survival. Plants once firm and hardy would grow soft in texture and spread in tropical luxuriance. 2nd. Perhaps some unknown chemical quality inherent in the localized valley specie of the Peyote plants, upon which both the Mictli and animals constantly fed, was responsible for the abnormal growth. The above supposition, taken in conjunction with the unnatural surroundings and their probable effect, would seem to explain an otherwise inexplicable phenomenon. Centuries of inter-breeding was of course responsible for the degeneracy of the Mictli, and Xalia was, in all probability, a throwback.

"I learned this legend of the Mictli I now tell thee and mastered the secrets of the Sacred Rites as Priestess of Taotl. All this my father, the Wiyatao, poured into my eager ears before the infamous Romero and his treacherous followers transgressed the last unbroken law and shed human blood.

"Aye, scarce ten glances has Tona-tiuh, the glorious Sun God, cast through the rock-rimmed Eye of Taotl since at one great killing they slaughtered those of the Mictli who still clung to the True Faith; all but Xalia, whom even they feared, for she is the Sacred Priestess of Taotl and likewise the coveted of Romero, their leader. Romero, who now lusts for her and means to possess her.

"But three days hence, at the Feast of Metzli, will he come to seize me, claiming, though falsely, that I have reached the age of mating and if I deny him, my life will be sacrificed at the Waters of Oblivion on the altar of Taotl in the Bowl of Death."

I tried to cry out, struggled to move, but a paralyzing numbness held me helpless. I watched her features slowly fade and pass from my sight. Then a black oblivion descended on me and I lay as one dead.

CHAPTER IV

THE THIRD DAY

AN EMPTY age of dreamless non-existence seemed to have rolled over me before I began to feel a growing sense of animation stealing through me. An age, broken at intervals by the dim presence of Xalia, who fed and cared for me.

As my rousing consciousness slowly scattered the clouds of sleep I felt new vigor pulsing through me. My eyes opened and I saw Xalia. Bathed in the familiar ruddy light, she knelt near the doorway and stirred the contents of a round vessel, while her bur-

nished hair fell about her face, clouding it in shadow.

A sleepy contentment pervaded me. My leg was healed. I now felt physically fit and strong again, so lay quietly to watch her, while the memory of that vivid dream tale ran through my wondering mind. Could the thing be true? Why not? The wolves and bats had been real enough. The marvelous healing effects of the drug were certainly no dream. Those armored corpses of the tunnel. They were real, too, and practically proved the truth of the wild legend.

Suddenly, a harsh call broke the quiet of our rocky cell.

Before I could move or even speak, Xalia had glided out, closed the woven grill and disappeared from sight.

An uneasy feeling that something evil threatened her took possession of me. Some danger lay out there which she had gone to face alone.

Abruptly, the last part of Xalia's story leaped to my mind. I recalled her awful situation, alone in this valley at the mercy of the degenerate Mictli, Romero's threat to come and take her on the third day.

The third day!

The truth struck me like a blow in the face.

This was the third day.

I'd lain in a drugged sleep all that time. And now, in unselfish desperation, Xalia had answered that call and gone out to give herself up and by so doing conceal my presence.

I sprang up.

As I dashed the woven lattice back, I stopped to cast a single glance over the weird scene beyond. The sight I saw set my blood on fire, maddened me.

There, in the open space before the rock dwelling, stood Xalia, bravely facing a threatening crowd of some two hundred human monsters.

It was all true. Those specters of Xalia's story, the degenerate Mictli, were a living, breathing reality, for

there they stood. Huge, grotesque creatures with bestial faces, flabby and soft, who grimaced or grinned from lipless, toad-like mouths that continually slobbered saliva.

Their protruding eyes, almost colorless and devoid of brows or lashes, shifted furtively. Where their noses should have been, two moist holes gaped in a fleshy lump. The scanty hair that grew on their otherwise smooth egg-shaped heads formed scraggy, moth-eaten patches, gaudily dyed.

All were clothed similarly, in single piece garments of thick, varicolored spider web that clung to their gross bodies and clearly revealed the repulsiveness beneath. In their putty like paws, ending in rudimentary fingers, each clutched a two-edged club similar to Xalia's. But what astonished me most was the towering bulk of their monstrous bodies which ranged close to eight feet in height.

One, a huge lump of pasty fleshiness, even larger than the others, began to shuffle forward.

Something warned me that this was Romero, the leader of the pack. As he reached forward to clutch Xalia's shoulder, the girl who had sacrificed herself to protect me, something in my brain seemed to snap. A red haze floated before me. My fingers crooked with the longing to bury themselves in his bloated throat.

I leaped forward.

As the sea of stupid faces turned toward me their leering grins changed to startled wonder, hate, then abject fear. Taken completely by surprise, they stood rigid while I dashed at their leader.

My fist crashed against his livid face. I felt my hand sink into the squashy flesh, saw him stagger and topple back. Heard his snarling cry of pain. As he fell I snatched away his club with one hand and swept Xalia close against me with the other arm.

Plunging forward I drove the club

into the pale blóbs of faces before me. Smashing blows that sank deep into the flabby flesh and sent the monstrous bodies staggering to right and left. Shrill screams of pain rang out. Yelling, I struck again and again at the wall of soft bodies that opened as by magic before my sweeping blows. With Xalia pressed close against me, I forged ahead, now leaping a squirming shape on the ground—now striking at the bestial faces that tried to dodge the swing of my club.

Occasional blows fell on me but without serious effect for there was no real power in the muscles that delivered them. Like the great wolves and bats these degraded Mictli had comparatively little strength and went down with astonishing ease.

The smell of warm blood, mingled with the fetid stench of the crowded bodies rose about us. I plunged through the thinning ranks that now began to push and scatter apart, believing me some strange, mad thing suddenly let loose in their midst which they couldn't understand or face. Panic seized them. Their ranks parted before us. They fought madly to escape my club.

Suddenly we broke through the last of the living wall and plunged into the winding trail beyond. Behind us, the noise of moans and shrill beastly whimperings soon faded, then disappeared in the distance.

I STOPPED to rest and look behind. "Go on, go on for thy life," I heard Xalia whisper, as her arms tightened round my neck. "They were overpowered only by the sudden surprise. The unexpected sight of thee struck terror in them.

"Soon they will gather together and so gain courage to pursue and attack. Flight is our only hope. Follow this path for it leads to the safety of the ancient dwellings of my forefathers that are cut deep in the cliff lying above the Bowl of Death.

"There, in that dread place of spirits even Romero dares not follow us. And now, Don Roger, place me on my feet and hasten, hasten for the vile Mictli are upon us."

I set Xalia down and threw a swift glance back.

It was true. The scattered Mictli had gathered together again and were in hot pursuit. Even as I looked, Romero dashed around a turn. Blood streamed over his pulpy features but an animal hate gleamed in his colorless eyes.

Xalia jerked my arm and I grasped her hand. We leaped forward and rushed along the trail with the shrill screams of the maddened Mictli dinning in our ears.

Dodging clawing branches, diving under overhanging masses of spiny growth—we pressed rapidly on and on along the narrow trail that tunneled and twisted its tortuous way through the matted jungle. All about, a mouldy hothouse odor rose in waves, strangely sweet and sickening.

An immense spider web, thick as twine and elastic as bands of rubber, barred our way. With a few strokes of my club I hacked through it. The hairy guardian scuttled toward me intent on attack, but a sweeping blow of the club crushed out its venomous life. We dashed on, rounded an abrupt turn of the trail, and halted.

Close to the further side of a good sized clearing crouched a great cat-like beast gnawing at one of the bloated cactus plants that covered the rocky ground. As it caught sight of us, the huge puma, fully as large as an ordinary mustang, dropped the half gnawed plant and glared.

Then its sinewy tail began to lash the ground, it gathered itself and prepared to spring. Xalia screamed, "Beware the peyote eater," and leaped in front of me. The great cat snarled. With a yell, I bounded past the girl and dashed at the beast.

The pale eyes wavered, it snarled

again, hesitated and suddenly turned to slink off. But it had waited an instant too long. My club crashed down above its lean flank and I felt the spine snap. Paralyzed, its hind quarters crumpled under it. The great feline spit, snarled, then, turning in a paroxysm of rage, clawed and bit at the air.

As I sprang back and stood panting, Xalia ran to my side. Simultaneously, a chorus of triumphant yells rang out from the trail behind us.

I swung around. Romero and his followers were pouring into the clearing.

Seizing the girl's hand I hurried her into the opening of the further path.

"Run, Xalia, run," I called, "while I hold them back!"

Turning, I faced the first of the pursuing Mictli. Romero and a handful of his followers were half way across the plant-choked clearing but still fifty or a hundred feet away. A happy thought struck me.

I reached down, grasped a round stone and sent it whizzing across the clearing. The next instant Romero lay doubled up, kicking and gasping for air. My missile had struck him in the stomach. He was helpless. Rock after rock thudded into the hesitating group of screaming Mictli gathered around their fallen leader.

One after another they yelped and fell. But more and more were pouring from the trail to take their places. I'd held them long enough. Now it was time for me to leave.

I turned to dart after Xalia, whose fluttering drapery I expected to see far down the trail. Instead she stood waiting for me not ten feet away. Behind me, screams of rage and pattering footfalls told me the pursuit had recommenced. Without a word, I clutched her hand and we broke into a run.

The fleshy, clawing foliage flashed by us in a pale blur of bleached un-

healthy green. Salty sweat stung my eyes. The hot, sticky air reeked with the cloying smell of the exotic plant life.

As we ran on and on the shrill screams of the Mictli gradually grew fainter. But now I could hear Xalia's labored breathing. She was tiring rapidly and our pace was slackening noticeably. Slowly the shouts behind us began to gain volume. Finally the patter of feet reached us.

SUDDENLY Xalia faltered, staggered and trying to release her hand from mine, she gasped:

"Seek thou safety, Don Roger, for I can go no further."

I caught her up in my arms and stumbled on doggedly with the yells of the Mictli ringing in my ears. On and on, through clinging spider webs, past clutching thorny branches, dodging, twisting, turning, on and on.

It couldn't be much further now. But the pursuing pack were still gaining, for their yells sounded closer. The breath labored in my lungs, my chest seemed bursting. The over-shadowed trail had become a gloomy tunnel leading toward a dancing patch of hot light just ahead.

Suddenly, the ground under me trembled. An angry rumbling filled my ears and drowned out the yelping cries behind us. I stumbled, lost my balance and pitched forward. Xalia slipped from my arms as I rolled over the edge of an abrupt slope and fell until my body struck a rock and stopped. Shaken and dizzy I sat up, and called to Xalia.

Her panting voice answered me from somewhere above. I looked up and saw her anxious face peering over the rock rim. In another moment she was beside me and had clutched my hand.

As we turned to take up our flight, I stopped and stared at the awe-inspiring sight below.

Bathed in the blood red rays of the

setting sun, that streamed through the Eye of Taotl, that enormous round fissure in the valley wall, lay the Bowl of Death. The name fitted the place, for it was a titanic cup-like hollow divided in four parts.

It led down through hundreds of concentric circles or narrow terraces, which grew smaller in circumference as they descended and neared an open central ring, where a fantastic cone-shaped mound of some glassy mineral deposit rose shimmering in the sunset to a height of twenty or thirty feet.

From an opening at the cone's top, spiteful puffs of steam belched up and melted in a rainbow haze. But the terrible, the ghastly thing about the place was the crouching multitude of human bodies that were ranged in serried circles around each terraced shelf.

In rigid ranks, eternally still, they sat facing toward the center, with the blood red light glistening on the glassy coating that encased them all.*

"Who—who are they?" I gasped.

"These," Xalia faltered, "are the gathering of the dead. The ancient ones who have tasted of the Waters of Oblivion and are forevermore at peace. Before thee, thou beholdest all that remains of my people, the True Mictli, all but the Wanderers, those strange cabaleros who rest, no one knowest where. They . . ."

The clatter of rocks sounded above us.

I looked up just in time to sweep Zalia aside as a great boulder bounded past and crashed its way through those silent ranks below us.

*The glassy coating covering the corpses in both the Bowl and tunnel may be explained by the supposition that the waters of the geyser were in all probability saturated by a generous chemical mixture of silicon and arsenic in solution. This compound, when precipitated on the bodies, would tend to, 1st, preserve the flesh by the action of the arsenic and, 2nd, by far the most important, the pure solution of silicon would then form a transparent coating impervious to air, and therefore an absolute time-defying preservative unless cracked or broken. The mist and spray continually falling from the geyser onto a body would rapidly mould a uniform coating of silicon over any object it touched.

A series of mad yelps broke out above us as we leaped into the path that the hurtling rock had cleared in its irresistible descent. Scrambling, sliding; at times falling and even rolling, we descended from one terrace to the next, for directly across the great amphitheatre lay the haven of refuge.

The subterranean dwellings of her ancient ancestors, which was the one spot in the valley feared above all others by our superstitious pursuers.

Bruised, cut, panting, we hurried down through rank after rank of shimmering corpses. But even our headlong flight could not prevent me from noting the ghastly assembly all about us.

The bodies of men, women and even children sat staring at us from unwavering eyes, while their rigid lips, stretched tight across their clenched teeth, seemed to mock our struggle for escape with ghastly grins.

At first, gross, hulking forms, imperfectly preserved, appeared, that squatted in their dyed spider web garments along the upper tiers. In looks, they somewhat resembled the depraved mob pursuing us, but as we passed further down this repulsive type began to change.

The bodies, now clothed in woven fabric and ornamented with feathers, gold and silver, became more normal in size, the faces developed definite human features and I realized that there before me the ghastly story of the Mictli's retrogression was graphically recorded in their dead bodies.

MY INTEREST was abruptly ended by a bounding rock that crashed past us, followed by a fusillade of others. Romero's sly brain had found a new way to hamper us. Now, added to the difficulties of our descent, we confronted the continual menace of being crushed.

But this bombardment of boulders was not the greatest danger, for, as

I glanced over my shoulder, I suddenly realized that he had adopted a definite plan of pursuit. The rocks were meant only to divert our attention and interfere with our rapid descent.

The real menace lay in the swarm of Mictli headed by Romero, who were dashing down an inclined path that led through the packed corpses toward the center of the Bowl. It was a determined attempt to cut off our retreat and by so doing either they would overpower us or force us to double back where we would be at the mercy of the fiends still waiting above.

Only one desperate chance of escape now remained. We must reach the center of the Bowl and start climbing the further side before Romero and his party could stop us.

But was there time to make it? Would those tremendous legs of the howling pack carry them to the central point before we could reach it? The advantage lay with them in the descent, for they followed a clear path and their bulk helped rather than hindered them.

They were straining every nerve and had even stopped howling and waving their clubs. No element of sudden surprise would help to carry us through here. Only our own speed during the next few minutes could decide the question of life and death.

Suddenly, Xalia saw the Mictli's move and understood, for she gripped my hand and panted.

"See, Don Roger, they overtake us—leave me, leave me, for I hinder thee—haste thee for thy life!"

As she sobbed out the last word I gathered her in my arms and, casting caution to the winds, sprang forward heedless of everything but speed. Slipping, panting, kicking aside obstructions, I leaped from shelf to shelf, closer and closer to the central goal.

But equally determined the Mictli swept down toward the same point in a living stream of potential destruc-

tion that would break into the central circle close on my heels.

As the Mictli saw us about to slip from their grasp, they flung themselves forward in a final, desperate attempt to cut us off—all except Romero. While his followers rushed on he stopped, steadied himself and hurled his club.

The heavy wooden missile struck me just below one knee, caught between my legs. I tripped and crashed forward into the central circle, with Xalia clasped close in my arms. Simultaneously, the exultant pursuit poured into the circle, fifty feet away.

In desperation I lurched to my feet, lifted Xalia and started toward the further side when suddenly a gurgling, hissing roar, ear blasting in its intense volume, burst above us.

The sheer shock spurred me to a dozen mighty leaps that carried us to the lowest tier on the opposite side of the circle. Then came the deluge, for the Eternal Waters of Oblivion had risen in their might to save us and punish the desecrating Mictli.

Rumbling, gurgling, foaming, a great green pillar of boiling water shot high in the air. As it jetted up and up, through billowing clouds of snowy steam Xalia and I ran, ran for our very lives along one of the four radiating runways that sliced up through the gathered dead toward the top of the Bowl.

Less than twenty seconds may have elapsed, though it seemed an age before the mighty pillar reached its highest point, wavered and broke in a streaming, hissing deluge of falling water that spread an impenetrable wall of scalding death between us and our pursuers.

Xalia and I had reached safety, but some at least of the Mictli had been less fortunate as the faint echoes of their agonized screams gave proof. Nothing now stood between us and the caves of refuge in the cliff, so,

spent and weary, we dragged ourselves up the sloping path till we reached the top of the Bowl.

WITH a sigh of relief I stopped and turned to look back, then stared, scarcely believing my eyes. Romero had just lurched into sight from behind the central cone and with him straggled a handful of his followers who had also escaped death, shuffled toward one of the inclined paths.

He was still determined on following, for his ghastly face, staring up at us was filled with a look of bestial hate, while with shrill cries he urged his followers on. When they hesitated he screamed and struck at them viciously until they started forward and as they came their anger rose.

"Come," Xalia whispered and dragged at my arm. "Let us hurry for they are very angry and we must reach the refuge where they dare not follow."

We turned and I stared upward in amazement at the frowning red barrier of the stone ahead that rose higher and higher gradually curving outward until it hung threateningly over us.

"Look!" Xalia pointed.

My eyes followed her gesture and I saw that the base of the cliff was honeycombed with black openings. Over the face of the rock itself sprawled heavy carvings and bas-reliefs, weatherbeaten and cracked but still imposing and beautiful.

"In this place," Xalia went on, "there is safety. Because of the wandering spirits, the terrors of the unknown darkness and what it conceals even Romero dare not enter here. I also have dreaded and shunned this place, but when you are near me all is different, fear vanishes nor can harm touch me."

Together we hurried across the boulder-strewn space that sloped up sharply to the foot of the cliff until at last a great truncated door, that

was the central entrance, yawned darkly before us. As we stopped and peered into the intense gloom of the interior the vicious gleam of animal eyes confronted us.

Foreseeing the need of torches and some sort of fuel, I told Xalia to wait and ran toward a patch of scrub cedars, long since dead, that crowded against the base of the cliff a hundred feet away. But Xalia, refusing to be left alone, followed me along the cliff to the cedars and together we hurriedly gathered a double armful of dry fuel.

Scarcely five minutes could have elapsed before we had gathered what wood we needed and were ready to retrace our steps. But as we turned, Xalia cried out:

"Look, Don Roger, look, they come!"

It was true. The Mictli were pouring out of the Bowl and streaming up the slope, howling their hate as they came. We were effectually cut off from the main entrance but close beside us gaped a number of smaller openings.

As the maddened Mictli leaped toward us I pushed Xalia into the nearest of these apertures and dived after her. Intense darkness swallowed us, a clammy black blanket, rank with the fetid odor of decay and death. While we stood close together uncertain of our next move, a rising wail, horribly inhuman, trembled through the gloom, swelled to a quavering shriek, sank and died away.

A crash sounded as Xalia dropped her burden and clutched at me, for a pair of glowing eyes had suddenly materialized in the darkness and now stared at us with an evil, unwinking intensity. From outside came a wild medley of furious yells and shrieks that mingled with the eerie wail of that nameless thing beyond us.

The Mictli were crowding toward the entrance. The glowing eyes before us seemed creeping closer. Xalia moaned and clung to me. Would the

insanely mad Mictli dare to follow us even here? We stood between two threatening dangers but the lesser was probably that ahead.

I dropped my burden of wood and found a match. Fire might show us the road to safety and frighten the creature with the diabolical eyes. Groping on the rock floor, my eager fingers found a billet of dry resinous wood, one end of which was splintered. Swiftly I struck the match and lighted it. The flame flared up in a column of leaping light.

Beside me, Xalia gasped, sank to her knees and whispered in an awed voice:

"The Sacred Flower of Flame, Don Roger, the lost secret of my people." Her pale face sank to her hands and she broke into convulsive sobs.

Again that wailing cry rang through the place and fell in shuddering chords that were drowned in the Mictli's furious clamor outside.

With my heart thumping a muffled tattoo I raised the torch high above my head and stared around a great square room, a room generously carved and hewn from the living rock, but without any sign of an interior door. Dense shadows leaped and danced against the further side, partially concealing it; so I moved forward, then stopped.

A great shapeless something reared its vague bulk close to the opposite wall. Clenching my teeth I stepped forward and swung the torch around my head. A shower of sparks scattered to right and left.

The flame leaped higher and I saw, reared high on a pile of bleached bones, decayed offal and filth, the indistinct outlines of a huge feathered creature. Fully six feet in height it crouched forward with monstrous wings outspread to an extent of fifteen feet or more.

Its round horned head was thrust out displaying two enormous ringed eyes that blinked in the light above a

wicked curved beak that snapped viciously in impotent anger.

In the dark the creature was a potential terror incarnate, capable of tearing a strong man to shreds, but, dazzled by the flame, it was helpless, an impotent devil.

WAVING my torch, I ran forward and struck at the hissing monster which I'd suddenly recognized for what it was—a great horned owl of giant proportions. My torch only grazed its evil head but a shower of sparks scattered from the flaring end of the stick and settled in the tinder-dry fluff on its breast.

In a frenzy of sudden fear, the creature beat the air madly with its huge wings. The glowing sparks spread, grew brighter. There came a puff of smoke, a flicker of flame and the feathers were alight. Clumsily the great owl fluttered from its filthy mound and headed for the door, wrapped in a flaring sheet of fire.

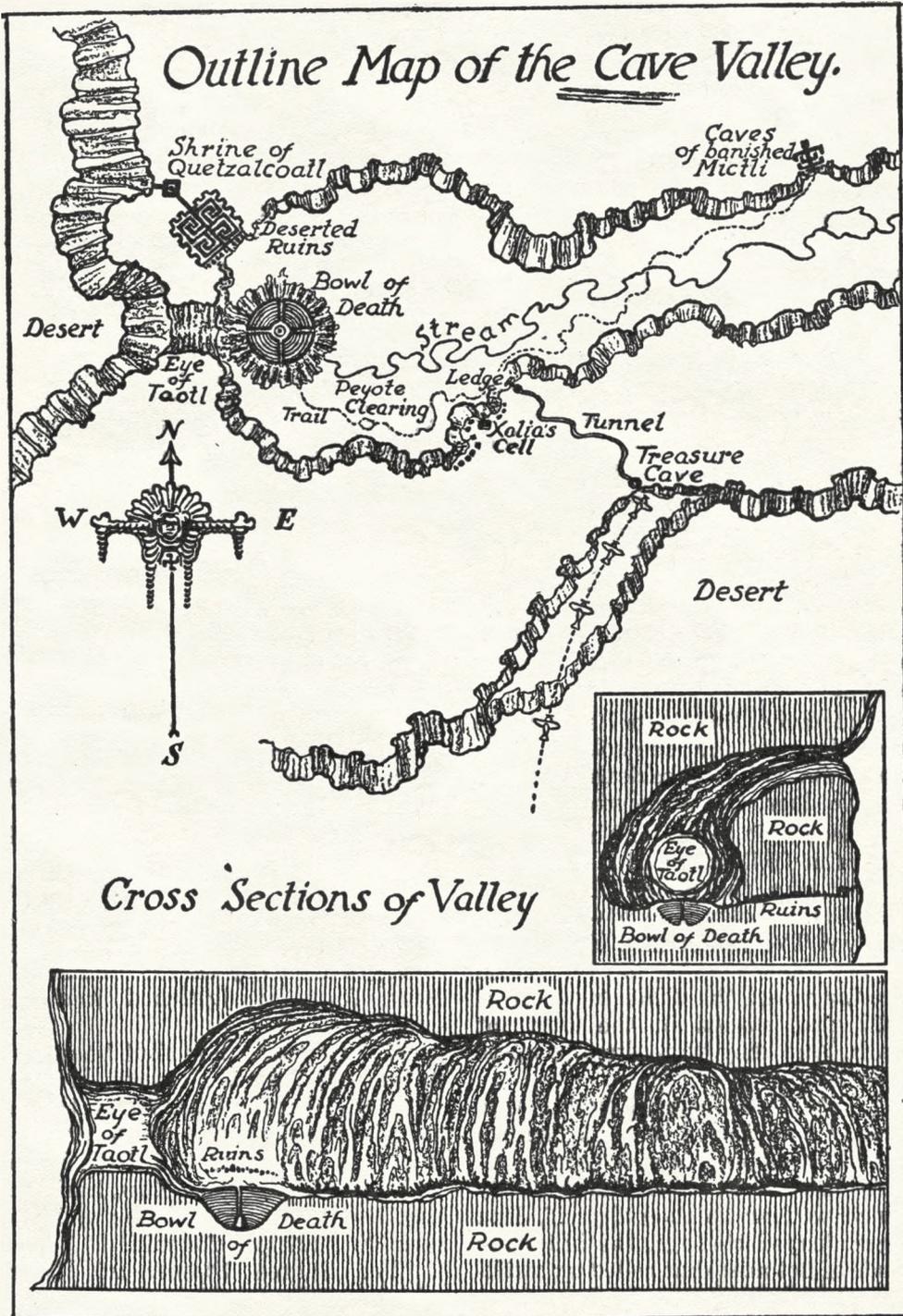
Xalia screamed and threw herself to one side. I leaped after the flaming, flapping shape, beating and striking until it rose and blundered out through the entrance trailing a stream of sparks like a fiery comet gone mad.

Simultaneously, wild howls of terror mingled with screams of agony rang out from the Mictli, closely followed by the thud of running feet. A moment later I reached the door and looked out.

The flaming creature had flown through their midst and vanished, after setting fire to the flimsy web clothing of a score who now rushed away screaming in agony while the remainder, mad with fear, were leaping down the slope toward the edge of the Bowl, headed by Romero.

Here was our chance to reach the main entrance, for I knew this cul-de-sac we had stumbled into was no real refuge but a trap.

Outline Map of the Cave Valley.



Cross Sections of Valley

Turning, I re-entered the gloomy chamber of the owl and called:

"Come, Xalia, the Mictli have gone. We must hurry back to the great door that leads to safety."

"Yes, Don Roger," Xalia answered.

Obediently she rose, picked up her armful of wood and together we ran along the foot of the cliff to the central entrance. Just inside the deep shadows of the massive portal we stopped. Lighting two torches, I held out one of the flaming brands toward Xalia.

For a moment she shrank back fearfully, then, with trembling hands, she reluctantly took it, and stared into the wavering flame. As she gazed, a fixed, far-away look clouded her eyes, her face paled, she shuddered and suddenly dropped the torch.

"What's frightened you, Xalia?" I called, and sprang forward to steady her where she stood swaying and passing one hand over her eyes in a dazed manner.

"The vision, the vision I saw in the flame, Don Roger," she sobbed, then turned and pointing back through the massive door, she whispered:

"I have seen my fate. The Eternal Waters of Oblivion shall claim me at the last, for the Sacred Flower of Flame hath shown me and—it cannot lie. Aye! The vision that bloomed in the red flame showed me the Mictli pressing round the glittering altar of Toatl that stands in the Bowl of Death. And they were staring up at me in hate.

"I beheld the beast Romero, who towered over me, a look of fiendish hate stamped on his evil face as he stared down. A look that swiftly turned to fear as thou thyself, Don Roger, leaped through the billowing clouds of hot mist that rolled up swiftly and hid the last awful moment from my view. And so Don Roger, the vision faded and merged into the glowing flame."

Xalia's voice broke and trailed off in a hopeless sob.

Throwing my arm about her protectingly, I whispered:

"Poor kid, you're all in; seeing things and it's no wonder after all you've gone—"

THE sharp rattle of dislodged stones just beyond the entrance cut short my answer.

I swung Xalia behind me and turned to face the sound.

What new danger menaced us now? We stood rigid and waited. The rattle of rocks came again, closer this time. As a long moment of intense silence dragged by we slowly retreated backward into the deeper gloom of the great corridor.

Suddenly, from beyond the entrance, the high tones of Romero's voice, vibrant with jealous rage, cut through the gloom.

"Xalia," he screamed, "I, Romero, thy master, for the last time bid thee obey me. Deliver thyself unto me before it be too late and all will be well. Refuse and the doom of the Eternal Waters of Oblivion shall descend on thee."

Quivering, Xalia shrank closer to me.

For a long moment her tear-dimmed eyes looked up into mine. I pressed her closer and she seemed to gather strength from my caress for her willowy form straightened and she called:

"Go, Romero, thou foul beast, for never will I deliver myself into thy clutches. Though I perish by the destroying kiss of the 'Waters,' as I know I shall—still will I die happy and undefiled by thee. Now, hark and pay heed, Romero. At the end, thy own life shalt pay for mine.

"The Sacred Flower of Flame, which hath been restored to Xalia thy Priestess, hath told me this. Aye, and likewise it hath showed me that the strange champion, who the Bright

God Taotl hath sent, shalt call thee to account for each and every evil deed thou hast done.

"Be warned and beware, Romero. Fear makes thy cowardly followers futile through terror of this haunted gloom. So get thee hence for thou dare not follow where I now go."

With a choking gasp Xalia finished and threw herself on my breast in a storm of tears. As she lay there, sobbing convulsively, Romero's threatening reply reached us.

"So be it, thou false Goddess. By thy own words thy doom is sealed. No mercy shalt thou know. The burning kiss of the Eternal Waters awaits thee. Aye, and with thee thy mighty champion. Deceive thyself not, Xalia, for on the morrow thou and thy secret lover shalt grovel at my feet. Be warned and farewell till then."

Romero's frenzied words ended in a high pitched snarl of hate, punctuated by the clatter of rocks as he stumbled away from the entrance.

For a moment we stood in heavy silence, broken only by Xalia's muffled sobs. Then I growled.

"So that's that. But our little playmate Romero sure believes in throwing the bull."

Beside me Xalia shivered and pressed closer while she whispered in choked tones:

"I know not what it is to throw a bull, Don Roger, but I do know that the beast Romero is sly and treacherous and one cannot tell what he will do to gain his ends for it hath ever been thus."

In answer I patted her shoulder, bent to lift the bundle of wood, then waved my smouldering torch and we moved forward under its brightened flame.

From one great chamber we passed into others; all coated with the dead dust of centuries, all carved from the living rock in scrolls, and borders, separated by intricate mat work surrounding bas-reliefs of human fig-

ures that were adorned with boughs and feathers, executed with great skill.

As we advanced further and further into the maze of echoing rooms the spreading pads of wolves and lesser creatures began to appear in the dust of the floor. Once a pair of huge bats blundered by on flapping wings, chittering and spreading a nauseous odor in their wake. At times glowing eyes appeared in the darkness only to fade, as their half-seen shadowy shapes slunk away from our light.

Finally, we came to a narrow corridor that inclined upward. This we followed for perhaps a hundred feet to its end and stopped abruptly. A massive triangular arch formed by overlapping courses of projecting stones rose before us.

Beyond lay a huge room whose walls towered up and up in the form of a pyramid and lost themselves in the darkness above. But midway of the chamber a monster shape reared its black bulk a hundred feet or more over us.

AWED by the sight I drew Xalia closer to me. As we slowly passed into the great truncated chamber and halted before the massive stone figure a shaft of ruddy light began to filter through the solid western wall.

While we watched in silent wonder the red gleam grew and spread. Its creeping finger of rosy brilliance touched the great stone image caressingly and illumined the massive face that stared down at us in solitary majesty.*

Xalia shivered, then whispered:

"It is the Supreme God Quetzalcoatl."

*The ray of sunlight that entered the great chamber was in all probability cleverly engineered by a narrow cleft cut through the western wall at such an angle that the last rays of the setting sun would be directed onto the face of Taotl, fading as the sun sank and changed the angle. This device has been used time and again by numerous ancient peoples for various purposes.

She humbly bowed her head while I stood gazing up, half in awe, half in perplexity.

Suddenly, I was rudely brought back to the present by a low rumbling that came from under our feet. The solid rock about us trembled and the next instant a clear jet of water gushed high in the air before the brooding Taotl.

It wavered, broke and was turned to a rainbow by the slowly fading shaft of light. As the rumblings died away and Xalia timidly raised her face, I walked toward the feet of the God, then stopped at the sight before me.*

There, side by side, in a deep stone sarcophagus encrusted with carvings, lay two gleaming human bodies, a man and a woman.

A hoarse cry escaped my lips. I stared down in bewilderment, for under the wavering light of my torch I saw the face of Xalia.

Feature by feature I scanned the beautiful dead countenance and found it identical to that of the girl just behind me. Then my eyes darted to the man, I leaned further forward, clutching the torch that now shook in my hand. The body was covered with a beautiful suit of Toledo half armor richly chased in gold.

The handsome, clear cut face was bearded and shadowed by the broad brimmed morion on his head while under the folded hands, cased in steel gloves, flashed a jeweled rapier, a masterpiece of armorer's art.

"Look, Xalia, look!" I whispered.

Slowly she crept forward and stared down. Then, with sudden fear clouding her eyes, she gasped:

"Is it a warning from Quetzalcoatl? A message of doom, Don Roger?—For see, am I not like unto her that sleepeth there in eternal rest beside

her lord? Aye! It is an omen for something tells me that these two are none other than Don Valdes and his mate, the first of my forbears and soon, I also will be as they."

"No, Xalia," I answered, "not that, but a promise of life, for you and I shall leave this valley safely, just as Don Valdes and his wife entered it so many years ago. See this crucifix? It is a symbol of hope." I raised the jeweled cross that lay on the woman's breast and held it up.

"Aye, it is the sign of the Four Winds, the emblem of hope," Xalia breathed.

Together we looked up into the stone face of the God, where the fading glow touched the massive features.

Perhaps it was a queer trick of the gathering shadows, but as we gazed, the great head seemed to move, to nod in friendly majesty. Simultaneously the air around us began to vibrate with those soft enveloping strains of melody I'd heard in the valley.

Xalia sank to her knees and bowed her face in her hands while I stood quietly staring up at the God's face as it slowly faded in the gloom.

"I think you meant that nod," I whispered and stood a moment more before turning to Xalia, and laying my hand on her shoulder.

Slowly the flowerlike face was raised to me, her lips parted and her eyes clung to mine. An almost irresistible impulse to take her in my arms and comfort her shook me, but I put it aside and said:

"Tonight, Xalia, we stay here together where none of the Mictli will dare to come. Tomorrow I'll go out and search for the entrance of the hidden tunnel by which I entered the valley. When I find it I'll come back and together we'll escape. But tomorrow for a time you must stay here alone. Have you the courage?"

*The jet of water that gushed up from the feet of Taotl was no more than a subterranean connection with the main source of the geyser, through which the water was forced upward by natural pressure every time the geyser itself functioned.

Xalia looked up into my eyes, then whispered:

"For you I have the courage to die, Don Roger."

I bent, took her hand and kissed it. Then I gently raised her from the floor and we climbed to greater safety on the massive knees of the God, where I kindled a small fire.

Later, when I knew that darkness had fallen, I made four trips to the valley for wood. On the last trip I came staggering back not only carrying fuel, but with a rabbit as large as a good sized dog slung across my back, that I had killed with a blow of my club as it started up from feeding. In a short time our hunger and thirst were attended to. Then came sleep.

CHAPTER V

TRICKED

THE padding sound of stealthy paws and shadowy forms gliding through the gloom told me daylight had come. The beasts that hunted during the night were returning to their lairs.

Xalia was still sleeping and I didn't wake her, for there was something I had to do that was better for her not to see. The arms and armor of Don Valdes were more valuable to me living than him dead.

The task was unpleasant but soon over, for five minutes later I stood fully cased in armor, and ready to start, but the hardest part still lay before me.

Lighting a torch from the fire I bent over Xalia and touched her shoulder.

Slowly her eyes opened. A look of fright gathered on her white face and she sprang up clutching her breast.

"Xalia, don't you know me, Roger?" I called.

Her terror died as suddenly as it had come, leaving her weak. She swayed where she stood so I threw my arm around her and said:

"It's time to leave you, Xalia, but before I go promise me to keep this fire burning and not to venture from the knees of Toatl where you are safe. When I've found the path of escape nothing can keep me from coming back for you."

She clung to me for a long moment, her face upturned, her eyes closed. Then her lids slowly opened and her arms fell from my neck as she breathed:

"I promise."

With a lump in my throat I swiftly passed across the great chamber, through the narrow corridor and into the darkness of the dust-filled maze beyond, my torch scattering sparks as I went.

Here and there the shadowy form of some beast slunk away, its teeth bared, its eyes gleaming, but nothing attacked me. At last, far away through the dusty gloom, a faint point of light appeared that I knew for the red reflection of the valley.

Suddenly sensing danger ahead I advanced with greater caution and stopped at the portal of the last room. For a tense moment I stood listening, the Spanish rapier gripped in my hand. Somewhere beyond the outer doorway a stone had rattled. Romero and the Mictli were waiting—but they were quiet, too quiet. Did they expect to catch me unaware? To spring some sort of trap?

Well, a trick for a trick would be fair enough. I'd soon see.

Waving my torch until the flame flared up brightly, I took a stronger grip on the hilt of the rapier and was ready. Then, with a series of yells, I ran toward the entrance stamping my feet as I came.

Twenty leaps carried me across the room and to the door—but instead of plunging on through I stopped short on the threshold. Luck was with me for, as I halted, an avalanche of jagged rocks, that had been swung

above the door in a woven net of creepers, crashed to the ground.

Now was my chance and I took it.

Flinging myself through the dense cloud of dust I leaped over the stones and shot into the red glare of the valley, like a gleaming ball of metal. In my right hand I held the rapier straight before me, in my left flared the torch.

Before me rose the pale, featureless face of a Mictli. I slashed and saw a red gash spread across it. Another took its place. A heavy blow struck my breastplate, glanced off harmlessly. I used the point and felt it grate on bone.

To right and left the huge Mictli were rising from behind concealing boulders. Howling their hate they began to close in. I saw that speed was my best chance. Like a flash, I leaped to the top of a round rock, slashed down at the face that rose from behind it and bounded to a second boulder six feet further on.

A hurled stone crashed against my armor. Another leap and I was twelve feet beyond the nearest Mictli. From there I dropped to the ground, panting. But as my feet touched the earth a club struck my helmet, tore it from my head and it fell clanging to the rocky ground beyond hope of recovery.

Staggered by the blow I swayed back then lunged forward and flung my blazing torch into the face of the figure that was trying to slink away. I saw it was that devil, Romero, who shrieked and threw himself back, a split second before my glittering blade cut the air where his head had been. Too late now to kill the beast, for his mob of followers were nearly on me.

I bounded forward and ran along the path that led through the Bowl of Death, while behind me the snarling yells of the Mictli rang in my roaring ears.

Somewhere across the valley lay the tunnel of horrors by which I had entered, the one chance of escape from this pit of evil, if I could only find it. And now every minute of light counted, for here in this underground place the day was short, too short, and Xalia was back there alone and waiting for me in the dark.

DOWN one side of the Bowl I ran, across its center, past the altar of Taotl and up the further slope. Behind me streamed the pursuit, losing ground at every step. Just ahead the path opened into the giant growth.

I plunged in and pushed on doggedly, my flying feet thudding in time to my laboring breath. Here and there some belated animal scuttled from the path. The yells of the Mictli grew fainter, then ceased altogether.

My mind wrestled with the problem of how I should gain the shelf I'd fallen from. To climb the smooth wall was impossible but what other way was there to reach the revolving boulder. Before I realized it I had burst into the clearing of the peyote plants where the puma had met its death.

Here a pair of the albino wolves crouched, gnawing at the great overgrown plants. As they saw me they snarled and crouched with lips drawn back across their yellow fangs. But now I knew these creatures and rushed at them yelling.

For a moment they held their ground, but the sight of me clad in shining armor and rushing straight toward them was too much for their daylight courage. A second before the glittering blade reached them, they scattered and leaped away snarling.

Without slackening my pace I ran forward with my thoughts on Xalia. I'd take her out of this Valley of Hor-

rors and bring her to civilization where she rightfully belonged or die trying. My undamaged plane lay beyond the tunnel and needed only refueling to make it serviceable.

That part was easy. The tunnel and Xalia were the real problem. Instinctively I slashed through a spreading spider web that blocked the path and seized a handful of the streaming stuff to wipe the sweat from my eyes. But now the steady strain of the pace began to tell on me.

I was sobbing for breath and wondering how much further the twisting, burrowing tunnel of matted growth led, when I suddenly burst from the path, close to the spot where I'd pitched from the ledge and fallen at Xalia's feet.

Panting and streaming with perspiration I stopped at the foot of the red cliff and stared up eagerly, searching the smooth wind-worn stone for some trace of the treacherous ledge. Could I see it from below? Could I find it at all? Xalia needed me. I mustn't fail.

The salt sweat ran into my eyes and blinded me. As I dashed it aside, angrily, the hilt of my rapier struck the rock wall beside me and sank an inch or more into the stone. Surprised, I jerked it loose and turned to look.

Just where the pummel had seemed to sink in the rock, the caked dust of ages was trickling from a hole in the smooth stone, about three inches in diameter, and six feet further up appeared another small, round depression.

That was enough. Stepping back I looked up and saw, high above me, a ragged section of newly broken rock. It was the crumbled edge of the ledge. I'd found it through sheer luck and with it, if my guess was right, a system of holes drilled in the cliff that, at some previous time, had formed a set of sockets for a primitive peg lad-

der, a ladder to the tunnel above and freedom.

The sharp point of my poniard soon dug the packed dust from the lowest hole in the wall and I knew I was right. A surge of triumphant joy flooded through me.

Escape! That's what it meant. Escape for Xalia and life for us both—life together.

Everything now depended on quick work and some pegs. Then, back to the ruins, get Xalia, trick the Mictli, bring her here and climb out to safety and freedom. And that brought back the thought of Romero. Where was he and his pack of human animals? Why wasn't there even a faint sound of pursuit?

An uneasy feeling that something was wrong began to chill me.

Spurred on by growing anxiety I swiftly collected a quantity of stout wooden branches and broke them into short lengths, for I knew that from the greater height of the ledge I could see across the valley to the ruins and learn what was happening there.

The first hole was nearly on a level with my eyes and already cleared out. I jammed a peg in and hammered it home with a rock. The socket above was harder to reach and took longer to clear as the powdery red dust sifted into my eyes and stuck to my perspiring face.

After that I had to pull myself up to the first peg, stand there and work with one hand, while the other clutched the peg above. Fortunately, the cup-like slope of the wall helped to support my body. One by one I dug the dust from the sockets, hammered in my pegs and mounted higher and higher, building my ladder as I ascended.

The work was heartbreaking and terribly slow. The heat, under the heavy casing of my armor, was frightful but now there was no time to take

it off. Salt sweat trickled down my face and into my eyes. The dust choked me. The poniard slipped in my perspiring hand. The insteps of my feet felt as if they were being cut through.

Blisters rose on my palms and broke. But now, the ledge, the goal of my struggles, was just above me. With a sigh of relief I drove in the last peg and lifted myself another three feet. My arm rose and hooked over the crumbled lip of the ledge. I heaved myself up and squirmed across the broken edge.

At last it was done. Our path of escape was ready and Xalia would be saved.

Weary and panting, but filled with rising hope I rolled over to stare across the valley toward the ruins that were hiding her so securely.

But the sight I saw brought me staggering to my feet.

Darkly etched against the crimson glare of the declining sun, streaming through the rock-rimmed Eye of Taotli, I beheld a milling mob of the Mictli with Romero at their head crowding in front of the central arch of the ruins.

At that distance they appeared no larger than ants, but even so I could see the wild excitement in their close packed ranks and, by reason of some odd acoustic property of the valley walls, the far-off snarl of their mingled voices reached me clearly.*

HAD Xalia tried to follow me? Had Romero tempted her out with lying promises? Had they taken her? The uncertainty was torture.

As I stood there in rigid suspense, staring across the red valley at that ominous scene beyond, an impotent wave of rage surged over me. But my blind rage swiftly gave way to dread,

for the Mictli's angry clamor abruptly stopped, died away and a dead silence, like the calm before a storm, settled over the valley.

I clenched my jaw and leaned forward staring, my ears strained to catch the faintest sound in that unnatural quiet.

Suddenly, clear as a bell, a far-off reverberation echoed along the rocky walls. The clang of metal on stone.

A moment's silence followed. Then the high snarl of Romero's voice came to my eager ears.

"Xalia," he cried, "come out, for thy lover is in my power. I, Romero, thy rightful mate, have conquered him. He now lies dying beside the Waters of Oblivion and calls on thy name continually."

A soundless interval followed Romero's lying words.

Then, muffled and almost indistinguishable, came the faint echo of Xalia's voice:

"Liar," she cried, "liar and beast, thou hast not the courage nor the strength to overcome such as he. This is but one of thy foul tricks. I believe thee not.

Again Romero's harsh tones reached me.

"Hark to this sound, Xalia, and know the truth."

The reverberating clang of metal striking stone rang across the valley, followed by Romero's words, filled with hateful triumph.

"Canst thou deny that sound, Xalia? The sound of the metal headpiece thy lover wore striking against the rock? Listen once again, for the time is short if thou wouldst see him still alive."

Once more the metallic clang of my lost helmet echoed around the valley and Romero cried out:

"Wouldst thy lover suffer me to take this metal headpiece were he not dead or lying helpless in my power? No, Xalia, never. Thou knowest well

*This subterranean valley with its rocky, wind-worn walls would unquestionably have formed an ideal whispering gallery or sounding board where voices would probably carry to an exceptional distance, with perfect clearness.

this is the truth, for the voice of the metal cannot lie.

"Believe me, Priestess, and I myself will lead thee to the dying lover, who calls in ever weakening tones the one word 'Xalia.' That one longing word 'Xalia' . . . Wilt thou come, Priestess?"

A breathless silence descended on the valley.

Surely Xalia wouldn't, couldn't believe that monstrous lie—that vile trick. Tense, keyed to the breaking point, I waited, my ears straining to catch the first word of the answer that must decide two lives.

At last it came.

Xalia called fiercely: "Romero, I come."

CHAPTER VI

ON THE ALTAR OF DEATH

THE blood pounded in my brain, a red mist swam before my eyes as I found myself scrambling down the ladder of wooden pegs. There should still be time to save Xalia or die in the attempt—there must be.

I dropped the last fifteen feet, leaped up and dashed into the narrow trail, headed for the Bowl of Death, the Spanish rapier gleaming before me like a slender tongue of revenge.

My breath came in short, panting gasps. The blood drummed in my ears. I plunged on desperately, while a mental picture of that ghastly hollow with its boiling executioner in the center, formed before my aching eyes.

A picture that showed me Xalia's frail body, half hidden by rising puffs of steam, bound hand and foot across the gaping mouth of the glittering altar.

The horror of the thing gave me redoubled strength. I clenched my teeth and ran faster, while my fears for Xalia, keeping pace with my pounding feet, drove me on and on with maddening thoughts.

How often did the great geyser discharge? Would I be in time? If

Romero dared to harm even a hair of Xalia's head— A vicious curse rasped from my cracked lips and ended the threat.

The matted foliage flashed past me in a blur of mottled light and shade. The hot, moist air choked me. My lungs labored for breath. My heaving chest seemed bursting. The path twisted and turned maddeningly. Streams of clinging spider web fluttered out behind me.

How far had I come? What was that brighter patch of light opening up ahead? The next moment I sprang into the clearing of the peyote plants and my heart leaped for I knew two-thirds of the trail lay behind me.

A drove of rabbits, large as dogs, bounded across the path in terror. I tripped, floundered to my knees and staggered up and on. Sweat blinded me, thorns tore at my face and hands. But now hope was rising as the trail flashed by behind.

As if in mockery, a dull rumbling mingled with the throbbing beat in my ears. The ground trembled. I knew that warning note, knew how short a time remained before the final boiling deluge would thunder up and so end Xalia's life.

Desperation lent me new strength. I dashed ahead in a final mad burst of speed, rounded a turn and leaped from the end of the trail to stare into the Bowl of Death.

Below me lay the terraced hollow, filled with that silent gathering of watchful dead who sat bathed in the red glare of the sinking sun.

Close within the central ring, a shouldering crowd of the Mictli stared up at Romero whose gross body loomed, huge and menacing, above the frail form of Xalia where she lay across the open top of the glistening altar, half hidden in a rising mist of rainbow tinted steam.

Before me lay the grim reality of that mental image that had sent me

rushing in headlong dread along the trail.

Again the red rock under me trembled. The sullen growl of that mighty force boiling up towards the surface rumbled round the great Bowl, louder this time. The final warning before the deluge.

I leaped into the opening of the sloping isle that led straight through the packed tiers of shining dead to the central pit. As I raced down the narrow way I saw Romero raise my gleaming helmet and shake it, while he screamed:

"Die, Xalia, thou false Priestess, and may the Eternal Waters purge thee of thy sin."

Spiteful puffs of steam began to shoot up about him. I saw his foot reach for the top step of the flight that led down from the altar's glistening summit. Suddenly, his eyes fell on me. He screamed a warning.

My hurtling body had almost reached the outer ranks of the packed Mictli when Xalia saw me. Our glances met and fused in a white hot flame of love.

THEN—with the strength of a madman, I struck the packed ranks of the Mictli.

Slashing, stabbing, I drove through the terror-stricken creatures like steel slicing butter. I felt my keen blade sink into flabby flesh, grind against bone. Gross bodies fell. Warm blood spattered, its hot reek followed me as I leaped up the altar steps.

Through a red haze, I saw Romero's face, crowned by my morion and contorted with fear. Romero, who suddenly realized he was trapped between two deaths—the boiling Waters of Oblivion behind, and me, Roger Kent, a living death mad with blood-lust, in front.

A piercing scream of abject terror burst from him. He tried to leap from the altar. His foot slid over the wet edge. Clawing for support, his

crooked fingers clutched Xalia's bound wrists.

As he tried to save himself from pitching headlong onto the glittering tongue of steel in my hand, the full weight of his great body dragged her frail form from the steaming vent on the altar top and she rolled down the sloping side.

At the same moment, my rapier darted forward with all the force of my hate-filled body behind the thrust. I felt the heavy basket hilt thud against Romero's breast, heard his bubbling death-scream, saw the hulking form totter, sway and crash across the gaping altar. Simultaneously, the boiling Titan below burst its bonds. With a rumbling roar the great green column flashed upward carrying Romero's body in its hissing heart.

Before the high flung deluge could fall I leaped down the steps, snatched up Xalia's body and hurled myself into the milling ranks of the Mictli, who had stood gaping until the last second, their slow minds too stupefied by surprise to realize their danger.

When I could shoulder forward no further I stopped, bent forward to shield Xalia's body with my own, and braced myself for the inevitable downpour of steaming water.

With the first pelting drops a tremendous weight struck my back and beat me to my knees. Then the deluge fell.

THE heavy boots saved my legs. The armor protected my arms and body, while the inert object that covered my back formed an additional barrier, for it sheltered my bare head and broke the brunt of the falling torrent. Xalia, shielded as she was, scarcely suffered at all.

Dense clouds of hot steam choked and blinded me. The heat was terrific. Breathing became a torture. I was forced to exert every ounce of

strength to keep from being beaten flat, while I waited for the close packed bodies around me to break apart.

The scalded, shrieking Mictli struggled to escape, to reach some spot of safety beyond the boiling flood streaming down on them. Their flimsy garments offered no protection. Many fell and died where they lay, writhing and screaming in agony. Those on the outskirts scrambled up the sides of the Bowl, leaving their helpless comrades to die miserably.

Gradually the press about me began to loosen and break apart. Dim shapes lurched past, screaming in anguish. I staggered to my feet. The tremendous weight on my back bowed me down. Xalia's precious body, gripped tight in my arms, hampered me as I slowly groped my way forward through the enveloping clouds of steam and mist, blindly searching for the lowest tier of the Bowl.

Finally I blundered against it.

Here the heat was less intense, breathing became easier.

I braced myself and heaved upright. The mysterious burden slid from my back and struck the rocky floor with a ringing clang of metal.

Swiftly turning to see what had saved us from the scalding downpour I started back in wonder. At my feet sprawled Romero, his bloated body even more hideous in death than in life. The lipless mouth grinned evilly.

The fishy eyes, wide open, stared up at me from the shadow of my steel morion that lay cocked at a rakish angle over one fleshy ear.

Romero had drunk the Waters of Oblivion to the last dregs while a perverse "Fate" had utilized his gross body to protect the two whose lives he had craved.

One look was enough. No single spark of pity stirred in me, only a faint wonder at the incomprehensible ways of providence.

I was about to turn away when Xalia's eyes fluttered open. She saw Romero and shuddered. Then her glance fell on my helmet for she whispered:

"Take thy headpiece, Don Roger, who knows but that it may still preserve thy life."

As I reached down, snatched up the morion and placed it on my head, her lids closed and she fainted.

With my rapier, I hurriedly cut the bonds at her wrists and ankles then turned and passed upward through the silent ranks of the Dead, bearing her in my arms.

All went well until we neared the upper rim. Here one of the Mictli saw the flash of my armor and shrieked a warning. An answering howl of hate rang round the Bowl.

Mad with mingled rage and pain, those who were able began clambering toward us determined to cut off our retreat before we could gain the opening of the trail above.

Panting and straining every weary muscle I raced on.

The first of the howling pack were a scant thirty feet behind when I finally topped the rim only to find one of the Mictli standing in the mouth of the trail, his bulky body and upflung club blocking the narrow opening effectively.

With Xalia clasped in my arms, my hands were useless. Although I still clutched the rapier it was now more a hindrance than a help. There remained but one slender chance to break through.

I lowered my helmeted head and charged.

The clang of metal rang in my ears as the Mictli's club glanced harmlessly from the smooth steel of my morion. I felt the sickening sensation of tearing tissues as the sharp ridge of the helmet ripped into the creature's flabby flesh. With a scream of agony, the man spun around and

crashed into the thick undergrowth, clawing at his bleeding body.

Close behind me, a chorus of snarling cries burst out.

I leaped across the twitching legs and dashed into the narrow trail. Now all my strength went to running for everything depended on speed, on reaching the ladder in the cliff far enough in advance of Mictli. The vital question, how much longer could I hold out, beat through my brain.

Then I felt Xalia stir. Her eyes slowly opened and stared up into mine. Her lips parted in a smile. My leaden feet quickened their stride. The sounds of padding pursuit grew indistinct, the howls fainter. But now my strength began to give out. I lurched as I ran. The chances for escape looked black.

Suddenly I stumbled and Xalia cried:

"Put me down, Don Roger. My own feet shall carry me."

I staggered to a stop and she slid to the ground. Without a word we ran on for that momentary pause had brought the Mictli in sight of us.

Blood-mad, stirred out of their usual indolence, the monstrous creatures had clung to the chase doggedly for the wholesale slaughter in the Bowl of Death had affected them like liquor. To their limited intellect Xalia and I were responsible and must die.

They came close to success, for as we burst into the fading glow of the peyote clearing, a number of the great valley wolves leaped up and stood across our way, snarling viciously.

With a shout, I sprang in front of Xalia and slashed at the nearest beast. It yelped and fell kicking spasmodically while its mates slunk into the matted foliage, but Xalia tripped over the twitching legs and pitched forward on her face.

As I snatched for her hand, the Mictli broke from the path scarcely

fifty feet away. Jerking Xalia to her feet, I faced around and drove my rapier through the leader's body. With a gurgling shriek he stopped, whirled around and crashed across the trail. Those of the Mictli directly behind him were forced from the path to pass the body, while Xalia and I turned, dashed across the clearing and on into the further trail.

THE rest of that heart-breaking chase is only a blurred memory of desperate effort to outdistance the screaming demons who clung close behind us. When at last the frowning cliffs at the end of the trail loomed above us through the swiftly gathering dusk we were nearly exhausted. But now just ahead lay the ladder of safety.

As we lurched to the foot of the red wall and I swung Xalia up to the first peg the Mictli burst from the path.

"Climb, Xalia," I called hoarsely and faced about to meet the attack of a hulking brute who was rushing at me.

I clenched my jaw, shot a swift glance up at Xalia and grasped the lowest peg with my left hand.

Then the leader of the pack was on me. His club crashed against my helmet with a harmless clang. I heard Xalia scream. Swift as a striking snake my rapier darted out.

The club fell clattering to the ground. His piggish eyes opened wide, foam dripped from his mouth, a look of amazed wonder spread over the flabby features as the massive body tottered and crashed back on his followers.

I'd counted on that single moment to gain the first peg and leaped upward. My toes dug at the sloping wall. One knee settled on the peg beside my hand. That hand shot up and clutched the next peg. I stood upright and braced myself against the



Romero's foot slipped—a piercing scream of abject terror burst from him.

cliff as an eight-foot Mictli, swinging his club, leaped at me.

Kicking straight out my heavy-soled boot crashed full into the pulpy face. His head snapped back. Through the crunching sound of smashing bone a smothered scream gurgled up and the bloated body toppled back on those behind it.

During the confusion of the next minute I rapidly climbed toward Xalia who had stopped fifteen feet above my head and clung there waiting. As I went up, jerking the pegs from their holes and throwing them far into the jungle, I saw the look of haunting fear in her eyes slowly change to joy. When I reached her, she timidly touched my hot cheek with her hand.

Below us, the Mictli, now bulking indistinct and ghostly in the swiftly gathering gloom, began to shower up clubs and rocks while they ran about screaming in fury.

As we climbed the peg ladder together, I made every effort to protect Xalia with my armored body until the ledge was just above. Here I lifted her over the crumbling rim and dragged myself after her. At the same moment the familiar pulsing chords of melody began to steal through the heavy air, to grow louder each instant.

As I turned to stare down at the frenzied remnant of the Mictli I saw that they were no longer grimacing up at us but were staring fearfully into the gloom that had fallen so swiftly over the valley. Something was wrong down there, for the wild howls of hate had suddenly died away and given place to a quavering moan that quickly rose to a swelling wail of terror-choked cries.

What had happened? I bent further forward to see.

Suddenly I understood and a shiver ran along my spine.

A surging mass of pale bodies, mad

with the smell of blood, were rushing up the valley. The eery howls of the charging wolf pack rang out in elemental ferocity and mingled with the wild clamor of the fright-crazed Mictli below.

Xalia's hand fell on my shoulder. I turned. A look of horror filled her eyes. She shuddered, pointed a trembling arm and gasped:

"Look, Don Roger, look."

I saw what she meant and leaped at the revolving boulder.

Why hadn't I realized the threat of the darkness before? Could I force the rock open in time—or was it too late?

In desperate haste I threw myself against the obstructing stone for a horde of the great flesh-eating bats were silently flitting towards us. Like the wolves they smelled fresh spilled blood and were mad with hunger. But unlike the wolves, these monsters could reach Xalia and me on the ledge.

With the snarling tumult of the battling wolves and Mictli ringing in my ears I threw myself against the jammed boulder.

Had it moved or was it imagination?

As I felt for a firmer foothold, the fitting silhouette of a great bat darted down at Xalia.

She screamed and pressed close to me. I turned and slashed the hairy shape with my rapier. A sharp chitter of pain shrilled in my ears. The pale body fluttered down, was pounced on by others and the flapping mass of fetid foulness dropped from sight.

I wheeled about and, with all the strength that lay in me flung myself against the rock. The stone grated and moved. I heaved desperately. As it began to turn, a spiral whirl of bats rose over the rim of the ledge.

With a sweep of my arm I caught Xalia to me and forced myself through the narrow opening into the blackness beyond.

CHAPTER VII

DARKNESS TO LIGHT

MY GROPING feet found the floor. I set Xalia down and whirled to close the boulder but the thrashing sound of beating wings close by told me I'd been too slow. Some of the bats had already slipped in. With a heave of my shoulder I sent the rock crashing into place. As I turned to throw a protecting arm around Xalia my foot struck something that rolled off in the darkness.

A sudden hope flared up in me. Could it be the flashlight I'd dropped on my way in?

Stooping, I hurriedly groped over the floor while the sound of thrashing bodies, hisses and frenzied squeaks grew louder. The next instant my fingers closed on the cool metal tube that I knew was the torch.

Leaping to my feet I pressed the switch and a beam of white light stabbed through the darkness. As I swept the torch around the brilliant ray fell on a confused mass of bodies locked in a death grapple before me. The great bats had found it impossible to fly in the cramped space and fallen to the ground where they were now at the mercy of the gathering horde of huge albino rats and snakes.

A deadly nausea swept over me. I felt Xalia shudder. But I knew our only road to freedom led directly through that foul-smelling pack.

I lifted her high on my shoulder and leaped into the midst of the struggling mass. The creatures were so intent on their ghastly feast that they offered no real resistance until I had nearly reached the foot of the stairs. Then they took up the chase.

A few frantic moments of panting effort brought me to the head of the steps where I dashed forward, following the dancing beam of the torch. As I ran down the tunnel with Xalia clasped tight in my arms, the tumult behind us began to fade.

But, now that safety lay so close ahead, a strange weakness began to steal over me. Our headlong flight through the tunnel seemed unending before the first of those gleaming corpses flashed to view in the white light of the torch.

I felt Xalia tremble, heard her gasp—

"The ancient Wanderers—the Hidden Ones." Then she bowed her head and seemed to pray.

As I stumbled into the vaulted treasure cave the cumulative effect of fatigue, fighting and the constant strain I'd been under took effect. I stared up at that first Romero where he sat guarding the fabled treasure of the Aztecs and a sudden horror of the place swept over me. My one thought now was of escape, to get Xalia and myself into the blessed sunlight away from these silent, shimmering corpses.

Before me lay the revolving boulder, the gateway to freedom.

I lowered Xalia to the floor and threw myself against the great rock. It grated, moved and a shaft of soft twilight filtered in. Then the stone swung open.

With a glad cry I caught Xalia in my arms and lowered her to the ground outside. As I started to follow the thud of a heavy object striking the floor close to my feet echoed round the cave.

A chill passed up my spine, cold panic gripped me. Was I to fail at the moment of success? Instinctively, my eyes rose to that gleaming shape seated on his throne of virgin gold. I stood and stared.

Romero's body had moved.

Even as I gazed up, the armored figure stirred again and I saw a gold ingot, dislodged by the thrust of his mailed elbow, fall and roll to my feet close beside another. Slowly the shining shape slid further forward and stopped as his feet struck the lowest of the gleaming jewel caskets. Dislodged by the slight shock the

golden coffer rolled toward me and brought up against the two ingots.

For a breathless minute I stood and stared up at the thin, pale face of Romero. But now those hawklike features seemed to smile instead of scowl. What did it mean? Had the vibration of my heavy footfalls running down the tunnel dislodged the delicate balance of the body, or was this first Romero trying to offer reparation for the evil we had suffered at the hands of that last Romero?

Stooping swiftly, I lifted the heavy gold ingots and dropped them outside, the carved coffer of jewels followed. Then I turned, stood at stiff attention and raised my gleaming rapier in the officers' salute.

Whether to was a trick of the fading light or pure imagination I don't know to this day, but Romero's haughty head seemed to nod a stately return.

Stepping back I slipped through the opening to the blessed light of day and Xalia, as the massive boulder with a grating thud crashed shut on its age-old secret.

AFTERWORD

EL PARADISO, New Mexico, June 1st—At an early hour this morning an extraordinary marriage ceremony was consummated here by our esteemed and well known Mayor Adam Plant. Below we quote Mayor Plant's own words:

"Yessir, as I was comin' home early this mornin' after puttin' in a hard night at a special meetin' in the Town Hall, I hear the buzz of a airplane engin'. I looks up an' there's a plane sailin' outa the southeast. Looked like it was goin' to land near the edge of town so I strolls out to meet it.

"Sure 'nough it landed an' a man an' a woman steps out, an' the man asks me where can he git oil, gas an' married. Yessir. So I tells him I kin

fix him up on all three items an' we come on into town.

"Well sir, right off I figgers they was movie stars 'cause the man, name of Dale, was a big good-lookin' ordinary sorta feller all dressed up in some kinda stage armor. He looked right much play'd out so I offers him a bracer—strictly for medical purposes, which he gives to the woman. An' speakin' of her, Valdes was her name, yessir, Xalia Valdes. Well, I can't just rightly describe her except that she was a girl an' she was wearin' a man's leather coat over a dress that was made of some shiny, spider-webby stuff.

"Well sir, on her red hair that wasn't real red but had a sorta alive look about it, she was wearin' some kinda shiny brass thing that wasn't a real hat but had imitation jewels glitterin' all over it. An' around her waist, where I seen it plain when I was lookin' at her dress, was hangin' a belt studded with peyote buttons.

"Yessir, that mescal cactus stuff that's been causin' all the ruccus 'round here. The stuff the injuns calls the caterpillar an' chew to make 'em see things an' the Government's been callin' a narcotic drug an' tellin' the injuns they can't use it no more in their religion. Yessir, that's what she was wearin'.

"Well, sir, while I was gettin' 'em gassed an' oiled an' married some of our local reds comes strollin' along, sees the girl an' flops down on their faces in the dust yellin' somethin' in their lingo about a lost goddess. Lucky the weddin' was most over 'cause another half hour woulda seen us in the middle of a good old-time injun un-risin' the way them reds was carryin' on. Yessir.

"Well, sir, to cut it short, them two was rarin' to go so I quit pressin' them to light down a spell. An' the last I seen of them was their plane a-headin' northwest an' risin' higher every minute. Yessir."



Donald stood and glared about him.

Revolt on Inferno

A Big Book-Length Novel
Complete in This Issue

By VICTOR ROUSSEAU

Because of a conspiracy to overthrow the corrupt Dictator of the Earth, half a hundred men and one woman were banished from all earthly contact—and sent to Inferno, the Doom Planet, from which there was no returning—a fate an hundredfold worse than death!

CHAPTER I

THE DOOM SHIP

FIFTY-ODD men lay in the hold of the *Planetaria* in the throes of space sickness. Through the barred windows of isochromin glass, a stupendous view was unfolding.

Underneath, like a huge ball that filled the tenth part of the horizon, lay Earth, its continents as clearly demarcated as on a map, black against white seas that reflected the light of the red sun overhead. The moon lay, a silver sickle, between the two, but a sickle that looked as large as Earth, and seemed about to embrace it with its curving arms.

But the fifty-odd men saw nothing of all this, and cared nothing, for space sickness is to sea sickness as wine to water. With throbbing heads and distended tympani they lay, groaning in agony, upon the floor.

Only one man seemed to retain a certain amount of self-possession. Racked though he was by nausea, while his ear-drums felt as if they were bursting, Donald Evans stood on his feet, his back against the barred window, and glared about him. He had not yet recovered from the unexpected and sudden shock of his arrest the night before.

He had been hurried without notice aboard the *Planetaria*, where he had found some fifty other captives; the leaders of the conspiracy that was to free Earth from the tyranny of the dictator, Yoska. The dictator had struck hard, and just in the nick of time—just when Donald had believed that he and his men were secure.

Another day, and the movement would have been launched that would have swept Yoska and his abominable cruelties away forever. Now it was crushed hopelessly, and for the conspirators there remained nothing but hopeless exile on Inferno, the Doom Planet.

It was well called Inferno, for no

earthly penal settlement could have exceeded it in horrors. The outermost member of the solar system, lying far beyond Pluto, it traversed so immense an orbit that it was believed to complete it only after a period of thirty thousand years.

Describing an extreme ellipse, it had been invisible to the strongest telescope until it swung into view on its return toward the sun, fifty years earlier.

Now it was at its nearest point to Earth, and already beginning its recession into the depths of space.

This was the destination of the prisoners, because exile to Inferno was an hundredfold worse than death. The very name conveyed unspeakable horror.

None had ever returned from it who had been sent there as captives, but crews of Government space-ships had spoken freely of what they had seen of Inferno, and of the lot of the wretched prisoners there.

NOTHING grew on Inferno, because every germ of life had been destroyed in the depths of outer space, where the sun was not visible even as a distant star. Not even algae or mosses covered the rocks. It could not be said even that Inferno contained either seas or continents.

A small planet, smaller than Mercury, its surface consisted of masses of volcanic rocks, fearfully upheaved, alternating with salt seas that were forced up through clefts and crevices with a velocity that flung fountains of boiling spray a mile high, to descend in scalding rain.

Furious winds carried these boiling showers at times over almost the whole surface of the planet. Here and there, too, were treacherous morasses in which many of the exiles had perished.

But there was a worse feature of the Doom Planet than winds and boiling rain. For, though the surface was

denuded of all life, the salt seas were inhabited by life, swarming, tenacious and incredibly cruel.

Myriad kinds of organisms, equipped with adjustable swimming bladders, and dwelling normally a mile beneath the surface of the seas, had pushed their way upward as the sun's heat began to warm the approaching planet.

And in pursuit of them had come monsters whose hideous shapes, size and voracity had only been paralleled in the height of the Age of Reptiles upon Earth. Ruthless, fearless, rapacious, they had made the lives of the exiles a continuous fight for existence.

Man, on Inferno, had resumed the place he occupied on Earth, when, as a tiny mammal, he was forced to use all his wits to escape hourly death.

This was the hideous destination to which Donald and his fellow-conspirators were doomed. And, though they had faced this prospect without a qualm, when they decided to inaugurate a rebellion against the dictator, Yoska, it was bitter to have failed just when they were on the very eve of success.

More bitter, because Donald had had in his hands an invention which, he was convinced, would make the success of the revolt a certainty.

Sick, hopeless, dejected, Donald leaned against the window bars and stared, without seeing them, at the groaning prisoners upon the floor of the hold.

THE steel door clicked open. A man stood in the entrance, flanked by two guards armed with jetta tubes. These were the weapons worn by the dictator's police; the fine spray that could be shot from them produced instant catalepsy, terminating in death, unless a secret antidote was given.

This secret neither Donald nor any of his fellow-conspirators had ever

been able to discover, so jealously was it guarded.

It was not necessary for the official who had appeared to protect himself with the guards. None of the groaning men upon the floor was capable of defense, much less attack. The man saw that, and turned to Donald, a sneer upon his face as Donald's showed astonishment that he could not hide.

For the newcomer was Danvriil, one of the chief agents of the dictator, Yoska, and the man who had brought about the arrest of the conspirators the night before.

"Well, Evans?" Danvriil's sneer became more pronounced as he saw Donald's condition. "Space sickness? The grand conspiracy seems to have dropped from the sublime to the ridiculous."

Donald straightened himself. "What do you want, Danvriil?" he asked quietly. "You've not come here for the pleasure of taunting me, I imagine?"

"Isn't the insinuation a trifle harsh?" replied the other with jeering jocularly. "No, my friend, I have better use for my time than gloating over an enemy who is in my power. I want a few words with you in private, if you are in a condition to talk."

"I'm in condition," said Donald. "Here?"

"No, in my cabin," answered Danvriil.

Donald, throwing off the nausea that still clutched at him, walked steadily toward the door. He cast a quick glance at his companions. Would they suspect him of betrayal if he went out with Danvriil? But they were too sick to care—and then, what difference did it make now?

FLANKED by the two guards, Donald followed Danvriil along the narrow passage between the exterior isochromin glass and the multigyros

set in the very bottom of the spaceship, under a dome that rose between the cargo that was stacked fore and aft.

These consisted of a dozen top-like mechanisms, set at various angles, imparting what had been the last difficulty to overcome in interplanetary navigation, stability in absolute space, viewed as a four-dimensional continuum.

Then up a stairway to the main engine-room, which occupied the entire length of the ship, in which a score of skilled mechanics moved to and fro amid a bewildering array of colored lights and softly thrumming engines. Up another, and still one more, to the main deck of the *Planetaria*, where, beneath the navigating bridge, Danvriil had his cabin.

It was a long room, with a bed in one corner, a table, chairs, desk, and safe of duroferrin. Danvriil entered first, turned to the guards.

"You may leave us," he said.

He fingered the miniature jettatube through the cloth of his pocket-flap. The atomized spray acted instantaneously, but only upon contact with human flesh; inhaled, it was harmless; one molecule upon Donald's face would throw him into immediate catalepsy. Armed with a single tube, Danvriil was invincible against the whole shipload of conspirators.

"Well?" asked Donald, as Danvriil stood watching him, a furtive smile on his face.

"You were surprised last night?" asked Danvriil.

"I give you full credit for your cleverness," replied Donald.

"We were on your trail for weeks. We could have arrested you at any moment. We wanted to know more about your machine."

"That you'll never know," said Donald. "The man who holds that weapon, holds the whole Earth in his power."

Danvriil nodded. He stepped back,

watching Donald furtively, and threw open a door behind him. An almost imperceptible gesture invited Donald to pass through.

DONALD stopped, momentarily palsied with amazement. Within the empty room that disclosed itself was his machine, exactly as he had seen it the night before, and a few minutes before his arrest.

He had kept it in a secret compartment in the block of rooms he occupied in the Trenton section of York-Adelphia, and he had not dreamed that Danvriil's spies knew where it was located.

Seeing it there, on board the *Planetaria*, Donald felt first utter despair, then a strange gleam of elusive hope which he did not understand.

Danvriil followed him inside the room, his hand still playing with the guard of his jettatube. When he spoke next, the sneer was gone from his face.

"Our skilled employees have looked this over," he said. "Of course, not much could be accomplished in four hours. Nevertheless, the principle seems fairly clear. There's no doubt we can unravel the secret when we get it back to the Federal laboratories at Chicago. You can't hope to baffle the most skilled investigators in the world."

Donald said nothing, waited.

"The principle is clear," Danvriil went on. "This is simply a superfrigidation machine. As a matter of fact, we know its purpose—to absorb all heat in any area so fast as to cause instant death to all animal and vegetable life. How large would such an area be?" continued Danvriil blandly.

"I've no objection to telling you that," answered Donald. "The machine is effective over an area of something like a hundred and fifty square miles. That is absolute. Outside that area, there is a death zone twice as large, though within this

fringe it is possible to counteract the action of the cold."

"Not in the interior zone?" asked Danvril.

"No. It produces absolute cold immediately, 273 degrees below zero, Centigrade, at which all electronic motion is suspended. The vital processes are stopped as speedily as by a shock of high-tension current."

"And the chemical compound that produces this result?" asked Danvril.

"Is and remains my secret."

"I am authorized," said Danvril, speaking slowly, "to offer you freedom, return to Earth, and a position of the highest order under Yoska, in return for that secret."

Although Donald was not conscious of the least temptation to yield, he hesitated for a moment before replying. He glanced through the windows of the room. The space-ship had travelled a considerable distance since he had left the hold.

Earth was smaller, and half of her cut off by a shadowy sickle, giving her the appearance of the moon. The sun was about the same size as on Earth, but, viewed through ether instead of air, presented a strange coppery aspect, due to the absence of the blue-reflecting dust particles in the atmosphere.

Donald was thinking of Earth, which had never seemed so attractive. It was quite true, the Earth-born man could never find happiness on any other planet. And there were human ties He had to stop thinking. He turned back to Danvril.

"No!" he answered.

DANVRIL smiled. "The Government might even be willing to pardon the rest of the conspirators if you accede to its proposal. Of course, we can discover the secret for ourselves, in time. But Yoska likes converting enemies into friends."

"I will never betray the cause of human freedom by any such disgrace-

ful bargain," answered Donald. "If that's all, Danvril, I'll return to the hold."

"That's not all, Evans."

"No?"

"No! I've still another argument. I was keeping it till the last. Frankly, it's an argument I hoped not to have to use—for personal reasons. But the interests of the State come above personal feelings. Go through that farther door, Evans!"

Donald hesitated again, he could not imagine what *diablerie* Danvril was preparing for him; then, squaring his shoulders, he crossed the empty room and opened the door at the farther end.

He was looking into an ordinary passenger stateroom, and there was a passenger in it—a girl. She was seated in a low chair; she turned her head, uttered a cry, jumped to her feet and stumbled forward with outstretched arms.

"Donald! Oh, Donald, how did you come here?" she cried.

CHAPTER II

COUNTER-PLOTS

BEFORE Donald could answer, Danvril's sneering voice broke in, "I haven't yet told Ottili about our freight in the hold," he said. "You see, her petition to the Government, which has been under consideration for a long time, was granted at the last moment.

"Yoska has accorded her the extraordinary privilege of accompanying the *Planetaria* to Inferno, in order that she may see her brother, who, as you know, was exiled there two years ago.

"Pardon me a moment, Ottili," he added, as the girl clung half-fearfully to Donald, looking into his face. "Evans shall be with you in a few moments."

He beckoned Donald back into the room that contained his machine, and

closed the door. "Since we have agreed to be frank, Evans," he said, "I may as well say that I hunted you down with peculiar pleasure, in the hope of removing a rival from my path. You played your cards and lost.

"Nothing would delight me more, as a human being, than for you to persist in your refusal to make friends with Yoska. With you permanently exiled upon Inferno, I fancy I should not encounter any serious difficulties in my wooing.

"But I am prepared to sink my own feelings in my sense of duty to Yoska. Evans, I repeat my offer to you. Give me the secret of the machine, and you and your companions shall go free. Refuse, and—well, my friend, I shall not consider it essential to wait for a marriage certificate on my return to Chicago."

"How do I know that I can trust you, Danvril?" asked Donald.

"In this way. You shall be freed, with your companions, immediately, though of course they must remain under the supervision of the guards. I am not taking any chances of mutiny.

"Give me the formula, and it shall be compounded from the chemical stores aboard this vessel. Prove that it worked on Inferno, and the bargain is signed, sealed and ratified."

"I agree," said Donald.

"I HADN'T any idea that you were at the head of the conspiracy, Donald. Nor yet that you had been taken," said Ottili, later, as they paced the deck together.

Donald had seen that it was useless to attempt to keep the girl in the dark as to affairs. He had told her everything, therefore, except Danvril's actual threat to her.

"You see," he said, "Danvril, without meaning to, made his offer conditional, and therefore I was able to accept it. Actually, I would rather rot on Inferno forever than betray

this secret, and so would all my friends. Once Yoska is in possession of that, there will be no chance of overthrowing his tyranny.

"I shall supply Danvril with the chemical formula, and I shall prove that it works. But I shall handle the machine myself, and it is so contrived—expressly so contrived that unless a certain tiny valve is closed, the mechanism will not act. That valve is not likely to be discovered.

"And I had another idea in mind, Ottili. Your brother was exiled to Inferno on suspicion of betraying the secret of the atomic motors of the new Government space ships. You worked with him and shared his secrets. Could not you and I disable the motors of the *Planetaria* so that she will be unable to return until repaired?"

"I can give you the formula that will put them out of commission," answered Ottili. "But I've got better news for you still, Donald. Although you didn't take me into your confidence about the plot against Yoska, I was working with one of the inner committees of the revolutionaries too. Perhaps if we'd trusted each other more—"

"Trusted each other more? Did you think I was going to expose you to the risk of being exiled to Inferno, Ottili?" protested Donald. "But what's this news?"

"One of our men is among the engine-room crew. His name is Egli. He has been working there for months, and it was because I knew he was here that I ventured to make the voyage to Inferno to see my brother. Egli has promised me that if any opportunity arises, he will help him to escape."

"And he'll help disable the engines?"

"I'm sure he will, Donald."

DANVRIL was no fool, or he would not have risen to the post of Yoska's chief secret agent for the York-

Adelphia district. He kept his word in that the prisoners, freed from the hold, were given the freedom of the deck below the main one, but the stairways leading to it were guarded by men with jetta-tubes, and no communication with Donald was permitted. What his men thought of him, whether or not they believed he had sold them out, Donald had no way of determining. He guessed, however, that Danvriil had probably intimated that he had betrayed the cause. However, a few hours more would see them at Inferno, for they had passed the giant orb of Jupiter, whose baleful bulk had seemed to fill the entire sky.

That had been the supreme moment of the trip. Every ounce of energy in the multigyros had been called upon, to counteract the attraction of the huge planet, swinging overhead. Failure meant a rush, swift as a comet's, into that flaming bulk, whose great red spot burned like a fiery eye, while the seven moons circled majestically about it.

They had passed Jupiter, had threaded the mazy passage of the asteroids, and Saturn loomed not far away. Uranus appeared, a round disk like a little moon, beyond it. Pluto showed faintly, and the great telescope upon the bridge had picked out Inferno as a planet commensurable to Venus seen from Earth.

In the laboratory, Donald was busily compounding the chemical mixture that would put his machine into operation. He had not seen Ottili since they had paced the deck together.

But besides working out his own formula, he was also engaged in compounding the acid salt of arsenic that, applied to the atomic motors, would combine with the iridite that entered into the duroferrin of which they were principally composed.

Donald had long known that iridite and acid salt of arsenic would set up a process of oxygenation that would prove fatal to the delicate atomic ac-

tion of the engines. And the formula he had asked of Ottili he had found among his papers a few hours later, without knowing how it had come there.

With the engines disabled, and the heat-absorber in his hands, Donald believed he would have little difficulty in seizing the opportunity that would make him and his fifty, masters of the *Planetaria*. Yet he did not underestimate Danvriil's ability. Everything depended upon circumstances, and he worked furiously until he had both mixtures ready.

Saturn was long past, Uranus lay abreast, and Pluto was a moon overhead when Donald, returning from the laboratory to his stateroom, caromed into one of the blue-clad mechanics, who seemed to be taking a stroll on the deck. Not far away lounged one of the guards, who were always in Donald's vicinity, but his suspicions did not seem to be aroused by the mechanic's proximity.

"I'm Egli," the man whispered hurriedly. "Ottili has told me. I can disable the engines when we reach Inferno. Have you the salts?"

DONALD slipped the little package quickly into the man's hand. Egli glanced around hurriedly. The guard was looking through the glass at the stupendous sight of mighty Uranus.

Egli made a slight motion of his head, and moved around the angle formed by the base of the navigating station overhead. Donald followed him, and the mechanic slipped something into his hand.

"A jetta tube," he whispered. "It has six charges. One of the guards at the air dock, who is a friend of the Cause, procured it for me."

He was gone before Donald could utter his thanks. Donald slipped it into his pocket. His spirits were rising high. Everything now seemed in his favor.

He threw himself down in his stateroom for a brief period of sleep. Although she was travelling at a speed of twelve million miles an hour through the frictionless ether, the *Planetaria* seemed at rest.

There was not the least sense of movement, and the only sound was the soft vibration of the atomic engines as they forced her along by sending out a steady stream of power that disintegrated that same ether.

Or, rather, according to the current view of science, space was eating up time; the *Planetaria*, actually motionless in the four-dimensional continuum, was dragging Inferno, in the wake of all the planets, past her.

Scientists were still arguing the pros and cons of the case, as they had argued since the dawn of history.

DONALD leaped to his feet as a tapping sounded at his door. Instinctively he clutched his jetta-tube, then thrust it down into the bottom of his pocket. Four inches long, its deadly vapor was compressed into six rhondium capsules, transparent and flexible as linen, each hardly larger than a pill.

Danvril stood outside with one of the guards. "You've completed your preparations, Evans?" he asked.

"Everything's ready," answered Donald.

"We shall be at Inferno within an hour. You'd better have breakfast."

Donald walked into the dining-room. Otili was not there and he wondered whether the girl had been confined to her stateroom.

The Chinese waiter was standing at Donald's table, and Donald ate a hearty meal, with the grim realization that it might be his last—squarr from the Venus cold-storage plants, Martian kale, bread and butter from Earth, coffee from the heat-plantations of Mercury, and Moon-cucumbers, a planetary combination that would have amazed the men of the

previous century. Then he strolled out on the glass-enclosed deck.

The sight that met his eyes was staggering. The *Planetaria*, ablaze with lights, was heading through the eternal twilight toward Inferno, which filled the entire sky.

On the bridge stood Captain Crofts, a sturdy old man whose history went back almost to the first interplanetary voyage, apart from the first fugitive rocket-journeys to the moon.

Inasmuch as the complete course of the space-ship had been set by the experts before she left Earth, and the multigyros maintained it without the slightest variation, old Croft's task was largely a routine one. Nevertheless, upon the bridge, he seemed to typify those old traditions of the sea, which had come down as legends through the years.

Even to the last moment when she settled into her dock upon Inferno, the *Planetaria* was controlled by the force originally set in motion. And, though the dock was still invisible, Inferno, with her lava rocks and salt seas, was unfolding momentarily.

Donald shuddered with horror as he saw that hideous coast, studded with crater-pits, in the light of the ten million mile searchlight at the *Planetaria's* nose.

That concentration of a searchlight into a single beam that suffered no absorption outside the limits of atmosphere had been one of the innumerable discoveries that had made interplanetary travel possible.

THE *Planetaria* was slowing down to a mere hundred thousand miles an hour—and that, too, had been calculated and arranged before she left her dock at Chicago. The sound of the atomic engines increased, became deafening as the air-pressure gauges admitted air that transmitted the sound waves.

Donald's ear-drums began to throb, again he felt a recurrence of the old

space sickness, though it was transitory. Without that protective shield of air, the *Planetaria* would have been converted into a blazing meteor by the friction of the air about Inferno.

She was slowing at the rate of a half-million miles a second, dropping toward the dock and buildings now coming into visibility.

She was a mere fifty miles away, hovering in an atmosphere which, though rarer than the air within a vacuum tube, made her a pandemonium of sound. The voices of the stewards, of the engineers, echoed through the thin compartment walls.

Ten miles away—five—a single mile. The air-dock seemed to move leisurely toward the *Planetaria's* keel. Donald saw a cluster of buildings about it, the fence of duroferrin surrounding them, and, outside, the scattered huts of the exiles.

Then the space-ship began settling lightly down, her keel scraped the receiving arms of the dock, and, by the pressure of a lever within the engine-room, a hundred windows were opened simultaneously.

Fresh air rushed in—air of Inferno, yet singularly sweet after the canned air of the past three days and nights. Donald drew in a chestful as the ship came to rest, and a score of dock attendants—men recruited on earth at high rates of pay, came running to make fast the magnetized anchors as each sought its individual magnetic post.

Donald heard swift footsteps behind him. Ottili came running to his side.

"They locked me in!" she gasped. "My brother—where is he? And what's happening over there?"

CHAPTER III

DONALD STRIKES

OUTSIDE the high fence of duroferrin, among the huts of the exiles, something was certainly happen-

ing. Donald could see the land heaving in a number of different directions, as if a succession of miniature earthquakes was in progress. And toward the fence came flying a number of tiny figures.

Great gouts of mud, each a half-acre in extent, went flying into the air. Twilight though it was, the light of the stars that spangled the black sky enabled Donald to see clearly that something was in pursuit of the fugitives.

Something that seemed a quarter of a mile in length, and writhed its way through the ground, upheaving mud and rocks indiscriminately.

Then, just as the foremost of the fugitives approached the great rear gateway in the fence, there arose a thing of indescribable terror—a walrus head covered with scales, with bristles yards long on either side of the gaping mouth, filled with gleaming teeth.

Quick as a flash the monstrous head dipped from the emerging body, and with a shriek that was perfectly audible one of the fleeing human beings seemed to dive bodily into the yawning cavity of the throat.

"God!" whispered Donald, while Ottili clung to him, shaking like an aspen. That might have been her brother! Donald knew the thought that was in her mind. And like a man trapped in a hideous dream, he watched the scene before him.

The rear gate was opening, but how slowly! Again that head shot forward, covering a huge arc with as much swiftness and accuracy as the chameleon's tongue that darts to engulf a fly. A second man vanished in the monster's maw.

Then from a tower within the fence there came a flash of brilliant violet light. A ball of smoke appeared against the monster's head. It vanished.

The head was no longer there, and the truncated neck, writhing in knots,

was slowly sinking beneath the ooze. And now the fugitives had reached the safety of the enclosure, and the gate closed.

Danvril came up. "A happy introduction to life on Inferno, Evans," he said. "I think you will agree that you were fortunate in your compact. I must ask you to keep to your stateroom until the stores have been disembarked. Then I shall be happy to have you prove that you are able to keep your part of the bargain."

"My brother!" gasped Ottili.

"I'll call the station," answered Danvril. "Meanwhile, I must ask you, also, to keep your cabin."

There was no help for it. Shaking and white, Ottili turned away. Donald stepped to her side to support her, but Danvril's hand fell on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Evans, but Ottili must find her way unaided," he said.

For an instant Donald, conscious of the jetta-tube in his pocket, was tempted to make an end of Danvril there and then. Wisdom prevailed, and without a word he made his way to his stateroom.

TWO hours later, having watched the stores swung ashore by the magnetic cranes, he was released. The guard who summoned him conducted him down the gangplank to the interior of the fence.

Here, on a bare terrain of smoothed lava, he found the machine, also Danvril. Groups of the spacemen and mechanics of the *Planetaria* stood about, or squatted over a game of cards.

Donald perceived, from the loud laughter and incoherent shouts, that many of them were already partly intoxicated. As members of a privileged class, they were largely exempt from discipline when the space-ship docked.

"Now, Evans, all is in readiness for the experiment that is to win freedom for yourself and your companions," said Danvril.

His face had a heavy, sullen aspect, and Donald imagined that Danvril, too, had been drinking or drugging himself.

"Ottili's brother?" asked Donald.

"Lucas is safe in his hut yonder," answered Danvril, jerking his hand contemptuously toward the huts outside the fence.

"You've driven the fugitives out again?" asked Donald with sudden, fierce anger.

"The orders of the Department are that the gate is to be opened only at times of immediate danger," responded Danvril. "Life on Inferno is not meant to be as safe as in a child's cradle. You have an excellent chance to escape it. Come, how do you want the machine placed?"

"Do you realize that it will annihilate every living thing within an area of twelve miles by twelve?" demanded Donald.

"I am not so foolish as to suppose that the machine carries danger to the operator," returned Danvril. "A target for you was prepared by radioed instructions while the *Planetaria* was on her journey. Yes, I guessed that you would come to terms.

"Forty miles away a choice selection of Inferno's animal life has been assembled on a plateau of solid rick, surrounded by a duroferrin fence. I shall ask you to obliterate it."

Danvril's intelligence was certainly not to be despised. He had gauged the telescopic sight as to its distance potency with extreme accuracy. Up to twenty-five miles vision was perfect; beyond that distance chromatic aberrations entered into the visual field, owing to the impossibility of using isochromin glass, which disintegrated when molecular activity was suspended by the absolute zero of heat-motion that was produced by the chemical compound.

Watrous glass, an inert organic substance, had to be used, therefore,

and at distances above five-and twenty miles vision was imperfect.

DONALD mounted the platform on which the machine had been placed. The telescopic sight had already been adjusted. Looking into the lens, Donald could see faintly the square fence of duroferrin, and within it small black moving objects. He turned and looked at Danvril.

"If I succeed, you hold to your compact?" he asked.

The question was meaningless, but the pause gave Donald the opportunity to adjust the tiny valve, unseen by the other.

"Absolutely," answered Danvril.

Donald nodded and turned back to the machine. From his pocket he withdrew the little carton of salts, innocuous until the ray from the projector released their atomic energy.

This created a heat of 430 degrees Centigrade, which, converted into magnetic force within the metallic body of the machine, passed harmlessly into an electrical field which quickly dissipated.

He opened the breach and let the crystals drop one by one into a tiny cup. He closed the breach.

"That's all?" asked Danvril.

"Nearly all," answered Donald nonchalantly.

The cross-wires of the sight bore exactly upon the tiny square of the duroferrin fence. Donald released the valve-lock, stepped to one side, and pressed the button. Forty miles away a violet flame shot like a spire into the air.

It was the rush of free air, mounting upward. The air, made incandescent, glowed like a white flame along a horizon arc of fifty degrees, turned red like a sunset cloud, grew normal.

Quickly and unobserved, Donald opened the tiny valve that threw the mechanism out of gear.

"Excellent," said Danvril, smiling

broadly. "Now let us see the result of the experiment, Evans."

As if by prior instructions, two mechanics trundled a small airship out of a shed, one of the old-fashioned kind in use toward the end of the twentieth century. It was operated by the release of atomic energy arising from the disintegration of uranium salts, and flew only within an atmosphere.

"There's no danger there now?" asked Danvril.

"Not the least," answered Donald. "The cold lasts a bare fraction of a second."

Danvril stepped into the rear seat of the plane, and as Evans, at his gesture, took his place in front, one of the guards entered and sat down beside him.

Danvril pressed the starter, and the plane rose vertically, hovered above the station, and shot off at a speed of no more than five hundred miles an hour. A few minutes brought them to their destination. The plane hovered and fluttered down. Donald stepped out.

A cry of horror broke from his lips. The occupants of the enclosure had died instantly and painlessly. They lay as they had fallen, some score of them, in heaps or singly.

But these were not monsters of subterranean Inferno. These were men—twenty men and four women, prisoners, dressed in the plantextile uniforms supplied by the Government.

Donald felt uncontrollable wrath blaze up within him. He turned—fortunately for the instant he forgot the jetta tube in his pocket. But neither Danvril nor the guard had forgotten his. Both men were grinning, and both men had Donald covered.

"Surprised?" asked Danvril with a leer. "I told you we had assembled a choice selection of Inferno's animal life, Evans. What selection could be choicer than these?" He waved his hand toward the dead.

“YOU murderer! You damned murderer!”

“Be careful of your words, Evans, unless you want to share their fate! Well, I admit I hid this little matter from you.

“But it was essential to have you make the demonstration, and really it would have been extremely difficult to secure and bind any of the earth monsters of this planet. And those people are better off dead than alive—as I think you’re going to learn, Evans.”

“You mean you—propose to trick me?”

“We won’t quarrel over words. You’ve placed yourself in my hands, Evans, and do you think I’m such a fool as to permit you to return—with Ottili?”

“We know this much, that a single charge of salts placed in the mechanism will last for at least fifty discharges. Before then we shall certainly have analyzed the compound. No, Evans, I think you’ll agree with me that you have nothing to bargain with.

“So you’re going to join the exiles on Inferno, and I trust you’ll have as pleasant a time here as circumstances permit. Really, some of these people have lived a quarter of a century on this planet. It’s easy enough, if your limbs are agile enough to enable you to escape the subterranean monsters.

“You fool!” he added, in a sudden, uncontrollable outburst of scorn, “did you suppose you could snatch Ottili away from me?”

He turned to the mechanic. “Start the motor!” he ordered. And, turning back to Donald, “It’s only forty miles to the station, and you’ll get food there, and shelter. A nice little walk, Evans.”

And he waved him away with his jetta-tube.

Donald pulled himself together at that instant. After all, he didn’t blame Danvril for having double-crossed

him. He himself had been planning to double-cross Danvril. Moreover, he had succeeded, though as yet Danvril did not suspect that fact.

Donald glanced at the mechanic, who had replaced his jetta-tube in his pocket and was stooping over the motor. Danvril, his jetta-tube between his fingers, drooping like a cigarette, was waving Donald away.

DONALD pulled the jetta-tube from his pocket and levelled it. He saw the look of sudden terror on Danvril’s face, saw him strive to coordinate his muscles, paralyzed with fear, to bring his own tube into play, saw the cry for help forming upon Danvril’s lips.

Then Donald pulled the trigger.

He did not see the atomized spray from the ampule. But Danvril’s look of fear seemed to freeze into his face. He stood stiff upright for a moment, and then, every limb and muscle rigid, collapsed sidewise and lay like a trunk upon the ground.

Donald walked slowly toward the plane. As he neared it, the mechanic turned and looked at him without comprehension.

Then he saw Danvril’s body on the ground, and with a cry he drew the jetta-tube from his pocket.

He was too slow. Donald anticipated the act by about three-fourths of a second. The second ampule discharged its spray, and, smitten into the same cataleptic rigidity, the mechanic toppled to the ground beside the plane and lay there insensible.

Donald stooped over the man. There was not the least sign of life in him, no pulse, no breathing. To all appearance he had been killed instantly. And it was the same with Danvril.

Nevertheless Donald knew that this was catalepsy, not death, though it would pass into death in the absence of the antidote which only Danvril knew.

CHAPTER IV

THE TABLES TURNED

DONALD lifted the two bodies into the front seat of the plane, where they lay stiffly, arms and legs protruding like limbs of wax figures. He climbed into the rear cockpit and started back.

He had already made up his mind as to the only possible course of action. He must land, take advantage of the guards' lack of suspicion, and board the *Planetaria* before he could be prevented. Once aboard, it should be possible to release the prisoners, and capture the vessel.

A desperate course, but not a very desperate one, thought Donald, as he rose into the air and set his course back toward the enclosure. A few minutes, and he was hovering some thousand feet above it.

Then he perceived that something was taking place underneath him. The rear gate of the fence was open, and a number of men were filing through. Each of them carried a heavy knapsack on his back.

For a few moments Donald circled, trying to get the import of what was happening. Then, as the gate closed behind the last of the crowd, he understood.

These were his companions, treacherously consigned to that living death upon Inferno from which they were to be saved, according to his compact with Danvril.

Slowly, bowed down beneath the weight of their packs, the crowd was moving in the direction of the huts a short distance from the station. Donald could see these in a hollow among the lava ridges, and some of them must have been constructed in anticipation of the new arrivals, for the duroferrin of which they were composed was new, and shone in the starlight.

Behind the prisoners marched four

of the guards. But there was no evidence of any plan of resistance. What chance of resistance could there be when the guards were armed with the deadly jetta-tubes?

Donald had to make his mind up quickly. To land on those lava ridges would be to smash the plane, with the probability of a fatal accident. And once outside the fence, he would be helpless.

The removal of the prisoners from the *Planetaria* had turned all his hopes to ashes, but at all cost he must get aboard and try still to take possession of the vessel.

If he could get into the engine-room, he could turn on the magnetic current which at present ran into the anchors and kept them in position. By charging the metal gangplank, he could cut off all communication between the vessel and the shore.

He circled, hovered, and dropped to earth in the middle of the stockade.

A glance as he descended showed him that the interior was almost empty. Two or three mechanics, who had seen the plane approaching, stood in front of one of the sheds, from which came the bawling voices of the rest, raised in a drunken song.

As the three came forward unsuspectingly, Donald let fly with his jetta-gun. It was no time for the niceties of warfare; besides, these were unknown on Inferno.

The three, each touched by several molecules of the spray, stiffened in their tracks and toppled. Donald flung out the mechanic, then seized Danvril by the shoulders. He was about to cast him out too when it occurred to him that he might still be of use to him.

Swinging him across his shoulders, he started for the gangplank. Danvril was a heavy man, and the journey, though short, was not exactly a promenade.

DONALD was nearing the plank when he heard shouts behind him. A bunch of the mechanics had come out of the shed and stood staring at him. Evidently they recognized Danvril, for they let fly simultaneously.

The jetta-tube was reasonably accurate up to some thirty yards, although the jetta-gun would, of course, shoot for half a mile.

Probably the mechanics' potations were responsible for the fact that Donald escaped injury.

In another ten seconds he had gained the deck, and set Danvril down just as one of the guards appeared around the base of the bridge.

Donald dropped him with his tube before he had time to draw. He turned and faced the snarling crowd that was approaching the gangplank. They drew back and fired.

Donald leaped for the shelter of the base of the bridge. From behind a stanchion he covered them, his own tube in one hand, the one he had taken from the guard in the other.

The crew set up a yell. Another of the mechanics came running up the ladder. Donald swung about, covered him, then recognized Egli, who halted, eyes wide with astonishment. He hesitated, then hurried forward.

"I've stopped the engines," he whispered. "What's happened?"

He caught sight of Danvril's body, and his eyes opened wider.

"Rush down to the engine-room and throw the switch that will magnetize the gangplank," cried Donald. "I'll hold them!"

Egli disappeared. From the saloon, alarmed by the cries of the mechanics, came Captain Crofts, with his three chief officers, Rubo, the engineer, Cohaine, the navigating officer, and Khan Sale, the planetist. Behind them appeared the face of the Chinese steward.

But the four carried napkins instead of jetta-tubes, and Donald

guessed there was not a tube among them. He swung about and covered them. They were nicely placed, for a single shot would spray the four of them.

"Don't move!" he called.

Their hands went up in the centuries-old gesture of surrender that has never changed. For a moment or two, there was tense silence. The mechanics ashore hesitated to charge, even though they had jetta-guns and Donald had two sides to guard.

Donald watched both parties out of the corners of his eyes. Easy to spray the officers and get them out of the way—but there was no antidote aboard, that he knew of, and he couldn't bring himself to kill old Crofts.

Suddenly, with a yell, the mechanics charged. And at that moment Egli threw the switch below. The body of the first mechanic, struck by the terrific current, described an arc through the air and bounded back into the inclosure, dead long before it touched the ground. The others fled in panic.

Secure from that side, Donald turned to the officers. "You are my prisoners, gentlemen," he said. "Stay where you are for a few moments."

RUBO and Khan Sale cursed, Cohaine muttered objurgations; old Crofts remained silent. Egli appeared again, a broad grin on his face as he took in the situation.

"Where's Otili?" asked Donald.

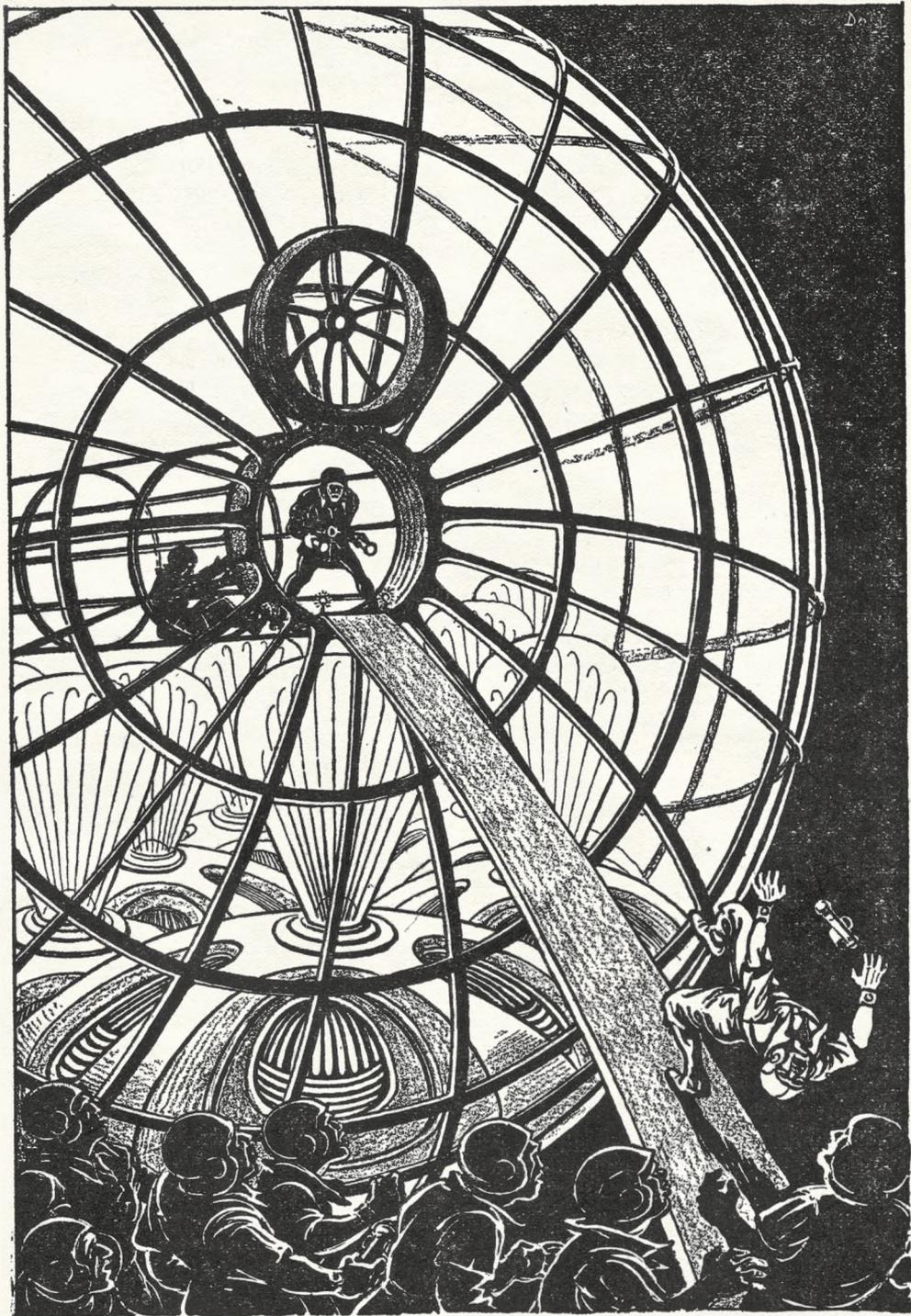
"Locked in her stateroom," answered Egli.

"Throw the switch that releases her. Wait two minutes, then reverse the current," commanded Donald.

And, when Egli had disappeared, "Now gentlemen!" he said, gesturing the officers to proceed to the door of Otili's room.

The four obeyed. Khan Sale scowled viciously. "You dog, you'll pay for this!" he snarled.

Then he saw Danvril's body lying



"Struck by the terrific current, the body described an arc through the air."

inert against the base of the bridge, and collapsed like a pricked bladder.

Donald marshalled his captives outside Ottili's room. They saw each other through her window. But the window was closed, and nothing but an atomic disintegrator would break the isochromin glass. Nevertheless, sound penetrated it perfectly.

"Donald!" gasped the girl. "Have you seen Lucas?"

"Not yet!" A terrible fear came into Donald's mind that her brother had been among those whom he had unwittingly slain. "You'll be free in a moment," he aded. "Don't be afraid."

A moment later, the door, held by the magnetic current, clicked open as Egli threw the switch below. Ottili came out. Her face was white with fear. She gasped when she saw the captain and officers prisoners.

"Now, gentlemen, inside, please," said Donald.

"We are in your hands," said old Crofts gravely, and entered. The three others followed.

"Just what do you expect to accomplish by this mad act?" demanded Crofts. "How are you better off than if you had accepted your fate quietly?"

"I'll see to that," answered Donald with a grin. He stepped back. "I'll try not to inconvenience you, gentlemen," he added. "It's lucky you've dined. Ottili, you'd better bring out your bag. But hurry."

Captain Crofts, with a courtly gesture, handed Donald Ottili's little bag, which was already packed. Immediately the door began to close softly.

It clicked. Until the switch was thrown again, no power on earth could open it.

“WHAT’S happened? What are we going to do?” demanded Egli and Ottili in a breath.

"Let's get the ship first. Stay here, Ottili! Keep out of the range of jettatubes in case those fellows try to shoot

across the gangplank. But they can't reach you here. Come along, Egli!"

The two ran down the companion. The engine-room was empty, but the mechanics left aboard could be heard talking in their quarters adjacent. There were five of them, and their dismay, as the two appeared in the doorway with levelled tubes, was comical.

"Raise your arms," commanded Donald quietly. "Now form single file and march up the companions to the upper deck. Then I'm going to let you go ashore."

He glanced at his wrist chronometer, then at that of the engine-room, visible through the glass. There was no aberrancy; chronometers of the better class were set to the absolute zero of planetary n-longitude, based on an imaginary curve passing through the Martian capital.

"Throw the gangplank switch in one minute, Egli," said Donald. (The old nomenclature was preserved.) "Then back twenty seconds later. You'll have to hurry, gentlemen."

The mechanics scrambled up the companions. A second after the minute, Donald ushered them down the gangplank, while a scowling knot of mechanics and guards looked on from the enclosure.

As the last mechanic filed ashore there came the expected jetta-spray from a half-dozen tubes. Donald, behind the stanchion again, laughed at their futile efforts.

"Don't try it, boys, the current's on!" he called, as there came a hesitant movement toward the gangplank. He knew that he could trust Egli.

And he turned his back calmly upon the raging, cursing mob, and rejoined Ottili near the saloon. In a minute or two Egli came up from the engine-room.

The ship was theirs. And Egli had disabled the engines! They had not foreseen that they might need them!

"The question is what we're going to do," said Donald.

"My brother," pleaded Ottili.

"He'll be our first care, of course. Then the other captives. Let's finish the officers' lunch while we talk it over. Here, we're absolutely secure."

Donald forced Ottili to eat. He told the girl and Egli of the events of the morning. There was nothing to be gained by concealing the facts.

"Danvril told me that your brother Lucas occupies one of those huts," said Donald, pointing to the cluster ashore. "That means that he must be safe."

Ottili was a little reassured. "But when we've got him, what are we going to do?" she asked.

"We've got the ray-gun aboard, and the heat-absorber ashore," said Donald. "If we can get the heat-absorber back aboard again, we can return to Earth and deal a deadly blow at Yoska."

"No, we can't do that," said Egli.

"Why not?" asked Donald. "We've got Cohaine and Khan Sale. They'll navigate us back to save their lives."

"You don't understand," answered Egli. "We don't navigate. The course and return course are both plotted from Earth. The calculations must be exact to the millionth part of a second. Otherwise we might collide with our Moon, or, worse yet, fall into Jupiter."

Donald nodded. Matters had suddenly assumed a serious aspect. Jupiter's giant bulk was as big a bugbear to space-travel as any shoals or rocks had been to sea-ships in earlier centuries.

"When do we start?" Donald asked.

"Exactly five-thousandths of a second after 23, which means in four hours' time. But when I say there is no navigating, I mean, of course, outside Earth's atmosphere. It's Cohaine's job to see we land at Chicago instead of falling into the Atlantic."

"If we start on the dot, can't we at

least reach the atmosphere of Earth, and then force Cohaine to do the rest?" queried Donald.

"No," answered Egli. "You are forgetting that I have disorganized the atomic engines. And I don't know how to fix them!"

CHAPTER V

THE CODE MESSAGE

THE three looked at one another in consternation. This was a calamity that could not have been foreseen. Donald had hoisted himself with his own petard, and with a vengeance.

"If only I could find Lucas," said Ottili, almost in tears.

"We'll do our best, Ottili," answered Donald. "Just as soon as we can settle on our course of action. Egli, it looks as if we've reached a condition of stalemate.

"The only thing I can think of is to radio Earth for a repair ship. Then, when it arrives, we ought to be able to surprise and overcome the mechanics and operators."

"I've been in charge of the radio," answered Egli. "But there's a difficulty—I don't know the code."

"The code?" asked Donald.

"A message in Amerish would arouse suspicion and result in the dispatch of a ray-boat."

"We must get the code from the captain."

"He hasn't got it," answered Egli, with his exasperating nonchalance.

"Well, who has?" snapped Donald.

"Only Danvril. And the code is itself a code—by which I mean no one but Danvril could read and interpret the code book."

"Then we've got to wake Danvril up!" shouted Donald. "Don't you suppose that by any chance he brought the antidote to the jetta poison aboard?"

"I should think it extremely likely," replied Egli. "But Danvril knew what he was about, and you can be sure he

didn't intend to let the secret of the antidote fall into any one's hands."

Donald, in despair, noticed that Egli spoke of Danvriil in the past, as if he was already as good as dead. Then a thought came to him.

"If Danvriil had the antidote on board," he said, "it's a safe bet that he concealed it upon his person. He never envisaged the possibility of being personally assaulted."

Egli threw the switch demagnetizing Danvriil's room, and Donald carried the body inside and laid it down upon the bed. He stripped off Danvriil's clothes and subjected each article to a minute scrutiny. And with an exclamation of satisfaction he came upon what he sought.

At least, there was little doubt but that it was the antidote. Else why should Danvriil have had that false back in his wrist chronometer?

It was the fact that Danvriil's chronometer was a whole half-second off time that aroused Donald's suspicions. Donald had subconsciously glanced at his own chronometer and noticed that the second hand was half-way around the milliar dial; next instant Danvriil's was registering an entire milliar.

Only the presence of some foreign substance, emitting the Delta rays, which science had never succeeded in eliminating from certain salts, could account for that fluctuation, since every chronometer of that make was perpetually adjusted to the great chronometer on Mars. And thus Donald found what he was seeking.

A flattened skin of rhodium, inside which could be seen several grains of blackish powder, each perfectly visible! Donald re clothed Danvriil, an extraordinarily difficult matter with the man's limbs completely inflexible and projecting at various angles from the rigid trunk. Then he unsealed the capsule with his nail, removed one of the grains, and resealed it.

And, while his heart beat quickly with hope and anxiety, he placed the tiny grain of black powder upon Danvriil's tongue.

NO MOTHER ever watched over a sick child as zealously as Donald watched over Danvriil in the minute that followed. For a few seconds he felt an increasing despair as the conviction grew on him, either that this was not the antidote, or else that it had been administered wrongly.

Then his heart leaped as he saw the rigid jaw begin to close. Suddenly he perceived moisture on Danvriil's skin. Then the arms, which had been pointing stiffly upward, dropped on the bed. The breath began to stir in Danvriil's lungs.

He sneezed, coughed, swallowed. Slowly the eyelids fluttered open. And into the staring eyes came the undefinable look of recognition.

Danvriil was conscious.

In the next ten minutes Donald talked fast. It was astonishing that Danvriil's recovery from the effects of the jetta poison should have been practically immediate, and certainly fortunate, for he needed all his wits to realize that the tables had been turned completely.

"I'm talking straight to you, Danvriil," said Donald. "If you accept my terms, I guarantee you your freedom. If you refuse, or try to trick me again, I'll kill you with no more compunction than you've shown to those unfortunates who have fallen into your hands. Those poor devils whom you induced me to slaughter, with your devilish malice, for instance.

"Here are my terms. You'll radio Earth in Government code for the immediate dispatch of a repair ship. You'll remain my prisoner aboard the *Planetaria*.

"You'll do all in your power to cooperate, by removing all suspicion from the minds of the relieving crew, and so enabling me to take possession

of their vessel. I'll do the rest, and guarantee your life. What do you say?"

Danvril had no thought of asking what Donald's intentions were toward the officers. He wasn't even interested in knowing whether they were alive. His own skin was the sole thing that seemed to interest him.

"I accept, Evans. I've got to," he bleated. "You've beaten me hands down. I'll do everything you wish me to do gladly, Evans."

Donald ushered Danvril outside, where Egli and the girl were waiting. "You see, the experiment has been a complete success," he said. "First of all, Danvril is going to radio Earth for the repair ship. I have made it perfectly clear to him what the price of treachery will be."

Ottili flew at Danvril. "Where's my brother?" she cried, seizing him by the arm.

"He's in one of those huts," answered Danvril, pointing. "He's perfectly safe. You shall have him aboard in a little while. I promise you!"

Ottili released him and stood looking at him doubtfully. Then she looked at Donald. That look of hers was dark and dubious. Donald remembered that later, but for the moment he was too deeply absorbed in the work on hand to give the matter more than a passing thought.

"**T**HERE you are, Evans!" Danvril was smiling for the first time when he rose from the radio instrument. "Now I've fulfilled the first part of the compact. What do you want me to do now?"

Egli drew Donald aside and thrust some jetta ampules into his hand. "I threw the armory switch and found these inside," he said. "I've got an idea that we'll need them. Danvril's plotting mischief."

"I agree with you," said Donald. He turned to Danvril. "Come up on deck," he said. "Egli, please open the

door of Ottili's room, demagnetize the gangplank, and stand by below. I'll signal you from the bridge."

In the few minutes that they had been in the radio room a perceptible change had taken place upon Inferno. A storm was blowing up. Dense black clouds were forming, and gusts of hot air came through the open windows.

Within the enclosure, the guards and mechanics, who had apparently abandoned all thought of attempting to regain possession of the ship, were shouting at the top of their voices, and seemed all to be riotously drunk.

Donald threw open the door of Ottili's room. "You gentlemen will go ashore," he said. "All except Cohaine, whose services will be needed later."

All four proceeded to step out, Cohaine trying to hurry past Donald; then, at the menace of the jetta-tube, he retreated, snarling.

"You'll get no help out of me!" he swore.

"I think so," replied Donald. "Step back, please!" He closed the door in Cohaine's face. He had gauged Cohaine as a blustering coward. It would be necessary to remagnetize that door. He turned to Captain Crofts.

"You and these gentlemen will have to reconcile yourselves to the idea of remaining on Inferno for a little while," he said. "I believe conditions are not bad, inside the enclosure. I promise you ultimate freedom—and in no long time. Captain, I am entrusting you with a message to the mechanics ashore."

A group of the mechanics, warned that something was happening aboard the *Planetaria*, had come staggering out of the hut. They shouted tipsy curses, but they did not know that the gangplank was demagnetized.

"**T**ELL those men that they will all be rescued, together with yourself and these two officers, at an early date," said Donald. "Meanwhile, they are to open the rear gate of the

stockade and let the prisoners come aboard.

"This must be done immediately, or the Ray-gun will be turned on them and they will be blasted out of existence.

"Furthermore, my machine must be brought aboard by the prisoners undamaged.

"Finally, if they will let the prisoners bring aboard the guards who received charges from my jetta-gun, I will revive them and return them."

"I shall obey your orders, of necessity," returned old Crofts with composure," but I have already warned you of the consequences of your acts of mutiny."

He turned toward the gangplank, accompanied by Rubo and Khan Sale, the latter muttering curses under his breath. Donald watched the two narrowly—also Danvril.

As the three set foot upon the gangplank Donald touched Danvril on the shoulder, saw him quail under the threat of the tube he held.

"On the bridge!" he said curtly.

His gesture showed that the order was to be obeyed promptly. Before the three officers had crossed the gangplank, before the drunken crowd ashore had taken in the fact that it was demagnetized, Donald and his prisoner were on the bridge.

They knew that a turn of the wheel would charge the gangplank again. They stood at the other end of the bridge, snarling.

Quietly Donald swung the wheel that controlled the starboard Ray-gun. The muzzle came up through the slit in the anti-Ray shield.

"Bring the two guards aboard," he called to the crowd. "Only four of you, two to each man. If a fifth man sets foot upon the gangplank, it will be charged immediately."

A breath of icy wind fanned Donald, followed by a sudden drenching shower. Out of the distance came subterranean moanings. Ugly weather

was brewing, and Donald felt he would be glad when the business was over.

He saw that Crofts had evidently delivered his message, for the rear gate of the stockade was being opened. But the clouds were beating up over the stars, and it was impossible to see whether the prisoners were being summoned.

Two guards appeared, carrying one of the mechanics who had been shot down. Without relaxing his vigilance for an instant, Donald placed a grain of the black powder on the man's tongue. He did the same thing for the second guard, the man who had accompanied Danvril and himself in the airplane.

Then, as the rain ceased for a moment, and the increasing blackness paled, Donald saw the indistinct forms of the prisoners coming aboard. Eyes glued to the gangplank, and hand upon the signal-wheel, he waited.

The prisoners came up the gangplank with a rush, but there was no attempt at treachery on the part of the guards, in spite of the confusion that ensued. It was difficult to make out what was happening, and all Donald could do was to make certain that the guards made no attempt to follow.

Had they done so, he would have swung the wheel and sent guards and prisoners alike bounding to death under the impulse of the electric current.

He shouted, peering through the darkness, "All aboard! I'm charging the gangplank!" He saw the last man clear the plank and swung the wheel. "Gangplank's charged!" he cried in warning, though the tiny electric light that had sprung up on either handrail should have been evidence enough of this.

DONALD turned to Danvril. "Get below!" he ordered crisply.

"They'll kill me," answered Dan-

vril, shuddering, as he glanced down at the prisoners, who seemed only just to have realized the meaning of the situation.

They had made out Donald on the bridge, and were milling at the bottom of the bridge stairs, shouting wild demonstrations of delight.

And before Donald could answer Danvril's well-taken objection, something hissed overhead, and a flash of brilliant violet light came from the tower inside the duroferrin fence.

The Ray-gun mounted on the tower was attempting conclusions with the gun on the *Planetaria's* bridge. And those bolts of electricity, displacing and disrupting air, had the exact effect of knives hurled blade on with inconceivable energy. Striking fairly, one of them would have sliced its way through an elephant.

CHAPTER VI

THE DUEL

IN THE brief, sanguinary struggle that had ushered in the dictator Yoska's reign of terror, the *Planetaria* had been fitted out as an auxiliary battlecraft, and had done yeoman service against the horde of barbarians in their piratical space-cruisers who had swarmed from the Martian moon Phobos, intent upon plunder.

That was what saved those on the *Planetaria*. The anti-Ray shield that protected the bridge ran down to the base, leaving room enough behind it to accommodate the fifty, though it was close quarters.

Had the guards in the tower turned their attention to the prisoners first, instead of trying to catch Donald off his guard, they could have slaughtered a good part of them.

As it was, they took in the situation instantly, and ran crowding pell-mell behind the shield.

"Ottili!" cried Donald desperately. "Where is she? Who's seen her?"

In the confusion it was impossible to make himself understood. Sick with horror, Donald realized that, wherever the girl might be, the best chance for her safety lay in victory in the duel that had now opened.

He grasped the photophone, and in the receiver saw Egli standing patiently before the controls in the engine-room.

"Tower's raying us," he said. "Don't leave your post." He touched the button and a tongue of flame leaped forth from the gun's mouth, answering a second one from the tower.

Puffs of white smoke sprang out all along the front of the Ray-shield where the positively charged electrons, constantly renovated from the disintegrating lead-W element in the paint that coated it, dispersed the electric bolts from the tower gun.

The white puffs could be seen distinctly too, on the tower gun shield. It was a soundless duel of electric forces, destined to go on until a bolt struck one of the inevitable imperfections in the lead-W paint on either shield.

A scratch, a minute flaw, struck by one of those knife-edge charges, would widen and rip as a woman rends a seam, until the whole shield, disintegrated, would be battered into a shapeless hulk, leaving those behind it an easy prey.

Chance—blind chance; but there was something more. Donald knew that his Ray-gun, no longer recharged by current from the disabled engines, was good for a hundred shots at most before its accumulators were exhausted.

He did not know whether the motors that supplied energy to the tower gun were good indefinitely, or whether this, too, had a limited period of service. And he fired steadily, slowly, searching foot by foot the shield of the tower gun.

HE COULD see only by the flashes, for the rain had become a deluge. The subterranean muttering had grown into a menacing moaning like that of some imprisoned giant. Far away among the desolate lava hills flashes of fire spurted upward.

And Ottili was—where? Had she got locked by inadvertence into one of the rooms? Donald dared not let himself think.

And yet at any moment, should they so decide, the gunner in the tower could turn his weapon upon the *Planetaria* herself, and reduce her to a heap of shapeless metal. If he failed to do so, it was because he dared not, in default of Danvril's order. Danvril—

Suddenly Donald became aware that Danvril was no longer at his side. Silently, stealthily he had slipped away in the darkness.

In the base of the bridge the rescued fifty were shouting encouragement, cheering as each of Donald's shots appeared as a puff of white smoke against the tower gun's ray-shield. Donald turned from his gun a moment and called down to his men:

"Danvril's got away! Is he among you? If he is, hold him!"

Confusion, straining among the packed bodies, contradictory answers shouted back. Suspicion, tumult—nobody could distinguish his neighbor

Cr-rack! A long, jagged strip of metal from his shield whizzed past Donald's head. The tower gun had found a flaw in his shield.

He crouched lower, for his head was exposed now, and a single well directed bolt would shear the top of it clean away, as a man slices an egg. He fired back steadily.

With a screaming sound that end of the ray-shield buckled in two. The first crack had strained the metal, dislodged a few minute flakes of the lead-W paint; but that was enough. A

few shots more, and all would be at an end.

Desperately Donald pressed the button. And suddenly there came a smashing, rending, toppling sound from within the enclosure, and a great spire of purple light shot up toward the murky skies. And where the tower had been, there was no more tower, only a heap of crumbled ruins.

Donald's last shot had, by a miracle, found some weak spot in the defenses, weak enough to admit the disintegrating bolt of electric energy. It had sliced through the shield like cheese and ripped the whole structure bodily asunder. Cries of despair came faintly to Donald's ears out of the darkness.

But those cries did not come from the tower, whose occupants lay, a mere shapeless heap of charred and mangled flesh, within the ruins. They came from the guards and mechanics of the *Planetaria* in the duroferrin enclosure, as they realized that all was over.

Donald leaped for the photophone and again saw Egli standing at the controls below.

"Close all windows; demagnetize gangplank and all stateroom doors!" he shouted. "Join me here immediately, bringing any jetta-tubes and ammunition you can find. The tower's down, they're helpless; Ottili's vanished, and we're going to find her."

In his excitement he had forgotten Cohaine, locked into Ottili's room.

He called down to his men: "We've won. Form up on deck! Line up and wait for orders!"

CCHEERING, they rushed from behind the shelter of the shield. In a few moments Egli joined Donald.

"Gangplank has been demagnetized for some time," he said. "The controls refused to act. See!"

He pointed, and Donald saw for the first time that the little bulbs on the hand-rails were out. One of the bolts

Danvri!



from the tower must have passed near enough to throw the mechanism out of action.

"God!" shouted Donald. "Ottili's gone!"

He rushed to the stateroom, hardly realizing that Cohaine had been locked inside it. He switched on the light. The room was empty, but even so he forgot all about Cohaine. On the bridge he had thrust the girl out

of his mind by a violent effort of will; now she monopolized it.

He shouted her name, lost control of himself for a few moments, pulled himself together again with violent self-control.

He turned to Egli. "Danvri's vanished too," he cried. "We'll get her—and him, if we have to comb all Inferno to find them!"

Donald was once more the man of

action. "I want ten men to remain aboard the *Planetaria* and hold her," he said. "Hand out jetta-tubes, Egli. There'll be no need to fool with the controls. Ten men can hold the ship against any force.

"Ten more to hold the enclosure after we've disarmed the guards and mechanics there. I'll need the rest of you. You too, Egli." Suddenly he remembered Ottili's brother. "Where's Lucas?" he demanded.

"He's not here with us," said one of the ex-prisoners. "He was with us when we started from the huts, but he didn't come aboard."

Donald said nothing more, but leaped forward down the gangplank into the enclosure. As he had anticipated, there was no attempt at resistance. Many of the guards had been crushed by the falling tower, which had collapsed right through the hut where they had been roosting. In the pale zodiacal light that always plays over Inferno, they were quickly rounded up, together with Captain Crofts, Khan Sale and Rubo.

"Where's Ottili?" demanded Donald of the latter, covering him with a tube.

"She passed through here some time ago," replied the other, with a sneer. That sneer told worlds to Donald.

"Where's Danvril?" he shouted.

"He's gone too," tittered Khan Sale.

Donald swung upon him, would have sprayed him in his blind fury, but old Crofts intervened.

"Ottili came looking for her brother," he said, speaking with his customary quiet dignity. "She found him. Danvril came upon them, ordered out one of the airplanes, and forced them to accompany him. I am glad to tell you, Evans, because I protested in vain."

"Get me another airplane!" Donald snarled at one of the mechanics.

"The other one has a leaky engine.

It can't be relied upon—" the man began.

"Get it, I said!" Then, to Crofts, "Which way did they go?"

"There's only one place they can have gone to," Crofts responded. "It's the central Inferno station."

DONALD nodded in understanding. The prisoners upon Inferno, after becoming acclimatized in the huts in the vicinity of the landing port, were transferred in batches to the central station, some thousand miles away.

Here they drew a three months' food supply, renewed at equal intervals, and then they were turned loose to shift for themselves among the caves of the desolate lava country. Then they found themselves exposed in reality to those horrors that made death far preferable to their exile.

So terrible was the fate of these exiles that even among the supporters of the dictator, Yoska, a movement had arisen in favor of the abolition of the penal colony. And this movement was intensified by the contrast between the fate of the exiles and the lot of the few officials who inhabited the central station.

Bribed by sufficient money to enable them to become independent after a three-year term on Inferno, they lived at the central station in a luxury that can only have been paralleled by the Sybarites of old, according to legend.

There, under a dome of isochromin glass, within a fence of duroferrin, in an artificial temperature and under an artificial sun, amid flowers and lawns and shrubs brought there, with the very earth itself, they enjoyed life attended by such of the prisoners as chose to sell themselves into slavery, and accompanied by the fairest of the women prisoners.

The realization that Danvril had taken Ottili to the central station filled Donald with horror. What his motive

had been in taking Lucas, Donald could not determine.

"Hurry! Hurry!" he shouted, as the mechanic came trundling out the plane.

Crofts stepped forward. "Evans, I know I can't turn you back," he said, "but if you reach the central station in this storm what can you do? It is a fortress. It could repulse an army. And there's no way in. I was there once, five years ago. Unless Otili is everything in the world to you, you are not bound in honor to go to your death."

DONALD did not reply. He stepped into the rear seat of the plane. Then Egli began clambering into the front.

"Egli, you didn't hear. This is certain death," said Donald.

"Otili was my associate in the fight for freedom," answered Egli quietly.

A quick glance into Egli's face showed Donald that it was unnecessary to say anything more. And two were better than one. He pressed the starter, and the plane shot up vertically into the teeth of the storm, which made the isochromin panes rattle in their frames. Flashes of lurid fire shot upward from the marshes beyond the range of volcanic hills.

The mechanic had spoken the truth about the engine. It was essential that the energy generated by the disintegration of the uranium salts should take place in a spatial vacuum, that is to say, a vacuum from which not merely air, but matter itself, had been expelled.

The creation of such a vacuum had been perhaps the outstanding feat of science in the past century. Going down to the very root of physics, it banished matter by theoretically straightening the four-dimensional space continuum, reducing it to three dimensions; and the very theory was still hotly disputed. The only thing

known for sure about the process was that it worked.

Yet some leakage was inevitable sooner or later, and the engine of Donald's plane was leaking badly. It stuttered and protested as he soared up into the brighter band of zodiacal light beneath the storm clouds, while the wind howled and whistled about the duroferrin struts and time and again sent the craft careening onto a wing. And, with engine wide open, Donald raced against time and the flagging engine.

Far in the distance he saw a vertical shaft of sunlight pierce the clouds. He did not realize that this was the artificial sun that supplied the central station with warmth and light, a sun reflected from Earth, from the superpower station in the Rockies.

He thought it was an optical illusion due to the zodiacal light. And he drove frantically onward, until there came a sudden roaring outburst, like the loosing of the waters of a dam, and the engine stuttered its last protest and ceased.

CHAPTER VII

INTO THE INTERIOR

FORTUNATELY the helicopter motor still functioned, and Donald succeeded in effecting some sort of landing. It consisted, in fact, of reaching ground with his head wedged against one of the struts that supported the wing cantilever, and his legs entangled in the aileron gear.

Bumping along the ground with nothing but a sheet of isochromin glass between one and ridges of razor-sharp lava is not a pleasant experience, and Donald was glad when the motion stopped.

He heard Egli calling him, "Are you all right, Donald?"

"I'm all right," he called back, and through the gloom saw Egli crawling toward him.

"What's happened?" he asked, as

clods of earth rained ceaselessly upon the glass, though there did not seem to be a handful anywhere in the neighborhood.

"Sounds like an eruption," said Egli, peering out through the glass.

Though the machine would never fly again, the unbreakable glass encased them, and they crouched there in darkness faintly illumined by the distant artificial sun, whose rays hardly pierced the murk of the whirling clouds above them.

Huge clods of earth, torn from the ground miles away, bombarded them, landing with a force that would have crushed any substance less firm than the isochromin, and causing the panes to sag inward as their supports bent under those impacts. For perhaps an hour the storm lasted; then suddenly ceased.

"Well, we may as well see where we are," said Donald, opening the door and stepping out upon slippery mud where there had formerly been the knife-edges of lava.

Egli followed him. The plane was half-buried in the mud, which was boiling hot to the touch. Its heat penetrated through the soles of their boots. A little ahead, however, there seemed to be firm lava.

They struggled onward in the direction of the artificial sun. Perhaps a half-hour passed. Then the gale began to blow still more furiously.

Clinging to the sharp lava ridges, Donald and Egli had all their work cut out to prevent being lifted up bodily and swept away.

THEIR clothes were whipped to ribbons. Fortunately the storm seemed to be raging most fiercely in the upper layers of the atmosphere, where the clouds raged and whirled like shock troops of cavalry in conflict.

There was nothing to do but hang on, and hang on they did grimly, with bruised and bleeding hands, thrusting

their shoulders into hollows of the ground, against which they were dashed violently again and again by the insane fury of the storm.

Then, as suddenly as it had arisen, the storm subsided, leaving the two drenched, waterlogged, and shivering in the icy cold. They picked their battered bodies up and looked at each other ruefully.

"That sun looks good to me," said Donald, pointing to where the artificial orb streamed down its rays. "We've got to go on, Egli," he added. "She's there!"

"I'm cold! I'm cold!" gasped Egli, whose home was in the warm regions of Congolia. "I've got to get warm." His teeth were chattering, his limbs almost palsied.

In mocking answer, something dropped upon his face. Egli started with a cry. It was a drop of water, boiling hot.

Next moment the clouds discharged themselves again. Torrents of boiling rain descended, mixed with more clods of mud.

It was the liberal plastering of mud that saved the lives of the two fugitives. Spattered, scalded, they raced for refuge among the lava pinnacles, arms above their heads to protect themselves against that steaming deluge.

Suddenly in the dim light they saw before them what looked like a great rock vault in the base of a sheer cliff that towered aloft. They dashed inside, stopped, panting. They were temporarily secure.

Life on Inferno was quite as bad as it had been supposed to be. That was Donald's thought, as he rubbed the steaming mud over his scalded face and hands and winced under the pain.

"Well, we'll have to wait here till this storm stops," said Donald.

"It's stopping," answered Egli, peering out.

"Seems to have been staged for our special benefit," answered Donald.

He looked about him. In spite of the over-arching rock, the cave was faintly luminous, and this luminosity appeared to increase as it grew deeper, until the rear portion was fairly aglow.

"This place looks as if it had been made by human agency," said Donald. "What are these lights?"

The light was not steady, but flickered and glowed and seemed to quiver like shot silk. Streaks of fire ran up and down the rock walls.

Then Donald saw that the light came from innumerable small insects that covered the cavern walls, thinly near the entrance, where the starlight was evidently distasteful to them, more thickly further back.

"What's that?" whispered Egli, twitching the rags of Donald's sleeve.

Something was moving against the illuminated rear wall of the cavern. It had the shape of a head — a human head. Another came into view behind it. Then others. The shadows moved slowly forward, and beneath the heads were the shadows of hunched shoulders.

"Who's there?" called Donald. As he spoke he pulled out his jetta-tube.

SUDDENLY all was pandemonium. A snarling, screeching throng hurled themselves forward at the two men. There must have been fifteen to twenty of them, and among them were women.

Gaunt creatures, clothed in rags of the plantextile clothes supplied by the Government, stoned in their hands, ape-men rather than humans, in the dim light of the cave. Yet, dim though that light was, the mob halted and wavered uncertainly, for they had seen the deadly jetta-tubes in the hands of Donald and Egli.

"Stand back, or we shoot!" shouted Donald.

"Curse you!" screeched a ragged man at the head of the crowd. "Shoot! We're not afraid to die. You can't kill

all of us, and those who survive will get you!"

"Wait!" shouted Donald. He pronounced a word. "Is there any one here who knows what that means? I'm Donald Evans, of Circle Four."

A man screamed, shuffled forward. "You're not a Government man?" he cried.

"I'm an exile like yourselves. One of the last batch to reach Inferno. We've got possession of the *Planetaria* and we're going to set you free and bring you back to Earth. If you'll help us, we'll break Yoska's power forever."

They crowded about him, still uncertain, but Donald's rags and mud-plastered face made him look so like one of themselves that their doubts changed to belief.

The reaction was a touching one. They grasped his and Egli's hands, raising them to their lips, their joy at first was incoherent.

They told him that they were the remnants of those who had been exiled to Inferno, some for as many as eight years. They had abandoned all hope of ever seeing Earth again. Their lives had been a nightmare of struggle against the storms and cold, against hunger, against the monsters that lived beneath the earth, so that they were secure only in caves among the thick lava rocks.

Some, who had been willing to sell themselves into ignominy, worked as slaves at the central station, under the isochromin dome and the warm sun, among flowers and trees. The rest of them had determined to make a desperate attempt against the officials, in spite of the armament of ray-guns and huge jetta-tubes.

They told Donald that even to try to reach the station meant probable death. There had been a week of intermittent storms and eruptions, and after such eruptions the monsters that squirmed through the mud of the marshes were always active.

MONSTERS hundreds of yards in length, hunger-maddened by the dispersal of the smaller life on which they fed, owing to the upheavals, creatures which, despite their rudimentary brains, had learned that human flesh was savory.

"How do you propose to enter through the duroferrin fence?" asked Donald.

"We'll tell the guards we've come to sell ourselves into slavery. Once inside we'll rush the ray-guns and the jetta-tubes, kill and be killed."

"It's hopeless," said an old man, as the hubbub subsided. "There's one chance in a million, when the sun goes out."

"The sun?" asked Donald.

"In three days' time. I've kept the time on a notched stone. I've told them, but they won't believe me. I was an astronomer on Earth. I was sent here seven years ago after the last conspiracy against Yoska. My name is Mackay. My forefathers came from Scotland."

"I remember you," said Donald. "Many thought you were wrongly convicted."

"I knew nothing of the conspiracy. Enemies involved me. But now I'm heart and soul with these people. And we're all willing to fight or die."

THREE days later Donald and Egli, accompanied by old Mackay for guide, started across the lava rocks in the direction of the central station. An hour later the rest of the prisoners were to follow, to reap whatever fruits there might be of Donald's strategy.

If he had succeeded in gaining entrance to the station, they were to rush the guns at his signal; if he had failed, they were desperate enough to fling themselves against the fence and be shot down.

Donald had lived on food whose origin he shuddered to think about. He had crouched in the cavern while

boiling rain came down in buckets-full; for two days an incessant eruption had tossed the scarred land about as if giants were at play. And during that time, Mackay had explained to him what was due to happen.

The artificial sun was reflected to Inferno by means of the huge parabolic mirrors of the super-power station in the Rockies. But the relative positions of the luminary, of Earth, and of Inferno had to be calculated to a nicety.

And, according to Mackay, in spite of the most ingenious reflecting devices, there must be a period of one hour during which the intervention of Jupiter threw the artificial sun into eclipse.

That period was now due, and Mackay had calculated it by means of a wrist-chronometer stolen from the station by a slave, who had later been expelled. The three were to approach as near as possible to the station, then to await the onset of the eclipse; in the darkness, to make an attempt to scale the fence.

But for Mackay's aid, Donald and Egli would never have come within half the distance of the station. Under the pale stars they marched, marched incessantly toward that shaft of light that descended vertically on the horizon through a rift in the clouds. Their feet were slashed by the sharp lava edges, their boots had become tatters of leather.

Yet this was nothing in comparison with the trail across the marshes, still upheaving after the eruptions, like a stormy sea.

Along a narrow trail of hard ground the three picked their way, while the earth bubbled on either side, and threw up salty spume. Everywhere, into the infinity of the horizon, extended that heaving sea of mud. Once, too, Mackay caught Donald and Egli by the arms and whispered to them to remain motionless.



The hundred yards body writhed through the mud

Then, sick with horror, Donald saw what Mackay's more accustomed eyes had seen more quickly—the hundred-yards long body, thick as a thick tree, and gleaming with scales, that writhed through the mud; the head, no larger than a man's, and singularly like an idiot man's, with the huge mouth agape in a vicious grin, displaying the rows of gleaming tusks within.

Perhaps the monster had no sense of smell; or, bedaubed with mud, the three might have been of the same odor as the soil itself. Against those scales, the small jetta-tube would have been useless, and the head writhed too fast for accurate aim.

The three crouched motionless on the firm causeway, and the menace passed.

THE glow grew brighter. The skill of the projectors on Earth, millions of miles away, had contrived that the artificial sun, instead of radiating light in all directions, should focus it directly downward upon the central station.

Nevertheless, at a distance of a mile or two, within the fringe of the circle, the light was as bright as on a dull day on Earth. Donald felt a painful throbbing of his eyeballs as he followed Mackay up an isolated pinnacle of lava rock that commanded a view of the interior of the station.

But he forgot it when he turned to look. And a gasp of wonder broke from his lips.

Within the duroferrin fence, which covered an extent of about twenty acres, an earthly paradise had been constructed. A paradise, even for Earth—much more so for the surface of hideous Inferno, on which not a blade of grass grew, though a few plants had sprung up among the lava from seeds blown from the station.

Groves of palm trees, flowering shrubs, whose sweet odors were dis-

cernible even at that distance; sweet water, condensed from air by some of the power engines within the enclosure. And everywhere green grass and sunlight!

The central building was a long, one-story bungalow, covering about an entire acre of ground. It was wreathed with flowering vines, and surrounded by gardens with high hedges.

Nearer the massive entrance gate of the fence stood various smaller buildings, all perfectly visible in the clear yellow sunlight, and evidently housing the guards, perhaps the slaves, and the various machines.

At intervals along the walls were platforms on which stood sentries beside what looked like medieval machine-guns, but were actually ray-guns. Huge jetta-tubes were in position on the flat roofs of the buildings.

Suddenly old Mackay clutched Donald's arm. "Look! Look!" he whispered hoarsely, pointing to a cluster of men gathered at one point of the surrounding fence. "Do you see, Donald?"

"I can't see what they're doing—"

"The fence is down! Yards of it! Thrown down by the eruption. They're repairing it! Our chance! Our chance! If only the others come!"

Donald glanced back, but the trail along which they had come faded into invisibility outside the circle of the sunlight.

"Our chance!" whispered old Mackay again, wild with excitement. "If the light fades before they complete the repairs—"

And, even as he spoke, a black curve appeared upon the artificial sun overhead. Then, ten times as swift as an eclipse of the sun seen from Earth, the curve spread over the disk.

The station grew indistinct and vanished. Only a dark blur was visible as the stars came out again.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CENTRAL STATION

“ONE hour!” chattered old Mackay. “One hour!” Donald did not answer him. He was barely conscious of his presence. To rescue Otili from Danvriil was a task that would require every ounce of concentration of which he was capable. And the chances were, frankly, as good as nil.

Mackay, who had no ray-gun, was to watch the result of Donald's attempt to enter the enclosure, then to hurry back to meet the rest of the captives. Egli was, of course, to accompany Donald.

But they made no plans, because they would be useless. To rescue Otili was the first step; to recapture Danvriil, to manage in some way to keep things going until the rest could arrive—all that was as chance might contrive.

Fifty yards from the fallen section of the fence Mackay bade them goodbye. “I'll bring the rest, they'll die or conquer,” he said. “Do what you can.” And he was gone.

From where they crouched, Donald and Egli could hear the voices of the repair men. It was uncertain whether they consisted of slaves or Government guards, but the probabilities were that they were mixed. There must be at least a dozen of them.

“We'll rush them,” Donald said to Egli. “Shoot without hesitation; then rush for the house. It's all we can do!”

They drew nearer. The workers seemed to be resting on the ground, awaiting the ending of the eclipse. Donald and Egli, on their faces, worked their way through the patches of weeds that had sprung up here from seeds blown over the fence.

Now Donald could count their numbers. There were more than a dozen—there were fourteen. They sat in

two groups, a larger one of eleven, a smaller one of three.

One of the three rose, bawling some command. The eleven leaped up with eager alacrity. Slaves! Only three guards! That simplified matters considerably!

Only a dozen yards to cover now. Inch by inch onward. One of the guards turned, pointed, uttered an exclamation. Now! At them!

Like panthers the two men leaped. They were upon the guards before the latter could draw their tubes. But Donald's and Egli's jettas spoke, spraying the three into instant unconsciousness.

Donald turned to the stupefied prisoners. “Take their jetta-tubes and ammunition, three of you, and follow us. We've come to set you free. The rest of your friends are following us!”

WITHOUT waiting to hear the answer, he sprinted toward the house, with Egli at his heels. None of the three guards had had time to cry the alarm. A guard bawled from a tower, but there was no challenge in the cry.

Donald raced for the long building, up the path of pumice blocks. A single guard stood at the entrance. His figure loomed up on the threshold. The cry was frozen on his lips as Donald fired, and, instantly cataleptic, he dropped rigidly across the sill.

Donald rushed into the house. He entered a long room, with walls extending up to the huge dome of glass that covered the entire enclosure. The isochromin glass, light as eiderdown, curved in a vast expanse, unsupported by pillars, from the house to the fence, a triumph of structural engineering which had put to shame the most famous domes of ancient times. In spite of his eagerness to find Otili, Donald stood still, amazed at the beauty of the interior.

A single rug, a hundred yards in length, woven with all the skill of the

Orient, covered the floor. Small pieces of graceful furniture stood back against the walls. Basketwork stands, filled with exotic, heavy-scented flowers, were before the windows. But the room was empty.

Donald rushed through. A slave appeared, an old man, staring stupidly at him. Donald levelled his tube. But the slave had none, and terrified, he dropped upon his knees and raised his hands.

"Ottili! Danvril!" shouted Donald.

The slave gesticulated, stammered incoherently in his terror, pointed toward the further door. Donald rushed through.

Nobody was in this room, but a door was open at the other end, and there sounded the scurrying of footsteps. Donald burst into the room behind.

Three women were there, attired in fancy costumes, one wearing Victorian hoops, one the short skirts of the twentieth century, one the frilled knickerbocker suit of the twenty-first. They fled squealing through still another door in the long sequence of rooms.

But there was a fourth woman—Ottili. Bound to a frame against a wall, her eyes wide with mingled terror and joy as she saw her lover.

"**W**HERE'S Danvril?" asked Donald, as Egli slashed her bonds. "And Lucas?"

"Danvril's got my brother in a dungeon somewhere. Danvril was here an hour ago. He's drugged or maniac, swearing he'll depose Yoska and make himself king of the Planetary Union, and me his queen. We must find my brother," the girl implored.

But outside there sounded the yells of the guards. The invaders were discovered. Men were already running through the rooms. Two guards appeared in the doorway shouting as

they sighted the two men. They raised their jetta-tubes.

Donald and Egli were too quick for them. They fired from the hip, and the two guards, frozen into instantaneous catalepsy, dropped across the threshold, while those behind them scurried back.

"The roof!" shouted Donald. "We must get the jetta-tube there, hold the place till Mackay brings his men. It's our only hope. Which way?" he asked Ottili.

"I don't know," gasped the girl. "He brought me here; I've never left this room—"

"Quick!" Donald seized her, and the two ran, with Egli bringing up the rear. As they reached the opposite door there came a rush of guards through the one by which they had entered. There sounded the soft hiss of discharging jetta-tubes. But the three were untouched, and next moment were through the door.

They found themselves in a small, square passage, with a circular staircase. Doors led out of this on three sides. All of them, except the door through which the three had fled, were barred and bolted.

Donald turned as the swarm of guards rushed toward him, fired his tube in the face of the foremost, fired again, and found it empty.

But the guard, falling, brought down three or four of those behind him, and Donald slammed the door in their faces, and he and Egli raised the heavy duroferrin bar and got it into place.

Donald reloaded as he rushed up the staircase, supporting Ottili. It gave upon the flat roof. Only a single guard was there, and he, evidently forbidden to leave his post, was shouting hoarsely and peering out into the darkness. Egli rushed at him. As he turned, he gave him a buffet that sent him reeling over the edge into the shrubbery beneath.

Panting, the three surveyed their surroundings.

THE only armament consisted of a huge jetta-tube, with a caisson of cartridges; it was mounted on a swivel and capable of being fired in any direction. It was protected by a high ray-shield, also swinging in a groove, so that at any time the gunners would be protected on three sides.

For the rest, the roof was flat, with a low parapet surrounding it, and an open trap-door of duroferrin guarded the top of the stairs up which the three had fled.

Donald and Egli seized the trap and swung the ponderous piece of metal back. It fell into position, showing duroferrin bars on the exterior, which were quickly adjusted. The three ceased their labors.

For the present they were secure. But they were also trapped hopelessly. As soon as the artificial sun came out again, they would be the target for the jetta-tubes and ray-guns from the platforms on the walls all round them.

They looked into each other's eyes and read that fate in them. But none of the three showed a trace of fear.

A crash sounded below. Evidently the guards had got the barred door out of its frame. There came a rush up the staircase, a hammering upon the under side of the trap. It ceased, and the footsteps could be heard receding. There was no reaching the roof that way.

A strange silence fell. Through the darkness the three could hear an occasional voice bawling an order, but for the most part nothing was audible. It was a queer waiting there—a waiting for death.

Donald bent over the jetta-tube, trying to discover its mechanism in the starlight. It was fed from a magazine, capable of containing a dozen cartridges at a time, and Donald and

Egli inserted these from the caisson, and closed the breech.

As he did so, his head collided with something like a round rod that was affixed to the gun—no, it ran vertically through the gun and down through the roof. He reached up and could not find the top of it.

Egli struck it at the same time. "What is it?" he cried.

They could only just see the object. It seemed to be of isochromin glass, hence almost completely transparent. They could feel it, and could distinguish a faintly nebulous circular outline, but its use was a mystery.

"Evans!" Danvril's voice came from a loud-speaker somewhere in the building, no doubt with audiophone attachment on the roof. "I want to talk to you. I've got proposals to make. Are you willing to listen? You're trapped, you know. But I've got terms to propose—good terms."

Donald hesitated. It was impossible to trust Danvril, but, on the other hand, in their predicament he could afford to overlook no chance.

"What are your terms?" he answered.

"I can't hear you. Move over to the attachment above the caisson. You'll find an ear there."

Donald obeyed, beckoning to Otili and Egli to accompany him.

"I like your courage, Evans. I've thought of making you a suggestion, and now I've decided to do so. I want you to join me, with your heat-absorber. I can win over the repair ship. We'll return to Earth and overthrow Yoska, make ourselves supreme rulers.

"We'll release all the prisoners on Inferno and inaugurate a reign of peace, liberty and justice. And I'll surrender Otili to you. What do you say, Evans? I'll free Lucas too."

Evans grinned wryly. "Don't trust him," whispered Otili.

But Danvril had heard. "You can trust me, Evans," he pleaded. "We

both tried to double-cross each other, but I'm serious in this. I shall need men like you. You shall have the highest office under me. Refuse, and, in a few minutes, when the sun comes out, you will be annihilated."

AFTERWARD Donald wondered whether Danvriil might not have been sincere—long afterward, when the extensive record of Danvriil's own plotting against Yoska came to light.

"Are you prepared to come up here and place yourself in my hands as a hostage, Danvriil?" asked Donald.

"You don't trust me? How can I trust you?"

"I'll meet you on no other terms."

"You fool, you're courting annihilation—sure, inescapable annihilation. I can use you, but I don't need you. Open that trap door and come down the stairway, and you'll find I'm a man of honor. Refuse, and take the consequences!"

"Go to Inferno!" answered Donald. "That's my last word to you."

He was using a popular expression that hardly suited the occasion. Danvriil's curses came back. Suddenly Egli shouted, pointed.

Directly overhead the edge of the artificial sun had appeared!

CHAPTER IX

DESTRUCTION

SWIFTLY the luminary came into view as the black curve of Jupiter vanished from its surface. Everything grew visible in the soft glow that was shed over grass and shrubberies. A fairyland of pleasure—guarded by the grim ray-guns of the platforms, with their gunner-guards.

And now Donald could see the thing that had mystified him in the darkness. It was a straight and slender pillar of isochromin glass, no thicker than an man's arm, but, of course, unbreakable. It ran up to a height of about five hundred feet, and seemed

to support the mighty dome of glass that enclosed the station.

Seemed to support it—and yet it was impossible that that single central column could have borne the weight of the entire dome, feather-weight though the isochromin glass was. It must serve some other purpose—but what that purpose was, Donald could not divine.

The fight was on! The air was alive with planes, circling noiselessly like huge dragon-flies. Round and round they winged their way, their small ray-guns pointing threateningly at the defenders, though as yet no shot had been fired.

The three, crouching behind the shield, saw at once that they would have all their work cut out to guard themselves. The shield moved noiselessly and easily in its groove, but it had to be turned constantly to cover the small segment of the circle that always remained exposed.

Sooner or later that open segment would come into the line of fire of the ray-gun of some passing plane, and then—instant obliteration!

The gun swung with the shield, and Donald manipulated it, turning the wheel ceaselessly, while the threat went on and on.

Danvriil's voice sounded again: "You see, it's hopeless, Evans. Surrender!"

Donald did not answer him. He guessed Danvriil, afraid of Otili's being hit, had instructed the flyers to wear down the defenders by their methods, but not to fire.

"This can't go on," he said to Egli. "I'm going to open the ball. When I say 'Mark!' press the button."

Round and round! The three were growing dizzy. Donald had marked one of the largest platforms, near the gate, mounting an enormous ray-gun. Egli, finger on button, crouched as Donald revolved gun and shield.

"Mark!" shouted Donald.

The gunners, stupidly unprepared,

had left the slit in their ray-shield open. It was a miracle of good fortune that sent the discharge straight to the mark. The platform was obscured in smoke; it trembled, and collapsed, carrying down gunners and guards under a heap of crumpled metal, and bringing down a large section of the duroferrin fence with it.

FURIOUS yells arose everywhere. Danvril's voice could be heard uttering terrific curses. But his cries were drowned in the shouts for vengeance. Everywhere about the interior could be seen the forms of the guards, rushing to their stations.

A siren blew. The airplanes fluttered to the ground. Three ray-guns opened simultaneously upon the defenders. The smoke coiled up from the ray-shield.

Donald revolved the shield, keeping the open segment opposite the smashed tower, so that from this point no attack was possible. Revolving the gun over three-fourths of a horizon, he fired back briskly.

For five minutes the soundless duel went on. But it was one gun against six; the laws of chance alone made the issue certain. Once, indeed, a plate of duroferrin on one of the hostile shields, caught by a bolt that had found a flaw, leaped into the air as if released from springs, but next moment a great gap opened in Donald's shield.

And that meant the end. A second well directed bolt would smash shield, gun, roof and defenders into a mere amorphous heap.

Donald glanced at Ottili and saw that she understood. Instinctively their hands met and clasped. He turned back to his gun.

Then, with a terrific scream, the slender isochromin pillar, struck by a stray bolt, broke and went crashing down in ruin. And instantly everything was plunged in darkness again!

AFTERWARD, Donald understood what had happened. The slender pillar, as he had divined, was not for the purpose of supporting the immense dome of glass above it. Its head, on the outside of the dome, carried the atomic condenser, an electrical generator of immense potency, which created a magnetic field extending into fathomless space.

By means of this condenser the rays of the artificial sun were gathered, focussed, and directed downward over the interior of the station. When the chance shot from the ray-gun destroyed it, the artificial sun ceased to exist for all practical purposes.

The mad rage of the guards had made them reckless of the possibility of destroying the pillar. In destroying it they had sealed their own doom, though even now they did not dream what that doom was to be.

Donald took in the situation instantly. "Quick, before they try to rush the stairs!" he shouted.

He almost dragged Ottili to the trap. But Egli had already got it open, and in a moment the three were down the staircase and rushing back through the room by which they had come. Outside all was pandemonium. The guards were yelling, and answering yells were coming from the breach in the fence.

"It's old Mackay and the rest!" shouted Egli. "Quick, Donald, let's help them!"

But Donald had Ottili, and after her experience on the roof the girl was shaken, almost fainting. At all cost Donald must get her out of the range of any chance shot from a jettatube.

By the vivid violet flashes from the ray-guns, which were still bombarding the roof of the house, Donald could see that a furious melee was in progress. Men were falling right and left under the spray of the guards'

jettas, and still the mob of prisoners came on, preferring to face death rather than live their life of horror.

Danvril's voice was booming from somewhere, shouting commands, but Donald knew Danvril was not in that melee.

"Donald," said Otili faintly, "don't think about me. Go and help your friends. Remember, Egli and I were working together with the revolutionists."

Donald looked about him desperately for a place in which he could place the girl for the while, but the shrubberies offered her no security against the rays or the jetta-poison, and the fight was coming nearer.

"Go and help them," whispered Otili still more faintly. "If they lose, Lucas will be killed, and I—won't—leave here—without him."

And the girl collapsed, inert, in Donald's arms.

THE fight was closing in about them. Some of the prisoners had succeeded in wresting jetta-tubes from the guards and turning them upon them, but these mostly contained only one or two ampules, and were speedily rendered useless.

The battle was not fought at close quarters, for each man, attempting to avoid the wide belt of spray from his opponent's jetta, would run, whirl, discharge his tube, and run again.

Donald, holding Otili in his arms, looked wildly about him. He saw a thicket of some spiny shrub near by, and ran toward it, with the idea of leaving her behind it. There she might escape observation until the fight was over.

And as he did so there came a fearful crash behind him. A bolt from the last shot fired from one of the big guns, deflected somehow, had struck the upper portion of the house and brought the whole central portion crashing down in ruin, as well as ripping a long ditch across the green of

the lawn and uprooting trees and shrubbery.

For a few moments there came a rain of stones. Some of them fell all around Donald and Otili, but fortunately neither of them was struck. Then, leaving the girl, Donald hurled himself into the fray.

The attackers, pitifully few in numbers, were backed against a section of the duroferrin fence, while the guards, now in a disciplined line, were approaching them in open order, recharging their jettas as they did so.

An officer was commanding them, and it was evident that the first volley would mean extermination for the attacking force, now on the defensive behind a rampart of stiffened bodies that was heaped upon the lawn.

Snarling like wild beasts, and disdainful to ask for mercy, the men against the fence awaited the inevitable end. Old Mackay lay unconscious on the green, but Egli was still alive, and flourishing a jetta-tube, and it was the fear of this that made the guards cautious in their advance. The jetta-tube had a very limited range, and the guards wanted to get just within that range, but not too far within it.

"Kill the dogs!" came Danvril's voice, hoarse with passion. "There's enough of the antidote to bring back to life every guard who's shot down!"

EGLI saw Donald and sidled toward him, still facing the guards. Donald waved him away. They could not both afford to be killed by a single shot. Egli misunderstood, waved to Donald, and, with a hoarse yell, ran forward.

Three of the guards, struck by the spray, toppled forward like pins in a bowling-alley. Then Egli stiffened, half-turned, and dropped. And Donald felt a surge of despair and hatred pass through his heart.

In the starlight he could see Otili not far away. She had got upon her



feet and come out from behind the shelter of the shrubbery, and was looking about her in a dazed sort of way, as if only half aware of what was happening.

And Danvril saw her too, wherever he was hiding. Donald heard him bawling commands to seize her. He saw two men rushing from the ruined house in the girl's direction.

And Egli was lying, stiff as a corpse, almost at Donald's feet.

Donald saw red. The whole scene swam around him, became meaningless. He was conscious only of a mad desire to kill, to save Ottili.

And then he saw Danvril! The arch-devil was standing in the ruined entrance of the house—and the two guards were half-way between him

and Ottili. And Egli was lying a catalept upon the ground.

With a wild cry that came spontaneously from his lips, Donald hurled himself forward. He emptied his jetta-tube as he ran, and saw two of the guards stiffen and fall flat.

Then he was in the midst of them, using the short tube as a club, and fighting so desperately to reach Danvril that the remaining guards, tripping over one another, were unable to fire.

He saw Danvril's leering face in front of him. Danvril was covering him. He plunged on, raised his tube to strike him down. Then suddenly, instantaneously, his muscles tweaked, stiffened, and he knew nothing.

CHAPTER X

IN THE PIT

A BITING taste, the agony of returning circulation, the intolerable pain of a heart expanding under the impetus of the circling blood, lungs straining under the inrush of air! Donald opened his eyes.

He moaned and tried to move his limbs. At first they would not respond to his will; then gradually the muscles began to answer it. A succession of violent cramps ran through them. Then Donald knew that he had regained the use of his body.

In the almost total darkness he could only dimly see the figure of the man who was working over him. But he knew what had happened. He had been thrown into catalepsy and had been revived by Danvril's antidote.

But this man was not Danvril, for he was speaking, and it was the voice of a stranger:

"He's come round," he called.

"Leave him and attend to the other!"

And that was Danvril's voice, muffled, as if speaking through some partition.

Donald tried to move his limbs

more strongly, and found that they were bound fast with ropes. His eyes were growing used to the obscurity. He saw now that he was sitting propped up against a wall, upon a narrow platform.

This platform ran all around an oblong central pit, very much resembling a public swimming bath, except that it was much longer and larger. Here and there upon the platform other bound figures came into view.

Donald looked up. Faint starlight was visible about fifty feet overhead, and walls of rock ran up toward it. Upon a platform almost immediately over Donald's head stood Danvril.

It was evident that this place was sunk deep in the ground, but what its purpose was, Donald could not divine. But a groan beside him caused him to turn his head in that direction. That voice was Egli's.

And it did not require much discernment to guess that the bound forms were those of the captives, who had been restored to life for some infernal purpose of Danvril's own.

"So you've come round, Evans?" Danvril's voice was savagely sarcastic. "And you've lost the desperate game you played. You realize you've lost, Evans?"

Donald made no answer, and Danvril went on, with an insane chuckle:

"This is the real inferno, Evans. This is the Inferno zoological gardens. A sort of safety valve, Evans. Before we dug this place, some of the subterranean monsters used to work their way beneath the fence and make things unpleasant here. Now they know that when the lights go on they'll find their supper waiting for them here, Evans. Their supper—can you guess?"

Ottili's voice broke in beside Danvril's, frenzied with terror:

"Spare their lives, Danvril, and I'll do everything you ask of me. Only let them live. This is too fearful; you can't do it, Danvril!"

"Can't do it?" Danvri's voice was unmistakably that of an insane man. "There's nothing I can't do, Ottili. A little while ago I offered a bargain. Evans refused. I heard you say, 'Don't trust him!' Why should I show weakness now when he has nothing to bargain with? Nor you?"

"I tell you from now on no human feelings shall stand in my way. Evans and the clown Egli, and your brother shall die the death reserved for recalcitrant slaves and exiles. The lights! The lights!" he bellowed to an attendant. And his voice was that of a demoniac.

OTTILI'S piercing shriek ended in a sob, as if she had fainted. Simultaneously the whole interior of the well became brightly illumined.

For a few moments stabbing pains in Donald's eyes blinded him. Then he was able to make out the horrible significance of the setting.

Some dozen prisoners were lying bound on the platform. On Donald's right was Egli, on his left a man whom he knew, from his resemblance to Ottili, to be her brother Lucas.

The central well, instead of containing water, was filled with steaming mud that bubbled and boiled unceasingly. Strange tremors ran through it, as if things imbedded deep in it were trying to force their way to the surface.

Then, to Donald's unutterable horror, a monstrous head protruded.

A head like that of an idiot man's, with long bristles beside the cruel, wide, red, grinning mouth, set with rows of immense fangs. And behind the head a neck that uncoiled like a rope, yards in length!

Palsied with horror, Donald watched the cruel green eyes, infinitely small in comparison with the size of the head, surveying the scene. The red mouth seemed to stretch in a horrible grin, the white teeth gleamed.

Then the head reared backward,

and, quick as a flash, it described an arc through the air, so fast that the eye could hardly follow it. It stopped, and one of the prisoners a short distance from where Donald lay, was screaming and writhing in the monster's jaws.

Shrieks of fear broke from the throats of all as the writhing body disappeared beneath the boiling mud, followed by the long curve of the monster's neck.

Danvri's hoarse bellow broke through the tumult. "Afraid, Evans?" he bawled. "There's more to come. Our friend is drowning his dinner in the hot mud. He'll be back for more! He usually takes six humans for his meal. Then he sleeps for a half-year or so. Yes, there's more to come, Evans!"

The prisoners were shrieking in insane terror, and straining madly at their ropes. And the long neck was coming up again, the vile head with the gaping mouth!

It swooped, and a second of the prisoners lay screaming and struggling between the monster's jaws, and again Danvri's voice rang out in horrible, insane laughter.

But before the head was plunged beneath the surface again, a second head appeared, a second neck, and in a moment the struggling man was being torn to pieces as the two monsters engaged in a death struggle.

The huge bodies, covered with scales, half projected above the surface of the mud, writhed and floundered, tossing the boiling substance high into the air.

Above Donald's head Ottili's scream rang out. Then something tinkled on the platform at his side.

"My knife, Donald, my knife!" he heard Ottili scream. "I kept it to kill myself to save myself from him!"

Donald put forth his hand, found the knife, and hacked madly at his bonds. Overhead he heard Danvri

screaming insanely. But he was free—he was already free.

Danvriil was screaming like a demented man, but Ottili seemed to be engaged in a desperate struggle with him, and, if he had a jetta-tube, he was unable to use it.

In a moment Donald had cut Egli's bonds, and then Lucas's. The three men staggered to their feet.

ONE of the monsters, with a broken neck, lay covering the entire length of the well, its vertebrae heaving spasmodically, its crocodile legs paddling in the mud, and sending it flying high into the air. The other, ignoring its beaten rival, was coiling out its head for another thrust. But this time the neck moved slowly, and the cruel green eyes seemed to be scanning the line of shrieking captives, as if exercising conscious choice.

Donald had started down the line intent upon cutting the bonds of the prisoners when suddenly the neck swooped toward him.

As a rabbit, fascinated by the thrust of a serpent, remains motionless, so Donald stopped dead, overcome by some queer hypnotic spell. And in some strange way the movement of time seemed suspended, so that what was the action of a split second seemed to extend over a measureless period.

He saw the baleful green eyes glare into his, and the split of a red mouth widen, then open. Inside were rows upon rows of gleaming fangs, from which saliva dropped.

And he contemplated his end fearlessly. In that instant all the past seemed to flash through his mind. And he was conscious of nothing save that imminent end.

Then something flashed past him, and the next instant the head had swooped, and the fangs had closed, not upon Donald but upon Egli, who had given his life for him.

"Farewell, Ottili!" came Egli's triumphant cry.

Long after Donald understood its meaning—long after, when Ottili confessed to Donald of Egli's hopeless love for her.

Before the dying man could be plunged into oblivion, another of the vile heads upreared itself, another, and still another. And again the mud was churned up by the hunger struggles of the monsters.

Danvriil was shrieking like a maniac. The guards, clustering about him, were trying to spray the monsters with their jetta-tubes, but it was like using sparrow rifles against a heard of elephants. The body of Egli had already vanished, but the mud devils, tangled into a writhing knot, were fighting each other to the death.

Suddenly the ground seemed plucked from under Donald's feet. He felt himself flying through the air, he was sensible that one of the rock walls had given way; the lights went out, and a giant hand seemed to pick him up and hurl him through space.

HOW long he was unconscious he never knew. It was the touch of a soft hand upon his face that brought him back to consciousness. He opened his eyes. Far overhead the dim starlight was visible. He was lying upon a heap of rock debris, and Ottili was at his side.

"Oh, Donald, thank God you're alive!" she wept. "Lucas and I thought you were dead. Will you try to stand, dear, and make sure that you are not badly injured?"

The girl gave him her hand, and he managed to get upon his feet. He was badly bruised, but no bones seemed to be broken.

"Where are we? What happened?" he asked.

"A—a landslide I think, Donald. The whole side of the well gave way, hurling Danvriil and the guards into that horrible mud place where those

devils were fighting. See, it's gone now. It's nothing but masses of rock."

"And Danvril?"

"Down there," said Otili, pointing and shuddering.

She told him that she had managed to break away from Danvril in the confusion, and had just reached Donald's and her brother's side when the landslide happened. The corner of the well in which the three of them happened to be had not fallen; but every living creature inside the place except themselves had undoubtedly perished.

"If you can walk, we must try to get out of here, Donald," said Lucas.

It was easier said than done. It was only after hours of labor, of struggling up the fallen rock masses foot by foot, that the three succeeded in reaching the stairway that led down into the well.

Five minutes later they gained the summit and flung themselves down exhausted in the ruins of what had been the house. Above ground, as below, the whole station seemed to be equally untenanted—except for the dead extended in rows where the jetta-tubes had mowed them down.

There was no possibility of obtaining the antidote for them, but, as Donald learned later, the time within which the antidote could be used had already passed.

THEY slept—how long they did not know. It was a sleep of sheer exhaustion. Donald awoke aching in every limb, but apart from that his normal strength had come back to him in sleep. Lucas was already awake. The two men left Otili sleeping and went out into the enclosure.

The first sight that met their eyes was a fissure in the ground where the ditch had been ploughed by the ray-gun. But this fissure was fifty yards across, and seemed to reach down into the very bowels of the earth.

"I think I see what happened," said Donald. "Old Mackay told us that af-

ter the eruptions the monsters come to the surface of the ground. There was a subterranean passage that connected one of their haunts with the well, to which they had been trained to come to obtain human food.

"The eruptions probably shifted the subterranean strata in such a way that more and more of the devils were able to work their way through the ground toward this feeding place, of whose existence they knew by instinct, just as crabs know when a dead fish lies somewhere under water.

"Perhaps the bolt from the ray-gun aided in this shift of strata.

"Then I can see how numbers of these devils would undermine the foundations of the house at an immense depth, so that its fall became inevitable. That's what happened, Lucas. I think we three are the only living humans left here."

He was thinking with poignant regret, of Egli, who had given his life for him because he had seen that Otili loved him.

"The question is," he went on, "how we are to get back."

"What's that?" asked Lucas, pointing to a dim shape in the distance.

They went toward it. It was a plane, lying apparently undamaged in the midst of the debris that surrounded it.

CHAPTER XI

HOMEWARD BOUND

IN THE faint starlight, shining fitfully through the clouds that presaged another storm, Donald, at the controls, could see the dark bulk of the *Planetaria* at her magnetic moorings, but within the station all was dark and silent.

In growing fear, Donald circled above it, trying to peer through the murk. At a height of five hundred feet he discovered that the duroferrin fence was nothing more than a heap of shattered and twisted metal. Not

a building remained standing, and the entire enclosure was a mass of debris.

He made a descent outside the place and the three stepped from the cockpits. The desolation all about them, the absence of lights on the ship filled them with renewed fears.

Donald called old Croft's name several times in vain. He looked about for some signs of life, but it was plain that the station had been subjected to an intensive bombardment by ray-guns. It was improbable that any one could have survived it.

Suddenly Lucas shouted. Donald swung about, to find that the three were surrounded by a number of figures that seemed to have appeared from nowhere.

"Hands over your heads! Drop your tubes!" came a voice.

"Crofts!" shouted Donald. "Stand back! We'll fire!"

"You, Evans?" came the captain's incredulous voice. "Don't fire! We're your own men! Yes, I'm with you heart and soul, Evans, after what's happened here!"

It was an excited crowd of prisoners and guards that conducted the three to their hiding-place beneath the ground, the cavern occupied by one of the earth monsters at some time, but now fortunately abandoned by its grisly tenant. Quickly Donald learned what had transpired while he had been at the central station.

Danvril's code message had betrayed the exiles. The repair ship had arrived, a crew had been placed aboard the *Planetaria*, and the atomic engines had been adjusted. That had been some forty hours before, and it required forty-eight hours before sufficient energy was generated to start the engines working.

A committee of the exiles, wearing guards' uniforms, had believed that they had deceived the officers of the repair ship into believing that they

were Danvril's men. The repairs concluded, they had been surprised, shot down with jetta-tubes, and left to die.

The exiles at the station had then received an ultimatum requiring immediate surrender. They had preferred to die, and had sent aboard the repair ship the remaining guards whom they held as prisoners, save three or four who had voluntarily elected, from political reasons, to throw in their lot with them. The *Planetaria's* officers, Rubo and Khan Sale, had been among those released.

Old Crofts, enraged by the slaughter of the committee, had thrown over his allegiance to Yoska and elected to remain in charge of the defenders.

THERE was only one dock on Inferno, and, as the *Planetaria* could not be disturbed while her engines were charging, the repair ship had begun to circle the planet, to retain energy in her own engines, and, as each revolution brought her back to the station, had poured in a merciless bombardment with her ray-guns.

Fortunately, the cavern of the monster had been discovered, and, sheltered in it, the defenders had escaped injury.

"We found this," added old Crofts, handing Donald a duroferrin identification badge such as is worn by all citizens of the Interplanetary Union. It was stamped with the wearer's number, the letter indicating the profession, and the city of residence.

"It belonged to Cohaine," said Crofts. "He must have taken refuge here and met a fate more awful than he had ever dreamed of. If the monster returns . . . but we would all prefer that death to the punishment that would be meted out to us."

"How soon should the repair ship be back?" asked Donald.

"Within five hours," Crofts answered. "Doubtless they believe us

all dead. They'll sail away and leave us here. We can't reach the *Planetaria*; they've magnetized her gangplank."

He pointed to the two tiny lights on the hand-rails.

"One thing we did," he added. "That machine of yours that was left here—we removed it about a mile outside this enclosure in case anything happened."

"What?" shouted Donald. "God bless you, Crofts! You've saved the day for all of us! Send two men to bring it in. Let them wheel it carefully. No, I'll go with them!"

Something like an hour later the heat-absorber was wheeled into the station. And for an hour thereafter Donald worked with complete absorption that left him oblivious to everything else.

The salts were still in the cup; securely sealed, they had remained uninjured by the storms. Donald adjusted the valve-lock, he screwed the focus dial of the telescopic sight to infinity. A little lessening of power, but not at a range of a some two miles, such as the repair ship would offer on her return.

And now everything was in readiness, and there was nothing to do but wait.

The hours passed. Tensely expectant, Donald stood by his machine. Time seemed to have ceased for him. Looking at his grim face, nobody, not even Crofts, dared address a word to him.

Ottili, her hand clasping her brother's, sat near by and watched.

Old Crofts plucked up his courage and stepped forward. "She should be due any time now," he said, "unless she's changed the speed of her revolutions."

Donald made an imperceptible gesture, indicating that he had heard. The cross-wires of his sight covered

the Star Delta in the constellation Hercules.

CRIES, gasps, a sense of suspense that gripped every one within the station as the dark bulk of the repair ship, showing pin-points of lights like fireflies, swung over the horizon. It was too dark to use the range-finder, but Donald estimated her distance at two miles.

She would cross Star Delta before getting into position to open with her ray-guns again. Donald released the valve-lock.

She was in the cross-wires now. Donald pressed the button.

A sheath of luminous violet fire enveloped the repair ship. Her course set, and unchangeable until her atomic engines ran down, she passed like a flash across the horizon and vanished.

"She's gone! What's happened? Will she return?" A score of voices shouted questions as the exiles crowded around Donald.

"Every living thing aboard that ship is dead," Donald answered. "The ship will continue on her course around Inferno until her engines stop; then she will fall. All that remains for us now is to go aboard the *Planetaria* and—"

"We can't board her. Her gangplank's magnetized!"

Donald laughed. "Sheer bluff," he answered. "The charging of the atomic engines automatically demagnetizes every part of the ship. Those lights on the hand-rails come from a small accessory battery.

"Bluff, like that which has sustained the tyrant Yoska in power so long. But we're going home to Earth to make an end of him. Ottili!"

The girl ran to him; he drew her arm through his, and side by side they led the way up the gangplank aboard the *Planetaria*.

Fish-Men of Arctica

A Complete Novelette

By
JOHN
MILLER
GREGORY



Horrors unspeakable threatened civilization when the moon, like a bullet, rushed earthwards. But a man and a woman plunged into the blackness of the sub-Arctic to find—

CHAPTER I

THE MOON ENLARGES

IF JIM FENTRESS had been an explorer among the stars and planets instead of to the far corners of the earth, he could hardly have been more excited than he was. In fact, the whole world was on its toes with interest.

Leaning against the brick wall which surrounded his penthouse on one of New York's highest apartment buildings, Jim stared into the blue velvet reaches of the sky listening to the steady voice of the radio announcer which came through the speaker in Jim's livingroom.

"Constant reports from the world's greatest astronomers," the voice was saying, "advise the world to remain calm. Doubtless something extraordinary is taking place on the moon, but no one can say what it is at present.

"Professor Harpen, from the Lick Observatory, states the moon has grown larger and is glowing with a reddish light. It may be approaching the earth. With reference to this comment, the great Jesuit astronomer, Father Bannerman, announces from Shanghai, China, that the moon has been erratic before.

"At times it has fallen behind her predicted motion; then forged ahead in a remarkable way. Father Banner-

man's statement is technical regarding the 'inequalities of long period,' so it will not be read. But Maurice Block, the Broadway comedian, says: "The moon's just full and staggering home."

Staring at the glowing plate of silver light hanging low in the evening sky, Jim drew in his breath sharply. Without a doubt its color was changing. It seemed now a dull sheen of molten gold.

A GAIN came the voice of the radio announcer:

"Fear riots are reported from some cities. Fortunately New York, Chicago and the other large cities of America are calm. New York is wisecracking. Boston is praying. Professor McKenna, of Yale, believes the interior of the moon is still fluid. The change in appearance may be from volcanoes. I hope it keeps its lava up there without sprinkling it down on us. But this, of course," he hastened to add, "is facetious. I mean I'm in New York and wisecracking."

The aberrations of the moon and the comment of the announcer were interesting, but a hard day was ahead of Jim. At twelve of the night following he would shove off in a submarine for an exploration of the Arctic Ocean under the ice. He sighed regretfully, turned off the radio and went to bed.

An hour later he was aroused by the incessant ring of the telephone by his bed.

"You will not know who I am, Mister Fentress," a voice with an accent said, when he answered it, "but you have observed the odd appearance of the moon."

"Yes; what of it?"

"It is a warning to you. You must not go to the North Pole."

"All right; thanks."

"Darned crank," he muttered as he hung up. "Why don't they let me sleep?"

IT WAS precisely one o'clock of the following day when Jim Fentress hurried into a private dining room of the McAlpin Hotel, where the Dutch Treat Club was holding in his honor their regular Tuesday luncheon. At the tables sat famous explorers, authors, illustrators, editors; men whose names in the current news of the day kept it alive with human interest.

At the speakers' table the genial president, a famous short story writer, introduced him to the one woman present, Hope Wilkins. A star in a revue success, she regarded him with more than usual interest in her calm, gray eyes.

Half an hour later when the president introduced him as the "Ambassador to God's Frozen People," the slim, blue-clad figure of the Park Avenue heiress who had adopted the stage as a career, leaned forward with keen concentration.

The tall, well-formed body of Jim Fentress arose. The applause at his name went quiet.

In a few words he told of his intended journey. The government, he said, had loaned him a submarine which he had fitted up for the long trip under the ice. Modestly he gave more credit to those who were to accompany him than to himself.

"The whole world right now is interested in the peculiar aberrations of the moon," he stated toward the end of his talk. "It may be interesting to know that some scientists claim the moon came from the Arctic Ocean. I do not know whether we will bring back any evidence to this effect.

"But I am quite sure what will happen to us if the moon returns from whence it came, if it did come from the Arctic. If this earth remains after the crash, some future explorers may find our submarine's remains. Certainly not the remains of its crew."

As the meeting broke up he felt a tiny hand on his arm and turned to

look again into the cool eyes of Hope Wilkins.

"I suppose it would be utterly impossible to take a woman with you?" she asked in a bantering tone.

"Surely you don't mean yourself?"

"Why not? I'd love to go."

He laughed good naturedly. He was young and the girl's offer pleased him although, of course, she couldn't possibly have meant it.

"I wouldn't deprive New York of you, Miss Wilkins."

Her face shaded.

"I felt certain you wouldn't take me; that's why I haven't asked you before. However, we'll see," she added cryptically.

ABELLHOP approached through the crowd paging his name. He handed Jim a note written in a peculiar hand. Excusing himself he read it.

"You owe it to yourself to see me a few moments. Your life may depend on it. I am in room 1300."

It was signed "Nifheim."

The word seemed to click somewhere in the recesses of his brain. It came back suddenly. Nifheim, the world of mist in the far north, ruled by the Sun God.

The signature intrigued him and in a few moments he knocked at the door of Room 1300. Inside he found a small dark man with glittering black eyes, who looked at him steadily.

"I am glad you came," the man said, quietly. Jim recognized the voice which had spoken over the phone the night before.

"I am very busy—"

"I know. I shall keep you only a few moments. You saw last night the peculiar action of the moon. Do you know what it may mean?"

Jim shook his head.

"Perhaps the fulfillment of a prophecy. It has been kept alive for more centuries than any other prophecy. Handed from father to son it came through the black ages from the

dawn of history. Up from Egypt into the cold stretches of the far north where Surt, the Sun God, wreaked his vengeance on a wilful and disobedient people. Perhaps the time has come when Surt feels avenged and the moon will return to the place from whence it came."

"To the Arctic Ocean?"

"So the prophecy runs. If it should your life will be crushed out. I beg you to stay where you are until our astronomers learn what is going on in the path of the moon."

"Why should you be interested; who are you?"

"I am a man from the far north. My name will mean nothing to you, but I am a worshipper of the Sun God. He reigns over Nifheim, the world of mist. Over Muspelheim, the world of fire in the far South. Over Ginungagap, the yawning abyss. Over these he reigns with a blazing sword in his hand. To go contrary to his wishes will mean death to you in a frightful form."

Jim Fentress smiled. He had an innate sense of respect for the religions of others, but to him the fears of this man were absurd.

"Thank you very much," he said, cordially, "but I'm afraid I've gone too far. I'll have to take my chance."

"You will go?"

"Tonight at midnight."

"May the wrath of Surt be appeased at your bravery." He held out his hand. "I honor a brave man."

Jim shook his hand. Outside the door, as he strode down the corridor, the man's earnestness remained with him. Jim was anything but reckless. He was going north with all the guards possible for his safety and those of his men. But a falling moon! The wrath of a Sun God!

Jim shrugged. No man on earth could conceive of preparations to circumvent these. He wondered if, under the man's apparent friendliness, there was a threat.

CHAPTER II

THE BLACK WHALE

SHORTLY after midnight Jim's submarine cast off its ropes at its dock in the East River and headed into the shimmering water on its way to the ocean.

Along the coast of Connecticut, as the ship glided smoothly over the surface, Jim heard a commotion in the scientific staff's laboratory in the bow of the boat. Before he reached it the door swung open; an harassed scientist glared at him.

"I was just coming to find you, Captain. Come in here."

Jim followed him into the tiny room. Braced against a wall, her cool gray eyes shining, was Hope Wilkins. At sight of Jim, she smiled.

"I told you we would see, Captain. I really had to come with you."

Jim gulped. Of all the nuisances in the world he thought nothing could be worse than this. Hope Wilkins a stowaway! A wild rage surged in him, then his sense of the absurd came to the rescue. He laughed.

"I should be furious, Miss Wilkins. But I won't be. Of course, we shall have to land you. It uses up precious time, but, by George, I do admire pluck and you have it. Plenty."

"That idea is going to cause a lot of conversation," she replied coolly. She glanced at the worried scientist. "I wonder if we can have it alone?"

Jim nodded.

"It isn't going to do the least bit of good. In the first place it's impossible for a woman to come with us."

"In the second," she laughed, "you don't know what you're talking about."

"All right, but don't make it long. I'll give orders to land you at the nearest port and—"

"Not yet; wait."

Jim smiled at the scientist, who withdrew, leaving them alone in the laboratory.

"Of course I apologize for having come like this," she began. "But it was necessary. Do you know Professor Carmine?"

"The famous astronomer? Of course."

"He's my uncle. You know he is immensely wealthy, although practically a recluse. He lives near the Connecticut coast and I suppose we're off that now. Have you a radio?"

"Why yes, but—"

"Lead me to it and we will get him," Hope interrupted.

He started to protest but she stopped him with a little sign of annoyance.

"My uncle told me to come aboard your boat as I did," she went on, handing him a small piece of paper. "You can raise him with your radio on the wavelength written on that paper. It is a private wavelength granted by the government, so no one can cut in. He will tell you why I am here and why I should accompany you to the north pole."

"You!" gasped Jim.

"Come ahead," ordered the girl imperturbably.

In a few moments they were in the radio room and Jim took the key after dismissing the operator. In a short while an answer came to his signals.

"It's your uncle," Jim informed her shortly.

For half an hour the signals popped to the conversation of the men. Finally Jim shut off.

"You win, Miss Wilkins," he told her, his mind evidently occupied with stirring thoughts. "Come with me."

IN A few moments they were in the officers' messroom. A call brought all the officers and scientists on board, whose conversation went silent at the serious look on Jim's face.

"I have just been in conversation with the great astronomer, Professor Carmine," he told them after introducing Hope. "He is Miss Wilkins'

uncle, who stowed away on this ship at his request.

"Professor Carmine believes the moon came from the Arctic Ocean. Recently he has found that the place formerly occupied by the moon is inhabited by men and women who live under the ice and waters of the Arctic."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed one of the men. "Is such a thing possible?"

"Professor Carmine is certain. Like everyone else he was interested in the aberrations of the moon. One of the scientists who work with him, a physicist, believes the moon is being drawn back to the earth by some new-fangled ray or power of attraction. If it falls no one can say what will happen to the earth.

"Now here's the tremendous importance of his belief. If these people who live under the Arctic have scientists great enough to bring the moon back to its original resting place, the whole of the Arctic will be changed. It will blossom forth with temperate climate; the ice will melt; trees, shrubs and flowers will grow no matter what happens to the rest of the earth.

"Out from the caverns under the ice will come the strange creatures who have been imprisoned there for centuries and centuries. For our people will come—devastation. Our cities will be wiped out; our civilization will be destroyed."

"Good God!" exclaimed one of the men, a reverent, fearful tone in his words.

"You may well call upon God," said Jim, gravely. "Only God can save our world. I hope He will use us as His instruments."

He stopped a moment, then went on.

"For a long time Professor Carmine and his assistants, behind the walls of his great estate on the coast, have been working on an underwater ship which will go to great depths. He wants us to land at his dock, transfer to his ship and proceed north in it."

"To find these—these Fish Men?" asked Commander Swayne.

"Exactly, and put a stop to what they are doing. Personally I think this is the most tremendous work that could face any body of men at this time. I am willing to make the transfer. I suppose it is hardly necessary to ask for volunteers."

A shout of agreement rang in the room. Jim Fentress smiled. He handed Swayne a bit of paper.

"Here are your orders, Frank. Proceed at once to the coast of Connecticut. Lights will direct you where to land. I will keep in touch with Professor Carmine by radio."

"I suppose we shall have to transfer everything on this ship."

Jim laughed easily.

"Not at all. You don't know what kind of a man Carmine is. I'd lay you two to one we won't have to transfer as much as a toothbrush."

It was graying day when the submarine came to rest at a dock in an inlet several miles in from the shore. In the dusk stood two men who greeted Jim with cordial handclasps as he came ashore.

"I felt certain you would come," said Professor Carmine, a short, stoop-shouldered, gray-haired man, who peered up at the tall form of Jim through thick glasses. "However, to make it more certain, I sent my niece, Hope, to bring you."

"I assume your ship is ready to shove off?" asked Jim.

"Of course. It's submerged at present, but I'll get it up in a jiffy."

HE TURNED to his companion, a tall, rather bashful man.

"This is Geoffrey McClintock, one of the world's greatest physicists. Will you tell him about the ship, Geoff?"

"You'll find it a peculiar vessel," stated McClintock slowly, as if weighing every word. "We built it for the special purpose to which you will put

it. Utmost secrecy has surrounded our work, which accounts for our not calling on you before.

"The boat is driven by oil-burning Diesels on the surface. When submerged the powerful screws will be operated by electric motors. You will find it shaped like a cigar with an hydraulic cushioning bowsprit to telescope gently in case of a collision with ice.

"In the northern waters you will hardly find the ice more than fifty feet thick, as you know," the physicist went on. "However, we have extensible exhaust tubes with ice drills on top which can bore up to one hundred feet. We also have a hollow elevating conning tower with ice drill through which men can climb to the surface.

"Many of these things, probably, your own boat has. But the hull of our boat is formed of an alloy of aluminum and beryllium, which will stand tremendous pressure and shocks. It is built to go fifty thousand feet under the sea."

Jim whistled incredulously.

"But that's ten miles!"

"You can make that depth with safety. Professor Carmine will assure you that every detail has been taken care of. The generators are my own invention, carefully tested. You will find a laboratory for your scientists; officers' messroom and comfortable quarters; crew quarters; engine room complete to its smallest bolt. You will find an improved air compressor as well as oxygen tanks and electrically-controlled heat insulation."

He hesitated a moment and Jim saw a whimsical smile light his lips.

"Of course, Miss Wilkins' quarters are complete."

"Miss Wilkins!"

"Why, yes," said the girl, who had followed Jim to shore. "If I didn't go, Captain, it might delay you."

"That's right, Fentress," put in Carmine. "Hope has seen me build this boat from the first day. She

knows where everything is located. I promised her she would be a member of this expedition."

"That settles it with me, Professor. But does she realize the danger?"

Carmine laughed.

"You'll find plenty of that, Fentress. But I doubt if Hope would remain if it were twice as great."

"But none of us know just what danger we will face," protested Jim. "In this case there seems to be an ancient tradition of the curse of some savage god. If Miss Wilkins is superstitious—"

"I'm not, Captain." Her tuneful, silvery laugh rippled out like the first white light on the wavelets of the water. "That makes it all the more interesting," said Hope.

Her eyes met Jim's coolly. He thought he saw a taunt in them.

CHAPTER III

INTO THE BLACK WATERS

MANY days later the Black Whale, as Carmine had named his ship, surged along in a channel of leaden water far into the north. Carefully it picked its way like a gray rat between masses of ice and frozen snow. A mist covered the ocean; a cold blast of wind came down from the pole.

For days Jim had stood in the central compartment, situated amidships, scanning the ice through a raised periscope. Now he turned to Hope, who stood at his side.

"We might as well go down, Hope. We're simply losing time picking our way through these channels."

"I've been wondering why you hadn't done it before."

"Frankly, because of you," Jim laughed. "I thought it best to stay on top as long as possible."

"Go down at once," she ordered, a trifle coldly. "And promise me, Jim, never to give me a thought after this. You have no more right to think of

me than you have of one of your crew."

"Thanks, Hope," Jim replied, gratefully. "I knew you felt like that."

To the Commander he gave orders to submerge the ship, then turned again to Hope.

"Come forward with me and we'll get the first view of Arctic Ocean life beneath the surface in the observation room," he suggested. "If you want me, call me there," he added to the Commander.

Through the officers' messroom and the laboratory they went and into a small room situated far forward in the bow of the ship. He pressed a button and a portion of the hull slid up. Thick glass covered the opening. As the boat submerged the light of a ten-thousand-watt underwater lamp, which had been swung out in a protected case, came through it.

For hours they sat in silence, staring through the glass side for some form of life in the cold waters. Occasionally a peculiarly formed fish would float into the light, stare at them with ghoulish eyes, then vanish into the black water.

Suddenly Jim started and leaned forward. The next moment he jumped to the phone which connected with the control room.

"Put out the side light and slow down," he ordered.

Immediately the outboard light went out. Jim sprang to the glass and peered through. Something odd was happening out there in the dense blackness.

Almost lost in the distance he saw a narrow beam of purple light. Like a threatening finger it swept through the water. As if it was seeking something it moved to and fro, reaching out its baleful finger, which grew longer as he looked. It came up from below and disappeared at the top of the glass reaching upward. Every moment it grew brighter. It shot this

way and that in the water, which grew green as it swept through.

The buzzer of the phone sounded.

Jim leaped back and took off the receiver. The voice of Commander Swayne came through.

"We seem to be caught in a current. It is taking us down. Shall we follow it?"

"No, wait. There's a peculiar light out there. Fight the current; get out of it if possible."

He was back at the glass again, peering through. Green water lighted by the purple finger swept past. He could feel the churning of the propellers as they fought against the odd under-ice current.

The purple light grew brighter, changed into a dull red as the ship fought on. The water seemed now like blood, swirling and dashing as if some gale were sweeping it onward. Through the crimson water the ship made its way slowly. Gradually the water went pink, then changed again to green. Once more the purple light formed a finger, stretching through the blackness, swaying to and fro.

A GAIN the phone buzzed and Jim answered it.

"We're out of the current," Swayne informed him. "Shall we proceed direct ahead?"

Jim thought a moment. It might be possible, it occurred, that this odd light, coming up from the blackness, might burst through the ice overhead and sweep on through the ether toward the moon. If this was true it might have in it some attraction which was bringing the moon toward the earth, even as it fought to pull the ship downward.

Jim was an explorer, not a physicist. His job was to find what was affecting the moon. Obviously his place, at that time, was on top of the ice to see what effect, if any, the stream of light made.

"Take us up to the ice," he com-

manded Swayne. "Go cautiously. If we can find a channel, so much the better, but don't look for one. If we hit the ice we'll bore through."

Without waiting Swayne's reply, Jim closed the hull over the observation glass and went back through the laboratory to the conning tower. Quickly he got into his furs, awaiting Swayne's report.

Before long he heard the grating of the hydraulic-cushioned guide arm, which served as a trolley-like feeler on top of the ship, as it grated against the ice. It stopped almost immediately as the engines ceased operating.

Jim rang the control room.

"We've stopped under the ice," came Swayne's report.

"Right. We'll drill through for the conning tower. I want to see what's happened above."

In a few moments the ice drill began to work. Upward it went, drilling out a bore which would allow the 28-inch tower to be thrust up. Five, ten, twenty feet it went. Thirty and out into the open.

Instantly Jim was in the tower and climbing up. As he approached the top he heard the rush of a mighty wind. He looked aloft. The sky was black.

Out of the top of the tower Jim scrambled and looked around. The sky was changing. The white snow and ice turned to gold in the yellow light which came from above. Over them rushed a wind which all but threw him full length to the ground.

On all sides were great fissures in the ice as if some gigantic savage had stood with a tremendous axe and hewed about him with a devastating hand.

Out of the yellow light in the sky came a round plate of burnished gold. High in the air it swung, pulsing like a live thing. Now copper colored, now red.

A cry burst from Jim's lips.

"The moon!"

Fascinated, unable to move, he

watched it, unmindful of the cold wind, the steady rain, the tremor of the ice around him. It grew larger as he watched. Then his heart went cold. Through the mist he saw that pale, purple finger of light coming up through the ice, up into the atmosphere, stretching out farther than his eyes could reach to lose itself in the immensity of distance.

As suddenly as the moon had appeared its light began to fade. The wind died in a moan like the groan of a great multitude, then ceased altogether. Out of the north came the light of the aurora borealis, marvelous colors, red, yellow, purple, painting the sky through the mist and bringing to Jim a sense of security for the present.

"God's still in His heaven," he thought. Then, swiftly, he got back into the funnel and went below.

CHAPTER IV

BACK TO THE DEPTHS

IN THE officers' mess Jim found Hope Wilkins, the officers and scientists, and the few men who formed the crew. They were eager for news.

"Big show above, I suppose?" asked Swayne.

"All you want," said Jim, suppressing a shudder at the thought of the dying wind's moan. "Just what I expected, Frank."

In a few words he told them what he had seen above; of the blazing moon, the purple light fingering through the murky waters which reached up from the blackness toward the down-rushing moon.

"I had an idea that light might be affecting the moon," he said, when he finished. "I don't know how it can do it, but I thought it best to go above and see."

He turned to one of the scientists.

"I suppose you would like to make records. But it seems our duty is to

do what we can to save the earth by following that purple light in the water."

Swayne laughed grimly.

"We won't have to follow it, Jim. It was all I could do to get the ship out of the current. Because of the increase in the light I have no doubt we were drawn towards it. All we have to do is to find it again, if possible, and then—"

"Then wait and see what happens?" asked Jim with a smile.

His face went serious almost immediately.

"There's still a chance for any of you who don't want to come with me. You, Hope. We can rig up some kind of a shelter and leave food enough to keep you until an airship reaches you."

"Not me," said Hope, with a shrug. "I'm going with the ship."

Jim laughed.

"How about you fellows?"

The grim faces lighted with smiles. Jim turned to Swayne.

"All right, Frank. Pull down the conning tower and get going. No use wasting time talking."

The men leaped to their duties while Jim and Hope remained in the mess room.

"I hate to risk your life, Hope," he began.

She closed his lips with a smile.

"If anyone's risking it, I am. Where you go, I'm going." Her eyes blazed with light. "Just imagine, Jim, being the only woman in a play like this."

"I hope it doesn't end a tragedy," replied Jim glumly.

Before long the ship was under way again. Jim and Hope were back in the observation room again, straining their eyes for a glimpse in the dark waters of that finger of purple light.

Hour after hour they sat, but the inky blackness outside was unilluminated by even the faintest glare. They were weary when the buzzer on the phone sounded.

"We're picking up speed," said the Second Officer, who was on duty, when Jim answered it. "Perhaps we've hit that current again. See that light yet?"

"Nothing so far. Just let the ship go and—"

A plunge of the boat sent Jim violently aside. He got back to the phone and called through it. After a moment the Second Officer replied:

"We're in a whirlpool. The ship's spinning like a top."

"Keep steady as possible," Jim ordered. "Put on all power and drive through it if you can."

The phone clicked as the Second Officer hung up. Jim sprang back to the glass side. Hope was there, peering through the darkness.

"There!" she cried, suddenly. "The light!"

UP THROUGH the blackness came that reaching finger of purple. To and fro it swept through the black waters. Slowly the color changed. Blood red the waters became, swirling and dashing around the madly spinning ship. Jim and Hope could hardly retain their upright position. Hope clung to Jim as they fought to keep erect.

As quickly as the ship started spinning it righted itself. The buzzer sounded, catching Jim with the receiver half off the hook.

"We're through the whirlpool."

"Good."

"Maybe. We're heading down. I've tried to keep the bow up, but it seems impossible."

"All right. Let her go. If we go too fast, put on reverse; hold back as much as possible."

Back at the glass Jim could see by the rush of crimson water against it the sharp, downward declivity of the ship. Hope, braced against the end of the compartment, stared with cool, interested eyes at the swiftly flowing water which gushed past them.

As they watched the color of the liquid began to grow pink. Then a greenish hue began to make its way through it.

Frank Swayne came in, his face grave.

"We're almost eight thousand feet down," he said, grimly. "I wonder how much longer we can stand the pressure."

"Don't worry about that," Hope reassured. "When we can't stand the pressure, we'll stop."

"We might, if we were under our own power, but we're being drawn. We've been in full reverse for ten minutes."

"Just the same we won't burst."

The light outside now was a pale green. Through it the boat rushed with tremendous speed, the bow down.

Swayne stepped to the phone.

"What's the depth?"

At the answer he hung up and came back to the glass.

"Fifty thousand feet," he informed Jim. "That means the pressure is eleven tons, unless I'm mistaken. Great Lord!" he burst out. "Is it possible to stand such pressure! Ten miles under the surface!"

"Still going down," said Jim. He stepped to the phone.

"What's the pressure?"

At the answer he gave a little gasp.

"The speed?"

He hung up when the reply came and turned to Swayne.

"Here's something to worry over. Our speed has decreased; we're in half reverse. And the pressure—"

"Yes?"

"It's decreasing also."

"The devil you say!"

"Before long we'll be under our own power again."

"You mean you'll use the same method to go down as you use to go up?" gasped Hope.

"Exactly. Unless I'm greatly mistaken, we're approaching the home of the fish men, as Frank called them. If

there are men living down here, perhaps they breathe the same air that we do."

"Impossible!" said Swayne.

Jim laughed.

"Nothing is impossible now. I wouldn't be astonished if—"

His reply was cut short by a shrill call from Hope. Instantly the ship grated slightly as it landed. The light outside was a peculiar yellowish green. They stared through the glass following the direction of Hope's finger.

Through the water several objects approached. As they drew closer they saw they were men with huge chests and ears like fishes' fins. Others followed, gliding with ease through the waters which covered them.

Against the glass window came three faces. From wide round eyes they gazed into the compartment. They were dead eyes like oysters. Jim saw the hand of one, pressed against the glass, was webbed like a duck's foot. Their fin-like ears flapped constantly as their huge chests rose and fell.

"The Fish Men," said Jim.

CHAPTER V

THE GOLDEN CITY

CLOSING the observation glass, Hope and the two men went aft to the control room. Jim found the Second Officer still gazing at the pressure register with wide, unbelieving eyes.

"It's the darnedest thing," he said, as they came in. "The pressure kept getting less and less, then I had to start the engines to keep going down. We're fifteen miles under the surface."

Jim laughed. "I know, but the darned things haven't even begun to happen yet. We saw men out there in the water. Fish Men. I'm going out in a diving suit and see if they're friendly."

He called for a diving rig, which order was supplemented by Hope for one for herself. They put them on in the air lock without the weights, which Jim felt they did not need because of the lack of pressure. Each, however, took a Momsen "submarine lung" and their masks were put on. They then entered the diving compartment, which was flooded with water.

Leading the way, Jim stepped to the exit door with Hope close behind. It closed automatically behind them as they went out, just in time to prevent the entrance of an inquisitive fish man who shot toward it.

Immediately they were surrounded by the odd creatures who lived beneath the water. They were naked and the sea seemed to be their natural habitat. They seemed to have the same color as the waters in which they swam.

Through them swam one who seemed to have authority, as they separated to let him pass. He came close and his lips moved, but Jim shook his head, signifying his inability to hear. The man made a sign to follow and swam away.

Jim and Hope had but little difficulty in following. They approached what seemed to Jim an immense cliff whose rugged heights arose in the water. Their ship had landed on a bench of the cliff. The fish man swam into a channel cut in the rock and came to a stop in a small compartment.

When Jim and Hope entered, he slid down what seemed a metal sheet. Instantly the water which filled the small room began to run out. The compartment moved downward. For several minutes this kept up then it came to a stop. Their conductor slid up the metal door. Hope and Jim stepped out and their eyes grew wide with astonishment.

They were in what appeared to be an immense city. A city under the ocean.

It was a place of tremendous ac-

tivity. Odd-shaped cars, which seemed to be made of metal, swept through the streets. They were slightly raised from the earth and without wheels, scurrying along, apparently, on magnetic currents with vast speed.

Men and women with oyster-like eyes, fin-shaped ears and duck-webbed hands crowded around them. Into the mass surged men who drove them back, protecting the visitors from a curiosity that might have caused them serious injury.

To all appearances the men and women breathed as Jim did. He determined to take a chance. He motioned to one of the men to unloose his mask. When this was done, he disconnected his "Momsen lung" and took a tentative breath.

FOR a moment he felt dazed. There was something clammy about the air he drew in. It was cool and wet. The feeling left him at once and he proceeded to divest himself of his diving rig. Then helped Hope out of hers. Free from these encumbrances again they looked around.

They saw now they were in a city of gold. A peculiar yellow light gilded everything: the buildings, the streets, even the men and women. They saw, too, that the last were clothed; the women in loose flowing gowns caught up at the waist by a belt. The men in short breeches, the upper part of their bodies bare. Their skins were yellow.

There was a cold, clammy breeze blowing, which did not seem to affect the inhabitants of the odd city, although it sent Hope shivering. The air was dank. Jim lifted his eyes and an expression of dismay escaped him.

Instead of a sky he saw dark stretches of water as far as his eyes could reach. It hung suspended far above, rippling in waves as the breeze caught it.

Over Jim went a great fear as he stared upward. He caught Hope's arm.

Fifteen miles of water over their heads! He heard her laugh.

"Speaking of darned things, Jim, how about that?"

Her coolness brought him to himself.

"As long as it stays up there, no use to worry, I suppose. But what about this light? Where does it come from? And this breeze?"

"Don't ask me. I only know the light is beautiful. It's gold, Jim. Everything is gold."

Jim had no time to reply as their conductor, who had taken their diving rigs to a small building nearby, approached again. He spoke with a peculiar hissing voice, but his words were meaningless. Again Jim shook his head.

The man shrugged. He called some assistants, and surrounding Hope and Jim, conducted them through the crowd to one of the magnetic cars which stood at the side of the street. Into this he put them, taking a seat in front before a panel on which were several dials.

The car shot forward at immense speed. There were no bumps; not the slightest discomfort. In a few moments it came to a stop before an immense palace, which shone in the peculiar light as if it was made of golden blocks.

Into this they were conducted and down a long corridor. Men with long rods in their hands stood at attention, their great chests thrust forward.

"This must be the palace of the Governor or King," said Jim to Hope, "and these soldiers his guards. I wonder how we can talk?"

"I'm a woman, so I ought to find some way," said Hope, with a laugh. "But so far I've been sunk."

"One thing is certain. I'm not going to leave here until I find out about that damnable purple ray which I believe is causing the trouble with the moon."

"I'm not fooling myself," replied Hope, with another laugh. "Perhaps we won't leave at all."

JIM'S wonder about the means of communication was satisfied shortly. They came to a halt in a large room which seemed to be a waiting room, as many men stood around. They were dressed quite differently from the men they had seen on the street, but all in gold cloth. Great as these people appeared to be, evidently they had no colors.

The officer who brought them spoke to a man who went out and returned immediately with three objects in his hands. They were of golden metal and looked to Jim like flashlights except their ends were open.

The man handed one to Hope, another to Jim and retained the last for himself. He placed his hands over the two ends and motioned Jim and Hope to do likewise. Immediately to Jim's mind came a question.

"Who are you?"

He thought at once, "Jim Fentress."

The man nodded, smiling. Again came a question:

"Where did you come from?"

One of Jim's hands came away from the opening. He thought of "the earth." The man looked puzzled. He motioned to Jim to put his hand back. He started to do so, but refrained. He turned to Hope.

"This tube evidently is some kind of a thought translator, Hope. I get his thoughts and he gets mine—translated so that both can understand. But you have to hold both hands over the openings to make it work."

"Good," she exclaimed. "When you don't want to answer, drop one hand before you think."

"That's exactly what I had in mind. I started to think about the earth, but perhaps such information wouldn't do

at the present time. I'll think about New York."

He put his hand back on the thought translator and his mind went to New York. The man bowed and smiled, although he still looked puzzled.

"Do you come as friends?"

"Oh yes," thought Jim.

"We welcome you as friends," came to Jim's mind from the others. "King Reyfuld will see you immediately."

Jim thought: "Does King Reyfuld welcome as friends strangers from other lands?"

"If you worship Surt, the great Sun God, who reigns over the world of mist."

"And if not?"

The man's brow furrowed. Quickly he removed his hand from one end of the tube, turned and walked to a huge door which rose in its gold loveliness at the end of the room. He opened it and went in. In a moment he returned. He raised his tube clasped in both hands.

Jim caught his thought.

"His Majesty King Reyfuld will see you."

Jim turned to Hope.

"Watch yourself about that Sun God. Remember the warning of the dark man in the hotel I told you about. The deeper we get into this the more apparent it seems a catastrophe is hanging over the earth. I wonder if there's anything to that old legend?"

Hope did not reply. Together they crossed the room, entered the doorway and stood face to face with the king of the Fish Men.

CHAPTER VI

THE HIGH PRIEST

THE room in which King Reyfuld received his visitors was smaller than the one outside. It was far more handsomely furnished.

The king sat in a huge chair made of gold, a gold canopy over his head. Like others of his race his chest was

a massive barrel which rose and fell to each breath. His oyster-like eyes were dead. The room was lighted by the peculiar yellow light which seemed to come from nowhere. It grew neither greater nor less as time went on.

The king clasped a thought translator.

"I'm informed you come from New York," he thought. "What and where is New York?"

"It is a friendly city far away, Your Majesty."

"I have never heard of it."

"Neither has New York heard of your country. When I return I shall take great news of it. The whole world will resound with its praise."

The king turned to a young man who sat at his right, whose general aspect was unpleasant to Jim. His eyes, like all the others, looked like oysters. He kept them fixed on Hope, raising them to her waves of chestnut hair, gazing steadily into her blue eyes, dropping them down her blue-clad figure, taking in every line and curve of her well-formed body. There was something repugnant in the way he did it. There was a sneer on his bloodless lips.

"You hear that, Kentor, my son?" asked the king. The young man shrugged and kept his eyes on Hope.

The king turned to his left, where in a chair sat the most amazing of all the amazing men Jim had seen under the water. He was attired in a great heavy robe of golden cloth, on which the Sun was embroidered in darker hue. Golden rays went out from it. There were hundreds of smaller suns on the robe, all with their rays pointing toward the large one.

It was not the man's odd attire which attracted Jim's interest as much as his face and hands. To all appearances he must have been over a hundred years old. His face was the smallest Jim had ever seen on a human being. It was criss-crossed with



The High Priest turned to Jim—"You will come with me."

innumerable wrinkles, dried like a withered orange and about the same color.

His eyes, deep in his head, without eyelids or eyebrows, peered out blazing with intensity, totally unlike the oyster eyes of the others yet still of the same flat gray. The effect was startling; as startling as the hands which rested on his legs, more slender than a woman's, skeleton and clawlike.

At the king's look the old man spoke in the peculiar hissing manner of the Fish Men. His statement brought a look of astonishment to the king's face. They conversed for some time, then the old man spoke in English to Jim.

"I speak to you in your own language because I know everything. I am the Great High Priest of Surt, the Sun God. My name is Ektom and my years are past your understanding. I know who you are, you earth creatures. I know why you are here. But mark you well. Ektom's deathless body holds the power of Surt, the Sun

God; his mind is that of the ruler of the earth, the sky and the lands under the earth."

Slowly he arose and straightened himself. To Jim's amazement he was but a dwarf, but his voice rang out as he continued, filling every portion of the room, shrill and strident.

"SEVENTY times seven thousand years ago, as you reckon time on your earth, I stood in the hall of one of the world's greatest kings, in the annual festival of the sowing of the new seed. The world's riches were in the coffers of the great King Marcostli. The festival was the greatest of the year.

"Men, women, even little children, drank deep of the cup which makes brains whirl. More than all the rest King Marcostli drank. When he drank he thought himself greater than Surt because, he said, Surt ruled only in the day while he ruled day and night. I had warned him of his blasphemy, as Surt had ordered.

"But this night Marcostli, from his throne, looked down on the shameless dancing and smiled. Twelve of the children he chose and ordered them sacrificed to the Great God Marcostli. There in the hall they were sacrificed, to the joyful cries of their fathers and mothers, who gave them gladly to the new god.

"Suddenly all joy came to an end. Silence went over the mad crowd. It spread like a pall amongst us. In it a voice was audible, sounding everywhere, yet coming from nowhere. I knew that voice. It was that of Surt, the Sun God.

"I fell on my face grovelling, fearing the words I knew were coming. Then, from a fountain playing in the hall, they came:

"'Dance, dance, beautiful ankle of mine. Soon you shall be buried in the deep sea.' Thus the fountain spoke.

"Marcostli leaped erect as I came to my feet. His face was pale with terror. He ran toward a door, eager to get away from that dread voice. The words from the fountain followed:

"'Dance, dance, beautiful ankle! Soon you shall be buried and decay in the deep sea!'

"Immediately the world shook from the vengeance of Surt, the Sun God. To me and a few others who had been given an ageless life it meant nothing, for death could not strike us down. But all the other inhabitants of the earth were swept away on a part of the earth which split off."

"The moon!" burst from Jim's horrified lips.

"You call it that. For innumerable centuries it has gone its way, dead, without light, cold, uninhabitable, the gleamless vengeance of an outraged god. Its place on this earth was taken by black water, its surface frozen in almost impassable ice where no man can live.

"Over fifty thousand feet under it I, and those to whom Surt gave an ageless life, were condemned to live and

bring to life another race of people half man, half fish, there to stay for seven times seven thousand years. Then the moon will return to the earth and the vengeance of Surt will be satisfied."

He stopped and the silence with which his words had been heard was broken for an instant by the movements of those in the room. Again he went on.

"The time is almost here. To me Surt has given the secret of the magnetic attraction that will pull the moon back to the place from which it was hurled. The impact will ruin what your civilization has built. Your people will die. Your friends will be laid waste in another ice age.

"But I and my people will come from the caverns under the sea to live again in the warm light of the sun. The vast reaches of the north will bloom again with flowers, trees and shrubs. Again we will have the annual festival of the sowing of the new seed.

"In the worship of Surt we will start another civilization thousands of years ahead of yours, because we will take with us what we have learned deep under the ocean as prisoners doing penance for the blasphemy of Marcostli."

"This is madness!" exploded Jim. "You live here happily. If all your country is like this great city you have all you want. Why should you bring back the moon to ruin the earth on which we live?"

"Because it is the will of Surt. It is you who are mad to question it."

"There is no God but One," replied Jim. "You are His creatures. This is your life. You dare not go against Him."

"**WE** DO the will of Surt, whom we worship," said the old man. "We have no ill-will toward you. You and this woman may remain here. We will not harm you but for one transgression. You must make no ef-

fort to stop what the Great God Surt has ordered."

"Then it can be stopped?"

"It may be in your power to hinder what Surt has given me to do. Evil gods have worked against him; you may be their hand-man. I warn you. You will have freedom. You may come and go. But you must do nothing to hinder me."

"You will let us go back to the earth?"

"Yes, but why should you? When the moon returns not a soul on top of the earth will remain alive. Here you have life. There in a short time you will be dead."

He turned to the king. Jim grasped his thought translator with both hands to learn what would pass between them. Into his mind came the thought of Ektom; the replies of the king.

"I have told him all, O Great King Reyfuld. He is a brave man and the woman with him is brave. If not, they would not have come the great distance under the ice to see us. I have offered them freedom, happiness, probably life again when the great day comes. I believe they will stay amongst us. It will be well. From him I can get the history of the people now on top of the earth."

"It is well, O High Priest. The Great God Surt has endowed you with much wisdom. You have eyes that see; ears that hear; speech we cannot understand. But for your great science, learned in your ageless life, we would be reptiles crawling among the rocks.

"You have taken us from the water, yet still we can live in it. You have given us air to breathe; light to see by; food for our bodies. Above our heads you hold the water so that we can live beneath it.

"All Arctica is at your feet, O Great High Priest, awaiting the day when you will lead us out from our caverns

into the glorious light of the Great God Surt.

"What you have done is well. We will give these people a home and all they want to make them happy. We will take them with us when we go into the sun. But if they make the slightest effort to hinder your work, they shall die."

"So be it, O Great King."

"Take them to your palace where you will give them whatever they wish. If they want to go back from whence they came, the way will be open to them. You will teach them our ways, and they will tell you about their country. Like our own we will care for them."

The king waved his hand in dismissal. The High Priest bowed. He turned to Jim.

"You will come with me."

Jim's face was white. Partly from wonder, partly from dismay. But most of all because, not for a moment during the long speeches had the oyster-like eyes of the Prince left the form of Hope Wilkins.

If trouble came, Jim thought, it would come from that fishy-eyed prince with his sneering lips and his air of superiority.

CHAPTER VII

THE GOLDEN GIRL

IT TOOK only a few seconds for the odd metal car containing the High Priest, Hope and Jim to reach Ektom's palace. Far away from the city, surrounded by a forest of trees and shrubs on which hung peculiar slimy looking vines, it was entirely unlike any house Jim had ever seen.

Apart from the peculiar fungus growth which attached to every tree trunk, the odd yellow color seeped through forest, over lawn and tinged the heavy stones with which the building was made. Everything was that unnatural gold; the long driveway which swept around to the magnifi-

cent entrance; the well-trimmed hedge with which it was rimmed; the wide, easy-mounting steps; the tremendous doors. Even the porch seemed plated with gold.

The light seemed to come up from the ground, from the stones, out of the walls of the house. There was no source, apparently. It was more like a gas. It made no shadow. Even in the forest, each tree limb, twig and leaf stood out plainly and inherently yellow, without the shadow of the one next it.

When the car drew to a stop Ektom climbed out, gathering his robe around him. Despite his great age he ran up the steps and the door swung wide.

He waited until Jim and Hope had gone in, then followed and bowed low, with a sweep of his arm.

"The High Priest of Surt, the Great Sun God, welcomes you," he said in his shrill voice.

Jim hardly heard him, so busy was he looking at the magnificent hallway into which Ektom had led them. It seemed like some gorgeous theatrical stage set; wide gold steps mounting upward; golden banisters; golden carpets. That this house held luxury far beyond Jim's dreams was evident. Yet, over it all, was that damp, dank air, a feeling of clammy discomfort.

At Ektom's suggestion they followed a gorgeously gold-clad servant across the great entrance hallway into the left wing of the palace.

Through use of the thought translator he told them this wing would be reserved for them for the present. A man would be sent to look after Jim; a maid to care for Hope. Each had complete apartments in addition to general living and dining rooms. Their baths were magnificent sunken pools in which Jim found ice cold sea water with no way to warm it.

When Jim finished examining his apartment, he went to Hope's. For the first time he noticed his feet sank into the floor at each step. It was uncom-

fortable as if he were stepping on wet moss. Through open windows came the rustling of the trees and shrubs outside, sounding like the distant lap of waves against a beach.

"I feel as if this place is about as healthy as the underside of a dock," said Jim to Hope when they finished examining the entire left wing. "It's getting horrible."

"I feel the same way, Jim. It's depressing, frightful, repugnant. Despite its beauty there's something slimy about it. And that old man!"

"The High Priest?"

Jim laughed.

"He's either the greatest liar that ever lived or he's a pretty smooth old buzzard. Probably both."

"At least he's clever enough to make these people believe his lies. An ageless life! Imagine! Seventy times seven thousand years! That would make him—let me see—over 400,000 years old."

"Four hundred and ninety thousand to be exact." Again Jim laughed.

"Heaven knows he looks that age," said Hope.

The humor left Jim's voice.

"There's just this, Hope. Whether or not he's a liar, I'll bet he's the fellow who's playing tricks with the moon. You caught the king's thought when he stated that old Ektom was a great scientist?"

HOPE nodded.

"That gave me the idea. I'm going to watch him, Hope. We've got to stop him."

"How can we?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. However, I am certain that devilish purple ray is some kind of magnetic attraction which is pulling the moon to the earth. If this is true I am going to find out where he discharges it and smash his machine if possible."

"Hum. That's going to be a job, Jim," she answered, slowly and thoughtfully. "You remember Ektom

said that Surt had given him the secret of a magnetic attraction which would pull the moon back."

"That's what I mean," said Jim, enthusiastically. "I'll lay my last penny we'll find it in that purple finger of light."

"If he has such a machine doubtless he will guard it day and night," she ventured. "Don't you see," she hurried on, "he retains his power by making these people believe he is going to lead them into a promised land where the sun shines; out from the caverns beneath the ice. If he's lying about his ageless life, he must have something to back up his bluff."

"Oh, he has, all right. Of course, I don't believe he's invented anything that will keep fifteen miles of water hanging over our heads nor this odd light. I'm going to find out more about them if possible.

"Frankly, I think Ektom's as crazy as a March hare. Lord only knows what evil a man like that can do. Perhaps he actually believes that old legend, that he can bring these people out into the sun by bringing back the moon to the earth. Perhaps he can, I don't know.

"But this is certain. If the moon fell to earth there would occur a frightful cataclysm. Our whole civilization might be wiped out. It may cause another ice age. On the other hand the world might be burned."

She smiled. He noticed her calm gray eyes were cool.

"There's no use worrying over it, Jim. We've simply got to get busy. Suppose we take a walk around the garden. We might find the old gazook's laboratory where he discharges his ray. Even if we can't get in, at least we can lay our plans."

"That's a good idea. The quicker we get to work the earlier we'll know what we're up against."

Out in the garden behind the huge house Jim quickly saw what made the plants seem so odd on his way through

the forest. The flowers, trees and shrubs were only half nurtured, although some of them grew to tremendous size.

"They're like mushrooms," he told Hope, as they continued down a walk toward another forest in the rear of the garden. "I'll bet if this peculiar yellow light were removed we'd find them a pale, unhealthy looking green, something like water plants or those growing in wet places without sunshine."

Hope shuddered and threw away a flower she had picked.

"It feels like wet velvet and smells like wet wool. I doubt if there's a flower in this garden without that dank, sickening odor. Ugh! It makes me feel creepy."

Suddenly a cry rang out, coming from the direction of the forest; a woman's shriek at imminent danger. Again it came.

Without a thought but to help her, Jim rushed forward with Hope at his heels. He shouted as he went and again that call of terror came back. Into the forest they dashed, pushing their way through close-packed bushes, then out into a little clearing where he stopped with a cry of amazement.

On the other side was a huge tree, something like a banana tree. Its limbs went in all directions, from which grew tremendous leaves, two together and joined at the back while the sides opened like the huge jaws of a great snake.

IN THE jaws of one of these leaves a girl was struggling. He could see her gold gown whipping to and fro as the limb gave to her weight. The jaws of the leaf were coming together gradually crunching out her life.

Jim leaped forward. The girl heard his shout and struggled afresh. With each movement of her body, Jim saw the jaws of the leaf come closer.

Horror-stricken, Jim rushed on. He

had heard of the plant on top of the earth which lives by gorging on flies which it catches in its leaves filled with a kind of honey. But this was a tree! It was devouring a human being!

Long strides brought him to the tree's side. Then began a fight for the life of the girl.

She was too high in the air to reach. Jim leaped at the huge body of the tree. His hands slipped down its slimy side. The girl began to swing wider on the limb which held her.

To and fro the tree lashed her as Jim clawed at the smooth, slick side of the trunk. It seemed to be furious at Jim's attack. Unable to reach him it took its vengeance on the girl. Her cries had ceased. The jaws of the leaf were almost closed over her body.

Frantically Jim took out his hunting knife which he had brought in a leather sheath at his belt. He plunged it in the length of the blade and as he drew it from the soft, pulpy mass, a gush of slimy water came out. The tree wavered.

He plunged the knife blade in again, cut the trunk half way around, then leaped to catch the girl as the limb which held her sagged. The next instant the tree fell, bleeding out its life in viscous profusion.

Hurriedly Jim cut apart the jaws of the leaf and pulled out the girl. She lay on the grass where he put her, her eyes closed, breathing painfully. Finally she opened them and quickly sat erect. With Jim's help she rose to her feet, and raised her face to his.

For the first time he noticed the beauty of the girl he had rescued. She was about Hope's size but far more beautiful, without, however, Hope's strong, characterful face. Jim thought her the most beautiful girl he had ever seen.

Her mass of glorious yellow hair fell around her shoulders, making a marvelous frame for her lovely face with its soft magnolia skin. Her eyes,

unlike the others he had seen, were a greenish blue and oval like his own. They sparkled now with interest. Almost miraculously the girl had regained her strength.

She was dressed in a cloth of gold, bound as it flowed free at her waist with a golden band.

She spoke in the peculiar hissing way of the natives, but Jim smilingly shook his head. In his pocket he had his thought translator, which he took out. Hope handed the girl hers. The thoughts of the Golden Girl and Jim came together.

"SHE says her name is Lora," he told Hope after a few moments. "She is helping Ektom in some of his experiments. She says Ektom has been living for centuries and has all the wisdom in the world. She started to tell me her age, but took off her hand before the thought reached me."

Hope smiled, as Jim went on.

"Women! They're all alike no matter where you find them. I'd say she was twenty-three."

"At least twenty-six," said Hope. "Ask her about the laboratory."

"We'd better let that wait for the present. We mustn't make her suspicious."

"Then ask her if she's married. I suppose they marry down here."

Jim clasped his cylinder. His face went saffron in the yellow light.

"She is engaged to Prince Kentor. She says she hates him. She—she wants to marry me."

Hope burst into laughter and the Golden Girl frowned.

"At least she's frank. But perhaps every year here is leap year."

"Just the same," said Jim, nettled, "she'd be mighty easy to look at across the breakfast table."

"Oh! Would she? Don't let me stop you."

Hope turned away and started back toward the house. Jim and the Golden Girl caught up with her, but Hope

refused to speak further. At the doorway the Golden Girl stopped and motioned to Jim to hold his thought translator.

"She wants us to have dinner with her this evening," he told Hope, when the girl sent him her thought.

"You'll have to have that pleasure alone," said Hope. "I—I have a frightful headache."

Jim laughed.

"The reaction from the horrible sight you saw, probably. But perhaps it would be a good idea, Hope. I might get more from her alone than we could together. I'll see you after dinner and tell you all about it."

Hope tossed her head. She went swiftly into the house. Ten minutes later, when he bade the girl good-bye, Jim knocked at Hope's door. But repeated knocks brought no response.

CHAPTER VIII

EKTOM'S RAY

THE dinner which Jim ate with Lora in her own dining room was, as he would have put it, a complete washout. Served daintily, the meal was tasteless, even nauseating. It consisted mostly of fish in various forms garnished with, what seemed to Jim, water weeds and soggy leaves.

He was encouraged when the servant brought in as a part of the dessert what looked like a chocolate éclair. It turned out to be a cat-tail, which he ate trying not to show his disappointment.

After the meal, Lora sat on a couch even more lovely than ever. Her gown was a pale gold and her gold hair was bound on her head with a golden band. Her green-blue eyes were alive with eagerness. But now Jim saw something odd in their depths. It made him think she had a hidden cunning such as he had seen in the orbs of the gold-diggers of Broadway.

He shifted his eyes from hers quickly. The girl was too beautiful to

allow such thoughts to mar his appreciation of her loveliness. She motioned toward his thought translator, laughing as she did so with a display of white, even teeth.

"There must be a great deal you want to ask," she thought. "Tell me what you want to know."

"There is a great deal," thought Jim in response. "First, about Ektom. Just what is he and what has he done?"

Over the girl's face went a look of fear, but she conquered it.

"There is no mind in all Arctica so great as his. It was his purple light which brought you down to the depths of the sea."

"How did he know we existed?"

"Ah, he knows everything; even how to speak your language."

"Then he must have some means of communicating with the top of the earth."

"He has. He has been to your earth in one of his boats. He has men there who talk with him through water waves."

"Worshippers of the Sun God?" asked Jim, thinking of the dark-faced man who had warned him.

"Oh, yes. They tell him what is happening on earth. He has promised them an ageless life such as he has for their co-operation."

"One of them warned me not to come to the North Pole."

"Because Ektom fears your scientists. He believes in some way they will hinder him in bringing back the moon which will free his people."

"His people! Aren't you one of them?"

The girl's face grew sad.

"I cannot tell you who I am. But I am not of Arctica. I am not even as you see me. I was made over by Ektom—that's why I fear him."

"But—"

"You must ask me no more. I dare not tell you who I am nor where I came from."

"Then do this for me," begged Jim. "Take me to Ektom's laboratory; show me the wonderful things he has invented."

Lora's face grew serious.

"It might be dangerous for you."

"Not as dangerous as letting that purple ray draw me fifteen miles under the sea. Come on, be a sport."

"The place is well guarded. No one goes there but Ektom and me. However—" she flashed a meaning glance, "the guards like me."

"Then come on," Jim urged.

SHE arose and he caught a look baffling and disturbing in her eyes. It told him she would do whatever he asked regardless of Ektom; gave him the impression that to please him was her greatest desire.

"You must promise one thing," he learned from her thoughts. "Should Ektom come you must not touch him no matter what he does. If you touch Ektom in anger, you will be burned instantly to a crisp."

Jim laughed.

"That old bird certainly protects himself," he thought with his hand off the cylinder. He put it back again.

"I can't promise that, Lora. But come on; I won't touch him unless absolutely necessary."

"I've warned you. It will mean your instant death."

They went outside into the night, if it could be called night. The yellow glow of the day had changed now to a rich, marvelous blue. There were, of course, no stars overhead, but the blue color was gorgeous and mystifying.

The vast palace they left behind was lighted with the yellow glow of day. High in the top three windows blazed.

"That is Ektom's study," thought Lora, which Jim caught. "He will remain there the night through."

"Tell me about these lights," Jim sent her. "Where do they come from when there's no sun?"

"Ektom brings them from the stones. He claims to have discovered it centuries ago when the people lived in darkness."

"He would," thought Jim, his hand off the cylinder. "I'll bet those rocks are filled with radio-active salts which conducts the light in some manner from the sun above into these depths."

They had arrived now at a low, beautiful building whose stones in the blue light shone white and with dazzling loveliness, like the famous Indian tomb Taj Mahal in the moonlight.

Lora spoke to a guard who conducted them within the place and opened a huge door through which he admitted them into a large room. He left them, closing the door, and instantly the chamber was flooded with the yellow glow of daylight.

"Won't Ektom see the light?" Jim asked.

The girl laughed softly. "There are no windows."

"But this is daylight. Is it possible Ektom stores the light for use whenever one wants it?"

"Of course. The city must be lighted. See, this light comes from there."

She pointed aloft to the center of the large dome which roofed the room, where Jim saw a huge globe filled with a cloudy gas. The girl sent him another thought.

She was pointing to a tremendous round ball which seemed to Jim to be made of polished steel. From it to the roof and through lifted a tapering cylinder made of the same material. At one rounded corner was a board on which were a number of meters, dials and what seemed a peculiar kind of clock.

"That is the ray which brought you here," Jim caught from the girl's thoughts.

"The ray which is bringing down the moon to the earth?"

Lora nodded.

"No one knows how it works with the exception of Ektom. I have found out this: It only plays a certain time, then requires a renewal of something to keep it going. That's why Ektom has that clock."

"He must have found radio-active stones with power enough to magnetize the moon," thought Jim. "Perhaps they attract the iron in it. If this is true perhaps the old man has been experimenting so far. When he gets ready he will put in the required atoms which will bring the moon rushing down upon us."

SHUDDERING at the thought he went closer to examine the huge ball.

"I'd have about as much chance getting into that as I'd have picking a safety deposit vault door with a hair-pin," he said to himself. "However, I might prevent the old duffer from re-loading it."

The girl had gone across the room and now stood before a large mirror. It was in an odd frame. As Jim came up he found it was no mirror at all, but a highly polished surface like chromium.

"You must not stand in front," said the girl, her hand on a switch. "Look!"

She pressed in the switch and the polished surface began to glow. It turned a brilliant red. Around the frame sputtered a blue light, changing the ends of the mirror-like surface into a rich purple. Jim stared at it horribly fascinated. He stepped forward only to hear a cry of warning from the girl. Quickly she pulled the switch and the heated surface of the plate faded into its original metallic color.

Lora breathed with relief.

"If you had stepped in front of it," she thought with her hands pressed to the ends of her cylinder, "your other self would have left your body."

"My other self! You mean my soul?"

"You would have dropped to the floor and from your body you would have seen your soul come out."

"Good heavens! Is such a thing possible?"

"You would remain as you are, but you would have no mind, no idea of God, no thought."

"But the soul would return?"

"Never. Your body would live until your time expires. Your soul would follow wherever you went. But it could never get back into your body."

"Has Ektom been experimenting on you with this?"

She laughed sadly.

"I have no soul," she said, simply.

Jim shuddered. He hardly heard her words.

"A man who would invent a thing like that is a fiend. He's too dangerous to let live."

"No one can kill Ektom. He has an ageless life."

"Rot! Can you believe such an absurdity? The man is mad. He is older probably than any one down here and has made the people believe all that foolishness to obtain and retain power."

"His people believe it. I have no way to disprove it."

She wandered around the room, glowing in her loveliness, pointing out to Jim other odd machines, explaining, as well as she could, what they were. Finally she stopped under an odd-shaped globe.

Jim caught in her eyes that strange, frozen look which had so disturbed him. She smiled as she lifted her hands and let down her glorious hair, then reached for a button on the wall. The globe glowed.

Instantly her whole appearance changed. From a beautiful woman she became radiant. The light which shone down enfolded her in a soft radiance bringing to perfection her lovely features, the glorious lights in her hair,

suffusing her face with a glow of health.

The sight wiped from Jim's mind all thoughts of other women. Through him hot blood surged. This was no woman. She was ethereal. A goddess! She was some creature of another world more ravishingly beautiful, more appealing, more startling than any earth woman could possibly be.

Into his ears came a soft sound of the girl singing ravishingly beautiful notes. His heart pumped to the violence of his emotion. His mouth went dry. From his throat a husky cry swept out.

He leaped forward and enfolded the girl in his arms. Her body gave to his as she leaned toward him. Her lips parted, deliciously red. Victory was in her eyes. He pressed her close. She raised her face.

Then, with a strength of fury, she pushed him away. With flaming eyes she turned toward the entrance.

Jim's orbs followed.

In the doorway stood Hope. Leering at her side was Kentor, the Prince of Arctica.

CHAPTER IX

DROSS OF GOLD

ONLY a moment Jim stared at Hope and her companion, then over him again went the burning desire to hold this lovely girl Lora in his arms. He stepped forward and gathered her to him once more, his tall body straight, tense with defiance.

Swiftly Hope crossed to them, her face white. The Golden Girl in Jim's arms nestled close, her glorious head on his shoulder. Sneering Kentor lounged up.

Coldly came Hope's words.

"Jim! What does this mean?"

"It means I love her, Hope. I'm mad about her. She is the most gorgeous woman the world has ever seen. I'm going to take her back with me. The whole world must see her loveliness."

"Jim, you're mad! She has bewitched you. She has driven you crazy."

"Perhaps, but I love her, Hope. If she won't go back with me, I'll stay here with her. I shall never give her up."

"But she is to marry Prince Kentor."

"She'll marry no one but me. If I'm mad, I'm mad. What does it matter? I love her! No man—here or on top of the earth—shall ever take her from me."

A scornful light gleamed in Hope's eyes.

"You fool! You fool!"

Her voice broke.

"Oh, Jim! Listen to me. You must forget this woman. We came here to do something far greater than this. The lives of our people are at stake. Only you can save them. Jim, oh Jim! No matter how lovely this woman is, you must forget her. You must! You must!"

"Never! I cannot, Hope. I will not. I love her, I tell you, I love her!"

"Jim, I won't allow it. Can't you see her as she really is. There's something repugnant about her. See! She won't look me in the eyes. She knows I know her for what she is."

"Not even you shall talk like that, Hope. She is marvelous! Glorious!"

"I tell you she is not. If you could only see her as I see her. If only you could—"

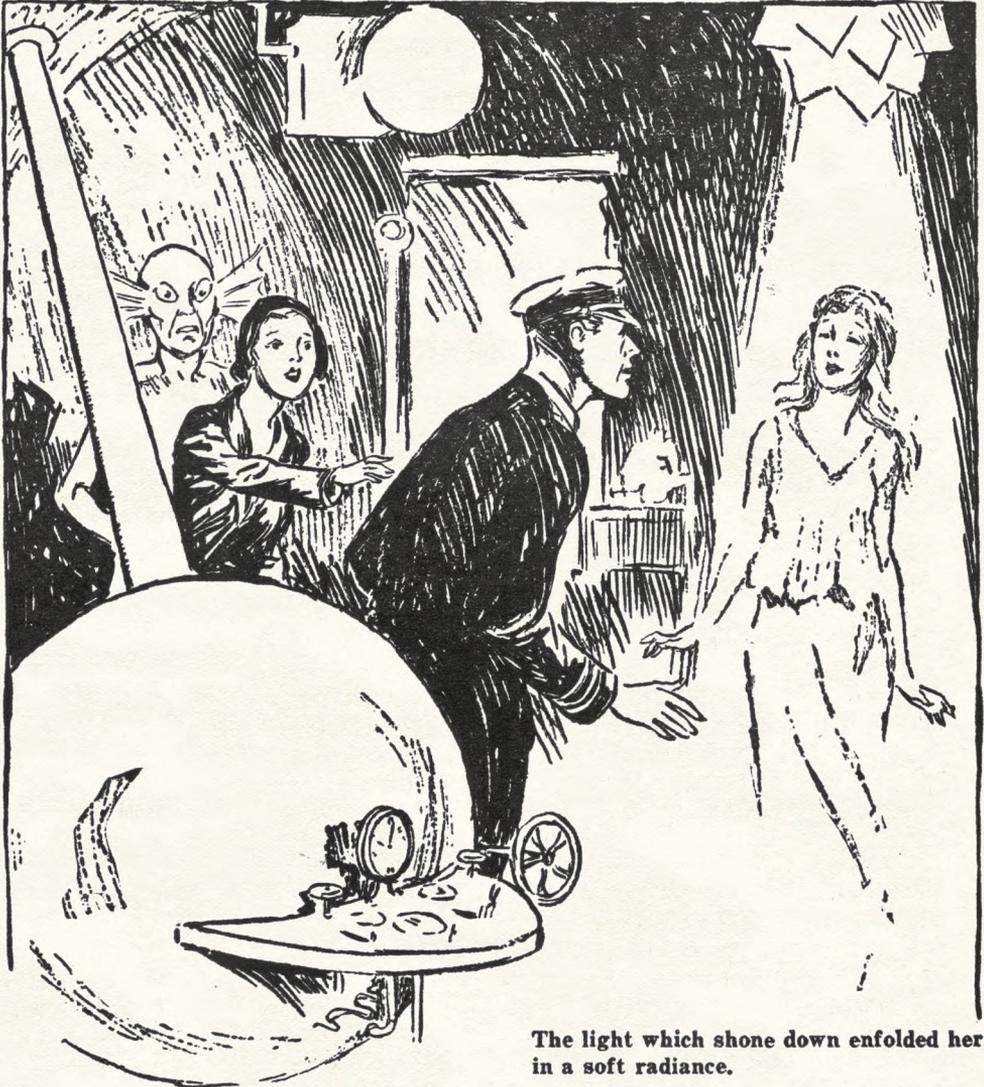
She broke off and looked around her wildly. Her hands clenched; her lips pressed together.

"It must be that light she's under," she cried. She sprang forward toward the button on the wall.

At the movement the girl in Jim's arms fell away from him. A wild cry swept from her lips, but too late. Hope's finger had touched the button.

The light overhead faded. It shone now ghastly green. A startling transformation took place.

The glorious golden girl slowly



The light which shone down enfolded her in a soft radiance.

changed color. The pink suffusion of her cheeks turned green. The marvelous golden hair hung dank and stringy like grass from her head. Her erect form sagged as if she found difficulty in standing erect. Her pale soft skin became hard, cracked and withered into fish scales. Her eyes were round and staring with a film over them.

HORRIFIED, Jim stared at the horrible change which had turned this beautiful woman into

something slimy and dreadful. The light went out. She straightened. Her eyes became normal again. The scales left her face and its soft magnolia shade came back.

Wearily she picked up her thought translator and turned to Jim, a wistful smile on her face.

With difficulty he regained his own cylinder which had fallen with hers to the floor. He moved painfully, racked in every nerve at what he had seen. The dross of the girl's gold had been stripped by the hellish con-

trivance of Ektom to show her unspeakably atrocious with her green skin and fishy, loathsome eyes.

He caught her thought as she sent it to him.

"You see now what I am. My name is not Lora, but Lorelei."

"Lorelei!"

Jim's thoughts were whirling.

"That voice! You are one of those who sing on the rock luring sailors to their death?"

"I sang because I had to sing. I know nothing about sailors, but I could not help singing. That was before Ektom captured and brought me here to make me what you see."

"Ektom did that?"

"I hate him for it. I did not want to stay. I want to go back to my own, back to the rocks on the surface of the sea."

"To lure more men to their deaths?"

"Ektom has taken away my voice. I cannot sing now. I can only lie in the sunlight or play with my sisters in the warm waters."

"I'll take you away if I can get away myself," thought Jim. "I owe you that at least for bringing me here. But you are to marry Kentor."

With his hands on his thought translator Kentor gave a cry of abhorrence. Jim caught his thought.

"Not I! That was Ektom's plan. I want this earth woman."

He stepped to Hope's side and reached out his hand. Trembling, Hope sprang to Jim's side.

"Don't let him touch me, Jim. I hate him! I loathe him and everything else down here!"

Jim's arm went around her. He drew her close.

"I was a frightful fool, Hope. I don't know what got into me."

A tremulous smile went over her lips as she raised her face.

"Equally as good men as you have been lured to their deaths, Jim. But let us do something. I want to get away from this horrible place."

Kentor had caught her thought if not her words. He faced them with a sneer on his face.

"You can never get away. You're mine! No one can go against the will of Kentor," came his thought.

Jim thrust Hope to one side. Hands clenched, eyes flashing fire, he glared at Kentor.

"Get this, Kentor! If you put a hand on her, I'll kill you."

KENTOR jumped forward, his hand outstretched. He grasped Jim's wrist and a sudden pain whipped up, benumbing his arm, torturing his muscles, almost pulling out his nerves like the sting of a stingray. Kentor withdrew his hand and a spot of blood appeared on Jim's wrist.

Almost crazy with pain, he leaped forward. His left fist caught the prince under the jaw. He staggered back and again Jim's fist lashed out.

A cry of startled pain whipped from Kentor's lips and he went down directly under the chromium plate which took away men's souls. Before Jim could stop her Lora sprang to the switch and threw it in.

Blue spits of flame shot out around the frame, the mirrored surface glowed red. The body of Kentor twitched. In the sudden silence Jim saw a wraithlike form rise from the body and stand behind it. Frantically he jumped for the switch and broke it.

He was too late. The wraith hovered over the prostrate body of Kentor, waiting for him to arise.

Angrily Jim turned to Lora. Her eyes were cold as she stared at him.

"You would never have got me away if I hadn't done it," her thought came to him. "It is best for all that he will be what I have made him. Whatever he does is evil."

Slowly the body of Kentor turned over. He got to his feet swaying, the wraith at his back. He stared at the others with wide, unseeing eyes. His

lips moved soundlessly. He turned and with hanging arms and bent shoulders wandered to the wall and slumped down.

Hovering over his soulless and helpless body the wraith waited.

CHAPTER X

THE DIABOLIC FINGER

WHILE Kenton's soulless body lay hunched against the wall, Jim ran to the huge round ball which housed the devilish ray which Ektom used to magnetize the moon. He looked for something to smash its sides if possible, but nothing was in sight.

He sprang to the switch board intending to tear loose the knobs and dials, but a cry from Hope arrested him.

"Don't touch them, Jim! You might start it working."

Her cry came too late. One of the dials spun in his hand. Inside the great globe he heard a whirring noise which rose to a screech and went away into nothing.

Jim fell back, his body trembling.

"My God! What have I done!"

Tensely they watched the globe, strained their ears for another sound. But nothing came out. The globe remained as when first he had seen it.

Suddenly the silence in the room was rent by a cry of intense wrath. Into it strode Ektom. He wore no robe now of gold embroidered with the sun. Instead he looked like a gnome as he ran forward, bent and malformed. Screaming, he cried out:

"What have you done? You—you—"

"I hope to heaven I've smashed the damned thing," snarled Jim.

"Tell me! Tell me, quick! What did you do?"

"I turned this dial," said Jim, harshly. "I wanted to tear it from its fastening, to make it impossible to work this ray again."

The wrinkled, dried, orange-like

face of Ektom twitched and twisted in his wrath. His baleful eyes found Jim's.

"I told you if you did this, you would die. You and your woman."

"If we die, you'll die, too."

"There is no death for Ektom. I warn you. Touch Ektom in anger and you will die with a thousand pains. You will burn to a cinder. Your ashes will scatter around this floor."

"We'll see about that. Don't move, Ektom."

He pointed to the body of Kenton huddled against the wall, a helpless mass of flesh.

"There's your prince."

From Ektom's throat came a startled cry. His withered body shook as if with a tremendous ague. He tried to speak, but the words failed to come.

"That's what your infernal invention did for your prince, Ektom. I would do the same for you, but I'm not going to take the chance. Neither am I going to let you stay here to run this infernal ray of yours again. I'm taking you to the top of the earth."

A cry of intense rage burst from the husky throat of Ektom. He started forward trembling, fighting to hold his senses. He came up short at the glare in Jim's eyes, shivering, gasping.

Jim turned to Lora.

"I have promised to let you go back from where you came, Lora," he thought with his hands on the thought translator. "Do you still want to go?"

"I do, oh, yes I do."

"Get me a cloth to wrap this man in."

She sped away and in a few moments returned with a cloth which Jim threw over his arm.

"Have you a car?" he asked her.

"Yes, I can get it."

"All right. Quickly now. I'll take you to the water and let you go. Is that all right?"

THE girl did not wait to send him a thought in reply. She flashed out of the room and in a few moments returned to inform Jim that one of the magnetic cars was at the door.

Ektom stood spellbound while Lora was away. But Jim could see his mind was working. At her return he seemed to find himself. A shrewd look of cleverness came into his fishy eyes. His twisted lips actually tried to smile as he raised his gnarled face to Jim's.

"You cannot touch Ektom," he said. "You will go away with your woman. If Lora wants to go with you, I shall not try to keep her. Look! I will turn her back to what she was. Come Lora."

He strode to a fixture on the wall over which hung a globe similar to that under which her beauty had bewitched Jim. Lora hung back.

"Ah! I know what you are thinking, Lora."

He spoke in his native tongue, but his meaning was clear to Jim. As if to reassure them, Ektom brought out a thought translator and clasped it with both hands.

"You see," he said to Jim, "Ektom has nothing to fear. He lets you read his thoughts."

"Fat chance," thought Jim, his hand off one end of his cylinder. Ektom was speaking to Lora.

"You're afraid you will be changed here; that you will stifle from want of breath. But that I shall not do. The effect will come only when you reach the water where you will take on your former form. But your voice I cannot give back. Only under the beauty light can you sing, but never without it."

Lora hesitated while Jim caught her thought.

"If I do not let him change me I shall die for what I did to Kentor. To be here is worse than death."

She spoke to Ektom in the hissing tongue of his people. Ektom's face lighted. Slowly the girl walked under the bulb and Ektom turned a switch.

For several moments a pale blue light glowed within the bowl. It turned to green. Ektom shut it off.

"It's over, Lora."

Jim caught his thought as he spoke.

"You may go with them. Nothing will hinder them in getting away except—"

"Except what, Ektom?" flashed Jim.

"Except you touch Ektom. Then you will die."

"I'm going to take that chance," snapped Jim, grimly. "I came here to stop what you were doing to the moon. I'd rather die than fail."

From Hope broke a sudden cry. Then her head flashed back. Straight into Ektom's eyes she looked.

"Both of us would rather die than fail to do what we came here for."

Ektom licked his lips.

"I've warned you."

Even as he spoke he jumped toward the switchboard at the side of the huge globe. Half way to it Jim caught him, swept his arms around the struggling figure and clasped his hands to his sides.

RAVING like a madman, Ektom struggled, but he was like a child to Jim's superior strength. In a few moments Jim held him helpless.

He grinned down into the twisting face of the high priest.

"Well, I'm not dead yet, Ektom. To touch you in anger is to burn, eh? Well, listen, I'm so darned sore with you if you weren't so old, I'd just naturally wipe up the floor with you as a preliminary. What I'd do for a finish, Lord knows."

Ektom sputtered with wrath, then the twisted smile came back to his face.

"The greatest riches your world has ever seen you can take back with you if you release me," he said.

"Ah! To let you go ahead with that infernal ray of yours?"

"I myself will destroy it. You may see me do it."

"I wouldn't trust you, Ektom, as far as I could throw you."

"Fifty years it took me to make it. I could not make another in fifty years."

"What's fifty years to you with your ageless life?"

Ektom grimaced.

"I lied about that," he said.

"Maybe, but I'm not going to take a chance. I think you'll be quite a curiosity when I get you back to earth."

Despite Ektom's protests Jim picked up the cloth Lora had brought him from the floor where it had dropped as he sprang toward Ektom and bundled the slim figure in it.

"Come ahead, Hope, let's go."

He lifted Ektom in his arms and strode with him to the door. Through it he went, followed by Lora and Hope. The magnetic car was outside and Jim bundled Ektom within, closely wrapped with only space for his nose to breath.

Lora leaned forward and touched a button and the car whisked away.

As they sped forward occasionally Lora twisted a small dial to guide it in its direction. Before long they were at the entrance to the elevator that had brought them down from their ship.

"We'll have to get our submarine lungs," said Jim to Hope. "I think we can take a chance without diving suits."

Hope was out of the car almost instantly as it drew to a stop, her thought translator in her hand.

"I'll attend to that, Jim. I doubt if we'll be stopped."

"I'll see that no one sees what I've got in this bundle," grinned Jim.

Hope went into the office where their diving suits had been taken. She was absent a long time but finally reappeared, the two submarine lungs in her hand. She was followed by one of

the officers who went to the elevator and lifted the metal slide.

Hope and Jim donned their lungs and again Jim took up Ektom's body.

"Listen to me, Ektom. If you make a single crack to that officer who'll take us up, you'll never live to come down, even with your ageless life."

Ektom grunted.

"Ektom's time has not yet come," he grated. "Woe be to the man who touches Ektom in anger."

They reached the elevator and stepped within. In the light of the car Jim watched Lora. Gradually she was changing. She appeared to be growing weak. She sagged against the side of the car and her breath came in gasps.

The elevator came to a stop and the man who brought them up touched a button. Instantly it was flooded with water. As it mounted Lora's strength came back. To their waists it came, higher. Swiftly, before his eyes, Lora changed into what she had been. But now, in the water, she was beautiful. Her hair seemed like long, wonderfully green grass. She disappeared in the water.

The metal slide went upward and Hope and Jim, with his burden, stepped out. Then something swam into Jim's sight, slim, sinuous, marvelously green. Great eyes stared at him filled with happiness. Off it swished and vanished in the pale green water.

Lora had gone back to lie in the warm sunshine and play with her sisters around the rocks.

CHAPTER XI

EKTOM'S SECRET

THE Black Whale lay motionless on the rock on which it had landed, its blazing eyes turned on the cut in the stone through which Hope and Jim had gone. As they emerged Jim saw with relief there were none of the Fish Men near it. He opened

the cloth with which he had bound Ektom and peered down into the wrinkled face.

He saw there victory, success.

The oyster-like eyes were blazing up through the water if such were possible. Evidently the man had no trouble living and breathing as the others had done.

Jim and Hope made the ship's side without difficulty and entered the diving compartment which the officer on duty opened. In a few moments the water was let out and they stepped into the air lock. Here they divested themselves of their submarine lungs and passed out through the laboratory room and into the officers' mess.

Their reappearance was greeted with shouts of joy as the men crowded in. Jim threw Ektom into a chair where he huddled, his face twitching, but still that look of victory in his eyes.

At Jim's orders the engines started and the Black Whale shoved off. Upward it mounted leaving, as Jim hoped, forever, the land of the Fish Men and the horrible ray which was bringing back the moon to the earth.

As he related what had occurred to the men off duty, the Black Whale forged upward. Only the gleam of victory in Ektom's eyes took the joy out of his speech.

What triumph did the odd creature await! Had Lora been mistaken when she said that no one else could work the magnetizing ray? Would an assistant wreak terrible vengeance on Jim and the earth by bringing at once to a climax Ektom's efforts to get the moon back to the earth?

Could it be possible that death awaited them on the surface—death to all but this shrivelled old man with the monkey face and the orange skin? Death, probably, to all the earth but those in the caverns below.

Into the room rushed one of the officers from the control room. His face was white.

"That light! That purple finger! It's out in the water again!"

With the words Ektom leaped to his feet. Gone now his silence. Gone his steady indifference. Gone his contempt and the sneer on his face.

Up rose his voice screaming in anger.

"You thought to beat Ektom! You thought you were mightier than he! You worms! Even with your strong arms which took Ektom away he will beat you.

"Why did I let you do it? Why did I lie without a motion while you took me away from my people? Because the brain of Ektom was back there in my laboratory. Because you—you—the brave Fentress, turned the dial which sends out the ray of death to all your people."

Silence swept over the crowd as the dread meaning of Ektom's words beat into their brains.

Shrill again came Ektom's words:

"You—you did that! Ektom knew when you told him. But Ektom keeps silence when silence is best. Your hand sent the charge into the atoms stored in my globe. Your hand started their action. Your hand shot the ray towards the moon.

"Ektom's victory! Ektom's victory! Nothing can save the earth now. I only hope you will get to the top in time to witness the devastation which your hand has brought."

TREMBLING in his wrath the old man sank down, blubbing, shaking, almost consumed with the anger which burned within him.

Jim did not wait to hear more. Back to the observation room he dashed with Hope following closely behind. Other officers massed into the small compartment, as Jim threw up the metal side and stared through.

Straight up through the black waters came that purple ray of death. Straight up, as Ektom had said, to the moon, every moment growing bright-

er as the atoms in the globe increased in velocity to hurl their tiny forms thousands of miles to draw the moon down.

Shaken in every limb Jim cast himself into a chair and buried his face in his hands. He hardly felt Hope's assuring hand on his head nor heard the words she breathed in his ear.

"You did the only thing you could do, Jim. No one could have done more."

"I should have killed him," moaned Jim. "I might have known he would outwit me."

"He hasn't yet," soothed Hope. "Remember Lora told us the thing works only for a specified time. Let's hope the atoms will give out and that no one will be there to recharge it."

Her words brought but small comfort to Jim. Yet still, while there was life there was hope.

He dashed into the control room, flashed his orders for speed, more speed. Every second's delay might mean cataclysm on earth. He wanted to be there to see it. It was useless to go below again.

Up through the water the Black Whale mounted. Jim kept his eyes glued to the depth register. Every moment they came nearer the top.

Frank Swayne shook him by the shoulder.

"We're almost up, Jim."

Jim turned an agonized face. Despite his fear he was cold, collected. Every nerve held taut.

"If we're fortunate to find a lane through the ice it'll be fine, Frank. If not, run her against the ice and we'll bore through."

Swiftly the Black Whale mounted. The pressure grew less. Jim had no doubt now that Ektom knew of their coming which accounted for the ray fingering its waters to magnetize the ship and draw it down. He thanked heaven that a similar thing was not happening now. Caught in that whirlpool and current the ship, even

if able to fight through, would be tremendously delayed.

A shout from Swayne caught his attention.

"We're up through the ice!"

Jim's orders crashed out. Through the ice meant a lane. Up into it nosed the Black Whale; up into the green waters; up to the light of day. A gray and dismal light Jim saw when he reached the observation room. The ship had stopped. He peered through the glass. The light that met his eyes was even more dreadful than the black waters through which they had come.

As he looked the boat shook as though a mighty hand had wrenched it. The ice in his vision cracked as if a mighty hand had smashed it. A wind so vast that its sound penetrated even into the ship hurled across it.

INTO Jim's eyes came the sight of something high in the heaven which brought his heart into his mouth.

Huge, round, glaring red through the mist came the moon.

Down it rushed, every moment growing larger, a staring, stark engine of death as it fell. Gray mist was torn aside as it swept onward. Around it the sky turned into an inverted copper bowl glowing and simmering.

A cry high and shrill came over the moan of the wind. It was Ektom but Jim paid no attention. Hope in his arms they stared through the glass covering of the observation opening speechless, frightened to their souls, helpless.

The wind grew higher. Like a cork the ship tossed on the maddened waves. Raging water smashed against the glass. The shriek of the wind drowned every sound as it bellowed like a mass of enraged bulls with a titanic noise. Every moment the moon grew larger, redder.

Jim came to himself suddenly. He

shook Hope, pointed through the glass.

"Ektom! Look! He's got out!"

Out in the raging wind the gnome-like figure of the high priest fought against the wind to reach a little hillock almost dimmed by the flying snow. On he went, now up, now down, struggling, beating on.

Again the ship rose high in the air and swamped down as a great fissure appeared in the ice at Ektom's feet. Jim saw him before the boat swamped. Headlong into the opening Ektom went. The next second the fissure closed, swallowing Ektom in an icy coffin.

Immediately something happened to the moon. Its blazing red light grew dimmer. Back it went from the place it had come. The sky lost its copper color; the wind ceased. In a long and dreadful moan it died out.

Jim scarcely dared to speak. Finally he forced the words from him.

"It's over, Hope. The moon has gone back. The ray has stopped working."

She trembled against him.

"Ektom! Do you think he has gone back to start it again?"

"He will spend his ageless life in the ice," he assured her calmly. "He has gone to his reward from his god Surt, the ruler of the great abyss."

"Fish or man," she said, "he was great."

"Just to make sure I'm right, Hope," replied Jim, "we'll spend several days cruising around under the

ice to see if there is any further indication of the purple ray. We don't want to take any chances."

SEVERAL days later the Black Whale arose again to the surface. There had been no sign of the purple finger.

They found the surface as they had left it, torn and beaten by the earthquakes. Otherwise it was normal.

Before long they had Professor Carmine on the radio. He was wild with enthusiasm when Jim reaffirmed what he had prophesied in his former message before they went down again.

He turned to Hope as the signals stopped.

"He said the whole world had been told of what we have done, Hope. He wants us to come home immediately, that the world wants to thank us."

Hope's eyes blazed.

"What a glorious last act, Jim!"

Jim laughed.

"It isn't the last act, Hope. Let's make it the first—of a domestic drama of happiness."

"At last, Jim. I thought you never were going to say anything."

She looked at him archly.

"Just tell Uncle that you have met a Lorelei who has lured you on the rocks."

"I'll do nothing of the kind," denied Jim, a flush on his face. "I'll tell him we've started our play where most plays finish—a clinch."

"Hurry," said Hope.

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Quick—Unlock that Door!

A MOMENT of hesitation—then from Murette's slim black revolver there leaped a spurt of smoke and flame.

The special constable lurched back against the cell bars as the others stood bewildered before the sudden fury of this girl; while behind the locked door Jim Kent watched in tense silence, every nerve alert, every drop of blood in his body on fire.

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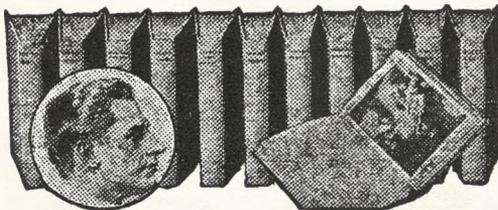
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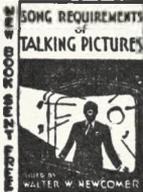


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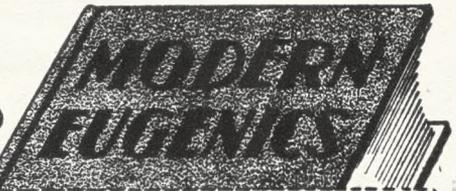
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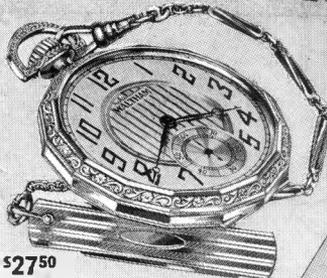
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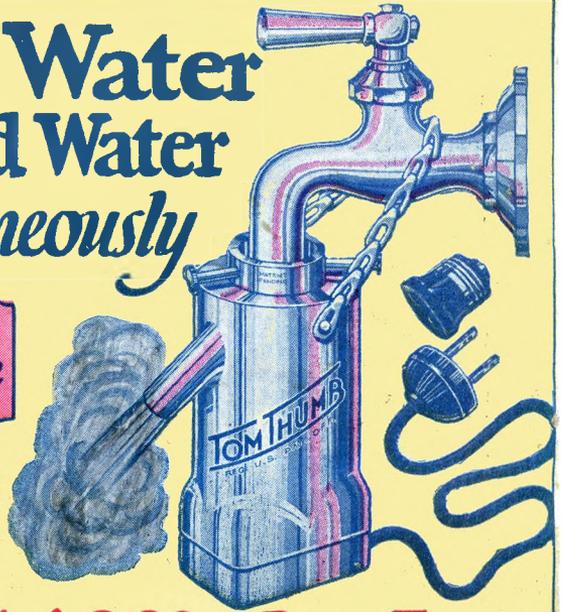
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