

PLANET STORIES

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STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS
—THE UNIVERSE OF FUTURE CENTURIES

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ICE EMPIRE

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Fall Issue 1940
 Volume 1, No. 4



20c per copy



THIS IS A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE

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THE ULTIMATE SALIENT

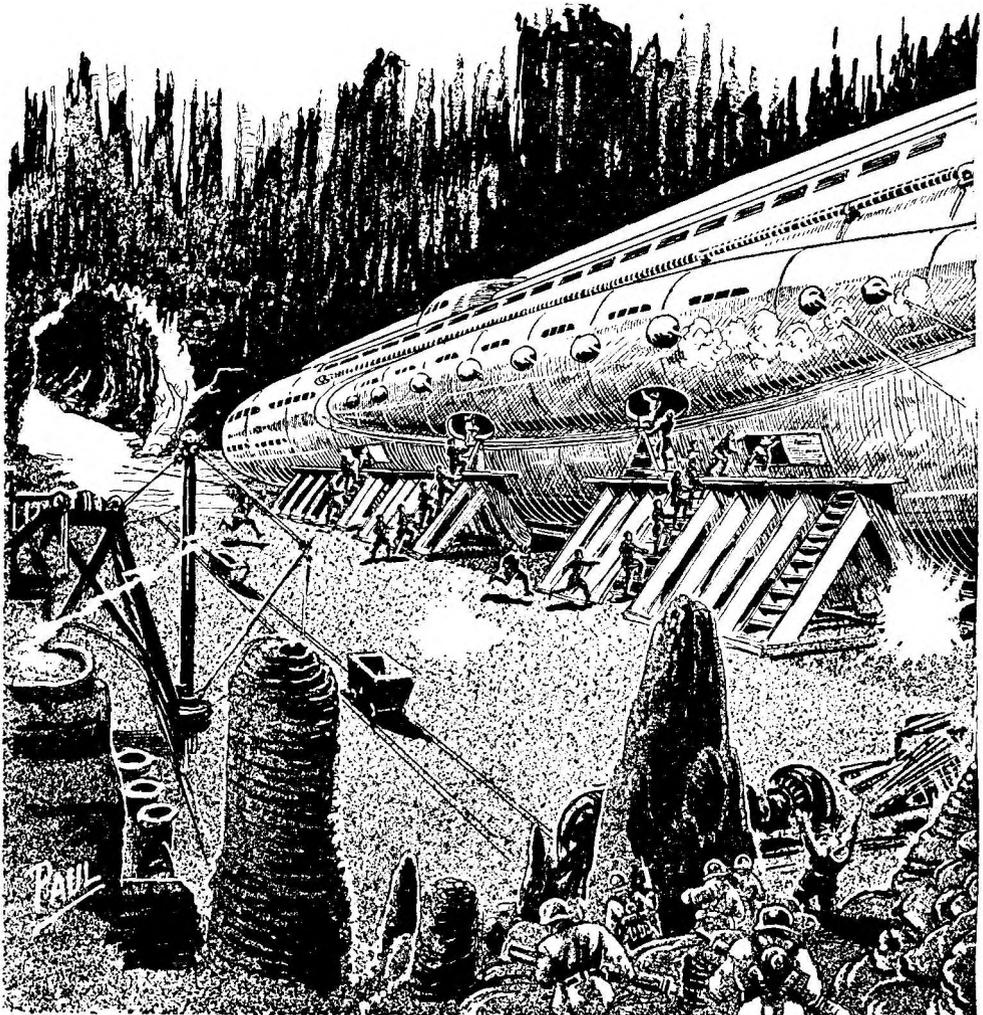
By **NELSON S. BOND**

Brian O'Shea, man of the Future, here is your story. Read it carefully, soldier yet unborn, for upon it—and upon you—will one day rest the fate of all Mankind.

*H*E glanced at me slowly, and a bit sadly, I thought. "I'm sorry, Clinton," he said, "but that won't do. It won't do at all. It will have to be writ-

ten. You see—you won't be here then. . . ."

I thought at first he was the census-snoop, returning to poke his proboscis into





whatever few stray facts he might have overlooked the first time. My wife was out, and when I saw him coming up the walk, that bulky folder under his arm, I answered the door myself—something I seldom do—sensing a sort of reluctant duty toward the minions of Uncle Sam.

HE was a neat and quiet person. One of those drab, utterly commonplace men who defy description. Neither young nor old, tall nor short, stout nor slender. He had only one outstanding characteristic. An eager intensity, a *piercingness* of gaze that made you feel, somehow, as if his ice-blue eyes stared ever into strange and fathomless depths.

He said, "Mr. Clinton?" and I nodded. "Eben Clinton?" he asked. Then, a trifle breathlessly I thought, "Mr. Clinton, I have here something that I know will prove of the greatest interest to you—"

I got it then. I shook my head. "Sorry, pal. But we don't need some." I started to close the door.

"I—I beg your pardon?" he stammered. "Some?"

"Shoelaces," I told him firmly, "patent can-openers or fancy soaps. Weather-vanes, life insurance or magazines." I grinned at him. "I don't *read* the damned things, buddy, I just write for them."

And again I tried to do things to the door. But he beat me to it. There was apology in the way he shrugged his way into the house, but determination in his eyes.

"I know," he said. "That is, I *didn't* know until I read this, but—" He touched the brown envelope, concluded lamely, "it—it's a manuscript—"

Well, that's one of the headaches of being a story-teller. Strange things creep out of the cracks and crevices—most of them bringing with them the Great American Novel. It was spring in Roanoke, and spring fever had claimed me as a victim. I didn't feel like working, anyway. No, not even in my garden. Especially in the turnip patch. Hank Cleaver isn't the only guy who has trouble with his turnips.

I sighed and led the way into my workroom. I said, "Okay, friend. Let's have a look at the masterpiece. . . ."

His first words, after we had settled into comfortable chairs, made me

feel like a dope. I suppose I'm a sort of stuffed shirt, anyway, suffering from a bad case of expansion of the hatband. And I'd been treating my visitor as if he were some peculiar type of bipedal worm. It took all the wind out of my sails when he said, by way of preamble, "If I may introduce myself, Mr. Clinton. I'm Dr. Edgar Winslow of the Psychology Department of—"

He mentioned one of our oldest and most influential Southern universities. I said, "Omigawd!" and broke into an orgy of apologies. But he didn't seem to be listening to me; he was preoccupied with his own explanation.

"I came to you," he said, "because I understand you write stories of—er—pseudo-science?"

I winced.

"Science-fiction," I corrected him. "There's quite a difference, you know."

"Is there?" He frowned. "Oh, yes. I see. Please forgive me. Well, Clinton—" The professorial stamp was upon him; quite unconsciously he addressed me as if I were one of his students. "Well, Clinton, I came to ask a favor of you. I want you to transmit a message to a certain man. I want you to write the message in such a form that it will not be lost—in the form of a fictional narrative."

It takes all kinds to make a world. I gazed at him thoughtfully. I said, "Don't look now, but isn't that doing it the hard way? I'll be glad to help you out. But putting a simple message into story form is—well, why not just let me *tell* the guy? By word of mouth?"

"I'm afraid," he said soberly, "that is impossible. You see, the person to whom this message must go will not be born until the year 1942."

"Nineteen—!" It worked. It threw me off balance for a minute. Then came the dawn. It *was* a gag, after all. My pal Ross being funny from out Chicago way, maybe? Or Palmer, deserting Tark long enough to joyride me over the well-known hurdles? I chuckled. I said, "That's all right, Professor. I'm young; I can wait. Just tell me the name of this unsprouted seedling, and I'll stick around till he gets old enough to talk to. Only the good die young; I expect to live to a ripe old age."

He glanced at me slowly, and a bit

sadly, I thought. "I'm sorry, Clinton," he said, "but that won't do. It won't do at all. It will have to be written. You see—you won't be here then. . . ."

YOU know, it should have been funny. Uproariously, screamingly funny. I should have laughed my crazy head off, given my obviously screwy visitor a smoke and a drink and a clap on the back and said, "Okay, pal. You win the marbles. Come clean, now. Who put you up to this crystal ball stuff? What's the payoff?"

But I didn't, because somehow it wasn't funny after all. There was a deadly seriousness to my visitor's manner; the knuckles of his hands were white upon his knees, his icy blue eyes burned with a tortured regret that was like a dash of water to my mirth.

"I'm sorry, Clinton," he said. "I'm really dreadfully sorry."

I lit a cigarette carefully. In as even a voice as I could muster, I said, "Perhaps you'd like to tell me more? Perhaps you'd better start from the beginning?"

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I think that would be best." He fingered the thick brown envelope nervously. "The story begins," he said, "and ends—with this manuscript. . . ."

"AS I have already told you," said Dr. Winslow, "my profession is teaching. Psychology is my field. Recently I have given much of my time to research into the lesser-known faculties of the human mind. Experimental psychical research such as that investigated by Prof. J. B. Rhine of Duke. You are undoubtedly familiar with his work?"

"Extra-sensory perception?" I nodded. "Yes. Most fascinating. The results are far from satisfactory, though. And some of his conclusions—"

"You make a common error," said my visitor gravely. "Dr. Rhine has not assumed to draw any conclusions—as yet. He offers only a few, and completely logical, presumptions."

"Dr. Rhine's studies to date, however, have been in the field of extra-sensory perception only. There are other fields of psychical research quite as untouched, and, I have reason to believe, even more important and—fruitful."

"It is in one of these companion fields that I have been laboring. I have been investigating the phenomenon you may know as 'telaesthesia.'"

"You mean," I asked, "telepathy?"

"There is a difference between the two. Telepathy, as defined by Myers in 1882, is 'the communication of impressions of any kind from one mind to another, independently of the recognized channels of sense.' It implies a deliberate, recognized contact between two minds existent at one time."

"Telaesthesia is a more complex meeting of entities. If A, let us say, reaches out and helps himself to the contents of B's mind *without* the knowledge or assistance of B, that process will be called 'telaesthesia.' Unlike telepathy, it knows no barriers of Time. There are hundreds of recorded case histories from which we learn of men of our time who have established telasthetic contact with former forgotten eras."

"And of days to come, as well!" Here Winslow's eyes literally gripped me. "But never, until now, has anyone succeeded in gaining more than a fleeting glimpse into the Time stream of the future. Never before has a man established a contact so deep, so strong, that he could read not one sentence or one paragraph of that which is to be—but an entire chapter, decades long. . . .!"

IT was spring in Roanoke. Outside, warm April sunshine poured down luxuriant gold upon the faint, green buds. My place, *Sans Sou*, lies in a quiet fold between two rolling hills. There was nothing to disturb that quiet now save the boastful warble of a redbird, "Purty! Purty!" and the petulant complaint of a chipmunk in the sycamore.

The sky was a pale, soft blue, cloudless and serene. There were no clouds, and even the delicate fronds of the weeping willow drooped motionless. So it could not have been a storm I heard. Yet as he spoke, a dark shadow seemed to scud across the sky, veiling the sunlight, and the gods made portent in the swell of distant thunder. I felt the short hairs stiffen on my neck, and despite the warmth I shivered.

I said, and why I spoke in a whisper I

cannot tell, "Never before . . . until . . . now?"

"Until now!" he repeated. And suddenly his fingers were swift with eagerness, he fumbled with the flap of the envelope while words raced from his lips. "Several months ago I began to experiment with automatic writing, one of the means by which teleaesthetic contact is authenticated.

"At first the results were—as might be expected—faulty. From the autohypnotic synopses into which I was able to project myself, I woke to find nothing on the sheets before me but meaningless scribbles.

"And then, suddenly, I woke one day to find that in my period of subliminal usurpation I had achieved a definite result. I—or someone—had written four full pages. The first four pages of this manuscript!"

Here he handed the manuscript to me. I had time to notice that the writing was full-bodied, flowing. Then Dr. Winslow's words claimed my attention again.

"That was but the beginning. Once having established contact, it was as though I became the *alter ego* of this mysterious correspondent. From that time on, my experiments were graced with success. Whenever I resumed contact, pages were added to the manuscript. By the periodicity of these, I am led to believe that Brian O'Shea is a diarist, and that through some inexplicable phenomenon, it is given to me to be able to set down, teleaesthetically, the very words he writes in his diary—"

"You said," I interrupted, "Brian—?"

"O'Shea," nodded Winslow. "Brian O'Shea. A soldier in the army of the Americas, Clinton—in the year 1963 A.D.! His diary is a history of the things to come!"

WHAT I would have said then, I do not know. Maybe I would have said something bitinglly scurrilous—which I most certainly would have regretted later. Or perhaps, as is most likely, I was momentarily stunned into speechlessness. But I was spared the necessity of speaking. Dr. Winslow had risen; eyes glowing strangely, he touched my shoulder.

"I am going to leave you now, so you may read this manuscript in peace. When you have finished, you will understand why

I came, and know that which must be done.

"You will find that the manuscript begins abruptly at the moment when first I 'contacted' O'Shea. It ends with equal abruptness. There are fragments missing; these may be filled in or rounded out as you consider necessary for the purpose of story-telling. I have made a few slight changes in spelling. Whether O'Shea was—or should I say 'will be?'—a poor scholar, I do not know. The spelling of some words may have changed over a period of trouble-swept decades. . . .

"But whatever surprises lie in store for you, whatever conclusions you draw from the manuscript you are about to read, I beg of you that you play the game of caution. If you end by doubting O'Shea's story, *still* you must convey to him the message the manuscript demands. It is the only way. We must take no chances. I will leave my address—" Here he scribbled a few words on his card; I noted subconsciously that his own handwriting was tiny, crabbed, angular. "When you have finished reading, get in touch with me. No, don't get up!"

For a long moment I stared after him. Is there any way I can tell you how I felt? I, who have written fantasies woven of thin air, now thus to be suddenly thrust into a fantasy beyond my own wildest imaginings? Even more important, is there a way I can make you believe that this is not merely another amusing tale, to be read today and forgotten soon?

The structure of this narrative is mine. I supplied the story form. But is there any way I can convince you that the words which follow are not my own? *I did not write this story!* It is the story of a man who is not yet born, who will not live these happenings for twenty years.

Here is the story of Brian O'Shea, soldier. . . .

II

—STUMBLED and pitched to his knees. I ran to his side and would have carried him, but he shook me off.

"It's too late, O'Shea," he said. "My number's up. Take over. And—" He hiccoughed convulsively and his lips drooled red. "And for Lord's sake, Brian, get the men out of this trap!"

His eyes glazed, then, and his head dropped forward to his chest. Someone tugged at my shoulder. It was Ronnie St. Cloud; he was screaming, above the splatter of shrapnel, "The hills, O'Shea! They've cut us off from the river. The hills are our only way out!"

Danny Wilson was beside him, and Knudsen, and a few more. About us milled a shrieking, terrified throng; it was impossible to tell soldier from civilian. Our uniforms were anything but uniform. We wore whatever serviceable garments we could salvage. I still had—though I suppose it was unrecognizable beneath a layer of caked sweat and mud—an old khaki campaign shirt, but my breeches were a corduroy pair I had found in a demolished farm house near Sistersville. St. Cloud wore the horizon-blue jacket of a *poilu* beside whom he had fought in Belgium. Knudsen looked least military of all in whipcord riding breeches commandeered from the tack rooms of the Greenbriar Inn at White Sulphur.

St. Cloud was right, of course; we might have known from the beginning we couldn't hold Huntington. It was open to the west, and that entire sector, from Chicago to Detroit and spearheading southward to Akron, Cincinnati, Zanesville, was occupied by von Schuler's Death's Head Brigade.

But Captain Elmon, who had whipped our tiny company into some semblance of order after the debacle at Pittsburgh and had brought us safely down the river through Parkersburg and Gallipolis, had believed we might be able to defend this West Virginia river town until reinforcements could reach us from the Fort Knox garrison.

THERE was a school here, a Marshall College, with a layout ideal for our purposes. The buildings were more than a hundred years old, sturdily built; there were dormitories, kitchens, private power plants for heat and light. The campus was encircled by a waist-high brick wall which, sandbagged, made a perfect first-line defense against infantry.

The rugged, mountainous terrain made it impossible for the Toties to bring up mechanized units. Nor could they bring pressure to bear from the Ohio River

which, here, was not only shallow but bedded with rubble from the locks and dams we had blown up.

But—the old, old story. They got us from the air. Their Messerschmitts and Junkers descended on us like a host of locusts, bombed the town ruthlessly; small pursuit planes strafed the fleeing populace with merciless persistence. We couldn't do anything about that, of course. Captain Elmon told me once—he saw volunteer service in Sweden before our country got into it—that in the early days of the war, aircraft confined its operations to military objectives. But I laughed; I knew he was just leading me on. He was a great one for joking, was the captain, even in the darkest hour.

Now Elmon lay dead at my feet; his final command had been that I take over. Get the men out of this trap. There was no time to waste in bootless grieving. Already the sharp bite of sidearms augmented the scream of shellfire . . . which meant the Toties were up to their old trick of parachuting an army of occupation into the beleaguered town.

I shouted swift orders to the others, bade them pass the word around to "take to the hills." There were viaducts under the railroad at 16th and 20th Streets; we used these as our ports of egress. It wasn't a matter of minutes. We gave ground slowly, fighting off the enemy advance from street to street, alley to alley, house to house.

By the old football stadium, now an ammunition dump, I found Bruce MacGregor, the Canadian, and the roly-poly Hollander, Rudy Van Huys. They had impressed the services of a dozen scared civilians, were loading trucks, vans, anything with our meager store of ammunition. MacGregor glanced at me sharply.

"Where's the Old Man, O'Shea?"

"Dead." I told him. "We're on our own. Mac, do you think you can handle this job alone?"

"Why?"

"I want Van Huys to forage. We're retreating to the hills. Use the 20th Street underpass, cut south to the Big Sandy, then west at Louisa. Rudy, get all the food-stuffs you can lay hands on. We're heading for hungry country."

They grunted understanding and I went

on. They were two good men. The chubby Dutchman could smell out provisions like a beagle. Our men wouldn't starve immediately, anyway.

That moment's delay was the only thing that saved my life. I was but a half block away from the underpass when a Totie bomber spotted the stream of refugees flooding out of the city through that viaduct. My ears sang to the screaming whine of his power dive, concussion threw me to the pavement as he loosed his entire rack full of bombs into the heart of the fleeing throng.

They never had a chance. Those who did not die instantly in the explosion were buried a split-second later in the tons of twisted steel and concrete that cascaded down upon them. There was one moment of dreadful cacaphony, hoarse screams of fear mingling with the thunderous roar of the explosion—then a dull, unearthly silence, punctuated only by the muted whimper of a few charred bodies that could not die and the grating slither of broken masonry filling the chinks of the funereal mound.

I ROSE, shaken, nauseated. Others had come up behind me; among them was Devereaux. There were tears in the young Frenchman's eyes. He lifted his head blindly toward the sky, shook an impotent fist.

"Les sales cochons! Will it never end, O'Shea, the triumph of these devils? Are honor and mercy dead? Is God dead? My country . . . all of Europe . . . now yours. . . ."

"They haven't taken America," I told him savagely, "yet! Come on. We're leaving town through the 20th Street viaduct. Is that you, Ronnie? What's the news?"

"They've consolidated position along Fifth Avenue, thrown a defense line from Four Pole Creek to the river, infantry advancing north along the river bank to the college. Thompson and a foray squad are trapped in the First National, no use trying to save them. We blew the Toties' brains out, though." St. Cloud grinned ghoulishly. "We had City Hall plaza groundmined. They chose that spot to set up general headquarters."

"Where's Frazier?"

"Dead. Blue Cross."

"Janowsky?"

"Same thing."

"Wilson?"

"He's all right. Or was. He went back toward the college. Said something about having an ace up his sleeve, whatever that means."

I didn't tell him. I didn't have to, for at that moment Danny came racing toward us. He waved his hand at me in a sort of vague salute or greeting, yelled, "If you're ready to get goin', *git!* There'll never be a better time."

"Why?"

"Because the Toties are goin' to have their hands full in a minute. With something too hot to handle. I just happened to remember that college we were bunked in had its own heating plant. A natural gas pipe-line. Since it was the Toties' objective, I thought maybe I'd warm house before they got there. Hold your hats, folks! There she goes!"

There came a sudden, terrific blast of sound. Even at that distance we felt the shuddering repercussion, felt a breath of superheated air fan our cheeks as the natural well Danny had set off let go with a thunderous detonation. Into the gathering dusk shot a writhing spiral of white-hot flame . . . the jagged outlines of oft-bombed houses looked black and ugly against the searing screen.

The flames leaped higher, higher, spread. An oily pall blotted the dying rays of the sun; from afar came to us the crackling agony of a city destroying itself. I watched, spellbound for a moment, then turned to the others.

"Danny is right. This is our chance. Let's go!"

MACGREGOR and Rudy Van Huys were waiting for us in the hills beyond the city. We paused to take stock of equipment, count noses, and plan our next move. Of our company—which had numbered six hundred before Pittsburgh, and had been one hundred and sixty-odd at yesterday evening's rollcall—now there remained but fifty-seven men. Twelve recruits joined us from the clamoring mob of civilian refugees. These were, of course, either graybeards, striplings, or men of dubious value as soldiers. All

men of fighting age and caliber had long ago been called to the colors by wave upon wave of government drafts.

We were a pitiful collection, poorly fed, inadequately armed, raggedly clad. Even so, the civilians were loud in their demand that we remain with them to "protect" them. But this I could not agree to do.

"You'll be safer," I told them, "hiding here in the hills than marching with us. We'll try to contact Preston's brigade at Fort Knox. You have food, water, radios, medical supplies. Hide out, keep living and—keep hoping!"

And so we left them. They must have numbered three thousand, mostly women and children. A few tried to follow, but I quickened the pace. The last weeping woman abandoned the pursuit after five miles; I saw her fall to earth, beating the insensate soil with weary, hopeless fists.

Beside me marched Danny Wilson. He was a reckless, devil-may-care lad, was Danny. Even in the thick of battle his ruddy features were habitually wreathed in a grin. But it had deserted him now. He said soberly, "Maybe we should have stayed with them, Brian, boy. It's a hard row to hoe."

"We can't fight a war in small detachments," I told him grimly. "You know that. Mexico tried it, and now their country is under Totie rule. Nova Scotia tried it, and now the swastika flies there. Our only hope is to concentrate, meet them somewhere in one decisive battle."

"I suppose you're right. We go to join Preston?"

"Yes. It's the general concentration point. Elmon got instructions by radio just before he went west. Jackson is bringing up his army from the Gulf, Davies is marching in from Springfield. They say three flights are taking off from Fort Sill; we'll have a small air force. If we can beat the Toties off at Louisville, we'll cut their communications line from Pittsburgh to Cincinnati, hold the Ohio."

That night we slept along the Big Sandy. Before we bivouacked I broke our little company into six squads, each of eleven men, each headed by a veteran on whom I knew I could depend. I appointed Danny Wilson and Ronnie St. Cloud as my lieutenants. In arranging the squads, I tried to place the men according to na-

tionality under one of their own race.

Raoul Devereaux led one of the French squads, while Anatole LeBrun the other. That would have been funny a few years ago, when the army was still organized under the caste basis, because Devereaux used to be a captain and LeBrun a common private. But that old "officer and gentleman by Act of Congress" stuff had gone overboard a long time ago. Now we picked our leaders by their leadership ability.

Ian Pelham-Jones, the Britisher, and Bruce MacGregor headed two English-speaking squads; Rudy Van Huys commanded a group of Dutch and Belgians; the tall Norwegian, Ingolf Knudsen, led a collection of assorted Scandinavians. Norwegians, Swedes, Finns, Danes — Lord, there was a tough outfit!

And so we hit the trail. There's not much use telling about the days that followed. We marched and slept and ate and marched again. We were spotted once by a Totie spyplane; he came down to do a little plain and fancy strafing but we had the advantage of broken terrain. We took to cover and turned his crate into a colander before he decided he'd had enough. Lars Frynge, the Swedish sharpshooter, claims he punctured the pilot as well as the plane, but I wouldn't know about that. Though it's true that he did wobble as he flew away.

WE avoided Lexington, cutting south through Campton and Irvine. We picked up a railroad at Lancaster. Joe Sanders, a native of these parts, said it was a part of the old Louisville & Nashville. If it were in operation, he said, it would take us right to our destination. But that was like saying if we had wings we could fly. The rails were twisted ribbons of steel; in some places the roadbed had been so completely eradicated you would never know it had been there.

We saw people from time to time, but mostly in the small towns. They came out to cheer us as we marched through, offered us what little they had in the way of fresh water, barley bread, clothing that would never be used, now, by sons, husbands, brothers, who had fought their final battle. I got a fine new sweater in one village. In another we had an odd expe-

rience. A white-haired granddame insisted we accept a flag she had sewn for us. A funny-looking red flag with blue diagonal cross-bars and thirteen white stars. We used it later to bury Johnny Grant. He died of a delayed gas hemorrhage.

The larger towns were deserted. We saw only one man in Danville. A scrawny, long-haired weasel skulking through the ruins of what had once been an A & P supermarket. Bruce MacGregor took a shot at him, but I knocked his rifle up. The bullet whistled over the man's head, and he scurried away like a sick, desperate rabbit. I knew there was a G.O. to shoot all looters on sight, but the time had passed, I told Mac, to concern ourselves with such trivialities. Ammunition was too precious.

And, anyway, if he didn't find the buried provisions, maybe the enemy would.

The seventh night out, we camped in the woods north of Bardstown, just a few yards off what had once been a main highway. I was beginning to smell smoke. Tomorrow we would join the main garrison, get fresh clothing and equipment and be assigned our duties in the projected offensive. That is, I suppose, why I was sleepless.

We had stumbled across a deserted tobacco shed the day before. The brown leaves were old, parched, crumbling, but it was better than the hay-and-alfalfa mixture they had given us up North. I rolled myself a cigarette and was sitting by the side of the road when suddenly I heard it. The sound of an approaching automobile.

A moment later moonlight glinted on metal; I saw it picking its slow, lightless way over the cracked asphalt. My heart leaped. This must be a car from Louisville. I ran down to the road, stood waiting eagerly. It approached at a snail's pace, but in the gloom the driver must have had all he could do to watch the road without keeping an eye peeled for vagabond troops, for when, as it came beside me, I cried a greeting and reached for the door, there came a startled sound from within, the motor roared stridently, and the car leaped forward, almost wrenching my arm from its socket.

Somehow I managed to hold on, though the automobile bounced and jarred crazily

as it struck deep ruts in the roadbed. My head glanced metal and I saw whirling stars. "Hey!" I yelled. "What the almighty hell are you trying to do! Take it easy!"

Brakes squealed; the car jolted to a stop. And from the interior a voice, high-pitched with relief, cried:

"You—you're an American! Thank Heaven!"

Then a slim form collapsed suddenly over the wheel. I yanked the door open, dragging the unconscious driver from the cab. He must be, I thought, wounded. He must be—

But it wasn't a "he" at all. As the body fell back limply over my arm, a campaign hat tumbled earthward. Soft brown hair cascaded from beneath it. The driver was a girl!

I had ammonia tubes in my first-aid kit. I snapped one beneath her nose, jolted her back to awareness. And she proved her femininity by coming out of it with a question on her lips.

"Who—who are you?"

"O'Shea," I said, "commanding a detachment from the Army of the Upper Ohio. Marching to join Preston's brigade at Louisville. But never mind that. Who are *you*? Where do you think you're going?"

She said, "Louisville!" In the darkness her face was a white blur, drab, expressionless, but there was a touch of hysteria to her voice. "Louisville! But haven't you got a radio? Didn't you know—"

We hadn't. It didn't make sense. As she faltered, I snapped, "Know what? Go on!"

"Louisville has fallen. The Toties have taken Fort Knox. Our troops are destroyed, the government has fled, and the Army of the Democracies is in utter rout!"

I stared at her numbly. In the black of the woods a nightjar screamed a single, discordant taunt. . . .

III

THE commotion had roused most of the others. Quiet forms in the midnight, they had drifted to the road. Wilson spoke now. He said, "That's the end, then. If she's right, Brian, the war is over. And we've lost."

I said to the girl, "How about it?"

She shook her head.

"I'm afraid so. The last reports I heard, they had seized the Mississippi, cut all contact between our Eastern and Western armies. The Japs control California and Nevada. There was a terrific battle being waged at Albuquerque. The Russian navy holds the Great Lakes. Everywhere you hear the same story."

Pelham-Jones demanded harshly, "St. Louis? Did you hear anything about—?"

"Wiped out to a man. It was caught in a vise. The Germans from the east, the Italians from the north."

Pelham-Jones said, "I see," quietly. He turned away. His shoulders looked heavy. He had a younger brother at St. Louis. Van Huys looked at the girl suspiciously.

"How do we know she's telling the truth, O'Shea? It may be more lies. She may be a Totie spy."

I said, "You have your dent?"

She nodded and handed it to me. I flashed my light on it. It was authentic, all right. The picture on the tiny metal identification tag was an image of her; the name beneath was *Maurcen Joyce*. She was tagged as a WAIF, a member of the Women's Auxiliary Intelligence Force. I gave it back to her.

"Very good, Miss Joyce. Sorry. We can't afford to take chances, though. You understand, I'm sure. But—" My curiosity made me exceed my authority. "But what are you doing here? Surely you wouldn't be attempting to escape the Toties in this direction? If they hold the east?"

She hesitated for a moment. Then, carefully, "I am acting under orders, Captain O'Shea. They were supposed to be *secret* orders. But in view of what has happened—" She made up her mind. "It would be better for more than one to know. In case—in case anything should happen to me.

"You've heard of Dr. Mallory?"

"Thomas Mallory?" I said. "The physicist? The one who pestered the daylighters out of the government about some crack-brained invention during the early days of the war? Is he the one you mean?"

"Yes. The government isn't too sure, now, that it acted wisely in refusing to listen to his plan. But you know how it was for a while. Miracle men flooded the

War Department with fantastic ideas for 'smashing the enemy.'

"Only, in this last extremity, the War Department decided to investigate Mallory's claim. As a last resort. I was commissioned to find him, bring him to Louisville. But now—" Uncertainly. "Now I don't know just what I ought to do. Even if he has a plan, and a good one, there is no one to whom we can communicate it."

SURPRISINGLY, it was Danny Wilson who interrupted.

"Except," he said suddenly, "us!" He turned to me. "Brian, it would be suicide for us to go on to Louisville—and there's no place else to go. We might as well make this our job. We have everything to gain, nothing to lose."

"Do you," I asked the girl, "know where Mallory is?"

"Only roughly. Somewhere in the hills of the upper Cumberland. I plan to comb the neighborhood—"

The Kentuckian, Joe Sanders, edged forward.

"Don't need to do no combin'," he drawled. "Reckon I c'n help. This yere Mall'ry—he a big man? White hair? Red complected?"

"Why—why, yes. I believe so."

"Mmm. Figgered it'd be the same one. I know him. Usta fish near his place when I was a colt. He come there in the summertime, big house in Cleft Canyon on Mount Rydell. I 'member we usta call him the 'devil Doc,' 'count of there was alluz queer goin's-on at his place. Well, Cap'n?"

He squinted at me. I weighed the chances briefly. It was probably a wild goose chase. On the other hand, it was useless, as Danny had pointed out, to throw our little force against the might of the Toties who now held Fort Knox. And there was a faint, insane possibility that Dr. Mallory had a 'plan'—an invention, maybe—that would enable us to form the nucleus of a new army that, reorganized, would sweep the invaders from our land. . . .

"We'll do it!" I said. "We'll march at dawn!"

We had to leave the car there on the road and strike out across country. It

was the shortest and safest way to Cleft Canyon. Now that the Toties had made a clean sweep of the East, the roads were no longer open to us. As in Mexico five years ago, as in Ontario, the Maritimes, the New England States year before last, as in Illinois last year, floods of Totie scavengers were pouring through the conquered land in a series of "mop up" operations.

Time and again aircraft droning over our heads sent us scurrying to cover. Once a flight surprised us in an open field. That's when we lost Johnny Grant and three other men. Nearby woods saved the rest of us.

Before we abandoned the car, I had the men strip it of everything we could possibly use. Upholstery, tires, all electrical accessories, including the televisé. It was this last that kept us going, kept our spirits aflame with determination, even when the trail was hardest. Wherever we spun the dial we found the ether crackling with the boasts of the enemy; each scene pictured on the plate was one calculated to tighten the already grim jaws of my men.

The Totie banner floated everywhere. It was a blood-red flag; in the center was a quartered circle. In each of these segments was a symbol of one of the four totalitarian states that had welded to form the Totie army. Swastika and crimson sun, side by side with the Italian fasces and Soviet hammer-and-sickle. The Big Four that, irresistibly combined, had ground the principles of democracy under foot.

It made me bitter, but it made me heart-sick, too. I could not help wondering how, or why, my father and those of his generation had been so blind as not to see the shadow of the inevitable creeping toward them.

Surely they must have known, as early as 1940, that Sweden would not be the last neutral to be drawn into the conflict? Even then there must have been rumblings in the Balkans, on the Mediterranean? Did they not guess that Italy and Russia were just waiting until the hour was ripe, that Japan's leisurely conquest of China was a mere military exercise to keep Nippon warmed up until the day should arrive for a blow at the Pacific Islands?

My own country was perhaps the worst

offender. Had it not been told by a wise man, centuries before that, "In Union there is Strength?" Yet America, like Switzerland and Portugal, Greece and Egypt, played ostrich. Hoping against all sane hope that each succeeding conquest would so weaken the Toties that the few actively fighting democracies could win out in the end.

I remember, as a child, the gleeful shouting in the streets of America when news reached us across the Atlantic that Hitler had been assassinated. I remember my father saying to a neighbor, "That's the last of the mad dogs. Stalin and Mussolini are gone; now Hitler. There'll be an armistice within a month. After that—"

I wonder if Dad ever thought of that when he fought with his regiment at Buffalo. The true facts must have come to him as a series of staggering blows. The sudden collapse of the Franco-British union when Russia and Italy, selecting their moment with diabolic accuracy of timing, threw their support to Germany. The three mad dogs were dead, yes, but four younger, madder dogs took their place. Himmler, Ciano, Molotov, and Kashatuku. The crushing of India, the rape of Africa, the shadow of the crimson banner stretching across the Atlantic Ocean to touch Brazil.

It was too late then to evoke the Monroe Doctrine. Too late to throw defenses about our own shore line. Canada owned but a shell of its former man power, Mexico was a hotbed of Totie sympathizers. Our militia was unready, theirs fired for twelve years in the flaming crucible of war.

These were not pleasant memories I had as our small band marched toward Mallory's hide-out in the hills. But I could not escape them. I, myself, had witnessed the siege of New York, had seen Philadelphia blown to shards by the mighty Armada that swept up the Delaware, had heard the last, defiant cry of the defenders of Los Angeles—

UNFORTUNATELY, here a portion of the manuscript is missing. To Brian O'Shea the events mentioned must have been so commonly known as to render unnecessary the mentioning of specific dates. Dr. Winslow places the probable

date of the invasion of the United States at 1959, but this may vary as much as two years, one way or the other.

"—low!" warned Sanders. "I don't think he's seen us!"

Danny's eyes had widened; he was pointing eastward.

"He's not looking for us! There's what he's waiting for. Look! An American plane!"

I was soaked to the skin, cold and miserable. The damned Totie scout might, I found myself thinking unreasonably, have waited just five more minutes before sneaking up over the horizon. Five more minutes and we would have finished fording this stream, would be up the rise and through the tangle of elm that Joe Sanders claimed concealed the place that was our destination.

Beside me, Maureen sneezed. The poor kid was wet, bedraggled. I don't know how she contrived to still appear beautiful under such circumstances. Somewhere behind me, I heard the snick of a breech-bolt. I turned in time to find LeBrun raising his rifle. I slapped it down.

"No, you idiot!"

He looked sulky.

"He's low, O'Shea. I can lay one in his gas tank."

"And if you miss," I hissed, "you'll have the whole damned Totie army down around our ears. We've come this far without being caught. We'll take no risks now."

Still, I knew how he felt. It was rotten to crouch there, knee-deep in icy mountain water, concealed by a vault of foliage, watching one of our planes—one of what must be a very, very few of our planes—drive blindly into the path of a hedge-hopping Totie fighter that had spotted its prey and was now waiting for it.

Then, suddenly, there was the roar of motors. The American plane had come within range. The Totie plane broke from concealment, spun skyward in a swift, dizzying burst of motion. White puffs broke from its nose seconds before our ears caught the spiteful chatter of machine-gun fire.

It caught the American flyer off guard. Something broke from his left wing, flapped crazily in the wind, as he jammed his plane—more by instinct than anything

else—into a dive. The Totie was on his tail in an instant. And we stood there, helpless, watching a sweet, if one-sided, air battle.

The Totie plane was superior, of course. But our pilot was a master. Time and again he wriggled out from under the other's nose just as it seemed he would be riddled into fragments. Once he managed to climb high enough to try a few shots of his own, but the Totie Immelmanned, was back on his tail before he could even get his sights trained.

It ended as suddenly as it had begun. One minute they were spiraling for position, whirling around each other like a pair of strange, snarling dogs. The next there came a thin streamer of smoke from the tail of the American plane; a streamer that thickened to a cloud as we watched, became flame-shot black, choking, menacing.

The Totie fired a final burst into the damaged plane. It went into a spin. Something dark appeared from a gap over the fuselage, it was the pilot climbing free. For what seemed an endless moment he poised there, then he was a brown chip on the blue breast of the sky, a chip that hurtled headlong to earth. Beside me Maureen gasped; I felt her shoulder tense against mine.

Then a white mushroom blossomed suddenly; I choked a word of profanity that somehow I didn't mean to be profane. The parachute, bloated with air, zigzagged languidly to the ground. The pilot was halfway down when his plane crashed. Flames leaped in a wooded thicket across the rise. The Totie airman circled several times. Then, apparently content, he gunned his ship, disappeared northward.

MacGregor frowned. "They must be confident. First Totie I ever saw who didn't gun a parachuter."

WE left our hiding place, then; broke into the open where the caterpillar could see us. He was a good flyer. He sighted us, played his cords expertly, and landed less than an eighth of a mile from where we had gathered. A couple of our men helped him fight down the still-struggling 'chute; he kicked himself loose from the straps and approached me.

"Won't have any more use for that," he

said ruefully. "You're the leader here? My name's Krassner. Jake Krassner. Fourth Aerial Combat."

I introduced him around. Danny Wilson said eagerly, "Did you say the Fourth? I knew a guy flew with them. Name of Tommy Bryce. From Hoboken. You know him?"

Krassner shook his head. He had hard, black eyes, a little close. Crisp hair. Broad shoulders. He was a good-looking chap. A little haughty, maybe. But airmen are like that, especially to ground-huggers.

"I'm sorry. Our personnel has changed a lot. Lately," he added grimly. He looked at me. "I seem to have picked a hell of a place to get shot down, Captain. What on earth are you doing in this desolate spot?"

Van Huys chuckled, and Joe Sanders grinned.

"Don't look like much from topline, eh, Krassner? I figured it wouldn't. The old man's a fox. He spent more than twenty years givin' this hideout the damndest coat of natch'ral camouflage you ever seen."

"Old man?" said Krassner curiously. "Camouflage?"

Maureen touched my arm. She whispered, "Maybe you had better not tell him, Brian. It's our secret—"

I started to tell her what the hell. He was one of us, and there were mighty few of us left. We needed all the men we could get. And Krassner looked like a man. I didn't get a chance to say any of this, though. For as we talked, we had continued to follow Sanders. Joe was now picking his way confidently through an opening in the tangle of foliage.

Sunlight dimmed as we entered a huge, cleared space entirely roofed by an interwoven network of boughs. In this space was a wide, rambling, one-story house, adjoined by a number of inexplicable sheds. And on the veranda of the house stood a man I recognized instantly. It was Dr. Thomas Mallory.

IV

MALLORY made us welcome. More than that, he seemed positively delighted that we had come. He showed anxiety on only one point.

"No one saw you come here, Captain? You're sure of that?"

"Positive," I told him.

"Good!" He called, and assistants came from inside to lead my men to quarters. I was surprised, as well as a little shocked and disappointed, to discover the number of women attached to Dr. Mallory's household. There were a few men, but for the most part he seemed to have surrounded himself with girls. Not only that, but with young and pretty girls!

But this was no time to sit in judgment on a man's morality. We had an important mission. Maureen broached the subject as soon as we three were rid of the others.

"You must know why we're here, Dr. Mallory. We did not find this place by chance. We came because you are the last hope of our country. Too late, the government realizes it needs the invention you offered it five years ago."

Mallory shook his head sadly.

"I'm sorry, my child—"

"You can't refuse, Doctor!" I broke in. "Don't you understand? The Toties overrun all the Americas. Democracy is dead unless—"

He raised a weary hand.

"Then democracy is dead, O'Shea. Not even I can restore its life. I can say only one thing; I am glad from the bottom of my heart that the government refused to listen to me when first I approached the War Department with my plan."

"Glad? Why?"

"Because I was guilty of that which a scientist must ever dread. I jumped to a hasty conclusion, based on insufficient evidence. My conclusion was wrong, my plan—" He sighed, turned toward a door. "But come. I will show you."

HE led the way from his office into an adjoining room; a laboratory, spotless, white-gleaming. About the walls of the laboratory were a number of cages. In some of these were small animals; I saw monkeys, guinea pigs, a squirrel, rabbits. Some were active, eating, shuffling about, looking at us with bright, inquisitive eyes. Others lay apparently asleep.

But these I noticed with some remote part of my mind. For the focal point of attention was a glass-walled case in the

center of the room; a topless case in which lay the body of a man. Maureen started. She said, "Dead, Doctor?"

"He is not dead," replied Mallory somberly. "He is the result of my dreadful error of judgment. These others—" He nodded toward the cages. "—were the experiments that misled me. This man, one of my assistants who trusted me and was daring enough to become my first human experiment, sleeps. How long he will continue to sleep, I cannot guess. But it may be for one, two, or even more decades!"

"Sleeps!" I said. But Maureen, with a flash of that swift intuition I had seen before, guessed the answer. She said, "Anaesthesia! That was your plan, Dr. Mallory!"

"Yes, my child. That was my plan. I am a scientist, but five years ago I was sociologist enough to recognize that the United States could not match the power of the Totalitarians. I realized, even then, that the ending we have seen come to pass was inevitable. I set myself the task of finding a way to meet the impending menace.

"I found the answer in a new form of anaesthetic. I will not tell you its formula. It is a dismal failure—but that I did not know. I thought it was a great success. When I permitted small animals—those you see before you—to inhale some of the delicate granules—"

"Granules, Doctor?"

"Yes. It was a revolutionary means of inducing unconsciousness. When I permitted the animals to inhale these granules, they fell into a soft, deep, harmless slumber. I timed their periods of sleep carefully, discovered the anaesthetic rendered them senseless over periods ranging from one to two weeks.

"It was then, heady with success, I offered my plan to the government. It was, I thought, so simple. Our planes would scatter the granules over enemy terrain—" He laughed shortly, mirthlessly. "—and the enemy would fall into deep slumber. While they were thus incapacitated, our men, garbed in specially constructed suits, wearing protective masks, could walk amongst them, disarm them, imprison them. The war would be ended bloodlessly—"

I stared at him incredulously. I said, "But—but if it really works that way, Dr. Mallory, that *is* the weapon we need!"

"Yes, my boy. But it doesn't work that way. I have told you I made an error in judgment. I assumed that Man, being a higher animal than those on which I experimented, would experience the same, or a slightly less drastic reaction than that experienced by the animals. I did not take into consideration the fact that Man is also a more highly integrated animal. That he is weaker, in some respects.

"When Williamson, here, volunteered to become a human guinea pig, I accepted his offer. I exposed him to the granules. He breathed deeply, fell asleep—" Dr. Mallory shook his head. "And that was more than four years ago. He still sleeps!"

I SAID, "I understand now, Doctor, why you consider your plan a failure. But you speak as a scientist and a humanitarian who would shudder at seeing thousands of men sleep for a decade. I am a soldier. I have met War face to face, and have learned, by bitter experience, that there is no weapon too dreadful to use if the results are satisfactory.

"What if your granules *do* put the Toties to sleep for years instead of days? Isn't that better than seeing our countrymen die beneath the sword of the aggressor? Unless we act swiftly, this war is over. Freedom, liberty, equality of men, all the things we believe in, are doomed. But there is yet time to equip a few of our troops with the suits and masks you speak of, turn loose your slumber-granules to the winds.

"Even though thousands of our own men share the sleep of the enemy, we can go through with the disarmament program you planned. When our foes awaken, a decade hence, they will have lost their leaders and their war. When our friends waken we will take them, triumphantly, to the homes and cities we have rebuilt while they slumbered."

Dr. Mallory said, "I wish it were as simple as that, O'Shea. But there is one other thing you do not know. The granules that are my anaesthetic are more than mere granules. They are spores. Worse—they are self-propagating spores!"

He pointed to a trebly barred and locked door opening on one wall of the laboratory. For the first time there was nervousness in his voice.

"There is a storeroom beyond that door, O'Shea. In that storeroom, quiescent in sterile containers, lie spores. Countless thousands, millions of them. They are the granules I made for the government before I discovered their real nature. There lies beyond that door a weapon potent enough to end this war immediately—"

He paused suddenly. We had all heard it, the squeak of a worn hinge, the shuffle of a footstep. I motioned Mallory to silence, tiptoed to the office door and flung it open.

The aviator, Krassner, stood there. He was smiling. He said, "Ah, there you are, Captain! I was looking for you. I wanted to ask if—"

"How long have you been here?" I asked angrily.

"How long? Why—just a minute or so. I—"

"Were you listening to our conversation?"

He stiffened; a flush highlighted his cheek bones.

"I beg your pardon, sir!" he said.

"Because, if you were—" Dr. Mallory was beside me, his hand was on my arm. I hesitated. There was no sense in being so violently suspicious. I said, "Well, never mind. Go back to your quarters, Krassner. I'll be with you shortly."

"Very good, sir!" He saluted, turned and stalked from the office, a picture of affronted honor and dignity. I felt somewhat ashamed of myself.

Mallory said, "It really doesn't matter whether he heard us or not, O'Shea. What I was about to say is, there lies beyond that door a weapon potent enough to end the war immediately—but it must never be used. For once loosed to the winds, those abominable spores would not only end this war, they would still all animal life on the face of Earth. I have said they were self-propagating. Each new generation of spores would deepen the slumber into which mankind had been soothed by the first—"

I said, "But why keep them, Doctor?"

"I don't quite know, O'Shea. Perhaps I have done so because I am, at heart, more

emotional than a true scientist should be. Perhaps I have a secret fear that there may come a day when I shall be forced to play God, give mankind its release from the chains of the tyrant."

Maureen shuddered.

"No, Doctor! You mustn't even think of that. Things look black now, but they can't go on like this forever. Right and truth and liberty will prevail in the end. There must be some other way to escape—"

"There is," said Dr. Mallory quietly. "There is another way. A plan I have been working on ever since the failure of my first. There is one last refuge to which they cannot follow us."

I said, "I don't understand, Doctor. Do you mean Antarctica?"

His grave eyes captured, held mine.

"No," he said. "A place more remote than even that. I mean, O'Shea—the moon!"

I KNEW, then, suddenly and with a great, overwhelming despair, that our journey to Cleft Canyon had been a vain one. As a last resort we had sought the hidden laboratory of one who had been a great scientist. We had found a madman.

I said, "Maureen—" and I suppose there was regret in my voice.

But Mallory stopped me. "A moment, O'Shea. I'm not insane. Nor is my plan—as you undoubtedly think—impossible. Did you ever hear the name of Frazier Wrenn?"

The name was vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place it. Maureen could, and did. She said, curiously. "Isn't he the traitor who disappeared from Earth with a group of followers? Years ago? From a laboratory out west somewhere?"

"Yes, my dear. In 1939. From Arizona. But whether he and his tiny band were traitors is something future generations must decide. Wrenn hated war; foresaw what must come of Earth's second Armageddon. He fled Earth, his destination was the planet Venus, his purpose to maintain, on that wild colony, a vestige of culture and civilization until Earth's feverish self-destruction should end."

Mallory sighed. "We do not know what has become of Wrenn's expedition. There

has been no remotest sign, no signal—”

I said, “Venus! But, Doctor, that means *spaceflight!*”

“Yes, Brian. I was to have been a member of that gallant party. But I was delayed in reaching their Arizona rendezvous, and their departure was hastened by an unexpected attack. They left without me. But, fortunately, Wrenn had confided in me the plans for his spaceship. For years, now, with what scraps of metal I could steal from a war-ridden, metal-hungry humanity, I have been secretly building a small duplicate of the *Goddard*.

“You wonder where it is hidden? Our Kentucky hills conceal great caverns, Brian. There is one beneath the hill on which this house stands. Below us—as I will show you shortly—is a gigantic cave. In it is my almost completed craft.”

I had not noticed that Maureen’s hand was in mine until I felt its soft whiteness tense within my grasp. She cried, “But why the moon, Dr. Mallory? Why not follow the Wrenn expedition—?”

“You ignore a major factor, my dear. Celestial mechanics. Wrenn’s flight was planned for a time when Venus and Earth were in conjunction. Such is not the case now. Earth approaches the Sun, while Venus is at aphelion. And my craft is, as I have said, but a small copy of Wrenn’s. Moreover, I have been able to collect only a small amount of fuel.

“There is only one body within our cruising range—Earth’s moon. It is my dream that we shall go there—”

I had been listening silently, stunned. Now I came to my senses.

“No, Doctor! I can listen to no more. You forget I am a soldier of the United States army.”

“The government has fallen; the last of the democracies is crushed beneath the conqueror’s heel, Brian, lad.”

“It will rise again. In the hinterlands—”

“—are Totalitarian troops.”

“There are still eighty million Americans—”

“And a hundred million aggressors!” He put a hand on my shoulder. “Don’t you see, Brian, this is how you can best serve your country? Make this flight with me. We will take your men and my fol-

lowers—two score men and the women you have already seen—and form a colony on the Moon.

“We will return, then, secretly, for more Americans. And more, and more. We will transfer our democracy to a new soil, there grow in strength and power and wisdom until some day we can reclaim our heritage.”

Despite my training, I could not help but be convinced. I said, shaken, “But astronomers tell us the Moon is a barren, lifeless world?”

“For the most part, it is. But the Caltech telescope indicates that air still lingers in the depths of the hollow craters. And in underground caverns. Water can be synthesized. It will be no easy existence, but it will be—”

“The ultimate salient!” breathed Maureen at my side. “The last line of defense for freedom’s children! Brian, Dr. Mallory is right! We must do this thing!”

He looked at me hopefully. “Well, Brian O’Shea?”

I took a deep breath. “When does our flight depart?”

V

AT Dr. Mallory’s suggestion, I did not tell my men too much about our plans. “With so much at stake, O’Shea,” he said, “the less they know the better it will be.”

But they did not ask to know much. They were good men; they trusted me. And if they chafed a little at the enforced idleness of the next week, the rest must have been a welcome surcease from months of fighting. Only one man failed to share their calm acceptance of my orders, Krassner. He told me, sulkily, “There’s something going on around here, O’Shea. And, damn it, I have a right to know what it is. As a fellow officer—”

“I respect your brevet, Krassner,” I told him somewhat curtly, “but for the present I must ask you to remember that you are attached to this division through courtesy only, and have no authority. In a few more days, now, I will be at liberty to explain everything.”

He had to be satisfied with that. Though it was the nature of the man to be snoopy; several times he was observed prowling

around the grounds, searching some clue as to Doctor Mallory's well-concealed secret.

He was chasing a will-o'-the-wisp, of course. A man might have searched for months without finding the entrance to Mallory's underground workshops. Mallory admitted Wilson and St. Cloud, my lieutenants, to his confidence. He took us to the cavern wherein was being constructed the spaceship.

The gateway to the depths was that which appeared to be a photographer's dark-room. Once inside, Mallory pressed certain carved ornaments, the entire farther wall slid back, and there stretched before us a smooth, well-lighted passage leading downward at a gentle incline.

We must have followed this more than a half mile before we debouched into the main cavern; a mighty, vaulted chamber, a huge bubble of emptiness blown in the solid mountain centuries ago when Earth was in the travail of making.

But it was not this natural wonder that made me gasp. I had seen others; I had, indeed, once taken refuge for four weeks with the Ninth Artillery in Luray. That which brought an exclamation to my lips was the shimmering monster braced on an exoskeleton of girders in the middle of the chamber. A gigantic, tear-shaped rocket-ship, stern jets lifted some feet off the ground, streamlined nose pointing at the roof of the cave.

About it, in and around it, sweating men fretted, worried, labored, like so many restless bees. Here the brief chatter of a riveting machine woke snarling echoes as a final plate was welded into place; there a master electrician wove an intricate network of wires into some obscure purpose. In still another place, a strong-thewed gang trundled seemingly endless trains of supplies into the ship's capacious holds.

Dr. Mallory smiled at the expressions on our faces, and there was pardonable pride in his smile.

"There, my friends," he said quietly, "is the *Jefferson*."

"*Jefferson*?" repeated Maureen wonderingly.

"Named for him who, in our country's infancy, wrote down in blazing words the principles on which all democracy is based. The inherent right of men to enjoy life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Once

his words showed us the way. Now his name shall lead us to a new civilization."

"Amen!" said Danny Wilson piously. Then, "Now can we have a look at her? I mean *him*, Doctor?"

Knowing every nook and cranny, berth and hold, turret and gun-chamber of the *Jefferson* as I do now, it is hard to remember my feelings on that day when first I strode her permalloy decks. Even so, I can recall the vast wonder that engulfed me as Dr. Mallory led us through the ship, pointing out the engines, the control-rooms, the Spartan simplicity of the living quarters, the well-equipped kitchen and compact storage bins. There was much I did not understand until long afterward. Permalloy itself was a novelty to me. The metal had been invented, Mallory said, by a German scientist. One of the old school. A Doktor Eric von Adlund.

"I do not know what has become of him. Perhaps he, like the other peace-loving great of his race, has long since been liquidated by the Totalitarians."

SO said Dr. Mallory sadly. And he tried to explain the operation of the small, inconceivably powerful, atomic motors, the invention of Frazier Wrenn. It was a concept so novel, yet so simple, that it staggered us all. But I could see how, without first having a knowledge of the heretofore unknown element *inektron* (the spelling of this important word seems to have confused Brian O'Shea. In the manuscript it is incomprehensibly scribbled. Dr. Winslow suggests the philological similarity of such words as "inertron" and "inactron"? NSB) man might never have discovered the long-sought power of the atom.

St. Cloud, frankly at sea as regarded scientific matters, was delighted with the military efficiency of the ship. I could see his fingers yearning for the lanyard of one of the rotor-guns installed in the fore and aft turrets. He liked, too, the foreman who came over to meet us.

"How many men have you working here below?" he asked.

Myers, the supervisor, told him twenty-three. "And there are twenty women topside," he grinned. "Doc says we're going to a brutal frontier. But if the women can stand it, we can. A man can do lots of impossible things with his wife at his side."

I understood, then, the number of girls I had seen above ground, and regretted my hasty judgment of Dr. Mallory's character. I might have realized that he did nothing without purpose. He had seen—as I saw now—that without something, *someone*, to fight for, the men of our little colony-to-be could easily lose heart. He was assuring our venture against all eventualities.

I was glad, suddenly, that Maureen was beside me. I wondered if she felt the same way.

Danny Wilson voiced a problem that had puzzled me.

"But this cavern, Doctor? Aren't you like the man who, in his spare time, built a yacht in his cellar? How are we ever going to get this monster out of here?"

Mallory said placidly, "When the hour comes, we will burst from this cavern like a moth from its chrysalis. You have not yet witnessed the power of our atomic beams.

"One thrust of blinding energy from the forward jets and we will shear an exit through the tons of solid rock and earth that now conceal us. Before we leave—" He looked at me significantly. "—we will destroy the buildings above ground. Including that one, sealed chamber that no man must ever open.

"The Totalitarians will have no way of guessing who we were, what we did here, or where we have gone. And even if they should guess, they would be powerless to follow us."

His voice was low, vibrant, anticipatory.

"Your men and mine, Brian O'Shea, we hundred odd will establish the first base on Luna. Then there will be other trips to Earth, gathering more converts to our cause. The day will come when we will match our conquerors in strength. And then—"

I said thoughtfully, "One more thing, Doctor. The *Jefferson* is supplied with water and provisions, yes. But if our number grows, we will need our own farms and granaries. How are we to grow food in the lightless grottoes of the moon?"

He nodded sagely.

"All that has been provided for, Brian, lad. I have overlooked nothing. Chemical culture is possible. Trust me to take care of that problem when it arises."

Danny Wilson coughed apologetically.

He said, "We do, Doc. But—but I think I know what's in the back of Brian's mind. Suppose something should—I mean—if anything might happen to you—?"

"That, too, I have considered. There is a complete scientific library in the aft turret. Science is no secret to the man who can read and think."

Danny's face lighted. He said beautifully, "A library! Golly! Books! I haven't seen a book for nigh onto fifteen years. Except Field Code manuals. There hasn't been much time for reading lately."

"And that," said Mallory darkly, "is perhaps the greatest catastrophe of this war. Reading men, thinking men, are happy men. They are not concerned with the lust for conquest of anything save the unknown. Yes, Wilson, there are books. And for those who seek light entertainment there are even volumes of fiction. Magazines for amusement."

"Magazines?" I said, puzzled. "Magazines for amusement? I don't see anything funny in an armament warehouse."

Mallory sighed.

"Forgive me, O'Shea. I had forgotten your youth. There was a time, when you were a toddling child, when 'magazines' were not always ammunition bins. Publishers used to issue monthly periodicals, printed on paper, bound in bright jackets, filled with stories. Exciting adventures in sports, the West, tales of crime and its detection, fictionized hazards as to the future of the world—

"Ah, but that was long ago. That was when paper was cheap and common. When the vast mills of Norway and Denmark and Canada poured endless rolls of pulp into our country."

Danny said eagerly, "I'd like to see some of these here 'magazines,' Doc. Could I?"

"You may. Myers will help you select some from the storage bin, Wilson. And now, my friends, if you are ready to return to the surface—?"

THAT, as I recall, was on the 29th day of July, 1963. Yes, I know it was that day, because that was the date of the fall of Santa Fé. We watched that battle through our televisions; it was triumphantly broadcast—a braggart deed in keeping with their boastful ways—by the Toties.

Albuquerque having fallen, General

Bornot, commander of the Army of the West, had withdrawn his forces to the old capital of New Mexico, there to make a last, desperate stand.

It was a valiant, but doomed, defense. The very fact that intimate details of the battle were televised shows how vastly superior the Totie forces were; their airplanes could fly without hindrance over our lines, spying out resources, reserves, and the pitifully weak remnants of our Army.

Like our own demolished Eastern army, the westerners were a motley crew. I saw French, English, Scandinavian and Canadian uniforms; loyal Sikhs from India fighting shoulder-to-shoulder with kilted Scots; swarthy refugees from Totie Mexico and Guatemala defending futile breaches beside blonde, fair-skinned Icelanders.

The main body of attackers stormed up from captive Albuquerque to the south; these were the trained warriors of Japan, the yellow horde that had ravaged California, Arizona and Utah and pressed eastward to meet Kievinovski's command. The Russians came down from the north, cutting off any avenue of escape through Taos. ("Once," Dr. Mallory told us sadly, "Taos was the artistic center of the United States. Now but one pigment flows there; the red of blood.") And Schneider's Army of the Mississippi had swept westward through Arkansas and Oklahoma, leaving nothing but waste and desolation behind them, to meet the other armies at this last defense post of democratic gallantry.

It was no battle at all, really; it was a slaughter. Our army had refortified old Fort Marcy, earthworks built by General Kearny more than a hundred years ago. Two divisions were quartered in the Garita, the old Spanish headquarters. Thus they lay, more than four thousand Democratic troops—waiting behind breastworks of earth and 'dobe for the attack of armies whose artillery was built to blast steel and concrete pill-boxes out of existence.

Even so, the gallantry of their defense turned the blood in my veins to electricity. They did not wait for the Toties to attack; they carried the fight to the enemy. With the first, tentative shot from the besiegers there came an answering blast from the besieged. Then the bedlam was on.

Stream upon endless stream, the Toties flooded into the city. As they did so, we—and the enemy—discovered that the spying televise had not told the whole story. Windows opened to expose spitting, snarling machine guns. Doorways gaped to expose light fieldpieces that poured fiery death into the Toties. Fake walls split miraculously, from them charged concealed troops of Americans, faces grim, guns flaming, roaring, bayonets flashing.

Guerrilla warfare became the order of the day. At street barricades powder and flame were forgotten as men met face to face, looked with stark eyes upon dripping steel. Americans and their allies fell, but for each of them fell two, three, a half dozen of the invaders. The scream of explosives was deafening, the street pictured on the metallic screen before us was a shambles of blood; bodies lay asprawl like the forgotten toys of a careless child.

And—the televise screen went blank!

Danny Wilson loosed a great cry of joy. "They're licked!" he roared. "The dog-whelped cowards are licked! I never knew of them to turn off a televised victory—"

For five glorious minutes we shared his hope. Then the broadcast was resumed, after a murmured comment about a "technical difficulty in transmission"—and when again our eyes looked upon the streets of Santa Fé, the picture had changed.

Once more it was aircraft that had won the day. In the face of impending disaster, the Toties had loosed the full power of their air armada against the beleaguered forces. It did not matter to them that their thermite bombs fell amongst their men as well as ours; that was a hazard their hirelings had been trained to accept. Burst after flaming burst rocked the streets of old Santa Fé, broken bodies were flung brutally against shattered walls, doorways and windows emptied—and there were no more defenders. Only fresh, unending troops of Toties filling the gaps left by their fellows.

I SAW the Garita fall, a flaming shambles; I saw an airplane swoop low over breastworks hastily flung up at the *Puerta de Los Hidalgos* and wipe out a company of Americans. I heard the biting rasp of machine gun fire, the staccato bark of anti-aircraft; once the visiplat before us

whirled giddily for an instant as the plane in which our broadcaster rode narrowly escaped disaster.

I saw the last great moment of Fort Marcy; the fall of the gates and the horde of snarling Toties that rushed in, bayonetting all before them; I saw the bayonet wielded that slashed the rope holding the American flag to the flagpost. I saw the man who turned and raced to that flagpost, grasped the ropes and held them taut as, for a moment longer, the tattered ensign whipped out through the smoke and flame.

Then I saw the bullet that found this unknown hero's breast; saw him cough and loose his grasp, slip earthward as the flag above him tumbled to the dirt. There was a look of hurt surprise in his eyes. Then I saw no more, because my eyes were wet. And Dr. Mallory said, "There is nothing more to see—"

And turned off the televisé.

YES, that was the 29th day of July, 1963. I remember it well. For it was after that I asked Mallory, "Do we go now? There is no reason to delay."

And he said, "We will leave in five days. By that time all will be in readiness. And the third of August will be a day of good omen. It was on that day, centuries ago, that a humble Portuguese sailorman with a great dream sailed westward to the Indies and found a new world.

"Like Chistofero Colon, we will select that date to set our course for New America—"

Maureen's hand tightened on mine. Krassner, who had been watching the televisé silently, gaped at us.

"New course? Go? Go where?"

"Skip it—!" I began. But Dr. Mallory stopped me. "No, I think it is well the men should be told now, O'Shea. My helpers know. Your men, who must be the fighters of our party, should be told where they are going."

And he told them. It came as a stunning blow. Some of them looked frightened; some, to be quite truthful, simply did not understand. Others were openly incredulous. Among these was Krassner. He epostulated, "But—but, O'Shea, this old fool must be insane! Flight to the Moon! Absurd!"

His eyes narrowed.

"There's more to it than that. This is a trick of some kind. I'll bet it's tied up with that mysterious invention you've got hidden in your closet—"

I grasped him by the shoulder, whirled him about.

"Then you *did* hear us that day?"

"Sure. I heard you. Is there anything wrong in that? I couldn't help hearing you say you had a weapon that would end the war. If that's what you've got, trot it out! That's a lot better than dying like rats on a fool's expedition to the *Moon!*

"Luna! Pah! I, for one, won't have anything to do with it—"

I said hotly, "You damned fool, we can't open that closet. Don't you realize—?"

"Brian!" snapped Dr. Mallory.

I shut up suddenly. Krassner looked at me, then at the old man suspiciously. He snarled, "You reminded me once that I had no authority over your command, O'Shea. Well, now I remind you that you have no authority over me. I'm pulling out of here. I've had enough of this insane secrecy and—"

He started for the door. I said only one word.

"Lars!"

Lars Frynge, the towering Swede, had his revolver at Krassner's midsection. He said amiably, "Ay tank maybe you batter lissen to Captain, hey?"

Krassner's face purpled. He bellowed, "This is the last straw, O'Shea. Insulting an officer and an equal! By the gods, I'll—"

He was right. He was an officer and an equal. But I was determined of one thing. Go with us he would, whether he liked it or not. But in the meanwhile—

"All right, Lars," I said. "Krassner, I'm sorry. I wasn't just trying to throw my weight around. But think it over carefully, man. This means a lot to all of us. You're at liberty to do what you will."

He snorted and strode from the room. Danny Wilson cocked an eyebrow at me; I nodded. Danny followed him. Maureen said nervously, "He's a trouble-maker, Brian. I don't think we should trust him out of our sight."

"That's why Danny left us," I grinned.

"And when we go, we should leave without him."

"That," said Mallory, "is impossible.

When we go, there must remain no one behind to know where we have gone."

AND there were five days left in which to finish all that had to be done before our departure. Those were days of feverish excitement and activity for all of us. Having been let into the secret, my men were shown the way to the underground cavern. There they labored, side by side with Mallory's helpers, to load the cargo, put the last finishing touches on the *Jefferson*.

We stripped the house; we gathered all forage from the barns and silos and bins. We rolled cask upon cask of fresh spring water into the holds. We locked and sealed the holds, one by one.

Danny raised a fuss about that. He had found something new and wonderful—something I meant to investigate myself as soon as the opportunity permitted. The joy of reading fiction.

"It—it's swell, Brian!" he told me. "Boy, I wish I'd lived in them days when magazines was common. You ought to read some of them stories. Sports and detective stories and—" He looked sort of sheepish. "The ones I like best are science stories. Gosh, you'd be surprised, Brian. Them old writers guessed sometimes pretty near what was going to happen.

"There was a guy named Bender, or Binder, or something like that, who guessed 'way back in '40, at the start of this war, that we'd get into it. And there was another guy named Clinton who said the same thing—he was nuts, though. He said the women would bust loose from the men and set up their own government.

"And those others, they predicted things like the spaceship we'll soon be riding in. And television, and—"

I said, "Those magazines must be plenty old."

"They are. Ancient. But they're still fun. Brian, can't I sneak a few of them into my berth instead of sealing them up in the library? Do you think Doc would mind?"

"I guess not," I told him. So he did just that. By the time he'd finished robbing the library, it looked moth-eaten and there was scarcely enough room in his berth for him to turn around in. . . .

Those were full days and exciting ones, but pleasant. It is hard to realize that we were living on the bright edge of grave calamity. Nor did we know it until the eve of the day on which we were to take off.

It started with a thin, high droning to the north. The familiar drone of aircraft. As always, under these circumstances, Dr. Mallory sounded the "Take cover!" signal, and everyone scurried to the shelter of the camouflaged grove, there to wait until the danger should pass.

But it did not pass. The droning came nearer, deepened in tone. And we saw, through the leafy veil that concealed us, that it was not a single plane that was approaching, nor a single flight—but a solid phalanx of enemy aircraft!

Even then we did not guess the dreadful truth. It was not until they had come directly over us, swung into an involute loop and began concentrating upon us, that we knew what was happening. Then we saw something dark and ominous loose itself from the rack of one bomber; a thin screaming filled the air—and in the woods to our right there came a frightful blast!

Earth shook beneath us, Maureen screamed needless words in my ear.

"They're bombing us, Brian! They've found our refuge!"

VI

THERE was only one thing that spared all of us in those next few minutes. That was the fact that the Toties did not know *exactly* where we were. Somehow they had learned the approximate location of Dr. Mallory's mountain hide-away, but not in vain had the aged scientist spent twenty years nurturing plant life to form a perfect barricade of concealment about the dim, squat buildings. From above, the wooded dell that hid his laboratory must have looked like one of thousands such.

Therefore they scattered their shots. One bomb exploded a quarter mile from Mallory's house; I learned afterward that it killed two workmen who had been laying in cordwood. Others exploded as far as five miles away as the hive of lethal wasps eddied back and forth, bombing the entire countryside with abandon.

A thousand questions seethed through my brain, but there was no time now to ponder the answers. No time to ask why, or how, the Toties had learned of this place. I seized Maureen's elbow, half-led, half-dragged her toward the laboratory. Above the crashing din I howled in her ear, "To the cavern! That's the only safe—"

The rest was lost in an ear-splitting thunderbolt. But she knew what I meant.

We were not the only ones who fled to the security of the house. The lab was the lodestone toward which all we tiny, helpless motes gravitated. By the time we reached it, the shaking walls were jammed with soldiers, workers, women, who had sought refuge there.

A few of these were itching for action. Such a one was Danny Wilson. He was pleading with Mallory, "How about it, Doc? Just one of them anti-craft guns? We can get it up here in no time"

"No. They don't know just where we are, Wilson. A shot would locate us definitely. We must remain silent and take our chances against a lucky placement."

Krassner, his handsome face oddly pale, clutched at Mallory's arm.

"This cavern you were talking about, Mallory. Take us there! We'll all be blown to bits—"

Joe Sanders' nose wrinkled, he looked at the airman disgustedly, and spat. Mingled with my own contemptuous reaction to Krassner's demand, I felt a warming glow of pride in my men. Each of them had realized, as had Maureen and I, that the only safe place was the underground shelter. But each of them had wanted, before we took to that refuge, at least one vengeful poke at the enemy. Quivering capitulation like this rubbed them the wrong way.

But Mallory, serene as ever, had already led the way to the secret entrance. He pressed the knobs, the door swung open. I was beside Krassner as he did so; I saw the look of surprise on the aviator's face as he saw the long tunnel that fed to the depths beneath. I couldn't restrain the taunt.

"Thought Mallory was insane, eh, Krassner? Does this look like the work of a madman?"

He muttered something incoherent. Then Pelham-Jones, whose squad had been quartered farthest from the main house, burst into the room excitedly.

"They're landing foray parties, Brian! How long will it take to get everyone out of here?"

I glanced at Mallory. He said, "Fifteen or twenty minutes, at least."

"And to get the *Jefferson's* motors started?"

"Another ten."

"Then," I snapped, "you'll need protection for a half hour. That's what we're here for. Bruce, Rudy, Raoul, split your squads. Send half below; have the others throw a cordon about the laboratory. If they're dropping infantry, they'll have to stop bombing. By the time they find us, the others will be below. Then we'll take to the cavern—"

"Very good, sir!" They sprang into action.

THE women continued to file singly into the small darkroom, pass through the doorway into the tunnel. Maureen clutched my arm.

"Brian, you don't have to stay up here. You're too important. You're the leader. You've got to—"

"—to stay with my men!" I told her quietly. And I did what I had been wanting to do, but had never before dared. I took her, unresisting, into my arms; kissed her. Her lips were warm against mine. Then I pushed her toward the doorway. "Get down there. Don't worry about us. If we hold our fire it will take them a long time to locate us. Danny, where did Krassner go?"

Danny grimaced.

"That yellow mutt? Don't ask me. He's probably down there by now, hugging a stalactite."

"Well, to hell with him. Let's get going. And don't forget—don't fire a shot unless they actually see us. We don't want to give our position away."

Mallory said quietly, "I'll herd them below as fast as I can, Brian. When you hear the signal, bring your men on the double. But before you leave the laboratory, you know what must be done?" He nodded significantly toward the inner room, toward the trebly-barred door that

contained a world's fate. I nodded. "I know."

The steady evacuation continued. I went outside again. As Pelham-Jones had reported, the Toties were parachuting infantry to the ground. More planes had reached the scene; the sky swarmed with them. And a mass occupation was in progress; from each transport tumbled a steady stream of dark figures that, like strange, winged insects, plunged out of their humming cocoons, hurtled headlong toward Earth for a moment—then suddenly grew filmy, white umbrellas that lowered them gently to the ground.

It was a random, haphazard occupation for the Toties *still* had not solved the secret of our exact location. But many—too many—were dropping near our sheltered grove. It would not take them long, I knew, to find us.

Happily, the aerial bombardment had ceased with the dropping of the infantry. That was good. No chance explosion would find the heart of our refuge, destroy the lab and cut us off from the underground cavern.

Approximately twenty of us remained above ground as defenders. I told MacGregor, "Encircle the house. Defend it at all costs until you hear Mallory's call—then hightail it for the tunnel. I've got something to do inside."

I went back to the door beyond which were concealed the lethal anaesthetic spores. There were two barrels of oil there; we had placed them there for the purpose I now carried out. I broke them open, spilled their contents every which way. Now a single match would set the house ablaze, destroy forever the danger Mallory had feared. I would strike that match just before ducking into the tunnel myself—

A single, explosive crack sounded outside! A rifle had spoken!

THAT ripped it! With that shot there came a moment of macaber silence; then the air was alive with an answering volley from the hills and woods surrounding us. I raced out of the house, found Rudy Van Huys. I roared angrily, "Who fired! Why? Good God, man, don't you realize—"

His pink, chubby cheeks shook with

anger to match my own. He said, "I don't know, Brian. They hadn't spotted us until then. But now—"

He didn't need to point to the forest; I could see the grey-green uniforms sifting through the trees, closing in on us. The *spang!* of a Wentzler shrilled in my ears, spent lead splattered against the wall behind me. All about us, now, rifle fire rasped and spat; I saw an advancing Totie soldier stop short in his tracks, stagger, spin, and fall, clutching his stomach with red hands that clawed. I heard a grunt from one of the men beside me, saw his mouth form an astonished O and an ugly, purple-black third eye appear magically in the middle of his forehead. The back of his head. . . .

Then came a welcome sound, a cry from Mallory.

"All clear, O'Shea! Bring your men!"

They came on the double. Not all of them. Half of them, maybe. Those few minutes of gunfire, raking our fearfully exposed position, had cost us. MacGregor, huge bear of a man, staggered around an ell of the house carrying a still figure. Danny Wilson. I cried, "Mac, is he—?"

"Bad, Brian! Mighty bad." MacGregor lumbered into the house with his burden; the rest of the men followed him, lingering to throw last shots into the advancing force before they disappeared.

There remained, still, my most important task. Now the Toties had apparently brought up several pieces of light artillery, for mingled with the snap of musketry I heard the familiar coughing bark of ordnance. Once the house shuddered and quaked, concussion deafened my ear drums as a shell found us. But I sped down the empty corridors toward the lab. Time was precious. All too soon the Toties would close in on the house; before that I must toss my flame, race back to the tunnel entrance.

I burst into the room, at last, and—

—and stood aghast! I had only presence of mind to throw a shielding arm across my face, hold my breath. For no longer was the closet sealed. The bars had been smashed inward, the lock was a shard of broken metal, the door a heap of splinters. The gods of chance had tossed a die for our enemies. That shell I had

heard—had found its way into the granary of death!

I had a momentary glimpse of the inside of the closet. I saw grey, fungoid granules sifting through the broken door; a cloud whirled and eddied toward me. To breathe that cloud meant oblivion. Beating at my clothes, my hair, with suddenly frenzied fingers, I turned and fled from the room.

In the hallway I stopped, ignited the box of matches I carried, tossed the blazing brand onto the oil-soaked floor. Flame licked hungrily along those stained boards; the bright fire-flower grew before my eyes. Even so, I knew my effort was in vain. The shell had entered through the walls of the house, and even now I could see those spores of slumber sifting out to float with the winds.

An agonized cry brought me to my senses. Mallory's voice, "Brian! Brian, lad—where are you!"

I turned and fled toward the secret portal. I made it just in time. The aged doctor and I were the last to enter the tunnel as the first Totie set foot in the laboratory. Stumbling, panting, we raced down that smooth slope to where the *Jefferson* awaited us. A dull throbbing wakened echoes in the hollow depths; eager hands helped us into the air-lock.

I heard Mallory gasp, "Take off! *Now!*" The humming deepened to a frightful roar, the Niagara of powers beyond comprehension. I was dimly aware of a cascade of broken rock smashing down about the *Jefferson's* permalloy casing, of an unearthly sheet of flame mirrored through quartzite windows. Then a tremendous tug pulled me to my knees, my lungs strained for precious air, blood danced before my eyes and there was agony in my bones. . . .

VII

EARTH was a tremendous disc, swaddled in lacy veils of gleaming white, when next I looked upon it from the control turret of the *Jefferson*. I did not look for long. I had, when I turned my gaze upon it, some vague idea of being able to determine (if nothing else) broad continental outlines of the sphere from which we were roaring at a speed which

Mallory had told me was approximately 25,000 miles per hour.

But the sheen was so terrifically blinding that I had to shut my eyes. Dr. Mallory, no longer so intent over his instruments now that he had checked his course and found it satisfactory, noticed the movement, reached over and turned the pane through which I had been looking a quarter-turn in its grooved frame. Immediately the burning radiance dimmed into murky grayness.

"Earth-shine, Brian," he answered my unspoken query. "Our mother planet is a great reflecting body. At this distance it is even more painful to look upon with the naked eye than is the sun."

Maureen said, "But the moon, Doctor? We don't seem to be moving toward it?"

"We aren't. It's moving toward us. Or perhaps I should say both it and we are moving toward a mutual point in space where our paths will intersect in—" He glanced at a chronometer and at his calculations. "In a little less than eight and a half hours.

"Before that, however, Brian," he turned to me seriously, "there will be a few minutes that I am afraid will be rather uncomfortable for our party. The period of absolute weightlessness when we reach the 'dead spot'; the spot where the gravitational forces of Earth and its moon are completely nullified by each other.

"You might go below and warn everyone that this is to be expected. Bid them not to be alarmed."

Someone coughed apologetically at the turret door. It was St. Cloud. His face was granitelike, but his eyes were haggard. He said, "Brian—"

"Yes?"

"It's Danny."

"Danny? Is he—?"

He nodded. "I'm afraid so. He'd like to see you."

I FOLLOWED him swiftly down the ramp, through the corridors, and into the sick bay. There were a half dozen of the men in there receiving first aid treatment from one of Dr. Mallory's assistants. Wilson was in one of the private wards off the main hospital room.

He turned his head slowly as I entered, essayed a grin that froze, suddenly, as

a spasm shook him. But he said, in a low, husky voice, "Hyah, Cap!"

I said, "Hayah, yourself, soldier!" and motioned the others to get out. The door closed softly behind them. "Got a blighty one, did you?" I said.

He said laboriously, "You wouldn't kid a guy, would you, Brian? I got a west one this time." His hands plucked at the sheet covering him, drew it down. Even the bandages had not been able to staunch that slow, staining seepage. I drew the cover back again.

"You're tough, Irish," I told him. "You'll get over that one before breakfast."

But I had a hard time saying it; the words rang false from my lips. I was lying, and he knew it as well as I. He shook his head.

"I don't much give a damn, Brian. I got the guy who done it, and a couple others for good measure. There's only one thing I'm sorry about."

"Yes, Irish?"

"That story. It was about a guy named Kinniston. A Lensman. He was in a hell of a jam. I'd like to have known if he got out." He said plaintively, "I can't lift my hands, Brian, boy. They're so damned weak. . . ."

I said, "One of those magazines? Where is it?" He nodded to the chair beside his bed. I picked the thing up, found the place where he'd left off. I started reading to him the story that had captured his fancy. It wasn't easy. I hadn't read much of anything since I left military training school at the age of thirteen. A lot of the words were unfamiliar, and I guess I made pretty heavy weather of it.

But he seemed to be enjoying it. He lay back on the pillows, breathing hard, so intent on the adventures of this "Gray Lensman," printed in an old and yellowed fiction book, that he almost forgot the icy fingers closing in upon him.

He only interrupted me once. That was to say suddenly, "Brian—it was Krassner, you know."

"What?"

"He fired . . . the shot."

The shot that had betrayed us! I was reminded, forcibly, that I hadn't seen Krassner aboard ship. I didn't know

whether he'd made it or not. But if he had—

"Go on . . . Brian. Get him out of trouble before. . . ."

So I read on. It was weirdly strange, sitting there reading a story of spaceflight adventure written twenty years ago. While we, ourselves, soared the void in a craft bound for Earth's satellite. But I read on. And it must have been ten minutes before I sensed something wrong. At first I couldn't figure what it was. Then, suddenly, I realized. It was the fact that Danny's breathing no longer rasped beside me. . . .

I rose and closed the magazine. I hope that somehow he knows, now, how the Lensman fought his way out of that jam.

I WENT back to the turret, then. But on the way I sought out Ronnie and Mac and Rudy. I asked them about Krassner. They hadn't seen him.

"But we will! If he's aboard this ship, we'll dig him out!"

They were gathering their squads into search parties as I left. In the control room, Dr. Mallory had just completed another check-up and minor course revision. He was jubilant because the *Jefferson* was reacting so beautifully. "Another six hours, Brian, and we'll be there. I've been teaching Maureen to operate the ship. She's an apt pupil."

Maureen flushed with pleasure. Mallory continued, "I'm glad we have another pilot. Now she can make the next trip back to earth, pick up more colonists while we build our Lunar colony—"

I started, and looked at him swiftly. Then he didn't know! I said, "Doctor—those spores. How swiftly do they propagate?"

"With drastic swiftness, Brian, lad. That's why I kept them in a sealed, sterile chamber. Had they ever been loosed, within two month's time all Earth would have succumbed to their somniferous power. But why do you ask—?" A sudden look of fear swept his features; his voice rose.

"Brian! You destroyed the spores? I saw flames leaping before you entered the tunnel—"

And then I told him.

It took him a good while to speak again.

And when he spoke, his voice was deep with sorrow. He glanced at the dim shadow of earth outlined on the polaroid window, and his hands made a yearning gesture.

"That which I feared most has come to pass. We are powerless to prevent it. We might have time for two, three, a half dozen trips to Earth to save a few refugees from the sleep to come—but even that is unsafe. Were a single spore to get into the ship, be borne back to Luna, our colony, too, would be stilled in centuries, aeons of slumber. You're *sure* the spores escaped, Brian?"

"I'm sure."

"Then soon we will be the last of Earth's waking children. Our responsibility is graver than ever. Now must we not only keep alive the spirit of liberty, but all man's dreamed-of future is in our hands."

Maureen cried desperately, "But the responsibility is too great, Dr. Mallory. Surely you, who invented the spores, know some way to counteract their action? Isn't there some way to effectively destroy them?"

"None, my dear. None . . . except . . ." His eyes dimmed uncertainly. "I don't know. Maybe. There's a faint, far possibility. Once, as I was experimenting, I happened to expose certain of the spore-plasm to synthetic chlorophyll. A reaction took place, a sloughing of the spore cell. I was not interested in that at the time, so I didn't pursue the experiment. But it is remotely possible . . ."

"We must try, then," I told him. "As soon as we get to Luna, you must try that experiment again. Try it on your sleeping assistant, Williamson. Better he should die now than slumber on forever in his glass coffin.

"And if the antidote works, we'll be in a position to reclaim Earth. Sweep away the plague, and while doing so, end the war in the very fashion you once planned."

"I'll do it!" he cried excitedly. "Chlorophyll must be the answer! As soon as we reach—"

He stopped abruptly. Footsteps were pounding up the runway; breathless men were tumbling into the room. Big Mac was at their head, his brow was red with unbridled rage. He yelled at me, "Brian!

We've found him! We've found the dirty, skulking rat!"

"Krassner, you mean?" I thought again of Danny, and of those others who had died because of Krassner's revealing gun shot. My anger flared to match MacGregor's. "Where is he? Bring him in!"

"We've got to take him. He's barricaded himself in the aft storage compartment and threatens to blow the ship to hell if we make a move!"

VIII

FOR a moment, everything before my eyes was outlined in crimson. As from afar I heard my own voice gritting, "Get your men together! Follow me—"

Then Dr. Mallory's sharp command, "No, Brian! Don't move hastily. He has the upper hand. He can do just what he threatens. Those aft storage bins are loaded with explosive, inflammable substances. Maybe we can reason with him—" He turned to Maureen. "Hold the ship to its course, my dear. I will be back in a few minutes."

We moved aft. Mallory and myself, MacGregor and Ian Pelham-Jones, Devcreaux. We passed through the bulkhead that sealed the forward from the aft portion of the ship, hurried down a long corridor, and came to the carriage lock beyond which lay the storage bins, the engineers' berths, the recreation room and the library.

This door was closed; before it, tense, nervous, uncertain, hovered a dozen of my men. Van Huys headed them; he looked up at me, his pale blue eyes troubled.

"He's in there, Brian. I think the man's gone mad!"

Mallory raised his voice, called mildly, "Krassner?"

There was a shuffling sound from behind the lock. A moment's silence, then Krassner, suspiciously, "Well?"

"What's the matter, my friend? You mustn't act like this. What is it you want?"

"Turn the ship back to Earth!"

"But we can't do that." Mallory's voice was soothing, persuasive. "We've set our course. We can't return."

"You must, damn you!"

I couldn't restrain myself any longer. I brushed by Mallory, cried, "Krassner,

you're acting like an idiot! Come out of there immediately!"

Again there was a brief instant of stillness. Then Krassner's tone altered subtly, became half-mocking. "Is that you, O'Shea?"

"Yes."

"The gallant captain of a drag-tailed company. You want to save your command, don't you, Captain? Then make the old fool turn this ship back, and do it *now!*"

Wrath inflamed me; I stepped forward and hammered on the metal door. There came the sound of swift, frightened movements inside. Krassner yelled sharply, incisively, "Don't try to come in here, O'Shea. I can blast this ship to shards, and by the Banner, I'll—"

He stopped abruptly, aware that in his excitement he had finally given himself away. But if he was startled, I was even more so. Suddenly, now, it all made sense. I wondered why I had not guessed the truth before. But I am not a clever man; I am just a soldier. And we had met Krassner under circumstances that favored his deceit.

I said slowly, "So you're not one of us, after all, Krassner? You're one of them?"

He had recovered his aplomb. He laughed stridently. In my mind's eye I could see his face, thin lips drawn in a tight smile, those too-close eyes lifted at the corners with mockery. His voice was a taunt.

"Congratulations, O'Shea, on having played the dupe so long and so excellently. Allow me to introduce myself in my proper character. Captain Jacob Krassner of the Imperial German Army—at your service!"

It was all too clear, now. I remembered the day we had met Krassner, seen him "shot down" by an enemy plane. I remembered MacGregor's comment at the time. "Damned funny. First Totie I ever saw who didn't gun a parachuter."

And that day I had caught him listening to us from Mallory's outer office. His restless wanderings around the laboratory grounds; now I knew he had been seeking the hideaway of the *Jefferson*. And the betraying rifle-shot—

"You Americans are a naïve race," Krassner was saying amusedly. "It never occurred to you, did it, O'Shea, that I

might have concealed on me a portable transmitter? It was I who exposed the location of the laboratory to our gallant forces. We had suspected for some time that strange things were brewing near Cleft Canyon. That is why I—shall we say 'dropped into the picture'? To learn the meaning of certain things that puzzled us."

He was a braggart, like the rest of them. Now that he had given himself away—only Toties swore "by the Banner"—he was gloating triumphantly. And he held the upper hand. We could not even tell him that which we knew; that Earth was doomed, that already hundreds of thousands of his compatriots as well as ours by quiescent in dreadful, sleeping undeath. If he discovered the Totie cause was lost—well, they were ever ones for the heroic, the vainglorious gesture. And his hand controlled forces that would blast us all into nothingness.

I GLANCED about me nervously. The faces of the men mirrored my anxiety, Mallory's brow was heavy with fear, Van Huys gnawed his full lower lip savagely. Only the gleaming metalwork of the corridor was impassive; that and the heavy door that barred us from a traitor and an enemy. A grilled square, high in the walls of the corridor, was like a great, fanged, laughing mouth. I stared at it.

"Mallory!" I whispered the name. "What is that?"

"Eh?" He followed my glance. "Oh—that? Part of the ventilation system. But, why—?" Then he grasped the reason for my sudden eagerness. "Yes, Brian. It feeds into every chamber. We'll give you a hand. Bruce—"

Krassner's voice came to us, suspicious. "What are you whispering about out there? I warn you, don't attempt to enter this room. If you do, we'll all die together!"

Mallory somehow managed to keep his tone steady.

"Krassner, you're an intelligent man. Listen—"

"Keep him talking, Doctor!" I whispered. I nodded to MacGregor; his huge hands cupped to give me a hand-up to the grill. My fingers tore at the four studs that bolted it into position. One came out. Another. All eyes were upon me as I

lifted the heavy grill from its position, lowered it into the outstretched hands. Only Mallory continued talking, pleading, arguing, reassuring. Stalling for precious time.

I nodded, MacGregor's shoulders heaved, and I was scrambling into the smooth bore of the ventilating system. It was narrow, but not too narrow; the air was cool, clean-smelling. I crept from the opening, was lost in darkness.

A native sense of direction, keen-edged by years of guerrilla warfare, aided me in threading that black labyrinth. How long the creeping journey took, I had no way of knowing. It seemed endless, for I moved slowly, cautiously, dreading the revelatory scrape of clothing upon metal, the sound that might send Krassner suddenly into action.

A turn, a rise, a descent, and another turn. Then before me loomed a networked square of light. And the sound of Krassner's voice was no longer muffled; it reached my ears loudly. "—fine organization, O'Shea, where the soldiers address their 'captain' by his first name. But we will teach you obedience, you Yankee upstarts! We—"

I was at the grill. There was no way to unscrew it from the inside. What could be done must be done—and in a single, sure move—from here.

Krassner stood a few yards from the barred and bolted door. He had not been bluffing. He had prepared the way for the destruction of the *Jefferson* in the event his demands were refused, his scheme went awry. The end of a coiled fuse lay beside him, he toyed nervously with an electro-lighter as he talked. But now his patience was wearing thin. He said, "But enough of this conversation! Are you, or are you not, going to turn about? Your answer now, or by the Banner—"

Mallory answered reluctantly, "Krassner, once more I beg of you to listen to reason."

"The time for reason is past. I want action. You, O'Shea! Speak to me! Are you going to turn the ship?"

Silence. I eased my revolver from its holster with infinite slowness. I saw a puzzled look appear on Krassner's features, turn to a look of sudden doubt.

"O'Shea! Where are you? Speak to me!"

My gun spoke for me.

KRASSNER never suffered for the misery he brought on others. He never knew what struck him. My shot crashed into his brain like a Jovian bolt. Without a word, a whimper, a groan, he collapsed where he stood, his lips still parted in the question he had been hurling at the door upon which, now my comrades were battering.

But even in death, Krassner was destined to throw a last blow amongst us. My cavernous eyrie echoed with a roaring blast; when my deafened ears could hear again they heard a sizzling crackle. The stench of burning powder stung my nostrils.

I craned to look down through the grill; saw there that which damped my forehead coldly. Krassner's weapon had been the hand flame-thrower of our enemy. The stricken convulsion of his fist had shot a withering blast of flame upon the fuse. Now a charred line of fire was racing to the charge Krassner had prepared.

In frantic haste I screamed this knowledge to those beyond the door. "You've got to get in somehow! Stop that fuse!" Their efforts redoubled. I heard the ringing crash of metal upon metal which meant they had brought up a pry, then came a hissing sound, and at the doorjamb, by the hinges, metal warmed, turned orange, glowed cherry red. A blowtorch!

I could do no good behind this grill. It was the act of a contortionist to turn in that meager space, but somehow I accomplished it, scrambled desperately toward the corridor grill through which I had entered the air-duct.

It was just as I gained the opening that the hinges of the lock finally gave way, the door burst open. Even I was not prepared for that which appeared through the frame. The entire aperture was one solid sheet of flame. Despite their eagerness, no one could blame my men for falling back, horrified, from the scorching fingers that leaped out to grasp them.

All but one! And that one was Dr. Thomas Mallory. Perhaps it was because he alone realized the vital necessity of jerking that fuse from its charge before every-

thing ended in one coruscant moment. Arms locked before his face, head lowered, he dashed recklessly into that flaming hell!

I fell—or dropped, I know not which—from my outlet, found myself on my feet, heard myself bellowing, "Water! We've got to stop that fire before—"

But they knew that. Already someone had raced to the jets, another was tugging desperately at a reel of fire hose. I suppose what I did next was heroic. Either that or damned, blind foolishness. It could not have been deliberate heroism, for there was no time to measure the chances, weigh the consequences. I leaped through the doorway, followed Dr. Mallory. And even so, there was another figure at my side. That of burly Bruce MacGregor.

We found him at the same time. He lay face down on the floor, arms outstretched before him. But in one blistered hand was—the end of the fuse. Scant inches from its charred end stood piled boxes of Triple-X, most deadly of all explosives. The flames had not yet quite reached it, but in another moment—

Then the water came! Like a solid fist it caught me in the middle of the back, shot me, sprawling, forward. The breath shot from my lungs before that impact—but never had I been more grateful for a bruising blow.

MacGregor, a sorry sight with his blistered cheeks, scorched hair, spark-charred garments, bent his brute strength against the flood, roared directions.

"Here! On these boxes first! Soak them, ruin them! We can fight the fire later. . . ."

WE got Dr. Mallory out of that furnace. How long we battled the fire after that is hard to say. At least an hour. Krassner had planned his coup with deadly Teutonic thoroughness. Not only had he arranged the fuse and explosive charge; he had also soaked walls, drapes, furniture, with gasoline.

Against this, our water was useless. We had no sand. Men labored to drag the lethal crates of explosive out of the danger zone; after that we went back at the ever-spreading fire. Chemicals did the trick finally. The last blaze succumbed to the stifling blanket of carbon dioxide, a clean-up crew methodically swept up the last of the charred débris.

Thus died Krassner—but at what a cost! Ten of my men in the hospital, at least two of them seriously burned. Three whole bins of provisions gone forever, devoured by the hungriest of all foes. A binful of linens, clothing, blankets, burned to cinders. And every other room that had been in that aft section of the ship gutted!

All these disasters paled into insignificance when, bandaged, cleaned, reclad, I went to visit Dr. Mallory. One look at his face and I knew that here was the heaviest price we were to pay for the destruction of our last mortal foe. Only Mallory's eyes were visible under the swaddling mask of bandage, and these were raw and bloodshot. But the ghost of a smile lighted these fine old eyes, and his voice, sieved through a layer of gauze, said weakly:

"I . . . reached there in time . . . Brian, lad."

"You did that," I told him huskily. "You saved us all, Doctor."

"Not only us, but . . . mankind. We *had* to live, Brian. You must lead . . . our people . . . out of the wilderness."

I said, "Not I, Doctor. *You*. You are the only man who can save us, reclaim the sleeping world—"

He said, as though not hearing me, "It's a good . . . thing I showed Maureen . . . how to run the ship. Isn't it? Now she can take us to Luna."

"Brian, boy . . . find the notes . . . in my desk. They'll help you. I believe . . . you'll find the crater of Copernicus . . . the best place to land. There will be air there. Thin, maybe. But air. In the underground grottoes . . . should be . . . water. . . ."

A SPASM shook him; his eyes closed for a moment in pain, then opened again. They were febrilely bright.

"Most important of all . . . Brian . . . the spores. You must find a way . . . to destroy them. Go back to Earth . . . and awaken man . . . to a new, a peaceful, world."

He was silent so long that I cried out, "Doctor!" I couldn't say more.

But he spoke again, and for the last time. "I am sure now . . . Brian . . . you will find the answer . . . in chlorophyll. Keep after it. The fate of all . . .

mankind . . . is in only your . . .”

And that was all. His eyes closed, then, as if they had finally found peace. I turned away. Maureen covered his face tenderly. She came to my side, and her voice was soft.

“He was right, Brian. You are our leader now. It is up to you to find the antidote for Earth’s illness.”

I stared at her long and bitterly. My voice must have been harsh.

“I! I, Maureen? Tell me—do you know the formula for chlorophyll? Do I? Does anyone aboard this ship, now *he* is gone?”

“Don’t be upset, Brian. No, we don’t—but there’s no cause for despair. It, and everything else you need know, is at our disposal. That’s why he went to such pains to provide a scientific library for the ship. All man’s knowledge lies there, waiting for us to seek it out.”

I took a deep breath. I said, “That’s just it, Maureen. I couldn’t bring myself to tell him. But—”

“But, Brian—?”

“The library is gone! The books that meant life or death for mankind are a pile of crumbled ashes!”

I SUPPOSE I should be grateful that we are here. I should be thankful that Maureen’s quick intelligence made it possible for us to land here at the crater of Copernicus. I look from the window of my little shack. I see shanties like my own arranged in a crude circle here at the base of towering mountains.

Dr. Mallory was right. We have air here, and water. We have enough provisions to last us for years. By the time those are exhausted, we will be independent of our Earthly supplies, for already Sanders and Van Huys have set soil into cultivation; they claim, gleefully, that this thick, rich, Lunar soil flowers like a desert when watered. And we have set up plants for the synthesis of water.

Strange how quickly we have adapted ourselves. We even laugh sometimes, nowadays. There have been marriages; I suppose that means that in a little while there will be births. Imagine that! The first Earth child to be born on the Moon.

I, too, should be happy. At times I am—comparatively. For I have Maureen be-

side me; our love is a great, sustaining force in a desperate existence.

But I cannot be completely happy, for night or day I am reminded of the great, impossible burden that weighs my shoulders low. The Earth, a massive, glowing globe, lights our sky. Occasionally I think I can glimpse the gleaming ocean waters of Earth; once, on a clear night, the familiar outline of our lost homeland, America, was crystal clear to our eyes.

Yet all life on that nearby mother planet is, must be, now deep in everlasting sleep. Everlasting because I am powerless to interrupt it. Because Mallory’s library is no more; because I am a stupid soldier, not a clever man.

Only recently there came a wan ray of hope. It was as we were transferring the last pieces of furniture from the *Jefferson* to our shacks. In the berth that had been Danny Wilson’s—gay, laughing Danny!—I found pile upon pile of those amusing, colorful “magazines” that Danny loved.

They are old and ragged; many of them are coverless. But most of them—for such was Danny’s preference—are the kind which Mallory once called “science fiction.” Dreams of the world-to-be, pathetic in the face of that which now confronts us.

But it is my only ray of hope, these magazines. I brought them to my shack. I am culling them carefully, one by one. There is a faint, and oh! so faint, chance that . . .

Yet I fear it is a hopeless search. There is so much of fancy in these little books, so little simple fact. Had but *one* of those imaginative writers of years ago thought to include in one of his stories that which must have been, to him, a commonplace formula—that for chlorophyll—I could yet do that which Mallory demanded of me. Here we are rich with ores, the soil teems with every element known to man. We have a well-equipped laboratory, we could synthesize *anything*. But we cannot create this “chlorophyll” because we do not know what it is, nor what elements combine to form it.

Hope dwindles as I read. There remains but one more slim pile of magazines before me. If the answer is not in one of them, then we must perish. I turn pleading eyes to the past, to the year 1940,

before I was born. But there is no one to hear my plea. Unless, in one of these remaining—

(Here the manuscript ends.)

POSTSCRIPT

COMMON SENSE tells me there can be little doubt but that this "manuscript," purported to be written by one Brian O'Shea, a soldier in the Army of the Democracies in the year 1963, A.D., is a deliberate and painstaking hoax.

Who is responsible for it, I cannot begin to guess. Somehow I can't bring myself to believe that Dr. Edgar Winslow (whom I have investigated and found to be exactly what he claimed, a fellow in the psychology department of one of our nearby Southern universities) would lend himself to such a fantastic trick.

But it is hard to believe, also, that Winslow could and did achieve the perfect telepathetic rapport evidenced by the foregoing pages.

But—there was an earnestness about Winslow that stirred me strangely. He did not have the air of a man perpetrating a fraud. He asked me, you will remember, to "play the game of caution," even if I did not believe that which I found in the manuscript.

I should, perhaps, dismiss the whole thing with a shrug; heave the "story" back at Winslow with the advice that if he wants to become a science-fiction writer

he should do so honestly, not try to insinuate his way into print on the byline of another.

Yet—it is a queer manuscript. It is quiet here in Roanoke today. As I write, I look from my office windows to see the rolling hills, now sweet-breasted with fresh green, misted with the soft white of dogwood. The sky is blue and clear, the sun a warm beneficence. Still, the morning papers tell of the desperate plight of the Allies. Again they have lost ground to a grim, mechanized Totalitarian army. Finland, Norway, Belgium, Holland,—the list grows.

Mussolini has sent his restless legions to battle; Japan makes overt gestures toward the Indies. Russia, the patient bear, crouches in the north, watches . . . and waits. . . .

I don't know. I honestly don't know. The manuscript is probably a hoax. And yet . . . and yet . . .

Anyway, here it is, Brian O'Shea. Here is what you asked for. You'll find it on the cover of this magazine. If this magazine is one of those through which you still have to search, the world you mourn may yet blossom anew.

And because covers, like man's freedom and dreams and hopes, too often crumble into dust, the formula you want is printed here again, man of the future.

$C_{55}H_{70}O_6N_4Mg$ is the empirical formula for chlorophyll, Brian O'Shea!

$C_{55}H_{70}O_6N_4Mg!$



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Andy's blaster roared again. "Quick!" he barked, "Get inside the cave. It's our only chance . . ."

QUEST ON IO

By ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

Radium-seeking Andy Horn and his talking honey-bear believed they were alone on Jupiter's bleak satellite. Then out of nowhere dropped the space-girl trailing a fateful comet of piracy and death.

“OS—CAR . . .” Assistant Navigator Andy Horn cocked an attentive ear and listened for an answer, but only the soft eternal moan of Io's restless winds came to his straining ears.

“Dern that perfidious imp of Satan to hell and gone and back again,” he muttered, stretching his red neck out like a turkey gobbler and squawking again.

“Os—car. . . . Dern your flea-bitten hide. You better turn up.”

Gravel grated on a rock ledge not five feet above him and a Ganymedian honey bear stepped daintily into view. It was about the size of a fox, had sleek, heavy brown wool interspersed with longer black hairs, and a round, intelligent face. It sat down on the ledge and eyed him as guilelessly as if it hadn't heard him calling all the time.

"Hi, Bub," it said.

Andy reached decisively for a rock. "Dern you, Oscar, I've told you not to call me Bub." He let go with the rock, but Oscar had slipped blithely to cover. Andy grabbed another rock and waited and pretty soon the round face peeked over the ledge at him. It eyed the stone he had in his hand and was very contrite.

"Aw, Boss, put down that rock. I was only foolin'."

Andy maintained his belligerent attitude.

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Horn."

"That's better," Andy answered. "I didn't raise you on a bottle from the time you were three weeks old to have you sass me when you're grown up. Show some respect. Come on down from up there. We're going to eat."

Andy had brought food with him from Ganymede, for Io produced nothing that human beings liked, except mineral wealth, and he was prospecting for that, taking advantage of the two months' forced vacation while the *Golden Stag* was being repaired. A stern jet had jammed when she was landing, and she had sat down heavily on her tail, shearing off her stern rocket tubes and knocking a hole in her hull. In two months, if fate was kind, he might possibly locate a claim that would provide him with enough money to purchase the dream of his life, a neat private space yacht lying at the docks, on Luna where her millionaire owner had left her after a narrow escape from a meteor had convinced him that space travel was not for amateurs. The ship could be bought for a hundred thousand, which was a give-away, and Andy had come to Io prospecting, for with the ship he could earn a comfortable living prospecting around the world. He had brought his honey-bear along for company.

"Ah, food!" Oscar licked his chops, and started to descend, but hesitated and looked

doubtfully over his shoulder up the twisted, rock-ribbed ravine.

"Boss," he said hesitatingly, "I think you ought to know and I was going to tell you when you got so free with that rock, but there's another of you blood-thirsty humans prospecting up this ravine, and he's got a gun, and when you started shouting for me, he quit prospecting and grabbed that gun, and started looking."

"The devil!" Andy ejaculated. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I have. Duck, Boss. . . ." Oscar flattened himself out of sight.

ANDY needed no further urging. He squeezed his lithe six-feet down behind a boulder just as a heat beam hissed over his head. It hit the bluff behind him and he watched the dust boil out as the pulsing radio-frequency beam turned to heat. The gun worked that way. A thin radio-frequency special beam was projected and it continued on its way until it struck something, when it turned to heat. It didn't work worth a darn on Jupiter. The planet's soupy atmosphere turned the ray to heat within a dozen feet of the muzzle, but in space, or in the extremely thin atmosphere of Jupiter's moon, it was bad business.

Andy cautiously stuck his head around the boulder.

"Hey," he yelled, "cut out the shooting. What are you trying to do? This ain't the Fourth of July."

"Get out of here," a shrill voice came floating down to him.

"This is a free country and I'll stay here as long as I damn well please."

In answer a heat ray singed the top of the rock he was hiding behind.

"Blast 'im, Boss. He almost got you," he heard Oscar whisper.

"I'll make him hard to catch," he answered, pulling his stumpy blaster from the holster at his back, and testing the spring to see if it was wound up to maximum capacity. The blaster was spring actuated, and hurled an explosive pellet about the size of a buckshot, which was really a tiny atomic bomb. Where that pellet hit, there was big trouble immediately, but the pellets in rare instances had been known to explode in the gun, in which case the person who had hold of the gun was never heard of

again, so that blasters were not a favored weapon. Andy had picked this one up at a bargain from a technician whose nerves had gone bad from space strain and who no longer had enough guts to shoot it. Blasters were not used on Jupiter or Saturn. Too much atmosphere and gravity for even the most powerful spring to hurl the pellet far enough for the shooter to be safe.

Andy poked one eye around the top of the boulder and squinted for a target. He was in the edge of the glow zone. Off yonder, 216,000 miles away, the mighty rim of Jupiter was visible. The sun was on the other side of Io, but reflected light from the planet supplied illumination much better than the best terrestrial moonlight.

Twisted, tumbled, torn and shattered rocks met his eye. Mosses, lichens, a few tough, low-growing plants. It looked like a picture of hell, but it was a prospector's paradise, for the rocks of Io were shot through with veins of gold, silver, platinum, iridium, not to mention the more common iron and copper, which were not sought for because transportation back to earth was too expensive to pay profits.

"Off to the right," Oscar whispered.

The glint of Jove-glow on a polished sight up the ravine gave Andy an aiming point and he snapped the blaster in that direction. He over-estimated the weak gravity of Io and the pellet hit on top of a high ridge beyond. A most satisfactory explosion took place there. Rocks split and tumbled in every direction. Andy lowered his sights and blasted again. Another brilliant explosion illuminated the landscape, far to the left this time.

"You shoot like a rocket-man," Oscar commented.

"Shut up," Andy growled. The men who tended the rockets lived in atmosphere of constant hammering from the explosion of the driving charges. A few years handling rockets and a man was unable to hold his hands still, so that old rocketmen always looked like they had well-developed cases of *paralysis agitans*. To tell a navigator, who had to have sure nerves and steady hands, that he resembled a rocket-man was a supreme insult.

"Duck, Boss, he's drawing a bead on you," came Oscar's hurried whisper, and Andy jerked his head down behind the

boulder just in time to avoid a ray that frothed across the top of the stone. No warning shot, that one. The unknown marksman had fired that shot with honest intentions of doing damage.

THE ray skipped back and forth across the boulder, went over the top and burned into the bluff beyond. Andy watched it, and wondered what in hell all the shooting was about. Io, by order of the Interplanetary Council, was free territory, with the exception of commercial developments, but any straggler was always welcome there, for the sake of his companionship. Andy did not know whether he had stumbled into a space-pirate's lair, or whether some cracked prospector was using him for a target.

The ray played out, vanished, but Andy kept his head down and waited. Minutes passed. Gravel crunched at his left and he swung the blaster up, but it was the honey-bear.

"Oh, it's you," Andy said. "Get back up there and keep your eye peeled for the man with the ray gun."

"He has beat it. I saw him slip back up the ravine and over the ridge."

"The deuce he has!"

"Yeh. Let's get out of here. This shooting makes me nervous."

Andy stuck his head over the boulder. Nothing happened. He waved his cap, sure that this would draw fire, but it didn't. He lifted his blaster, whereupon Oscar hurried out of sight. He loosed a couple of pellets, which tore up great holes in the rocky ravine. There was no answer. He climbed up on the boulder. Only desolation met his eye.

"Is the shooting over?" Oscar chirped from some unseen but probably secure refuge.

"Yeh. Come on out."

The honey-bear came into sight. He looked up at Andy.

"Boss, I tell you let's get out of here. First thing you know, you'll get in the way of a heat beam, and then what'll I do for sugar?"

"Skirmish, dern you, skirmish. We're going to track that fella down and find out how come all this shooting."

"Not me, Boss, not me."

"Yes, you, or no sugar."

"Aw, hell."

Oscar subsisted largely on a Ganymedian sweet and found sugar an excellent substitute. The honey-bears were a great puzzle to scientists. Their hair glowed when subjected to rays from radium, the creatures were very intelligent, had vocal organs readily adaptable to human speech, but were altogether an enigma. They lived in holes in the ground, had a very loose tribal organization, but made no effort to improve their condition, and obviously despised the human race for trying to improve theirs. They were content to be honey-bears, or *thlots*, to give an approximate English rendering of what they called themselves. Affectionate and loyal, they made marvelous pets. And while Oscar protested against following the person who had shot at them, Andy knew the *thlot* would be right with him.

Their advance over the broken terrain of Io would have done credit to an Indian. Andy, figuring an ambush might be ahead, was very cautious, and Oscar was cautious by nature.

They had advanced for over a mile when Andy caught a glimpse of a tiny glow in a crevice in the rocks. He crept forward and found himself on a ledge overlooking a very humble camp. Perhaps thirty feet below him, the man was sitting. He was using his heat-gun set at low concentration to boil water, an old prospector's trick.

Even in the cumbersome garb necessitated by the chill of Io, the man looked lithe and slender. Some youngster, Andy decided, taking a desperate chance on a frosty moon, but he wondered what necessity would drive a kid to brave the rigors of Jupiter's flea-bitten satellite.

HE craned his neck for a better look and a loose stone turned under his feet. The figure tending the boiling kettle was on the alert instantly. He had grabbed the heat-gun and was looking for a target. Andy was in a pickle. He was too close to use the blaster, and he didn't want to use it anyhow, but any second the man would locate him and then the heat-gun would make him sizzle. There was only one thing to do, and he did it. He launched himself out into space, the weak gravity of Io permitting him to make the drop without danger.

Andy heard a startled cry as the man saw him coming. The gun hummed as a ray lanced by him. And then he landed on the man's neck, the heat-gun went flying, and the man crumpled, Andy landing on top. The man wiggled and Andy twined his legs around the middle, applied pressure. Hands scratched at his face. He launched a short jab, aiming at the chin, but the man jerked his head to one side and Andy's fist landed up on the head, doing no damage but knocking off the man's cap. Andy took one look at the short red curls flying in his face and hastily stopped his right.

He released his legs and scrambled to his feet.

"Madam—" he began, his intention being to say that he was sorry, but she made a grab for the heat-gun and he was obliged to shove her, which was not the thing a gentleman would do—but then ladies usually didn't try to blister every strange man they met with a heat ray. Andy picked up the gun.

"Madam," he said reprovingly, "What in heck ails you?"

"Give me that gun, you—claim-jumper!"

Since she was starting toward him, he held the gun behind him. Seeing she couldn't get the gun, she stopped, and the blast she launched from her eyes made Andy think they were heat guns of a new kind.

"Singe her, Boss, singe her," a new voice spoke, and Oscar came scrambling down the gravel slide.

"Oh!" the girl gasped, for Oscar looked plenty bloodthirsty as he galloped. "It's a dingo. Kill it. quickly."

Dingoes were the only predatory animals found on Io. What they lacked in size they made up in fierceness, and since they usually hunted in packs, they made life very unhappy for the lone prospector.

"No. It's Oscar. He's not dangerous." The honey-bear skidded to a stop beside them, saw how fright had made the girl move close to his boss, and disgust was very plain in his voice.

"Phooey—a woman!"

She saw the half-grin lurking on Andy's face, and jerked away, her cheeks flaming.

"He liked to have you stand close to him, the idiot," said Oscar in an easy way.

"Mind your manners!" said Andy

sharply, but the *thlot* only grinned and wrinkled his nose to show his disgust. Oscar was a woman-hater.

"Now that you've got me, what are you going to do with me?" she snapped.

"Do? Do with you—" It was a poser, Andy saw. He hadn't wanted a woman, hadn't bargained for one, and hadn't the least idea of what to do with one. He knew that men frequently married them, and while he was thirty-three and quite old enough to get married, he hadn't been planning on it, for space men on the Jupiter run usually didn't live long enough to enjoy matrimony. And anyhow, Andy had a vague idea that you were supposed to be in love before you got married, after an appropriate interval of moonlight, and romance, and nonsense.

"I'm not going to do anything with you," Andy continued, shaking his head.

"Why did you jump on me then?"

"I! Hell, woman!—I beg your pardon— Why did you shoot at me?"

"Because you and your gang tried to jump my claim. You know that as well as I do."

"Me? I never jumped a claim in my life. I'm a navigator, doing a little prospecting on the side, while my ship is laid up." And since she seemed doubtful, he showed her his credentials and told her the story, even telling her about the yacht on Luna that he wanted to buy.

"OH," she said. "Oh . . . I'm sorry. I had located an outcropping of quartz, and three men tried to take it away from me, and I thought you were one of them. . . . I'm very sorry."

"Quite all right," Andy answered awkwardly. "A perfectly natural mistake."

"Phooey!" Oscar snapped. "Women!"

Andy glared at the *thlot* and turned to the girl. "Prospecting is a mighty tough occupation for a single woman, isn't it, Ma'am?"

"My father was a prospector. I was born in a mining camp on Ganymede, and I followed my father from the time I was able to walk. Yes, it's a hard life, but it's better than being a sissie and having some man support you because he happens to be married to you."

"Um—" said Andy thoughtfully.

"Um—"

"You got something there," Oscar interpolated.

"I was just getting ready to eat," the girl said suddenly. "Will you join me?"

"Only too happy to, provided you tell me your name." It was a magnificent effort, for Andy.

"Frieda Dahlem."

"Frieda—Ah, nice name."

"Poppycock!" said Oscar. "Let's eat."

Conversation languished during the meal. Andy glared at the *thlot*, but Oscar was busy with his cube of sugar, too happy to say anything.

"Have you—have you found anything in your prospecting?" Andy asked.

"No. Oh, there's the outcropping of quartz I told you about, but the vein isn't rich enough to make it profitable. To import extraction machinery would cost a small fortune. The hills here are full of caves—dark, gloomy places that looked like they would make good hiding places for dingos, and I've been afraid to venture into them. Have you had any luck?"

"Naw. I guess I'll be a navigator until the end of my days," Andy answered dolefully.

"More sugar, Boss. One more lump, please," Oscar queried.

"Sugar costs a fortune here, you glut-ton, freight rates being what they are. No more for you today."

"Aw, Mr. Horn, one more lump, please."

"Give the horrid thing another lump, Mr. Horn." Oscar sulked at being called a "horrid thing." Fearful of an outburst of *thlot* profanity, Andy hurriedly produced the requested sugar. Oscar grinned happily.

The grin and the happiness both vanished as something hissed through the air over their heads. It struck several hundred yards beyond them and the explosion sent debris showering in the air. Andy and the girl jumped to their feet.

"It's those men who tried to jump my claim," Frieda said. "They have come back."

The air hissed again and another explosion followed.

"Home was never like this," Oscar wailed. "Where are those caves the woman was talking about? Me for them."

"That's a darned good idea," Andy

answered. "We better move out of here, and move fast."

Frieda needed no urging. Her face was white, but she held her heat-gun resolutely as they skipped over the rocks. Andy had his blaster out, and was searching vainly for a target. Another explosion shook the ancient, time-worn hills.

Andy snapped three shots at random and three explosions followed. This business was a game that two could play at.

"This way," Frieda panted, the thin air of Io not providing enough oxygen for fast running.

FOLLOWING her pointing finger, Andy saw a dark opening yawning in the face of the bluff. In other circumstances he would have instantly noticed that it had an artificial appearance, as if the cave had been cut into the stone by other than natural means. Frieda came to a panting halt just inside the entrance, but Oscar, his tail between his legs, skipped rapidly out of sight into the dark cavern. The *thlot* loved peace.

"Frieda—Miss Dahlem, I mean," Andy panted. "We're safe here, at any rate."

Almost immediately a blast shook the cavern. Loosened stone fell from the roof, there was a shower of debris outside, the cavern rumbled, and the light coming in through the entrance faded as a landslide almost completely blocked the opening.

"Hell!" Andy gasped. "another shot like that and we'll be buried alive. This is no place for us. Let's get out of here."

He moved to the entrance, his earth-sired muscles thrusting aside slabs of stone that he could not have handled on earth. Frieda worked with him. Together they cleared a space of less than two feet at the top of the cavern, which would allow them to slip out. Andy stuck his head out and immediately jerked it back.

"There are three of 'em. They're on top of the hill and they've got a blaster trained on us. Luckily they didn't see me, but if we try to run, they'll blow us to smithereens."

"Can't you get a clear shot at them?"

"Maybe. But if I miss, they'll blow enough junk over the mouth of this cave to bury us a mile deep. Too much chance. What's eating them, anyhow?"

"They saw some very rich samples that I had dug out of the quartz vein I told you about. If the whole vein were as rich as those samples, it would be worth a fortune, and they think it is that rich. Having tried to take it, they know they have to kill us, for if we escape, the space police will round them up and give them a shot of gas."

"Um—I see. Looks tough on the home team."

She didn't answer. Andy cautiously stuck his head outside and jerked it back as another atomic pellet dislodged a huge stone that came sliding down the hill.

"Did they see you?"

"Don't think so. That was just a shot for good luck. They think we're bottled up in here, but you can bet, if we lie still and don't give them any indication that we're alive, they'll be around to make certain our goose is cooked. I would, if I were in their place."

Frieda looked at him and he immediately added. "I mean that's the logical thing to do. If you've got to kill somebody, make sure he's dead."

It was a hard statement but the men who piloted the liners on the Jupiter run were a hardy breed. They took grim chances every day the liners were in space and were accustomed to look death in the face and call him friend.

They waited. Andy scooped out an opening where he could watch without being seen. Frieda, sitting below him, whispered to him several times, but his only answer was a terse command to shut up. He was watching the three men who had now begun to move stealthily down the opposite hill.

They came slowly, taking advantage of every bit of cover. Andy watched and grimly waited, pushing his blaster into position. He had no illusions on this matter, but he was aware that the girl was protesting.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to blow those crooks clear to Jupiter," he answered, finality in his tone.

"No," she protested. "Can't you hold them and disarm them?"

"Don't be an idiot! How?"

"I don't know. But it's murder to shoot them down like that."

"Yeh? They been asking for it. Ah. . ."

THE three men were standing in a cleared space looking across at the bluff, evidently deciding on what to do. Andy squinted through the sight, lifted his head to estimate the distance and the drop, dropped the rear sight a notch, and squinted again. He was aiming for the blaster in the hands of the first man, a tough-looking, bearded brute. If the pellet from his gun hit the blaster in the man's hands—well, there wouldn't be enough left of the three men to smell bad. He steadied his gun, started to squeeze the trigger.

"Stop it," said a wailing voice in his ear and a heat-gun prodded him in the back. "It's murder. I can't let you do it."

"You infernal idiot!" Andy shouted, forgetting himself. The sound of his voice reached the three men. They took to cover. Andy ducked away from the opening. He half carried, half led the protesting girl back into the cave. They were just in time. A sharp explosion at the mouth sent tons of rock cascading down, blocking the entrance completely.

"Now we're fixed," said Andy grimly. "We'll never get out."

The girl was sobbing softly. "I'm sorry—I couldn't help it—"

Another explosion sounded outside. Andy could hear the muffled sound of falling stone.

"They're doing a good job—" he began "Hello Jupiter! What was that?"

The cavern swayed and rocked to the blast of a terrific explosion. It sounded like a blast from a battery of atomic cannon. A section of the roof between them and the entrance fell in and a choking dust arose. The ground seemed to buckle.

The solid stone quivered like jelly.

"I got it," said Andy, awe in his voice. "Their blaster. A pellet exploded when the spring hit it, and that set off the magazine." He hesitated, then continued. "There's not . . . enough left for identification purposes."

The girl was crying. "Anyhow . . . you didn't murder them," she sobbed. "And I'm glad—you didn't."

"So am I, kind of. We got maybe a week or two to be glad in. We have a

few condensed food tablets in my pack. Everything else is back at camp. The tablets will last a little while. . . ."

He could hear the girl crying softly, but the closing of the entrance had shut off the last gleam of light from the cave, and he couldn't see her. Awkwardly he reached out in the darkness, found her, drew her gently to him.

For a long time there was silence broken only by an occasional soft whisper of sound as one or the other changed his position. Andy realized that he was a little thirsty, and he wondered if this was the forerunner of the violent pangs to come.

He was aware of her soft whisper.

"Sh— Look—"

A spot of weirdly glowing light was moving slowly along the cavern floor. Without body, or visible means of locomotion, it seemed to flow along. Andy felt his hair rising as he looked at it.

"Give me your heat-gun," he whispered, and the weapon was passed over to him. He lined up the sights and waited.

THE small spectral figure slowly approached. It hesitated, moved back, then came forward again. Andy forgot that he was thirsty, that he would soon be hungry, that he was doomed to die.

He could hear the girl breathing hard.

What was the glowing figure? Was it friendly. He did not know, did not dare to guess. Perhaps it was seeking them, perhaps it recognized food in them. Perhaps it was some form of electrical energy, perhaps it resembled jelly, like the blobs that existed on Callisto that were so avid for human flesh.

Andy held the sights of the heat gun on it, waited. He did not know whether the gun would affect it.

The girl was breathing in long, slow pants, like she was holding her breath.

It came nearer, shining like a gigantic fire-fly except that the glow was pale blue instead of golden. It was within twenty feet of them.

"Shoot!" Frida whimpered. "Shoot, quickly. . . ."

He started to squeeze the trigger.

"Boss," a familiar but unhappy voice spoke. "Something is wrong with me. I shine."

"Oscar!" Andy shouted dropping his

gun. "You imp! Where in hell have you been?"

The glowing spot bounded forward, leaped into Andy's arms.

"Do something for me, Boss. I shine and I don't like it."

The girl's laughter sounded silly.

"I'll do something for you. I'll buy you a barrel of sugar."

Radium. Somewhere in this cavern was a deposit of radium, and Oscar had run into it. The hair of the *thlot* glowed when in the presence of radio-active energy. Andy was laughing crazily. Radium . . . more precious than diamonds. Fortune. The ship on Luna. His! He had forgotten they were locked in the cavern.

"Come on," he yelled. "Lead us to the place where you started glowing."

"It's back in there, in a ball. I don't want to go. Let's get out of here."

"You take us there, or I'll break your damned neck."

"Aw, Boss. . . ."

"Get going."

Oscar, complaining bitterly, started off. They followed.

The cave widened out into an immense chamber. In the center was a crucible of some kind, a cracked, battered crucible filled with glowing matter. Andy scratched his head, moved forward.

"There it is, Boss, right there."

A soft glow, like moonlight, filtered through the interstices of the crucible, dimly illuminating the cavern. Dust moved beneath their feet, dust that had not been disturbed for ages. Oscar sneezed.

A heavy, cup-like crucible with cracked walls that had been several feet thick . . . in the center was a softly glowing ball. . . . Andy bent over it. . . . Radium. . . . There was no doubt. . . . But . . .

"Hell," he said, his jaw dropping. "Hell. . . ."

His eyes caught the heavy outlines in the dust on the floor. He stirred it with his toe.

"Intelligence," he muttered. "Intelligence was here, in this cavern perhaps a hundred centuries ago. The crucible is lead, incredibly old. Perhaps part of it was once radium. It was the heart of some kind of an engine, some method of releasing energy, possibly hundreds of thousands of

years ago. Look! You can see in the dust where other metals, which formed a framework, have oxidized. . . ."

The girl said nothing, and Oscar, for once was silent.

"Once there was intelligent life on Io. It built this, and left it for some reason that we can't even guess at."

FRIEDA stared at the glowing metal, moved back.

"A fortune," she said. "Yours."

"No," he corrected. "Ours."

They were silent. The mighty cavern was silent. Dim ghosts seemed to move in it, the shadows of a mighty people that had once been here, and had gone. . . .

"I want to get away from here," Oscar whimpered. "I don't like this place."

Andy sighed. Their dust would mingle with the dust of the builders of the cavern. Another hundred thousand years would pass before the place was rediscovered. Maybe more. . . .

"We can't," said Andy. "The entrance is blocked."

"The hell we can't!" Oscar answered. "When all the shooting was going on the rocks started to fall in here, and I looked for a way out. The hill is hollow. There's an opening on the other side. Come on. Quit gaping at me, and get a move on."

"*Thlot*," said Andy grimly. "If you're lying, I will break your neck."

"I'm not lying. Come on. You can come back later. I itch from being near that shining stuff."

The *thlot* led them off into the darkness. At last a dim glow of light showed up ahead. Andy pushed ahead of the honeybear, stepped through a narrow opening, got a glimpse of the rim of Jupiter, red and angry, immovable on the horizon.

He was suddenly very tired. He sat down heavily, stared at the forbidding planet. Forbidding it was, but it looked mighty good to him at that moment.

The soft purring of the *thlot* made him turn his head. The girl had sunk to the ground. She was scratching him and he was purring. Andy looked at him reprovingly.

"I know it's poppycock," said Oscar, "but I like it. You ought to have her scratch your back sometime."



BUCCANEER OF THE STAR SEAS

By Ed EARL REPP

“... and thou shalt be immortal!” Such was the curse of that 13th Century sorcerer. Now Carlyle roamed the uncharted star-seas, seeking Death as he sought the richly-laden derelicts in that sargossa of long-vanished space-galleons.

AN unpleasant shudder went through Thaddeus Carlyle as the great iron door thundered behind him. Reading Gaol's raw, damp atmosphere seemed

to settle into his bones. Hopping on rheumatic legs, the aged turnkey preceded him down the vaulted stone corridor.

“T is the first time my key has dis-

turbed Friar Bacon's lock these six months," his grumbling voice came to Carlyle's ears. "Plagued few they are that visit the roguish priest. Not even the canon comes now, to exhort him to renounce his black magic."

Thaddeus Carlyle's dark eyes flamed with quick interest. "Then he practices still these works of the devil?" he queried softly.

The turnkey stopped, his narrowed eyes mirroring fearful thoughts. With his crooked forefinger he tapped the young nobleman's gold-cloth taberd.

"Only last month he asked for brimstone, charcoal and niter. We gave him the stuff, seeing no harm. A week ago, as I am passing his cell, there was a great flash, and roar. The devil's powders had exploded as steam bursts a tight-lidded vessel! He carries still the marks of a burn."

"No!" Carlyle's smooth features were blank. "Fire—from such stuff as that?"

"That's not all, my Lord. Friar Bacon tells me that if we would give him enough of the stuff and a long tube, he could throw an iron ball across the Thames!"

Turning away with a crafty nod and a meaningful blink, the turnkey led on to the mean little cell in which Roger Bacon had now spent nine years. The visitor was openly affected by the jailer's incredulous story. He had heard strange and terrible things of the Gray Friar. The church, in incarcerating him, had accused him of consorting with the devil. Some whispered that he had learned the secret of immortality. That was the rumor which had brought Thaddeus Carlyle, the second Lord Monfort, into the gloomy confines of Reading Gaol.

The lock scraped shrilly as the jailer turned it. Throwing the heavy door open, he grinned: "Lucky for him you came, my Lord! In another month this lock should have been rusted past turning. Then Friar Bacon would have been forever without hope!"

"Have I, indeed, such hope now?" a soft and gloomy voice inquired.

The turnkey merely winked at the nobleman and hobbled off.

Carlyle was suddenly seized by panic. Now that he was so close to the notorious philosopher, fear smote him and he was



on the point of turning back. Yet, ridden by an even greater fear, he stiffened his purpose and advanced. Closing the door, he stared at the white-bearded man seated before a great calfskin-bound book on a ponderous table.

"What hast thou with me, young man?" demanded Roger Bacon, peering shrewdly from under ragged brows.

"Only the admiration of an ignorant man for a very learned one," said Thaddeus Carlyle simply.

Bacon's eyes misted. Precious years of his waning life had he spent in prison because there was no man to say such a thing before.

"You—you do not believe what they say of me, that I consort with Satan?" he queried. "That my science and my secrets are Lucifer's?"

"Well—as to that," said Carlyle, his confidence returning, "I am again the ignorant one. Where you get your knowledge I neither know nor care. I only know that your learning is great . . . and that that learning can help me!"

THE Gray Friar wagged his head wonderingly. His eyes went over Thaddeus. He saw a strapping young man over six feet in height, with a muscular development such as came only from constant participation in the strenuous contests popular among the nobility. His skin was brown as leather, burned, Bacon reckoned, by hot Oriental suns during the last Crusade. He saw a man whose rich clothing spoke of a fat purse. And he was asked to help him—he, who could not help himself!

"Who are you, young man?" he asked, at last.

"Thaddeus Carlyle, the second Lord Monfort," was the reply.

"A noble—!" Bacon murmured. "But you—you jest with me!"

"Not so!" Carlyle threw a leg across the corner of the table and peered earnestly into the monk's face. "You are old and wise, Friar Bacon. Perhaps you do not know the fear of death. I do! Always it is with me, haunting my pleasures, disturbing my sleep— Fear of growing old and toothless, of losing my strength—of dying as helpless as the day I was born!"

"But how can I help you?" frowned Bacon. "All men must face that fear."

"But not as I know it! I, who have so much to make life worth the living." Thaddeus rubbed his sweaty palms on his velvet-clad thighs, his brown young face set. Abruptly, he blurted: "They say you possess the secret of immortality, Friar. Is that true?"

"They say many things of me," muttered the philosopher.

Carlyle leaned toward him. "That doesn't answer my question," he snapped. "I have heard that you added twenty years to your own life by magic!"

Bacon stared strangely at him. "You believe that I could save you from death?"

"Implicitly!" Carlyle replied. "If you wished to!"

FOR the first time, Bacon stirred from the chair. His eyes flashed briefly to a brass-bound chest, near his pallet of straw. Then he stopped with his back to the wall, staring at the young nobleman.

"But even if I could do this—!" he frowned. "You do not know what immortality means. Perhaps it would be worse than death!"

"If so, I could easily put an end to my immortality," retorted the other.

Roger Bacon did not speak for long seconds. Then: "They speak true of me. I do possess this secret. But to release it would mean one more atom of misery thrown upon the world."

With his first words, Thaddeus had hunched forward, teeth shining behind drawn lips, eyes glittering. "Has the world been good to you?" he shot at him. "Do you owe it any consideration?"

"None," the Gray Friar muttered. "Tell me; what month is this?"

"November, Friar," the younger man replied frowningly.

"November!"

In Bacon's mournful syllables lay all the bitter coldness of the winter itself. "November, Anno Domini twelve hundred and eighty-seven. Nine years since I was thrown into this place of stone and despair. The world has little loved me, my friend, and I hold no love for the world. *Inopem me copia fecit*—abundance made me poor. Abundance of foresight and inventiveness that might have made the world over."

The monk had paced to the window through which he got his only small view of the world. Now he swung back. "Yes, my Lord Monfort. I will do what you ask!"

Carlyle lurched forward to grasp his arm. "Friar," he breathed. "I only dared hope. But if you do what you promise, I will see that you are freed within the year!"

"*Dominus vobiscum!*" Bacon said, tiny lights shining in his eyes. He crossed to the massive chest and opened it. Digging around for a moment among hundreds of curious objects the like of which Carlyle had never seen, he at last returned to the table with two shining articles in his hand.

"I told you this would bring a certain amount of grief to the world," he said, when Carlyle was seated beside him on a stool. "I say it again. For each lifetime you add to your own, another must die. And always it shall be a woman . . . a woman whose love you have won"

Carlyle stared at the philosopher with a mixture of hope and horror in his face.

"You must understand," said the Gray Friar, "that the life-spirit, as I call it, is not so deeply rooted in a woman as a man. You hear often of a woman dying of a broken heart, yet never of a man. This is because the woman simply wills her spirit to leave her. It will be your task to cause a woman to give you her life-spirit because she loves you sufficiently."

"Yes, Friar," Thaddeus whispered, his heart hammering against his ribs.

Bacon placed in his palm a tiny crystal heart dependent from a silver chain. It was crudely carved, yet alight with unholy brilliance.

"You will give this to the woman to wear. You yourself will wear this plain silver band I now give you. The process

may take days or weeks. When you are with her, cause your own ring to be always touching the crystal heart. Gradually she will grow weaker, while your own strength increases boundlessly. When she dies . . . you will have earned perhaps seventy years more of life."

"Must it be this way?" Thaddeus groaned, staring horrified at the baubles.

"It is the only way," Bacon murmured. "If at any time you decide that you prefer death to immortality, destroy either the heart or the ring and you will not long survive it. Old age will come swiftly."

Thaddeus got to his feet, his stomach a lump of ice in him. He suddenly felt a necessity to get into the open air, where he could think. Hastily he muttered:

"I will do as you say, Friar Bacon. Thank you for what you have done. I will see that you are freed as soon as possible."

Wise old Roger Bacon knew the struggle that was going on within the young lord, and he made no attempt to prolong the visit. "*Pax vobiscum,*" he nodded soberly. "The Lord guide you in this."

"Th-thank you, Friar!" Thaddeus faltered, and hastily fumbled at the door and left.

FOR a month the crystal heart and the ring lay untouched in a small chest in his treasure-room. Then his old fears and nightmares drove him to take them out. He had become accustomed to the grisly demands and they no longer loomed so blackly in his mind. Pictures of himself as an ancient ruin with the skin hanging loosely from all his bones helped in this.

For a long time Thaddeus had known that the young daughter of Lord Cartwright secretly loved him. Tremblingly, one night, he bestowed on her the gift of death . . . in the form of a tiny crystal pendant. Within a month the girl was dead.

And Thaddeus Carlyle . . . in his body surged and leaped such strength as he had never dreamed of. He felt he must live forever. His friends began to change, growing wrinkled and less virile, but never he. Soon he saw he must change his abode, lest men suspect him.

It was ninety years before the need came upon him to renew the life-spirit in his body. He found a dark-eyed girl in Seville

on one of his journeys whom he nominated for his second victim. It was easier, this time. Before she was laid away that old feeling of boundless youth was his again.

And so Thaddeus Carlyle saw kings change and nations dissolve, saw a German named Gutenberg print the first book and an Englishman named William Shakespeare write the most perfect prose ever devised. Saw wars and tragedy and comedy, and grew sick with the seeing. Gladly would he have given it up, had he the courage.

Down the corridors of time he passed, seeking death as many seek wealth. In peace and war, he was ever in the most dangerous occupations. When aviation came in, he was one of the first and most reckless pilots. Then space travel merged from dreams into reality . . . Carlyle became a test pilot, taking on million-mile journeys any craft with a rocket tube and a steering device. To his disgust, he always came back.

He had not the courage to shatter the crystal heart and grow old swiftly. He who had condemned so many beautiful women to death was now chained to something worse—eternal life.

II

"MR. CARLYLE! *Mr. Carlyle.* Are you all right?"

Thaddeus Carlyle came out of his reverie with a start, to hear the shrill rasping of the *televis* on his desk. His hand snapped the instrument on.

"Sorry, Mrs. Loomis," he muttered. "I must have been napping."

The face of his middle-aged secretary looked relieved. "Captain Wolfe is here," she told him. "About the new secretary, you know."

"Send them in," Carlyle grunted.

He swore softly to himself. Too often lately he had dozed off at the wrong times. He was due for another replenishment, and he cursed his luck that it had to come now. Tomorrow he was leaving in his giant salvage ship, the *Friar Bacon*, for the newly-discovered sargasso off the orbit of Pluto. Nor could the trip be postponed.

But the renewal of his life-spirit could not wait either. He was a little too tired at night, a little too slow to react. But the

certainty was in him that he would not survive the trip to the new salvage fields, with its attendant rigors.

Captain Wolfe, chief officer of the *Friar*, entered with a small, dark-haired young person at his side.

"You're in luck, Chief!" he grinned. "I told you I'd find an A-1 secretary for you, and I think I've got her. Miss Holland, meet Thaddeus Carlyle—and don't say you haven't heard of him. Mr. Carlyle, this is Ann Holland."

The two exchanged acknowledgments, and Carlyle drew up chairs. "We'll have to be brief," he said. "I've got a thousand things to attend to before night. Now—you have the report from the company doctor?"

Ann Holland took a folded slip from her purse and tendered it to the owner of Salvage Lines, Incorporated. Carlyle took the opportunity to appraise her swiftly. He hardly need to scan the physician's report to know her health was boundless. It glowed in the soft rose color of her cheeks, the sparkle of her dark eyes. Her brown hair was carefully combed back from a smooth forehead.

The report bore out his supposition. Carlyle questioned her briefly about her qualifications as a stenographer and secretary. Everything was satisfactory, and the references she had to show were excellent.

Carlyle handed back the papers. "I think I'm lucky to get so well-spoken of a secretary on such short notice," he smiled.

"I know darned well you are, Chief!" Larry Wolfe laughed. "I had to fight every officer in Ann's company to make them let her go."

Ann Holland laid a hand on his arm. "I think I had a little to do with my quitting, too," she reproved. "I can't tell you how I've been fascinated by the stories of your salvage trips, Mr. Carlyle. And, of course, hearing Larry talk of his work with you—"

Thaddeus's dark eyes opened wider. "Oh— Then you have known each other previously?" he queried.

Blond Larry Wolfe held up the girl's left hand, showing the sparkling diamond on the third finger. "Three years previously," he laughed. "We're going to be married after this trip."

Against the flash of resentment and disappointment that struck him, Thaddeus

Carlyle brought a smile to his lips. "That's fine," he said. "Congratulations, both of you."

WHAT he didn't voice was the strain of remorse coursing through his mind: "Fine, hell! It's bad enough preying on unattached girls. But the fiancée of your chief officer—"

Nevertheless, it was too late to change. Mrs. Loomis couldn't go because she was married. Besides, she was old. There wasn't much life to be stolen from her.

"Of course, you'll be wanting to know the type of work you're to do," he got out. "Frankly, it will be more tedious than adventuresome. I've been considering doing a book on the navigation conditions obtaining in the sargassos. You'll take dictation from me most of the time we're in the salvage field. I'll want the notes neatly typed up when we return. That's about all, except that the pay will be seventy-five dollars a week. Satisfactory?"

"Perfectly!" Ann breathed, and put her hand out to retrieve the papers from the desk. As she did so, Carlyle's brown, strong fingers picked up the references and tendered them. For an instant their fingers met. . . .

Ann's eyes went suddenly wide, and they flashed up to lock with Carlyle's. She started, as if from a chill. It seemed as if a strong current flowed from his body into hers . . . and yet, had she but known, the phenomenon was exactly an opposite one. By now, Carlyle's parasitical work was second nature to him, hardly requiring the jewel and ring.

It struck the girl that his eyes were the strangest ones she had ever gazed into. They were so clear she seemed to look through them and far past him. Clear—but yet somehow they were filled with wisdom. It was as though she was looking into vast, forgotten depths of time.

Abruptly, she recalled herself. Her hand drew swiftly away from his.

"Thank you so much," she murmured. "We're leaving at six, I think you said? I'll be ready."

When they were in the outer office, Larry Wolfe took her arm. He was more than happy at the prospect of having the girl along on the long trip.

"Drive you home?" he suggested.

A frown scored Ann's brow. "No, thanks, Larry," she murmured. "I've got some things to buy uptown. Then I want to go home and rest. I feel a little tired."

THADDEUS CARLYLE stood at his window and watched the last bit of loading being done out on the field. The *Friar Bacon*, with her six tiny salvage ships in their bulging hangars growing out of the mother ship's shell, like pilot fish clinging to the body of a shark, was nearly ready for the trip. Carlyle sighed and wished again that he had time to linger a few weeks before leaving.

But it was out of the question. Even a man who possesses immortality must earn his living, and salvaging treasure ships from space was Carlyle's way of doing it. Right now that living was threatened by the savage competition of Brand Haggard, owner of another salvage outfit.

Haggard cared little for the ethics of the business. He'd double-cross, steal, murder, lie, to gain his ends. It was such tactics that had put Carlyle in his present hole.

Coming in on his last expedition, he had found the sargasso off Pluto and duly registered it with the Universal Salvage Commission, applying at the same time for exclusive salvage rights. But Haggard had used his crooked political affiliations to get in on the pie. Carlyle had had to share the rights with him. Now it was a bitter fight to be the first in the field, for the first ship there gutted the most treasure from the wrecked space vessels.

A delay of three weeks or a month would mean the *Friar Bacon* returned with empty holds. And that might mean ruin for Carlyle. Lately, salvage pickings were getting smaller and smaller. He intended to get into another business for his next lifetime.

The question of the girl still lay like a bitter pellet in his mind, but with an effort he shelved his remorse. He decided to return to his packing. There were two more things to be stowed away in his private lockers. One was a plain silver ring, and the other was a little crystal heart.

AT six o'clock the next morning the *Friar Bacon* rested in its deep starting-tube in the center of the field. At seven o'clock it had proceeded so far on its

journey that Earth was but a silver quarter hanging in the sky behind it.

Larry Wolfe was on the bridge. His engineer's eyes sparkled as he regarded the instruments. Fuel—brimming over; speed—one-quarter; retarding gravity quotient—three percent. Ideal conditions, and an ideal ship. He had faith in the *Friar Bacon*, and in its owner. He knew about Brand Haggard, but it didn't worry him particularly, with the best of materials and men to work with.

Larry was on the point of inching the speed up a trifle when a bell began to tinkle. Swiftly he twisted in his seat. Immediately he saw what had aroused the alarm. A ship was coming up fast, behind them. Haggard already! he thought. He stabbed at the buzzer to Carlyle's quarters.

The hard, brown features of the ship's owner snapped into view on the *televis*. "Yes?" was the metallic query.

"Ship approaching, sir!" Larry clipped. "I think it's Haggard's *Martian*. Shall I give her the gun?"

"No, let him come up with us. No use racing yet. We'd just strain the seams before they've heated properly."

"But if he beats us to the fields, sir!"

Thaddeus Carlyle's eyes crinkled. "He won't, Wolfe. I registered a false location with the Commission! He'll either go hell-for-leather out toward Uranus or he'll pace us. Either way, I'm not worrying."

"Very good, sir." Larry Wolfe turned from the instrument to his controls. "Hard as nails!" he chuckled to himself. "He wouldn't hurry for the devil himself. You'd think he'd lived five hundred years, the way he thinks of all the angles and beats hell out of every other ship in the fleet. He's too smart for one man."

That very night, trouble boarded the *Friar Bacon*. In a way, it was Larry Wolfe's fault.

Coming off duty eight hours after they left, he hurried to Ann Holland's stateroom near Carlyle's suite, eager to hear how she had enjoyed her first day aboard a space-liner.

He found her tired and curiously subdued.

"Excitement get you?" he asked her.

Ann's eyes flashed as she thought of the thousand new things she had seen. "A little, I guess," she admitted. "But, Larry,

it's wonderful! Such a feeling of freedom, so many strange things to be seen. Here we are darting through space like a liner plowing the Atlantic!"

"You'll get over that pretty soon," Larry grinned. "Then you'll be like the rest of us space-sailors, cursing our luck that man can't push his darned ships along at the speed of light."

"I don't think I ever will," the girl mused. "They build these ships just like Swiss watches, don't they? Every beam and girder machined by hand, every nut and bolt a masterpiece. I went over the whole ship with Thad. I feel like an authority already!"

She laid her head against the cushioned back of the chair, glancing through drowsy eyes out the port-hole. With her face turned away from Larry's, she did not see the swift bolt of jealousy that shot through him.

"Thad?" he echoed. "That's funny, Ann. I've never been allowed to get that familiar with him myself. It's always 'Chief' or 'sir' to us crew members."

The girl's eyes widened a little; then she shrugged her slim shoulders. "I don't know how I happened to call him that. He seems to be a person so very likeable you can't be formal with him."

"I hadn't noticed it," Larry Wolfe snapped.

Ann sat up wearily, brushed stray hair back from her ear. "Oh, now, Larry," she reproved him. "Are you going to start acting like a high-school boy the minute we start?"

The young ship officer's jaw had set like cement. "What'd you do all day? Talk, I suppose?"

"Yes, we talked! For eight hours! I don't know where the time went, but I do know I've never had a better time in my life!"

She said it defiantly, and in the wake of the angry words grew a high wall of pride between them. Ann made one final effort at conciliation.

"Larry, do you have to be like this?" she pleaded. "I'm wearing your ring, isn't that enough?"

Larry stood up. "That's exactly it," he snapped. "You're wearing my ring and the men are going to be watching pretty damn' closely when they see you hobnobbing

constantly with Carlyle. Oh, don't get me wrong; he's a fine fellow and I think the world of him. But I'm going to ask you not to be with him any more than your work requires!"

Ann's fingers tugged at the diamond ring, and suddenly she was handing it to him. "Then here's something for you to mull over, Mr. Larry Wolfe," she said frigidly. "While we're on the trip you can just pretend that you've never met me before. I won't have your jealousy preventing me from doing a good job."

Larry let the tiny platinum band drop into his broad palm. His eyes showed the pain that twisted through him, but all he said was: "All right, Ann. But when you want the ring back, you'll have to ask for it."

III

BRAND HAGGARD'S sleek, black *Martian* did not try to pass them, as Carlyle had prophesied. For three weeks the ship was back there on the starboard quarter, matching them move for move. It was on Larry Wolfe's mind constantly while he stood on the bridge, doing little to ease the tension of his nerves.

Strange, unpredictable currents suddenly developed about the ship, and Larry knew that they were only a day or so from the sargasso. Staring through the finder, he made out the diaphonous cloud he had been searching for so long—the sargasso in which they hoped to find millions of dollars in salvage prizes.

Magnetic currents, as yet unidentified by scientists, drew space wreckage here from all over the solar system. Ruined space liners, flotsam and jetsam of fifty years of interplanetary traffic, here collected bit by bit. For the salvage crews who made lucky finds, there was wealth; for those who made the tiniest of errors in their dangerous work, there was death.

Larry Wolfe's thoughts were on the long-missing *Astral* as he stood his watch that last night. The *Astral*, lost gold transport from Mars to Earth, had been the dream of salvage men for twenty-five years. Somewhere in the solar system it still drifted about. The chances were good that it had been sucked into one of the many sargasso fields; still better, that this

newest field, largest of all, had caught it.

In Thaddeus Carlyle's rooms, Ann had been hearing the same story that Larry was dreaming over even now. Carlyle's quiet, powerful words painted romantic highlights over it. The girl found her heart beating faster in anticipation of the days ahead.

"But in all this trackless wilderness of—of ether," she frowned, "how can you hope to find anything at all? Let alone the *Astral*—"

Carlyle smiled, glanced out the port at the vague gray shadow into which they were heading.

"If we worked with just the one ship, we wouldn't find much," he admitted. "Actually, we use six. We drop the smaller salvage ships here and there as we enter the sargasso. The three men in each craft cruise about within a one-hundred-thousand-mile radius. After we've dropped all the ships, we circle back to the spot where we left the first one and wait for the flare signal from it. There's no radio transmission out here, you know. The scout ships are pretty much on their own. When they've located a prize, they tie up to it and go to work dismantling the craft. If they haven't located anything after the first scouting trip, we move them along to the front of the line. It's something like playing leap-frog."

"I suppose your ships and Haggard's honor each other's finds?"

"Supposed to," said Carlyle grimly. His dark eyes flashed to the slim, shark-like hull haunting their wake. His big, sturdy body seemed to tighten. "Haggard's got the reputation of being a pirate. I'm not looking for trouble, but if there is any—well, we can take care of ourselves. I know a few tricks more than Brand Haggard, I think."

Looking at him, Ann knew a thrill of admiration. His attraction for her had been growing with every hour they spent together. "You seem so confident about it," she murmured.

"After twenty years of this sort of work you get your lines pretty well in mind," Carlyle chuckled.

"Twenty years!" Ann's brow arched. "But you don't seem to be over thirty—!"

"I'm a little older than that," the laughing answer came. "I began as a galley-boy."

Silence fell for a moment, while Ann tried to figure his age from what he had said. Then suddenly Thaddeus Carlyle was saying softly:

"You aren't wearing Captain Wolfe's ring any more. I couldn't help noticing. Anything wrong between you two?"

"We—we decided it was best, during the trip, to forget our engagement," the girl faltered, the color rising into her cheeks. She knew he saw through her evasive answer. His eyes, so piercing and yet gentle, seemed to know everything she thought.

ABRUPTLY, Carlyle's fingers slipped about her hand. "Ann, if you and Larry ever do break it off," he pleaded. "will you remember that I—could love you very much?"

Ann was startled. Still more startled to feel the almost irresistible link between them, drawing them together. "I'll remember, Thad," she murmured.

Carlyle slipped something from his pocket. "And just to make sure you don't forget," he said sternly, "you're going to wear this as a reminder. I found it in a wrecked ship, a long time ago. Like it?" He leaned forward to slip the thin silver chain about her neck.

Ann's eyes widened as she accepted the necklace. She held the tiny crystal heart in her fingers as Carlyle snapped the tiny lock.

"I've never seen anything like it!" she breathed. "So crudely cut, and yet every line so perfect. Thad, look! The color of it! There seems to be just a suggestion of pink in the very heart of it—"

Thaddeus Carlyle let the gem fall into his palm, so that the crystal contacted his silver ring. Ann gasped. The suggestion of pink was now a glowing atom of scarlet, as though the heart held one drop of blood. It throbbed and pulsed with life of its own. The heart grew warm against Carlyle's palm—

Suddenly the girl fell back against the chair.

"I—I'm so tired, all of a sudden," she whispered. "Almost too tired—to breathe. Take me—to my cabin—Thad. I think I want—to lie down."

Carlyle swore under his breath. "Fool!" he muttered. "I've been wearing you out

with work, and excitement piled on that. You're going to bed, young lady. The ship's surgeon is going to have a look at you, too."

"No, I'm all right," Ann murmured. "Just—tired."

But Thaddeus Carlyle's strong arms were under her, now, and even as he carried her from the cabin she fell asleep. Looking down on her placid features, so like death, he felt a stab of remorse.

Why did it have to be like this? he groaned. A life for a life—Carlyle knew within himself that he was willing to die right now. He'd seen enough of life and its disappointments. But always there was that strain of cowardice in his soul—fear of growing old, of dying. He'd courted death so long, hoping for a quick end on some battlefield, in some remote part of interstellar space. But never did it come. Friar Bacon had indeed cursed him with eternal life.

SIX hours later, just as his shift was ending, Larry Wolfe spotted the first loose cluster of drifted wreckage. This meant they had entered the actual salvage field. He rang for Carlyle and the ship owner responded immediately, ducking to enter the bridge.

Larry's clipped voice masked the jealousy he felt toward Carlyle. "Flotsam off the starboard bow sir," he said mechanically.

Through powerful glasses, the other examined the wreckage. He lowered the glasses hurriedly. Apparently it was merely the torn, gutted shell of a barge, but—

"Rest of it may be near," he grunted. "We'll drop off Murphy, Stoller and Cass. Seen anything of Haggard lately? Anything to worry about, I mean?"

"Yes, sir. He's drawn closer . . . much too close considering we should be splitting apart now."

Carlyle pivoted and shot a glance back at the darkly looming *Martian*. His brows drew into a solid bar across his angry eyes. "Half speed astern, Captain," he clipped.

Larry glanced back at him. "You mean that?"

"Exactly. Pull in beside the devil. I'm going to speak him."

The *Friar Bacon* rolled and wallowed as the message was flashed to the engine room. Larry braced himself against the forward lurch of his body. The ship owner stood with legs spread wide, fists on hips, watching the *Martian* shoot ahead, seemingly, until it was nearly even with them. Its stern jets, firing pale columns of flame, did not slacken.

"Send up a flare," ordered Carlyle. "I'm going to the air-lock. And by the way, tell Murphy to cut his ship loose right now."

"Yes, sir." The bridge door clanged shut and Larry sprang to his round of duties, sending up a purple flare—"we wish to speak you" signal—relaying the message to Murphy to drop away in the scout ship with his two-man crew, swinging the ship over until the *Martian* was so close they could see the faces at the ports.

The purple answering flare went up, and Larry moved to maneuver the ship alongside, so that air-lock was to air-lock. The other pilot was an expert, handling his ship like a toy in the hands of a giant. The shock was almost imperceptible.

Larry left the bridge just after he saw Murphy, Stoller, and Cass silently pull away, keeping the tiny scout in the umbra of the *Friar Bacon*, hidden from Brand Haggard's eyes.

He found Carlyle waiting for him. Together they closed themselves into the tube. The outer end was now locked firmly against the glass door of the *Martian's* air-lock. Forms shifted eerily behind the double-thickness glass. At a tap on the glass, Carlyle swung his own window back. The other ship's master did the same.

Then, suddenly, they were standing face to face, Haggard and Thaddeus Carlyle, Larry and the captain of the other craft.

Carlyle was not one to spar for openings.

"Let's have an understanding right now, Haggard," he snapped. "You've cut yourself in on this deal but you'll play it according to the rules. Make one misstep and it's war to the last man. Is that clear?"

Haggard chuckled. "I think I get it," he said. "Well, it's okay by me, mister. I'll work this section and you work the other side of the field."

"You will like hell," barked Carlyle. "I've got a ship in the field already. That, according to the Universal Salvage Code,

gives me prior rights. Find yourself another playground."

Larry watched the other ship-man's eyes dwindle to steely pin-points, but still he kept a grin on his wide mouth. Haggard was a powerfully built Swede, one of those laughing, blond-headed men who seem a throwback to the days when giants fought with seventy-pound broadswords and wore chain mail. His savagery belonged to another era, too. Men who had shipped with him never did so again, and thanked their stars they were still alive and more or less sane.

"All right, Carlyle," he chuckled, at last. "Round one is yours. You keep your boys toeing the mark and I'll try to do the same." His eyes dropped to Larry's face. "Got your course mapped out?"

Larry handed his captain the chart he had brought with him, and the man glanced at it with shrewd, faded blue eyes. He was a hard-case old-timer, leathery of skin, short coupled, and tough as oak. But he knew his business, and handed the sheet back directly.

"Fair enough," he gruffed. "That gives us room enough to turn around in."

"I guess we're agreed, then," Thaddeus Carlyle said curtly, extending a broad palm to Haggard. "Good luck."

They shook hands, and once more the glass ports were rolled back in place, the locks opened, and the ships drew apart.

"The damned liar," Carlyle said darkly, watching the *Martian* arch itself high above them and surge away. "We'll have trouble with him before two watches are down on the log."

IV

IT was not until just before he himself quitted the mother ship that Larry Wolfe learned of Ann's illness. Climbing above his pride, he had gone to her cabin to say good-bye.

Doctor Van Doren, ship's surgeon, met him at the door. "You must not excite her," he said, in a low tone. "Say good-bye if you like, but—"

"Doctor!" Larry seized his arm. "I—I hadn't heard Ann was sick. What is it?"

"I don't know. Just a complete physical collapse. She's too tired to eat, even. Ever since last night."

Larry was pushing past him into the cabin. He went down on his knees beside the girl's bed and his hand closed on her cold fingers. "Ann!" he choked. "They didn't tell me. . . ."

Ann wouldn't meet his eyes. "I asked them not to. I'm all right, Larry. Just tired."

A cold blade stabbed at Larry's heart. "Why wouldn't you let me know?" he asked.

Ann's eyes seemed fixed on a rivet in the ceiling. "Because I didn't want to worry you. And—I didn't want to fight with you again."

"As if I'd so much as raise my voice, with you sick," Larry groaned. Then his eyes fastened on a ruby-colored heart lying on the girl's breast. "What's that?" he asked, half in alarm. "I've never seen it before; it looks—like it's alive, Ann!"

The girl's fingers toyed with it. "It was a gift," she murmured absently.

"Carlyle!" Larry could not restrain the angry syllables. "I don't like it, Ann! It's like a serpent's eye, or something. It looks so alive—"

Ann's eyes at last met his, and they were cold as space. "We won't argue about it," she said wearily.

Larry got up, striving against the hot resentment searing his heart. "You know I'm leaving now?"

"Yes. Good luck, Larry."

"Thanks!" Larry snorted, and strode from the room.

LARRY'S was the last scout to be dropped from the *Friar Bacon*. The mother ship was now piloted by Carlyle, who swung it back to the first salvage ship they had dropped.

For hours it was a matter of cruising this way and that, searching the sky for traces of wreckage. Bits of flotsam were everywhere, but large fragments were scarce indeed. Larry's heart was leaden, but he buried himself in the work and succeeded in half-forgetting his worries.

Lanky Jeff Adams was at the controls of the cramped little vessel when the first dark splinter was sighted in the void. Braced against the lurch and roll of the ship, Larry scrutinized the wrecked ship as they neared it. So unbelievable was the sight he saw that for an instant after he lowered the

glasses it did not penetrate his reflexes. His fingers were tracing the vessel's name into the log when suddenly he stared at what he had written: "11:46 A. M. sighted derelict *Astral*. Good condition. . . ."

Larry Wolfe dropped the glasses and let out a yell. Jeff leaped as though he had been stung, his magnificent red beak of a nose growing redder with the excitement. Abe Miller, stocky, beetle-browed helper, stared at the officer.

"What's amatter, Chief?" he jerked.

Dumbly, Larry pointed. "That's—the *Astral*!" he gasped. "Two hundred million dollars—in gold—!"

Abe and Jeff were stunned; then they crowded the port to stare at the ancient craft dead ahead. The scout had drawn near enough now that the name of the transport was plainly visible in letters running from stem half-way to stern. Weakly, Jeff let himself back into his seat and muttered:

"Two—hundred—million . . . in Martian gold! And we get ten percent for findin' 'er. Ten percent of two hundred million, divided three ways—"

Larry laughed and poked playfully at his big nose. "Don't count your shekels before you hear them jingle," he counseled. "The *Astral* may have been gutted by pirates. Give her the gun, mister; we're finding out!"

The little space-craft slewed and rocked to a stop beside the giant transport. Shock struck the three men dumb with their first glimpse close up. Faces crowded the ports, staring out at them. Larry fancied he saw movement among the watchers on the bridge. To all appearances the *Astral* might have been a vessel in mid-flight.

They cruised slowly up the side, not ten feet from the ghostly faces that watched them with staring eyes. Foot by foot they proceeded. Rounding the front of the craft, they could see into the bridge. Two men were working over charts and a man in blue-and-gray uniform was at the controls. Another, a pencil over his ear, stood reading a gauge high on the wall.

Then the meaning of it all came home to them.

The port side of the ship was ripped open from stem to stern. Something—no doubt a jagged meteor fragment—had sliced and torn its way through the shell of

the speeding transport. The occupants of the open side had exploded like deep-sea fish drawn to the surface. These in the space-tight, unharmed cabins opposite had been frozen instantly by the outrush of pent-up air. And there they had stood in the attitudes in which Death had found them, staring out as they forged through the meteor-swarm, hoping they would not be hit.

In the silence they tied up to the derelict, their magnet-plates clinging like suction cups. Donning space suits and carrying kits of tools, they leaped through the rent into the dead ship.

A vague twilight dwelt in the interior. Larry led the way to the bridge. The frozen lock was cut out by means of a torch. With set jaws he went inside.

"Better load 'em out quick, boys. If the sunlight starts to thaw 'em there'll be a hell of a mess. Throw 'em clear of the ship. It's tough—but it's a sky-man's end, and we may all meet the same some day."

While Abe and Jeff carried the corpses away, he found the log and traced back to the vessel's start. There he located the cargo list. Two hundred million was correct, as the refining company had stated when the ship was lost.

Their next job was to cut into the hold. The sight of two hundred million dollars in gold bullion took their breath away. Jeff sat down and began laying the ponderous bars into three piles, muttering:

"One for me, one for you, and one for Abe. One for—"

Larry laughed, "Get to work, you half-baked lout. We've got to lug all these out to where they'll make quick loading. *Friar Bacon* should loom up in about four hours. I'll set the flares—"

And then they all went stiff, hands reaching for energy-pistols. Through the ship's floor came the thud-thud-thud of walking men!

LARRY sprang into the hall. Three whirled at his advance. He snapped on his transmitter, the instrument operating through the metal floor like a telegraph.

"Get the hell out of here!" he barked. "You're fifty thousand miles out of your territory. Is this how Haggard keeps a bargain?"

The foremost pirate said not a word, but

suddenly the pistol in his hand flared redly. Larry flung himself aside, blasted away with his own weapon. The wall of the corridor dissolved beneath his shoulder.

A scream rang through his helmet, chopped off clean as the pirate's space suit was blown open. Jeff and Abe were yelling for Larry to get out of their way and give them a clear shot. Larry's answer was to duck into the hole blasted in the wall by the energy bolt.

He got the second pirate in his sights and saw him crumple under a wave of atom-dissolving force. A mere fringe of the charge scored the helmet of the last man. Screaming shrilly, air rushed from his suit. His body blew up like a balloon in a decompression-bell, until he filled the bulging suit. Then there was a ghastly moment of seeing blood spurt through the hole in the helmet. And after that he was only a sickening smatter of glass and blood and powered bone.

The swiftness with which it was all over left the three salvage men weak. Larry forced himself down the hall. There might be more of them. But a glance outside showed only one *Martian* scout tied up. As a precaution, he turned his force weapon on the little ship until the hammering and searing energy shocks melted its magnet plates and hurled it away.

Hastily, then, he turned to Jeff and Abe.

"Pile aboard," he cracked out. "We're dropping this until we contact Carlyle. Haggard will be back looking for his scout. We want more than hand guns to use when he returns. This is war!"

V

THEY sighted the *Friar Bacon* well toward the front of the line of scouts. Only one ship lay in its carrier. The mother ship hove to while the tiny craft nuzzled into the waiting pocket.

Carlyle was waiting at the air-lock when they sprang out. Larry's words crackled with tension.

"We've raised the *Astral*, sir! Afraid Haggard's going to know about it in a few hours, too. One of his scouts jumped us and we killed the men. Better let us go back with Murphy's ship while you round up the rest of the fleet. This is going to mean trouble!"

Carlyle's eyes glowed, and his features seemed to shine with inner energy.

"Great work!" he breathed. "I'll drop off Murphy directly. Mark the way out there with flares. We'll get the rest of the boys and be there in three hours. If we're lucky we can unload the *Astral* and be out of the territory without crossing his path."

Larry Wolfe saluted and turned back to the scout. He tried to summon the fierce dislike he had for the salvage boss when he was away from him, but it would not rise. Carlyle's personality was a strong one. Men instinctively took orders from him and liked it, and women— Well, Ann had certainly changed. Yet there was a shading of something sinister under the man's smooth, forceful exterior. Larry could not isolate the things about him he distrusted.

Once more they dropped away from the *Friar*. Murphy, Stoller and Cass came booming along after them, jets belching and the whole, tiny craft leaping like a released whippet in the effort to pace Larry.

It was an hour and a half before they saw the *Astral* in their glasses once more. In their path they had dropped red fluctuating flares to guide the mother ship to the derelict. The scout sidled in beside the space-barge. Magnets sent out invisible tentacles and hauled them against the vessel with a stiff shock. Murphy's red head bobbed into view as his own craft made landing.

Larry Wolfe snapped orders. Stoller and Cass tackled the job of cutting away the ragged metal to provide more room for the loading of the salvage ship. Jeff, Abe, and Murphy joined Larry in the back-breaking toil of moving the gold.

And all the time they were conscious of the precious weapon that was slipping from their fingers . . . *time!* Minutes, seconds, fleeing from them, while they wondered which ship would be first to return, the *Friar Bacon* with its glittering silver hull, or the black tiger-shark of the void—the *Martian*.

Without warning there was a terrific crash against the side of the derelict. The six sweating workmen were flung to their faces on the floor. One of the scout ships was torn lose and went rolling away.

Larry ripped out his gun and crawled to the opening in the vessel's shell. What he

saw caused him to sigh with new relief.

"Meteor shower," he called to the others. "We took the biggest part of it right then. You can hear the dust pattering against us now. Nothing to worry about."

Nothing to worry about—!

But right then another impact came that up-tilted the barge and hurled them from their feet, stunned. A shadow fell over the sunlight splashed room and a long, black shape glided past, a mile or two away. The *Martian* was back and ready for war.

THERE was a second shot that sprawled them around. In the bow of the attacking cruiser winked a malevolent green eye. At Larry's signal, every man jammed the range setting on his pistol up to full. Even with the guns taxed to their utmost, they would be pitiful answer to the cannon aboard the other craft.

"Murphy!" Larry yelled. "Take your men up to the bridge where you can keep your eye on 'em. Keep firing. Don't let 'em rest."

But there was no slowing down Brand Haggard. With the cunning of a tiger, he swooped and curvetted about the *Astral*, never stopping long enough to let one of those pistol shots burn deep. There was not an instant when the derelict was still; constantly it rolled in a sea of searing, churning ether, burned fiercely by force-charges. From time to time a great hole was gashed through the barge.

Then there came a blasting concussion that piled Larry, Jeff, and Abe in a corner like three rats in a box. Blood filtered down Larry's neck where his space suit had gashed him. Light spilled into the ship through the fore parts. With his heart hammering, he ran forward to the bridge.

He found the hole where the bridge had been, but Murphy, Stoller and Cass were gone. A hundred yards away the *Martian* was maneuvering for another shot.

Larry ran back to the others.

"They're gone," he bit out. "And we're slated for the same if we hold out any longer. Let's grab the scout and head for the *Friar*. Maybe we can get back here before Haggard guts this barge."

All three men seemed to sense the cessation of the *Astral's* rolling at the same

instant. They glanced dumbly at each other. *What had caused the pirate to stop its barrage?*

All at once, Jeff was pointing, yelling like a madman. Cheers broke from the others' throats. With the swift grace of a bullet, the *Friar Bacon* was shooting across the sky in pursuit of Haggard's ship!

For a few minutes it was like watching a pair of clever fencers feint and lunge. The speed of the ships went for little now. It was the daring and skill of the man at the controls that spelled victory or defeat.

But in the end it was the *Martian* that drew off. A shot ripped away most of a scout carrier and showed Brand Haggard, temporarily, at least, that he was bucking a tougher, smarter man.

Carlyle did not chase him. Such a pursuit, zig-zagging on full throttles through space, could easily last a week. He brought the big cruiser alongside the wrecked *Astral* and the survivors sprang aboard.

VI

LARRY, Jeff, and Abe were pounded on the back by their companions, while eager hands dropped to the derelict to begin the transfer of cargo.

"You three better hie yourselves down to the galley and get some grub," Carlyle grinned.

Jeff and Abe took him at his word; but Larry, lingering, asked Carlyle pointedly: "How's Ann? She was pretty sick when I left her."

He would have taken oath that the salvage boss' dark eyes flinched. Those piercing eyes searched his face for an instant before Carlyle replied. Finally:

"Not so good, Captain," he said. "Why don't you look at her? Might do a lot for her, you know."

"I'm afraid I don't know, sir," Larry Wolfe ground out. "I seemed to be so much excess cargo last time."

He turned stiffly and passed him. But, drawn by something more powerful than his wounded pride, he went straight to Ann's room and knocked softly.

A voice so weak he scarcely recognized it answered him.

Larry went in. Ann was lying back against the pillows. The deathly pallor of her face caused him to start.

"Ann!" he groaned. "What is it? What's happening to you?"

The girl's bloodless features did not warm at sight of him. But a strain of fear coursed through her throaty tones.

"I don't know," she whispered. Her fingers went to toying with the little heart lying against her throat.

Suddenly Larry was striding forward, to stand looking down at the jewel with blazing eyes. "Damn that thing!" he gritted. "You're going to turn it over to me right now. I don't know what it is, but I'll swear it's alive with some deadly force of its own. It's glowing like a piece of red radium!"

Ann's waxen fingers closed over it. "You're talking like an insane man, Larry!" she panted. "You may as well understand right now that I'm not taking orders from you like a stevedore. If I want to wear a simple piece of jewelry, no amount of your ranting will prevent me!"

Larry's cheeks grew scarlet, his fists knotting up hard. "Maybe it won't," he retorted, "but by Heaven Carlyle knows the secret of that stone and I'm going to wring it out of him right now!"

"Larry!" The girl's voice followed him, laden with sharp fear. Larry Wolfe ignored her cry and strode to the loading deck. What he contemplated was mutiny, perhaps, but it was Ann's life at stake.

Carlyle was not on the loading deck, nor did Larry locate him on the bridge. As a final resort he strode to the ship owner's room. The door was unlocked, and he barged in without knocking.

Staring angrily about him, he saw no sign of his quarry. Then a sort of madness laid hold of him. He began to ransack Carlyle's belongings, searching—what he sought, he couldn't have said. But he was seeking proof that Thaddeus Carlyle was something more than he represented himself to be.

There was nothing he wouldn't have expected to find there. Nothing but one small article: an oval-shaped brooch of yellowed ivory, a tiny painting of a man's head on it. He had examined similar ones in museums. Carrying it over to the light, Larry was shocked to note the resemblance of the man's face to Carlyle.

Then he found the minute, hair-line

script below it: "Thaddeus Carlyle, Lord Mon—" The last word had been obliterated by time. Larry's breath rattled in his throat as a queer panic gripped him. Feverishly he shoved stiff fingers through his hair. *Lord Monfort*—! They hadn't made miniatures like this one for hundreds of years.

Larry turned the brooch over and discovered on the back the words: "From Helene. Nov. 1346."

The brooch struck the floor with a clink. The sound seemed to pour new life into Larry. He shouted, "Ann!" and sprang into the hall and swiftly toward the girl's room.

VOICES stopped him just before he touched the knob. Carlyle's voice, softer than he had dreamed it could be, murmuring:

"If only there weren't Larry—if I weren't afraid he might steal your love back. You say he means nothing to you, and yet—"

"You *know* he means nothing to me!" For all its animation, Ann's voice held the monotonous cadence of one who is half-asleep.

"You do love me, Ann—more than life itself?"

"More—than life—Thad!"

"Ann, I'm going to ask you something—wait, dear! I know you're tired; but you must keep your eyes open a moment longer. . . ."

The door crashed inward. Larry Wolfe was through it and upon Carlyle before the latter could get to his feet. He had been sitting on the edge of Ann's bunk. With steel fingers Larry hauled him to his feet.

"You damned parasite!" he shouted. "You thought you'd prey upon Ann the same way you did the others, did you?" His fist struck out, but the salvage boss caught his wrist and held it.

"Are you insane?" he roared.

Larry's mood was not one of arguing. Again he struck, and this time the blow chopped into Carlyle's mouth and brought blood.

Ordinarily the bigger man could have cut Larry down with a few man-killing punches, but the madness in Larry Wolfe knew neither pain nor weakness. He took

savage blows to the face and ribs, but stayed on his feet. A lucky uppercut jarred Carlyle's teeth in his head, and for an instant he was sagging against the wall.

Larry seized that split-second to spring to the bedside of the terrified girl and tear the necklace from her throat. He threw it at Carlyle with all his force. The gem missed, shivered into tiny, glittering crystals on the floor, like shining drops of blood.

Thaddeus Carlyle's face paled under its deep tan. He glanced down at the wreck of the crystal heart. He was on the point of drawing his pistol when the alarm began to ring.

"Mr. Carlyle! Captain Wolfe!" the voice boomed through the ship. "*Martian* returning. All hands at their posts!"

On the tail of the warning came a shock that tore the *Friar Bacon* from the side of the derelict. Larry had a glimpse through the port, of men in space suits left hanging in the void between the two ships, of gold ingots floating grotesquely around them.

The battle was forgotten, as fighters toppling over a cliff forget their differences and scramble for safety. Larry followed the ship owner up the corridor, climbed the ladder to the top deck, sprang to the firing lever of the big energy gun stationed in the nose.

The other men darted from the control room to their posts. The *Friar* was stationary for a second, while Carlyle located the other ship. With a surge of swift power that took the passengers' breath, the craft shot after it.

HAGGARD'S strategy had been to get in line with the sun and keep in line with it while he rushed down on the unsuspecting salvage ship. Reports were crackling in from all parts of the ship regarding the damage done. Nothing had been touched, it seemed, except one of the forward scout carriers, which was blasted loose.

Larry was tensely vigilant as he crouched over the firing lever. He did not glance at Carlyle. The salvage boss' face seemed to have set into grimmer lines than ever. Up ahead the *Martian* was fighting to keep out of line. Haggard's poor shot had put them in the disadvantage.

Carlyle piloted like a demon, straining the ship until the bulkheads chattered in their steps. Haggard's slightest error meant the gap between them closed that much more. Suddenly something seemed to go wrong. The *Martian* faltered for a tenth of a second. In the next moment Thaddeus Carlyle swerved until the pirate's rocket tubes were straight before them.

"Fire!" he clipped.

Larry pulled swiftly at the lever. There was no response. Harder, he tugged.

"I said *fire!*" Carlyle shouted at him. "I can't hold this point any longer. They're under way again."

Sweat started from Larry's pores. "The thing's jammed, Chief!" he groaned. "They got our gun with that first shot."

Carlyle seemed to wilt a little. What it meant was that they were up against a fast, armed vessel with no means of defending themselves. As if Brand Haggard sensed the trouble, too, he put the *Martian* about and came booming down the line at them, head-on.

Carlyle's response was slow. The ship heaved violently as a rear stabilizer melted under Haggard's shot. Only the fact that the shock threw them away from the pirate's line of fire saved them.

Now it was the *Friar Bacon* that dodged and ran. The air boiled all about them. Larry could envision Haggard's grinning, savage countenance hovering over the firing lever, ceaselessly yanking at it.

And there was something wrong with the staggering *Friar*. Larry thought for a while that their stabilizers were not functioning. Always they were a fraction of a second late in diving out of range. It was when Haggard was not over a few hundred yards in the rear that Larry glanced over at Carlyle. In a flash he was on his feet. . . .

He saw sunken, shrivelled cheeks and glazing eyes. Gray hair straggling from under the jaunty officer's cap. A scrawny neck going down into a collar many sizes too large.

Larry was cold all over. He took Carlyle by the shoulders and hauled him out of the chair, surprised at the lightness of his body. The bony fingers clawed at the controls and then gave them up. Larry let him sag to the floor and grabbed the controls.

Haggard was diving again, with throttles wide open. A few miles ahead lay the wreckage of the *Astral*. Larry suddenly saw his chance. He had no gun, nothing to fight back with; but here was where courage and skill might count heavily.

With the *Martian* a hundred yards in the rear, dead on the stern, Larry fired both bow rockets and the port stern rocket. Braces screamed and loose objects toppled, as the *Friar Bacon* slowed and went into a tight pin-wheel. The *Martian* roared up alongside. Larry blasted out with the other stern rocket and the two craft jarred together. At the same instant he turned on the boarding magnets, so that the ships were held together as though welded.

Brand Haggard's blond head bobbed into view only fifteen feet away. He stood up from the firing lever and stared through the bridge port at Larry. This was the first time Larry had ever seen him when he was not grinning that arrogant wicked grin of his.

HAGGARD was shaking his fist and yelling. His gun was useless now. And he knew only too well what lay in Larry's mind: To carry him dead into the *Astral* and pile the *Martian* up like a racing car striking a brick wall!

The captain of the black vessel tried every strategy he knew. But Larry held it down to the course he had set. The two ships flashed on toward destruction.

Haggard's face showed in the glass, threatening, cajoling, pleading. At the last moment he held up two fist-fulls of paper money, trying to buy another chance. Larry laughed and dropped his hand on the magnet lever.

Screams of terror built up within the *Friar Bacon* as the crew discovered the derelict dead ahead. They were drowned under the roar of rockets as Larry cut the pirate loose and moved to avoid the *Astral*.

He had a horrible moment of watching a fin on the wrecked vessel reach out to rake the belly of the slewing salvage ship. Then all dissolved in a shower of wreckage, the fin crumpling away and flames shooting up where it had been. The *Martian* had crumpled up like an accordion.

Bodies flew past the windows, to explode as the pressureless atmosphere inflated

them. Gold ingots mingled with them. Everywhere there was death, and the horror that can come only from a wreck of two such space-giants as the *Martian* and the long-dead *Astral*.

The *Friar* toppled end over end, a chip caught in a maelstrom. Miles away from the carnage, Larry Wolfe managed to right it. He stood up from the controls to find Ann Holland standing white and silent above Carlyle's body.

Larry shuddered. Carlyle's face was that of a mummy. His hands were crooked brown hooks like the dried talons of a buzzard. His uniform draped his shrivelled body like a gunny sack over a skeleton.

Ann pressed against Larry's side, seemingly unconscious that there had ever been anything wrong between them. "What was he, Larry?" she whispered.

"I don't know," he admitted. "But he was old—Lord knows how old. That crystal heart he gave you . . . there was something queer about it. I think that when I destroyed it, I killed him, too."

The girl suddenly buried her face against his chest. "Oh, Larry!" she sobbed. "It's so horrible. Let's go back . . . now!"

"Just as soon as we comb a few gold bars out of the sky," he told her softly. "Then we're going back and carry on with those plans we had before you gave me back my ring. But—I'd like to find out some time—just how old he was, and *what* he was."

SOONER than they had expected, they were to find at least the answer to Thaddeus Carlyle's age. Larry and Ann were married the day they docked in New York. For their honeymoon they sailed to England. It occurred to Larry while they were there to look for the Monfort tomb in Westminster Abbey.

They found it, an ancient stone crypt with the names of thirteen Lord Monforts inscribed, hidden in the shadows of the building's oldest wing. Birth and death dates followed each name. But after Thaddeus Carlyle's name were engraved only the numerals:

"1262—"

"Wish I had the courage of my convictions," muttered Larry. "I'd get them to finish it for the poor devil: '—died, 1970.'"



*A Swiftly-Paced
Short Story*

DOMAIN OF ZERO

By **THORNTON AYRE**

Spacemen gave tiny, far-flung Callisto a wide berth. For it was the domain of the shrunken, ice-skinned brain who called himself "Zero."

CLARK MITCHELL stirred uneasily in his bunk. His space-trained mind and body could detect a change in the direction of the private

space flyer; there was a distinct leftward pull, the drag of an unaccountable gravity field.

Sitting up abruptly he switched on the

safety light. Reaching across he shook the white shoulder of the girl fast asleep in the neighboring bunk. She uncoiled drowsily amid the sheets, blinked at him from her dark eyes.

"Wassamarra?" she slurred, yawning.

"That's what I'm wondering," he said anxiously. "Plenty's the matter by the feel of things."

He hopped into slippers and threw on a dressing gown, stumbled over to the port window and shook the tousled hair from his eyes. In an instant all sleep was dashed from his mind.

"Suffering cats!" he yelled. "We're headed toward Callisto! What in the name of—" He twirled round swiftly, jerked a thumb to his wife as she stretched languidly.

"Come on, Nan, you'd better come with me. You've more influence over your old man than I have. He must have gotten tight again, or something. This is what comes of leaving a souse at the controls!"

Clark stalked savagely from the bed-cabin and into the adjoining control room. In the doorway he stopped, staring blankly. Jathan Henshaw, millionaire *magnite* manufacturer, father of Nan, was slumped in the control chair, half asleep, his protruding midriff rising and falling steadily, double chin on his chest. On the bench close beside him a half emptied bottle of *teticol* stimulant stood in significant isolation.

Clark's jaw set. Muttering under his breath he leaned over the sleeping man and slammed the controls into position. It was useless now to try and drag away from Callisto; the vessel was too close. Only thing was to land there and then make a fresh start. Another hour would finish it. . . .

"**W**HAT, father!" Nan cried, coming in, silk gown moulding her shapely young form. "What's the matter?" She shook him gently with a slender hand.

"Canned—naturally!" Clark said impatiently, and the girl glanced at him indignantly.

"Oh, Clark, how can you say that! You know he has to take this stimulant to keep his heart in order. Otherwise—"

"Bunk!" Clark snorted. "I don't forget the way he filled up with alcohol when we

were on Titan. You remember, when he tried to match his voice up with those bass singing flowers? Boy, was he plastered!" he whistled reminiscently.

"Who's plastered?" demanded Henshaw suddenly, jerking up and flattening hair he didn't possess. "Whatja mean, Clark? Or is it a fight you want?" he finished, bunching flabby fists.

Clark turned deliberately. "That's a sure sign you've been tipping; you'd never want to fight otherwise." He drew a deep breath, then asked sharply, "How'd the ship come to get off the course for Saturn? We were heading back to Titan to make a study of Piano Key Range, and now this has to happen. What did you do?"

"You've got me there," Henshaw muttered. He closed one eye and meditated; then he said, "I guess it must have been Jupiter's gravity field that did it. It sort of swung the ship round and—hup! pardon me—I found Callisto coming toward me. Then—then I do believe I fainted," he finished with dignity, licking his lips.

Clark sniffed. "Fainted! O.K., I get it. You mean you got so tight you didn't know what you were doing, forgot to put the robot controls in action and then passed out. Well, we'll be delayed in getting to Titan, that's all. Darned good job I woke up or we might have crashed into Callisto. . . ." He frowned through the main window. "Pity it has to be Callisto," he murmured. "I don't know as much about it as I'd like. The other trading moons are all right, but Callisto's a bit of an outpost well over a million miles from Jupiter. Frozen world, by night anyhow. Least albedo of all the moons."

Henshaw got unsteadily to his feet. "S-sorry, Clark," he apologized, laying a hand on his shoulder. "I guess I do sort of mix things up, don't I? But I never"—he strangled an incipient belch—"never did know how to control one of these things." He looked across at the stimulant, picked it up reverently. "My heart," he explained anxiously. "I—I think I'll just lie down."

Clark nodded bitterly and said nothing, watched Henshaw unsteadily depart. Then he turned as the girl took his arm. Her face was serious in its soft mantle of dark hair.

"Honest, Clark, I don't think he meant

any harm," she said anxiously. "He's—he's weak, you know."

Clark grinned slowly. "Weak! Weak enough to build up a fortune from *magnite* explosive. And that heart business is a lot of applesauce, too. . . . Still, I guess you wouldn't be anything of a daughter if you didn't back him up," he sighed. "After all, but for his generosity a year ago I would never have been rescued from Titan, or found those *vilictus* deposits that provided the fortune to make this trip possible."

Pausing, he glanced through the window again.

"You'd better get dressed, Nan, then you can take the controls while I scramble into some duds. We'll land in about an hour."

"Right!" She moved lithely to the inter-door, paused. "Shall I wake dad?"

"No need. We'll only stop long enough to level out, then we'll push away against the gravity field and head for Titan. We can't straighten out from this position. Too much momentum. . . ."

THE passing of the hour brought the 3200 mile globe of Callisto to a point where it filled all heaven—a curious outpost of a world, a million miles further out from frozen Jupiter than the other satellites of Io, Europa and Ganymede. Possessing the lowest albedo of all, a density that bespoke the possible presence of hydrogen, and maybe oxygen in scarcer quantities, the moon was rarely visited save in an emergency. Nobody knew much about it: those who did pronounced it pretty much like Earth's Arctic Circle, save that the Arctic Circle is warm and cozy by comparison.

"I don't like this a bit," Clark muttered, staring fixedly ahead. "We're moving toward the dark side of the moon as misfortune has it. Makes it difficult to see; the other moons and Jupiter don't give such a vast amount of light at this distance."

Nan strained her neck over his shoulder. "Looks like mountains to me," she commented. Then suddenly, "But I thought Callisto revolved in relation to the Sun? What do you mean by dark side?"

"Sorry—I meant night side. Callisto does revolve in the solar sense, of course—about once a fortnight. Always turns the same face to Jove, though."

Clark took hold of the controls firmly and watched earnestly as the vessel began to drop, shooting downward toward a dark mass of mountain range and valley. Ridges of bluey-white rose up at frightening speed. The light of Jove and the moons vanished as the ship hurtled under the overhanging shadow of the vast range.

"Look out!" Nan yelled suddenly, pointing. "Look! That cliff—!"

Clark saw it a second later—a titanic wall, a diagonal extension of the mountain range spread straight across the flier's path, towering to an incredible height. Savagely he blasted the rocket tubes, ripped the vessel round in a circle, dipped—helplessly plunged and tore through a huge mass of apparent powdered ice and snow.

In seconds it was all over. The ship came to rest at a weird angle, surrounded by piled bluey whitenesses that had crept half way up the observation windows. Through what clear space there was a vision of that enormous cliff—a long icy slope—and far overhead, the ebony star strewn sky. Down here, Jupiter and the moons were completely hidden.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Nan murmured, straightening up, "but I think we've arrived."

"But only for a moment," Clark answered. "This is where we leave. The gravity pull will be squared against us now. The underjets will see to the rest."

Confidently he released the blast switches, then instantly sprang them back into non-contact as a vicious aura of flame zipped around the ship from end to end. White sheets of fire stabbed savagely outside the windows, momentarily illuminating the drear, wild landscape.

"What in—?" Clark stopped in bewilderment, staring at the girl. "Say, I nearly incinerated the ship!" He swung round and depressed the switch on the external registers. "What sort of an atmosphere have we got in this dump, anyway?"

He stared with the girl at the registers. "Hydrogen—and another gas that looks like argon," he said, wincing. "Ouch! Then— Let me think. Hydrogen freezes at -264° C, and it would float to upper levels like this. Oxygen, if any, would drop below, freezing at -212° C. This stuff outside must be it. . . ."

He snapped the lever on the sampler and

it released a portion of the exterior substance down a chute into a vacuum trap. The two stared through the thick glass partition.

"FROZEN oxygen crystals right enough," Nan murmured, gazing at the bluish shining powder. "That makes the external temperature somewhere around -200° C. Nitrogen, if any, must also be frozen; it seizes up around the same degree as oxygen, but it's pretty heavy. Probably at lower levels than this. Can't be much of it around or it would have doused that fire you nearly started. . . . Argon wouldn't do much," she went on, musing. "It's unsociable stuff—if argon it really is. Looks to me like some other unknown element. Assuming it is argon it doesn't like mingling with other gases. . . ."

"Let's see now. Frozen oxygen, hydrogen gas, traces of water vapor in the oxygen and also in the blast tubes due to condensation in change from blast-heating in space to sudden cold here. . . . Gosh! This is no spot to try out a flame, Clark. And it isn't a place for a deck-chair, either. . . ."

Clark sat down and rubbed his tousled black head.

"Right enough. . . . But how the devil do we get out of here, anyway? The jets are the only way."

The girl shrugged. "I have the idea that we're just going to park around until the dawn comes, then this stuff may congeal into normal, though thin, atmosphere. If there's any nitrogen around and it mingles up, we'll be all right. If not—"

She broke off suddenly. The ship had noticeably jerked a little, slid a slight distance. The curious squeegeeing noise of grinding crystals echoed ominously through the walls.

"Hell, we're slipping!" Clark gasped hoarsely, leaping up. "Moving down the slope—Look down there!" he finished with a yell, pointing through the window.

Nan caught her breath. She could see now in the starshine that the ship was perilously poised on a long sloping shelf of frozen oxygen, extending downward for perhaps a mile and a half. After that there was a sheer drop into—They knew not what. Probably a chasm.

Clark swung around. "Come on, we've got to get out! Get the space suits. Wake up dad—"

"No need to wake me," growled Henshaw, coming in. "Where the heck are we? I thought you were a good pilot, Clark—Whew, have I got a hangover?" he finished, shutting his eyes tight.

Holding his forehead he lurched toward the window, and his very action set the ship sliding again. Frantically Clark pulled him back.

"Look here, Clark, what is this—"

"It's the balance," Clark panted. "When we move we set the thing sliding. Your weight, dad, is—"

"And what's the matter with my weight?" Henshaw demanded fiercely. "Two hundred and forty pounds of muscle—that's me! Strong as a horse, except for my heart, of course. Now, ever since I was a boy—"

"Cut the history, father, and get into this," interrupted Nan practically, hurrying forward with an outsize space suit. "We've got to get out of this ship—at least until dawn comes."

Grumbling, Henshaw stepped into the suit, lurched and heaved wildly as Nan fastened it up. He was still protesting as the helmet clamped over his bald head.

"What about a drink first?" he yelled, but instead of a drink he found three ray guns thrust in his arms by Clark.

"Hang onto these, dad," he ordered quickly. "But don't use 'em until we come to some nitrogen or something, otherwise we'll go up like *magnite* powder. And put these rubbers over your boots. The slightest friction sparks may have disastrous results. . . . Nan and I will bring along the food and stuff."

Henshaw grunted and struggled into the massive goloshes, then he stood waiting as Clark and the girl scrambled into their own suits. Finally, equipment strapped on their backs, Clark led the way with gingery steps to the airlock and began to unscrew it. He snapped a length of cord to his belt, linked it to the girl and her father, then stepped outside.

THE ship slithered a little. The girl came out, ankle deep in the blue crystals. Henshaw was at no pains to be careful. Being naturally big and still

slightly intoxicated he visibly staggered, reeled clumsily through the opening outside. . . . That did it!

The rocking action started the sliding ship into a real slither. With a sudden grinding of crystals it commenced moving off down the slope with its port lights brightly gleaming.

"To one side!" Clark screamed—noiselessly, for the helmet transmitters were not linked up. Frantically he dragged the girl and Henshaw aside, just in time to avoid the bulging center of the vessel as it slipped invincibly past them.

Dazed, wide-eyed, they watched it travel to the end of the slope and there, visibly half over the edge of the chasm, it came to a standstill, supported by the congealed oxygen it had plowed before it.

Clark got up and flicked on his communicator. "Gosh, that's done it!" came his voice. "Even if we wanted, we wouldn't dare get inside it. It'd be over like a shot."

"And when the dawn comes the thaw will drop it down instead," Nan muttered hopelessly. "Suppose we go down and see how far it will have to drop? Come on, dad. . . ."

"Damned silly business altogether," Henshaw grumbled, getting up and stumbling after the two down the slope. "What with a third normal gravity, these ice crystals or whatever they are, and my heart—I'd give my fortune for a drink."

"You've got water tablets in your helmet trap," Clark grunted, "Why not use 'em?"

"Water!" Henshaw echoed in horror; then he unaccountably said no more. A sudden thought seemed to have struck him. He released his helmet switch and allowed a tabloid to automatically drop into his mouth.

"G-great stuff!" he mumbled, staggering along like a baby elephant. "Solidified *teticol* tablets! I remember now—I put them in my helmet in place of the water tablets; and there's a spare tin of them on my belt here. Easy enough, since my suit's the biggest neither of you would get it by mistake. Dammit, no man can live on water!"

Clark sighed. "O.K., dad, you win. I'll bet you'd find your beloved *teticol* in the middle of outer space. Only please don't

get tight! We need our wits about us. And don't forget those things have a pretty strong potassium basis. Too many of them will send you to sleep."

"Yeah; but before I get that far I find—hup!—bliss," Henshaw observed wisely, and he licked his lips in satisfaction in the cold starlight. . . .

II

IN ten minutes the three had gained the edge of the long slope. Carefully Clark lay down on his face and peered into the abyss below. It was wreathed in either dense mist or frozen air; he couldn't determine which in the faint light. Either way it was a terrific drop, would be certain to smash the space ship when the thaw allowed it to fall.

He stood up again, his serious face faintly visible inside his helmet.

"Only one thing for it," he said worriedly. "At the first signs of sunrise we'll come back here, take a chance on getting inside the ship. Then when the congealed oxygen in front of it breaks up we'll let the ship take a natural chute into the air of this valley. By snapping on the underjets we'll perhaps save ourselves from dropping down. Gravity's pretty weak here so we might manage it. It's the only chance. . . . Down there there will perhaps be nitrogen too. If there isn't— Well, I guess we'll go up like shooting stars. That's all in the cards."

"And in the meantime?" Nan quietly asked.

Clark glanced toward the frowning mass of the cliff along the slope edge. Dimly visible dark holes were distinguishable on its main ledge.

"Might as well try that," he shrugged. "Be able to shelter in one of those caves and watch for sunrise at the same time. It won't be so very long according to my calculations. . . . Come on."

They began to return up the slope. Henshaw was chanting to himself, entirely oblivious to his surroundings, to the possible danger, to the possibility indeed that split seconds lay between life and death when the dawn-thaw came at the rise of the far distant Sun. Far distant, yet sufficient to raise the temperature during the 14-hour day to create an admixture of

oxygen, hydrogen and argon—and it was to be hoped, nitrogen. . . .

Overhead, the stars loomed with steely glitter against a backdrop of misty nebulae and cosmic dust. Against this the upper mountain heights, the base of which formed the immense cliff, were etched out like the teeth of a monstrous saw. . . . Cold—merciless cold—is the lot of the Callistian night.

As they gained the long, frozen ledge leading to the caves, Clark turned.

"Better hand out the guns, dad. We never know. If anything attacks us we'll have to chance starting a fire. Not so much water vapor around here as on the ship jets, so it might be O.K. The guns will make their own firing mixture, of course."

"Huh?" Henshaw's huge, bloated figure came to a stop. "Guns? What guns?"

"What guns!" Clark yelled. "The ones I gave you on the ship, of course—" He broke off, staring fixedly as Henshaw drearily raised his arms. He was not carrying anything in them.

"I—I dropped them," he hesitated. "When you threw me aside from the ship. I remember they fell in the crystals. You see I—"

"And you were so darned interested in those *teticol* tablets you forgot to pick them up!" Clark groaned. "Lordy, what a sweet mess you've made of things! We can never find them now; they'll be buried in the oxygen. . . . Even if we knew where to look," he wound up unhappily.

"I'm sorry. . . ." Henshaw mumbled. "Darned careless of me, I guess. Don't see why we need them, anyhow," he finished irritably. "No life can be on this hell-fired planet, anyway."

Clark smiled bitterly. "Think not? My conclusions after trips around space are that life can exist anywhere. It exists on Jupiter, with nearly absolute space temperature—same on Io. And it lives in the steamy heat of Titan. So why not here. . . .? But what's the use?" he growled. "We'll have to take a chance. Come on."

THE journey along the ledge resumed. Henshaw, realizing he was in disgrace, clumped at a little distance behind, hanging onto the connecting cord. Another *teticol* tablet relieved his contrition somewhat; he felt his head swim pleasantly. With a

supreme effort he fought down a desire to yodel.

Then suddenly Nan stopped, pointing. Clark bumped into her and stared blankly as he followed her finger. A cluster of objects like children's toy balloons were gathered on the activity—perhaps twenty of them in all. One or two of them went floating away into the starry dark, suddenly distending their bodies to accomplish the feat.

"What do you know about that!" Clark whistled, staring at their bulging, bladder-like bodies and scrawny, silly necks. He turned and cried. "Here you are, dad! Life already! Birds!"

"Some place to have an aviary," Henshaw grunted, stopping. "More of them there. Look."

Further along the ledge a veritable flock of the things were collected, remarkably like long necked Sun-fish when inflated; little better than a cast out inner tube when deflated.

"So they fill themselves with hydrogen and float around with it inside them," Clark mused, watching closely. "No wings at all; they just rise and fall by inflating or deflating. Nice going!"

"But how?" Nan questioned, frowning. "How do they manage to separate the hydrogen from the argon—presuming it is argon?"

He shrugged. "How does a plant break down inorganic compounds? Nobody really knows; nobody can predict the exact nature of chlorophyll in plants. We have the same thing here: some internal chemistry on the part of these birds make them able to separate hydrogen from argon. That shouldn't be difficult since argon doesn't mix freely with hydrogen. . . . Since hydrogen is the lighter gas these things float— Well, not entirely on that account," he amended, thinking. "A balloon only rises because of the heavier air pushing from beneath it. Same thing here, I suppose, and inflation or deflation raises or lowers them."

"Wonder what they do when the air becomes normal at dawn?" Nan mused.

"Ever hear of a butterfly that lives only for a day?" Clark asked dryly. "Well, it may be something like that. Birds of the night, to be born, spawn and die in the space of the Callistian dark, leaving behind

them eggs which will hatch with the dawn. Maybe somewhere right at the top of this range, way up where the warmth will never have much effect, where hydrogen and argon are eternal."

Nan shook her head. "Poetic, but not very convincing. In that case they would probably retreat up to the heights at dawn and wouldn't die at all. . . . Or even, dawn may not have any thaw effect at all up here."

That was too startling a speculation. Clark took the girl's arm and the climb resumed. In the main the hydrogen birds seemed quite docile; only a few scattered away as the trio clumped through their midst. Then in another ten minutes they had reached the nearest cave and crawled gratefully into it, sat down heavily where they could look out over the cold, relentless frozen slope toward the sunward horizon—when the luminary rose.

Clark snapped off the cord and rolled it up, lowered his pack of provisions and small instruments. Nan did likewise. Henshaw swallowed another tablet and hiccuped solemnly.

"Still sorry about those guns," he muttered. "Darned stupid of me. You forgive me?"

"Of course, dad—" Nan began cheerfully, then she broke off in bewilderment as a hard, cracked voice cut across hers, distinctly audible in each helmet receiver.

"Implements of destruction! Foolish things! Disseminators of incredible violence, the outcome of bellicose yearnings. . . . So atavistic! So incomprehensible!"

III

THE three jerked erect and stared at each other in the dim starlight.

"Say," Clark whispered, "who slung those jaw crackers around?" He looked suspiciously at Henshaw. "Was it you, dad?"

Henshaw gulped. "Heaven—hup!—forbid! Elocution and grammar soured on me years ago."

"You, then?" Clark twisted to Nan, but her head shook. She was too startled to speak.

Clark got anxiously to his feet and switched on his torch. The beam penetrated clean to the back of the cave, fram-

ing an object that nearly dropped him to his knees in astonishment.

"Sweet Heaven, what is it?" he gasped helplessly. "Or am I nuts?"

"Or am I drunk?" whispered Henshaw, staring through his one soundly focused eye.

"Cla-Clark, let's go," Nan breathed nervously, scrambling up and clutching his arm. "It's—it's alive!"

"We are all alive. Life is variform—flux and confluence, yet it continues. In the void, in the air, in the planets—even in the stars."

"Gosh!" Clark whistled, and still stared in confusion.

The object might have been a man, only it was mummified beyond all comparison with a normal being. Perhaps it had once been Earthly, but now it was all skin and bone—a curious skin, with a dry, leathery aspect. The arms were of matchstick consistency; the legs were crossed and as thin as tapers. The skinny chest heaved up and down spasmodically with the effort of breathing—breathing hydrogen and argon at that!

There was a tiny chin, cracked, scarlike mouth, hooked nose, and beady almost hidden eyes, the entire face swelling out into a preponderant, mighty bald dome on which the skin was stretched as tight as a carnival bladder. An utterly fantastic presence—a brain with a decrepit, featherweight body.

"Animal, vegetable, or mineral?" hazarded Henshaw. "Or have I got 'em at long last?"

Cautiously, Nan clinging to his arm, Clark inched his way forward. Henshaw came up unsteadily behind them.

The object closed its eyes in the glare. Clark lowered the beam to the floor so the reflection alone served to illuminate the Thing.

"Who—who are you?" he ventured.

"I have no name," the Thing answered. "What is a name? Only an appellation or patronymic by which certain bipeds, and at times quadrapeds, to say nothing of other ramifications of life, are known or distinguished."

"If only he'd compile a dictionary!" Henshaw said regretfully.

"But how did you get here?" asked Nan, gaining courage. "What are you doing?"

"I have always been here—I shall al-

ways be here. Maybe it is centuries since I was born. Maybe only yesterday. Who can say?"

"From the look of you it sure wasn't yesterday," Clark observed dryly. "Just what *are* you doing?"

"I brood. Sometimes I think actively—such as now, when I read your minds to ascertain your language, which you all speak so atrociously. . . . But most of the time I brood. And brood."

"He broods," Clark told the girl wisely, and she nodded and said,

"You're telling me! But what do you brood about?" she asked.

"My body. My existence. Why things are."

"Who doesn't?" Clark sighed; then seriously, "But how do you come to be here breathing pure hydrogen—or is it hydrogen and argon?"

IT is not argon; it is unknown to you. It has practically no freezing point. I do not breathe it. I breathe hydrogen. Why should I not breathe hydrogen?"

"Oh, no reason—only it seems kind of funny. You've got an Earthly body, and we breathe oxygen, hydrogen, nitrogen, and an admixture of various other things."

"But you are of Earth—I am of . . . of Callisto, as you call it. Therein lies the difference. I am the last . . . last *man* of Callisto. The end of my race. When I go, intellectual Callistian mankind will have gone too. My body only happens to resemble yours. I have never been to Earth."

"But listen," Nan put in quickly; "doesn't it get rather cold in here?—just brooding? I mean, it's cold enough to freeze oxygen and nitrogen yet you sit here with nothing—er— Well, unclothed!" She coughed demurely.

"Here it is always cold. It never alters. But it is only cold to *you*. The atmosphere does not mingle any higher than the edge of the slope where you left your spatial projectile."

"What!" Clark gasped in alarm. "There's never a thaw around here? Good Lord, then the ship—"

"I am not cold," the decrepit voice interrupted him. "I have not flesh and blood, but a mixture of hydrogen, oxygen and water at a low temperature, kept from absolute solidity by a skin which is proof

against external conditions, just as your skins are proof against some cosmic radiations. If you were to touch me with a bare hand the cold would turn your fingers to powder. Only liquid air can compare with my exterior skin."

"I don't get this at all," Clark muttered. "How did you get this way, anyhow?"

"Evolution," said the creature impassively.

"For how long?"

"Maybe untold ages. Once Callisto was hot, when it left the primary. That was the time when our life flourished. We were an active race; then as our world and the primary cooled we used our bodies less and less. Nature, ever adaptable, gave us bodies that were able to deal with the changing conditions, until there came the final species of hydrogen breathers, like me. I am the last. Intelligence of surpassing power—but physical ability nearly gone. Held in place only until I master it."

"You want to die?" Clark demanded.

"One day. I shall stay here and brood until the time when I detach mind from body, limb by limb, organ by organ. That may mean ages; it may be tomorrow."

"Limb by limb!" cried Nan aghast. "How—how horrible! And painful!"

"Pain is unknown; pain is begotten of ignorance. The arm or the leg does not think for itself. Detach the mind from the limb or organ in question and it ceases to be of interest. In time I shall detach my mind from my body; limb by limb I shall fade away. The hardest task of all will be to leave behind my brain."

"There may be something in it," the girl acknowledged, thinking; then glancing at Clark, "You know! Like the devotees who hold a hand up until it loses all feeling, or the guys who lie on a bed of nails and face the east. . . . Or is it west? Anyway, mind over matter."

There was silence for a moment. The intellectual monstrosity was so coldly logical about everything there could be no room for doubt.

"You evolved rather rapidly to an intelligent state like this?" Clark asked presently.

"Why not? Pressure here is slight. Pressure hinders the circulation of blood, or my own particular fluid, to the brain. Where there is slight gravity and low air

pressure the brain is well fed, develops accordingly. Therefore I am intelligent."

THERE was another silence and the three stood looking at each other. They were each thinking the same thing—the possibility of earthly life perhaps ending in such a creature as this—hideous, incredibly intelligent, impartial, brooding alone in a forgotten cave amid sub-zero cold. There was something terrifying about the thought. The pooling of endless ages of knowledge and culture into the brain pan of a gargoyle.

Henshaw broke the silence with a comment. "What d'you say we call him 'Zero'?" he suggested, grinning. "A step removed from Nero, who fiddled instead of brooding. Huh?"

"Good name, but this is no time for levity," Clark answered seriously. "Zero here brings home pretty forcibly the pointlessness of earthly struggle—of anybody's struggle, for that matter. And besides—"

He broke off and twisted round at a sudden noise. He stared unbelievably at the cave entrance, seeing for the first time that it was blocked with stunted, hideous creatures, all mouth and ears, on blocky legs with short bodies. Wicked little eyes glinted in the torchlight. Every head was totally bald.

"Magnified germs, so help me!" Henshaw gasped—and his simile was oddly accurate. The things certainly looked like the real thing from a preventative advertisement.

"The others of my race—de-evolved," stated Zero placidly. "There must ever be two sectors—worker and intellectual. You have but to study your Earthly ant life to determine that. If the brain deteriorates the body gains control and becomes a weapon of evil; in the opposite direction intelligence gains, and you have such as me."

"Are they dangerous?" Clark demanded.

"To me, no. To you, very."

Nan gasped in terror. "Oh, dad, if only you'd brought along those guns—! We might have stood a chance!"

She fell silent, clinging to her father and Clark, backing into the cave between them as the chattering, mouthing monstrosities came slowly forward, obviously intent on only one thing—destruction. Possibly their cave was being invaded; that might explain

their presence. Clearly they were beyond reason. . . . Clark was more concerned for the fact that their sharp claw-fingers would rip the space suits. That meant instant, painful death.

Zero took no part in the proceedings. He sat on in impartial silence, still cross-legged, still brooding.

The three backed further into the cave until at last they were brought up sharp against the rear wall.

"Zero, do something!" Clark implored frantically. "Turn these things away! You've got the intelligence; we haven't."

"Only the fittest may survive in the course of evolution," Zero droned back. "Extinguishment—victory—survival—procreation—What are they? The evanescent, transitory movements of a race—"

"Oh, nuts!" Clark interrupted, and looked round him desperately. The creatures had stopped for the moment, as though deciding on a scheme of attack. Their vast mouths were still wide open, grinning caverns; their terrible clawed hands were extended.

"I'll bet they feed on either hydrogen birds or oxygen crystals," muttered Nan, trying to be brave.

"One rip from those things and we'll be playing harps," her father observed. "Guess I need a stimulant. . . ." His helmet clicked faintly as he dropped a *teticol* tablet in his mouth.

"Clark, can't you—" Nan began shakily; then he cut her short and twirled round, clutching the surprised Henshaw by the shoulder.

"Quick, dad—you said something about an extra supply of those tablets of yours. Where are they?"

"Huh?" The old man stared in the torchlight, then slapped his equipment belt. "Right here. But say, about my heart—"

YOU won't have a heart to worry about if this doesn't work," Clark panted, ripping the container from the belt. "This is a chance—and a mighty slim one. . . ."

He fumbled clumsily with his gloves, snapped the container open. The creatures had begun to advance again now. Nan gave a little cry and squeezed herself behind Clark's bulky form. Henshaw stood

his ground, swaying a little. In his present mood of semi-intoxication he didn't care much what happened.

"Here goes!" Clark breathed, and scooping up a gloveful of tablets he tossed them unerringly into the mouth of the foremost grinning monstrosity. Then he crouched back, waiting agonizedly.

He hadn't long to wait. Suddenly the torchlight gloom of the cave was illumined by a blinding, sputtering glare of livid flame. The foremost creature gave one mighty yell, and that was all: the next instant flame spouted from his wide mouth; his whole body transformed in a flash into a blinding mass that sputtered and span wildly, consuming quantities of oxygen crystal from the floor.

Blinded with the light the three jerked their faces away, flung up protecting hands. Zero still sat on with closed eyes. The remaining creatures twisted wildly and fell over themselves in their frantic efforts to get outside. . . . Smoke, slowly evaporating, took the place of the flame. The former shadowy, torchlit gloom returned.

Carefully, Clark looked round, spots of color swimming before his gaze.

"It worked!" he breathed thankfully. "It actually worked!"

"Yeah; but what happened?" Henshaw demanded. "Those pills cost—hup!—money, and I haven't so many left. I—"

"It was the quantity of potassium in their basis that I relied upon," Clark explained, as they started to edge to the cave opening. "I took the chance that those creatures were composed of the same stuff as Zero—oxygen, hydrogen and water vapor. You know what happens when potassium gets mixed up with water?"

"I'm no chemist," Henshaw growled. "What?"

"It drives the hydrogen out of the water at express speed, so violently and with such a release of heat that the hydrogen, mingling with the oxygen, catches fire. That's what happened, luckily for us. The germ turned into a glorified Roman candle."

"How many did you give him?" Nan asked breathlessly.

"Thirty! No wonder he blew up. . . . The whole tin full."

"We'd better get out of here before they come back," Henshaw said uneasily; then

he glanced back at Zero from the cave opening and waved his arm. "So long, Zero. Hope you make it!"

"Though generations shall pass I will master the final problems of life and death," came the droning answer—then the three were outside on the ledge again.

IV

NAN glanced around her at the starlit sky, at the sloping ledge at the end of which, far distant, lay the space ship.

"No sign of dawn yet," she remarked seriously; "and from what Zero told us it won't have much effect even when it does come. Not up here, anyhow—"

"Take a look!" Clark interrupted her, and nodded his head along the ledge.

Not five hundred yards away the monstrosities, their first fright overcome, were returning, intent this time on vengeance, beyond doubt.

"Uh-uh!" ejaculated Henshaw hastily, and started off at a blundering run. His own dizziness, the slippery ledge, and the lesser gravity made him a ludicrous figure; almost laughable had the danger not been so great. Finally he fell over and collapsed in the midst of the startled hydrogen birds further down the slope.

"Hey! Come back!" Clark yelled. "I've got to fix the rope to your belt. . . ." Clutching Nan, he set off after him.

"We'll never make it," Nan panted huskily. "They're gaining on us. We'd be safe enough on that slope below, but it's too far to jump. Following this ledge it will take us half an hour at least, and by that time—"

"Look!" Clark yelled, stopping momentarily. "What the devil's dad doing?"

That was a problem. Instead of scrambling to his feet, Henshaw was rising as though dragged, tightly clutching a quartet of hydrogen birds in his huge gloved hands. In an instant he was off the ledge, floating away over the frozen slope below.

"Dad!" Nan screamed wildly. "Dad, what's happened?" And her voice thundered in echoes over the dreary reaches.

"Dunno," Henshaw's receding voice echoed back. "Clutched their necks. . . . See you later. . . . I hope!" He drifted out of earshot, floating toward the distant space ship.

"I get it!" Clark whistled. "He must have grabbed a neckful of the things as he got up. They were inflating and lifted him right into the air. Actually they're strangled, but can't release their hydrogen gas—so they're a sort of balloon. Weight here doesn't amount to much. Four of those things could lift dad with ease— It's an idea," he went on hurriedly, resuming the scrambling run. "One way of getting off this ledge."

He cast another look around at the approaching Callistians, then at Henshaw's far off drifting figure.

"Why the blazes doesn't he release hold of them one by one?" he said anxiously. "He'd drop, then— Gosh! He's gone right over the edge of the slope toward the chasm. Disappeared! Come on!"

They redoubled their efforts, only slowed down as they approached the swelling and deflating hydrogen birds. One or two flew off; the others jerked their ridiculous heads round on their scrawny necks.

"Grab!" Clark ordered. "Four!"

He dived simultaneously with the girl as eight of the birds started to inflate. They caught them at the peak of their inhalation. The things struggled wildly as they found it impossible to exhale. . . . Clark found himself lifted from the ledge, carried upwards swiftly with the smooth ease of a balloon, buoyed up by the heavier argon-x, as he mentally named the unknown gas.

Behind him, clutching her own four birds tenaciously, Nan came. Back on the ledge the monstrosities arrived too late, were screaming and cursing threats in an unknown language.

"Hang on!" Clark shouted. "We've got to find your dad. Keep hold until I tell you otherwise."

THE girl's helmet nodded. The drifting took them over the solitary, blocked space ship to the yawning misty chasm beyond it. Nan closed her eyes at the frightful drop below, then opened them again at a cry from Clark.

"The Sun! Look!"

She stared across the misty wrappings, beheld the absurd far distant disk that was the Sun. Already at the touch of its slight but noticeable warmth the valley mists be-

low began to stir curiously like cotton wool with a draft under it.

"Drop!" Clark ordered. "Let go of your birds one at a time."

He set the example and she followed suit. Each time they released a bird they fell lower, until by the time they possessed only one bird each they were falling almost sheer into the midst of the stirrings and shiftings of re-forming, congealed atmosphere.

Suddenly the clear, thin clarity of everything changed. They were in semi-gloom, blanketed under clouds. A sloping mass, presumably the foothills of the titanic cliff at the top of which rested the space ship, rose up to meet them.

"Drop!" Clark yelled, and released the last bird. Instantly he and Nan ceased their drifting and fell vertically, slowly owing to the lesser gravity, dropped to the ground and rolled over and over, sat up amidst billowing gusts of wind as the irregularly warmed atmosphere took on balance.

They joined each other, stood up, surveying the towering height of cliff, clouds whirling savagely in the wind drifts at half way up its height.

"Well, we made it," Clark muttered, "but I don't know what good it's done us. Take a look at that cliff—it's unclimbable without proper tackle, and we haven't got any. Ice and snow ridges near the top, too—normal congealment." He stopped and stared round the desolation. Here and there the Sun was starting to peep through the twisting, warming air.

"There's nitrogen present down here, anyhow," he said thankfully, regarding the gauge on his belt. "Not that it does us much good with the ship way up there. . . ." He put the instrument back and yelled, "Dad! Dad! Can you hear me?"

His amplifier at full strength his shout penetrated deafeningly, echoed from the cliff sides.

"Dad!" he bawled again, and for a long time there was only the echoes of his voice. He prepared to shout again, then stopped abruptly at a distinct sound not very far away.

"Yo-ho liety! Iddio—ladiay! Ooooo-yoohooo . . ."

Nan laughed in sudden relief. "Clark, it's dad all right. He's—he's yodeling!"

"Huh?" Clark gulped. "What the hell for?"

"He's always wanted to," she said fondly. "Good old dad!"

They stood waiting, calling at intervals. The yodeling went on, echoing weirdly. The tuggings and puffings of the wind began to diminish, but far up the heights were curious rumblings and bumpings as warmth surged upwards toward that forgotten waste, charging it with the lightnings and thunderings of heat and cold.

Then suddenly old Henshaw appeared, reeling gracefully, a deflated hydrogen bird in his hand like a Christmas turkey.

"Illi-idio!" he warbled, coming up on clumsy feet. "I—hup!—guess I always wanted to—hic—yodel. It's the Swish—the Swiss in me. . . . Gosh, that was hard to say!"

"Thank Heaven you didn't break your neck," Clark panted, seizing him tightly.

"Mebbe you wanted me to, huh?" Henshaw demanded arrogantly. "Jus' so's you could inherit my money through Nan, huh? Nothin'—hup!—doin'! An, why shouldn't I fall easily, and near here? I came down on the same wind drift, didn't I?"

Clark agreed, then said ominously, "Dad, you've been parking away too dog-gone many of those tablets. You're tight again!"

"Sure—an' I like it!" Henshaw thrust out his chin behind his helmet. "S'what?" he demanded. "Without those *teticol* tablets you'd have been in a pretty—pardon me—fine mess back with those germ men, wouldn't you?"

HE reeled round and stared up at the heights. The air had cleared a lot now. The weak sunshine revealed the basic rock soaring for a thousand feet and more, ending then in sheer snow and ice, pinnacles and buttresses of it joining the oxygen crystal plain. Somewhere up there, on the edge, reposed the space ship.

"Say!" he yelled, wheeling. "How the heck do we get back?"

"I'm not good at riddles!" Clark sat down glumly on the black rock, stared moodily at the idiotic Sun, across the barrenness of the valley floor to the very near horizon.

"Y'mean, we can't—" Henshaw gasped, stumbling back. "But, Clark, we've got

to! We can't jush stop here. . . . It—it isn't done."

"Lots of things aren't done, but this one is," Clark retorted. "If you hadn't have floated so far we wouldn't be in this mess. If it comes to that, you're responsible for the whole darn business!"

"Yes. . . ." Henshaw closed a rueful eye and sat down. His face was so utterly woebegone behind the glass that Nan could not help but smile a little. She patted his gloved hand.

"Never mind, dad, we'll find a way to the top somehow," she said brightly. "There's always a way up mountains and cliffs."

"With tackle, yes—not otherwise," Clark told her gloomily. "You needn't fool yourself, Nan. We couldn't possibly scale those ice peaks at the summit. Our only chance is to rig up some kind of signal in the hopes of being seen by the regular Jove line space traffic. Mighty slim hope down here with the mountain range hiding things, but we might make it."

Henshaw twisted his head back and stared up at the snowy height.

"Funny," he muttered. "Funny to think we waited for the thaw and didn't know it never thaws up there. In that case we might have risked getting into the ship. . . . And down here there's the nitrogen we need. . . . Some things are mighty queer. . . ."

Clark's sour look silenced him. He beat his gloves together unconcernedly and started to yodel again. His ringing cries went beating against the cliff side.

"Li-tiddly-oh-te-oh—! Gosh, is that a hot one! Listen, Nan. *YiddleyJ*"

"Oh, shut up!" Clark yelled exasperatedly. "Things are bad enough without you bursting our receivers. Lay off!"

Henshaw shrugged, then suddenly his aggrieved expression changed slightly. He looked less stupefied. Swiftly he altered his sound transmitter to maximum output.

"What's the idea?" Clark demanded, watching.

"Ha!" Henshaw wagged a huge finger. "Idea, m'lud. . . . Lishen!" And he burst forth again with a streaming cacophony of most unlovely noises, yodeling that would have struck a Swiss mountaineer stone dead.

"For Pete's sake—!" Clark howled im-

ploringly, clapping a hand over his receiver. "What the hell are you trying to do? Deafen us?"

"Nope—jush get ush out o' this mess. . . ."

Henshaw stood up, yodeled again and again with the most shattering din, sent the thundering cries rolling down the valley . . . then suddenly he twisted round sharply and stared upwards. The constant muttering of the storm-ridden heights had changed to a deeper note—the growling, crumbling thunder of sliding matter.

"Avalanche!" Clark gulped abruptly, jumping up and clutching the startled Nan. "Yes—look!" He pointed upward. Already mighty boulders of frozen snow, oxygen, nitrogen, and other nameless elements were detaching themselves, moving downwards in a vast, overpowering flood.

"It worked!" Henshaw yelled in delight, dancing clumsily. "I knew it—! My yodeling— Come on!"

SOBBERED with the intensity of the moment he led the way. As fast as they could go they went blundering away across the stones, toward the steeply overhung level of the cliff itself. Directly underneath it they would probably escape the full force of the downfall.

Not a second too soon they floundered into the welcome shelter. Behind them titanic masses of white banged and powdered and exploded with terrifying power—some were frozen air, bursting apart under the sudden warmth. Others were actual rocks.

"You—you started this, dad," Clark panted. "Your damned yodeling voice vibrations shifted the upper ice and snow peaks."

"That's what I wanted," Henshaw an-

swered complacently. "I saw it happen somewhere once—Alps, I think. A guy hollered an' a mountain fell down. Sound waves and that. I figured the ship would fall down too. Won't be hurt much with snow and lesser gravity to cushion it."

"He's right, Clark!" Nan cried breathlessly. "It might work at that. The ship *was* on the edge—"

She broke off and stared anxiously at the curtain of white hailing down outside. Clouds of white foggy dust came drifting into the retreat. . . . When at last the concussions were over they were facing a hill of white with barely room enough to scramble over the top.

Clark began to claw his way through, held down a hand to the girl and her father. Standing knee deep in snow they stared around them, amazed at the quantity of snow and ice that had dislodged.

"There!" screamed Nan suddenly. "Isn't that it? That black thing poking up?"

She didn't wait to be answered; she went floundering forward, waist deep in snow, until she gained the black protuberance nearly two hundred yards away. In a moment Henshaw and Clark were at her side.

"It's it all right," Clark acknowledged thankfully. "Came down with the snow. Saved it from damage. . . . We'll soon have this snow away." He turned quickly to Henshaw. "Nice going, dad! The moment we get this snow clear and into space you can yodel to your heart's content. . . ."

"I don't want to yodel," Henshaw mused, scooping the snow away in his gloves.

"No? What then?"

"All I want is a darned good drink. I'm fed up with these makeshift tablets. . . ."

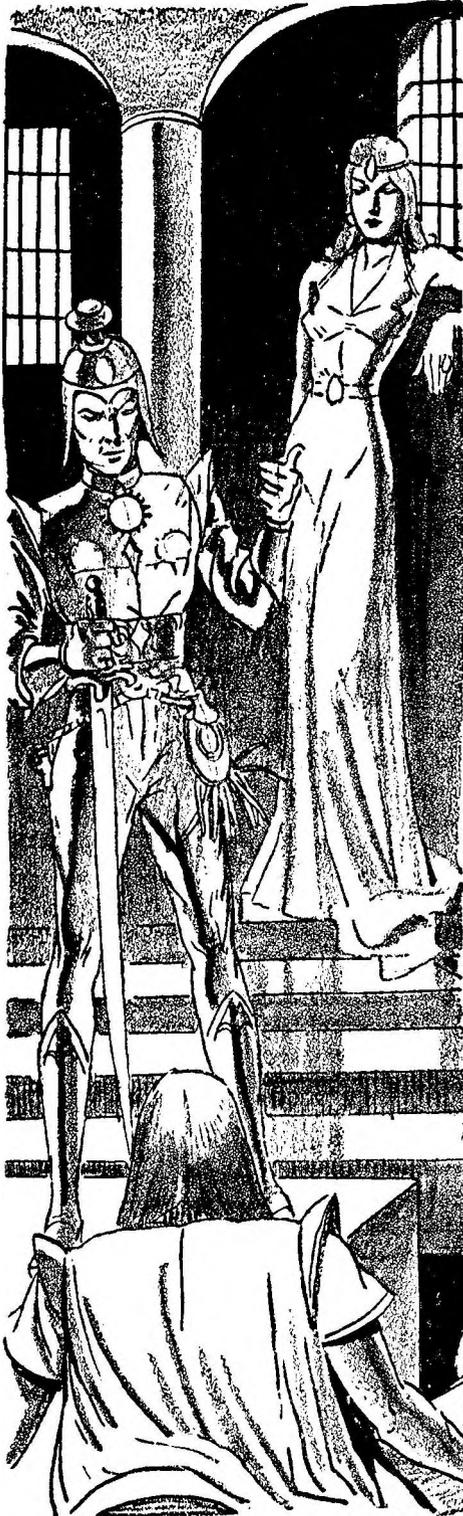
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THE PLANET THAT TIME FORGOT

By DONALD A. WOLLHEIM

Out beyond furthest Pluto, beyond pale Neptune, roared the *Stardust*. Rocketing toward the monstrous new planet that filled the heavens. Planet "P"—the colossus that Time forgot!

SHE stood upon the high battlements of the palace, overlooking the land of Toom, with sunlight splashing over the beauty and radiance of her. She, Oomith, *mataiya* of Toom. Her eyes wandered to the road that wound, ribbon-like, far beyond her land, out into the great reaches of her world, out into Nimbor.

Nimbor, whose lords even now were in session with Toom's officials, demanding the land's surrender to their superior forces. Nimbor, whose rulers offered life to the heads of Toom's commonwealth providing the *mataiya* mate with their prince.

She stood, trying to drink in the splendor of the land, for this might be a last time. What her answer would be as Directress of Internal Relations she well knew; what her answer, as woman, to Aald of Nimbor would be she knew even better. But now she must return to the council meeting.

Danuth, Head Center of Toom, was speaking as she re-entered. "What you demand, Aald of Nimbor, is the commonwealth's freedom, and our officers, in return for petty sinecures under your proposed regime. And the *mataiya* in marriage, as if it were in the power of any save she to grant that."

She did not flush as the insolent eyes of the young man across the table fell upon her, appraised, then leered approval at her. Her voice was clear and cold as she said:

"You boast loudly of your war-machine, Aald of Nimbor. You remark casually that you could crush our armies with a mere handful of men. But you say you are willing to spare our lives if we surrender without a struggle.

"In return for what do you offer us life, prince of Nimbor? Serfdom and misery for our people under Nimbor's hand; the stigma of cowardice upon us. I shall not argue with you. My answer is final: no!"

SHE glanced at Danuth, met the grim smile in his eyes. Was it possible that the careful building of decades would soon be wiped away? That the hopes and plans of Toom and her people lay helpless before the whims of this arrogant child with the lusts and appetites of a man? In Toom, he would still be a student, learning the responsibilities as well as the rights of citizenship. A coldness ran through her as she pictured Toom under his rule. Then Danuth's voice interrupted her thoughts.

"Even if the *mataiya* had not taken the initiative, my answer would still be the same. No, Aald of Nimbor, no. If you mean to enslave us, you will have to work for your victory. And, superior war-machine or not, the people of Toom will make

your triumph a hardly-bought one, if indeed you can triumph against a free people."

It was hard to keep a calm face as the prince tried first to scowl, then to sneer. If only this were the comic melodrama it should have been! But, no—if Nimbor's claims were based on fact, then there would be no more laughter for Toom and her people. Aald's tones were mockingly courteous.

"You speak well, Danuth, but your words prove your incapacity to govern anyone. What were your redoubtable Lugarth and the invincible hordes from Bhuur, of which you Toomians make so much? In whose name you still deem yourself secure from conquest? They were no more than barbarians—savages armed with spears and swords. Good fighters, I grant you, but helpless before the new warfare of which I am master.

"Do you think I am lying? This is your last chance. When you see your armies burn to cinders before your eyes, see your fields and towns incinerated, then it will be too late to bargain. Then you will come to me with pleas for peace, but I shall not hear you."

His eyes fell upon her again possessively. "Then I shall not honor you with the title of princess, Oomith of Toom. Woe to the conquered.

"You forget the matter of scientific progress, Toomians. We left your stupid notions of international relations behind long ago. If you surrender now, I guarantee the land of Toom the same care as I bestow upon Nimbor; otherwise, it shall be treated as a conquered province."

He stood up glaring. "I give you your last chance. Yield now!"

She rose lightly, as did the others, meeting his gaze with eyes steady and unafraid. "Toom does not yield. Earn your victory if you can; we are ready." A chorus of assents indicated that she spoke for all.

Aald bowed with an exaggerated gesture, swept a final lecherous glance in her direction, then withdrew as Danuth rang a bell signaling attendants. Once the other had gone, he sank back into the chair, his eyes passing from one official to another. She gripped his hand.

"Do you think he can do as he claims?"

"I greatly fear so. The reports from

our agents sound incredible—almost like wizardry. A projector that casts an invisible light, causing whomsoever it touches to die at once, as if boiling to death. If they be true, then Toom is lost."

DOWN below, in another part of the palace, the emissaries of Nimbor prepared to depart. Aald was whispering to one. What he said was scarcely understood, but the smiles on the faces of both could be taken as indicative.

"We will be waiting at the Corian Gate," said Aald in departing. The other bowed, and beckoned to two attendants of Nimbor.

An hour passed. At the Corian Gate to the palace grounds, facing the wide smooth road that led to Nimbor, a thousand miles away, rested a black, torpedo-shaped two-wheeled vehicle, now balanced by temporary legs set out from it. Painted on the door to its single cabin was the Imperial Shield of Nimbor.

Seated within, at the controls, was a man of Nimbor's party. Occasional puffs of smoke emitted from the rocket tubes at the rear as the ship was being kept ready for instant use. Aald himself waited impatiently in the road, fretting under the watchful eyes of the commonwealth guards at the gate. Finally he caught sight of something, and addressed the guards.

"They are my companions. Open the gate, guards, and let them through." He seemed to stare a moment at the oncomers, then called. "What's the matter with Eldh? Why are you carrying him?"

One of the two men approaching answered: "He slipped on a staircase and fell, Your Highness. He is unconscious and seems to have broken his leg. We thought it best to give temporary treatment now then bring him back with us; it is why we were late, Your Highness."

The prince nodded approval, motioned them to hasten. As they went through the gates, one of the Toomian guards looked down at the face of the black-covered body and checked it off his list. The men of Nimbor entered the rocketmobile, shut the door. A terrific roar as the vehicle got under way, then it had vanished down the long road.

Inside the conveyance Aald bent over the unconscious figure, looked down at the

scarred masculine features of one of the soldiers who had accompanied him. Then, with a chuckle, he put his hand on the yellow hair and pulled. The entire face seemed to fall apart. Beneath the extremely convincing mask was the face of Oomith, lying unconscious.

"It worked beautifully," he commented. "What of Eldh? Did he make his escape through the merchants' entrance as planned?"

"Yes, Highness. They suspected nothing. Nor did we have any trouble in kidnaping the *mataiya*. There were no guards by her room, and she had succumbed before she suspected the presence of a gastube. They won't know she is missing before we have arrived in the city."

Within the hour, the rocketmobile had passed the border and was in the capital of Nimbor.

IT was noon on the day set for attack. Aald and the commanders of the staff awaited the emperor's coming within a small enclosure just inside the walls of Nimbor. Outside, in the road beyond the open gate, a rocket vehicle awaited in readiness to take them to the front. Oomith was there as well.

"You see," drawled Aald, "we make good our boast. Very soon you will be joined by Danuth and the other commonwealth officials as our prisoner. You really should have married me when you had the chance; it would have saved many lives."

Oomith stared at him frostily. "The people of Toom would never have yielded to such filth as you, even had we betrayed them. It would have made no difference. We of Toom have self respect and honor to a degree that I fear is outside of your understanding."

His laugh was not pleasant. "Still prattling over your little foolishness. Honor, respect—what are they to the destinies of nations and dynasties? Such delusions are hardly worthy of the Oomith I might have married."

He seized a scroll from one of the officers standing nearby, shook it before her. "Here! Here is honor and respect. Here is such a thing as makes greatness. These are the designs of our war machines; this is what will teach the Toomians respect."

Without answering, Oomith snatched the

paper cylinder out of Aald's hand and darted forward. Straight toward the open gate she fled, toward the rocketmobile outside. A wild, insane scheme of seizing this and escaping to her own land in time possessed her.

Caught off guard, the men were already at a disadvantage; they knew even as they raced she could not be caught before reaching the gate. With energy born of desperation, she hurled herself forward. But, just as she was upon it, two soldiers stepped through and dashed at her.

At this point occurred what has gone down in history as the miracle that saved Toom. It is something for which no parallel in all history can be found. It caused Oomith to rise from the status of a beautiful and capable *mataiya* to that of a goddess.

Oomith stated later what were her feelings and experiences. She saw the two oncoming soldiers quite clearly. Her only thought then was to dash between them. Then, there came a terrible shock. An awful jolting as if she had been struck by a thunderbolt. The scene before her eyes dissolved instantaneously into a featureless gray; she felt herself seemingly detached as one might feel in the throes of delirium. For only a few seconds the strange sensation lasted. The only thing that she remembered seeing was the momentary impression of a single vision hanging before her eyes.

What she saw was a man. She does not recollect how he was clad. He seemed to be sitting on a bench. Behind him she saw distinctly a blue wall, in nature, metallic. In the wall was an open door through which only grayness could be seen. The face of the man was held close to hers; he seemed to be staring at her. It was the face of a middle-aged man, of one powerful. Two clear brown eyes looked into hers; a mass of wavy chestnut hair surmounted the godlike brow. And the figure was smiling.

For only the minutest fraction of a second this lasted, then the grayness returned. Yet, in a few seconds, it, too, had cleared away. The terrible blankness and queer feeling vanished abruptly as it had come. She could again see about her.

The castle of Aald and the men of Nimbor apparently had dissolved. Above her

rose the sides of the palace of the Directors of Toom. And about her were the men of Toom. For a moment, Oomith, and the men stared at one another, each mutually startled and disbelieving what they saw. Finally one of them recovered sufficiently to speak.

"*Mataiya* Oomith! We thought you were being held captive in Nimbor; what do you here? How did you get here?"

She could only reply hesitatingly: "I don't know. I was at Nimbor, trying to escape. Then everything went dark, and I found myself standing here." She started to put a hand to her forehead, then saw she was holding something. The scroll! Her eyes flashed.

"Quick! Summon the council. I have here the plans for the death machine of Nimbor. Bid them hurry. We have no time to lose!"

JORIS, military director of Toom, pounded the table with his fist. "Damn! We know everything the enemy knows, now. We have the plans so that we can meet them on their own terms. But they're on their way to attack us now, and we haven't even a working model. It's all here—but only on paper.

"We can save Toom, yes—but we cannot prevent the devastation of our fields and towns, nor the slaughter of our helpless non-combatants. We can only exact a vengeance and prevent a final triumph on the part of the enemy!"

Before Danuth could speak, a man burst into the chamber, hair disheveled, gasping for breath. On his face was an expression of amazement and joy commingled. Twice he tried to speak and could emit only gasps for breath. He clasped the shoulders of Joris, turned to the others. At length speech returned to him, and he spoke slowly, deliberately.

"The weapons of Nimbor are ours. They are here, within the walls of the palace. I cannot tell you how they came, nor can any of the guards. But we have all seen them, have examined their workings. We do not yet understand their principles—"

At this point, another man burst in, equally distraught and out of breath. "Directors!" he cried. "Toom is saved!" He fell to rapid, heavy breathing while his eyes sought first one, then another of those as-

sembled. He waved his hand reassuringly as Danuth started to speak.

"No, Directors, I speak truly. I am one of the prison guards. We suddenly heard noises from one of the unoccupied cells. Naturally, we hurried over and looked in. Inside, we saw Aald and the Emperor of Nimbor, with his entire staff. They don't know how they got there—I presumed that you would not want us to release them immediately."

A roar of laughter from Joris greeted the speaker. He smote the guard on the back with the palm of his huge hand, so that the fellow staggered against the table.

"No, not *immediately!* We have other things to do first. But we're not too busy to vote you the order of the commonwealth. And see if there isn't a better position for you to fill than that of prison guard."

He turned to the others. "The enemy will be completely disorganized and demoralized by this. I propose we move at once upon Nimbor, attack strategic points and refrain as much as possible from such destruction as will make miserable the lot of the Nimborian people, who are not responsible for their degenerate rulers. I propose we make contacts with the Nimborian commoners and urge them immediately to revolt against what is left of the Aald-Rhankur regime, strike for their own freedom."

(And now, we must go back in time, must travel to another part of space. We must leave Planet P, where lie Nimbor and Toom, for a return to Earth-time. Only thus can we have a logical understanding of the events related above.)

II

AT an angle above the plane of the ecliptic over the orbits of the asteroids was a long metal craft, resembling somewhat a cross between a towerless submarine and an all-metal zeppelin. In the forward cabin, six men were gathered. They comprised the entire crew and command of the vessel. Although an official meeting, there was about it none of the stiffness that marks such an event in military circles on Earth: on an interplanetary vessel every man's life is in the hands of every other man. The captain is obeyed,

not because of his rank, primarily, but because the lives of all depend upon explicit conformation to discipline. But in this vital discipline, there is no place for the sham of stiff-necked formality; thus, captain, officer, or member of the crew spoke to each other with frankness and mutual respect.

Captain Wanderman looked around, mentally checking to see if all were present: Lieutenant Alfred Rokesmith; Weber, the scientist; Opp, explorer and cook extraordinary; Mullins, skilled mechanical specialist; Barth, doctor and general overseer of vital supplies.

Wanderman smiled. "I guess you're all eager to find out whither we're heading, eh?"

"We sure would," spoke up Opp.

"Especially after that terrifically long period of acceleration," added Weber. "Three days of it . . . beats all my experience."

"It was necessary to achieve our speed. We're going a long way . . . have to make the trip as short as possible. We'll be putting on still more acceleration once the asteroids are behind us."

"Neptune?" asked Barth. "Pluto?"

"Farther than either."

"You don't mean Planet P, do you?" spoke up Mullins. "The one that was discovered last year, that hasn't been given a name yet?"

"Right!"

"I never did get quite clear on the subject of Planet P," drawled Rokesmith. "Just how was it discovered?"

Captain Wanderman cleared his throat. "Few people are; even the experts don't know much about it.

"Its existence was first surmised and calculated in 1931—about a hundred years ago—by Professor William H. Pickering of Jamaica. He observed that the planet Uranus was being displaced from its proper orbit. Of course, this perturbation could be due only to the influence of another planet, he thought. But there was no other body known at that time which could account for the drag. Thus, the Professor computed mathematically the existence, approximate size, and position of an unknown body which would account for the odd behavior of Uranus. This he calculated to be a giant planet of a diameter

of approximately 44,000 miles, in mass the third greatest in the solar system. He puts its distance to range in an elliptical orbit of from 5,000 million miles to 9,000 million miles from the sun. This, of course, made it extra-Plutonian in position. Its year would be in length about 656 Earthly years. He gave it the temporary name of Planet P.

"Planet P's existence was further indicated by the orbits of some sixteen comets, also affected by a drag which the theoretical planet made perfectly accountable. Last year the planet Neptune had finally arrived in the position where it, too, would be affected by this body. You understand: the astronomers, calculating both known and theoretical factors, determined that, if this Planet P existed, an irregularity in Neptune's behavior would be discovered at this particular time. The predicted irregularity arrived on time; thus, due to this added information, our astronomers were able to find out precisely where the new planet should be sought. And they found it. It is indeed an immense thing, shows a perceptible disc even at its great distance from Earth. We may anticipate something different when we arrive."

DAYS went by. Endless days marked only by the chronometer in the unchanging blackness of the celestial void. The tiny pinpoints of myriad stars glowed unchangingly. Behind them, a few planets grew more and more minute, each in turn finally being blotted out by the corona of the sun. Jupiter's orbit was left behind; they saw the great ringed planet loom up to one side and fade away as all the others had done. But this was not with the flashing speed of objects and cities passing the rocket-vehicle on Earth. It was a matter of days before each change could be realized, weeks before a planet filled the entire spaceports.

Onward and outward. Celebrations when at last Uranus was passed, the hitherto outpost of interplanetary exploration. Eventually pale Neptune, mysterious planet, passed under them, directly in their path, its great misty, frigid sphere glowing eerily in the twilight of outer worlds.

Outward. Tiny Pluto was too far off to be seen, but its orbit was passed. For a hundred years, the outpost of the solar

system. Now dethroned by the enormous newcomer, its passing was still a solemn moment. Then, one day Barth observed a tiny light where no light should be. Celebration again rang through the vessel: Planet P was sighted!

Days of deceleration followed. The rockets flamed, but no longer from the stern of the vessel. Days of a continual blasting from the vessel's prow until at last the unbelievable acceleration was neutralized. Now the planet had grown, until, even with their greatly decreased speed, it filled the view. Still more blasting until the ship was virtually drifting along, caught only by the gravity of the monstrous new world.

A great disk glowing dimly in the light of the stars, especially in the light of one particularly brilliant star that was the Earthmen's sun. The vaguest hints of geological features could be seen. Planet P.

The rockets flared again in an intricate pattern. Balanced on the pattern, the ship was lowered, slowly, into the atmosphere of the strange world. About it flamed a red glow as proof of atmosphere. An atmosphere, doubtless, of some unknown gases that would not congeal in the awful cold. And, finally, a shrill whistling penetrating the triple-thick walls, a dull thud, and a silence as she came to rest.

The voyage was over. Man had reached the outermost limits of the solar system, had arrived safely at the mysterious outer world, Planet P.

THE men gathered in space suits. "Each man will take searchlights and emergency rations. You will obey Lieutenant Rokesmith and myself implicitly; only on pledges of such obedience from all of you can I permit a planet-party to land."

Each member of the crew spoke his agreement.

"Mullins, take a coil of rope; Weber, the barometer and compass; Barth, the camera and flash. Are you sure your gravity controls are adjusted to decrease your weight to Earth normal? Make sure, everyone—that goes for me, too."

"Check!"

Rokesmith turned the lever and swung the thick outer port open. Wanderman stepped out onto the ground; the others followed.

Above them was a deep blue sky strewn with stars, though lacking in the abundant distribution of the outer void. Beneath their feet lay a clay-like expanse. They looked about them.

There was something dark looming up in the starlight a distance away. The captain started off in that direction, beckoned the others to follow. All felt that strange sensation that comes for everyone when he stands on the terrain of an alien planet. It makes no difference how often this experience has been undergone previously; the sensation cannot be shaken off.

"It looks like a wall," sang out Opp as they reached the looming thing.

Rokesmith turned the beam of his flashlight on it. "It is a wall!"

UNMISTAKABLY, it was a structure made of many square blocks of stone fitted together to form a section rising into the air from a foundation. Weber flashed his light around. "It ends here."

The men hesitated to go around. What could this enigmatic wall be doing on this frigid world? The instruments showed the temperature to be many hundred degrees below zero Fahrenheit. What beings could have built this great wall? What could it mean?

But at last they did go around the edifice, flashing their lights before them. And nearly collapsed from the shock of what they saw: a broad paved street on which bordered many stone houses whose glass windows reflected the dim glow of the stars above. The tiny sun cast a faint illumination on it all.

"People!" gasped Mullins.

There were. Standing on the streets and in the doors of the houses were the dim figures of men. Unmistakably human in form.

"They're not alive," observed Rokesmith.

"At least, they are not moving," replied Barth quickly.

"Come on, then. Why are we waiting? Are you afraid of a lot of statues?" Captain Wanderman suited action to his words as he strode forward, stopping directly before the first of the standing figures. He cast his beam over it from head to foot.

Unmistakably, it was a man. Clad in clothes and undeniably human. Its features were perfectly normal, bore the flush of

life. The feet and entire body were set in attitude as if in the act of taking a step. But it was motionless.

"Some statue!" breathed Opp. "I would swear it was a real man."

"It is a real man," said Barth, softly. He bent close to the face. "It has the pores and tiny hairs that can only be on a true body."

"Then he must have been alive once," murmured Weber. "What do you suppose happened to him? Is he petrified or only frozen solid?"

"Frozen, I think," said Barth. "Yet, it is very strange. His flesh is still soft and resilient; it is not natural."

"A land of frozen people!" Captain Wanderman's words struck a chilling note in all of them. Quickly they investigated the other figures. Some men, some women, some old, some young. All kinds and types; all apparently had been frozen solid in the middle of their normal activities. None showed any sign of being aware that death had struck. When the terrible freezing occurred it must have happened so swiftly, instantaneously, as to have caught all unaware.

They moved on, saying little. There was that same eerie atmosphere that one finds in a wax museum while passing about among the realistic but silent and motionless figures of apparently ordinary people. Add to that the grim knowledge that the figures they now saw had been alive, that in effect the explorers were in a monstrous, planet-wide graveyard.

They went on, coming to wide roads down which lines of marching men stood silently in attitudes startlingly like some paintings of men marching to war. Undoubtedly they were soldiers. Once or twice along the line, the Earthmen saw huge projector-like instruments mounted on wheels, being taken along with the marchers.

"Say, look at this scene!" called out Rokesmith.

He was standing before an open gate, staring in at the courtyard of a large, pretentious stone building. Before the gate stood two guards who evidently had been frozen just as they were turning about to stare in through the entrance. On their faces was a look of aroused inquiry. Inside the courtyard was a dramatic tableau.

A YOUNG woman of great beauty was fixed in the posture of running. Her foot was lifted from the ground, her body thrust forward, her face strained, hair flowing backwards as if the wind were brushing it back. In one hand, tightly grasped, was a scroll.

Directly behind her stood a young man with a look of astonishment and anger on a face that was cruel and evil. His hand was still held outstretched as if to grasp after the scroll that the woman was fleeing with. All about, in similar positions of astonishment and anxiety, were other men, some of whom had started forward as if about to commence a pursuit.

"Some scene, eh?" murmured Barth. "Looks real dramatic. I wish we could know what it was all about."

"That's an idea!" burst from Wanderman. "Why didn't I think of it sooner? Barth! We can use the mentascope on these frozen people—with the attachments that are used to read the minds of the newly dead, can't we?"

"I think we can, Captain. These people are perfectly preserved; there's no reason why we can't shoot a current through their brains and get the information stored there."

They turned, commenced to retrace their steps to the ship. It took them about ten minutes to reach the street by which they had entered the city and come to the vessel. Once inside, they hastened to unpack the mentascope and its attendant apparatus. When at last they were ready, they left the airlock and started back; the return to the ship had taken them about twenty minutes.

They entered the street of the city they had first chanced upon. As they passed the first figure, Weber suddenly whirled around and stared at it.

"Look! Stop and look at this man!"

The others gathered around.

"Does he look the same to you? It seems to me that it was his other leg which was being put forward when last we saw him. I'm sure his arms were in a different position."

They stared amazedly. The figure certainly was not in the identical posture as before. Weber's observations had been correct.

"All the rest of them seem to be planted

in slightly different postures, too."

Captain Wanderman bent down, studied the arm of the man carefully. He remained silent for some time, then he stood up. There was a tone of awe and bewilderment in his voice when he spoke.

"It has moved, and what is more, it is still moving. I saw that hand pass a given point on the body of the person in a few minutes. It's like watching the hands of a clock. At first, they do not seem to move at all, but if you watch closely enough for a time, you can observe the motion."

"Do you mean this fellow is still alive?"

"It would seem so."

"But why the slow motion?" asked Opp.

"I think," said the captain slowly, "that the mentascope can help us answer the whole business."

They came to the courtyard of the running woman. The tableau had changed; it seemed as if a few seconds had passed since they left. Now the figure of the woman was closer to the gate; the two guards from outside had passed through and were going forward to seize her, while the men behind were in full running appearance, as if, having recovered from a surprise move, they were taking to pursuit.

"All right men: set down the apparatus."

Two men set down a small battery, attached it to wires leading from a large metal helmet which another was placing over the head of the still woman-figure. Other wires were attached to the space-suit helmet worn by Captain Wanderman. Through the glassite panes it could be seen that he was wearing a somewhat similar helmet himself, having donned this while back on the ship.

A CURRENT of electrical energy was passed from an electrode pressed against one particular part of the woman's head through to another leading out. In passing through the brain of the woman, this current picked up the last and deepest occurrences in the life of the person subjected to it. It activated the cells on which these events were recorded in a form much like that of a charged body. Passing out of the brain, it carried these impressions with it and brought them to the mind of the operator as distinct thoughts. Since basic thoughts are not expressed in any language save impressions and pictures, the

operator finds that he has suddenly acquired the knowledge of the other.

Thus, in a brief time, Wanderman told the men of the story concerning Nimbor and Toom, of the *mataiya's* part in the drama. The men stood in wonder, staring at the figures; Opp calmly walked over to Aald and tweaked his nose. The Nimborian's expression did not change.

"I still can't grasp why these people are all like frozen statues," exclaimed Barth. "How can they live and act like everyday terrestrials when this planet is so lacking in heat and light?"

"I think I can explain," said Wanderman. "It sounds fantastic, but it is not impossible. And it would account for all the factors. I'll tell you when we get back to the ship: right now we have work to do."

"What work?"

"We can't stand around and do nothing while this woman is captured. And I, for one, do not care to see these sneering degenerates win this war.

"So I think we'll take over events on this planet for a while and fix things to suit ourselves. We can easily move these figures if we adjust our gravity belt to take care of the extra weight. Every man grab one person; I'll take Oomith. Roke-smith, you take Aald; Weber, grab the emperor, and you others pick out those who look important, who appear like staff officers. And don't forget the mentascope."

In a moment each man was burdened with a native of Planet P swinging over his shoulder. Thus burdened they marched through the center of Nimbor, through the columns of the motionless army, back to the spaceship. Several times they would have to halt and rest because of the irrepressible laughter that broke out, among them. Imagine earthly problems being solved like this!

In the ship, they dumped the Nimborians in a spare storehouse, while the *mataiya* was propped up on a seat in one of the cabins. The ship's course was set for the general direction of Toom.

"YOU men understand what is meant by time?" began Wanderman as the crew gathered around. "It is the flow of events. It is the way we conceive things

happening. We place an arbitrary measurement of time by using the period it takes our planet to rotate once on its axis. That is a day. Dividing the day into sections, we get hours, minutes, and seconds. To us, a second is a very short space of time.

"We move and live at a certain rate of speed: our heart pumps about 72 beats per minute. Our senses perceive a thing in a certain space of time. Small as it may appear, it actually requires time for your eye to see an object or for your hearing to function. Also for an impression of feeling to travel from the skin to the brain and to be recognized.

"To these people of Planet P, their world appears as one delightful to live in. For them a bright warm sun shines in a blue sky. For them life moves at as quick a pace as it does for us on Earth. Their day is approximately 24 hours also. To us, it may appear to be as long as 656 Earth days, since their world requires 656 Earth days to complete one of its days, and I am figuring in proportion. To them, a day is no longer than to us. Ten and four-fifths hours to us is only one of their minutes.

"That is why they live so slowly; they are living at a different time-rate than ours. Time moves for them exactly 656 times more slowly than it does for us.

"They could not possibly live at our pace. For, to us, Planet P is terribly cold; the sun is but little more than a bright star. But when they see the sun, it takes 656 times longer before they observe it. Thus, they actually get a time exposure. You know that if you want to take a picture at night you must leave the lens open for a long time; the longer it is open, the brighter the picture appears. Thus with them: they see the sun as a brilliant ball; they see objects as highly illuminated because their eyes are absorbing so much more light than are ours.

"Thus their bodies are not cold and frozen: of a makeup to conform with the time-rate on this planet, their bodies absorb and hold the heat radiated by the sun until it appears to be hot. If you examine any of these bodies now without your gloves, you will notice that they are as warm as ours.

"These people seem to be motionless, or

at least moving extremely slowly. To them, they are moving at a normal pace. Here is where the size of this planet comes in: under the huge gravity of this world, they could not move fast. Their bodies must normally weigh a terrific amount. That was another factor working in their evolution toward the strange rate of time-flow."

Wanderman left the room. He went back to where he had placed Oomith seated upright in a cabin. Seating himself directly before her eyes, he stared into them. He fixed himself motionless as possible, remained unmoving until the ship was ready to come to a halt at its destination. Before he left, he had the satisfaction of noticing the *mataiya's* pupils had finally focused on his; he felt certain that some impression would be carried back with her.

LANDING at Toom, they placed Oomith where she was later to regain control of her senses. They carried Aald and the others down to the dungeons, imprisoning them there. Then they returned to the ship.

One more task remained: the war machines of Nimbor. Cruising over the enemy lines, they dropped cables whenever they saw a projector and attached them. Then they swung them up into the air, letting them hang below until all had been thus captured. Once more they returned to Toom, this time to place the projectors where they would be found quickly.

The nature of the "burning death" of Nimbor they found to be simple. It was nothing more or less than electric heaters, such as are sold in winter on Earth. A polished reflector sent a beam of heat from the wire coil in the center. To a terrestrial, of course, this was nothing more than a pleasantly warm current; but to a native of Planet P, with their slower perceptions and great absorption of tiny amounts of heat, it was a ray of pure destruction.

Thus, for a brief instant in the history of the cosmos, two similar races and life forms met, the one greatly altering the course of development the other would take. Although a few well-guarded expeditions to Planet P have been made since, the Terrestrial Council is slow to permit these, inasmuch as the gross difference in time-rate cannot permit fair intercourse with its people. It is felt in scientific circles that for them to learn of the existence of a race such as ours would be a crushing psychological blow to them; to interfere, however well-meaningly, in their development would condemn them to superstition, for they could arrive at no logical, scientific explanation of such interference.

Planet P is not needed for the comfort or well-being of Earth. The Patrol is there watching, ready to step in in cases of natural cosmic emergency, but at other times gives the world a wide berth.

And Captain Wanderman will always remember the tableau in the courtyard, and a beautiful woman running.

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HERMIT OF SATURN'S RING

By NEIL R. JONES

The creeping, evil white fog of Saturn's ring. . . . All but old Jasper had been its flesh-devoured victim. Now, alone aboard a coffin-ship, the space Crusoe waited for the return of the swirling, invincible death!

OLD Jasper Jezzan passed his fingers through the locks of his graying hair and stared from the port of the space ship at the awful approaching grandeur of Saturn's rings. The third and outermost ring, their destination, loomed toweringly. He thanked his lucky stars that he was living in this twenty-fourth century which saw mankind pushing back the boundaries of the unexplored solar system with exploits of space pioneering. In his younger years, Jasper had been on the first expedition to Mars. Now, both Mars and Venus were being colonized. Jasper had figured in many strange adventures on both worlds as well as on several of Jupiter's satellites and the asteroids. Saturn was still virgin territory.

Jasper had lately passed his three score and ten, but the spirit of adventure still burned in his hardy frame. Again he thanked the fates that he was permitted to be among the first to gaze at the glorious majesty of the great rings at this close distance. He had joined Grenard's expedition as a tried and experienced hand, and he knew that the City of Fomar was to try and thread a passage through more than fifty miles of tiny moonlets.

The City of Fomar commenced passing stray, outer moonlets while still several miles from the main band, several of them larger than the space ship and rough in contour. It was like entering a forest whose trees are less numerous as one approaches. The moonlets in the ring itself were rounded and smooth from bumping contact. Through a slight attraction of gravity, the tinier pieces clung to the largest bodies. The ship plunged deeper into the mass. Every man stood at his appointed post, yet watched the marvelous phenomena without. Jasper's was a lonesome duty at this time. It was his shift in the air rejuvenating chamber, else this story might never have been told or had

fallen to the lot of a younger man. Unaware of what was impending, Jasper had looked his last upon the faces of his fellow adventurers, alive or dead. He turned a wary old eye to the gauges, and then turned his attention back to the unfolding mysteries of Saturn's ring.

The space ship of the Grenard expedition plunged ever deeper into the slowly revolving mass of moonlets. Sunlight became almost constantly eclipsed and less brilliant. Shadows, as always in space, were dark and sharp-edged. The light finally yielded to ever-increasing periods of darkness, and lights from the City of Fomar glowed through the deepening gloom. The City of Fomar occasionally bumped a moonlet in making a narrow passage, sending the fragment bumping against its neighbors in what appeared to be an endless relay of inertia without a retarding influence of any kind.

EVER deeper they penetrated into the depths of the ring. Without receiving a summoning buzz, Jasper tuned in upon the observation room where the officials of the expedition were gathered.

"There must be trillions of these little moons!"

That was Commander Grigsby. It was Grenard who replied.

"That, easy."

"What is that white fog over there?"

"What fog—the white moonlet?"

"No—it's not a moonlet. See how it changes shape—and it is misty."

"Why, yes, it's like smoke, and it's drifting this way."

"See it stretch out, almost as if it were alive. What can it be?"

"Dust."

This was an under officer.

"Without any atmosphere to float it?" Grigsby's voice was mildly derisive.

"It's breaking up."



D
-40-

Jasper had traveled the space lanes too much of his life not to sense something unusual. He went to the port and looked out, putting his head to one side of the port for an oblique view. The phenomenon was directly ahead. He could not see it. Inwardly, he chafed a bit. He listened for further detail.

"What makes it move?"

"Tell me what it is, first."

"It can't be alive!"

"The ship attracts it! The cloud is breaking up into separate parts!"

Again Jasper looked out, and he saw some of the strange stuff. It was like white smoke and possessed a volition of its own. He could no more imagine what substance made it up than he could account for its movement. It seemed almost to be alive, yet the idea was absurd even to Jasper Jezzan who had seen many strange things. This was a strange new element or combination of elements behaving strangely in this outer ring of Saturn. The rings themselves were phenomenal. The cloud turned from white to gray as it expanded to show dim contours of moonlets behind it. Again, it seemed to compress, appearing like a sluggish liquid or a solid.

"Here comes more of the clouds!"

"And more! Look! There! There! And all around!"

"They are merging together!"

"A part is dividing itself! See—it is splitting up!"

Bewilderment and awe expressed itself in the voices of the expeditionary heads. Jasper felt a tingle of excitement as he watched the queer antics of the unnatural material. He saw it gathering about the space ship. His port of observation went suddenly a translucent gray, and he could see nothing. He peered into the depth of that white mass separated from him by ten inches of crystal. It was like looking into dense smoke or a concentrated fog. Muffled knockings and other unaccountable sounds were heard upon the hull of the City of Fomar.

"We're not moving as fast!" Jasper heard Commander Grigsby exclaim. He detected a note of uneasiness in the voice.

"Can it be that damnable white stuff holding us back?"

"I don't know—but wait! The ports

on this side of the ship are commencing to clear!"

There followed a significant pause. Jasper strained his ears for further reports. His own port was still obscured.

"Grigsby—see those long strands of the stuff, like cables! It has us fastened to the moonlets!"

"More power!" the commander ordered.

A FAINT, soft sighing of the hull over his head drew Jasper's eyes back to the port. He saw a white contour slide away. He looked out and saw that long, cobwebbed strands of the mist showed a remarkable adhesion and tensile strength in holding the City of Fomar to the surrounding moonlets. With the application of greater power, Jasper saw the attached moons join in the forward progress of the space ship and pass the background of further bodies. He saw moonlets collide, felt the slight deviation of the ship and heard jarring concussions of impact as the City of Fomar struck bodies in its passage. Then once more the port was covered, whiter and denser than before. From the excited comment in the observation room, he realized that conditions there were the same. The knocking and pounding mystified them all. Then a new note of alarm rose from the control room.

"It's getting into the airlock! A long, thin stream of it is pouring in like a jet of steam!"

"There must be a weak spot in the outer door!" said Grenard excitedly.

"Without a pressure of air in the chamber, the outer door is never securely fastened! We'll fill it!"

Jasper heard his name called.

"Aye, sir!"

"Put a good head of air into the lock!"

The old man sprang to the controls and heard the air go hissing through pipes on its way to the airlock.

"That damned stuff is still coming in!"

"But not so fast!"

"The air is leaking out!"

"It's driving the mist away outside!"

"Now—the door is tight!"

"The white stuff inside the lock is expanding!"

Jasper was given a sudden order to stop the air. He never did know why. No one lived to tell him. He heard many

voices risen in alarm, too mixed and garbled to understand little more than the fact that the inner door had been forced. And then the outer one once more yielded. The white stuff was coming inside, and the air was leaving the ship. This last fact Jasper's horrified eyes took in at the gauges.

Sharp cries and awful screams came to him, screams which shuddered, were muffled and cut off short. This did not last very long. Soon, an ominous silence reigned. The white mist still veiled the port, and it was inside the ship, too. Jasper pulled himself together and ran down the corridor to close off that part of the ship. Too late. The white mist already curled along the floor and walls of the corridor exploringly in substantial volume. As if it felt his presence, it spread alarmingly fast in his direction the minute he stopped halfway down the corridor in dismay. A veil of the awful material streamed smokily across the ceiling and waved a curling pedicle almost in his face. An unnameable fear blanched Jasper's reason momentarily, but the old space mariner and explorer took a grip on his nerves. He turned and ran back into the atmosphere chamber. The white mist had gathered from the walls, ceiling and floor of the corridor, and he saw it coming for him slowly at first, yet with gathering momentum.

In the atmosphere chamber, he gave the main air trunk valve a quick turn which shut it off. Then he seized a space suit hanging near by and leaped inside an empty air tank just as the ball of white mist came charging madly out of the corridor at him. A shivering seized him, and it was not born of fear. A coldness was rapidly filling the ship. The air was leaving it. He found himself gasping and was glad he had turned off the main trunk. He was in darkness, having swiftly closed the hatch cover of the tank against entrance by the white menace. He turned the inside valve of the tank, feeling in the dark for it. He felt about and found the space suit; then suddenly reeled drunkenly bumping his head against the metal wall of the tank. He felt strangely exhilarated and light headed. He had given the tank too much air. This was oxygen intoxication and dangerous in his circumstances.

He fumbled about and found the valve again which he turned off. Then he collapsed as everything went giddy. But here lay death from coldness, and Jasper knew he must get into the space suit. His muscles were stiff and balky from the cold temperature which was dropping lower all the time. But he got the space suit on and started its normal air supply and heat to functioning. Not until then did he give way to the strain upon him. From a half-sitting position, he fell over sideways on the floor of the tank utterly unconscious.

II

JASPER JEZZAN never knew how long he lay in that air tank unconscious inside his space suit. It seemed to have been little longer than minutes, yet it might have been hours. In the dark, he took stock of himself and the situation, collecting his thoughts. Death rode that ship, the ravaging white doom its master. He wondered if anyone else had escaped. He had a subtle intuition of the cloudy menace still waiting outside. He wondered what malignant properties it held against a man in a space suit. He had no intention of putting the question to the test as long as he could hold out. He decided to wait patiently and see if the dread mist would leave the ship. Somehow, he was able to feel its presence outside the tank, roaming about, searching the City of Fomar out of which the air had drained to be wasted away into space among the moonlets.

He turned on the body lights of the space suit to relieve the monotony of the gloom and focus his thoughts upon something tangible, something he could see, although the inside of the tank with its inner valves and their controls were familiar to him. He arose and drained the tank of air. It would be necessary to at least reduce the pressure before he opened the door of the tank.

Then he sat down in the tank and waited, changing position from time to time. There was a strange affinity between this white mist and a subtle sixth sense, for Jasper realized with relief when the stuff had gone. Yet he was cautious, opening the tank door slowly and peering out. The ship's lights were still lit both

inside and out. The first thing he did was to peer from the port. The City of Fomar was drifting among the moonlets. One of them almost touched the ship up front. He saw no sign of the ghostly material which had forced a way into the ship. He felt sure that it was all gone. Then Jasper made a test, although he was almost certain of the result beforehand. He took a box of polishing powder down from a rack, removing the cover and letting a bit sift out. The motes did not drift to the floor, they fell like stones. As Jasper had suspected, the air was all gone from the ship.

He walked slowly down the corridor and to the fore, through the control room and into the observation chamber. He was prepared for the sight of death but not so complete and horribly efficient. White bones and skulls lay on the floor. The white mist had absorbed the flesh and articles of clothing. He moved one of the bones with his foot and was startled to see the indentation left by his metal shoe. He stooped and picked up a femur. It crumbled to bits in his hand. What awful entity or form of life was this cloudy mist of Saturn's ring? He wandered slowly about the ship and discovered more crumbly bones as the chilling suspicion of the truth struck him. He was the last man, the only man, alive on the ship.

He went into the control room to look over the mechanism, wondering how he was ever going to guide the space ship out of the ring single handed. His wonder was put to rest. He found all electrical equipment and instruments wrecked irreparably. Examination of them confirmed his suspicions. Proximity with the white mist had upset and destroyed them as completely as if a lightning bolt had darted through the ship. He was alone on a derelict and lost in Saturn's ring.

Jasper grimly hung on to his nerves. Things weren't so bad as they might be. There was enough food and drink aboard to last him a lifetime. The air machines functioned smoothly. He could shut off one or two chambers of the ship and manage to live. He dared not think too much of the future, of living out the rest of his life a solitary prisoner in Saturn's ring. Grenard's plans of entering the third ring on his way to the planet's satellite, Dione,

had been known, of course, on all three worlds, but chances of anyone coming through the outer ring at this particular point, even if they were looking for the lost expedition, were almost non-existent. He realized with a sinking feeling that the ship's system of communication had been disrupted.

HE became hungry. He found food stores and took them back to the air tank. He also found a radium heater and installed it for heat and light. Then he carried in bedding and other basic comforts of life. He would have to live there until he could fit up and seal off chambers of the ship. There were three principal sections of the City of Fomar which were built to be sealed in case of emergency. The blow had fallen so quickly, and the deadliness of the white horror had been so unexpected and devastating that no refuge had been taken. Jasper intended shutting off and using that section of the ship including the atmosphere chamber and supply rooms.

From time to time, he looked out among the moonlets for a trace of the white mist returning, but all was quiet and unmoving. He turned off the lights of the City of Fomar. He wanted to save power, at least until he knew where he stood and whether conservation was necessary. As for the misty material, he recalled the luminous, ghostly qualities it had evidenced in the distance where moonlets had blocked the lights from the ship.

Fitting up the chosen section of the ship for habitation was a longer job than Jasper had previously figured. The white mist had wreaked havoc which he had not originally noticed. Many substances such as leather, felt and other products of organic origin had been either absorbed or damaged in part by the strange white entity that lived in space, and Jasper found many items of repair, replacement and substitution requiring long work with what he had to do with before the chambers could be closed off and made safely habitable.

There were chronometers undamaged by the coming of the white mist, and Jasper preserved them carefully and maintained their functions. He was more than two weeks of earth time in rehabilitating

that part of the ship in which he had chosen to live out his lonely existence. Another five weeks were employed in the long corridor leading from the atmosphere chamber where he constructed an air lock. Jasper kept a sharp eye ready, even rigging up an electrical sounder alarm for his sleeping hours, but the white mist did not return during these weeks of his labors. Jasper, however, was prepared. He felt that the radium ray ejectors he had ready would do something to that white mist. He did not want to let the stuff get in its first blow and catch him unawares. He still recalled with a shudder how he had found a wooden door of a small clothes closet smashed to splinters by the compressed and concentrated blows given it by the white menace. Behind the wreckage of the door he had found the crumbling bones of Holman, a firm friend of Jasper's on the trip to Saturn. Jasper had been more fortunate in choosing the strong air tank.

In the long months which passed, the white mist did not return, and old Jasper Jezzan lived his lonely life aboard the derelict. He occasionally left the City of Fomar in space suit but never went far among the moonlets, even though he left the ship's lights blazing to guide him back again. When the lights were not on, everything was black and cheerless outside—no starlight, just space closely filled with floating moonlets. Jasper knew that once these unnumbered legions of tiny bodies had been a satellite of Saturn which had broken up. On his little excursions, he always carried one of the radium ray ejectors to use in case the white peril should return and catch him outside.

He made an interesting discovery on one of these trips. He was chipping the side of a moonlet when his helmet came in contact with the body. His chipping at the moonlet in a curious search for minerals produced an unnatural sound. He hit it again and again, and then he suddenly realized that the little moon was hollow. He marked it and went about looking for others. He found but three more among the hundreds surrounding the space ship. He could only hazard one possibility. The interior of the satellite had still been molten when it broke up under the strong, tidal attraction from Saturn. There had been

occasional thick bubbles which had cooled.

For want of something to do, Jasper immediately set forth plans for drilling into one of the moonlets, and he chose the largest of the four, a sphere fully twenty-five feet in diameter. He found equipment on the City of Fomar which would serve the purpose, and he set to work. He marveled at the density and strength of the semi-metallic substance and also at the thickness of the bubble. He drilled more than three feet before he reached emptiness. He was several days making an opening into the spheroid large enough to admit his body, and then when he was inside he found no more than he had expected, the inside spherical contour a bit rough and bubbled, glinting back the rays of his light.

In this way and many other ways, Jasper fought off the spectre of loneliness. He experimented with the ship's instruments, making a few tests and repairs, finally coming to te belief that he had found the direction of Saturn. Had the ship been manageable, he believed that he could have guided it out of the ring and into free space.

IT was nearly a year after the catastrophe which had overtaken the space ship in Saturn's ring before the event which Jasper had nervously anticipated took place. The white clouds returned. The menace came from all directions, seemingly, and focused upon the disabled City of Fomar. Jasper was luckily inside when the attack came. He saw an unnatural luminescence beyond the ports where utter darkness should have reigned, and he watched with rapid beating heart as ghostly swirls of curling, merging, dividing white strands enveloped the derelict until again all the ports were covered up.

Quickly, Jasper hurried to the little turret he had fixed. The movable radium ray ejector lay ready. The old man grasped the control lever and trigger nervously and loosed a sustained barrage. He could not see the result of his work for the port was obscured, but he saw that something had taken place, for there was a visible shifting movement of the white stuff in the recurrent graying and thinning. When the port cleared, he saw that his ray ejector was effectively burning a hole through the cloudy entity before it. He swung the

weapon and watched in grim satisfaction as it cut swaths of emptiness through the malignant mist which retreated instinctively, the scattered parts rejoining and merging into singleness. There was something repulsive in it, and Jasper shivered violently as he recalled the crumbling bones of its victims.

The ray ejector touched but an insignificant portion of the menace and possessed but a small area in which to work. Again, Jasper heard the same noises about the hull of the derelict. The ominous visitor was seeking an entrance, pressing, contracting and pounding, testing for weak spots. Jasper hurried to his improvised airlock and saw with dismay that the white mist had found a way inside it. The outer door was forced. The deadly vapor was in full possession of all the ship except that part which Jasper had closed off. Jasper grabbed a nearby ray ejector and made a hasty connection with a closed slot on his side of the airlock. He had foreseen this emergency, and he was prepared. He made an airtight connection, opened the slot and released a discharge of the ray into the rapid gathering mist which threatened the inner door. He saw it recoil and experienced a savage joy as it evaporated, untouched wisps of it hurriedly withdrawing from the airlock as if apprised in some telepathic manner of its peril. The menace had been removed here and not too soon, either, for Jasper knew what the accumulated power that gathering cloud could exert upon the inner door. It had happened before.

Something told him to make a hasty examination of other parts of his closed-off chambers, and he was glad that he did. He found a searching, groping cloud of the hateful mist in the atmosphere chamber. One quick glance at a tiny thread of white gushing from an air joint leading to another part of the ship showed Jasper the means of entrance. He quickly destroyed the cloud and released a current of air into the unused pipe, forcing out the white mist under pressure. He then made a quick tightening of the joint which under normal circumstances had never before leaked.

Jasper hoped that the insidious material would find no means of effecting a wholesale entrance, for he knew that he could never combat so much of it successfully

with the ray ejectors. He would be overwhelmed. His skin crept at the thought. Jasper was brave and had been through much during his adventurous life, but there were ways to die vastly more preferable to Jasper than being assimilated and made a part of the ghastly white cloud. He ran back to his airlock and found, as he had feared, that it was again being filled by the white vapor. He cleared it and then ran back to the atmosphere chamber. Everything clear. He hurriedly examined the storerooms and breathed a sigh of relief. No entrance had been effected at these points. He hurried back to the airlock to fight off the accumulating mist.

It was a long, hideous nightmare for Jasper. The white mist stayed longer this time than before, possibly because of a whetted appetite tantalized and unappeased. Yet Jasper realized that the cloud was self sustaining. Once during this time, it again forced the joint in the atmosphere chamber and Jasper had a fight on his hands. His timekeepers registered sixty-two hours before the strange resident of Saturn's ring left as mysteriously as it had come. Until then, Jasper did not sleep. After that, he yielded, for he knew instinctively that the white cloud would not return for a long time.

III

REFRESHED from sleep, Jasper examined his damaged airlock and thereby made an earnest resolve. He would quit the City of Fomar with its numerous possibilities of entrance by the persistent white mist and take up living quarters in the strong and hollow moonlet he had penetrated with so much difficulty. In the days which followed, days recorded only by his chronometers amid the changeless gloom of Saturn's ring, Jasper worked as industriously to this end as he had labored in sealing off a section of the space ship. Equipped with a strong hatch, he believed that the white menace could never force its way inside the metallic walls of the globe.

Jasper's first step was to enlarge the entrance he had made to the specifications of one of the emergency exits on the City of Fomar. Two of these large ports were removed from the ship. One was installed

on the outside of the passage through the thick wall of the globe, the other on the inside. In this manner, Jasper had his airlock for entering and leaving the hermitage. Then he installed partitions and a flooring, equipping this flooring with the gravitational substance taken from the floors of the space ship. There were four chambers. Two of these constituted his living quarters. The other two consisted of a storeroom and a room for housing the atmosphere plant and heating unit he planned to install from the space ship. As rapidly as he could accomplish the task, old Jasper Jezzan became a cosmic Robinson Crusoe.

Besides stores of food, his storeroom contained all manner of essentials taken from the ship. He did not abandon the ship but protected it from drifting away by attaching it to the moonlet with a long cable. He had found that there were various drifts to the moonlets, according to their sizes and neighbors. Slight gravitational influences played strange tricks, and he had noticed a slow change of positions in the neighboring moonlets since the catastrophe.

Jasper finally completed his hermitage, and he was not sorry to leave the City of Fomar with its ghostly memories and the constant fear of another visitation by the white stuff. During his building of the hermitage, another eight months had passed in solitude. Jasper had reconciled himself to this kind of an existence in the depths of Saturn's furthest ring. Thoughts of living there did not weigh upon him so heavily as the thoughts of dying there without the companionship of humanity—alone and untended. He wondered, sometimes, if his hermitage and the attached derelict would some day be found when the moons of Saturn were explored and colonized. This discovery might be hundreds of years later, perhaps thousands of years. Jasper was old, and he had known solitude in the cosmos before, yet he had never been an involuntary prisoner of it until now. He wondered if the ghostly cloud would eventually find a way of getting to him or if he would die of old age. As for the food stores, he might live a good twenty years yet, he realized, and he had faith in the air and heating equipment and in his ability as a cosmic mechanic to keep everything

in perfect running order. The machines were not so intricate but what he had the means of replacing parts. One chamber Jasper still maintained aboard the space ship. That was the machine shop. He worked there in a space suit.

He was both relieved and disappointed when the hermitage in the moonlet was completed; relieved, because he now felt more secure against the white enemy; disappointed, because time once more commenced to hang heavy on his hands. He was thankful for the books, audioviewreels and other means of education and entertainment aboard the City of Fomar, but these promised to eventually become too familiar and well known.

JASPER had lived in his new habitation for more than six months when during one of his sleeping periods, he was awakened by a sharp bump which set his moonlet in motion. This unusual break in the monotony of silence and comparative stability in Saturn's ring aroused Jasper like a shot out of a gun. He switched on the powerful floodlights of the City of Fomar by remote control and stared through a transparent facing in the outer port of his airlock at a strange sight. All the moonlets were changing position. He saw them in a relay of motion from a disturbance not visible. Moonlets struck companions, then stopped as the immutable relay of inertia continued. His own moonlet was moving. It finally jostled another body gently. The derelict had been bumped closer, and the cable was suspended in a fantastic shape. Another moonlet struck the hermitage, the sudden contact sending him off balance. Moonlets not striking one another squarely kept moving, their motion divided up with the bodies they struck. There was no loss of motion, no slowing up because of gravity. The movement was relayed. Jasper realized that these contacts would continue in the same direction and at varying tangents all through the ring. He wondered what had set the moonlets into motion. Perhaps a meteor swarm had hit the ring. He watched until the zone of movement had passed on completely and all was quiet and peaceful once more before he returned to sleep.

When he awoke and looked out, a thrill of discovery claimed him. A misty fog

obscured the outer entrance of the hermitage. With little criss-crossing radium ray ejectors installed outside the port and operated from within, he cleared the obstruction to his vision and looked out. The derelict was covered with a snowy mantle which was alive as it billowed and twisted. He knew that this mantle was but the surging outer rank of the crowding material which had forced itself unrestrained inside the City of Fomar and was greedily exploring all nooks and crannies, assimilating anything of organic origin it touched. Even the cable holding the ship to the hermitage was covered deeply with the strange stuff.

Jasper realized a snug sense of security. He no longer feared the white mist. He was curious. He wondered if there was any connection between the return of the white entity and the recent upheaval among the moonlets. Had the malignant clouds caused the commotion, or had the latter event aroused and stimulated the mist? Jasper wondered where the mist went and what it did when it was not clustered about the derelict and his moonlet. He decided to experiment with it.

In the depth of the ring, he created a disturbance of his own. There were explosives aboard the City of Fomar, and he placed six charges on the sides of as many moonlets situated at a safe distance from the hermitage. He returned to the hermitage and set them off by radio impulse. They jumped suddenly away from his common center and relayed their motion to their nearest neighbors, ad infinitum.

Jasper waited patiently. He had arranged a trap to catch some of that white mist. He was going to study it if, and when, it came again. He waited for hours, and there was no sign of the white terror from the unknown reaches of the ring. He was about decided that he was on the wrong track when his heart leaped suddenly at sight of the familiar, wispy, white strands curling like luminous smoke about the nearer moonlets. The devilish substance had been aroused after all, just as Jasper had believed it would be. A disturbance of any kind seemed to bring it unerringly to foreign objects.

Again it collected about the derelict and roamed the interior, also clustering in-

stinctively about the hermitage as if by subtle sense or intuition it knew of strange contents inside it. Jasper, as on the previous visits, felt its strange effects upon him. It made him restless. It seemed to exert an irritating influence upon his body in a lesser sense than its powerful effects on electrical equipment of the City of Fomar during its initial visit. The mist stayed for the usual duration of its time and then left.

When Jasper was sure that it was all gone, he put on his space suit and made a hurried trip to the space ship. Full of anticipation, his spirits rose in triumph as he found his trap sprung and automatically imprisoning a small portion of the white mist. He saw the dull white fog through the transparent facing of the tightly closed box. He hurried back with it to the hermitage.

THE following days were spent with more interest than he had known since being marooned nearly three years ago. He studied and experimented with the strange material. It was alive. No earthly science had ever known anything like it. Of that, he was sure. He always kept it inside a container, pouring it from one to another. For a vapor, it possessed amazing weight. He never let it touch him, though he knew metal to be impervious to its touch. Sometimes, it became almost a solid, often like a liquid in its quiescent state gathered in the corners of the metal box. Jasper found that it was rarely in the gaseous form, the condition in which he had always seen it before this. He better understood this whenever he shook the box or otherwise agitated the strange substance and saw it become gaseous. It assumed the vapor stage when highly excited and active. As a liquid, it was sluggish; as a solid, quiescent. He found that it was highly radio-active.

There were other strange properties of which he did not have the means nor the specialized education to ascertain. He fed it bits of leather, wool and bits of food which were absorbed by the white mist. From these repasts, the little cloud increased in volume. Jasper shuddered when he thought of what might happen if this radio-active substance should be unloosed upon the earth or one of its sister

worlds. Yet there were means of destroying it. The radium ray was very effective. Extreme coldness was the natural habitat of the white mist, yet it required a high degree of heat, nearly to the boiling point of water, to destroy it. As might have been expected, heat expanded it.

Jasper's thoughts roamed the channels of scientific theory. What was this strange life? Had it been born in Saturn's ring, or was it from some far corner of the universe? It was probably as ageless and deathless as the moonlets of Saturn's ring, or of Saturn itself. Had the once stable satellite of Saturn which had broken up into these many small moonlets known life? Was this milky cloud which knew a common existence in subdividing and merging at will the ultimate in evolution of life on this satellite of the past? Jasper wondered yet could only advance these theories which were no more fantastic than the living material which confronted him and provoked these thoughtful possibilities.

He kept the white mist carefully confined and gradually came to lose interest in it. He had learned all he could about it.

IV

TIME came to drag more heavily. Jasper was rapidly exhausting his interests. And he came to care less regarding his future. He took greater risks than ever, wandering farther afield in space suit among the moonlets than he had ever gone before. He was surprised to find that he had developed an instinct for directions in Saturn's ring, and twice he recklessly put this development to the test by penetrating deeply into the darkness among the moonlets far from the last feeble rays of the ship's lights. His only illumination came from the lights on his space suit. Both times, he returned unerringly and without hesitation. He had reached a point where he held his life cheaply. Even the chances of meeting the white mist among the moonlets held less fear for him. He longed for an actual human voice and more than that the closeness and affinity of humanity. The loneliness of the ring was awful. If he were only in empty space, it would be so much better. He could then see the stars, the same old constellations

which differed to no appreciable notice out here on Saturn's orbit than they did from the perspective of the inner worlds. He had known the solitude of the cosmic wastes, yet he had always had the companionship of the glittering stars on those past occasions. In Saturn's ring, it was like being buried beneath innumerable huge tombstones in the darkness of an immense grave through which he was permitted to wander.

He came to find companionship in the mute remains of the powdered bones of his long-dead comrades aboard the City of Fomar, and he felt himself longing to join them. This led to an uncomfortable suggestion which Jasper immediately put forth from his mind before it gained a foothold. He shrugged and drew himself together to face things and carry on. As long as his sanity and balance of mind remained, he would do so, he knew.

Jasper's moroseness, however, grew upon him. It came to invade the peace of his sleep. One night, finally, he did not sleep at all. Night to Jasper was merely his sleeping period of a studied earthly arrangement. It was night whenever he turned the lights off. This time, however, he laid awake through it. An uneasiness possessed him, a familiar feeling, so familiar as to cause him to look out into the darkness for a sign of the white menace. But it was not there unless it lurked hidden behind the nearby moonlets, and Jasper knew that this was not the way of it. His nerves and imagination were playing him tricks.

A ghastly discovery made during his following waking schedule, however, revealed the cause of his uneasiness. His nerves and imagination had not been playing him tricks. The white mist was close by but not outside the hermitage where he had looked for it. He was met by a large, gray cloud which thrust a misty pedicle at him when he went into the storeroom for food supplies. Jasper's overwrought nerves snapped at this evil discovery, and he shrieked as he found himself momentarily fixed to the spot, his dilating eyes taking in the grim circumstances in a glance. He ran from the storeroom and securely fastened the steel door, carrying with him the horrible vision of the white mist inside the security of his hermitage.

The broken container in which he had kept the imprisoned bit of radio-active life and the crushed and scattered food containers told a mute and condemning story. That small bit of life had broken loose, had fed upon and assimilated his food stores and had grown to these dangerous proportions. There was more of the radio-active life than he dared to tackle with a radium ray ejector. Only as a last resort would he do this.

HE pulled himself together. He must get rid of that white cloud. He decided to try and lure the stuff from the moonlet and into space, standing ready with one of the more powerful ray ejectors in case the plan failed to work. He reacted from using the ejector inside the hermitage unless it were necessary, for its use in the airlock of the space ship had been as destructive as the white mist.

He put on his space suit, turned off the heat and air supply of the hermitage and proceeded to open both doors of the airlock. Then he opened the door leading into the storeroom and waited, drawn back into a far corner, a radium ray ejector held ready. The unwelcome tenant did not emerge. He glanced cautiously inside and saw it hovered over scattered cartons of his rummaged food supplies. Tins lay crushed with traces of oozing contents. He shot a weak charge into the gray mass. It churned, expanded, rose from its gluttonous repast and sent snaky streamers exploring for the source of the searing plague. A globule of the malign entity plunged at the doorway and Jasper fell back hastily, his ejector held ready. From the far wall, he saw the exploring piece of cloud pause on the threshold and examine it independently of the main mass which did not emerge. While he watched, he saw more of it appear from the storeroom, until he knew it to be joined and assembled in entirety once more. It moved into his living quarters leisurely in an explorative manner. He waited fascinatedly against the wall, hoping it would move to the open, inviting airlock and find the freedom to which it was accustomed in space. He was prepared for it, too, in case it moved his way.

Jasper sat there grimly vigilant to the vagaries of the cloud. He watched for it

to come upon the opening passage and slide out into space. He saw it move along the wall nearer the airlock. He looked back to the storeroom doorway where a small remaining portion of the cloud lingered hesitatingly. He watched this laggard bit closely. When he next looked back at the airlock, his heart leaped in hopeful anticipation. A white streamer lay through the opening. An advance bit of the cloud had exploringly found the opening. He had often wondered how much telepathic impulse the scattered material possessed. He believed that the rest of the gray cloud would be apprised of this retreat into space and would join the exploring vanguard. That piece on the threshold of the storeroom had joined the main body.

A puzzling difference suddenly claimed his attention. The mist which lay in the airlock was of the usual white consistency he had known. The cloud moving along the wall from the storeroom door was gray. A dawning horror of numbing realization seized him, and the slowly increasing volume of the white menace in the airlock justified his worst fears. This was no part of the gray cloud from the storeroom. It was coming into the hermitage from space, not leaving it! The white peril had returned! The gray cloud in the storeroom had by some mysterious means of communication called its kindred from its scattered lair among the moonlets of the ring—and the deadly legion had responded.

JASPER aroused himself to stagger to the airlock and try to close it against the destroying forces which threatened him. At these quick moves on his part, a corresponding alacrity was aroused on the part of the incoming mist which suddenly ballooned and gushed inside so swiftly that Jasper's ray ejector hastily brought into play could not cope with and destroy it in fast enough quantities for him to reach the airlock and close it. A white wall expanded and struck him a buffeting blow which knocked him across the room. The white mist bore down on him more leisurely as he scrambled up and brought the ray ejector into play, his back against the wall.

Tongues of white death leaped out and touched him, bringing a frenzy

of ecstatic, tingling horror wherever the white gas even touched his space suit. The radium ray disintegrated and destroyed the white pedicles while the main mass pushed forward to crush in closer. With sweat streaming from him, and in exhaustion, Jasper fanatically fought his losing fight. Delirium partly obscured his reason, yet in no way hampered his effectiveness. He swung the ray ejector like a demented demon in the pits of Hell. Holes and swaths were burned from the solidity of the cloud, but these quickly filled once more. The tingling contacts became more frequent. Jasper's arms felt like lead. He felt his senses reeling and he desperately held on. There were flitting moments when his vision became obscured and the white cloud seemed to turn red. His knees suddenly buckled in under him, and he slid to the floor against the wall in a sitting position, the ray ejector waving more leisurely. The white cloud rushed in above where his head had been. His gasping breath hissed like steam in the helmet of his space suit.

He wondered vaguely why the white mist was not overcoming him. He was becoming less frantic in his efforts. His motions became mechanical. He was becoming too weak to defend himself any longer. He knew what that would mean, but even his will power clamored for a rest, a long, never-ending rest. The white mist seemed to be fading. It was retreating. He was able to distinguish objects in his living quarters. He saw the white mist pouring rapidly out through the airlock, and he wondered about it vaguely. Oblivion came to his exhausted body. The ray ejector dropped from nerveless fingers, its deadly power shut off as the pressure on the trigger was released.

Jasper never knew how long he laid there in his space suit, an easy victim for the return of the white mist. The hermitage was permeated with the coldness of space. The lights still burned. Both inside and outside entrances of the airlock yawned open. When he came to his senses, he looked around. He rose and staggered

to the storeroom threshold. He looked inside. The white menace had left entirely. Appallingly little was left of the food stores, however. Death by starvation was inevitable. Still, Jasper was glad. He preferred to die some other way. Slowly, he went about in space suit making temporary repairs.

He wondered why the white mist had abandoned the hermitage and its vicinity so suddenly, yet there were many unexplainable mysteries of the strange stuff which were beyond his understanding.

He paused suddenly in his job of fusing and welding. Lights shone outside his hermitage. He had not switched on the lights of the derelict, and he wondered what had made them illuminate. He stared through the double ports of the airlock. Another space ship cruised alongside the City of Fomar. Indescribable emotions seized Jasper as he shakily entered his airlock and closed the inner door. Through his mind flitted an answer to the strange behavior of the white mist. When this strange ship had penetrated the ring, it had caused a major disturbance. The white mist had become aroused and had descended upon the derelict and the hermitage—and had left at the closer approach of the space ship in order to attack the greater attraction. Jasper saw, however, that no mist accompanied the strange ship.

He fumbled with the outer door and flung it open. Giving a kick with his feet, he sped through the vacuum to the side of the space ship. He found the outer door of the airlock invitingly opened. Air was sent rushing into the compartment he entered. Faces, human beings, were regarding him in friendly wonder. The inner door was opened, and a man helped turn back the space helmet from his scraggly gray hair. Jasper Jezzan gazed wildly about him at the faces of the men, too overcome momentarily to speak. With tears streaming down his face, he at last found his voice.

"Folks!" he cried, tremulously. "Folks! Real folks at last!"





VENUS HAS GREEN EYES

By CARL SELWYN

Space-trotting Flip Miller was prisoner of the lovely, cruel Vennsian queen. It looked like star's end for the stubborn-jawed young Earthling until he remembered that women are women—on Earth or on Venus!

CHARLIE MEAD, trapper, and Flip Miller, ex-pro prospector, started a forty-day drunk. Charlie just liked the idea. Flip had reasons.

"In a few hours it'll be wetter'n a swamp duck's gullet," said Charlie, grinning behind his whiskers. "And darker'n West Pluto!" Charlie had been trapping otters

here for five years and accepted the long nights as resignedly as the mud, the eternal fog and the heat. He poured another glass of *loku*, squinted at its blue sparkle in the tube-light. The gray mists swirled through the open door and the raw wind whistled through the rusty holes in the wall.

Flip leaned back against the bundles of fur and held up four fingers.

"To hell with the following," he counted, "I. M. C., radios, fuel tanks, and this soggy planet of yours, Venus!"

NOTED for his wild-goose chases and wilder ideas, Flip Miller was always running into trouble. In fact it was just two months ago that the Space Patrol found him marooned on Pallas. He had one pint of air left when they found him, said he fell out of his plane while looking for diamonds. The Patrol took him to Mars. There, he immediately got in a poker game and made a fortune—and immediately got in another and lost it all. That is, all except a doubtful map of a Venusian xanite mine which nobody else would accept as stakes. Which was his reason for being here, if Flip ever needed a sane reason for being anywhere.

For once however his screwball ventures panned out.

"And I've been here all these years without knowing a billion dollars was in my back yard," said Charlie who considered the matter very funny. "Leastwise it was a billion till—"

"Shut up, you blinking old veedle-chaser," said Flip. People always laughed at his misfortunes. Maybe it was because he did too. . . .

Charlie's island was in the middle of the Black Swamp. The mine was a few hundred miles east. Fused with asphalt and deep in the mire, thousands of miles from nowhere, it was small wonder it had lain there unvisited since its original discovery. The map had passed through the hands of sundry dissolute, short-lived sourdoughs till the location became as dubious as other bar-room talk. It was Flip's luck that the map eventually got around to him. He was probably the only man in the system who would have believed in it.

Filled with quick visions, he'd figured his treasure up on the spot. It would cost

about fifty dollars a ton to get it out of the swamp, smelt the asphalt and ship the ore to Earth. On Earth xanite ore was worth over a thousand dollars a ton.

Then the fates ran amuck.

His plane's fuel tank sprang a leak. Flip lost every drop of the reserve that was to carry him back to the mainland. The mainland was 25,000 miles away. Then his sending set blew a transformer and he couldn't radio for help. Last, while trying to ascertain his position on the receiving set, he heard that I.M.C.—Interstellar Metallurgical Company—had just opened a gigantic xanite deposit on Mars. The Market quoted xanite now at twenty dollars a ton. Venusian xanite suddenly wasn't worth swamp water.

"It shore is too bad," continued Charlie with smiling sympathy.

"You probably wished it on me," said Flip, "so you could have company on this mildewed damn island."

That was the one blessing in his barrage by malevolent fates—he'd glided to Charlie's island and the old fellow, one of many of his kind in the Venusian swamps, had placed his metal shack, his canned beans and his *loku* at Flip's disposal. To all of which he was doomed till the supply ship came around after the rains—forty days ahead.

"I wish one of your pirates would show up," mused Flip. "I might could bum a ride out of here."

"Don't wish that, boy," said Charlie with quick seriousness. "I've been pretty lucky so far but I told you about the fellow who used to be here—he's buried out yonder in the mud. These here Venusian pirates 're about the meanest critters you find anywheres."

"They come around during the nights, huh."

"Yeah, when the season's catch is ready for packing. They kill the fellow and take his pelts. You quit talking about pirates, boy. They'd just as soon skin you as an otter."

"Say! What about this female pirate I heard about on the mainland?"

"Captain Vixen? I never seen her—never knew nobody that had. She don't come out here and the natives won't talk about her. But you can bet your Sunday space-togs she's behind this swamp raiding

—she runs everything on the mainland, about ruined the big industries there. Supposed to be a native queen back in the hills; hates foreigners. They say she's nursed scorpions and killed men with her fingernails."

"Pretty tough date, huh."

And now the twilight was coming on, it was starting to rain—and soon it would be blackness and constant rain for forty dreary days.

"Oh, hell," yawned Flip. "And I didn't bring my bathing suit." He joined Charlie in a drink.

THE thirty-eighth century Haliburton and the Black Swamp Bacclus were doing nicely with the sixteenth verse of *Lulu Drank Loku on Pluto* when one of the more technical gestures necessary to the famous ditty caused the bottle to be overturned.

"Now look what you've done," said Flip. "We've got only enough left for thirty-nine days."

"Sho shorry," said Charlie.

Flip felt in his shirt pocket for a cigarette and found the ill-starred map which had brought him here. The lines were blurred with sweat but he could still make out the circle designating the mainland port, the crow's feet designating the swamp, the large X in the upper left where the xanite was. He didn't need the map any more; for the location was stark in his mind. In fact he wished he could forget it.

"Ah, well," he said. He opened the tube-light, held the map over the hissing jet. It turned brown, then black and he crumbled the ashes in his fingers. "I sometimes wonder what'll happen to me next. . . ."

He heard something above the wind at the door; probably a stray veedle, one of the mud-mice which infested the swamp. Then he noticed Charlie's eyes. They were very big and slowly his mouth fell open. He's gone loku loco, thought Flip. Charlie was staring past him, over his shoulder. Flip whirled around.

A woman stood in the door.

Flip dropped his glass. Behind the woman stood three men. The woman said something in Venusian. Flip couldn't understand and there was a dumb pause as

he stared with eyes that grew wider. The woman wore hip-high swamp boots, two guns on her belt, a filmy shirt open at the throat. Her hair, uncovered and flowing, was golden, vaporous as the mist. Flip heard Charlie replying in the native language. The woman stepped into the room. Eyes flicking into every corner, the three men followed her. In the hand of each was an .03 pistol.

She halted before them and Flip rose from his chair like a ghost. Charlie sat very still. His face was pale, eyes narrow.

"Sit down." It was a command and Flip sank back down helplessly. In his amazement he'd probably have done anything she said. She spoke English, in the liquid tones of a native. And she was Venusian, in all its ancient connotation. Her eyes met Flip's evenly, calmly. Her eyes were emerald green.

"You are Flip Miller," she said. "You have a map. Give it to me." She held out her hand, as if refusal to her easy words was unthinkable. Flip found his voice.

"Who—?" he began. Her eyes were cold, commanding; his ego rebelled and he stood up quickly. With a swift hand, one of the men pushed him back down. Flip came up again with fists balled. A pistol was jabbed in his side.

"Jupiter's jumpers!" cried Flip. "What is this?"

"Captain Vixen . . ." breathed Charlie.

THE .03 gun was persuasive and Flip sat down. The man was huge, ugly with a welted blue scar across his cheek. He stepped back and stood with feet wide apart, the gun pointed at Flip's chest. Another stationed himself at the door, the other stood behind Charlie. The woman leaned against the table, crossed her legs.

"The map?" she said and produced a cigarette. Bravado was the word for Flip, naturally or *à la loku*, and forgetting his anger he struck a match for her. She ignored him, lit the cigarette herself. Without changing his expression, Flip thumped the burning match toward the man with the gun.

"So you're Captain Vixen," he said, meeting her gaze. "Perhaps I should ask your autograph."

"I should brand it on your mouth, Earthman. But the map, please?"

She wasn't beautiful, thought Flip; her eyes were too far apart, her lips too large—sensual. And her green eyes, her eyebrows long and slanting, her firm lithe sleekness—they were more feline than feminine. Which was dangerously feminine, thought Flip, and perhaps she was beautiful.

"Captain Vixen, the Legend does you an injustice," he observed. "The complexion! Like swamp lilies in the mist. . . ." Then he laughed, for lovely women weren't danger to Flip Miller. Quite on the contrary. "Now what's all this about a map? My xanite mine?"

"Fool, did you think your arrival on Venus was not made known to me—and your purpose here?"

"You followed me to get that map!" Flip threw back his head with mirth. Charlie made shushing noises. But it was too funny, Flip thought. Didn't she know the mine was worthless? She must! But she had come out here after him in person. Perhaps she didn't know the bottom had fallen out of the xanite market.

The woman motioned to the man with the scar. "Search him," she said, smoke curling from her lips. The fellow came forward, reached out a hairy hand. Flip slapped it aside, annoyed.

"Oh, drop the mask, Viki, and let's be friends," he said. "And I don't like the company you keep."

"Oh, Lord!" groaned Charlie. The man looked at the woman, waited for orders.

"I said search him," she repeated.

The man holstered his gun, snatched at Flip's collar. The shirt ripped and Flip's fist came up as he rose. *Spat!* The man staggered backward, hit the wall and slid to the floor. In the same second Flip hurled his chair at the man in the doorway. The woman was between him and the other fellow's gun, which probably saved him. He saw Charlie get to his feet as he whirled upon the woman—to find her pistol only inches from his belly.

Charlie turned upon the man behind him and was struck in the face by a gun barrel. He fell across a pile of fur, was struggling up when the heavy man deliberately placed a foot upon his wrist. Flip heard the bone snap.

He ground his teeth in rage, started to lunge at the man and felt the woman's gun

press into his ribs. She had not moved from the table and her face was calm as ever. She had merely changed the cigarette to her left hand.

Fingering their bruises, the men Flip had dealt with came up. The other had his gun leveled on Charlie. Flip saw the little trapper get slowly to his feet, holding his limp arm. His face was very white. It was then that Flip became quite sober to the situation. Suddenly he forgot this woman's beauty, and what had been admiration turned to burning hate.

He told her so.

"For the last time," she said, "I'm asking for that map." Her eyes were green ice and her hand did not waver on the gun.

"I burned the map."

"Then you will tell me the location."

"I will tell you nothing."

"Perhaps we can change your mind," she said. "Bring a rope, Thorg."

AFTER being thoroughly searched, they were pushed through the door. Charlie didn't say anything and Flip knew his wrist must be agony.

Twilight had come, the long twilight of Venus which precedes the longer night, and the mist was wet with drizzling rain. Visibility was poor; Flip could see only a few yards ahead. The sun, never seen on this dank planet, was now below the horizon leaving a dull gray afterglow—like false dawn on Earth. He did not know where they were going nor what mad torture the woman had conceived. He knew only that hate flamed in his chest and her white throat in his hands would be a great pleasure. Never before had Flip desired to harm a woman. But never before had he seen one like this.

They passed a trim strato-plane, vague in the fog, and Flip discovered how the pirates managed to land so noiselessly. On their craft's power jets were the slim serpentine coils of Doxim silencers, exhaust mufflers banned for years by Interstellar Law. If only a veedle would crawl in one of those tubes, he thought; it might blow up the ship.

Slashing through the rain at Charlie's side, the threatening guns close behind, Flip was jerked from his heated musings by an .03 shot. He whirled around, saw smoke curling from the pistol in the woman's

hand. A dead veedle, an exceptionally small mud-mouse, lay at her feet. Lordy, thought Flip as he was pushed on; the woman was heartless, mercilessly cruel for the sport of it. . . .

The edge of the little island halted them. Here the rock fell away for several feet to the sickening ooze. Covering half of Venus, it was the Black Swamp which stretched off in the dismal fog.

"Tie a rope around his neck and throw him over," came the woman's impassive voice. "He will become quite loquacious before he sinks. . . ."

So this was it. Flip looked at Charlie and Charlie looked at the swamp. Flip followed his gaze and the dark viscous mire rippled in a passing breeze, hissed against the rock and sucked hungrily like a live thing waiting to feed. The swamps were bottomless.

The man Thorg, the one who had broken Charlie's wrist, threw a loop over Flip's head, pulled it tight about his neck.

Flip fingered the rope and stared at the woman. Would she really do this? And would he talk? No! Damned if he would! He'd sink first. But the mine was worthless. Why not tell her where it was? But he had no reason to expect a lesser fate if he did. Besides it was a matter of honor now—and he knew one way to enhance that honor.

"Hold the rope when you shove him in," said the woman, her eyes mere slits against the mist. "Let him sink slowly." The other two men had their guns trained upon Flip. He met Thorg's beady eyes.

"Son of a veedle!" Flip said in his face. Suddenly he swooped down and upward with one long arm. The man was shoved forward, to the brink of the rock. He tottered there a long second, waving his arms frantically. Flip sprang toward the woman. Flame burst around him, he wasn't hit. He heard Thorg scream. He crashed into the woman as he heard a splash, more screams. Then there was silence and he was struggling on the wet-rock, the woman fighting like a tiger.

Flip found her gun hand, wrenched the weapon from her. He got to his knees. The two men stood before him, one holding his gun on Charlie. They couldn't fire at Flip for fear of hitting the woman. Flip started to blast them, then turned the pistol

upon their Captain Vixen beside him.

"Drop your guns or I'll kill her," he said. He leveled his pistol, got to his feet and backed away from the group. "Take their guns, Charlie," he grinned. "We're not licked yet."

"No?" said the woman.

His eyes flicked to her. She had a pistol in her hand. Flip had his sights dead upon her. Damn, he thought; he'd forgotten she carried two guns. They stared at each other—stalemated. The very wind was still.

"I've never killed a woman—" Flip said.

"I've never killed a man," she said quietly, "before." For the first time she smiled. Flip's gun was suddenly jerked away, fire streaked toward him, he heard the crash.

She had shot the gun from his hand.

HE stood there, helpless and dumb. Captain Vixen lit a cigarette, her gun still ready. She looked at him a long moment.

"Well," she said, green eyes never leaving his, "what are we waiting for?" She motioned to the man with the scar. "Take the end of the rope, Voss. Our Earthian friend hasn't tasted the mud yet, you know."

Charlie hadn't said anything. A gun at his back, his white mustache ruffled by the wind, he stood silently watching Flip, holding his broken arm. The choice was up to Flip.

"Look at the mud, Flip Miller," said the woman. "There is not even a ripple where Thorg went down. He went quickly. You shall dip slowly, that the conceit of your tongue and the rashness of your mind may be reflected upon with regret." Flip glanced over the rock's edge. There was only the quiet, waiting mire; no trace of Thorg's body.

"Vixen—" he began. He never finished for Voss pushed him over with both hands.

The black surface of the mud rushed up at him. Arms flailing off balance, he hit on his side with a heavy splash. He heard Charlie's yell from above. He raised his head from the mud, tried to brush the stuff from his eyes. A soft and clinging pressure was warm against his legs, his waist. Through the mud in his eyes, he saw the dark flat plain of the swamp stretching away into the mist. Turning, he saw the

perpendicular rock wall of the island rising above him. The hot ooze crawled up to his chest and in his nostrils was the fetid smell of the swamp, dank with the warm breath of ancient decay.

The mud crawled higher. He struck out with his hands against it, struggled to pull himself upward but a grim suction tugged at his feet and legs, slowly drew his body downward. Then his wrists were caught in the irresistible pull. He couldn't move his arms. Looking down, he saw the black mire high on his chest. As he watched, fascinated, the mire rose higher. It was at his shoulders.

Keen and swift, panic struck like a knife in his belly and his arms strained, every muscle in his body trembled with mad flight. But he couldn't move and the mud climbed to his throat. This is *it*, he thought, and pictures paraded through his mind, irrelevant flashes. He saw faces, dim in the mist above him, blurred with water and the mud in his eyes. He shook his head violently, the faces cleared. There was choking pain in his throat. The faces were of three men, and a woman.

It was Vixen, looking down from the rock above. His head was strained back and upward against the rope, tight on his throat. He had stopped sinking.

"Have you found your tongue?" It was the woman's voice. "Where is the mine? Speak! Tell me or you sink!"

Flip stared at her and could say nothing. He was smothered with the noose on his neck. His eyes burned with the pain, with red hatred of the woman.

"Let him down slowly." Her voice again. Flip stared up at her with mute passion.

The mud caressed his chin, repulsive and warm. Slowly, he felt it creep higher, moist against the back of his head.

"Speak, fool! Where is the mine?"

He stared up at her with bulging eyes, couldn't speak. Her words were meaningless. He felt only the pain in his throat, the pressure of the mire against his body. He knew only that he hated the voice that spoke and that his body was weak with that hatred. The mud crawled into his ears and the voice stopped. The mud rose to his lips. He could taste the thick salty warmth of it. He closed his mouth tightly but the taste remained. The mud

bubbled at his nostrils. He couldn't breathe. He saw the vast flat plain of black become level with his eyes.

The mud covered his eyes.

THE air was good and he gulped at it. He was lying on the rock. He felt his throat, wiped his face and saw somebody standing over him in the rain. The man had a scar across his cheek.

"Try the other one." It was the woman's voice. "Perhaps the muddy Earthian will talk to save his friend if not himself."

Flip sat up and stared at them, gathering his wits. Charlie had a rope about his neck. The man Voss held a pistol at his back. Charlie grinned at him.

"Proud of you, boy," he said. His right arm dangled at his side. Failing the first time, Flip's scene was to be repeated with a new performer.

"No," said Flip. "No! Charlie doesn't know where the mine is—he had nothing to do with this."

"No matter," said the woman. "Perhaps seeing him in the mud will affect your obstinacy."

"That mine's worthless," Flip said. "It's no good any more. Since I.M.C.—"

"I know," she replied.

"Hush, Flip," said Charlie. "There's more going on than we know about. Don't tell her. I'm an old man and—"

"Throw him in," said the woman impatiently.

Flip got to his feet, ignoring the gun in his face. Voss picked up the end of the rope around Charlie's neck.

"Stop," said Flip. "I'll tell you." He couldn't let Charlie go through with this. It wasn't his problem and he had a broken wrist already.

"Be quiet," said Charlie. "I don't—"

"Talk," the woman told Flip. The mine must mean a lot to her, Flip thought. Why? He was positive about the present market price. Could the radio report have been wrong? No. Not in a quotation affecting five planets.

"What do you want with that mine?" Flip stalled. "You know the market price."

"Your questions are unhealthy, Earthman. Tell me the mine's location or your friend goes in the swamp—without a rope."

Flip told her. He didn't lie. He gave the exact Venusio-magnetic direction he'd

taken to find it. But he was sure of one thing—that there was more here than he knew. The radio report must have been wrong. . . .

"You shouldn't of told her, Flip," said Charlie.

"Your life will be short if he lied," said the woman. She glanced up at the fog. It was a shade darker than when they had come and the rain was stronger. The mist was thickening and it was much cooler, Flip noticed.

"Come," said the woman, "we must prove his words while there is light." She turned, walked up the rock toward the ship. "Tie them in the cabin," she ordered over her shoulder. "If he lied, we shall return. If he spoke truth—they have only to free themselves before they starve. . . ."

WHEN the men left, Flip immediately tried the rope. Pulling with all his strength, he couldn't slacken it and, with the pain in his arm, there was little Charlie could do.

"Lordy!" said Flip. "What now?"

"We're lucky to be alive," said Charlie. "Captain Vixen must have taken a fancy to you."

Flip strained at his ropes with the thought of her. Venusian women were the beauties of the Universe and this woman had surpassed them all, but in her chill beauty, thought Flip, there was nothing feminine. She had no heart. She had but one emotion—the pursuit of her goal.

"It gets pretty chilly during the nights," said Charlie happily. "We'll get pneumonia before we starve."

Flip looked helplessly about the room. They were bound to their chairs and the ropes looped through holes in the wall. There was no way Flip could get to Charlie and perhaps untie him. The house was of metal and through the rusty walls and the open door came the increasing chill of night. Captain Vixen's men had made them "comfortable," left them to the whistling wind.

There was a draft on Flip's neck and he turned to see the rust had eaten away a small crack behind him. Just another thing, he thought. He was still caked with mud. Then he almost turned over his chair with excitement. He craned his neck, saw where the rope binding him was looped through

the wall. They were two small holes, rusty as the rest.

"Charlie," he said hoarsely, "these dumb Venusians! They've tied us to a *knife blade!*"

"What?"

"The holes they put the rope through! Look at the edges!" He began see-sawing back and forth with his chair. The rope rubbed against the rusty edges as he did so. "Maybe I can make it in time. It's been only a few minutes and they've got to warm up the ship."

"You mean you're going to face them again. Saints o' Saturn! Leave well enough alone, boy!"

Flip kept at his work. If he could get this part of the rope cut the rest would be simple. "And let 'em get that mine? Hell no! There's something about that xanite I don't understand and I'm going to find out what. I'd like a nice long chat with Miss Vixen too."

Charlie gave up trying to dissuade him and Flip kept sawing. With the mufflers, he couldn't hear the ship leave but he was sure they hadn't gone yet. Those high-power planes took a lot of warming up, especially with Moxims. What to do when he got there? Flip Miller's mind never strayed far from the present.

The rope broke. It was a matter of minutes before he was free.

"Try the same thing, Charlie," Flip said at the door. "You wouldn't be much good out there with a busted wrist and I'll be back before long."

"Maybe," said Charlie doubtfully as Flip streaked out into the rain.

THE ship loomed before him in the mist and Flip halted, some degree of sanity entering the elation of his escape. He couldn't see through the fogged windows, but there were three skillful guns inside and he was unarmed. They had taken all the guns from the shack when they left. Besides, the ship's door was closed and a strato-plane's hull is solid metal. Though he considered it, he couldn't just go up and knock.

The rise-rockets were idling. A pink glow appeared at each blast but there was only a soft hissing with the mufflers. The power jets hadn't started; they were geared with a synchronized heat progres-

sion which ignited them only when the proper temperature was reached.

A veedle scampered across Flip's foot and he jumped. If a veedle crawled into one of those muffler tubes it would explode, he remembered thinking when he first saw the ship. Flip snapped his fingers. If a veedle could cause it, why not he? With mud! He could fill a power jet and when the ignition started, it would burst like a clogged gun barrel. They couldn't leave. Perfect!

Keeping well below the windows, he approached the ship. The power jets, as usual, were outside and forward of the glowing rise-rockets so he could work in safety. That is, unless the jets started while he was near them. But he would never know it if they did.

Flip scooped up a handful of mud, stuffed it into the five-inch opening. It was like pouring water in a veedle hole but he kept at it, and heat from the smaller tubes blistering his hands. He could hear people moving about inside the plane. Finally he packed one more handful to make sure, grinning to himself.

The door in the side of the ship suddenly opened.

Flip dropped down beside the hull. It was the big fellow with the scarred cheek. He jumped down, walked toward the rear of the ship where Flip was. Making a take-off inspection, Flip decided. What should he do? He could make a break across the rocks, lose himself in the mist. No—they'd track him down, get Charlie again too. Well, there was one thing to do then.

The man was silhouetted against the open door as he walked forward. In the heavy mist, he couldn't see Flip yet. Crouched on hands and toes, Flip sank lower. The muscles in his knees tensed. The man came on. Flip shot toward him, hands outstretched.

His fingers found the thick throat, squeezed with all their might as the force of his spring carried them both to the ground. Flip landed on top, kept his hold on the man's neck. The fellow brought up his hands, plucked frantically at Flip's wrists but he made only soft gurgling sounds and soon his hands fell away. Flip turned him loose. He wasn't dead; a little out of breath. Flip took his pistol from its

holster. To keep him quiet a while longer, he slugged a finishing touch on his chin.

With a grin at this aesthetic work, he got to his feet. He had a gun now. But it was still two against one—he'd learned to count the woman—and they were inside. It would be risky entering the ship. Better wait till somebody else came out. They'd be out looking for this fellow soon enough. The door was still open.

Flip dragged the unconscious man under the rounded hull. Eyes on the door, he crouched down beside him to wait.

Suddenly he remembered the mud he'd stuffed in the power jet. Wow! If that thing exploded with him near it—! He leaped up, stuck the gun in his belt. He reached down to drag the man away too. As he turned, something jabbed hard in his side.

"So you haven't had enough, Earthman?" It was the other fellow, Voss. He must have come out the other side, circled around the back.

The rockets were glowing cherry red now. The power jets would ignite any moment.

"GET away!" cried Flip. "I clogged a tube! It'll explode—"

"No more of your tricks, Earthman," said Voss. He yanked Flip's gun from his belt, stuck both of them in Flip's belly.

"You fool, we'll be blown to bits."

"Shut up," said Voss, eyeing his comrade lying beside the ship. He poked him with the toe of his boot. The man groaned, moved slightly.

Flip saw bubbles ooze from the jet he'd stopped up. It was a matter of seconds.

Ignoring the gun, Flip hit Voss in the face. The man staggered back. Flip whirled to run. As he turned, the mist exploded red. Something crashed into him. An ear-splitting roar.

His head hit the rock and he was stunned for a moment. Something large and heavy lay across him. It was quiet in the mist and the rain was cool. It was a man's body across him. Something hot and sticky seeped through his clothes.

Flip shoved the man aside, sat up. He looked at the man's face. It was Voss. The back of his head was gone. His shoulders were a crimson mass and his back and legs were shredded.

Flip got to his feet. He was covered with blood too but could find only slight cuts. Voss had received the full force of the explosion and his body had protected him.

"Are all Earthians so lucky?" said a voice.

Flip looked up. The woman, Captain Vixen, was standing before him in the rain. One hand was on her hip. The other held a pistol.

Flip stared at her a long time and neither spoke.

"Lady," he said finally, "must this game go on forever?"

"Not for you," she replied.

"**E**ARTHMAN," said the woman, "in the hills, I am Queen. On the mainland, I am Terror. In the swamps, I am Death. Whatever defies me on this—my planet—dies. It needs be so, for the resources of Venus have been plundered to the Universe. Imperialism ruled until my father, king before me, died fighting it. You, Earthman, are a symbol of those that killed him, those that drove my people to poverty—until I came. I am a symbol of the Venus that *was*—and, as I live, shall be again. You understand now why you die. . . ."

Flip looked at the woman and the rain molded her hair into golden ringlets, the wind shaped her body in the sheer lines of an ancient goddess. The mist softened the chill beauty of her face and her green eyes were misty in the deepening twilight.

The wind was keen and Flip shivered.

"You are the coldest woman I ever knew," he said.

"And you are the coolest man."

"Since I am to die," said Flip, "you may

tell me why you wanted that worthless mine."

"The xanite is worthless—" She paused. "The asphalt mixed with it is pitchblende. It was a secret of my father's that the lost Swamp Mine holds enough *radium* to buy the Universe—to return Venus to her rightful place again."

She raised the pistol, took aim at his chest. Her hand was without a tremor.

"At the swamps," said Flip, "you said you'd never killed a man."

"I spoke truth. Now I am alone—I must."

Flip heard a splash. A veedle scurried across the woman's boots. She screamed. The mud-mouse streaked off into the mist. The woman's arms dropped to her sides. Her eyes were wide. For a fleeting second, the epitome of womankind was on her face. And the warmth of irrational helplessness. Then quickly it was gone, the mask returned. She jerked up her gun and fired. The shot went over Flip's head as he dived. His lunge knocked her down. He snatched the pistol from her hand, hurled it into the mist.

Pinning her arms to the ground, Flip sat upon her and laughed.

"You're a woman," he gritted, "you're a woman—afraid of a mouse!" She struggled violently to free herself. "You're a woman, forced into a deadly legend—a persecution complex. You're beautiful. . . ."

He bent, kissed her full upon the lips.

She freed one arm, slapped him across the face. He didn't feel it. There were tears in her emerald green eyes. Flip threw back his head, roared his laughter to the wind.

He'd forgotten Captain Vixen carried two guns.



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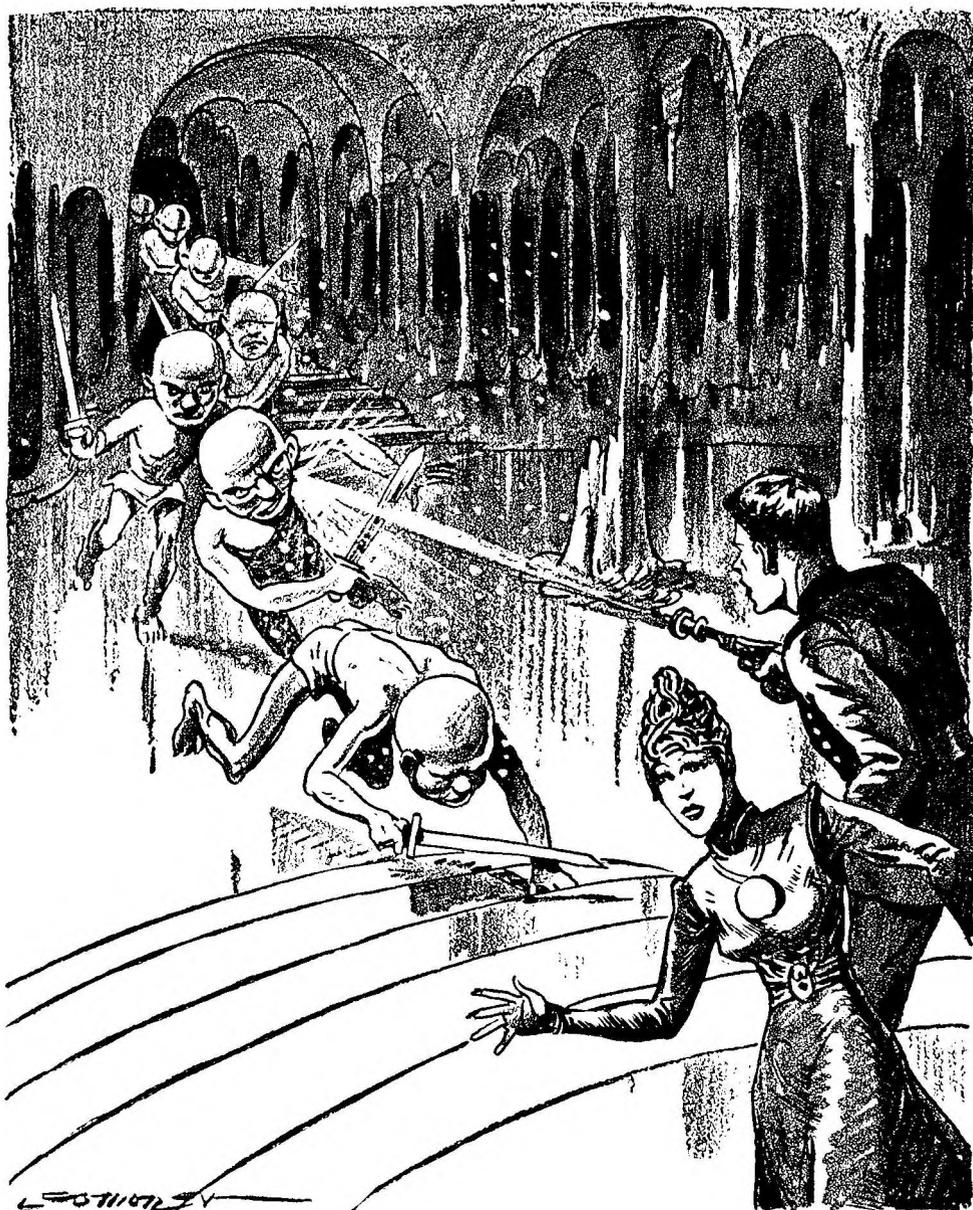
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REVOLT IN THE ICE EMPIRE

By RAY CUMMINGS

Frozen little Zura was a stellar Utopia, until the Earthmen came to topple the rule of its gentle queen with the cankerous weapons of revolt.

SO much has been written into the permanent chronologies of science concerning our pioneer voyage to the little asteroid of Zura—facts and figures

and sociological deductions, most of which are, of actuality, erroneous—that even now after these many years, I feel constrained to set down, as simply as I can, exactly

what occurred. All my life I have shunned publicity; my wife has shunned it. Zura, weird little wandering world, has never returned. Why, after coming in from the realms of outer space at least twice and rounding our Sun upon an elliptic orbit, it should now have failed to reappear—I will leave that to the astronomers to imagine. But no one from Earth, quite obviously, will ever go to Zura again. Tara and I, so to speak, are sole survivors.

So at least I think I am qualified to tell what happened; to correct the Official Chronograph in its implications that Zura was a model little world, from which our Earth might learn much. As my grandfather might have quoted his grandfather saying, that is the bunk. When you put humans on a planet, you will get love—but also hate; honesty, but dishonesty; peace, but also war. The weird people of Zura were weird to us only because their environment had made them outwardly different from us. Like us they were human—and there could never have been Utopia evolved from them.

I am no philosopher, but at least I must have my say on this. Tara was misguided. She admits it now. Indeed, at heart she is more opposed than most of you who read this, to those crusaders here on earth who talk of revolutions and bloodshed so that some new Social Order may evolve and bring the world Utopia. The ideals are often sound, but always impossible of fulfillment. And those who sponsor them usually are intelligent enough to know it, advancing themselves upon the pitiful hopes of the ignorant, who think they are being led upward when in reality they are often worse off than before.

Do I seem prefacing some weighty analysis of mankind's frailties? That is wrong. I am prefacing what might better be called a love story. I am an old man now, but it colors my memory still with a warm glow like a sunrise spreading glorious colors on the drabness of a twilight sky. That, to my young life, was the coming of Tara. . . .

I was just twenty, that spring morning of 1990 when Dr. Robert Livingston's message came to me.

"Strange good news, John. I have picked our destination, but it must be

secret. Fly up and see me tonight."

Strange good news! There was a note of suppressed excitement in those three words which somehow communicated to me so that as I flew my little car up to the Maine woods that evening I was tensed to hear what it could be. My name is John Taine, as naturally you must have realized from my preface. There is nothing of me that can be of interest to this narrative previous to that spring morning of 1990. I quite imagine I was a drab enough sort of young fellow. Certainly my work as mechanic in the building of stratosphere ships had brought me little money and no claim to achievement.

But Dr. Livingston liked me; for a year now I had been working for him, building to his specifications that primitive little space ship with which he hoped to pioneer on an exploratory flight to some other world. Livingston was an inventor and scientist of very great genius. But unfortunately, being a dreamer, a gentle fellow and trusting—completely no businessman—he had gone through life impoverished.

We had been much pinched for funds in our work. Our little flyer indeed was now not finished, and I was on an enforced vacation, with our funds exhausted, waiting until Dr. Livingston might find some sponsor to refinance us. Strange good news? Assuredly I was hoping that he would have a few decimars in hand now—or even a few thousand gold dollars with which we might continue the work.

HIS pleasure and excitement were obvious when he greeted me in the laboratory of his isolated little Maine home, upon my arrival just after dusk that evening.

"Good news, John. It certainly is. I couldn't tell you before what I've been trying to do here while work on the *Plancteer* had to stop. But I've accomplished my purpose."

"Money—" I said.

"Money, yes. Oh, yes, indeed, John. And fame. The accomplishment of our desire—to make a flight into Interplanetary space, and come back again. We've got it all within our reach now. Sit down, John—I'll tell you what I've done."

I had never seen Dr. Livingston so ex-

cited. He was a small man, forty perhaps, though he looked somewhat older with his thin face and his shaggy, longish iron-gray hair. He had no family; he lived here alone, with only one deaf old woman for his housekeeper. We were in his chemical laboratory now—a littered room on the ground floor of his home, which was a few miles out in the country from a small town of the Maine coast. We were building the *Planetecr* here, in a big impromptu frame hangar which was set on the wooded hill-top a hundred yards or so from the house.

But work on the *Planetecr* had ceased. Our two assistants who had been engaged with me now, like myself, were laid off. There was no one here tonight save Livingston and me and the old woman who now had gone to her room upstairs.

"We've got to be absolutely secret," Livingston said. He lowered his voice and flung a glance at the window oval where the moonlight was gleaming with a silver sheen. "There's big money involved in this. I'm going to trust you, John, but no one else."

"What is it?" I murmured.

A little half-smile of excited triumph was playing about his thin lips. "Let me ask you," he said, "have you ever heard of Xalite?"

"Well—just vaguely."

"The new element which was discovered a few years ago. I needn't explain its technical uses—"

"A germ-killer," I said. "I remember hearing a technological newscast—you bombard diseased tissues—"

"Exactly. To kill certain virulent germs without injuring the living human tissue. And they're thinking now they could use it in the new atomic engines—perhaps the one thing which would make them really commercially practical—"

"Except that Xalite costs about ten thousand gold-dollars a grain," I observed.

"Quite so. As a matter of fact, what little was discovered here on earth is now in use. No more can be found—and it's an unstable element. Within another year we will have no Xalite." He paused, and then abruptly he added, still more softly,

"I've discovered an unlimited quantity, John. Xalite in quantity beyond anyone's wildest dreams—"

"Where?" I gasped.

"Not here on earth. Don't you see how it fits with our plans for the *Planetecr*?"

I sat silent, tense as he told me. There was, this year, coming in from the realms of Interplanetary space, a little asteroid. Astronomers for their charts had named it Zura—a dark, cold little world of perhaps five hundred miles diameter.

"It seems this is its second visit," he said. "Some sixteen years ago it first made its appearance—came into our Solar System, rounded the Sun and went out again. The elements of its orbit, sixteen years ago, were computed. A narrow ellipse, taking it in between Mercury and Vulcan, and out beyond Pluto."

IN his laboratory here, Dr. Livingston had erected a small, but ultra-modern, electroscope. He took me to it now. The dark little Zura, he told me, already had cut the orbit of Mars and was fairly close to us. It was in the northern sky now, near the zenith. The night was clear, glittering with a myriad stars like gems profusely strewn on the deep purple velvet of the Heavens. I gazed at little Zura as he swung the high-powered little instrument almost to its full intensity of magnification. What I saw was a round, blurred, dark-gray disc, dimly mottled with heavy cloudbanks.

"What has this to do with us, and Xalite?" I murmured.

"I'll show you, John. If we can get a break in those clouds—it sometimes occurs—"

We waited perhaps an hour, with the spectroscope attached so that the vague reflected light from Zura was spread before us in its prismatic colors. And then, momentarily, a break in the swirling, turgid atmosphere of the dark little world, let us through to its bleak, blurred, dark surface. Light was coming from there; light inherent to the little world. On the spectroscope band I saw a new dark line.

"Xalite!" Livingston murmured. "You see it? Unmistakable. Deposits of Xalite exist there. Xalite in quantities which to us and our needs will be enormous. So that's the destination of our exploratory flight in the *Planetecr*! It's not a question of money with us now, John. The Anglo-American Medical Research Society—and the U. S. Government Dept. of Power—"

have financed us for all we need."

I could only gaze at him with excitement thrilling me, matching his own. All our money troubles ended. And a double purpose to our adventure now. The conquest of Interplanetary flight; and the giving to the world an element it so greatly needed.

Little Dr. Livingston was bending over me, gripping me. "You realize the need of secrecy?" he murmured. "You and I, if we get this Xalite, it will make us independently rich, of course. Enough for our life's needs. But beyond that, the world will have it. Xalite, to be cheap as old-fashioned petroleum." His voice had risen with his excitement, but suddenly he lowered it again.

"But John, suppose we were unscrupulous. To keep the price of Xalite up—to deal it out, only to the rich—to make ourselves fabulously wealthy at the expense of the poor—"

"I see," I agreed. I wonder why my glance, like his, strayed idly to our moonlit window oval, here on the ground floor of his home? I am not the least bit psychic; there is, of course, no such thing anyway.

"We'll finish up the *Planetecr* now," Livingston was saying. "Pete Duroh and Carruthers—that's all you'll need. And as we agreed, we'll take them with us. Four of us—that's enough to man the little *Planetecr*. But nothing must be said of Xalite. You understand?"

"Yes, of course."

"So far as the world will know, the *Planetecr* is starting merely on a trial flight into Space. We don't want any publicity anyway. And Duroh and Carruthers—they must know only that we're hoping we might reach this wandering little asteroid. Nothing about Xalite. That can come later. We don't want to take the least chance of this thing leaking out—"

He checked himself suddenly. We both heard it—the sound of what seemed padding footsteps, retreating from our laboratory doorway. Someone furtively slinking away in the house corridor.

"Why—good Lord—!" I gasped.

I dashed into the dim corridor. There was nothing; and then I heard a distant outer door close. The intruder had escaped from the house. And then, from

the laboratory, came Dr. Livingston's gasp: "John, look—"

I swung back to him. In the moonlight at the laboratory window a face showed behind the filmy curtains—a man's face peering in at us. It was just an instant glimpse. . . . Staring, wild, red-rimmed eyes—the face wearing a bluish stubble of beard. By no chance could it have been the person who had escaped me in the corridor.

In that second, I dashed for the window. The face had gone. I got there only in time to see a dark blob scurrying away into the shadows of the moonlit woods.

II

"ALL ready, Dr. Livingston," I said. "Eh? Oh, yes. Well, that's fine, John. We'll start at once."

"I checked the ventilators," Duroh said.

The big, beetle-browed Peter Duroh—dark-haired, handsome young giant who had been working for us nearly a year—stood beside me. It was the great night—our time of departure at last had arrived, with the little *Planetecr* glistening and ready.

To you who read this, familiar now with the great finned cylinders which the last half century has produced on earth for the conquest of Interplanetary space, our little space-ship was inadequate and queer indeed. Unlike modern vessels, Dr. Livingston had built the *Planetecr* in the shape of a huge bell-like globe. Huge, to us then. But its maximum equatorial diameter was a scant fifty feet.

Strange little ship indeed. Its interior was of three stories—the largest—the middle one—our several rooms of living quarters, ample enough for four of us. Below that, in the base, were the mechanism rooms. And the top level, fairly near the apex, was in effect a mere circular turret, with a glassite dome over it completing that segment of the outer shell.

It is not my purpose here to describe Dr. Livingston's pioneer mechanisms. All that is technological history in the chronicles of the development of space-navigation. But I do wish to point out that Dr. Livingston, in his essentials of mechanism, has not been improved upon even in this last half century. The *Planetecr* was

double-shelled, the six-inch space between the reinforced walls containing the swiftly vibrating, oscillating electronic current now known as the Erentz principle—the absorption of the outer pressure, translated by the swiftly flying electrons of the current into harmless kinetic energy. And we had, in segments, throughout the globe-shaped walls, gravity plates for the neutralization of gravity; its intensification; and the negative force of repulsion.

We had air-renewers—antiquated now, I admit—but still very serviceable to us; and ventilating and temperature systems. We had no electronic rocket-streams for atmospheric flight; that, as you all know, came much later.

It was, by earth-time, just midnight when we were ready to start. Dr. Livingston was excited, confused now that the time was at hand. But the other three of us, outwardly at least, were calm enough, eager only to be sure every preparation was in order.

There was no public celebration. Like Livingston, I had no close family, so that only a few of the family and friends of Peter Duroh and James Carruthers, our other assistant, were here on this momentous night in the little board hangar to see us off.

"Tell him to come in," Dr. Livingston was saying. "I want to start on the midnight hour."

The big, dark-haired young Duroh went to the incline that led down from the upper control turret room where we were now standing and shouted to Carruthers, who was still down, bidding good-bye to the visitors on the hangar floor.

"All right," he shouted up to us. "I'm coming." He came in a moment. He was Livingston's most competent technician, this James Carruthers. Like young Duroh, he had been with us almost from the start of the building of the *Planetecr*. He was an older man, rather a small, tight-lipped, sandy-haired fellow. Grim of aspect, usually silent, listening with alert, keen gray eyes.

"All ready," he said.

"Yes, bolt the door," Dr. Livingston agreed.

We waved our last farewells to the silent, awed little group of men and women down in the hangar, and I swung the big

glassite bull's-eye door closed, bolted it and admitted the Erentz current into it.

Departure from earth. . . . There was no one who could have seen that pioneer departure, much less be on it, without a surging thrill and a trembling. Certainly I felt it. Excitement—and fear. There is no one who can face the unknown without a little shudder, no matter how adventurous and reckless he may be. I recall that we four, in the dimly starlit little turret—starlight which came down through the open roof of the hangar and through our glassite dome—stood grim, silent and awed. Then Dr. Livingston flung the current into the base gravity plates set for the repelling negation.

The *Planetecr* trembled just a little; and then slowly, silently was rising. . . .

DEPARTURE from earth. . . . And we were just the second party of all earth people in history who had ever seriously tried it. The first, as you all recall, had been sixteen years before. The ill-fated Blake expedition—six men, one of them the strange, humanity-hating George Simpson, joining the explorers at the last moment, declaiming publicly that he wanted to leave the earth forever! Vowing that if Blake landed anywhere in the Universe, he, George Simpson, would remain there in preference to coming back to earth!

Well, the fanatic Simpson certainly had had his way in that! The Blake ship—even more antiquated than our *Planetecr*—safely left earth's atmosphere and plunged away. And never was heard of again!

Dr. Livingston's clutch on my arm and his excited murmured words jerked me out of my roving awed thoughts. "We're starting, boy—good luck to us—"

I could only nod and try to smile as I swallowed the lump in my throat. Leaving earth. There was a jumbled prayer then in my mind and heart that the great Creator would take care of us and give us luck. . . .

The little group of people down on the hangar floor were waving now, queerly foreshortened as in a second they dropped away. Then we were up in the starlight; mounting with the bleak Maine coast and its string of lights shrinking beneath us.

. . . Swift acceleration. Soon we were in the stratosphere; and then in a great curving crescent—product of our repulsion and the tangential force of the earth's rotation—we were hurled off into space. . . .

"Well, we did it, John—we did, didn't we?" Dr. Livingston said. "Now—do you want some rest? Go on down if you like." He was seated in his shirtsleeves by his little instrument table, with its humming bank of dials and levels. He mopped his dripping forehead with his handkerchief. It was hot as the shades of hell now in the *Planeteer's* interior—the friction of our rapid rise through the atmosphere, with which our temperature-controls were unable to cope. But we knew it would cool off quick enough presently.

"I'll stay here with you a while," I said. "I can't get used to it yet—wonderful, sort of frightening, isn't it?"

"And beautiful, John. Profitable, too—with the Xalite we'll bring back—turn it over to the authorities. And then, with our money, build another ship. A larger one. I'm going to devote my life to the development of space-travel. Why, John, can't you envisage—a big vessel, with passengers, bringing people from Mars maybe, if it's inhabited—"

Poor Dr. Livingston. His life was destined to be cut so short! How wise of the Creator that he so seldom gives us any hint of what is to come, so that at least we may dream. . . .

We had said nothing to Duroh and Carruthers about the Xalite, fearing that they might be tempted to tell others, family and friends, and before our departure the secret would be out. When we reached Zura, it was our plan to tell them, of course. And from the beginning Dr. Livingston had always insisted that he would see they shared equally with him and me.

My mind went back now to that night when he had first told me our plans; that weird face at our window, and someone who simultaneously had seemed to be eavesdropping upon us from the corridor. We had been apprehensive—if our secret was known—that something might occur to stop our departure, that some other expedition might hurriedly be made ready to try and get to Zura. But so far as we could know, nothing of the kind had happened.

"You see, John, with what we know now of space-flying," Dr. Livingston was saying, "the whole realm of the Solar System will be open to us in another twenty or thirty years. Why, with real money at our command, you and I—"

A shout from the living compartments under us checked him. Then there was the sound of a scuffle, and big Peter Duroh's roar:

"Why, damn you, come out of there! Grab him, Jim!"

And Carruthers' grim, quiet voice: "I've got him—"

They came clattering up into the starlit turret, dragging a man between them. Numbly Dr. Livingston and I stared. The face we had seen that night, peering at us through the laboratory window—wild-eyed, pallid, with a stubble of beard! We saw now that it was a thin, youthful face, with rumpled curly black hair above it. A boy, certainly no more than sixteen or seventeen. He was clad in tattered, dirty clothes, his whole appearance unkempt, his figure thin, almost emaciated as though he had been long without adequate nourishment. He cowered between Duroh and Carruthers, shaking with terror.

"Don't—don't kill me," he gasped. "I'll do what you want—I'll help on the trip. I just want something to eat and drink—"

"Cast him loose," I said. I swung on him. "Who in the devil are you—"

"Alan Grant," he gasped. "Oh, I guess you've heard of me, all right." He stood wild-eyed, trembling as Carruthers and Duroh let go of him. "Where are we? We've left the earth, haven't we? Well, that's all right—but don't you take me back. I'm not going to let anybody take me back—"

Alan Grant. We knew him then. For months televised images of the lad had been flung around the world. A wanted man—wanted for multiple murder—with a price of a decimar on his head for anyone who would take him, dead or alive!

III

YOU think we should approach from this side, John?" Dr. Livingston said.

I shrugged. "How can you tell?"

"True enough. If only those damnable

clouds would act decently and open up now."

Dr. Livingston and I were seated in the turret, bathed in the brilliant sunlight. Zura at which we were rushing broadside, so to speak, was now, even to the naked eye, a huge full-round disc, with the sunlight gleaming turgid in its sullen, swirling cloud-masses of atmosphere. By a queer mischance, we had had no break in the Zurian clouds since leaving earth. At which side had we best approach? Our only purpose was to land near some deposit of the Xalite.

But there was so much that we did not know. Were deposits of the precious metal widespread over the little asteroid? Would it be found only in a gaseous state, perhaps, so that we could not secure it? This atmosphere—would we be able to breathe it; or would our air-masks be necessary?

So much that we did not know, but there were many things about the strange little world which already we had learned. Apparently it was of a very great density. Dr. Livingston had calculated that back on earth. Its gravity, despite its five hundred-mile diameter, was, he thought, perhaps not much less than that of earth. And we knew now that it was not presenting one side always to the sun, but was rotating on its axis. A swift procession of days and nights, each some three or four hours long.

It is far from my purpose to detail the trip of the *Planeteer* from earth to Zura. All that has been written many times—with embellishments—and space-flying today has lost its novelty. Ours was a swift, uneventful passage, save that to us it was awe-inspiring indeed. Alan Grant, the young outlaw-killer who had so unexpectedly thrust himself upon us, had been a problem. His own case has now become history; I need not detail that either, except to say that by my experience with him, one may be a murderer and still inspire pity.

It is really horrible how quickly one may plunge downward in life. Alan Grant was only a boy really. Jealous over a worthless woman, and befuddled by alcoholite, in ten minutes he had changed himself from a decent, self-respecting lad into a bloodstained, multiple killer. All in ten

minutes—with all the rest of his life to pay the penalty.

To Dr. Livingston he was a problem. There were none of us willing to turn back to earth—even there at the start—just to deliver him to the authorities. It may have been his pleading; and Dr. Livingston's gentle, kindly nature. What would ultimately have been his fate, back on earth, was something which, as events transpired, never had to be decided. Certainly on the trip up to now, he had caused us no trouble—an intelligent lad, seemingly eager to do his share of work. We had told Carruthers and Duroh now about the Xalite. And Alan had heard it also. His thin, boyish face had had a queer look, or at least it seemed so to me.

The contamination of criminality! The thought had leaped into my mind, though Heaven knows I said nothing. One crime so easily to lead to another. But I flung away the thought. With a human excuse, Alan had stained himself with blood. Somehow, knowing him through those days and nights of that awing trip, I did not think he would want to repeat the experience.

"You'll stay on watch?" Dr. Livingston said, now as we sat together in the turret. "I'm tired, John. If those clouds break, call me at once."

"Yes," I agreed.

He went down to his room. Duroh and Carruthers were sleeping; and Alan also. I was left alone in the turret. I drew the curtains to shroud the sunlight. Bathed in starlight from the other side, I sat staring out at Zura. Wild, sullen-looking little world. The sunlight shot into its gray-black clouds with turgid orange and green light. We were so close now that the huge cloudy ball was spread over much of the firmament, with the white gleaming stars prismatic in the black abyss of space around it. And with our still-rapid approach, the disc was almost visibly enlarging.

A step sounded behind me. I looked up. "Oh, you, Alan?"

"Can I sit with you?"

"Yes, sure."

HE was a different-looking lad now. We had given him clean clothes; he was cleanly shaved; his face and his body,

though still thin, had filled out a bit. A handsome, sensitive-looking young fellow. But in his eyes was the same hunted look.

"That's Zura," he said. "Looks quite a bit bigger now, doesn't it?" Then suddenly he swung on me. "I'm going to stay there, John—understand? You can't stop me—not any of you—because I won't go back."

Pathetic damn words to come from a boy—to give up his world, his people, everything to which he was born, because he had made himself, all in ten minutes, unfitted for everything.

"Zura may not be habitable," I said. "No food. Maybe you can't even breathe that air down there. We don't know."

"I don't care. I'm not going back to earth." And then he added, "I—I guess I'd rather be there even without food." He muttered it with a grim bitterness. "The only man in my world—I couldn't do anything wrong then, could I?"

For an hour after that I think we both sat almost in silence. I was busy with the electro-telescope, trying to see down into the swirling Zurian clouds. On the stool beside me, Alan Grant just sat brooding. And then suddenly, as though he had been struggling all this time to reach some momentous decision, he burst out:

"I've got to tell you, that's all. John, listen—"

I was absorbed with the telescope so that I hardly heeded him. It seemed that the clouds of Zura, in one place in the northern hemisphere, were breaking into a little rift. At Alan's words, I saw out of the tail of my eye that he had flung an apprehensive look at the little spiral staircase of alumite which wound down into the lower levels of the *Planeteer*.

"What?" I said idly.

He lowered his voice. "I can't help telling you. I don't want—again—"

What a fatuous fool I was at that moment! Queer how in life, things momentous may of actuality hang upon seeming trivialities! If only I had listened to Alan Grant then! But in that instant, as I peered into the eyepiece of the telescope, a rift in the clouds of Zura opened up. I must have muttered some exclamation.

"What is it?" Alan demanded.

"The clouds are breaking! We may be able to see the surface now. Wait, I'll

swing it onto the image screen, so we can both see it."

I made the connections. The little fluorescent screen glowed with an image of the atmosphere of Zura—turgid, green, yellow and black masses of clouds, whirled and tossed by giant storms.

"Good Lord!" Alan exclaimed. "Are we supposed to descend through that?"

"No. We'd have to have a rift. There's one coming there now."

Midway between the equator and the pole there was a widening opening. Then a segment of the dark surface was visible. I focused the electro-telescope, swung its controls to a smaller area with a greater magnification. The surface of Zura! What a weird, wild scene! The image gave us perhaps a square mile. There was a turgid twilight down there, through which the daylight now was slanting, broken by the haze which still remained in this clearer atmosphere.

The terrain was rocky—a bleak, desolate waste, barren and empty. Tumbled rocks, buttes and spires, all slate-gray, sleek and glistening like marble. A tumbled terrain, with fissures and cave-mouths everywhere; rifts, gullies and huge canyons. Was it rock, or metal? Extremely dense—it had that obvious aspect; a compressed little world, with its surface broken, mangled as though by some titanic cataclysm.

IT was a frigid little world. White patches of snow and sleek blue ice everywhere were apparent. But it was melting ice now. Weirdly in places it drooped, grotesquely leprous where it had melted away. And in the hollows, there was water. Off to one side, a big bowl-like depression was a lake of water, scattered with melting ice. Frigid world, but now approaching the sun, warmth was striking down, melting the congealed surface. Masses of ice turning rotten. As I stared, a great frozen mass which hung like a white veil over a hundred-foot cliff abruptly broke away. Sunlight chanced to strike it as it came splintering down, so that it looked like fractured spun glass, a riot of prismatic color.

"John! Look! There, down at the lower corner!" Alan was tensely pointing to a corner of the image screen. What

was this? I stared and caught my breath. It seemed that against a distant ice-spire which stood like a stalagmite on the weird melting landscape, a white figure was poised. It seemed to move a little.

"Someone alive down there!" Alan murmured. "Look—that figure moved!"

Zura inhabited! We had never given a thought to that, save to assume that it was not. My fingers were shaking as I fumbled at the telescope, shortening the focus still further, giving a greater magnification of a much smaller area. Our fluoroscope screen blurred; then slowly clarified, with an area of only a hundred feet or so.

Numbed, we stared at a white figure which was against the ice-spire. A girl! A human girl? Heaven knows, it seemed so. Pale white in the weird Zurian daylight, she stood motionless, seemingly gazing out over the melting landscape. A girl the size of a girl on earth. A white garment, white fur perhaps, draped her breasts and thighs. Her long hair, white as a veil of frozen falling water, was tumbled over her shoulders.

Woman carved in white marble. Woman molded of sleek ice. If we had not seen her move, she could have been a strange statue of a beautiful earth-girl, frozen there. Then suddenly as the swirling clouds shifted, a shaft of sunlight fell upon her. There was a pink-whiteness, like a delicate flush, on her limbs, neck and face.

For that second Alan and I breathlessly stared. And then, as though the sunlight were something horribly frightening, her little body seemed to shudder. She turned, plunged into the shadows of a rock-rift and was gone!

IV

WITHIN another day, we were close over it. Of necessity our velocity was much less now. We had tilted so that the asteroid was under us, with our base gravity plates in negation. Zura for twenty-four earth-hours had been repulsing us, retarding us, as we dropped upon it. Dr. Livingston had made careful calculations. The total mass of Zura, small as the asteroid was in size, he had figured to be nearly that of the earth. We confirmed

it now, by the repulsing effect it had upon us.

Gradually we slowed, poised now midway in the northern hemisphere. Zura had a rotation on its axis of almost exactly four hours. That we had been able to check now—there had been six rotations in the span of an earth-day, as measured by our chronometer. A thousand miles up? It seemed now that we were no more than that. The Benson curve-rays, here in the turret, showed us on our tilted mirrors the full image of the little world directly under us. Its convexity long since had been apparent. It spread now like a huge cloud-enveloped ball, covering almost all the lower firmament.

"The clouds are lessening," Dr. Livingston said, as again he and I were alone in the turret. "We'll be able to descend easily through this atmosphere."

"Yes," I agreed.

There had been faint, though unmistakable, evidences of Xalite in many places. We had decided that our best course was to descend before the storms came back. Most of the moisture-masses seemed clustered over the southern hemisphere now. Here in the north, for six Zurian days it had been fairly clear. Swift alternation of day and night—days of gray, hazy light, with the sunlight often striking through. And nights of glittering stars. We had seen all the surface of the northern hemisphere now. Everywhere it was the same—bleak, metallic-looking gray rocks, wildly tumbled; huge, fantastic ice and snow formations; strewn pools of water, choked with melting ice.

Alan and I had mentioned that weird vision we had had of a living girl, so strangely fashioned in human mold. Was she real—or had our fancy tricked us? Dr. Livingston had blankly stared. From the big, handsome Peter Duroh had come a laugh and a ribald expression of hope that we were right. James Carruthers had merely stared incredulously, with his thin lips smiling and a look in his alert eyes that somehow seemed predatory.

But whether we had seen something animal or human, assuredly it had been alive. This atmosphere then, doubtless would be breathable to us; and the temperature down there, by daylight at least, must be around 40 F.

Dr. Livingston was checking his instruments. Another hour had passed. "Only five hundred miles of altitude now," he said. "I think we may use a little less repulsion for a time, and then the final retardation must begin."

Awesome descent. It took us another eighteen earth-hours while the weird convex surface of little Zura came up at us. I was often in the turret alone. Queerly an ominous sense of disaster was upon me. I could not tell why. Fear that we might not land safely? Surely it was not that. Rather was it as though, here in the little *Planeteer* which had been our world, something was impending. Somehow I had grown to dislike Pete Duroh and Jim Carruthers. Just little things. That ribald laugh. A way they had seemingly of watching me, whispering together while I was at the spectroscope, checking what evidence I could find of the presence of Xalite on the asteroid's surface.

And young Grant, boyish multiple murderer, whom now I had come somehow to like—what was it that he had wanted to tell me? I had tried several times to see him alone to ask him; but obviously he was avoiding me now. Whatever it was, he had repented the impulse.

We were all five in the turret during the descent through the Zurian atmosphere. Only fifty thousand feet up now. It was night, with glittering stars above us, and below, that wild, tumbled, fantastic landscape spreading now off to the horizon, bleak and grim in the starlight. . . .

TWENTY thousand feet. Sudden daylight had come and then night again. We were moving with Zura now in her swift axial rotation, dropping almost vertically down, slowly now with a constant retardation. I did not mention it, but I realized that we were poised very nearly over where Alan and I had seen—or thought we had seen—that strange vision of a girl. She had not reappeared. Were there others like her here? A race of people so much like earth humans that one of them could be a beautiful young girl, so like a girl of earth that I had resented the ribald attitude of Carruthers and Duroh?

My thoughts seemed totally impossible, according to scientific logic. Yet Alan and I surely had seen her. . . .

"This dam heat," Duroh said. He sat slumped on the control room floor, his lanky body in trousers and shirt. His black wavy hair was plastered on his forehead with sweat. He mopped it with his big handkerchief.

"You'll get it cold enough pretty soon," Carruthers laughed. "Take your time, Pete."

Carruthers was alertly watching Dr. Livingston as he shifted the gravity plates for a still greater retardation. "Going to slow us some more, Doc?"

"Yes. Yes, I don't want to take any chances."

Five thousand feet. . . . Then two thousand. Off to the right the great cauldron depression was like a mile-wide lake—black water choked with floating ice on which the starlight glistened prismatic. A great ramp of the gray metallic rock went up like a glacier to the left. Beside it, the foothills of distant mountains went up in great terraced tiers. Everywhere there were ice-filled gullies, with water pouring down out of many of them. Gullies, ravines and crevices; pits yawning with inky blackness. . . .

And then I noticed that, weirdly, there seemed light inherent to these Zurian rock-masses. Some of the cave-mouths were not quite black—a little light appeared in them, glowing with a prismatic sheen.

A thousand feet. I was at the gravity control-board now, executing Dr. Livingston's swift murmured orders. Without our modern rocket-streams, the little *Planeteer*, I must admit, was unwieldy. We were dropping slowly, with a side drift. In a corner Alan sat staring at us, with his hands gripped between his knees, his fingers working nervously. Duroh and Carruthers were standing tense beside me.

It was a touchy few minutes. We were some two hundred feet above a broken ice-strewn plateau, with a side drift that was carrying us toward a small cliff. I could see where Dr. Livingston intended to land now—a little shallow bowl-depression near the cliff, where the bottom seemed flat, with soft snow. The *Planeteer* was hovering upright, with a very slow, vertical axis rotation, so that as I used the cliff's repulsion to check our drift, I was shifting the current constantly in our side gravity plates.

Queer how one may think of two things at once! I was seated at the control table, with my fingers roving its gravity-plate shifting keys. Dr. Livingston was tensely peering through the side bull's-eyes, gauging our position, our downward and side-wise drift; calling out to me his orders. Certainly my mind had never been more alertly on anything than it now was on those gravity keys. But nevertheless, suddenly I was aware of an electric feeling here in the control room. Carruthers and Duroh exchanging glances. And over in the corner young Alan, with his hands between his knees, his fingers writhing, his dark gaze brooding on me.

"Base negation! Full—quickly now!" Dr. Livingston called.

We were almost over the snowy depression—hardly the height of the *Planeteer* above it. I flung on the base repulsion; held it only some ten seconds. Then gave attraction for an instant.

That may have been the first landing of any space-ship in the history of the Universe. I do not know, of course; but I will say we eased the little *Planeteer* down as light as a falling snowdrop. There was hardly a bump as we landed, with the base flat in the melting snow, and the globe of the *Planeteer* almost exactly upright.

"Good enough, John. We did it!" Dr. Livingston was triumphant. He swung toward me, his face flushed with pleasure. Jim Carruthers was close beside him. "Good work, wasn't it, Jim?"

"Yes," Carruthers said, with his thin smile. "You did nicely, Doctor." He was partly behind Dr. Livingston; I saw his arm raised behind Livingston's back. I had no more warning than that. The knife Carruthers was clutching stabbed deeply. I saw the smile fade off poor Dr. Livingston's face, with a dazed look of wonderment spreading there as he tossed up his arms and sprawled forward. He dropped in a crumpled heap almost at my feet, with the alumite knife-handle sticking from his back where a ghastly crimson stain already was spreading on his white shirt.

"Why—why, good Lord—" I gasped. I was on my feet; mind blurred, numbed with horror. My fists clenched as I whirled at Carruthers. "Why—why, you damned—"

"Easy there!" It was Peter Duroh's

growling voice behind me. I swung to face him. His big lanky figure leaned nonchalantly against one of the side bull's-eye windows. Both his hands were at his hips—his hands gripping an old-fashioned bullet-projector and a Banning heat-gun, with muzzles leveled at my chest!

V

"SO what are you going to do with me?" I demanded.

"Take it easy. Sit where you are." They had shoved me back into my chair at the instrument board. Over in a corner Alan still sat with his hands clasped between his knees, and his fingers working. Just a boy. He could not meet the glance I flung at him.

"Is Dr. Livingston dead?" I said. "If he isn't—Good Lord, are you going to let him just lie there?"

"Oh, he's dead all right," Duroh growled.

"You have no objection if I see, have you?"

"No. Go ahead."

"We'll go out by the lower door," Carruthers said impassively. "Keep your muzzle on him, Pete—I'm going down. Livingston said we'll use a portable spectroscope to locate the Xalite. It's in the base; I'll go rig it up."

"You better not open that base door too quickly," I warned. "If this atmosphere is wrong, in chemical content or pressure—kill us all here like rats in a trap."

"Don't you worry, Taine." From the head of the little incline stairway Carruthers grinned at me with his tight-lipped, ironic smile. "That's why you're alive. We realize you know more about a lot of things in this than we do."

Damnable cold-blooded villain. He waved his hand with jaunty irony at me as he vanished down the staircase. With Duroh's weapons alertly on me, I bent over the crumpled Dr. Livingston. He was dead, beyond question. For years he had been my best, almost my only, friend. There was a lump in my throat as I went back to my seat at the table.

"About this Xalite," Duroh said pleasantly. "In what form do we expect to find it? Pretty pure? Can you tell how pure it is with your instruments? If it's

in a pretty pure state, we won't need so much, will we? Fifty pounds or so—to deal out to a panting world for all our lifetime and make us rich enough for any man's dreams."

"So you all three have decided to be murderers?" I retorted. "One of us I should have thought was enough—contaminating damn business—"

My bitter words brought a burst from Alan. "So what can I do?" he flung at me; but still he did not look at me. "You think I want to live here on this God-forsaken little world—and die maybe in a day? Or go back to Earth? Dr. Livingston would have turned me over—you know he would—"

One crime with such ghastly fecundity begets another! Heaven knows I could hardly blame the boy. He was only sixteen; pushed into desperation.

"What will he do?" Duroh grinned. "Why, that's easy, isn't it, Alan? He'll go back to earth—rich. When you're rich—you can bribe officials. Or, at worst, you can't be hunted like a sewer rat as he was before. Money buys hiding places, clothes and food. Easy to hide out, when you've got the decimars."

"And me?" I persisted. "You need my help now? All right—let's say I'll give it. And then what?"

"When we get back to earth we'll turn you loose," he smiled. "Why not? You can hunt us all you like. We'll be gone."

Was that their plan for me? I doubted it a great deal. But I could see no reason now to balk them. Certainly it was to my interest to find the Xalite, get it aboard and start back. With Alan to help me—or possibly even alone, for that matter—I could navigate back to earth. The landing there, on one of the big flying fields, would be far less difficult than here. Meanwhile, I would watch my chance. And get a word alone with Alan if I could. I was still convinced that he wasn't the same stripe as these other two cold-blooded villains.

DUROH was questioning me now, and I answered him freely. A fairly rich deposit of the Xalite should be somewhere near here where we had landed. It would exist, probably as a strata in the metallic rock—not recognizable perhaps with the

naked eye, but identifiable with the portable spectroscope.

"And with a pick and shovel we dig it out?" Duroh said. "You damn sure better find it, Taine, if you know what's good for you."

"I will if I can," I agreed.

Carruthers came back. "Come on down and rig up this gadget, Taine. Then we'll get on some heavy clothes and make a start."

Docilely I let them shove me down past our dim living quarters, into the base storeroom. I saw now that Carruthers had a heat-gun clipped to his belt with his knife. Alan apparently was unarmed. Dr. Livingston, I knew, had brought some weapons. They were in his sleeping room—more than these cutthroats had taken—but I had no way of getting to them now.

In the base-room I rigged the small spectroscope, with its lenses, prisms and batteries. Duroh brought us heavy trousers, boots, mackinaws and heavy caps.

"Now," he said, "we're about ready, aren't we? If that air out there is no good, we'll have to go through the mid-section air-lock, with air-helmets? That the idea, Taine?"

"That's it," I agreed. "And maybe with pressure suits, for all I know."

But none of that was necessary. Cautiously I admitted the air. It was at once apparent that there was no great difference of pressure. It came slowly hissing in, stopping our ears for a moment. It was cold and dank, heavy to breathe and momentarily oppressive. But the feeling soon passed.

"Very good," Carruthers said. "Open wide, Taine."

I swung the bull's-eye inward . . . Zura. As my foot crunched into the moist, wet snow, a pang shot through me. Perhaps I was the first living thing ever to set foot upon an alien world. How different this landing was from what I had anticipated! Dr. Livingston dead; myself a captive in the hands of these cutthroats.

We had cut off the *Planeteer's* interior gravity, and had found that Zura was little different. As I walked now out into the raw, bleak night, a sense of physical lightness was upon me. I was conscious that if I took a leap it would be prodigious. Gravity perhaps was a quarter less; but the

difference certainly was no greater than that.

"We're leaving everything to you," Duroh growled at my elbow. "Make it quick now, Taine, if you know what's good for you. All we want is a supply of the Xalite, and get back and get away in a hurry."

Duroh and I were leading. He kept his little bullet-projector with its muzzle rammed into my side. Behind us came Alan and Carruthers. I carried the small electro-spectroscope, with its batteries slung across my back.

"I have no idea which way to go," I said. "It's all a chance. Suppose we go a little way; then stop and make a test."

"Suit yourself," Carruthers agreed from behind me. "We're cut off, down here in this depression. Once we get up on the level, almost anywhere should do for a start."

It was a weird, fantastic night-scene, as in a moment we emerged up upon the lip of the little depression. Overhead the myriad stars glittered in an inky, frosty sky. Around us spread the wild, tumbled landscape. It was a queerly small area, viewed now from the surface level. The convexity of the little world was instantly apparent, with the horizon everywhere crowding close; the stars in the dark sky which were low at the horizon seemed hanging there, as though one might make a leap and seize them.

WE were hardly more than a hundred feet from the ragged little cliff which towered now grimly over us. I flung a glance around. Everywhere great boulders and ice-masses were strewn, wildly tumbled. The starlight glittered prismatic on their tops. The shadows between them were black, yawning pits of emptiness. Everywhere a frigid desolation. But its congealed beauty was marred by the blight of warmth upon it. Veils of ice hung from the ragged, honeycombed little cliff—but they were leprous veils, their beauty eaten away by the blight of warmth, like some hideous disease rotting them. Everywhere water was dripping, running in rivulets, gathering into pools on which the starlight shimmered with a faint opalescent sheen.

"Stop here," Carruthers commanded.

We had picked our tortuous, sloshing way perhaps halfway to the little cliff. "Try the spectroscope here," Carruthers added. "Along the base of that precipice. If there's an outcropping there, it would be easy to get at."

His words struck me with apprehension. Carruthers seemed to know more about this thing than I had hoped. It was my plan now to locate the Xalite if I could. But somehow I feared to let them get their hands on it. With it safely on board the *Planeteer*, it might easily occur to them that they could successfully navigate back to earth. Their purpose in keeping me alive would be ended. . . . I could not forget with what cold-blooded nonchalance Carruthers had smiled at poor Dr. Livingston and then stabbed the knife into his back. I was alert every second now. If only I could get Duroh interested, with his weapon turned from me just for a moment. With half a chance I would risk a fight now, rather than cold-blooded murder later on.

"Now, let's hope—" Carruthers muttered, as I set up the little hooded spectroscope screen, and trained the instrument on the base of the cliff.

In a breathless moment the band spread out on the screen, glorious little splash of colors, diffusing from one into the next, with the thin dark lines of radiotronic emanations vertical streaks in the band.

Xalite! It was here, unmistakable. I glanced up from the hooded screen. Off there, where starlight was glittering at the ragged base of the little cliff, there was a narrow sword-slash of gray-white rock streaking the rock-face. It was visible now, where ice probably only recently had melted from it. Ore of Xalite! Dr. Livingston had described to me what probably it would look like in its crude state here on Zuria. A hundred pounds of that ore would be enough for a lifetime of earth's needs!

"Well," Duroh growled. "What do you see?"

I had been standing silent, peering at the cliff. Had something moved off there? A sort of white shadow, quickly shifting. I had that vague impression. And out of the tail of my eye, vaguely I noticed a huge rock-cluster some ten feet from us. It was piled with fantastic ice-formations,

blue-white in the starlight. But it seemed that there were white blobs there which had not been visible a moment ago.

"What's that screen show? Damn you, speak up." Annoyed at my silence, Carruthers prodded me in the ribs with his weapon. "Looks like Xalite—"

"That rock off there," I murmured. "Carruthers, look—"

Whatever vague sort of warning I had intended to give came too late. From beside us in the white, frosty starlight, weird white blobs materialized. Men? Were they? I had a vague glimpse of little white creatures, perhaps the height of my shoulder—white arms, legs, huge round heads, shining bald, slate-gray in the starlight. A horde of them in that second engulfed us.

The spectroscope went clattering as I fell, fighting, with half a dozen of them on top of me. Gruesome little creatures. To my grip their flesh was solid, sleek and cold. . . . I heard Alan give a startled cry, and then a groan as he went down. Duroh's weapon cracked, with its weird yellow-red stab of flame as the exploding powder in the old-fashioned gun hurled its bullet. The lead slug must have found a mark. There was an eerie, blood-chilling scream—inhuman, like some weird, unnamable animal in its death-cry; and I was aware of one of the little creatures leaping a dozen feet into the air and crashing down.

BUT Duroh had no chance to fire again. The swarming, snarling little things bore him down. And Carruthers was down. I had tumbled to my back, with half a dozen of them on me. They were heavy; more solid perhaps than an earthman. They seemed to have no weapons; their little fists, small as a child's, were thudding at me like hard balls of ice. Frantically I lunged, but the weight of them held me. A white, furry garment seemed tied around their middle. One of the faces came down above mine; weird face with eyes like slits, holes for nostrils and a wide slit of mouth that jabbered at me with guttural, unintelligible syllables.

"Don't fight," I heard Carruthers shouting. "Better give up—don't goad them to kill us."

It seemed reasonable advice. They were

jabbering like monkeys all around us, but now they seemed more eager to make us stop fighting than to harm us. I yielded suddenly, lying limp with their weight pressing me.

"All right," I muttered. "Damn you—get off me."

They understood at least my sudden limpness, and in a moment climbed away, and with a strength fully as great as my own, hauled me to my feet. Carruthers and Duroh now were up, with the little white Zurians gripping them. And I saw Alan, standing pallid and trembling, with blood streaming from a gash in his forehead.

"Got us," Duroh muttered. "Gosh, look at them."

There seemed a hundred or more of the little white forms materializing in the starry whiteness of the Zurian night. The protective coloration of nature. They were hardly visible except when they moved. The group that gripped us were fending off their crowding fellows now as they milled forward, wildly jabbering, peering to see these four strange beings which they had captured.

"Well, they don't seem to want to hurt us," I said. I peered down into the face of the one who was at my side, his small white hands, with long, thin fingers strong as little pincers, gripping my arm. "Take it easy," I said. "Let's be friends."

I tried grinning at him. Perhaps he vaguely understood the grin. The skin on his round white face was hairless, perhaps poreless, sleek as gray-white, polished marble. But it wrinkled with his grimace. I saw that he had no eyelids. The slits of the two sockets suddenly opened wide, so that I could see his huge round white eyeballs, with a very big purple-black lens in their center. It was a grotesque face, but suddenly I realized that it was not unintelligent.

Then we were being shoved forward. For an instant the big Duroh, towering head and shoulders over his little captors, made resistance.

"Don't be an idiot," I shouted at him. "Let them have their way."

The crowd milled around us as we were shoved along the base of the cliff. I could see Alan, pale, silent, with his blood-stained face; the grim, tight-lipped, pallid

Carruthers; and Duroh, docile now. And it occurred to me then, as I caught a look of frightened appeal from Duroh, how different things may be, all in a moment or two. I had been captive of Duroh and Carruthers and Alan, just a moment ago. Murderous cut-throats, they would have dispatched me, no doubt, when I had helped them all they needed. But now they looked to me as though we four earthmen were allied here against this fantastic enemy. And it was apparent that, like many bloodthirsty villains, Carruthers and Duroh were terrified. Cowards at heart.

We were being separated in the crowd. "Take it easy," I shouted. "Don't anger or frighten them—they'll kill us all." Certainly I had no wish to have Duroh go into a wild panic, with the Zurians killing me as well as the rest of us. We were all four unarmed now. They had searched us. One or two of them were carrying Duroh's and Carruthers' weapons, carrying them gingerly, awed and puzzled by them.

Where were they taking us? We came to an end of the little ice-cliff, rounded it, and I saw a dark yawning hole, like a cave-entrance in the honeycombed cliffside. The little white Zurians who were leading us plunged into it. I was shoved forward more swiftly now, with the darkness engulfing me—darkness filled with jabbering little voices and the patter of their huge bare feet.

IT may have been that at first my eyes were not accustomed to the greater darkness, and that presently, with expanding pupils, I began to see. That, of course. But now I was aware of that sheen of light, inherent to the rocks of this strange little world. A vaguely luminous, opalescent sheen which grew in intensity as we advanced so that it illumined the darkness with a weird, beautiful glitter.

I saw now that we were advancing into a widening tunnel. Already it was some fifty feet wide, with lifting ceiling so that presently I could only dimly see it, far up as it glistened in the opalescent light. Moisture was up there—a myriad tiny drops, glittering like opalescent gems in the eerie glow. Occasionally one would drop and hit my face.

Steadily the jabbering little crowd, with excited guttural voices, pushed forward. I

had the feeling at first that we were descending; this winding, broadening tunnel going downward at an ever increasing angle. Then presently it was as though the tunnel were level and as we advanced, the whole little Zurian world seemed turning forward and up over us. All in the viewpoint. Up or down; top or bottom—they are meaningless terms except for comparison.

It was growing steadily colder now. The roof moisture seldom dropped. Ice formations were everywhere here. There was a place where the roof was suddenly much lower, so that I could see an intricate lacery of ice-clusters up there, prismatic with glorious colors. Like stalagmites here on the tunnel floor, the ice stood in great columns, crinkled, glittering with a myriad facets of sparkling sheen. There were other tunnels crossing us now. I tried to imagine how far we had gone. Certainly a mile.

Then I was aware, as we rounded a curve, that ahead of us the shining passage was opening up into some sort of apartment. The light-sheen there was more intense. The crowd of Zurians had fallen silent now; and as another passage crossed us at an angle, our immediate captors herded most of their fellows away. Silently we advanced, with three Zurians gripping each of us. It was as though now we were advancing into some sacred place, so that our captors were suddenly respectfully silent.

"What the devil," Carruthers muttered, as I was shoved close to him.

We came out of the tunnel. I had a quick glimpse of a big blue-white ice-grotto here—walls glittering with an opalescent sheen on hanging veils of ice. And then I gasped; stared, numbed.

The Ice Maiden! The girl Alan and I had seen through the *Planetecr's* telescope! At the end of the grotto, perhaps a hundred feet from us now, on a small raised dais, she reclined on a pile of white furs. Her head and shoulders were raised on one elbow, her graceful pink-white limbs half revealed by the short white fur garment draped over her loins and breasts. Her hair, blue-white as spun ice, fell in profusion over her shoulders, framing her small oval face that was beautiful with a perfection of earth-beauty!

Our captors were all intoning now: "Tara! Tara! Tara!"

Then as we were hurriedly shoved forward, the girl's arm went up with an imperious gesture; and we were cast loose and flung at her feet!

VI

TARA! Quite obviously that was the girl's name. The little Zurian men were all intoning it with awed respect, as a gesture and a low, guttural word from her made them seize us again, stand us erect in a line before her. What weird, beautiful priestess was this? By what incredible science could it be that she was fashioned like a beautiful young earth-girl?

As we were stood upon our feet, with our captors at once withdrawing to line themselves near us, I saw that at each of the several door-openings which gave access to the grotto, other Zurians were peering in at us. And guards were here—men somewhat taller, with wide, powerful shoulders and smaller heads. Each of them held a long, pointed shaft of ice in his hand for a weapon, with his motionless figure tensed and his weird eyes alert upon us. Men who could with a single thrust of their powerful leg muscles hurl themselves in a bound half across the grotto.

For that moment we four stood silent, staring at the strange, beautiful creature reclining on the dais before us. Young Alan was numbed, blankly bewildered; Carruthers, seemingly less terrified now, gazed with a grim smile playing on his thin lips; and on the handsome, rough-hewn face of the giant Duroh, the panic of terror had gone. There was a look there now of open admiration; a bold confidence, an eager, predatory look.

Weird, transfixed tableau. It only lasted a brief moment, of course, while Tara stared down at us, calmly, musingly—a gaze of quiet, confident appraisal, her soft red lips gently curving into a questing smile and her cold, pale-blue eyes roving us. And then she spoke.

Amazing thing—it struck us numb, so that we could only stand and gasp.

"You look like earthmen," she said quietly. "Which is it, your language?"

English words, quaintly intoned, but English! Her voice was soft, with a queer

limpid, liquid quality to it, in amazing contrast to the guttural way she had spoken to her Zurians. And her tone, her look, her gesture to us were quietly imperious.

"English!" Duroh gasped. "What luck! So you speak our language—well, that's fine. Blast me for a sleeping tower time-keeper but you're beautiful, whoever you are. Tell us."

"I am Tara," she said. The little smile that played on her lips was amused now as her gaze roved the six-feet-four figure of Duroh.

"Tara? Tara what?" he demanded. "You're an Earthgirl of course. You must be. Then how did you get here—"

It was dawning on me now; the only combination of possible circumstances which logically it could be.

"You are the leader of your men?" Tara said quietly to Duroh.

"I—" Carruthers began. But a look from Duroh checked him—Duroh's look of bold confidence that he could handle this girl.

"Yes, I am," Duroh said. "I brought them here, on an exploring expedition from earth. We're not going to harm your little world. I killed one of your men—what in the hell did they dare set upon us for? See here now, what we want is—"

"You do talk rather too much," she interrupted. Her gaze left Duroh and fastened on Alan. "You—the young one—what is your name?"

"Alan. Alan Grant," he stammered softly.

"You have a nice voice. You look like a nice young man. And you?"

"I'm James Carruthers," Carruthers said. "If you'll let me explain—"

"And you?" she gazed at me.

"John Taine," I said.

She sat up suddenly, with her shimmering hair tumbling in a white mass over her breast. Again her calm, blue-eyed gaze impersonally roved us. "The big one lies," she stated. "Which one of you is leader here?"

"Our leader is dead," I burst out, "Murdered by these two—Carruthers and Duroh."

"You're a liar!" Duroh gasped. He took a step toward me, but thought better of it as the guard made a move forward.

CARRUTHERS started to speak, but Tara's calm voice silenced him. "So even in your little expedition murder had to come." She seemed saying it not to us, but to herself. "Of course, what would one expect? Who was murdered?"

Her gaze was on me, and I told her what had happened and why we were here. There was a brief pause, and again she silenced Duroh and Carruthers.

"Zogg!" she called. "Zogg—come—"

From a glittering, blue-white vaulted doorway a figure approached—a big Zurian nearly my own height. The shining, opalescent light gleamed on his white bald pate. He looked a powerful fellow. A white fur-skin draped him. In his hand was a club-like weapon, seemingly made of the heavy slate-gray rock, sleekly polished to a knife-like edge.

"Zogg, take them," she said in her calm English.

"All of them, Tara?"

"No. All but this one." Her imperious gesture went to me. "With him I will talk more."

Zogg's weird face twisted into a grin. A bluish tongue, like the tongue of an animal, licked the pallid lips of his slit of mouth. That the girl had taught him English was obvious. He had spoken to her haltingly, mouthing the words with his guttural voice.

"Not—hurt them?" he demanded.

"No," she flashed. "Never will I have that here. Well do you know it." Her cold-blue eyes glittered with her sudden angry emotion, and before it, Zogg drew away. And then she burst at him in his own language. I could guess that she was directing him what to do with the three prisoners. Duroh tried again to speak but was silenced. A dozen of the little side guards came pouncing forward.

"Easy," I warned. "Don't put up a fight, Duroh."

They were engulfed by the Zurians, shoved through the side archway, and were gone.

"Sit here by me," Tara said calmly.

At her gesture I sat on the side of the dais, with her calm gaze upon me as she questioned me. How shall I describe my first strange talk with Tara? Under her questions I described frankly our expedition, who we were, what we had come for,

and what had happened. And then suddenly I began questioning her. I had thought that her beautiful cold-blue eyes would flash with the little lightnings as they had at Zogg. But instead she said quietly,

"I shall tell you about myself, because there is no reason why I should not."

I had guessed what at least the main circumstances of her history must be. . . . The Blake expedition, which had left earth some sixteen years ago and never returned, had landed here on Zura, when the little asteroid previously had come into our Solar System. Landed here, with its spaceship smashed in the landing.

"George Simpson was my father," Tara was saying. "Everyone is dead now, of that little group, except me."

I WAS myself only some four years old when the Blake expedition disappeared. But I had heard of George Simpson. A fanatic. An altruist. That was the best, undoubtedly, that you could call him. A crusader for ideals, he had thought that he could remodel the world, remake God's erring creatures so that hate and fear and jealousy and violence would be gone. And among nations—peace, amity—never a hint of war or aggression.

Nice ideals. Simpson undoubtedly was a genius. A remarkable orator; a fellow of indefatigable energy; a personality forceful, winning. For years, with fanatic fervor, he devoted his life to converting others to his own ideals. It was ironic, but inevitable, that he himself was always a storm-center. Pathetically sincere, frequently he became a lawbreaker; was in prison and out again. Until at last he was the frenzied hater of humanity—an outcast. And with a wild burst of condemnation for earth and everything on it, he had joined Blake's expedition, vowing he would never return.

"And you were on that expedition too?" I said. "And your mother—I understood Blake took only a few men."

"He would not take my mother," Tara said. "So she hid herself on board. I was born here—a few months after they landed."

The rest of the story was simple enough.

Her mother had died about a year after Tara was born. Her father had brought her up, here on little Zura; had educated

her. For fourteen years, until his death a year or so ago, she had been his constant companion. George Simpson was an educated man, a scholar. He had left earth, determined never to return, so that he had taken many books with him, with which Tara had been taught. And he had found here a strange, primitive little people. There were, I believe, since it is understood now that the Zurians were a dying race, no more than a few thousands, living here in these interlacing honeycombed grottos. The forceful Simpson, when he had learned their language, had come to rule them. His intelligence, much greater than their own, and his own ideas which seemed here, at least, possible of attainment, had enabled him to make himself the Zurian ruler.

I must state now that it is far from my purpose—even if space permitted, which it does not—to sketch the life-history of the tragic little Zurian people. I am no ethnologist. Nor can I detail the effect George Simpson had upon them—the practical working of his ideal economic system. Books have been written on it in the last half century, based on what Tara was able to tell the learned men who questioned her. And as I indicated in my preface, much nonsense has been written. I think that my own experience, with Tara there in Zura, will demonstrate fully what I mean.

“And so now,” I said, “since your father’s death, you are ruler here?”

“Yes, of course. I followed my father’s ideals.”

“And there is no crime here? Nobody does anything wrong? They obey you?”

“I make them obey me,” she said; and again her eyes flashed with the little lightnings. “So I understand you came here to get what it is you call Xalite?” she added suddenly.

“Yes.”

“Something that belongs to us—to me—not to you.”

I WITHELD my smile. She was amazingly beautiful, reclining there so close to me. Her bosom, the contour of it faintly apparent beneath the white furry garment, rose and fell with her emotion. Her long snow-white hair glistened with a silvery sheen in the opalescent light.

“You’re very beautiful, Tara,” I said abruptly. “Your strange white hair—”

“My mother was like that. So you are a thief? My father would have expected it of any man of earth.”

I had touched her hand, where it rested on the fur rug beside me. “You were taught to hate all earth-people, weren’t you, Tara?”

“I hate thievery, and murder.” Her beautiful moist red lips curved with her scorn. “Five of you—just five to represent earth’s millions—and you are thieves and murderers. Everywhere on earth it is the same. Oh, I *know*—my father, he told me. Oh, he tried so hard for what is right—”

“I know he did, Tara. But he was doomed to fail.”

“And your nations, too—thieves, murderers, just like you individuals.” She suddenly seemed to realize that my hand was on hers. As though a viper had stung her she snatched her hand away. “You—Earthman! You would dare to touch me! Thief! Murderer—like all your miserable kind!”

She was abruptly sitting erect, quivering with her anger as she spat the words at me. I had drawn back. I was aware that from a nearby door-oval one of the little white Zurian guards was coming forward, but Tara imperiously waved him away. Her small white hand had gone to her furry garment, came back, clutching a small knife of polished stone. Little frozen volcano. But the tempestuous fires within her were seething now. For that breathless instant I thought that she was about to spring upon me with the knife.

“Tara—” I murmured.

Amazing little creature. Was it that subconsciously she realized the irony of her violence, and was ashamed that I should see it? Her hand opened and the knife fell to the rug at her side. Her flashing, steel-blue gaze like a little sliding sword, clashed with mine. Then she called out an imperious command in the Zurian tongue. From the shadows of the door-oval three guards came leaping at me.

“Tara—wait! Listen—”

Her furious commands drowned my protests. She was lying back, panting, staring after me as the guards roughly dragged me away.

VII

I WAS not killed, as momentarily I had feared, but was flung into a cell. You might call it that—a small cave-like recess off one of the smaller corridors. It seemed a level below the apartment in which Tara had been. My captors flung me into it, shoved a heavy stone into the door-slit, barred the stone with a metal fastening and withdrew.

More than ever now, the light inherent to the metallic rock-masses of subterranean Zura was apparent—a soft luminous glow. Left alone, I looked around me. It was somewhat warmer in here. The air was fresh enough. I saw that it was seeping in through many little rifts, an inch or two in width—tiny fissures in the honeycombed walls. There was a couch here, of white skins. I threw myself on it with the sudden realization that I was exhausted, and hungry and thirsty. The latter two needs I could not supply—but presently I had drifted into sleep.

I was awakened by the realization that the door-slab was being drawn aside. It was Zogg, Tara's guard who had taken Alan and the others away. He came in with food and water—food that was a fatty, uncooked animal flesh. I drank the water greedily—water different in taste from anything I had had on earth, but it was palatable. The blubbery animal-flesh at first was nauseous, but my hunger made me manage it. I was stiff with chill, but the food warmed me.

"Thanks," I said.

Zogg had been standing by the door, watching me impassively. I added: "Those friends of mine—what did you do with them? Kill them?"

"Near here. No hurt them," he said. Was that irony on his weird, grimacing face? A string of little ornaments hung on his chest now, dangling from his spindly neck. He gestured to them proudly. He was a dignitary here—one of Tara's leaders, I surmised. Afterward I learned that for years, in fact, he had been Simpson's lieutenant—forcing Simpson's commands upon the primitive little people, with what autocratic violence I could only guess. A belt of sinew was around his waist, with crude weapons dangling from it.

His grimace widened. He swept me

with a sidelong glance and again I had the feeling that this Zurian was far more intelligent than his weird, to me fantastic, aspect would suggest. His little slit eyes stared at me with a queer sort of cunning, and his grimacing mouth more than ever seemed ironical. It sent a vague shudder through me so that involuntarily I tensed as he came suddenly toward me.

"Tara send me for you," he said. "She wants see you now."

Silently I preceded him through the doorway. He followed, guiding me with his brief, guttural English words and with a knife-point prodding my back. We traversed the dim, glowing little tunnel, mounting steadily. I had expected we would emerge into the same apartment where Tara had been before, but we did not. Abruptly the tunnel ended in a huge glowing open space. The ceiling of this gigantic grotto must have been five hundred feet or more overhead; only a bluish opalescent haze was up there so that I had the feeling that I was outdoors. An ice and rock wall rose to one side of me, through big openings of which I could see the grotto apartment where I had met Tara a few hours ago.

And here, stretching before me in shining prismatic beauty, was her garden—a smaller, vaulted grotto to my left, into which Zogg at once led me. It was an amazing little place of glittering ice formations. From its arching roof, ice hung in great sparkling clusters, like stalactites, in places hanging down to meet the icy stalagmites of the floor, so that there were vaulted little corridors and aisles between them. In other places there were recesses shrouded with a white lacery of frozen moisture—great bridal veils, blue-white, intricate with nature's lacy patterns.

A little fairyland of ice. The opalescent sheen of the rocks sparkled on it everywhere with a riot of pastel colors—a soft, prismatic, breath-taking beauty.

"This way," Zogg said. "Tara waits you."

SHE was in a small ice glade where furs had been spread, and in a recess, half shrouded with frozen lacery, there was a stone bench fashioned in earth-style. She was standing by the bench. Zogg pushed me forward, and at her gesture, he with-

drew. I caught a glimpse of his face; his grimace—ironical.

"Tara—" I began.

"Sit down—John Taine." She waved me to the bench and dropped to the pile of rugs. "You angered me," she said. "I am sorry about that. I am thinking I will have to decide what to do with you—and those men with you whom you say are murderers."

I could think of no answer. I could only sit staring at her beauty. The lacery of ice-veils behind her seemed to glorify her with its prismatic pastel glow.

"Tell me," she murmured, "of your earth-world? Is it now what my father feared that always it would be?"

"Yes," I admitted. "I'm afraid it is." I began telling her of the history of my lifetime. It is horrible, when you think of it, how the events which humans create may be translated into terms of lust and greed, and jealousy and hatred. And the motives of nations—aggression—banditry.

"But it isn't all like that," I tried to explain. "There is love, too. And friendship and self-sacrifice. And science to try and heal the sick—to raise the standards of living. Xalite will do that. Xalite which is apparently of no use to your people, Tara."

She was staring at me musingly. Heaven knows, looking back on it now, I can try to understand her. Something within her, frightening her as she talked here alone with me. The urge, hardly to be understood by her, to order me here—to be alone with me. The first young man of her own world whom she had ever seen. Emotions, frightening—mingling with the life-long teachings of her fanatic father—his hatred of mankind, so that now what she instinctively felt must have angered as well as terrified her.

I had shifted from the bench to the rug beside her. My own emotions were sweeping me. "Tara," I murmured impulsively, "I'm going back to earth—and you're going with me."

I think she hardly heard me. She drew in her breath with a little hiss at my touch and leaped to her feet. "I shall show you my people," she said. "You will see what my father and I have done here."

She led me through the fairyland of the little garden; out through an archway, so

that again I seemed outdoors, with the ceiling of this giant grotto high in the luminous haze overhead. And presently we stood on a small rocky height, gazing down upon a primitive little city. It was a brief glimpse—my only glimpse—of the Zurian subterranean world. This group of habitations here—one of perhaps a dozen scattered throughout the vast system beneath the wild surface of the little asteroid—I saw as a scattered collection of white little mound-dwellings. Stone and frozen moisture, modeled so that families might have privacy. I saw the women there, with dangling hair and breasts; and children, playing in the doorways of the huts.

It had been, before Tara's lifetime, a much more numerous people. Perhaps once they had lived on the asteroid's surface. They were of a different bodily structure from earth-humans—cold-blooded, in comparison with ourselves. Then the Great Change had driven them in here—and killed most of them, so that now, so far as Tara knew, only these few thousand were left.

"The Great Change?" I said.

"It was when this world first came into the Solar System. My father has explained it to me. It happened at about the time of my birth when this world rounded the sun. Almost all of them died then. The heat was too terrible to them."

AND that time was coming again! Zura now was heading to round the sun, close, between the orbits of Mercury and Vulcan. Already, as I well knew, the little asteroid was inside the orbit of Venus. . . . With the protective blanket of heavy atmosphere, and the fires which doubtless were at the core of the little world, Zura, even in the realms of outer Interstellar space, had been habitable. But that protective atmospheric blanket was not enough, inside the orbit of Mercury! The heat would melt these ice-grottos. Already it was melting the outside surface.

"And you have no crime here?" I murmured. I could not avoid a faint irony. "Nothing ever goes wrong? Everyone always does everything exactly right?"

We were back in the prismatic little garden, walking down one of its glowing blue-white aisles. She stopped and faced me.

"They would not dare do wrong," she said. Again her eyes were flashing.

"I see," I murmured. "But you have done well, Tara. You and your father." And then, some damnable little imp within me made me add: "On earth, Tara, our people sometimes resent that their rulers live in palaces, when they can have only a hovel. That room where I met you—and your gardens here—they're very beautiful—"

It stung her. I cursed myself for the words, almost as I said them. She leaped to her feet, backed away, panting, in a tumult of hurt and anger.

"So all you can do is let me talk and then jibe at me! I—I hate you! You and all your kind!"

"Oh, Tara—I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. Really, I'm sorry—"

"I hate you—"

The words died in her throat. Behind us, here in the glittering garden, from Tara's apartments a group of Zurian women came running. They were terrified, calling out to her in their guttural voices. Her personal servants. And now, with them, a dozen or more of the little guards appeared. They came from several directions, shouting for Tara; confused, panic-stricken, wildly jabbering and gesticulating as they gathered near us.

Tara's questioning glance crossed with mine. "Why—why, what—" she stammered.

THERE was a turmoil everywhere here. Tara's servants and guards gathering around her in terror. And now we could hear other sounds, coming in through the huge archway from the open grotto-space outside. Sounds floating up from the Zurian village down the declivity. A distant blended murmur of angry voices. A mob down there, mounting the slope, screaming defiance. . . .

It was as though my words of a moment ago had been prophetic. Tara's people had risen now into sudden murderous revolt!

"Why—why, what is this?" she gasped. Amazement swept her face as she listened to the terrified words of one of her servants. And then her beautiful face contorted with anger, her eyes were flashing as she tossed up her head and squared her shoulders. "Why—why, how dare they—"

She whirled suddenly and dashed through the garden, with me after her, and the panic-stricken guards and servants gathering behind us. At the big archway, where we emerged upon a little ledge-like eminence with a ragged white slope down to the village spread below us, Tara paused, stricken by the tumult of the scene. A mob of a thousand or more, men, women and even children, were milling up the broken ascent. A frenzied, menacing mob. Most of them carried crude weapons—shafts of pointed ice, knives of polished stone; others primitive implements of agriculture.

At Tara's appearance on the little height, a great shout went up. Those in front, halfway up the slope now, momentarily paused, but the milling throng behind shoved against them, screaming threats, waving their weapons. A leaderless mob? And then I saw the tall figure of Zogg. Not in the front ranks, but a little farther down. He was shoving, shouting, inciting them forward. Then with a prodigious leap he was on a boulder, screaming up at Tara, wildly waving at the milling crowd, exhorting them forward.

The thought stabbed at me: Had the crafty Carruthers contrived this? Working upon Zogg, showing him how he could raise himself into power here in his little world by promising these people things which poor Tara had not been able to give them? Had Carruthers, Duroh and Alan contrived to be released? In that stricken moment I stared down at the frenzied, milling throng, expecting perhaps to see them down there. But I did not.

"Tara, good Lord—" I gasped.

An imperious sweep of her arm shoved me back. Then, with her little figure drawn to its full height, she stepped to the brink of the ledge, with her arms raised as she confronted the murderous mob!

VIII

FOR that instant the imperious, angry figure of Tara checked the climbing rabble. Their shouts rose higher, but as she grimly gestured, the shouts died into a low muttering murmur. And then she began speaking. For just a moment her imperious words in their own tongue held them.

Most of them had stopped milling now, staring up at her, muttering sullenly. Her voice rose above it. Then from his rock, Zogg was shouting and the mob caught it up, mutterings that rose again into screams as the rear ranks again began shoving forward.

Poor little Tara. For an instant she tried to shout above the din. And then suddenly she stopped, dropped her arms and on her face was the pathos of disillusionment. Her father's ideals, bred in her, clattering down now like a house of cards upon her.

The mob, frenzied again, was surging up the slope now. A thrown missile came hurtling past us, a rock that crashed into a lacery of ice-veil above us and brought it down upon us. Then other rocks, stones, a variety of missiles showered us. Behind me I was aware that the terrified servants and Tara's guards had fled.

"Tara," I gasped. "No use—"

I gripped her, trying to draw her away; and she stared at me with eyes in which tears now were gathering. "Oh, John—"

"Come—run," I muttered. "You lead us—out to the upper surface—"

We started back into the garden. . . .

"Here they are, damn them—"

It was Duroh's growling, triumphant voice! I whirled. He and Carruthers were here in the garden glade, with Alan behind them. Near them were two or three of the little white Zurian guards who evidently had released them. They stood confused as Carruthers, snarling, whipped out a heat-gun and leaped for me. Its sizzling violet bolt stabbed, missed me as I leaped under it; and I struck him with my lowered head. We went down, rolling, locked together in wild scrambling combat. Above us, as we lunged and struggled with flailing fists, I could see that Duroh had gestured at Alan to help Carruthers. He himself had leaped for Tara, seized her as she fought like a little wildcat, with a knife in her hand now, trying to stab him. Carruthers' gun had dropped from his hand with my onslaught. He was a damnably agile fellow. He twisted on top of me, his hands fumbling at my throat to strangle me.

The confused, terrified Zurians had decamped. I saw in that second that Alan, unarmed, was standing numbed. Duroh

thought he would leap to finish me up, of course. But he did not. Suddenly Alan seemed to realize that Duroh's huge arms were around Tara, his hand twisting the knife from her, his leering, grinning face pressing down with a caress upon hers.

And then Alan swiftly stooped, seized a blue-white ragged chunk of ice at his feet, and leaped at Duroh. The huge ice-chunk crashed on Duroh's head and he fell, with the raging little Alan upon him, crashing his head again and again. But the knife in Duroh's hand was stabbing. . . .

"Got you—" Carruthers leered. His hands throttled me. He did not see what was going on above him as he sprawled down upon me while momentarily I lay limp. But he didn't have me. My sudden unexpected heave caught him off balance, broke his hold on my throat. And I tumbled him off. The little heat-gun was lying here and I seized it. Its bolt seared full into his face, shriveling, blackening the flesh with a ghastly stench. He was dead in that second, with his face a bubbling, pulpy mass of horror.

"John—he—he's stabbed—dying—"

TARA'S voice called to me as I rose. Duroh, with his skull cracked, was dead, and beside him Alan lay with Duroh's knife buried in his chest, a ghastly crimson stain spreading over his shirt-front. His eyes were open, glazing. They seemed to focus on me, and his lips, on which bloody foam was gathering, twisted into a smile. Then he gasped faintly.

"I did something worthwhile—in my new world—didn't I? That's—good—I guess I'm—glad—"

A gush of blood from his mouth choked him. Tara was down beside him, her hand on his. He was trying to smile at her as the light went out of his eyes and he died.

"Oh, John—"

I was aware that the shouts from the oncoming mob were much louder now. Rocks were clattering into the arcade opening.

"Tara—we've got to—"

It seemed too late. In the opening three or four of the mob appeared, brandishing their weapons. My gun spat its sizzling bolt. One of the men screamed, leaped

and fell. The others scattered as I ran forward. On the ledge, with Tara behind me, I stared down at the advancing mob. The first milling ranks of it were hardly more than fifty feet from the top. My bolt hissed again; another man fell. . . .

"John—oh, please—my people—" Tara's hand checked me. But I could not be sure, if we tried to retreat, but that the frenzied throng would be able to overtake us. Then with sudden thought I adjusted the gun to a spreading heat-beam. The wave of heat leaped down—again and again—heat diffused over a wide area, not intense enough to kill. But before it the leaders of the Zurians staggered back, terrified, with their hands before their faces. The mob behind them wavered. Down at the bottom of the slope, others were pressing upward. In a moment it was a milling, scrambling crowd with panic spreading. And then the wavering ranks of it began rolling back until it was a rout. . . .

"Tara, come—hurry—they'll be after us in a moment—"

WHITE-FACED, with sorrow in her eyes mingled with wonderment, as though still she could not believe this catastrophe, she nodded. She led me as we ran, plunging down into the maze of tortuous corridors. Breathless, panting, we ran; rested a moment in a dim, glowing passage—and ran again.

"Oh, John—"

"Don't talk, Tara—keep going—"

It seemed that we could hear muffled shouts far behind us. But presently we outdistanced them, and then at last, after an eternity, we came safely out onto the upper surface.

It was night; glittering starlight on this doomed little world, heading for the heat of our giant sun.

And there, quite near us, was the dark little globe of the *Planetecr*, with the starlight glittering on its glassite dome-top.

"Wait, Tara—just a moment—" Unexpectedly, here on the sloshing half-melted surface, I came upon the pickaxe, shovel and big canvas bags, which Carruthers had dropped here when we were captured. The sword-slash of gray Xalite ore was visible, a gleaming inlay in the cliff-face nearby. I ran there. It chipped out readily under the axe, and then I shoveled it

PS's Feature Flash

FLASHING you the highlights on the men you've met in the preceding pages—those cosmic-minded writers and illustrators who help to nourish Planet Stories.

THE AUTHOR—

IF it hadn't been for the long-lamented crash of '29, Ed Earl Repp, author of "Buccaneer of the Star Seas," would very probably be unknown to these pages. Concerning the forces that pushed him into the writing game, Mr. Repp says:

"The crash of '29 changed the course of many lives into divers channels. When it happened, I was conducting a successful advertising and publicity business in Los Angeles, and almost overnight my accounts froze solid. Having a literary background, and ability of sorts, I looked about for a new field for developing it.

"Always more or less scientific mentally, although never having read a science-fiction magazine up to that time, I espied a fascinating cover one day, bought the book and read it. The contents intrigued me and were mighty good. The idea came to me that if other writers could profit by producing that kind of copy, so could I.

"And so I salvaged a typewriter from my defunct agency, went to work and turned out the two part serial "The Radium Pool" which Hugo Gernsback, often referred to as the father of science-fiction, thought was good enough to justify purchase and an order for twenty-four stories a year from me for his brand-new **WONDER STORIES** and **AIR WONDER STORIES**.

"So whatever the crash did for other people, it started me on a new and I hope permanent writing career. I've written fourteen books published here and abroad, and have written originals and screen plays for eighteen motion pictures for Warner Bros., Columbia, Universal and Republic. When I started writing I thought 1,000 words a day was a nice day's work. But now my regular schedule calls for 3,000 words daily. That's a million a year of nearly all types of pulp fiction, western, fantasy, adventure, love, published under various by-lines. I'm 39, like to hunt and fish and have a swell time generally following a hobby of archaeology and paleontology."

THE ARTIST—

PLANET is pretty proud of its new find-of-the-month in Leon Rosenthal ("Quest on Io," and "Domain of Zero"). Rosenthal went to the Yale art school, the Art Students' League and Pratt. Following this, he spent some time on ranches in New Mexico, California and Utah. He hopes to do illustrating in the big national magazines, and we don't think it will be long before he does. But we hope to hang onto him for a few issues at least before he soars.

FAN MAGS—

MR. TOM WRIGHT, in the **VIZIGRAPH**, deplures the rather weak little list of fan mags that we published in the summer issue. Ac-

cordingly, he has been kind enough to give us a comprehensive compilation of those publications so vital to the enjoyment of stf fans.

Reviewed by Tom Wright

MERCURY @ 5¢ from J. J. Fortier, 1836—39th Avenue, Oakland, Calif. The only west coast fan newspaper. Mimeographed.

STARDUST @ 20¢ from W. Lawrence Ham- ing, 2609 Argyle St., Chicago, Ill. Printed.

SPACEWAYS @ 10¢ from Harry Warner, Jr., 303 Bryan Place, Hagerstown, Md. Features fan material and poetry. Mimeographed.

THE COMET @ 10¢ from Tom Wright, R.F.D. #1, Box 129, Martinez, Calif. Contains fan articles, amature fiction, photos. Mimeographed.

HORIZONS @ 2 for 15¢ from Harry Warner, Jr., 303 Bryan Place, Hagerstown, Md. Amature fiction. Hectographed.

SCIENCE FICTION WEEKLY @ 5¢ from Robert W. Lowndes, 2574 Bedford Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y. The weekly newspaper covering all important stf. happenings. Mimeographed.

LE ZOMBIE @ 3 for 10¢ from Bob Tucker, Box 260, Bloomington, Ill. The humor mag of science-fiction. Mimeographed.

MIDWEST NEWS & VIEWS @ 5¢ from Mark Reinsberg, 3156 Cambridge Ave., Chi- cago, Ill. Covers the Mid West news. Mimeog- raphed.

SHANGRI-LA @ 10¢ from Box 6475 Metropoli- tan Station, Los Angeles, Calif. The L. A. club publication. Mimeographed.

NEW FANDOM @ \$1.00 per year membership. From 31-51 41st Street, Long Island City, N. Y. The official organ of NEW FANDOM. Mim- eographed.

THE ROCKET @ 15¢ from Walt Daugherty, 1039 W. 39th Street, Los Angeles, Calif. Arti- cles on Egyptology, a feature story and many other articles. Mimeographed.

SCIENTI-SNAPS @ 10¢ from Walter E. Mar- conette, 2709 East Second Street, Dayton, Ohio. Mimeographed.

FANTASCIENCE DIGEST @ 15¢ from Robert A. Madle, 333 E. Belgrade Street, Philadelphia, Pa. Mimeographed.

POLARIS @ 10¢ from Paul Frechafer, 404 S. Lake Ave., Pasadena, Calif. Weird stories and articles. Mimeographed.

FANTASY DIGEST @ 10¢ from Ted Diky, 3136 Smith St., Fort Wayne, Ind. Articles, humor, fiction. Mimeographed.

THE ALCHEMIST @ 10¢ from Lew Martin, 1258 Race St., Denver, Colo. Hectographed & Mimeographed.

THE VOICE OF THE IMAGI-NATION @ 10¢ from Forrest J. Ackerman, Box 6475 Met- ropolitan Station, Los Angeles, Calif. The fans forum of letters. Mimeographed.

SWEETNESS & LIGHT @ 10¢ from Russ Hodgkins, 1903 W. 84th Place, Los Angeles, Calif. Satire. Mimeographed.

THE FUTURIAN @ 4 for 25¢ from J. Michael Rosenblum, 4, Grange Terrace, Chapeltown, Leeds 7, England. Mimeographed.

Space prevents the printing of the remainder of the list. These will appear in the next issue.—Ed.

up, stuffed a hundred pounds or so of it into a bag and staggered away.

The *Planeteer*. Never was anything so welcome as that lower little door-oval. I tossed the bag into it. Barely in time. From over by the cliff, the first of the pursuing Zurians were pouring out.

"Hurry! Get inside, Tara—I'll close the door—"

Mutely she obeyed. The oncoming Zu- rians were led by a huge figure. Zogg. Grimly I leveled my gun, sizzled a bolt which struck him full, crumpled him. It checked the others for a moment as I slammed the *Planeteer's* door and with Tara rushed up to its upper control turret. The mechanisms hummed as they went into operation.

And then slowly, silently, we lifted. The Zurians were in a horde down there around the *Planeteer*, milling and scrambling. A few of them dropped off as we rose, up into the starlight with the strange little world sliding away beneath us.

"TELL me more of what I will see on earth," Tara said.

The *Planeteer's* journey was nearing its end. In the pale glittering starlight, Tara and I sat in the control room, watching the approaching earth, which was spread in a great crescent before us.

"You're too warm, Tara?"

"No, I'm getting used to it."

"The cold, on Zura—you never felt it?"

"I was born to that," she said. "My father, when I was a little girl, he did everything to make me fitted for it. But I will like earth's warmth."

Then again, as a hundred times before, I was telling her of earth—the things that we were going to do there together. She was seated now on a blanket on the floor- grid. Her knees were hunched up to her chin, with her hands clasping them and her eager little face over her rounded knees turned to me. Just an interested little earthgirl, making plans.

And presently I sat beside her on the blanket, with my arm around her, and her head tilted so that her cheek was resting against my shoulder. Then we fell silent as we stared out to the approaching cres- cent of earth.

Good or bad—our world.



THE VIZIGRAPH

MARTIANS, Venusians, Saturnians, Neptunians and fellow citizens—you're invited, all of you, to vizigraph in your messages. Kicks, kudos, bombs and bouquets—our expert operator can take it. All PS asks is that you make your vizigrams helpful and interesting.

Well, PLANET fans, you were the judges. Based on your selections, the winning letters in the summer issue were by Mrs. Ginger Zwick, 4S J Ackerman, and Leon DeMarlo respectively. We've sent them along the original illustration of their choice in that issue. Now here's a new batch coming up. Again, as before, writers of the three best letters, in your estimation, will have their choice of an original drawing in this issue. So pick your three favorites and send their names along to us.

To No. 1—Ginger Zwick: drawing by Lynch.

To No. 2—S J Ackerman: drawing by Paul.

To No. 3—Leon De Marlo: drawing by Smalle.

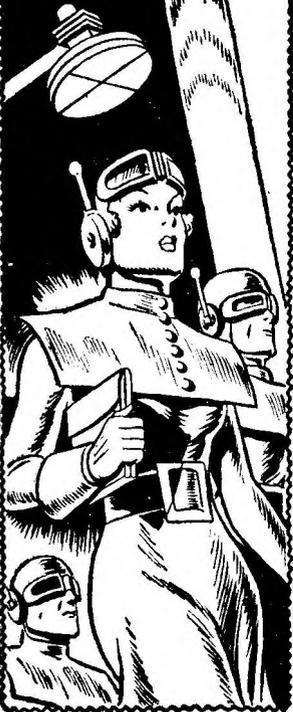
THEY ALWAYS SEEM TO, DON'T THEY?

Editor, PLANET STORIES,
New York City
CHEERIO CHUM:

In the current Summer issue, Tom Wright brings up a point that may well-nigh astound some people—there are fans who buy PLANET solely for its departments, and for their files, who will *never* read a story in it! The large majority of readers do not do this, of course; it would be foolish to assume this and edit the magazine accordingly. I estimate perhaps one hundred readers, or more, do this. They do it for one of three reasons: they absolutely haven't time to read the magazine, or they don't believe the stories are worth the time it takes, or they simply are collectors and never read stories. That this group exists, I am positive, for to a certain degree I am one of them.

A second number, perhaps from five hundred to five thousand, read the departments immediately upon getting the magazine, and then lay the issue aside until anywhere from a week to a year later to read the stories. I definitely belong to this group. It is for this group that the departments should be edited, together with the first group above. The rest of them either read whatever they find stuck in the back of the magazine, or ignore "such trash" altogether, either believing them to be editorially written, or youngsters of early teen age with a printer's ink complex. Very few investigate, and go through life ignorant of knowledge they could have gained for nothing.

Many improvements were noted in this issue. The cover is the first. The getting away from covers with a "comic book" touch was badly needed. Drake seems to be doing a fine job with such work as this, so see no need for changing to other and more-often-in-print artists that some people demand in every magazine in existence. I have an idea that the PLANET STORIES heading, once registered, costs money to change, so I suppose it's useless to ask for it to be improved, eh? I should like to see the second planet dropped (from Stories) and the stars removed



altogether; although for the name itself and the manner of presentation it is hard to beat. Publishers who, upon planning a new magazine, at once begin reviewing mentally all the amazing, astonishing, and wonder-words they can use for a title, amuse me. PLANET seems a good solid name, no pun intended.

Should definitely like to see trimmed edges. You surely have some idea on how this improves appearance, which comes first, and makes it easier for collectors, which comes second. It takes more time and money to be sure, but with quarterly publication at twenty cents, I don't imagine it will bankrupt the firm.

In passing it is amusing to note that while the chap on the cover is warmly dressed, as it is presumed he would be on another planet; the gal parades around in bare legs. They always seem to, don't they? I have a capital idea I would like to see done on a cover, and inasmuch as PLANET is always showing one scene; nasty men attacking Earth couple at door of their ship, it would go well here. With a story laid accordingly, have your cover artist paint a scene showing a Martian couple poised in flight at the door of *their* spaceship while a howling mob of enraged Earthlings attack *them*. The idea is *so* novel that I would have to ask a royalty if you use it: I demand the original of the painting.

The interior illustrations are better too. On pages 2—3 is the first Paul I have seen in many a green moon that I actually cared for. Usually he provokes me. The two new artists are noted, and I favor Don Lynch, by far! Notice the startling similarity to bits of his picture to work done by one of the Isip brothers in an astounding book of unknown name. Will welcome plenty of him!

In closing, to the "Vizigraph." Your method of handling this department, and answering letters therein, is novel. Give the originals to Tom Wright, Ginger Zwick and Ackerman (in that order) for the best letters this issue. In hopes, my choice of originals lie with Lynch and a good Paul, so all my relatives and friends all over the nation had better say "Ye Gods, isn't Tucker's letter a pip!" when they write you, or I'll settle with them when I meet them at the Convention . . . ohmigosh, I almost forgot what I had in mind when I began writing.

The Illini Fantasy Fictioneers (sponsors) cordially invite you, and all the readers, authors and illustrators of PLANET to attend the 1940 Science Fiction Convention to be held in Chicago this coming Labor Day. We want to see you there. And I will gladly send inquirers circulars telling them all about it.

BOB TUCKER,
P. O. Box 260,
Bloomington, Ill.

WOMEN ARE WARMER

DEAR MR. TUCKER:

Women are warmer-blooded than men, didn't you know? That's why our cover heroines are able to parade around in bare legs while their futuristic escort must go more heavily attired. In spite of all this, we have no intention of emphasizing the sex angle in PLANET.

As for your suggestion that we have our artist do a scene showing a Martian couple poised in flight at the door of a spaceship while a mob of enraged Earthlings attack them—well, it's a novel idea, all right, but, I ask you, is it sound?

But turning to more serious matters, I looked into the business of trimmed edges as you and Mr. Wright suggested but the cost of this refine-

ment is astoundingly high and the budget can't stand it. The only way we would be able to mine this money would be by paying less for the stories and I doubt if trimmed edges warrants anything like that.

It's fine that you like Don Lynch's drawings. I hope you'll agree with me that another new find, Rosenthal, in this issue, is also a welcome addition.

Cordially,
THE EDITOR.

PHOOIE ON DEPARTMENTS . . .

DEAR EDITOR:

Quote—The X-87 was a red shambles—unquote. Therein is contained my chief criticism of PLANET STORIES, summer issue. In every other respect the magazine is greatly improved. Beautiful damsels in distress are notably absent (so sorry, Mr. DeMarlo) and the stories are well-plotted.

I particularly liked "Asteroid H 277—Plus" and "Sphere of the Never-Dead"; the latter in spite of its title. "The Forbidden Dream" is out of Rocklynne's usual line, and definitely proves that he is not in a rut.

I enjoyed "The Cosmic Juggernaut." It is better than most of Fearn's super-colossals. Like most of his stories, it suffers from careless errors of fact, such as the transformation of half of a sphere of 8,000 miles diameter into a sphere 4,000 miles in diameter without change of average density, and without throwing any of the original hemisphere away.

Mr. DeMarlo's letter is interesting. In one respect we agree. He says no one can tell him what he likes (which is as it should be)—well, no one can tell me what I like either. Obviously my dinky B. S. doesn't rank with his imposing educational attainments; still, I think I can correct one misapprehension of his. He apparently thinks "education" and "intellect" are synonyms. They aren't, as a reference to Webster's well-known work will prove.

The editor is right, Mr. Wright, you're wrong. Phooie on departments! The Vizigraph and P. S.'s Feature Flash are both satisfactory and sufficient.

And now, Mr. Editor, I would like very much to have Don Lynch's drawing; failing that, Paul's for "Space-Liner X-87," or Eron's for "The Cosmic Juggernaut," would be appreciated.

Sincerely,
D. B. THOMPSON,
3136 Q St.,
Lincoln, Neb.

FUTURE LOOKED PRETTY BAD . . .

Red Rock, Ontario, Canada,
June 6, 1940.

DEAR SIR:

Congratulations! The third issue of PLANET STORIES places it among the best magazines in the science-fiction field.

At first the future of PLANET STORIES looked pretty bad; the first issue was terrible, worse than the average first editon. The stories appeared to have been written by authors of "Westerns," who simply substituted ray guns for six shooters, and space ships for horses. The errors were innumerable, especially in the story "War Lords of the Moon." Davies seems to be under the impression that the Moon has an atmosphere. Also his extraordinary rocket ships travel by far too slow. The ship in the story "Expedition to Pluto" is also too slow. At the speed stated 7200 M.P.H.

the trip to Pluto would take several years, not eight months. While on the subject of speed, unless my calculations are wrong, the velocity of escape, seven miles per second, comes out to 25,000 miles per hour, not 2500 M.P.H. as several of your stories, and Mr. Thompson state.

The second issue was a considerable improvement over the first, and could be classed as fair. The three short stories were the best in the issue. The rest of the stories were mediocre. The addition of the departments was a great improvement.

The third issue easily comes into the "good" class. (Make sure the next issue makes the "excellent" class.) The Forbidden Dream and The Cosmic Juggernaut were excellent; the best I have read anywhere for some time. They are by far the best two stories you have published to date. Let's have some more of that quality.

Your two new artists Lynch and Smalley are very good. The illustration by Lynch, for Forbidden Dream, is exceptionally good. Let them do more of the illustrations, and get rid of Eron. And how about a change in the theme of the cover? Each cover to date depicts a man in a glass helmet rescuing an overexposed blonde from the clutches of a horde of sub-men. By all means keep PLANET STORIES a quarterly, as Chester Payfer suggests. The market is already flooded with "cheap" science-fiction due to the mass production he mentions. Give us fewer issues, but better stories, and make PLANET STORIES a magazine to be looked forward to.

Lastly let me put in the well-known plea for trimmed edges. Trimmed edges improve the appearance of a magazine more than anything else.

Yours truly,
FRED HURTER, JR.

PLANET—GOING UP!

174 Windsor Place
Brooklyn, New York
May 4, 1940.

DEAR EDITOR:

The immediate reason for writing this letter is to commend you for your quite un-editor-like frankness in saying (on page 127 of the Summer, 1940, issue of PS) "I don't feel the stories are anywhere nearly as good as they might be. They are the best we are able to get at present, but they'll improve as we go along."

Well, sir, it's always been my contention that the big thing about a magazine is not where it is, but whether it's moving *up* or moving *down*. You just move *up* and you've got one steady reader right here.

There are two pet peeves I've got as far as science-fiction stories are concerned. The first is cheap blood-and-thunder. It gripes me to have a yarn full of flaming guns and dashing heroes with hair-breadth escapes cluttering up the pages. I have always thought that the science-fiction reader was just a *little* bit above the usual pulp-magazine clientele. I'm sure he can get along without the kind of tripe you find in each of the seventy-five million damn comic magazines that are drowning all the newsstands. Let's not have heroes that compete with Superman, Steelman, Rubberman, Garbage-man, etc. A few of us are actually older than twelve. A few of us have even gone to school. A few of us are even intelligent. In fact, just take notice that the most successful sf. magazine on the stands today is the one which has the least use for hero-villain junk.

My second pet peeve is well known to readers of sf. reader columns. It is this gosh-awful love interest that goes up the pages of too many sf.

magazines. Good Lord! If we wanted it, wouldn't we be reading "True Confessions?" And conversely, if we read science-fiction, do we want love-interest? Leastwise, do we want love-interest which, in quality and nature, is on a par with the strip-tease, as far as edification and value is concerned. In short, must we have women cavorting through the pages dressed in little or nothing just because it seems to be the general idea that the only way to get a reading public is to play for the gutter? Not in science-fiction!

Of course, there is this in what you say. It's always hard to start off a magazine and, especially in science-fiction, good stories aren't to be picked up on the sidewalk. In fact, you might say that if I'm so anxious to get wonderful stories with decent plots and a minimum of cheap action and cheaper love-interest, why not try writing some myself.

Well, I do. But so far, I've submitted nothing to PS for two good reasons. One—I'm busy at school right now and writing languishes. However, this objection will soon be removed for the term is over in three weeks. Two—I have the notion (I hope I'm wrong) that one of your editorial requirements of a story is that it contains a girl and that it be fairly saturated with love interest. Well, I've got the courage of my convictions. I think love-interest has no place in sf. except when carefully and realistically handled. I don't like "slop" and I won't write "slop." If it's any use submitting stories which either contain no women, or if they do, contain women only in an inoffensive manner—you'll be hearing from me one of these days.

Personally, I think you'll see it the fans' way on love-interest. Walton's yarn in the summer issue contained no females and lost nothing by it and Kummer's yarn contained a girl handled in a conservative and decent manner and actually gained by it.

But Cummings actually has a sixteen-year-old heroine with all the trimmings. Oh, Lord!

ISAAC ASENION.

ED.'S NOTE: Mr. A—is mistaken. PS. has no formula, demands no love interest. Only real requirement: A darned good story.

WANTED: MOREY'S HEAD ON A PLATTER

414 Washington Ave.
Charleroi, Pa.,
June 15, 1940.

DEAR EDITOR:

Will you please dislodge Morey from your magazine? If by some chance this cannot be done, MAKE HIM TAKE HIS TIME WHEN HE DRAWS! Never in my long experience have I seen such utterly putrid illustrating (if that's what you call it). At his present standard, I feel sure he would make quite a hit in the funnies!

Still speaking of illustrators, please give Paul and Eron a pat on the back for their work in the summer number of PS. It was wonderful, to say the least. Incidentally, how about getting Alex Schromburg and Mark Marchioni, for the mag? Schromburg is a fairly new artist, with an extremely interesting style. Marchioni has always been a favorite of mine. I'm sure you will find their work interesting, if you but give them a chance. . . .

I found the stories in the summer issue of the mag, on the whole quite good. But here they are according to their merit.

1. The Cosmic Juggernaut by John Russel Fearn

2. The Dark Swordsmen of Saturn by Neil R. Jones
 3. Space Liner X-87 by Ray Cummings
 4. Exiles of the Three Red Moons by Carl Selwyn
 5. Sphere of the Never-Dead by Sam Carson
 6. Asteroid H277—Plus by Harry Walton
 7. Star Pirate by Frederick A. Kummer, Jr.
 8. The Forbidden Dream by Ross Rocklynn
- Well, that's that. See you again sometime. . . .
With best regards,

BLAINE R. DUNMIRE.

NOT BEYOND BELIEF . . .

New York, New York,
May 13, 1940

DEAR EDITOR:

And you are one of the few editors of stf. mags that I can use that salutation with and mean the first word especially. Either you are having an exceptionally good run of luck or you are a very wise man and know the many and varied desires of the queer species, stfans. Beyond belief, possibly you are one of that species yourself. Stranger things have happened. And I'll tell you first of all, if this letter is a winning one (it won't be because the readers will probably not see it) reserve any Paul or Morey pic for me.

The first three issues of your mag I have before me, and behind me I have about fifteen hours of very thrilling reading. For a jaded fan, I can really say that the majority of the tales in PLANET STORIES thrill me as no other mag now on the market does. The first cover was terrible, the second fair, and the third, perfect. Only bad point is that they are all the same, only with slightly different hero, pursued heroine and pursuers. How about Paul and Morey covers? I bought No. 1 only to join my files. I actually pounced on No. 2 when I noted those grand Morey pics. The dealer is still gasping over the way I tore the mag from his hands upon seeing Paul. Again I say this isn't all luck but simply wise editorship. Even an artist that has done only poor work in other mags, Eron, surpasses himself with real stf. art in the summer issue.

Reynold's first novel was very good, but his second equally poor. The rest in No. 1 only fair. Illustrations terrible. But for my files, would you please give names of the artists of the first issue? Issue two had two good shorts and one well-written novelet by Repp. The rest were only fair. Morey is perfect and his full-page pics are the type that should be exclusively used, on the right-hand page preferably. Cummings will drive me insane if he pens another atom tale. The first fifty were sufficient. Another Drake cover, but pretty good.

The third issue, and best, brings Paul with a wonderful pic. For this you should be decorated. Its story, by Cummings, was a welcome relief from the above complaint. Rocklynn's "lette" was pleasing and had swell Lynch pic. *Covers without stories are taboo.* Never, never again. Selwyn writes good adventure. Fearn's *Cosmic Juggernaut* is the best thing in the issue and one of finest things I've read yet. The Jones yarn is almost duplicate of another in a different mag, even to title and pic. The three shorts were well presented and the science in them was explained interestingly. Pics good.

Now I will give my ideas on how the magazine should look. Everyone else is doing it. One novel of 40 pages, three lettres of 15 pages each, and two shorts of 10 pages each. All pics one full page and framed as were *Space Flame*, *Dicta-*

tor of Time, *Infinite Smallness*, *Three Red Moons*, etc. Book-jackets like *Forbidden Dream* acceptable. The two depts. now in use are fine and quite enough. I notice that the more recent stf. mags, unlike the "big three" and their companions, have an aura of dignity and decorum about them. No monstrous blurbs, massive print, sloppy pics due to misplacement, and numerous quizzes, questions, puzzles ad nauseam. Increase the two you have, though. Cover should always be a scene from a story in the mag, preferably the novel. The title of the magazine is especially sane and the fan does not feel like an idiot when asking for it. The publication should stay quarterly, or possibly change to bi-monthly. Too many mags of this type of fiction are now disappearing or becoming cheap, so stay on the safe side. Why get Wesso and Schneeman? They are both doing the worst work of their careers at present. Finley would be welcomed, but he does little stf. work and so seems improbable.

Congratulations to Mr. DeMarlo and Mrs. Zwick. I think it is a draw for the first prize. Those "fans" they fried are constant groaners, and I purposely did not write sooner in order to get out of the way of this type of "Fan." You were much too hard on poor Mr. Wright. Is there any association that 4SJ does *not* belong to at present?

May you keep up the constant success you have so far displayed by giving us more Paul and Morey, and on the covers, too. And may I win an illustration.

CHARLES HIDLEY,
2541 Aqueduct Avenue,
New York, N. Y.

ED.'S NOTE: Artists in first issue were Sherman and Fawcett.

THE TWO-BITS IS COVERED

DEAR EDITOR:

After reading over those two letters I sent you, I'll bet two-bits you get letters saying "Who does that punk Wright think he is? Tell you how to edit a mag, bet he couldn't do any better," and I guess they'll be right, but as I said, don't take me too seriously.

There's one thing to be said in your favor, I like your mag much better now, and if you can win over a reader that didn't like your mag in the first place, you're pretty good! Congrats!

The best story this issue, I think, is Rocklynn's "The Forbidden Dream." It has something. For a newcomer, or a pen name, Sam Carson is pretty good, too.

Ackerman's letter was best. And because I want an original, I'll say mine was second. Give third to Dick Burns.

I see you have a thing called Fan Mags, boy, is that incomplete! Enclosed is what I think is a complete list of all the fan mags, with a short review. Hope you can use it, if not I'd appreciate you sending it back.

Paul is a very good addition to your staff, Drake has improved a little on the cover.

Keep improving, lots of luck.

Cordially,

TOM WRIGHT,
R.F.D. 1, Box 129,
Martinez, Calif.

ED.'S NOTE: Sam Carson is no pen-name. Merely a new writer. Many thanks, Mr. Wright, for your open-minded point of view, also for complete list of fan mags which appears in Feature Flash dept.

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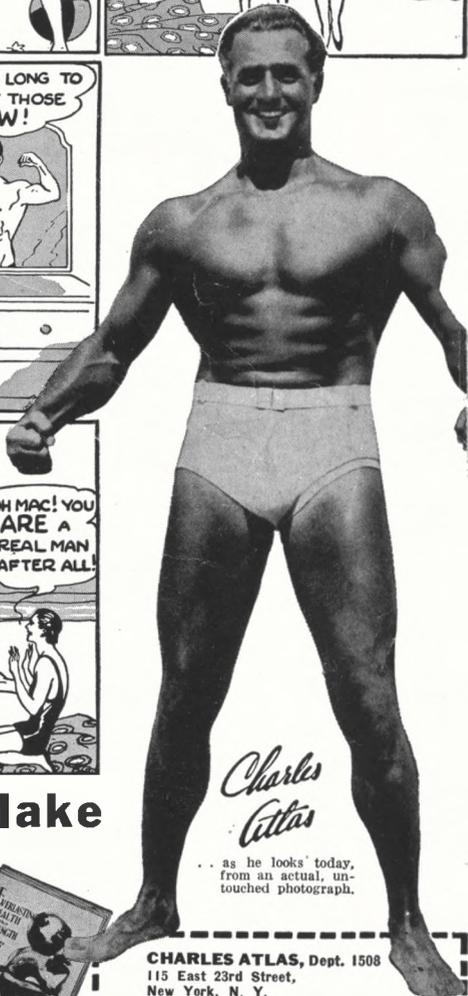
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Here's how I did it

by S. J. E.
(NAME AND ADDRESS SENT UPON REQUEST)



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"The training National Radio Institute gave me was so practical I was soon ready to make \$5 to \$10 a week in spare time servicing Radio sets."



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