

20¢ AUG.

# SUPER SCIENCE NOVELS

F

MAGAZINE



**AERITA OF  
THE LIGHT  
COUNTRY**  
*by* RAY CUMMINGS  
 L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP  
 OTIS A. KLINE

# I'm going to send you a Diamond or Watch

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You'll never miss the small monthly payments that will bring you one of these fine jewelry values. Write me today and tell me what you want.

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**A386** — Engagement Ring of rare beauty with 3 diamonds and 2 simulated sapphires or rubies in colorful contrast; 14K yellow gold mounting.



**\$4950**  
\$4.80 a month

**C809** — Dainty "Loveknot" Ring with brilliant diamond set in center of bowknot. 14K yellow gold mounting. A remarkable value.



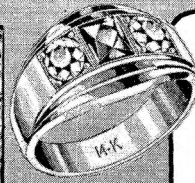
**\$1650**  
\$1.55 a month

**1402** — Massive Initial Ring for men. Brilliant diamond and 2 initials on genuine black onyx; heavy 14K yellow gold mounting.



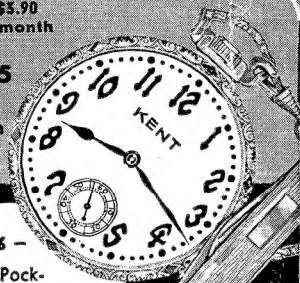
**\$2250**  
\$2.15 a month

**D220** — 2 matched brilliant diamonds and simulated sapphire or ruby in heavy 14K yellow gold ring for men.

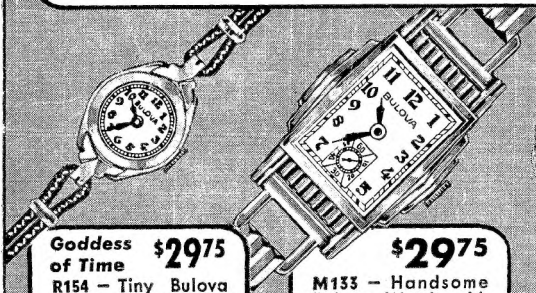


**\$3995**  
\$3.90 a month

**\$1295**  
\$1.20 a month



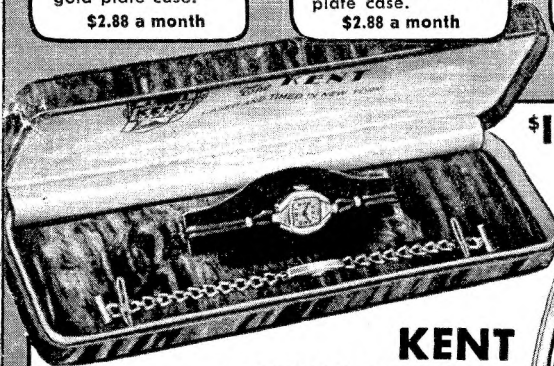
**1906** — Kent Pocket Watch with 7 jewels; chrome case. Knife and chain included.



**Goddess \$2975 of Time**  
**R154** — Tiny Bulova Watch. 17 jewels; 10K yellow rolled gold plate case.  
\$2.88 a month

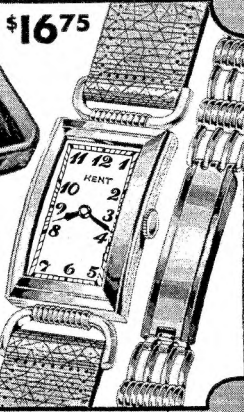
**\$2975**  
**M133** — Handsome Bulova Watch with 15 jewels; 10K yellow rolled gold plate case.  
\$2.88 a month

**\$44**  
**A185/C94**—Bridal Set with 6 brilliant diamonds. Rings designed to match in 14K yellow gold.  
\$4.30 a month



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**P160** — Ladies' Watch. **K124** — Man's Watch. Both with 7 jewels; 10K yellow rolled gold plate cases. Both come complete with strap and bracelet.



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# I JUMPED MY PAY \$35 A WEEK...

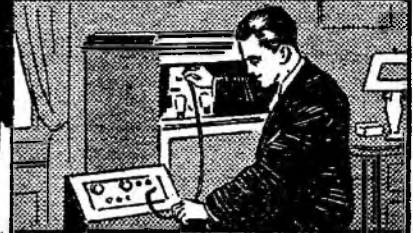
*This Free Book Showed Me How* 



**/A True Story By J. C. V.**  
*(Name and Address Sent on request)*



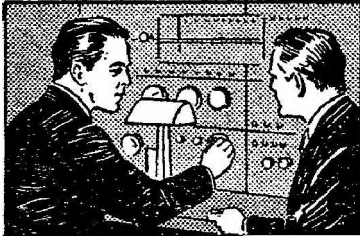
"I had a low-pay, no future job as a store clerk. I was not satisfied, but read about the opportunities in Radio and how N.R.I. would train me at home for them. I enrolled right away."



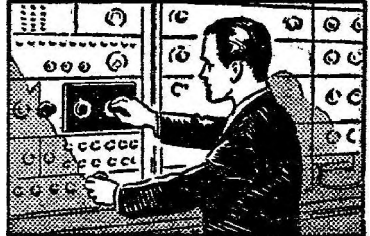
"The Course National Radio Institute gave me was so practical that I was soon ready to make \$5 to \$10 a week in spare time servicing Radio sets."



"After graduating I got a job as Radio Operator aboard ship, and was able to travel and see many parts of the world with all expenses paid, and a good salary besides."



"Immediately after leaving my ship job, I was made Chief Engineer of a small broadcasting station. Later I held the same job with several other similar stations in the South."



"I'm now Chief Engineer of WDOO, Chattanooga, Tenn. I make \$1,800 a year more than when I started Radio. There are many opportunities for trained Radio Technicians today."

# BE A RADIO TECHNICIAN!

## TRAIN AT HOME IN SPARE TIME

Many fellows who want better jobs are going to read these words—and do nothing about them. But a few, like J. C. V., who are MEN OF ACTION are going to say "SHOW ME HOW TO BE A SUCCESS IN RADIO!" The rest of my story is for these men—the "do-nothings" can stop here!

### Why Many Radio Technicians Make \$38, \$40, \$50 a Week

Millions of dollars in defense Radio orders on top of record business in regular Radio fields are opening new opportunities for men of action who train themselves NOW to be Radio Technicians. What's more—Radio Technicians, if drafted can earn special ratings paying up to 6 times a private's base pay, with extra prestige besides. Radio Technicians are well paid because they use their minds as well as their hands. It takes BOTH to repair home or auto Radio sets, to hold Broadcast, Commercial, Police or Aviation Radio, Television and Public Address jobs. Beginners become Radio Technicians and jump their pay, get better jobs, steadier work. Many, too, operate their own full time Radio Service businesses; or make extra money fixing Radio sets in spare time.

### Beginners Quickly Learn to Make \$5 to \$10 a Week Extra in Spare Time

When N.R.I. trains you to be a Radio Technician, you learn to make extra money

quickly. Many students report making extra money in spare time within a few months after enrolling; others tell how they paid for their entire Course with extra money made while learning.

### Mail the Coupon Below

Mail the Coupon for your FREE copy of "Rich Rewards in Radio"! This big 64-page book will show you why Radio is today's promising field with a future. You'll see more than 100 letters from men who got

into Radio through N.R.I. telling what they are doing, earning. You'll see why the N.R.I. Course is easy to understand, fascinating, practical. You'll get facts on Television and other fast-growing branches of Radio. ACT NOW! Paste the Coupon on a penny postcard, or mail in an envelope.

**J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 1G59**  
National Radio Institute  
Washington, D. C.



## GOOD FOR *Free* 64-PAGE BOOK

Mr. J. E. Smith, President, Dept. 1G59  
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Send me the FREE 64-page book which helped J. C. V. jump his pay \$35 a week. I want to know about Radio's opportunities. (No salesman will call—write plainly.)

Age.....

Name.....

Address.....

City..... State.....

20c

# SUPER SCIENCE

NOVELS MAGAZINE

ALL STORIES NEW

VOL. 3

AUGUST, 1941

NO. 1



## COMPLETE NOVEL

### AERITA OF THE LIGHT COUNTRY

.....By Ray Cummings 10

Grant's interest in the so-called winged girl was purely casual until he went into the side-show and saw her. Her wings were real! And the story behind her presence on Earth was stranger than anything the carnival barker could invent!

## TWO SHORT NOVELS

INVADERS FROM NOWHERE.....By L. Sprague de Camp 71

The Alans were friendly—with the friendliness of missionaries!

STRANGER FROM SMALLNESS.....By Otis Adelbert Kline 114

Smaller than a microbe, the Stranger was—but how he grew!

## SHORT STORIES

VENDETTA ON VENUS.....By Kerry Lash 52

In a battle of two mental Titans, even the aid of a mere human can decide!

WILLIE WINS A WAR.....By E. A. Grosser 61

Willie was only a thin blue haze—but he had firm opinions on people!

HIGGLEDY'S PIG.....By Myer Krulfeld 92

Bringing home the bacon sometimes proves very nearly fatal!

THE PSYCHOPATHIC MARTIANS.....By Allan Ingvald Benson 105

A Super Science Brief.

## ARTICLE

GALILEO'S REVOLUTION.....By Willy Ley 100

The story of gravitation—and transportation without power!

## SPECIAL FEATURES

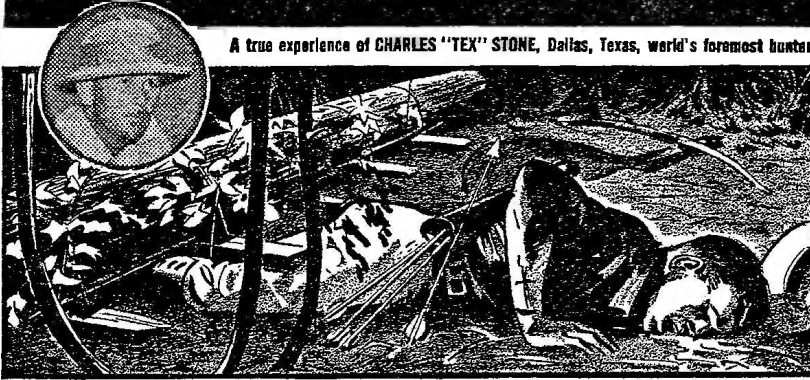
MISSIVES AND MISSILES..... 6

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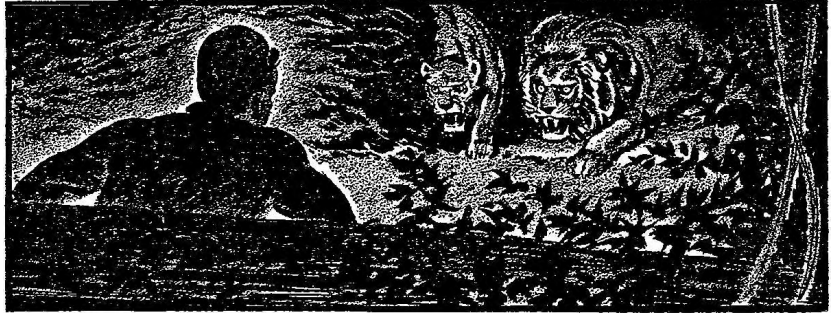
# FANGS BARED, THE JUNGLE BEASTS CROUCHED TO SPRING!

A true experience of CHARLES "TEX" STONE, Dallas, Texas, world's foremost hunter of big game with bow and arrows



"RETURNING FROM A HUNTING TRIP in the African bush one night," writes Mr. Stone, "I stopped to re-set a heavy log trap. Putting aside the haunch of meat I was carrying, I lifted the dead-fall. Suddenly I slipped! The log fell, pinning me flat!

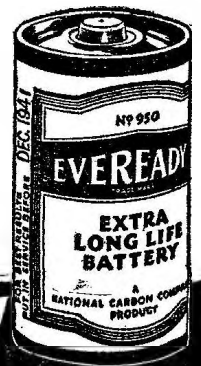
"THEN I HEARD A LION ROAR! It had followed the scent of the fresh meat! As I worked frantically to free myself, there was a stealthy rustle in the underbrush! I knew that death crouched in the darkness! Then I thought of my flashlight... switched it on...



"TWO ENORMOUS LIONS stood snarling at me... ready to spring! But the piercing beam held them at bay. Digging frantically at the soft earth, I finally got free of the trap. Thanks to those dependable 'Eveready' fresh DATED batteries, I was soon back at camp.

(Signed) *Charles "Tex" Stone*

The word "Eveready" is a registered trade-mark of National Carbon Company, Inc.

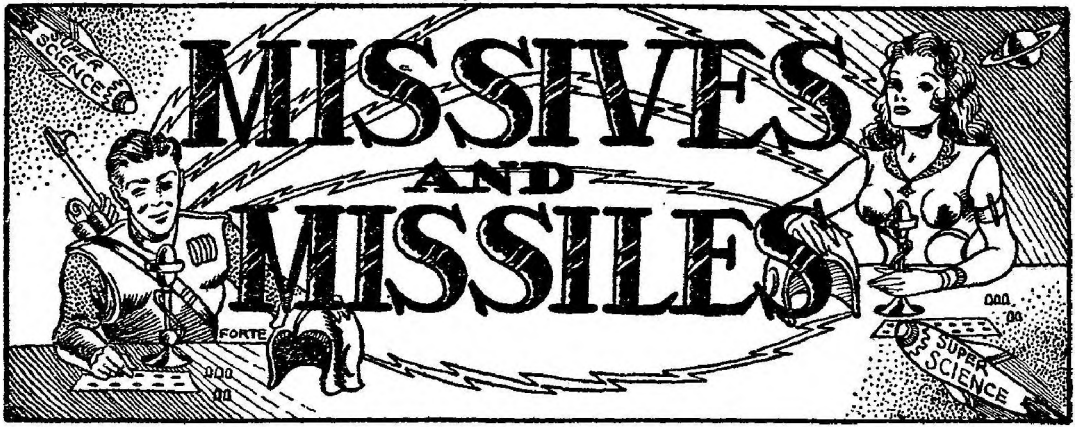


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### Author Praises Authors

Dear Mr. Pohl,

I don't know why I worry about ethics. Every time I sit down to write a letter to an editor, a tiny, saintly form with a halo over its head perches on top of my typewriter, transfixes me with a look of sad virtue and says, "I am your conscience, Asimov." (It calls me Asimov, because it's known me so long.) "I am your conscience. Do you think it is proper to write to an editor and tell him that 'Beings of Zxplch' by Joe Blow, is a terrible story? Is that a way to talk about a fellow scribbler? Where is your esprit de corps? Where is your united front? Remember, if writers don't stand together, the readers will get them all!"

So I say, "Well, Blow's yarn *was* terrible. I've got a certain intellectual integrity, and if I think a story disgraces a magazine, I'm going to say so. Why don't they buy one of mine instead?"

So my conscience leers and murmurs in a low, insinuating voice, "But what if Joe Blow writes a letter and knocks the hell out of *your* last story? You didn't think it was so hot yourself, remember?"

That decides me. We authors have our code of ethics, and so I don't write any letter. But, if you'll notice (and by this time, I imagine you have, if that clothespin on your nose means what I think it means) I *am* writing a letter this time.

Why, do you ask? Simply because in the May issue of *Super Science Novels*

there seems to be nothing but top-notch stuff. I couldn't scrape a knock out of it even if I tried—that is, if I didn't try too hard. And if I'm not forced to knock authors, I won't get into trouble. (Will someone kindly bring a glass of water? Mr. Pohl has fainted. What, brandy too! Thank you, I'll drink that.)

First, we have Willard E. Hawkins's "Rannie" which is certainly one of the best stories you have yet printed. There (I'm speaking to the world in general now) is love interest as it should be handled. You've got an orderly progression from scorn to love. Most stf. authors in handling love fall into one of two pitfalls. Either hero and heroine fall in love at first sight (which doesn't make for realism—believe me—no matter how romantic it sounds) or the guy and dame hate each other like poison all through until he rescues her from the demon-men of Mars for the seventeenth time (and very boring it is by that time) at which point she folds up suddenly in his strong, sinewy arms. They gaze at each other and one murmurs—

But what the heck, that's enough to nauseate the strongest. The point is that Hawkins avoids both traps with skill and finesse, to my great and unalloyed delight. Billsmith is a marvelous character. See what kind of characters us Rannies are—see!!

And then we come to "Interstellar

(Continued on page 8)

**DOUBLED MY PAY**  
 "When I enrolled at Coyne I was making 40¢ an hour or \$16.00 per week, at present . . . I receive over \$40.00 per week for 5 days" — *Benj. Spachko, Ill.*



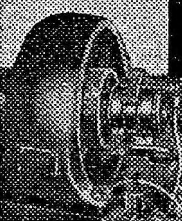
**\$225 A MONTH**  
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My friend, don't waste the golden years of your life saying, "I can't afford Specialized Training!" Of course you can! Get my catalog—see for yourself how we help graduates year after year. I have a special new low cost Board and Room Plan whereby students take care of their living expenses while at COYNE. Get training first, then pay tuition in 12 easy, monthly payments, starting 5 months after you begin school. So don't let lack of money keep you from sending this coupon for full details of my amazing plans!

COYNE extends the helping hand to YOU, too, if you're in a low-pay, discouraging job. Break out of the untrained class! If you are interested in bettering your place in life, get into ELECTRICITY—the gigantic growing field that employs more men than any other industry on earth!

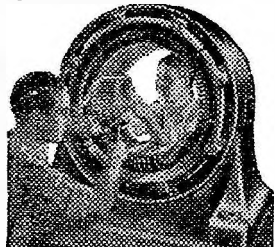
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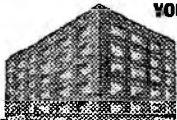


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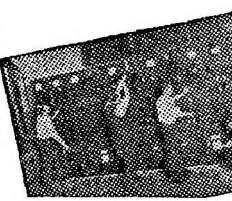
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(Continued from page 6)

Way-Station" and comes the time for a few plain words. Why the devil does Bob Tucker waste his time writing letters and fan mag articles when he could be grinding out yarns even half as good as I. W.-S? As far as humor is concerned, L. Sprague de Camp could scarcely have done better—and I say that with reverently-bowed head and bated breath. There isn't a let-down from beginning to end, and the ending—where the hero does *not* get the girl—is as refreshing as Dottie Lamour in a sarong.

Henry Hasse's lead novel "Mission Unknown" cops third place—and considering the level of the stories in this issue, third place isn't so bad. It was about as good as you could expect an action novel to be although it did sag a wee bit towards the end.

There now, common sense tells me not to proceed with four five, and six—except that I still haven't read a Super-science Brief that I liked.

The more I see of artists Bok and Thorp, the more I like them.

Oh boy, this has been a pleasure (for me, anyway). I haven't written a letter like this in almost two years and it almost makes me feel as if I were once more a carefree fan without a care in the world save that of making life miserable for editors and authors by frequent and violent knocks.

In fact, just to make the illusion even more perfect, I'll add something else. Here goes:

Listen, Mr. Pohl (vicious snarl) how about some smooth edges? (Lower lip thrust out). Isn't it about time we readers got some consideration? How about better paper? (eye-tooth bared in a scowl) And how about coming out monthly and increasing the number of pages?

Woo-woo. I'm young again. (As a matter of fact, I'm getting old so fast, I'm scaring myself. In a few months, I'll be

registering for the draft, and this November I'm actually going to *vote*. I'm no chicken, anymore.)—Isaac Asimov, 174 Windsor Place, Brooklyn, New York.

### Thorp for Covers?

Dear Mr. Pohl:

The May cover has a certain two dimensional flatness and artificiality suggestive of a comic book—not up to Mayorga's usual standard. Why not try Thorp?

"Mission Unknown" fell far short of the high standard set by "Genus Homo." It placed second in the issue with "The Rannie" first, and "The Brothers" third. Like Hidley, I'd rather see longer novels and fewer stories.

Suggestions—trimmed edges, and change to more mature title *Science Novels*. I'll be surprised if either of these is ever carried out.—Bill Stoy, 140-92 Burden Crescent, Jamaica, New York.

### Written Under Difficulties

Editor, *Super Science Novels*:

I have before me a copy of the May *SSN*, several post-cards, and one baby sister—"Arthur, what are you doin'?). The brat—I mean baby—has started to interrupt.

"I am writing my opinion of the latest *Novels*, the cover of which is good," respond I. "But I don't like the faces of the two people."

The baby leaves and I read and I write, "Tucker, Shea, Miller, Hawkins are good."

Oh-oh, she's back. "Arthur, read me a story."

"No," sez I. "Cantcha see I'm busy?"

"I don't care, read me a story."

"No," sez I again.

"*Wah-wah!* Read me a story! *Wah-wah!*"

Oh, heck, I can't write with her around. Will write again in May.—A. L. Schwartz, 229 Washington Street, Dorchester, Massachusetts.



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# AERITA OF THE LIGHT COUNTRY

Alan Grant stepped into the tawdry side-show to kill an idle hour — and found himself plunged head-over-heels into a maelstrom of battling adventure that took him across a hundred million miles of space, involved him in a vast civil war on an alien planet, and shouldered him with the fearsome responsibility for the safety of Earth!

Complete Book-Length Novel



## CHAPTER ONE

### Girl With Wings

“**A**DMISSION only one-hundred-thousandth part of a decimar, friends. Think of it—one-tenth of a miserable little gold-dollar to see the wonder Freak Show of the ages. Come up and get your tickets, friends. See the faceless boy from Borneo. See the beautiful girl with wings. Little flying virgin in all her breath-taking beauty. Who is she? Where is she

# By RAY CUMMINGS



from? What weird language does she speak? Twelve foot spread of feathered wings, my friends. Human girl of glorious beauty. Flying virgin—the world's greatest mystery . . . Get in line there—one at a time, please. A tenth part of a gold-dollar, to see the girl with wings—”

The barker's voice droned on. Young Alan Grant stood among the little crowd which milled here at the entrance of “Wilkins' Wonder Freak Show of the Ages.” A girl with wings? He smiled to himself as he dropped his arrant-cylinder, ground it out with his heel and shoved toward the ticket booth. A fake, of course, like the “Faceless Boy from Borneo” and the

"Living Mummy from the Valley of the Nile."

And then he was inside a dim smoky room, staring at a small dais which was illumined by a spot of blue tubelight. An announcer appeared.

"And now," Ladies and Gentlemen, I take great pleasure in presenting the world's greatest mystery. The girl with wings! Watch her closely, friends. Thrill to her breath-taking beauty. Who is she? What weird language does she speak? You will hear her talk—perhaps one of you can tell us where she is from . . . Now—here she comes!"

The announcer stepped aside. From the semi-darkness soft weird music was welling through the smoky little room. And then from behind a curtain the girl with wings glided forward into the blue sheen of the overhead tubelight. Young Alan Grant sucked in his breath with a gasp. What he saw was a small girl, hardly more than five feet tall. She was dressed in a long, flowing, gauze-like robe of drapery—pale-blue robe which shimmered in the sheen of the tubelight.

**A** BREATH-TAKING beauty? She was all that—a fragile-looking, ethereal little face framed by long silver hair that hung in two thick braids forward over her shoulders. Girl with wings! Two huge blue-feathered wings arched out from behind her shoulders, folded across her back with their feathered tips almost sweeping the ground.

For a moment she stood staring out from the dais at the smoke-filled room with its circle of curious faces gazing up at her. A girl no more than sixteen, or seventeen perhaps. Yet Grant could see that her queerly frail-looking body was rounded almost into the maturity of young womanhood. A face of ethereal, delicate beauty, but of what nationality? Strangely he could not tell.

For that moment she stood gazing at

her audience as though in confusion, with a little half-smile trembling on her coral lips. Grant felt his heart pounding. The wings were a fake, of course. But somehow that faint trembling smile seemed pathetic. As though she were frightened?

"Her name is Aerita," the announcer's voice was murmuring from the dimness. "First she will dance for us . . . Now, Aerita—you understand me?"

At his question she turned and nodded. And now to the slow exotic rhythm of the music she was swaying her hips, then gracefully waving her slim, pink-white arms. And still her tremulous smile persisted.

From the dimness of the audience a raucous voice suddenly protested: "Jess! What about her wings?"

A fake of course. Grant's heart unaccountably was pounding; but he told himself that now he would see where the wings were attached to her shoulders; and if she moved them he would try and see how the thing was worked. Through the standing group of onlookers he had quietly shoved himself forward until now he was at the edge of the dais, within three feet of the girl.

"Her wings?" the announcer responded quickly. "But first, I want you to hear her talk. Who is she? Where is she from? What weird language does she speak? She's the mystery of the ages, my friends."

There was a rippling murmur of derision from the audience on what seemed his stalling; but he ignored it. "Now Aerita—you may stop dancing."

The music died. The girl stood motionless; drooping. Her head was half turned toward the announcer's voice.

"Now," he said, "you understand me, Aerita?"

"Yes. I understand you—"

Weird, breathless little voice. It had a queer soft intonation; and she spoke the words so slowly, so measured that they seemed automatic. As though she were a

huge mechanical doll. Gruesome. Or was it very clever acting?

"Now, Aerita—tell us something in your own language—anything you like."

**F**OR a second there was a hushed silence; then the girl spoke—a soft, rippling flow of weird glib syllables. She gestured with them; and suddenly an animation had come to her face. Her eyes, luminous dark pools under long dark lashes, swept the nearer circle of her audience. Then her gaze seemed to land upon Grant as he stood breathlessly staring. For a moment it clung to his face. Was that fear in her eyes? A desperation? Whatever it was, in a second it was gone as her glance turned away.

Then she had finished speaking. "Well, you heard her?" the announcer said triumphantly. "What did she say? What language did she speak?"

Had it been only clever, rehearsed gibberish? Assuredly Grant did not think so.

"Her wings—" Several voices from the audience were calling it now. "Hey Mister, what about them wings?"

Suavely the announcer accepted challenge. "Her wings—why of course. Show us your wings, Aerita."

It was an amazing thing. Grant craned forward as abruptly now the great blue-feathered wings spread out. For a moment they spread at right angles to her little body—ten or twelve feet across them. And then they were slowly flapping. The rush of air from them fanned Grant's hot face. Slowly flapping wings, so that now, under them, the girl's slim, frail little body was poised on tiptoe. Seemingly almost weightless as gracefully she balanced herself.

A fake? Her draped gaze-robe had fallen away a little at the back of her shoulders where the wings seemed to join her body. Grant thought that he would see the weaving muscles there, pink-white

where the feathers ended at the base of the wings. Weightless little thing now. Only the toe-tips of one bare foot touched the floor. It was as though in another second she would have risen into the air. Then she dropped her wings, came flat-footed to the floor; and with a little bow, turned and ran behind the side curtain. . .

A ripple of awed applause floated out from the audience. At the front edge of the platform-dais, Grant stood silent, numbed by his pounding emotions. . . . Aerita. Like a premonition it seemed to him then as though, having seen this strange girl, he had glimpsed something of a destiny which was his. A destiny of—what? Love? Terror? There had been terror in her eyes, unmistakable. . . .

Thoughts are instant things. For that moment Grant's mind was a turmoil of weird conjectures. . . He was an extraordinarily big fellow. Among the pressing group of onlookers around him he towered nearly a head over them all—blond, handsome with a sun-bronzed face and crisp curly brown hair. Silent, he stared; and as the applause still held, the weird little girl came from behind the curtain to acknowledge it.

And now it seemed that all her gaze was for Grant, there where he loomed in the dimness above the others who crowded him. . . . His gaze and hers, for that instant meeting. Who shall say what can be carried in the crossing gaze of a man and a woman? A tingling surge swept Grant. It was only an instant; then Aerita had turned and again was gone. But in that instant Grant had interpreted her look—a mute, pathetic, terrified appeal!

## CHAPTER TWO

### Departure From Earth

**T**HE tawdry show went on. For a while longer, Grant stood watching as the "Living Mummy from the Valley of the

Nile," was displayed; and then, with a stream of others leaving, he went outside . . . Aerita. Queer that she had affected him so strangely. He tried to tell himself that she was merely some theatrical little waif who had gotten into this cheap show, and by trickery was pretending to be a girl with wings. . .

Grant was twenty-four, that summer of 2093. His home was in one of the big Northern suburbs of New York City, where he lived with his younger brother, Philip. They were orphans. Philip, now only eighteen, had graduated from the Government-school and was employed in a research laboratory of experimental physics. Alan, less of scientific bent, was a salesman of the new Government power-batteries for private aircraft. He was traveling now, and had stopped for the night in this curiously secluded little up-State town. . .

He had no plans, that evening as he stood lingering near the front entrance of the Wilkins' Museum of Nature's Freaks. The outside barker was still pattering about the "Flying Virgin—mystery of the Ages." Grant hardly heard him; there was only in his mind the vision of that pathetic little face—exquisite with ethereal, fragile beauty. Slim, pointed chin; eyes which had seemed aslant. Oriental? She did not seem so. Again weird conjectures flooded him . . .

Upon impulse, abruptly Grant went to a side entrance and demanded to see the Manager of the show.

"You wait here," he was told. "I'll see."

Then Wilkins came into the dingy little back office. He was a burly, bald-headed fellow of about sixty.

"Want to see me?" he demanded with sour impatience.

"Yes," Grant said. "I'm a stranger here—traveling salesman. I saw your show—I was interested in that girl with wings—"

"What about her?"

"Nothing at all," Grant said. "But I just got the idea that her wings are real. Weird sort of thing—"

Wilkins' beady little eyes narrowed with his chuckle. "Yes, ain't it? That's what I specialize in—mystery of the ages—Wilkins' Wonders—"

"So I just thought you might not mind telling me where you found her," Grant cut in. He drew a gold-coin from his pocket for a bribe. "I don't mind paying—just curious, you know. And just between us, of course—"

**W**ILKINS took the coin with alacrity. The smell of alcoholite wafted from his breath. "Well, thanks," he said. "You're a real gentle'm. Where did I get her?" He leaned forward and his voice fell to a confidential murmur. "Funny damn thing—I found her, only about twenty miles from here. Over by Twin Peaks. This is between us? By God, if you—"

"Of course," Grant said. He sat tense. Was Wilkins lying? He did not seem to be. He was telling now how three months ago, in a bad storm, he had been driving by night through a nearby valley and had seen the girl, drenched, terrified, crouching by the roadside.

"An' there you are," Wilkins finished. "So I took her in. Been takin' care of her ever since. Funny thing. I don't know no more about her than you do. Every damn word of English she knows, I've taught her, an' she knows plenty. Pretty quick, she is. Sops it up like a sponge does water. She's a good asset, but she's causin' me a lot of trouble now. By the Gods, if she thinks she can get away from me after what I've done for her—"

He suddenly realized that he had said too much. He sat up with an unsteady jerk. "Say," he added, "what in the devil you interested in her for? If you think—"

"And you've never reported her to the

authorities?" Grant murmured. "Naturally it's just assumed she's a fake—like your living mummy—"

"And where would I wind up?" Wilkins demanded. "Some science society takin' her—where's my profit?" He was suddenly alarmed. He climbed to his feet; his heavy-joweled face was red-purple. "Hey listen, you—get the Hell out of here. My living mummy a fake? Well it ain't. But the girl with wings is." He grinned with a foxy look. "You're the fine nit-wit—thought her wings was real? An' you didn't see how she was workin' them wings with wires? Come aroun' some other night—I'll show you. Now go on—get out of here—"

Wordlessly Grant retreated. The side door of the Museum slammed in his face. The little metal street here was dark. He crossed it; lost himself in the shadows of an inclined ramp. And then he crouched in the darkness. What weird mystery was this?

An hour passed. From where Grant lurked he could see the front of the Museum. There were no people going in now, and a steady stream came out. Then the show obviously was over. Still Grant had no plans, except that vaguely he was contemplating notifying the authorities, or some scientific society, in the morning. Would they take him seriously when he demanded an investigation? Would Wilkins be frightened now so that he would try and spirit the girl away. . . . Weird little captive. She was no more than that, Grant realized. Wilkins had intimated that she was trying to escape from him.

A shaft of dim tubelight from the opening side door of the Museum brought Grant from his roving thoughts. Two cloaked figures came out; a big one—the light for a second was on it so that Grant saw it was Wilkins. He was gripping a much smaller figure—a little upright dark blob. As they crossed the street Grant could see the bulge of the dark cloak over

the girl's folded wings. Then he saw a small black air-roller parked here under the ramp. Wilkins and the girl headed for it.

And suddenly there was a scuffle. "Damn you—stop that—" It was Wilkins' muttering voice. The girl had tried to twitch from his grasp. He cuffed her; slammed her into the little car; and as he climbed in after her Grant saw that he was holding a flashgun in his hand. . . . Grant was unarmed. He was still twenty feet away when the little black roller backed out and headed for the ramp entrance. In the darkness Grant made a run. He leaped as the car rolled onto the incline. There was a thump as he landed upon the car's rear fin; but the thump was lost in the rattle of the metal planking as they went up the incline. Then the car's wings slid out; on the ramp it gathered speed, came to a take-off jump and slid smoothly up into the air.

**F**ROM his precarious perch there was only starlight above the clinging Grant; a vision of the town sliding away beneath him and a rush of air past his ears. A rear window of the small tonneau of the air-roller showed him its dim interior—Wilkins at the controls and the girl huddled beside him. For another five minutes or so Grant clung to the fin. The car was mounting; Grant was calculating that he would need altitude if it went out of control. Then presently he hitched himself to the side running board. One of the back windows was open; he drew himself up, slid through it. . . .

Wilkins' voice was audible now. "Guess I'll have to hide you for a while, Aerita—a little trouble tonight—"

"You—let me go—"

"Guess you'd like to jump out one of these windows, eh?" He chuckled. "An' then you'd fly away? Well, I guess you could do that, for a fact." His arm went

around her as he drew her to him. "Listen—my wife ain't gonna take care of you any more—I'm tellin' her you escaped, get the idea? So you an' me—I got a little place up here in the hills—so we'll get better acquainted. I ain't such a bad feller—get the idea?"

Wilkins did not see the blob of Grant as he slowly shifted forward and pounced. The girl screamed as locked together the two men fell over the controls. But it was a brief struggle. Wilkins' gun was on the seat beside him. He snatched at it; tried to level it. But Grant's fist caught him under the jaw. The gun hissed with a bolt that sizzled into the roof of the metal cabin and sent down a shower of sparks. Then Grant had the gun; crashed it down on Wilkins' head.

In the dim little tonneau of the air-roller, Grant sat staring at the terrified girl. Wilkins lay on the floor; dead or unconscious. The car had fallen about a thousand feet, but Grant had righted it now.

"You—came?" Aerita suddenly murmured. The starlight was on her face, the terror there fading so that now she was staring at Grant with awe, and with what other emotions he could only imagine by the response within himself. What would he do now? Land the car? Take her to the police? And then lose her in the turmoil of scientific investigation which would engulf her. A freak of nature? Somehow the term was suddenly abhorrent to him. . .

"Well," he murmured. "Look here—you seem to speak English pretty well. Who are you?"

"I—Aerita—"

"He said he found you wandering out here somewhere. Where did you come from? You're the only girl on Earth with wings. How did—"

They were futile questions. He checked himself. Quite obviously she did not understand him. His vehemence terrified

her; she twitched away as his hand went to her arm. She was gazing down out of the window now at the mountainous wooded terrain some three thousand feet below them. And abruptly she gave a little cry.

"There is where I came from. See—down there."

**S**HE was pointing. The Twin Peaks which Wilkins had mentioned. They loomed off to the north a few miles away. A broad meadowed valley was here to one side, with a ribbon of lonely road threading it.

"There—" Aerita insisted. "See?"

She was excited now, her face flushed; and as she gazed again intently at Grant her eyes were glowing as though with a sudden determination. "You come," she reiterated. "I will show you."

Was her place—her home, down here in this valley? Impossible. . . He landed the car on the little road and brought it to a stop.

"What do you mean, Aerita? That this is where Wilkins found you? How did you get here?"

It was a side road, with no traffic at this hour of the night. "All right," he said. "I hope you're not trying to fool me. Come on out and show me."

She smiled; and as he opened the door she threw off her cloak and leaped from the car. Little blue-draped figure in the moonlight. And suddenly she spread her great blue-feathered wings. He gasped, stood amazed. Here suddenly was the reality he had pictured. And yet he had never quite believed it. . . Like a great graceful bird slowly she rose into the air, her little body tilted diagonal from the rush of wind, her drapes and her long silver hair fluttering. Numbly he stared, as with great, flapping, blue-feathered wings she sped over the trees and was gone. . .

Grant stood numbed. What a fool he had been—to have lost her. . . His cha-



grin mingled with a stab within him . . . his sense of loss. . . It was as though she had meant to him, not just something of interest to science; not just a mystery to be solved. . . Something—momentous. . .

Then he heard again the flap of giant wings and out of the dimness beyond the trees she came soaring, fluttering down with back-flapping wings until in another moment she landed poised on tiptoe almost beside him. She was panting; breathless.

“So bad the flying here—it is very hard for me.” Then at his expression, she laughed—little liquid ripple of soft laughter. “You come,” she added. “I will show—to you—”

She seemed wholly to have lost her fear of him now. An eagerness was on her as she gripped his hand, leading him. They went off the road, down into the wooded meadow. Queer. . . He had vaguely fancied that if she walked, or ran—she would be like a little elf, with fairy lightness. But now as she walked along the path under the trees a sluggishness seemed on her. As though she weighed too much. . .

**T**HEN Grant suddenly saw the thing to which she was leading him. It lay in a wooded dell, some distance off the path and by chance wholly hidden by brush and foliage until they were quite close to it. A long, dull-black, narrow cylinder. It seemed some twenty feet high at its central bulge, and perhaps fifty feet from tip to tip. It lay sprawled in the brush like a great weird fish, with side fins, and pointed head and tail.

A space-ship? Grant stared in startled astonishment. He had heard of course, that nearly a hundred and fifty years ago, here on Earth, a flying cube had been invented. Vaguely he remembered that he had read somewhere of a Dr. Norton Grenfell, and a Bolton Flying Cube. It had gone to Mercury, and later had been

destroyed so that the science of Interplanetary navigation was lost to Earth.

Was this girl from Mercury? Young Alan Grant was a practical fellow. He had never more than half believed the things he had heard of those weird incidents so long ago. He recalled now that they had concerned strange girls with wings. That part of the tales which his great-grandfather had been fond of telling him when he was a little boy, he had wholly disbelieved. Yet here was the reality before him!

Aerita was urging him forward. They reached the little cylinder. A small side doorway stood open. Grant's heart was racing; suddenly it seemed that an eagerness was on him; a lust for adventure. . . His life, and this girl's, destined to be so strangely interwoven. . .

“Come—I will show you,” Aerita was murmuring. “You will go with me? Oh, never did I want to come here to your Earth—”

He followed her through the doorway. The blackness sprang into a luminous gloom as she touched a lever on the metal side-wall. A tiny incline with a few steps led up into a small circular turret. Grant saw a table with a little bench before it—rows of strange-looking controls—levers, little switches, lines of triangular buttons and a score of indicator dials.

Aerita was staring at him, her face eagerly smiling. Her eyes were luminous with the mist of her emotion.

“You could help me—help us—so much,” she said softly. “And I would not be so afraid of the trip. Oh, you will come?”

“Yes,” he murmured. Still startled, he stood watching as she shifted one of the levers. From down the incline a click sounded as the entrance door slid closed. Then she was on the bench at the controls. Certainly she seemed to know what she was doing—her deft fingers were pulling levers, pressing some of the little trian-

gular buttons. The pallid interior was humming now—a slow, rhythmic hum, and Grant could feel a draft of moving interior air as the ventilating system began operating.

And through a vizor-pane, like a thick transparent bullseye here in the side of the circular turret, he could see the outside ground dropping away. Soon it was gone as the little cylinder, with a luminous rocket-stream like a comet-tail behind it, slanted up toward the stars that lay strewn, a myriad glittering gems on the blue-black velvet of the sky.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### The Attack on the Palace

**F**ROM the control turret of the space-cylinder, where he sat with Aerita, Grant gazed down upon the tumbled landscape of the little planet, Mercury. He knew now that Mercury presents always the same face to the Sun—one hemisphere eternally in darkness, and the other fiery with heat and glaring light. Aerita had guided her small vehicle now into a twilight zone, where to one side the horizon sky was faintly red-yellow with reflected glow and to the other there was only pallid starlight.

It was a weird and tumbled landscape upon which Grant now, from a height of some ten thousand feet, gazed silently down: a barren waste of metallic, coppery hills with peaks of towering jagged spires; canons like gashes slashed by some monstrous metalworker in mountains of the red metal.

It was a bleak landscape indeed. From here there seemed no life—just bleak glistening hills, in places gleaming with starlight and in others black and ominous with the shadow of low-scudding, turgid red and green clouds. No blade of vegetation was visible. There was no soil, save a glittering red-brown metallic dust, worn

by the rain and wind from the metal mountains.

“This—your Light Country?” Grant murmured.

“Yes. The Fire Country is off there.” She gestured toward the dull, red-yellow horizon. And then in the opposite direction: “And that way—the Dark Country.”

It had been a long trip from Earth; Grant almost had lost track of the passing time with no day nor night here, just the great black abyss of Interplanetary Space with its myriad blazing, distance worlds. Two weeks of Earth-time had passed. It had been an amazing journey, with this strange girl of another world. But with his startled astonishment past, a spirit of grim romantic adventure had come upon him so that he had settled into his life here in these little cubby rooms, impatient for the arrival.

To Grant, never before interested greatly in science save as it applied to the mechanics of Earth's modern aircraft, Aerita's little spaceship was at once a wonder and a fascination. Its rocket streams of electroidal gases, escaping under pressure, were like a comet's tail behind it. Then, leaving Earth's stratosphere, the rocket mechanisms had been shut off; and the intricate system of shifting gravity plates went into operation—attraction and repulsion so that the great masses of the distant stars acted upon the tiny mass of the ship; a flight toward the Sun; cutting the orbit of Venus; and then at last they had come within Mercury's attraction. . . .

To Grant the voyage was an amazement, far beyond the wonders of Interplanetary Space which now were spread around him. There was Aerita—the amazing things she had to tell him. They were incredible things—yet some of them fitted with what his great-grandfather had told him. . . .

Aerita had not learned English from Wilkins! She had been frightened; had

wanted only to tell nothing of herself and escape from him. Her grandfather, an aged scientist, had built this space-cylinder—the only one of its kind now on Mercury. Her grandfather had taught her English; part of her education, as his father and grandfather had taught him.

"You see," Aerita explained, "many years ago Earth people came to Mercury. One of our girls—her name I think was Tama—the legends say that she married an Earthman. We had terrible weapons then on Mercury. I do not know much of what things were like so long ago—it is forbidden now to study it."

"Why?" Grant demanded.

"Because much evil came from those weapons and things of science. Many people were killed. And so—I do not know how—all that was destroyed by our rulers. Our little world and your great Earth—better that they should remain separate. At least, so our rulers have thought for more than a hundred years."

**A**ND Aerita was descended through six or seven generations, from that girl of Mercury and that Earthman. Mercury wanted no connection with Earth. Grant, thinking of Earth's great wars—Earth's horrible instruments of diabolic science for the killing of humans—could well understand that attitude of Mercury's rulers!

But the ability to speak English had come down through Aerita's family. Her grandfather spoke it quite well, she said. So did Alto Jeenoh, the present Great Ruler of her people; and a few other leading men of the government spoke it also. To them it was a sign of culture, as a savant on Earth is proud of his knowledge of the dead languages.

It was a strange situation existing now on Mercury—a situation which a hundred and fifty Earth-years before had existed, and seemed to have been solved. But it had not, for now it was smouldering,

threatening the little civilization of Aerita's people with disaster. They were the people of the Light Country; their capital was known as the Hill City.

To each world, perhaps over all the Universe, it would seem that the Creator has sown its own allotted portion of the causes of strife! On Mercury, only the females of the Light Country race had wings. And for generations up to now, it had been the law that upon marriage the wings of the young virgins must be clipped, and with a horrible mutilation the muscles cut so that never again could they be used. It was like a badge of submission to the husband. The young girls had been brought up to consider it that, so that they submitted.

Grant could so easily understand how the custom had grown. The physical superiority of the male—to every normal male human, surely that must be an instinct. And these young girls of Mercury, free as fluttering birds in the air—inevitably in contact with them, the Mercurian young men, chained to the ground, felt inferior, humiliated, resentful. Grant's mind went back to that night with Aerita just before they left Earth. Out on the dark little road, she had suddenly escaped from him, fluttered up into the air and like a bird, was gone. He recalled his chagrin; his sense of futility.

And so here on Mercury, no wife could have wings. Then at last, just a year ago, the young virgins had rebelled. A thousand of them in the Hill City, led by Aerita, had vowed that never would they marry until the law was changed and they could keep their wings. Many of them had fled the city; established a wild little eyrie far up in the metal mountains which no man could reach; and much of their time was spent there.

"But my grandfather," Aerita explained, "he really thinks now that the girls are right. He is trying to persuade Alto Jeenoh, our ruler, to change the law.

But that has angered our young men—especially those among the workers. They want to use force upon us virgins—those of us that they can catch.” She was smiling whimsically. “That is their trouble—they cannot catch us.”

“I can well understand that,” Grant retorted.

**T**HEN she went on to tell him that on Mercury there were only two races—the Light Country people, and savages who lived in the Dark Country. Among the savages, there were now some four hundred criminals, Hill City men who in the past generation had been banished for crimes. One of them, their leader now, was named Rahgg. He was a man of scientific learning who once had worked for her grandfather. He had committed a crime against a young girl—had been exiled to live among the Dark Country savages.

“Your grandfather doesn’t believe in the idea of keeping Earth from contact with Mercury?” Grant asked. “If he built this ship—”

“Oh but yes, he does,” Aerita exclaimed. “He built this little vessel only with the idea of transportation around Mercury. Or perhaps an adventure to some nearby asteroid.”

The cylinder had been built, but not yet tested; and one night Rahgg had come furtively to the Hill City, seizing it and Aerita, carrying her off in it to the Dark Country.

“But I escaped from him,” she was saying. “And I got the cylinder—” She gazed at Grant slantwise in a way that made his heart pound. “A woman may think she knows much of science—my grandfather he was trying to teach me—and so I escaped in the cylinder.”

A little knowledge is such a dangerous thing. She had thought she understood the workings of the complicated mechanisms so that she could pilot the cylinder

from Rahgg’s stronghold in the Dark Country, back to the Hill City. And suddenly she had found herself hurtling out through the Mercutian stratosphere, into the abyss of Interplanetary Space. . . It had been a terrifying voyage. But she had survived it; had been only able to understand the intricate workings of the rocket-streams and the little gravity plates when she found herself near the great globe of Earth. . . And she had landed and wandered, terrified, confused by the drag of Earth’s gravity; not knowing where to go or what to do until in the violence of that summer electrical storm Wilkins had found her. . .

To Grant, as he sat now staring down at the naked coppery hills of Mercury with the destination of her home so near at hand, it was as though Nature had woven a monstrous, intricate pattern of weird events—all the pattern of his life and hers—weaving the separate threads until now so strangely they were being intertwined. . .

Swiftly, silently the cylinder slanted downward. The Mercutian twilight of the Light Country had been deepened by heavy, luridly colored clouds which now were close overhead. A rainstorm obviously had passed here. Rivulets of water were cascading down the naked copper hills. Pools of it lay glistening in the hollows. And then Grant saw little patches of soil and trees—oases where rock which was not too metallic had been worn into a soil. And with the heavy, humid heat, a luxuriant vegetation had sprung. The cylinder presently passed directly over a little patch of forest. Grant saw great spiny shafts of blue-red trees. They glistened in the dimness with an infra-red glow of the chemistry within them. Vegetation picking carbon dioxide from the swirling air after the storm so that the leaves were palpitating with red luminosity. It was a weird little patch of jungle. The trees seemed flimsy, porous; they

were heavy with hanging air-vines of giant spreading leaves and vivid, exotic flowers.

"My home," Aerita suddenly murmured. "Off there—see it?"

The patch of jungle was past; the naked copper hills had come again. Then there was a valley, of trees and fields. And now it seemed to Grant that he could see figures workings in the fields where things were growing.

**T**HE Hill City lay on the bottom and on the inner sides of a great bowl-like depression in the monster upper plateau of copper wastes which surrounded it. It was a strange little five mile spread of houses—squat metal dwellings of gleaming burnished copper. On the level cauldron floor the houses were set in crescent rows, with streets curving between them. They were sparsely set houses, each with its garden and its little field.

The outskirts of the city went up the inner slopes of the bowl. There were wider streets, like boulevards in concentric rings each a level higher on the slope. And there were other little streets that ascended, running like spokes of a wheel from the center of the valley floor to the thousand foot height of the upper circular rim.

Near to the top, on a great broad copper ledge with a giant flight of terraced metal steps down from it, a larger dwelling seemed like a government palace perhaps.

A profusion of flowers banked it, and adorned its broad flat roof.

Aerita gestured. "That is my home. My grandfather, he lives there with the Great Counsellor and his men who rule us."

The cylinder was dropping close now. In the semi-darkness with the lurid clouds still overhead, spots of light flared in the

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weird little city. They were flickering glows, as though from the light of braziers or burning little torches. Aerita was heading for the upper rim where near the palace there was a dark, seemingly level field where she could safely land. The scene outside the sealed cylinder still was soundless. But as they dropped lower, it seemed suddenly to Grant as though there must be undue activity down there. In the lower streets, down at the bottom of the valley, torchlights now were swiftly moving. Then Grant saw a group of milling human figures. And nearer at hand, on the flowered roof of the palace a man was running, plunging down into an opening that led below. Then from the lower palace doorway, other men came out. One was holding a great blazing torch. Its red-yellow light painted their robed figures. For a moment they stood staring down at the city as though with apprehension; and then they retreated back into the building, slamming its huge metal door after them.

"What the devil—" Grant murmured.

Beside him, Aerita was suddenly grim, almost terrified. "The workers, attacking the palace! Oh, they have been threatening to do that."

"But why?"

"Because our girls have been refusing marriage unless the law is changed so that we can keep our wings. The people want us to be forced into marriage! They've threatened to kill Alto Jeenoh, our ruler, unless he will do that!"

**A** REVOLT of the workers, storming the palace now to kill the men of government so that they could have their own laws! Aerita shook off Grant's hold as she gasped it. And all her attention was needed now at the cylinder's controls. She had changed her landing place, heading them now for the broad roof garden of the palace. Grant held his breath with perturbation as slowly, with a slight side-

drift, the cylinder sank down. They crashed through a spindly tree of the roof garden. There was a thump that shook him and Aerita; but they safely landed.

"Good enough," he exclaimed. She was on her feet with him; triumphant, but frightened. Trembling with haste, she slid open the little pressure door at the bottom of the turret. Grant followed her out; heavy humid air rushed at him—air that for a moment choked him; made his senses reel. He was conscious, as he leaped down into the roof garden of an unfamiliar lightness—the gravity here so much less than that of Earth.

In the luminous heavy haze of the stormy night-air, the torchlight down in the little city to Grant was at first only a blur. Sounds were audible now—the blended murmur of voices floating up—voices of angry menace. And now, far down at the bottom of the giant staircase, he could see where an angry milling crowd was gathering. Torchlit figures waving crude weapons. Then they were starting to mount the terraced steps . . .

"Oh come—" In agitation Aerita was pulling at him. "You be careful—not try to jump—you have so much strength—"

It was weird. He felt as though with a leap he could sail twenty feet or more. Aerita was drawing him toward stairs where a winding flight went down into the palace. The interior sounds were floating up—running footsteps; men's excited, frightened voices in the strange Mercutian language.

Grant was clad in long tight trousers of grey-black pin-stripes, with broad leather belt and white silkite shirt. He was bareheaded—his curly brown hair touseled. In the heat his face was flushed—and flushed too with the excitement of this weird crisis into which he was plunging. He was a young Viking Earthman; six feet four; obviously a strange sight here to these little Mercutians . . . In one of the upper halls he and Aerita encoun-

tered three or four little men. They were perhaps five and a half feet tall; some of them shorter—grey-skinned men with black and silver streaked hair, bushy to the base of the neck. Flowing, glistening fabric-ropes of gaudy colors enveloped them.

"Aerita—Aerita—" They gasped as they saw and recognized her. And then they saw Grant—stared mute, stricken with sudden awe and terror. In another moment they scattered, fled into a dark door oval near at hand.

Grant still had the small flash-gun which he had taken from Wilkins. It was jammed in his belt; he drew it out now. Aerita saw it and gripped him. Her flushed face was grim.

"That—maybe—" she murmured. "But I hope not to have bloodshed."

He followed her as they went down another big staircase. Near the bottom, instinctively Aerita spread her great wings and fluttered down. Grant took a leap, sailed a dozen feet and landed sprawling. He heard a cry of awe and fear. Another group of the palace inmates was down here—two or three older men; and an older woman. Her white hair was braided and piled on her head. Her folded wings arched behind her shoulders—wings scrawny with feathers moulted in places from them, and shriveled from lack of use. A gaudy tasseled drape hanging down her back partially covered them.

"You come—" Aerita again was dragging at him. She slid the big metal door-slide of the front entrance, and he rushed out with her to the terrace at the top of the great staircase.

It was a tumultuous sight. The milling crowd on the steps was more than half way up now. There were a thousand people at least—men, and a few women. The women carried blazing torches. The men brandished crude weapons—implements of the fields; knives like swords; huge sticks for bludgeons. . .

As Aerita and Grant appeared, a great cry went up. And then a shower of copper stones came hurtling. Most of them fell short, rattling like hail on the burnished copper of the steps. But one or two whizzed by, barely missing Aerita.

Grant seized her. "You come inside—you'll get hurt—killed—"

She flung him off. "I will do this—I will stop them—"

At the edge of the great flight she stood poised—an imperious little figure, facing her angry, frenzied people with her blue-feathered wings spread wide and her arms lifted in a gesture commanding silence.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### From the Crimson Storm

FOR a moment the angry throng on the steps was awed into silence. They were grey-skinned men, garbed in what seemed leather garments—jacket and knee-length trousers. The torchlight painted them; and illumined the figures of the women; short, squat, muscular-looking females with folded, atrophied wings. In milling, shoving ranks on the huge staircase they stood staring up at Aerita.

And now she was talking—a liquid flow of syllables, soft, persuasive at first, then rising into an imperious note of command as with an upflung hand she evidently ordered them back down the steps.

Grant, in a shadow of a copper column of the big building, stood watching, holding his breath. From the doorway behind him he was aware that an old man had come. The man had white flowing hair; a seamed, patrician grey face. Aerita's grandfather? And with him was a man perhaps Grant's age—a tall fellow, almost six feet, with bushy coal black hair, long to the base of his neck; a handsome face; high-bridged, hawklike nose, wide mouth and queerly pointed chin. He stood for a

moment gazing out at the scene; and momentarily the light from within the palace disclosed his face clearly. He was smiling; queer smile, Grant thought . . . a smile that was half a leer. Then he started forward as though to move to Aerita's side; but the old man called him.

"Talone—Talone—" And with a gesture summoned him back.

A stone suddenly whizzed up from down the staircase. It brought Grant's attention back to Aerita. At her command, for a time the crowd had wavered. Then some leader down there rallied them. The stone came hurtling; and as though it were a spark flung into gunpowder, a murmur of angry muttering went up. There were imprecations; then a roar of threats. Another stone came. . . Another; then a hail of them as again the menacing crowd began surging upward.

Aerita had lost. A stone struck one of her outstretched wings so that it quivered, flapped with the pain. But still she held her ground, her little voice calling with imperious command. . . With a leap, Grant was beside her.

"Aerita—Aerita dear—" He waved his flashgun at her. There was no way of re-charging it here on Mercury, but he knew that it had two or three brief bolts left in it. "Aerita, I'll show them—"

"Oh—Oh Alan—my people—"

But surely it was necessary. Grant could see now one of the leaders down there—a big grey fellow with a gaudy rag around his forehead. Brandishing a glittering, spearlike implement, he was mounting the steps, urging the others after him. Grant leveled his little weapon. The crowd had not noticed him before, but it saw him now and a great shout went up—the gasping of a few voices, then others until a thousand throats were crying out with astonishment and awe.

Grant's flashgun in that same second spat its little bolt—a hissing, sizzling pencilray of electroidal charge, violet-red in

the twilight dimness. It caught the big man full in the chest. His scream was lost in the roar of the crowd as he tumbled forward. In a heap his body hit the copper stairs, wavered and then fell backwards—gathering momentum as it went down end over end, then rolling with limp flailing arms and legs—down the steps until it crashed into the terrified crowd behind it. . .

It was just one shot of the little Earth-gun. To the Mercurians it was miraculous. For that moment the throng, awed into terrified silence, stood mutely staring. Some, far in the rear, were still shouting in anger, but those in front began wavering until in another moment they all fled in terror. The giant staircase was empty, with just the huddled form of the dead man lying there alone.

"Well, we did it," Grant murmured. "But if they come back—" He stared ruefully at his little weapon.

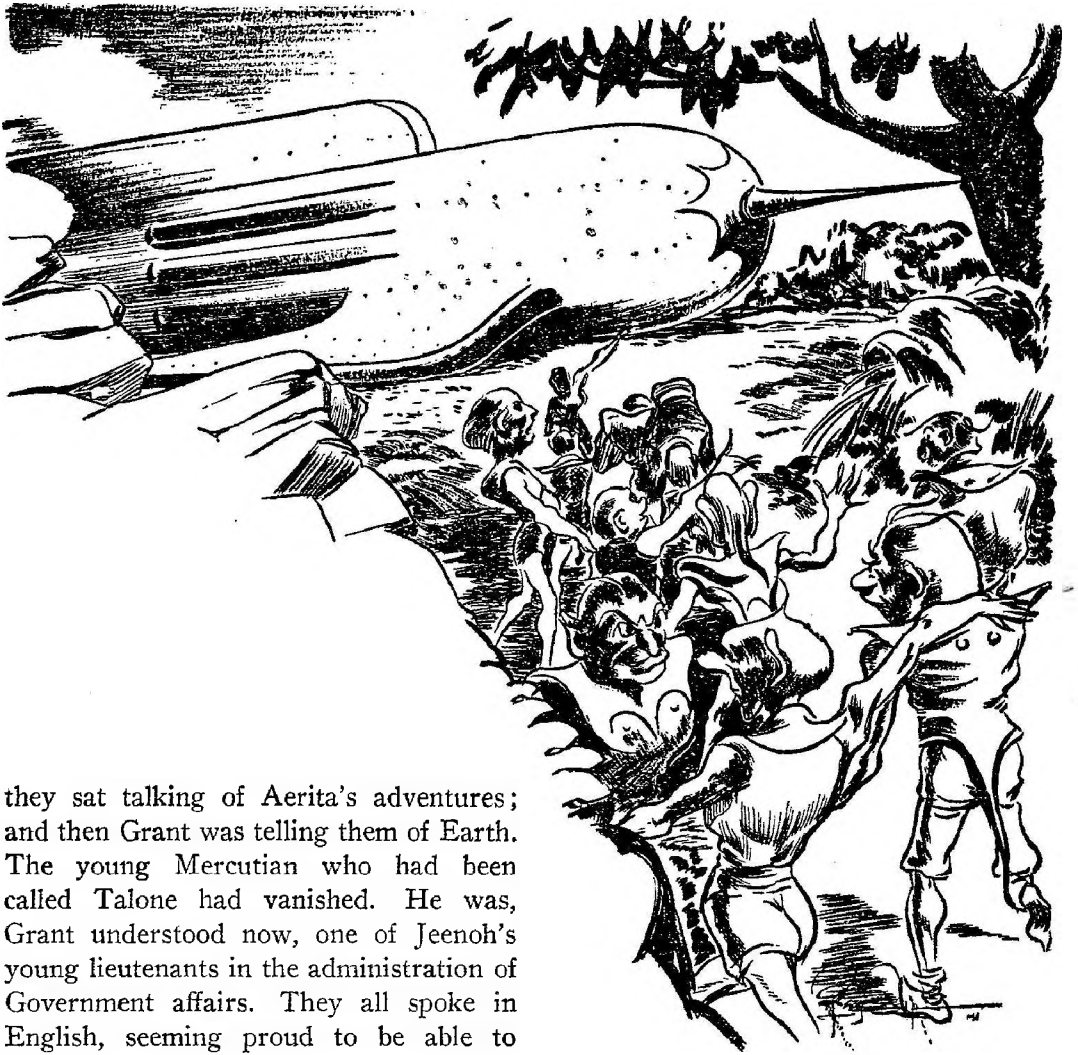
"Oh they will," Aerita gasped. "Not tonight maybe. But they have dared once—and they have been threatening it so long. We will have to see with my grandfather what is to be done."

She was staring out over the horizon. Storm-clouds seemed again gathering out there—weird clouds with a lurid red sheen to them. And now there was a puff of wind.

"A crimson storm coming," Aerita murmured. "They will not attack the palace again—not now if a storm comes. You come inside, Alan. You will meet my grandfather—and Alto Jeenoh."

**T**HOSE first hours on Mercury, to Grant, were strange indeed. He and Aerita were given supper in one of the big palace rooms while the girl breathlessly explained what had happened to her. The old man whom Grant had seen behind them on the terrace was Polter, her grandfather. With Alto Jeenoh, grey-bearded ruler in a long brocaded robe.





they sat talking of Aerita's adventures; and then Grant was telling them of Earth. The young Mercutian who had been called Talone had vanished. He was, Grant understood now, one of Jeenoh's young lieutenants in the administration of Government affairs. They all spoke in English, seeming proud to be able to speak it.

Outside the palace, Grant could hear that the weird Mercutian storm was coming closer. The puffs of wind were more frequent and more violent. The twilight gloom was deepening into night—an outer darkness lurid with a red sheen. Here in the palace room, with its low vaulted metal ceiling, metal furniture and luxurious fabric-drapes, the brazier cast a yellow flickering glow. But at the oval windows the blood light of the darkness outside was like a red stain in the night. And now it began raining—a rattle against the palace walls and on its metal roof. . .

Old Polter had been questioning Grant

with a keen, grave intelligence on the recent history of Earth. He had seen Grant's flashgun; smiling gravely, he had made Grant fire the tiny bolt through the window until the gun's charge was exhausted. He had heard Grant tell of Earth's horrible lethal weapons, so huge in size that a thousand men might be killed in one flash from them. . . And then he said gravely,

"When your visit here is over, Earthman, should you take my little space-car to go back to Earth, then you will promise me to smash it when you arrive. Here on Mercury we have no science like that. Perhaps we are better for it."

Then young Talone silently appeared and came and joined them. Aerita, with Grant, had withdrawn to a side of the room, where they sat together, silently listening as the two older men, and Talone, excitedly discussed the rebellion of the workers.

"I do not understand our people," the grey-bearded Jeenoh was saying. "I have promised them that I will do my best to persuade the young virgins—"

"But they do not believe you," Talone put in. He was standing a little apart from the others; tall, graceful figure in blue-grey trousers and shirt, with a swaggering cloak hanging from his shoulders. Light from the room's burning brazier illumined his handsome, hawk-nosed face; and on it Grant saw that same half-smile, almost like a leer. It made him tense. Somehow he sensed that he wasn't going to like this young Talone. He tried to shrug it off, wondering if it was because Talone had seemed affectionate with Aerita.

"And now," old Polter was saying, "the workers even seem to be having new complaints. Their conditions of work—their houses—"

**C**OULD it be that the people were being incited into discontent? The thought leaped into Grant's mind.

"I do not know what we should do," Jeenoh went on. He turned momentarily toward Aerita and Grant. "You, Aerita—I have let you influence me. And now we have another danger. Those accursed savages of the Dark Country—never have they dared attack us for half my lifetime. But now I have had rumours that they are planning something. That damnable fellow Rahgg whom we banished—if he would dare organize them—"

Was Rahgg and his murderous little band of Hill City criminals, out there among the savages of the Dark Country, planning now an invasion? A conquest

so that he and his men would rule here, and force the flying girls to their will? If that were so, this discontent of the workers here would be exactly what he wanted.

"If you would try and build us some weapons of science, Polter," Jeenoh was saying. "Or send young Grant to Earth, to get some—"

"Never!" Polter exclaimed. "When man arms to kill, always will he find reasons to kill. The example of Earth is not for us."

The talk went on. After a time, young Talone withdrew. Outside the palace, Grant now could hear that it was raining with a torrential downpour; and through the crescent windows the green-yellow and crimson glow of the storm-clouds was even more lurid. The rain was now a clatter against the metal building; and there was the roar of the irrigation-flumes—wide metal chutes which carried the water down from the metal hills beyond the city, carrying it far out to some of the distant fields which between storms were parched by the heat and by the fire storms which came at intervals from the Fire Country. . .

Then Aerita withdrew upon some household duty. In a corner of the room, Grant was left alone. An uneasiness was on him; a sense of something of evil which might be impending now. Old Polter and Jeenoh were still arguing. But Grant hardly listened to them. And suddenly, out in the roar of the weird Mercurian storm, it seemed that he heard a faint cry. Then there was a fluttering of wings; and through an open window on the lee side of the room a young girl came fluttering.

Her name was Arma. Grant had heard of her from Aerita. She was one of Aerita's closest friends—an ardent worker in the cause of the virgins. Drenched so that her pallid robe clung to her little body, her long pale hair stringy with the rain, she fluttered to the floor. She was

panting, gasping out in her own language. Then she saw Grant.

"Oh," she gasped, "An Earthman? You see, I speak the English—Aerita, she taught me. I have just come from our mountain nest, to see you and Aerita—"

These Mercutian girls were like birds, able to wing so swiftly from one place to another! One of the Hill City girls had flown with the news that Aerita and a strange man from another world were in the palace.

"And one of our girls was flying today high over the Dark Country," Arma added breathlessly. "There is something that they are doing there—strange lights, and men are assembling. Where is Aerita?"

The threatened invasion of the savages, and Rahgg's criminals? Was that coming now?

"Where is Aerita?" Arma insisted. Grant was on his feet. And suddenly he was stricken with a stab of horror. Through the palace a distant scream sounded; A girl's scream of terror! Aerita! Her scream welled out; and then abruptly it was smothered, choked with a ghastly abruptness so that it died away into shuddering, horrible silence!

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *The Flight on the Flying Platform*

**I**N THAT breathless second, Arma, the young flying girl, stood with old Polter and Jeenoh—all three of them numbed, transfixed. Grant got his wits. Instantly he turned, dashed from the room. The scream had seemed to come from a nearby corridor. He plunged into it; saw a distant opened doorway with the light of a brazier streaming out from it. Then a bounding leap took him almost to the corridor ceiling, and landed him at the door.

On the floor of the room Aerita was

lying, apparently unconscious. Her wings were bound behind her; and over her a man was bending, with fabric rope tying her ankles and wrists. From his gigantic leap, Grant had landed in a heap in the doorway. The man saw him; straightened from Aerita. It was Talone. His face was grim in the brazier light; his dark eyes were flashing.

Grant was scrambling to his feet, but Talone was quicker. A table was near him, with a heavy copper ornament upon it. He seized the missel; hurled it. Grant had no time to duck. He was aware of the crash of the metal blob on his head. And the room seemed to burst into roaring light as he fell. Dimly he was aware that Talone contemptuously had kicked him. And that Talone was lifting Aerita; carrying her through a nearby window, out into the roar of the storm. . . Then for Grant everything faded into the blank abyss of unconsciousness. . .

Then he was aware that within a minute or two he was recovering. He found himself sitting up, with blood matting his hair and his senses still reeling. Arma, Polter and Jeenoh were just entering the room.

Grant staggered to his feet. "Talone!" he gasped. "He took her—"

They crowded after him as with returning strength he staggered to the window. The rain and lurid storm-murk made the scene outside a turgid blur. Then a vivid flash of crimson lightning split the sky. For a second or two the rain-swept copper hills were illumined. Far away to one side at the edge of one of the giant flumes, Talone was visible, carrying Aerita. And then with her he leaped into the flume. The darkness closed in, but in a moment there was another flash. Far down the roaring flume, Grant had an instant glimpse of what seemed a tiny raft with Talone and Aerita upon it, riding it down the ten mile long chute of roaring water. . .

For an instant Grant stood numbed.

No man could follow that plunging little craft. Then he thought of Polter's space-cylinder, up on the palace roof. He seized Arma. "You come with me. We'll go after her—"

"Oh yes—I can fly. But you—"

"In the space-cylinder. It's here on the roof."

Polter was standing confused. Jeenoh was at the doorway, shouting futile orders at the other palace attendants who came running. Grant ignored them all; with Arma after him they hurried out of the room; up the palace stairs, out onto the rain-swept roof.

The space-cylinder was gone! There was no sign of it here, save the small tree which it had crushed in landing. . . Into Grant's mind leaped the memory that Talone had been missing for an hour or more earlier in the evening. He and perhaps some confederate had doubtless stolen the ship then; and with the storm, no one had happened to come up here and discover its loss.

GRANT stared numbly at the winged girl beside him. A searching party of men on foot would hardly be able to overtake and locate Talone now in a storm like this.

"I can fly to find them," Arma timidly offered.

Grant shook his head. "You couldn't do anything if you did. He'll make for the Dark Country—join some of his men out there somewhere, very probably." He gripped her. "Arma listen—if you could fly now and get some of your girls. Just seven—here in the city—"

"For the platform? And on it, we carry you—"

"Yes."

Aerita had told him how she had built a little platform on which the flying girls could carry her grandfather. They had practiced with it, but old Polter had disdained it—being carried by girls was be-

neath his dignity. The platform, Grant knew, was stored here on the palace roof, under a shed at one end. The dark outlines of the shed were visible now, blurred by the storm murk.

"If it's here, Arma—"

"Oh yes, I do hope so."

They rushed across the roof. The platform was here, under the protecting shed—a six foot, oblong raft-like affair made of light porous wood. It was built so that eight of the girls, four on each side, could carry it through the air.

"I will go now," Arma said. "I can get the girls—you wait here—I be not long." A gust of wind carried her fluttering body sidewise as she rose into the air; then she steadied herself, and with great flapping wings, sped off into the murk. . . It seemed an eternity to the apprehensive Grant as he waited on the roof. He could picture the villainous Talone now out there somewhere in the storm with Aerita, beyond the distant end of the flume, heading up into the mountains for the Dark Country. . . It was Talone, of course, a spy of Rahgg's here, who had been inciting the workers into revolt. . . If only Grant had known that. How easy it would have been to wring the fellow's neck! . .

The wind of the storm seemed easing a little, but the rain still was torrential. . . Then at last a flash of the weird crimson lightning showed him blobs in the nearby air. They were a cluster of girls. . . They came fluttering down with back-flapping wings; Arma and seven of her little companions. Flushed, panting and eager they ran at Grant with jabbering little voices in their own language. Then Arma shoved them to the platform. Four long rods were fastened under it, projecting out at each side so as to give the girls room to fly. In a moment Grant was lying prone on it, gripping its hand-holds.

It was a weird flight. Carried by the eight girls, the platform rose from the garden roof. The storm-wind caught it:

tossed it crazily. For a moment Grant feared that it would turn over, or be wrenched from the girls' hands. Beside him, four on each side, they struggled with frantic flapping wings. Then the gust eased a little; the platform came into control, leveled as the girls, settling into a rhythmic beat of wings, flew swiftly onward.

**F**OR a time Grant could see very little. The great sheets of rain, crimson in the stormlight, pelted him. The wind and the rain thudded past his ears. There was only a blur of drenched naked coppery ground far down, the turgid, red-green and crimson cloud-masses overhead; and the reality of the flying girls here beside him.

He called to Arma. The wind tore at his words and hurled them away. "Out past that flume-end, Arma. A few miles and then circle—flying low—we ought to be able to see them—"

She nodded. The girls were swooping lower now; the glistening rain-swept hills seemed only a few hundred feet down. They passed the flume-end where it divided into a ramified network at a huge cultivated field, beside which the water was dammed into a system of small canals to be used when needed. There was no sign of any fleeing figures down there.

The frail, wind-tossed platform swept on. Beneath it Grant saw only naked, un-

dulating copper plains now. The stormlight gleamed on them with a crimson sheen. Somehow it made Grant shudder with a new stab of apprehension. It was a blood-red little landscape. Even the wet-clinging drapes, the hair and the beating wings of the girls flying beside him—all were tainted with the blood-glare. It was as though this were an omen of things to come. . .

Abruptly Grant was aware that Arma was gesturing; then he heard her excited words: "See? Down there ahead—"

Far ahead, down on a ragged little plateau, a cluster of dark blobs was visible. They grew in a moment to be revealed as hurrying men. Talone, with Aerita beside him. And they had been joined now by a party of a dozen or more. They were not the coppery almost naked savages which Aerita had described, but men in the fashion of the Light Country people. With dark cloaks shrouding them, they were hurrying forward. They were criminals of Rahgg's murderous band of outlaws, Grant realized.

"Arma—wait—" he called. Could he hope successfully to attack these men? . . . Grant's little flashgun had been exhausted. He had only a long, thin-bladed knife here now. . .

He was suddenly aware that the platform was swooping down; and beside him, with one hand free the flying Arma gestured.



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"We have knives—all of us—you will see—"

Her hand waved the little knife. The storm-glare glinted blood-red on its naked copper blade. Before Grant had time to give any commands or to plan anything, the platform had swooped ahead of the dark little band of men down on the rocks. They saw it, and a shout floated up. They stopped; gathered in a group with Aerita in their midst.

Then, two or three hundred feet beyond them, in the crimson haze of rain and semi-darkness the platform landed with a thump. Grant, knife in hand, leaped to his feet.

"Arma—look here—you girls—"

But they had dropped the platform-handles; heedless of him, they were flapping up into the air; gathering into a fluttering group. For a second Grant stared up at them, transfixed with astonishment. Off in the gloom he could see the figures of Talone and his men. On a run, he started toward them, and close over his head the girls were fluttering. They went past him like a little flock of birds; luffed up into the wind until they were over Talone's men. And then with great wings poised motionless, they swooped down to the attack!

**I**T WAS a blur of chaos to Grant as with huge bounding leaps he went forward through the rain. He was still nearly two hundred feet away when the girls swooped down, like an amazing little covey of giant birds. The grouped men, with the weird attack taking them by surprise, for an instant were confused. Armed with knives and swords, they tried to stab upward at the fluttering figures above them. It was an instant of melee. Grant could dimly see the men standing on the rocks, wildly flailing their arms. confused by the bird-like attack of the girls who came fluttering, stabbed down and instantly darted up again. One of

the men fell; then another. A girl who had darted down and up again, seemed wounded. For a second she flapped, and then plummeted down, crashing on the rocks where she lay motionless with only her wings quivering as she died. . .

Grant realized that he was shouting now—shouting defiance to draw attention to himself. He could see that Aerita was on her feet; her wings were still bound, and the figure of Talone was beside her, gripping her. The fluttering girls, in a menacing little group were hovering ten feet above the clustered men; and then again they dove. . .

Grant was within thirty feet of the melee when suddenly he checked his advance. Beneath the frenzied, darting attack of the winged girls, several of the men now had fallen. Two or three others were making away in the lurid, storm-swept darkness. And Grant saw that Talone had swept Aerita off her feet into his arms—carrying her, running with her. A girl pounced from the murk above him, but Talone beat her off. He was heading for a great cluster of metal rocks which lay against the side of a nearby ascending slope. Grant turned, made after him.

Clouds of crimson storm-vapour were here now, wisps of fog, red as blood, trailing close above the ground. Through them, Grant just barely could see the figure of Talone as he climbed the rocks. Then like a bounding antelope with fifteen foot leaps Grant was upon him, so that Talone dropped Aerita and turned. His sword-knife was in his hand; the blood light of the crimson fog illumined his contorted face, stamped with his murderous fury.

Grant's sailing body catapulted into him. A stab like a thrust of hot steel went through Grant's shoulder as Talone's knife sank deep. They fell together as Talone went backwards from the impact; locked together, rolling, plunging. Grant's knife had clattered from his hand. The

long thin blade of Talone's knife broke off in Grant's shoulder as they fell. Grant's senses for an instant swooped with the pain of his wound. He was aware that the agile Talone had twitched loose and leaped to his feet. With his head reeling, Grant staggered up, stood for a second staring dizzily into the murk of the storm. Then he saw Talone running over the rocks, making away, and in another instant he had vanished.

Aerita was here on the ground, seeming dazed. Grant bent over her. "You're all right, Aerita? Not hurt—"

"All right—" she murmured. "But, oh Alan, you—your shoulder—"

"Damn him—he got away—" He turned to run after Talone, but Aerita seized him.

"No, Alan—your shoulder—the blood there. . . Let him go. He can do us no harm now."

Her wings still were bound. She held Grant as he staggered; he almost fell; and she made him sit on the ground until the girls came and gathered around them.

ON THE flying platform, the wounded Grant lay with Aerita beside him as the girls sped back through the dying storm. . . It was a triumphant return. But out there on the rocks, two of the girls were lying. . . Aerita was still dazed from the drug Talone had forced upon her, but she was recovering now. . .

She clung to Grant, holding him with one of her little hands caressing his rain-drenched hair. "You are all right now?" she murmured. "Alan—you—not hurt too badly?"

"No, it's nothing, Aerita. Just a flesh wound. I'm all right. And you are too? Thank God."

Beside them the six flying girls labored on through the red rain and wind which now were abating. Grant was pondering. Would Rahgg dare now or some time soon, to attack the Hill City?

"He has the space-cylinder now," Grant told Aerita. "Heaven knows what he'll try and do with it. Aerita, your grandfather said that he had built a tiny affair with which we might send a message to Earth. If Earth only knew that we needed electroidal weapons here—"

"Maybe we can send it, Alan. I think even that grandfather would have sent it himself, if we had not returned tonight. He is very stubborn about not wanting any connection with Earth. But he would want Earth weapons very quickly, if he knew that any terrible danger threatened me. He is very worried about us by now, Alan."

Then she lay with his arm around her, for a moment silent as the crimson murk swirled past them. And Grant was conscious that she was regarding him with her quaint whimsical smile.

"I was thinking," she murmured, "I am still eager for our cause—not to have our wings mutilated." Her great wings, unbound now, spread a little. She was gazing at Grant slantwise, and she added shyly,

"But I know now, I could love a man so much he—he could cut my wings when I was his wife, if—if that is what he wanted."

"But it isn't," Grant responded. His heart was pounding. His arm tightened around her. "My wife will have her wings—to fly free—glorious. That's what I want."

She had no answer; there was just the trembling pressure of her hand on his. Then suddenly a cry from one of the girls sounded. Following her gesture, Grant and Aerita stared into the crimson storm murk. Far ahead and to one side, a blob showed in the gloom—cylindrical finned blob with a luminous stream of gas like a tail behind it.

It was the space-ship! It carried Rahgg's men! They had seen the struggling little platform, undoubtedly. In a

great crescent, the ship was swooping down. All the flying girls had seen it now. For an instant they fluttered in a panic. Then Arma steadied them with vehement words of command.

The harried little platform was buffeted by the wind as the girls struggled through the storm. There were only six of them. Carrying both Aerita and Grant, from the start it had been too heavy; and the girls were tired now. Vainly they tried to sweep sidewise, to escape the oncoming ship; but it saw them, turned its swift-sailing course again to cut them off. Then it was close; hardly more than a hundred feet. Grant could see that its lower doorway was open; men were standing there.

And then a light sprang from the doorway—a little blue-white searchbeam that caught the platform, bathed it in a glare. In the silence of a wind-lull a voice shouted with a triumphant jibe.

“Turn us!” Grant murmured tensely. “They can’t turn as quickly.”

The platform darted sidewise. But the light clung; the little cylinder-ship, agile with its rocket streams, made another swooping arc. It was behind them now—five hundred feet, but with its greater speed, it was overhauling them. Then it turned a little; again came almost abreast.

“Aerita listen—” Grant murmured. He seized her by the shoulders. “Tell your girls to land us—quickly now. They can scatter and fly away—”

“No! No, Alan—”

**T**HE light still clung to them. In the illumined doorway, Grant saw one of the men raise his arm as though hurling a sling-shot. A coppery knife-blade glinted—little foot-long naked blade of copper with a finned fan-tail. It glistened as it came speeding like an arrow in the shaft of light. And it struck one of the girls. She screamed with a horrible, suppressed little cry; wavered against the platform handle she was gripping. The

blade was in her breast. For a second, like a great mortally wounded bird she flopped. The platform handle broke off as her body hung on it; and then she was flopping down and backward in the darkness.

“Good God—” Grant gasped. “Aerita—land us, I tell you!”

“Oh Alan—you—you’ll be killed—”

Another little blade came flying; then another. Two more of the girls were hit; one of them dropped. Grant was shouting that they must land. The platform was wavering, lurching. Beneath him Grant could see, some two hundred feet down, the dark, backward-sliding spread of crimsoned copper rocks. Only five frightened girls to struggle with it now, and one of them was hanging almost a dead weight on her handle with her wings quivering where a copper blade had buried itself in her shoulders between them.

It was a chaos to Grant. He was aware that he was trying to lurch to his feet, to jump from the swaying platform so that the girls would drop it and wing away.

“No!” Aerita screamed. “Alan, no! You will be killed—”

They were a hundred feet over the rocks now. Grant half fell, half jumped from the platform into the air; and in that same second Aerita had leaped and seized him; clung to him, her arms around him, her wings wildly flopping, trying to break the fall . . .

“Oh—Alan dear—”

They wavered down . . . Grant saw uprushing, gleaming red-brown rocks . . . He was conscious only of Aerita clinging to him, her wings wildly flapping . . .

“Aerita—let me go—” He was trying to push her away.

“Oh Alan dear—”

The uprushing, jagged rocks were close. He was vaguely conscious of the crash—all his body seeming stabbed with pain for just a second as his senses were



hurled off into the blank dark abyss of unconsciousness! It was a blankness lasting only a moment. He came out of it with Aerita still clinging to him. Bruised and battered he tried dizzily to stand up; tried to force her away from him so that she might save herself.

The space-ship had landed nearby. Then Rahgg's men came rushing; seized Aerita and Grant. In a moment more they were carried triumphantly and slammed into the ship; and it rose, sailed swiftly away for Rahgg's stronghold, far up in the black metal mountains of the Dark Country!

## CHAPTER SIX

### Raiders from Space

**I**N THE living room of his home, in one of the Northern distant suburbs of the great New York City, Philip Grant sat staring at a sheaf of charred fragments of paper-like sheets which lay on the table before him. He was a handsome young fellow, this brother of Alan Grant—tall, slim with a touseled mop of black curly hair. He looked older than his eighteen years—perhaps especially old tonight as with grim face and puzzled dark eyes he gazed moodily at the cryptic charred sheets. This fragmentary message, seemingly from another world—why in the devil had it been addressed to him? Why indeed, unless it had something to do with Alan's disappearance.

It was mid-August, 2093—a month and five days since so mysteriously Alan Grant had vanished—when on a beach of one of the Hawaiian islands, a small, bullet-like contrivance of shining copper was found. A projectile which seemingly had fallen from the sky; its outer copper casing was fused and pitted with the heat of falling through Earth's atmosphere. And it had crashed, so that most of its weird mechanisms were broken.

The native who found it had notified the local authorities. And then they discovered that there was a message—or at least it seemed like something of the sort—upon a strange form of paper within the projectile's interior. They were words scrawled in English. But the heat had charred the paper, parchment or whatever it was, so that most of the words were unintelligible. Its address was legible—to Philip Grant—his address in the suburb of New York City.

And the signature was the single word—"Polter."

The weird little copper mechanism was examined by several scientists; but its mechanisms were so smashed that they could make almost nothing of it. The cryptic, fragmentary little message was studied; and then by aircar it was forwarded to Philip Grant.

Philip, all this day, had been studying it with the authorities of his district; and with his employers in the Government Laboratories of Research Physics, where he worked. Now, baffled, he had taken it home, carefully placing it on his table under the blue-white glare of a tubelight—staring as though by sheer will power he could draw from its charred ashes the secret hidden there.

They were tantalizing fragments. He studied them over and over, pondering them with wild conjectures . . . "*Need the help from you of weapons—*" That phrase was fairly clear. Someone needed help. And then there seemed a more sinister hint: "*And so you . . . beware if Rahgg comes . . .*"

The burned scroll gave nothing else which could be construed to have any meaning at all . . . Except the words: "*Please—you hurry—*"

Young Phil Grant, with a hand rumpiling his wavy black hair, sat sprawled before his table. It was now nearly midnight. This home where for several years he had been living with Alan, was a small

metal cottage in a lonely neighborhood of the little hills which stretched back from the shining Hudson river. His housekeeper had gone for the night. He was alone here. The living room was dim, with just its spot of tubelight on the table where the charred fragments of the message were lying.

"*And so you . . . beware if Rahgg comes . . .*" The scrawled words in quaintly formed letters stared up at Phil as though mutely trying to add something else . . . "*And so you—*" Did that mean him personally? Probably it did, since "Polter" whoever he was, had addressed the message to Phil Grant. "*Beware if Rahgg comes—*" Who in the devil was Rahgg?

**I**N THE silence of his living room, Phil shifted uneasily in his chair. Somehow he felt as though even now there was a menace here—something weird, gruesome perhaps, which might be stalking him. The room was on the ground floor of the little cottage. The opened windows were dark triangles with a splash of blackness from the trees which were outside.

Then the silence abruptly was broken by a buzz, so unexpected that it jangled with Phil's taut nerves and brought him to his feet. But it was only the warning signal from his news-service audiphone—the signal to its subscribers that something of unusual interest was about to be broadcast.

He turned on the instrument, and in a moment the newscaster's voice began droning:

*"Dobb's Ferry, Hudson River Arsenal Raided! Government Storehouse of the New Errentine High-power Short-Range Hand-flash Projectors Attacked by Mysterious Raiders . . ."*

Tense, breathless, Phil sat listening. The raid had just been discovered; there were as yet, few details. Three of the watchmen at the Government storehouse

had been found dead—slashed throats and one had a strange copper knife-blade, with a finned tip like an arrow, buried in his heart . . . How many of the small, hand projectors were gone was not as yet known. A thousand perhaps . . .

The Dobb's Ferry Arsenal was hardly more than three miles down the river from Phil's home here. He stared around his dim little living room; and again that phrase of the cryptic burned message leaped into his mind. "*Need the help from you of weapons—*" Polter needed Earth weapons. Was it this Polter who now had raided the arsenal? But there was that other phrase: "*Beware if Rahgg comes—*"

The newscaster's voice droned on. Then there was another announcement: "*Mackay Projector Plant Raided! Murderous Dobb's Ferry Raiders Also Assail the Big Mackay Munitions Plant and Research Laboratories! Eight Workmen on Night-shift found Dead!*"

The Mackay Plant! It was in the Dobb's Ferry Neighborhood—a factory where the modern giant-flash, long-range projectors were being built! Five of them were found to be missing. The Mackay Research Laboratories recently had been taken over by the Anglo-American Government, and it was there that Phil worked. He reached for his public-wave audiphone to try and call his employer. But another even more startling announcement from the newscaster checked him.

*"Mysterious Clue Found Near Raided Mackay Plant!"*

In a small level field where evidently something had landed, crushing the grass and a few saplings, a small white oblong of what might be a strange form of paper had been found. Words in English were scribbled on it, in brown-red—what perhaps might prove to be blood. It was a weird inexplicable message, the newscaster was saying. The words were:

"Phil—watch out—after XL-Z2—"

It was evidently a hastily written little message. The signature was only an illegible scrawl . . .

**B**UT Phil understood it! He sat breathless, tense, staring numbly at the grid of his newsphone. That little message in blood was addressed to him. XL-Z2 was a formula for a new-type electroid flash of greater duration and higher voltage—research work which he had been doing here at home—in his own private little laboratory here which adjoined the living room. He had hoped to perfect it and then present it to the Government. No one knew of it, except Alan!

Then Alan must be here among these raiders! Alan was trying to warn him! . .

The newscaster's voice was still droning, but Phil hardly heard it. From a desk drawer near at hand he seized his small flash gun; and then the newscaster was saying something additionally startling, so that he dropped back into his seat, with the gun on his lap . . .

*"Mt. Killington Observatory Reports Strange Object Detected This Afternoon close beyond Earth's Stratosphere . . . Tiny flying Meteorite Perhaps . . ."*

It could not be the little projectile which had brought the message from "Polter"; that had dropped from the sky over the Pacific yesterday. This was this afternoon . . . These raiders—

Abruptly Phil's weird thoughts were stricken away. Mingled with the soft drone of the newscaster's voice there seemed a sound over by one of his windows. He stared; but the window, twenty feet away from him, was only an empty dark triangle. Phil's flashgun was alert in his hand. Then his gaze drifted to the little sheaf of charred paper which lay on his table.

The charred papers were moving! Trembling; quivering! And then all in that second the charred sheaf was sliding

on the table toward the window. Air was sucking it! The sheets broke apart, scattering as with a rush they went out of the window!

Phil was on his feet now; and weirdly he could feel the suction—all the air in the room, suddenly rushing at the window so that there was a breeze from behind him of air coming in the door from the house corridor. He braced himself in the blast, but the rug on which he was standing was sliding with his body toward the window. The door behind him banged as it swung wide open.

It all happened in a few seconds. Something—some mechanism—was at the window, sucking out the room's air; pulling Phil forward! Then it seemed that he saw a dark moving blur there. His flash sizzled through the opening—spat its blue-white bolt; evidently missed, for he heard a low startled oath, and then a guttural laugh.

The thump of Phil's body against the window casement all but knocked the breath from him. But the suction was gone now. He shoved himself back into the room, with his weapon leveled, spitting again out into the darkness. Then he was aware that something had been thrown at him through the window. It seemed to be a tiny globe. It struck his forehead; shattered like thin, splintering glass. Something wet ran down his face. He dashed it away with his coat-sleeve; and then, with a leap, snapped out the room-light and crouched behind a chair, with the flash-gun up on its seat, again leveled at the empty window.

They'd have a pretty hard time getting in here at him. If they tried a rush, he'd kill as many as he could . . . His public-wave audiphone was here on the table; cautiously he reached for it . . . The wet stuff on his face was pungent with an acrid smell. Was that what was making his head roar? . . .

Phil's groping hand never reached his

audiphone. The roaring in his head was suddenly like a Niagara torrent. The dim outlines of the silent room were blurring, fading into a black abyss with luminous spots like pin-points of tiny stars. Vaguely he knew now that he was drugged . . . That damnable little drug-bomb breaking on his forehead . . .

Dimly he heard the clatter of his gun as it fell from his numbed hand. And it seemed that outside the dark window there was another low guttural laugh. Then he knew that his body had crumpled and fallen onto the polished metal floor. Dark weird figures seemed to be coming through the window; bending over him.

He was powerless to move, drugged, but still dimly conscious. Low guttural voices in a strange language sounded as the men lifted him; carried him through the window. Then like a limp sack he felt himself thrown over the shoulder of one of them. The dark tree-branches of the woods here were over him. He was aware of the swaying, rhythmic tread of the man carrying him, with the others, weird dark forms, crowding around him. Then the outlines of a low, cylindrical thing of metal loomed ahead. A little space-ship. Its doorway was open, and Phil was carried into it.

His head was roaring. He felt himself dropped onto a soft padded floor; and then his consciousness completely faded.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Lost in the Copper Desert

**P**HIL came to himself with the feeling that a long time must have elapsed. He felt that he was still lying on something soft; and that his body was bathed in cold sweat. But he seemed uninjured; and as he opened his eyes he could feel his strength swiftly coming back to him. Dim room walls were faintly visible—walls of a narrow little cubby here. It

glowed with a weird sheen and throbbed with a low rhythmic distant hum . . .

“Oh Phil—speak to me—” It was a familiar, anxious voice. Then he realized that Alan was here beside him, bending anxiously over him.

His older brother Alan, like himself was a prisoner here in the small space-cylinder, on its way now to Mercury . . . Phil, still dazed by the drug which only now after many hours was wearing off, lay listening to his brother—trying to understand these weird things . . .

Alan and Aerita had been captured by Rahgg and his band of criminals, that night in the crimson storm when the flying platform had fallen. And now Rahgg had come to Earth in the stolen little ship which Aerita's grandfather, old Polter, had built.

“They brought Aerita and me with them,” Alan was saying. His voice turned grim. “They've threatened her with torture—to make me tell what I knew of Earth. Where weapons could be found—and about you—your formula XL-Z2. Did they get it, Phil?”

“No, I guess not,” Phil murmured. “I had it locked in my desk in the lab. I don't know — that damn drug-bomb knocked me out—” He gripped Alan. “I heard a newscaster tell about that message from you—”

Alan's handsome, rugged face bore a faint wry smile. “I stuck my finger—used the blood. Just a chance that it would get to you.”

In the darkness of the cubby, for a time Phil lay quiet, trying to understand what Alan was telling him of Mercury; of this Rahgg who was planning an invasion of the Light Country, and its capital, the Hill City. And Rahgg had the weapons now that he needed.

“Did you hear what was taken?” Alan was asking. “They kept me confined here on the ship—after they'd forced me to tell them where to land.”

"A thousand or so of the Errentine short-range hand-guns," Phil said. "And at the Mackay plant—I guess only five of the big projectors."

"And flare-bombs probably," Alan muttered. He seemed shuddering. "Phil, good Lord, if you could realize what weapons like that will do to the little Hill City—with not much more than flying girls—maybe a thousand of them—to protect it."

Phil had no answer. He was still weak and dazed; his head was roaring. But every moment now he could feel his senses clearing and his strength coming back. The rhythmic distant hum was a faint throb . . . It seemed to lull him, as though it would put him back to sleep. He roused himself, shook off his lethargy and sat up beside Alan.

"Where are we?" he demanded.

"On the way back to Mercury."

"Far out?"

"Well beyond the Earth's stratosphere," Alan said. "You were—"

He checked himself. Phil heard a door-slide open; a shaft of faint pallid light came in from what seemed a small vaulted corridor; and a dark figure was there. It was a woman. Phil stared blankly as she came forward with a tray of food and drink for Alan in her hands.

"Oh—thank you, Zara," Alan said.

"He—that your brother—" she murmured in soft, broken English. "He—better now?"

"Yes, thanks, he's all right."

"I tell to Rahgg."

SHE put down her tray and then she lingered, staring at Phil and then at Alan. The corridor light disclosed her now to be young, a girl hardly more than twenty perhaps. A strange, barbaric young girl. She was short, no more than five feet tall, clad in a brief scarf-like red robe. The skin of her limbs, neck and face gleamed in the pallid light—bronze

skin, glistening like burnished copper. Her face, flat-nosed, with a wide mouth faintly smiling now, was queerly sensuous. One could have imagined that among her own savage people she was beautiful, exotic. She had no wings. The copper skin of her bare back was smooth as burnished metal. On her head, her sleek black hair was piled high, with glittering baubles for ornaments stuck in it.

She was a savage woman of the Dark Country people. Phil realized it by what Alan already had told him. Baubles dangled from her wrists and knees; they tinkled as she moved. Then she lingered, with hands on her hips, her dark eyes staring at Alan with a smouldering gleam.

"Your brother, not so big—like you," she murmured.

"No—that's right, Zara," Alan said. He spoke to her as though she were a child. "You tell Rahgg my brother is all right now."

"Yes." But still she lingered. "You like—food there? It good?"

"Oh yes. Thanks, Zara."

She turned; the door-slide clicked closed and locked after her.

"Well, I'll be damned," Phil murmured. "She likes the look of you, doesn't she? What's the idea?"

Alan laughed; but it was a grim laugh. "Seems to have taken a fancy to me. Because I'm so big, she says. She's been waiting on me ever since we left Mercury."

"You taught her English in that little time?"

"She knew some of it—learned it from Rahgg. She's been his serving maid." Alan's smile faded. He lowered his voice, leaning closer to Phil over the tray as they ate the food. "If we're ever to escape, Phil—it will be through Zara," he murmured. "She'll do anything for me if it gets me away from Aerita—"

"I get you."

"Well if you do," Alan retorted, "you

keep your mouth shut about it. Not a word, where there would be any chance we'd be overheard."

"All right."

They finished the meal. Then footsteps sounded. The slide opened again.

"Oh, you Talone," Alan greeted. "What do you want?"

Phil stared as the handsome Light Country villain came into the cubby and stood gazing down at them. Talone's dark cloak was slung over one of his shoulders with his accustomed swagger; his grey, hawk-nosed face bore a faint leering smile.

"The Master wants to see your brother," he said. "You come with me."

The tiny cubby was in the stern of the cylinder. Silently Phil followed Alan and Talone to the small central control turret. And Phil had his first sight of Aerita—strange little flying virgin of the Light Country. She was on her feet near the turret doorway—ethereal little creature in brief, pale-blue drape, with her silver hair braided, falling forward over her shoulders. And behind her, the folded blue-feathered wings stretched down with their soft tips almost brushing the floor.

"You are Phil?" she murmured.

Mutely Phil nodded; and then as Talone shoved at him, he stumbled past her into the pallid turret where Rahgg stood at the bench by the ship's banks of controls.

**T**HE Master! . . . Murderous criminal, planning now the conquest of his little world! . . . He stood up to face his newest captive. He was a six foot burly fellow, wide-shouldered, powerful, clad in coppery gleaming garments of spun and woven metal—sheath-like tunic and short trousers out of which his legs came like great, greyish pillars of hairy strength.

Phil for that moment stood numbed, fascinated. There was a radiance of power about this fellow Rahgg. The aura of

genius—murderous, perverted genius, without doubt. A shining coppery cloak hung from his shoulders down his back. He flung it around him as he stood up. His heavy, grey, smooth and hairless face was arresting in the power of its ugliness—a wide forehead, surmounted by a bullet head of close-clipped black hair; nose, high-bridged, with wide nostrils; and a queerly pointed chin. The mouth, smiling faintly now, was cruel, thin-lipped. His eyes, deep-sunk under heavy black brows, stared at Phil with an ironic gleam.

"So?" he murmured with a slow, guttural drawl. "You are recovered now? Your name—Philip Grant?"

"Yes," Phil murmured.

"I am Rahgg—the Master. Has your brother told you that you must cause me no trouble?" He swung and gaped at Alan and his smile broadened. "Young Alan and I—we have had trouble. But that is over now. His directions were good—we got what we wanted."

He stared at Phil through another silence. "And now what?" Phil demanded abruptly.

Rahgg's gesture—his powerful grey hand heavy with ornaments—was deprecating. "You are young. Heedless—already you should know not to question the Master." His fingers were toying with his belt. Phil saw a strange-looking little sling-shot device hanging there; and a thin copper blade with finned tip like an arrow. And already Rahgg had hung there one of his stolen flash-guns.

"There was a formula we could not find," Rahgg said abruptly. "I will not need it for this conquest of the little Hill City. But later—you have it in your mind, young Grant? You will be able to help me, when the time comes that on Mercury we build more of your Earth weapons?"

Phil hesitated. Beside him he heard Alan murmuring, "Of course—"

"Yes," Phil said. "You won't have any trouble with me."

"That is good." Then Rahgg's dark ironic gaze swept to Aerita. "Come here by me, little Aerita," he added. "You and I—we must plan the ruling of the Light Country—there are many things I have not yet talked with you. I have the weapons now. Our invasion will be ready very quickly."

He was ignoring Phil and Alan as he sat Aerita beside him on the control bench. It was as though he were amusing himself with these captives—toying with them. "I am worried over the flying virgins of the Hill City," he was saying. His ironic smile broadened. "They seem to be fighters—you remember those eight who carried the little flying platform, they were all killed. I did not like that. My men are too interested in your thousand young girls to have them killed now in the great battle I am planning. They must live."

"**T**HEY will fight," Aerita murmured. "Yes. I know they will. I was wondering—perhaps if when we reach Mercury I would set you loose, you would fly and tell them not to fight?"

"Yes—you turn me loose—" Aerita agreed.

It made him laugh. "Ho! You see? I know how to please my little Aerita. Like a bird she would fly away from me if I gave her the chance. But I won't. I like you too well, Aerita. For ever since I

worked for your grandfather and you were only a child then—always was I dreaming of this coming day." His voice was low, intense now. To Phil the gleam in his eyes was like a smoldering madness. But he was only mad with his dreams of conquest—mad with his lust for power.

"Rahgg, the Master," he was saying softly. "Rahgg—Emperor of Mercury. And then—perhaps Master of the great Earth—of all the Universe—who knows? And you, my little Aerita—you would like to share that with me?"

His arm went around her. Across the pallid turret Phil suddenly saw young Talone, standing staring at Aerita. And then staring at his Master Rahgg—staring with a slow secretive smile. A smile of treachery! . . .

The days passed. Days? To Phil they were a succession of weird, seemingly endless intervals of living-routine, here in the tiny cubbies of the space-cylinder as it plunged so silently forward through the great black, star-strewn abyss. He and Alan spent much of their time in the cubby near the stern of the cylinder. Zara brought their meals. She was an alluring, copper-skinned little savage—with voluptuous gestures and smoldering eyes, always she lingered, gazing at Alan, talking to him in her quaint broken English.

Gradually Phil found that he and Alan more and more were permitted to move



about the ship. Apparently, sometimes, almost free to do what they liked. But always, it seemed, one of Rahgg's villainous, grey-skinned Light Country criminals lurked near them . . . Alan was planning something with Zara. Phil was aware of it . . .

The small space-cylinder plunged on, heading for the Sun, crossing the orbit of Venus; and then at last approaching Mercury. It was a tiny world of itself, those endless hours—this cylinder plunging with immense velocity on its trajectory through Interplanetary Space. With what truth one can say that wherever humans exist, smoldering strife will be with them! Often Phil pondered it—this motley little group of humans cooped up here. Rahgg with his dreams of conquest . . . Alan and Zara, each with their own secret plans out of which violence could come.

Then at last, with what to them was night of their living routine, the spaceship was through the stratosphere of Mercury; it dropped down through weird banks of gathering storm-clouds, lurid with crimson and yellow sheen; and through the bullseye of their dark cubby, Phil had his first view of the naked copper plains of the little planet. All he could see was a gleaming, tumbled desolation of copper rocks, wet with rain, glistening with a sodden crimson sheen as though they had been drenched with blood.

Phil stared in awe. "It looks empty of everything. Are we near the Hill City?"

"Yes. I think so. Aerita told me it would be in an hour now, perhaps less when we pass at our closest to it. We're heading for the Dark Country." He lowered his voice until it was barely a whisper. "I think no one can hear us—listen, I've got everything ready."

**P**HIL knew now what Alan so carefully had been planning with Zara. With the little savage girl to watch that

he was not seen, he had been able to load most of the small Errentine hand-weapons upon an emergency glider which was stored in a hull pressure porte.

"You think we can make it without getting caught?" Phil tensely whispered. Now that the time had come he found his heart racing. If they got caught, it would be death.

"Yes. And there's a storm gathering. We ought to try it in half an hour now. In the storm they won't see us dropping down."

Then Alan whispered the full details. Zara thought that only Aerita would escape in the little winged glider. Zara was glad to be rid of the Light Country girl—jealous of her with a smoldering jealousy which sometimes had made Alan shudder inwardly for Aerita's safety here.

"You get down into the porte, Phil," Alan was whispering. "I'll watch my chance and bring Aerita down there. Zara will be preparing a meal for Rahgg. She thinks she's going to help me get Aerita away a little later."

Talone would be in the turret with Rahgg. Most of the other men would be forward—a dining cubby there where Zara was serving them food. It seemed a good opportunity now.

"I'll go up to the turret," Alan whispered, "and get Aerita."

Tensely, Phil nodded. "You'll find me in the porte. Make it soon, Alan. And—watch yourself. We won't live long if Rahgg gets onto this."

Alan opened the doorslide, and closed it after him. For a few minutes Phil sat waiting in the dark silence. The distant rhythm of the cylinder's mechanisms seemed to blend with the thumping of his heart. Then he decided that he had waited long enough. Cautiously he drew the slide. The small vaulted corridor was empty. He moved like a shadow back along the corridor where it narrowed



into the finned peak of the stern. The rocket-tail mechanisms were thrumming and hissing here. Phil went down a short incline, into the pressure porte which was a downward bulge in the stern-hull.

The little glider was here by the closed outer pressure emergency door-slide. The glider was a twelve foot oblong affair, with its wings folded now. Phil was skilled in the operation of somewhat similar gliders of Earth. He examined the controls here; they looked simple enough. In the hooded central cockpit the Errentine flash-weapons were piled; lashed down and with a square of fabric over them.

Then at the inner doorway of the dark pressure chamber, Phil crouched and waited. Why didn't Alan and Aerita come? . . . The minutes passed. There was nothing but the hum and hiss of the rocket-stream mechanisms . . . Had something gone wrong with Alan?

Abruptly Phil heard a faint footstep, and a dark blob rose up beside him. It was Alan.

"All right, Phil," he whispered. "So far, so good."

"Where's Aerita?"

"Coming. Rahgg called her back into the turret. She'll get away in a minute, and then—"

His whisper died. He gripped Phil as they stood tense in the darkness of the little pressure-chamber. A low murmur of voices sounded from up the small incline.

"Talone—" It was Aerita's voice! Her sharp cry of protest, with words in her own language. And then Phil heard Talone's voice; and the sound of him and Aerita in a scuffle.

**A**LAN tensed, with a low muttered oath. He started for the incline, but Phil gripped him. "Wait—I'll go with you—we can catch that fellow Talone up there—kill him—"

Could that be done without an alarm that would bring half a dozen of the men down here?

"Listen," Alan was swiftly murmuring, "we're heading for the Dark Country now. Too late to glide for the Hill City, if we don't get started. You go, Phil—you can make it—remember what Aerita told you of the landmarks?" Phil felt Alan shoving at him. Then Alan, in the little space at the foot of the incline, was closing the pressure-chamber door-slide . . . Aerita had screamed, up the incline where quite evidently Talone was forcing his embraces on her. There were other, more distant voices up there now—men of the crew coming to investigate.

"You go," Alan was insisting, with swift vehemence. "I'll stay with her. Give the weapons to old Polter. Tell him—when the invasion comes—do the best he can."

The slide banged between them; Alan was gone. In the darkness of the emergency escape room, Phil opened the outer slide. In a moment he had the glider wings partly spread . . . The little glider lurched wildly up into the wind as Phil launched himself; spreading the wings full, throwing the weight of his body against the lurches until he had his frail craft steadied. For a second or two he was engulfed in the luminous gases of the cylinder's rocket streams. Then the space-ship glided on. And like a bird with motionless wings, Phil soared downward and outward until in a few moments more the ship was gone; just the streams of its tails were merging with the luminous gloom until they too, had vanished.

On the swaying little glider Phil lay prone, manipulating its controls. There was a steady breeze, with which he knew he could guide his soaring craft for a very considerable distance. But which way should he go? He gazed down, awed by the bleak copper wastes. They were still far down; six or eight thousand feet.

it seemed. Overhead, the crimson cloud masses were breaking so that little patches of starry sky were visible. The crimson storm apparently was not coming. But far off to one side, the yellow-red radiance that streamed up from the horizon seemed in places getting brighter. The Fire Country was off there, Alan had told him.

Which way was the Hill City? Like a puzzled, lost bird he circled, flying lower now. There seemed nothing here that Aerita had described—nothing here but a barren, tumbled desolation of copper hills and sleek metal plains . . . That yellow glare from the distant Fire Country most certainly was intensifying. He could see a dark cloud rising from the horizon off there. A cloud? It looked more like a puff of upward-rising turgid smoke, than cloud-vapour. And suddenly on the breeze it seemed that there was a new smell to the air—acid, chemical smell like sulphur. Was a fire storm coming?

Phil was really perturbed now. Surely he would have to locate the Hill City quickly. To be lost out here—caught in a weird horrible storm—would probably be the end of him.

Suddenly in the distant darkness, away from the rising fiery glare, he thought that he could see little dots in the air. He headed for them and presently saw that they were tiny fluttering figures above a wild, tumbled rocky peak.

It was the mountain fastness of the rebelling flying virgins who had fled from the Hill City. Like great birds they came circling around Phil's glider as he soared down into their eyrie and landed.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Monster of the Fire Storm

**“WE CAN** do it, Zara. And now is our time.”

“Yes, Alan. Now—our time—so I be with you—for always.”

In a dim grotto room of Rahgg's encampment in the Dark Country, Alan sat with the little savage girl, Zara, planning with her how now his chance to escape had come.

Her dark eyes were smoldering, her breast heaving with her emotions as she gripped him, staring at him with fierce barbaric passion.

“I do this,” she murmured, “I love you. Rahgg—he kill you maybe—if you stay here.”

“I wouldn't wonder,” Alan agreed. But there was no humor in his voice.

The Space-cylinder had landed at Rahgg's stronghold, far up in the ragged black mountains of the Dark Country. It was a tumbled, wild region, of dark, fearsome desolation, with wide, black deep canyons of sheer black walls and peaks rising like pointed needles—a ragged, tumbled land, rent and torn as though by some giant cataclysm of nature, ages gone by.

At the head of one of the broad, valley-like canyons, where the cliffs were honey-combed with tunnels, caves and grottos, Rahgg and his men had established their encampment, with one of the primitive, squalid little villages of the Dark Country savages located nearby . . .

There had been a chaotic, tense time on the spaceship, just before it landed—when Rahgg had discovered that Phil had escaped, taking most of the smaller weapons with him. Rahgg's fury then was Satanic. He had lashed half a dozen of his men; but Alan had escaped his wrath. It had turned also on Talone—who had been found with Aerita in the ship's corridor, with Alan protecting her from Talone's unwelcome attentions. Rahgg had seemed pleased.

“You do well to serve your Master's interests,” Rahgg had told Alan. “You would let no harm come to my little Aerita—that is good.” But there had been a sardonic gleam in his dark eyes as he



had said it. And when contemptuously he ordered Talone away from him where they were gathered in the control turret, he turned again to Alan. "You think you fool me," he added. "But you do not." Little lightnings were darting from his dark eyes. "With you I will deal later."

And now Alan, with Zara, saw his chance to escape. The series of grotto rooms here were half artificial—broken

subterranean walls of copper rock which were boarded in places with planking. This one, to which Alan had been assigned, had a wall of boards, dividing it from others like itself. It was crudely furnished; draped with dark fabrics; and dimly, eerily illumined by a little brazier. On a low couch in its corner, now an hour or two after the cylinder had landed, Alan sat planning with the amorous Zara. A

rift in the broken rock ceiling admitted the night air of the deep broad canyon. A little patch of the black sky was visible—a growing red-yellow sheen was up there. Occasionally a puff of wind came down, bringing an ominous sulphurous smell. Fire storm weather? Alan murmured it to Zara, and she nodded, shuddering.

“Yes—maybe. We go quick now—fire storm she is bad—”

**T**HEIR plan was simple; Alan could only pray that it would succeed. Aerita, Alan knew, was in a little grotto room, only thirty feet along a small tunnel passage. The exits to the grottos were guarded now by Rahgg’s men. Two of them were standing at a nearby corridor mouth, beyond which was the broad dark floor of the canyon. It was Zara’s plan to engage the guards’ attention, distracting them so that Alan could slip past them. Then out among the rocks of the canyon floor he would wait until she had joined him.

“In the Hill City,” he was earnestly whispering to her now, “I will make sure that they appreciate you, Zara. You’re a good girl—you’ll be rewarded for this—treated well always among the Light Country people.” He meant it sincerely; but what he did not tell her, was that Aerita would escape with them. It was fifty miles from here to the Hill City. Once they were safely on their way, Aerita would fly ahead, and come back with one of the platforms carried by flying girls which would take them swiftly for the remainder of the journey . . .

Zara’s arm was pressing him against her. “In the Hill City—always I be with you—”

He nodded. “Yes. Get going now—get those guards as far away from the entrance as you can—”

The ornaments hanging upon her copper-colored knees and wrists tinkled as she moved into the little exit passage.

Alan sat tense. If only now Aerita was alone in that other cave. He could get her in here, and in five of ten minutes they would try slipping past the guards . . .

In the silence of the subterranean rooms, sounds from outside were dimly audible. For an hour now the outer canyon had been a bustle of activity. Rahgg’s invasion of the Light Country was in swift preparation; the big projectors which had been brought from Earth were being assembled; mounted on huge wheeled carts. And an army of savages was assembling . . . Their jabbering, guttural voices were faintly audible; and the voices of Rahgg’s men . . . Within an hour or two the motley army would be starting down the canyon . . .

The listening Alan abruptly tensed, went cold. From the small interior tunnel passage between his grotto and Aerita’s her voice, sharply raised came floating. Someone was in there with her! But she knew that Alan, about now, would be coming for her, and she had expected to be alone. Rahgg had gone outside, busy with the assembling of his men and had left Zara to wait upon her.

Swiftly Alan crept into the small dark tunnel. A curtain draped its further end. In a moment he was crouching there, cautiously moving an edge of the dark drape. Within the other little grotto, Aerita was sitting on a couch with Rahgg standing behind her. A blue plaited rope of vines was in his hand.

“No! No—” she protested.

He answered with soft ironic words in his own language as he smilingly lashed her wings together. He was planning to take her with his expedition to the Hill City, no doubt, and did not want to chance her escaping from him.

**T**HEN as he stared, Alan was suddenly stricken by sight of one of the dark wall-drapes behind Rahgg. It hung apparently over a recess in the rocky wall

—and now it was moving silently aside. Talone was standing there, wrapped in his dark cloak! The brazier light gleamed on his contorted, leering face, his eyes, smoldering now with murderous fury as silently he shifted forward. And the light glinted on the naked copper blade in his hand, as he poised it to stab Rahgg.

For that second the crouching Alan breathlessly stared. Then Talone must have made some slight noise; Rahgg whirled, saw the blade stabbing at his back. His voice like an infuriated animal, rose with a roar as he struck at Talone's wrist. The knife clattered away; and then the burly Rahgg was upon Talone with a blow that knocked him backward. It was a swift, weird combat, grisly with its sheer brutality. Before Talone could recover his balance, Rahgg had leaped away and drawn a long bronze sword. But he did not stab. Instead, he slashed with the blunt edge of the sword, with a skillful blow that struck Talone on the cheek. He wavered on his feet, tried to gather himself for a leap. But the sword swished through the air again, cuffing Talone's other cheek; and then the side of his throat; and his forehead. They were swishing, slashing blows as though the flexible sword were a whip . . .

"No—no—" Aerita screamed.

Talone had crumpled to his knees now. His face was swelling with bruises and pulpy red with oozing blood. His eyes were closing, and blinded by blood. And still Rahgg slashed, silent with his grim fury. Talone fell; but with a thick powerful hand Rahgg lifted him up, pounding his face now with the sword-hilt. Through an interior doorway men had come running; but Rahgg scattered them, and silently they followed him as he carried Talone out, with the sound of the blows still gruesomely reverberating . . .

In the grotto momentarily Aerita was alone, crouching on the floor, her face covered by her hands. It was Alan's

chance. He dashed in. "Aerita dear—our chance now—come on—"

He did not stop to unleash her wings. With his arm around her, they hurried back through the other grotto, then out through the other hundred foot long little tunnel. The sounds of Rahgg and Talone evidently had not carried out here. The exit mouth was empty. Crouching there with Aerita for a moment, Alan could see the dark figures of the two guards, fifty feet or so away. Zara was between them; one of them was embracing her. They were too occupied to notice the dark silent figure of Aerita and Alan slipping past them . . .

"Far enough," Alan whispered presently. "We'll wait here for Zara. I promised her—and if we left her now, Rahgg would punish her for our escape."

**T**HEY crouched in the dark shadows of a rock cluster. The honey-combed cliff which was the end of the canyon was here close beside them. Five hundred feet away the rocky canyon was dotted with lights and groups of moving figures—Rahgg's men and the assembling savages. Every moment as they waited, Alan feared that their escape would be discovered. Then at last an approaching dark figure was visible—Zara coming to join them. Softly Alan called to her.

"Here, Zara—"

She came with a little cry of triumph. "So good! Now we go—I show to you—a tunnel here to another valley—"

And then she saw Aerita. The storm-clouds overhead were yellow-red, with little dots of flame licking through them—smoldering gases carried by an abnormal wind from the Fire Country, bursting now into tongues of flame. The light gleamed on Zara's bronze face. Her jaw dropped with her amazement. Then disillusionment, rage, jealousy contorted her features. And suddenly she sprang at Aerita.

"You!" she blazed. "So—you try take him from me?"

Alan seized her. "Don't be silly, Zara. We're going to the Hill City. Come on now—"

The scuffle, and Zara's raised voice, floated out over the rocks. From overhead, there was a shout. Staring up, Alan had a brief glimpse of figures up there on the canyon rim—men gazing down. Then something came whizzing down, clattering on the rocks within a few feet of Zara and Aerita. It was a fin-tipped knife-blade. And then another came hurtling. Zara gave a low moan; staggered and fell. The blade quivered in her breast, where a red stain was spreading.

"Oh Zara—Zara dear—" Aerita gasped. She bent down. Zara's feeble hand was trying to push her away, clutching for Alan.

"You—my man—so big and strong—" Zara faintly gasped.

Alan bent to her. "Oh Zara—I'm so sorry—"

"No—run now—men coming—"

A paroxysm shook her; then she stiffened with a last gasping breath as the light went out of her eyes and she was gone. Alan jumped to his feet. Another flying blade came hurtling down. He gripped Aerita's hand as together they plunged into the nearest tunnel opening, running in the darkness.

"Will this lead us into that other valley, Aerita?"

"Yes, I think so."

There seemed no pursuit. In the darkness Alan stopped, fumbled until he had cast the ropes loose from Aerita's wings. Ahead of them a yellow-red sheen showed where the tunnel emerged; and in a moment more they were out. It was a scene of wild desolation here—a spread of dark rocks and little ravines with masses of black naked cliffs rising in tiers, with the great metal mountains of the Dark Country behind them.

A DESCENDING narrow ravine seemed to lead down into open country in the other direction. Its rocky floor was piled with strewn boulders and crags. The light from the flaming clouds painted them with its lurid glare and cast monstrous inky shadows in the hollows. Clinging together Alan and Aerita stumbled forward. They could feel the storm-wind now—little puffs, acrid with the smell of sulphur. And suddenly from a wheeling black cloud close overhead, a tongue of flame licked down like a living thing trying to seize them.

It lasted just a second, and then the smoldering gases of it burned out and it was gone.

"Aerita dear—you fly ahead—"

"And leave you here? No—"

He tried to shove her away from him, but she clung. "Aerita—don't be foolish. These storms don't last long, you said. I'll be all right. When it's over you can come back with some of the girls and a platform to carry me—"

He checked himself suddenly. Close ahead of them, two dark figures suddenly rose up!

Alan knocked Aerita behind him; tensed himself for a leap.

"Alan!" One of the figures suddenly called it. "You—Alan!"

It was Phil's voice! And over him, little Arma was fluttering. She came with back-flapping wings, landed beside Aerita and Alan.

"You escaped?" Arma gasped. "We were hoping to help you—"

Then Phil was here, eagerly gripping Alan. "Good enough, Alan! Arma wanted to leave me, but I came—"

Phil had landed with his weapons in the girls' eyrie; had told Arma what had happened on the space-cylinder.

"We've got a platform near here," Phil was saying. "Only about a mile down the ravine. A dozen flying girls—we told them to wait there. Come on—"

"I will fly and bring them," Aerita interjected. "This storm—perhaps we had better stay underground until—"

Her words ended with a gasp as she sucked in her breath. All four of them, stricken with horror, stood staring. Close ahead of them, down the dark narrow ravine, a blob of yellow glare had appeared on the ground. It was a weird living thing! It seemed to enlarge as it came from a smothering hole in the ground—expanding until it was a ten foot round blob.

"A fire monster!" Aerita gasped.

They could see now that it was a weird, palpitating blob of living tissue. Tongues of yellow-red light-fire radiance streamed from it like an aura. Monster of the Fire Country, it was wandering here as it followed the sulphurous wind—a huge, headless, palpitating thing, but it had a cluster of weaving legs supporting it; and and a belt of eyes at its middle. The eyes were like glaring fire-dots.

Then it saw the four human figures. Its voice hissed like water poured on hot coals; its eyes brightened with triumph as it came lunging forward!

## CHAPTER NINE

### The Battle in the Copper Desert

**T**HE weird glowing monster was in an instant no more than fifteen feet from them. Alan shoved at his companions. "Can't fight it—scatter—get out of here!" He shoved at the girls. "You fly—"

With beating wings they fluttered vertically up. Phil made a leap; his body, here with the slight gravity of Mercury, sailed in an arc directly over the quivering, oncoming monster. Alan, delayed by urging the girls, had no time to jump; and all in that second, with a weird lunging pounce, the monstrous jelly-like, fire-thing was upon him.

Alan had tried to leap sidewise; but

from the monster a great weaving tentacle-arm like a tongue of red-yellow flame licked out and wrapped itself around him. It was jelly-like, hissing ooze; hot and sticky; flimsy, ghastly stuff, luminous with a radiant glow. It closed around Alan, pulling him. And then the thing's quivering luminous body engulfed him. He fought to keep his feet. With flailing arms and legs he wrenched the flimsy, weird ooze apart. The heat of it burned his flesh. It hissed in the air as he flung gobs of it away . . . He knew he mustn't fall. That would be the end . . . The damnable thing, as he broke it apart, like viscous hot rubber flowed together, healing its wounds. Its horrible little voice was gibbering now; the cluster of its eyes, deep in its glowing middle, was like a mass of shining red-white coals.

A slap of the sticky stuff hit his face. He wiped it away. Then he was aware that Phil had come back with another leap; Phil frantically pulling at him. And now the two girls were flapping in the air close over the monster, reaching down, plucking at it.

"You keep away!" Alan shouted. "Keep back!"

The glutinous ooze of the damnable thing, as Phil and he tore at it, occasionally burst into flame—combustible gases within it, released as it wrenched apart, igniting with the oxygen of the air. Alan felt his clothes burning. He beat at them with seared hands.

At last Phil tore him loose. Together they staggered away, as the monster, distracted by the fluttering girls, was bouncing heavily into the air, trying to reach them. Baffled, suddenly it was lurching off along the rocks, until in a moment it plunged into a hole, crouching sullen with the yellow-red light-glare from it streaming out into the darkness.

Alan and Phil, with Arma and Aerita leading them, plunged on down the ravine. Then Arma fled ahead; and presently

through the lurid yellow-red storm-murk, the platform carried by twelve of the girls came fluttering. Alan and Phil climbed on it; lying prone as the girls gripped its handles and with rhythmic beating wing-strokes lifted it into the air.

Heading for the mountain eyrie of the rebelling virgins of the Hill City, the platform sailed swiftly forward through the smoky glare of the gathering fire storm.

"It is reaching its worst now," Aerita murmured. "In a little while it will be past."

With Alan she crouched in the shelter of a rock cluster on the mountain top of the girl's eyrie. Arma and Phil were nearby, and among the crags and small cave crevices groups of girls were huddled. The weird fire storm seemed now to have reached its height.

**I**T WAS a wild, eerie flaming scene. Great wheeling cloud masses were circling overhead—smoky black vapor with little tongues of red-yellow flame licking through it. The wind was circular now, a hot sulphurous breath heavy with choking gas fumes. Occasionally the circling cloud seemed exploding—rent as though by yellow-red lightning with a thunder-clap as some pocket of pent-up gas was ignited.

It was a demoniac cataclysm of nature. The flame-lightning spit through the clouds so that the rent vapors rolled apart and upward like great masses of lurid smoke, hurled skyward in massive columns, then clapping together and coming down again. Sometimes the huge tongues of flame licked toward the ground, swirling for a second or two as they seared the copper desert and then puffed into nothingness.

It lasted half an hour. Then Alan could see that the storm center was past; over the black, naked peaks of the distant Dark Country mountains, the blazing, snapping turmoil seemed now at its worst. And

then the rain came—slanting sheets on the dying wind; rain that hissed out of the overhead murk, sizzling like water on a fire. The glare now rapidly was fading from the clouds; darkness again was falling upon the naked tumbled wastes of the copper plains . . .

"It is over," Aerita murmured. "Now our girls can start."

The little hand projectors of the Errentine flash, which Phil had taken from the space-ship, had been distributed among the flying girls. It was thought that Rahgg's expedition must already have started from his Dark Country lair. Traveling on foot, they ought still be in the descending canyon-valley.

"The storm must have stopped them," Aerita was saying. "But they will be starting again. We must hurry, Alan."

The flying girls were fluttering with excitement among the crags of the little mountain-top, with Arma among them, making sure that each had her weapons; organizing them, with directions of what they should try to do. Their jabbering, excited little voices mingled with the flapping of their great wings. It was a weird little army, preparing now for battle. About a thousand of them were here.

"But listen," Alan protested, as he had several times before. "You can't let your girls do this—so many of them will be killed—you know it—"

Aerita's little face was grim, solemn, but her eyes flashed. "It is our only chance. And that you know—"

He did indeed. Earlier in the night, girls had flown with the news to the Hill City. An army of young men was organizing there, making ready to march out and meet Rahgg's men and his horde of savages—to meet them out on the copper desert, try and turn them back before they could get within range and devastate the Hill City. But men on foot, armed only with flash-projectors of thirty foot range—what chance would they have



against those giant machines Rahgg was bringing? Rahgg had five huge projectors of the Mackay high-voltage flash which would bring death at three hundred feet or more. The young men would be slaughtered.

"We girls, from the air, will have a better chance," Aerita was saying. "You must see it, Alan. And think too—we have been in rebellion against those young men, so that by law our wings may not be cut. But many of those men—we love. They will be our husbands, when this terrible time is over. How can we let them now go out, to be killed in a battle where they have no chance?"

Alan, and Phil who now had joined them, had to yield. They could see it was hopeless to dissuade these excited, crusading girls. And there was, indeed, no argument against Aerita's logic.

**T**HEN presently the girls were ready; each of them belted with the thirty foot Errentine flash; and with little sling-shots and finned copper knife-arrows. In small groups they began fluttering upward; wheeling, like birds gathering in coveys. They were amazingly, fantastically beautiful with pink-white limbs, fluttering drapes and hair; and the giant blue and white feathered wings flapping as they poised, with excited little voices calling down to their comrades to hurry.

Alan and Phil, silent and grim, finally took their places on the oblong platform, with twelve girls gripping its handles as with beating wings they lifted it into the air. Aerita and Arma were flying free, with the girls in small groups strung out behind them. Like a great migration of flying birds swiftly they winged forward to the battle . . .

"You and Arma—stay close by us," Alan called to Aerita who was flying nearby. "What we say to do—you can tell the girls."

"Yes. All right." But in his heart,

Alan knew that these reckless girls would quickly be beyond command. At an altitude of five hundred feet, gazing down as he lay prone on the platform floor, Alan could see the glistening copper spread of desert. The entrance to the broad valley lay ahead. And from it now, in the dim half light the winding cortege of the enemy was visible—little lines of dots down there—Rahgg's three hundred men, on foot; and gathered around them, an unorganized horde of two thousand or more of the Dark Country savages. They saw the oncoming girls. There was a flurry down among them—the men in front stopping; and those in the rear pressing forward. Within a minute they seemed in confusion—a milling throng, suddenly startled by this enemy in the air above them.

In the center of the throng Alan could see nearly a dozen huge wheeled carts. Then as the platform swooped lower, he was able to make out that five of the carts each carried one of the giant Mackay projectors, raised a few feet above it on a metal chassis. The other carts doubtless were loaded with bombs and miscellaneous equipment.

At five hundred feet, Alan shouted, "Keep away for a moment; and when you attack, head for the carts. No closer than twenty feet—fire—and then come up."

Aerita and Arma, flying overhead, called back agreement. In the dull, red-yellow night-glare, Alan had a glimpse of their set white faces. Then from below, a sudden bolt stabbed up—a little violet pencilray of electronic voltage. For a second of duration it sizzled and then died.

"Three hundred foot range is right," Phil muttered.

It fell short of the hovering girls, so that they jibed with a murmuring defiance. A little less grim dismay was within Alan as he saw that tentative bolt from the enemy. This was the Mackay pencilray—narrow beam hardly more than a

few inches in breadth. It would not be easy to strike a fluttering, swiftly moving girl with it and hold it upon her for that second or two. At least they had a chance.

"There they go!" Phil suddenly ejaculated. "Start us down, Alan!"

**A**T ALAN'S command to his leading girl, the platform swooped in a long curving downward spiral. To Alan, lying prone beside his brother, weapon in hand, it was a chaos of shifting, fluttering figures and crazily swaying vision of the dim copper desert and the sky; and the girls were swooping even more swiftly. In little fluttering groups they passed close over the carts, fired their thirty foot bolt and mounted again into the air.

To Alan it was a moment of wild chaos. Flashes were hissing up from the carts as the girls swooped down. Alan caught his breath with a stab of horror as he saw the first girl struck—swooping blue-draped little creature with the pencil-ray of the giant flash striking her full. For an instant she fluttered with one of her great wings melted away, then her little body flopped, turning end over end until like a wounded bird she crashed into the horde of savages—tumbling coppery figures engulfing her like vultures.

The platform in another few seconds was sailing close above one of the carts. Alan and Phil fired their little bolts down over the platform edge. A hit! One of Rahgg's cloaked men, manipulating the huge projector, fell upon it. An upward-stabbing flash caught a corner of the platform, melting it away, leprous. And then they were past, and rose, with one of the forward girls hanging upon the handle, her legs melted away where the flash had struck her.

Alan reached for her. "You come up and lie here with us."

She was one who spoke a little English. "No," she gasped. "Still can fly."

Arma was passing, and took her place

at the handle. And in a moment she had persuaded the wounded girl to leave. Grimly Alan stared as the girl wavered through the turgid darkness, winging for the Hill City.

Again at some five hundred feet of altitude, the platform hovered, with the girls circling around it. But there was so many less of them now! Some were flopping away in straggling groups toward the Hill City; and others were slowly fluttering to the ground where still others were strewn.

"But we gained something," Phil was muttering. There were dead figures of men strewn down there, and one of the carts now seemed on fire. Then suddenly its projector exploded—a puff of flame and resounding report, with flying fragments of wood, metal and human bodies. It started a little panic among Rahgg's crowding savages; that section of them, hurled back by the explosion, suddenly was wildly milling and then stampeding off into the darkness.

Flare-bombs were mounting now from others of the carts—hissing flares of electronic light that came up and burst with a vivid orange glare. One of them struck a wheeling girl at the edge of the formation. As it burst there was just a horrible little charred blob, and then nothingness, where the girl had been.

**T**HEN again the girls swooped, with the platform among them. It was a sustained attack this time, each girl for herself so that now the glaring scene was a wild, fantastic chaos. Ten minutes? Half an hour? Alan and Phil, crouching there on the swaying little platform as it swooped, mounted, and swooped again and again, lost all track of time. They were aware only of the horrible chaos of flaring lights, spitting, hissing flashes, with strewn bodies on the ground; wildly milling, frightened savages trying now to escape; and fluttering, frenzied girls.

Alan saw presently that Phil beside

him, was wounded—Phil, with his left arm gone at the elbow, and in his right hand his last little projector was empty of its charge. His face was pallid, strained. He sank back, prone.

“Can’t—keep at it, Alan,” he gasped. “But we’re getting them?”

“Yes. We’re getting them.”

Down through the glare on the copper ground, fires were flaming. All but one of the huge projectors had exploded now, or were out of action. Only one was left, so that now the girls were attacking more freely. And the dark horde of savages and some of Rahgg’s remaining men were scattering in rout, with the girl fluttering singly after them—stabbing at them with the little bolts, or dropping upon them to stab with their flying arrows used as swords.

“Just one projector left,” Alan muttered. “That looks like Rahgg, standing there manning it. We’re going down—”

Aerita fluttered past—still unhurt, thank God. Throughout it all, Alan had been in an agony of apprehension for her.

“You stay up here,” he shouted. “Almost over, Aerita.”

Little Arma was hanging on the handle, exhausted. Alan drew her up; put her beside Phil. There were only eight girls left at the handles now; the platform wavered, then steadied and swooped.

It was Rahgg, standing there on his last cart amid the burning wreckage of the strewn ground. He saw the platform coming as it aimed to sail close over his head. He was trying to twist his broken projector to train it on Alan. Then he gave it up, and shouted to try and rally his fleeing men.

In a swooping arc, the platform dove and straightened. From its forward end, for that breathless instant Alan stared down. His little flash-weapon was aimed. Then from no more than ten feet, he saw Rahgg’s face with the fire-glare lighting

it. It was a grim, white, heavy face; and on it was stamped his disillusionment—this, the final wreckage of his mad dream of conquest . . . disillusionment of a mad-man-genius . . . wild despair . . .

The staring Alan, for some reason which he could not have named, withheld his shot. The platform sailed past, rising again. And Alan turned; gazed behind him. Rahgg was still standing there, clinging to his broken projector. For a second he swung around, staring up at Alan; and on his face there was a defiant, ironic smile. Then he gripped the big projector, wrenched it loose from its raised chassis; and hugging it, toppled sidewise with it, down into the flames of an adjacent burning cart. There was a second of silence; then a puff of red-yellow glare and the roar of the explosion—flying dark fragments of the cart and the projector, and the body of the man who had thought to make himself the Great Master of Mercury . . .

High overhead, the pitiful remnants of the flying girls gathered with the platform in their midst. Far down, the copper desert was lighted by the dying yellow fires . . . Huddled, broken dead forms were strewn everywhere . . . And then a heavy black pall of smoke was settling like a shroud to hide the mute, tragic scene of death . . .

ALAN and Phil were married in the Hill City, to Aerita and Arma—a huge wedding at which two hundred or more of the girls were joined to the young men of their choice. There was no talk of the mutilation of the wings of the young wives.

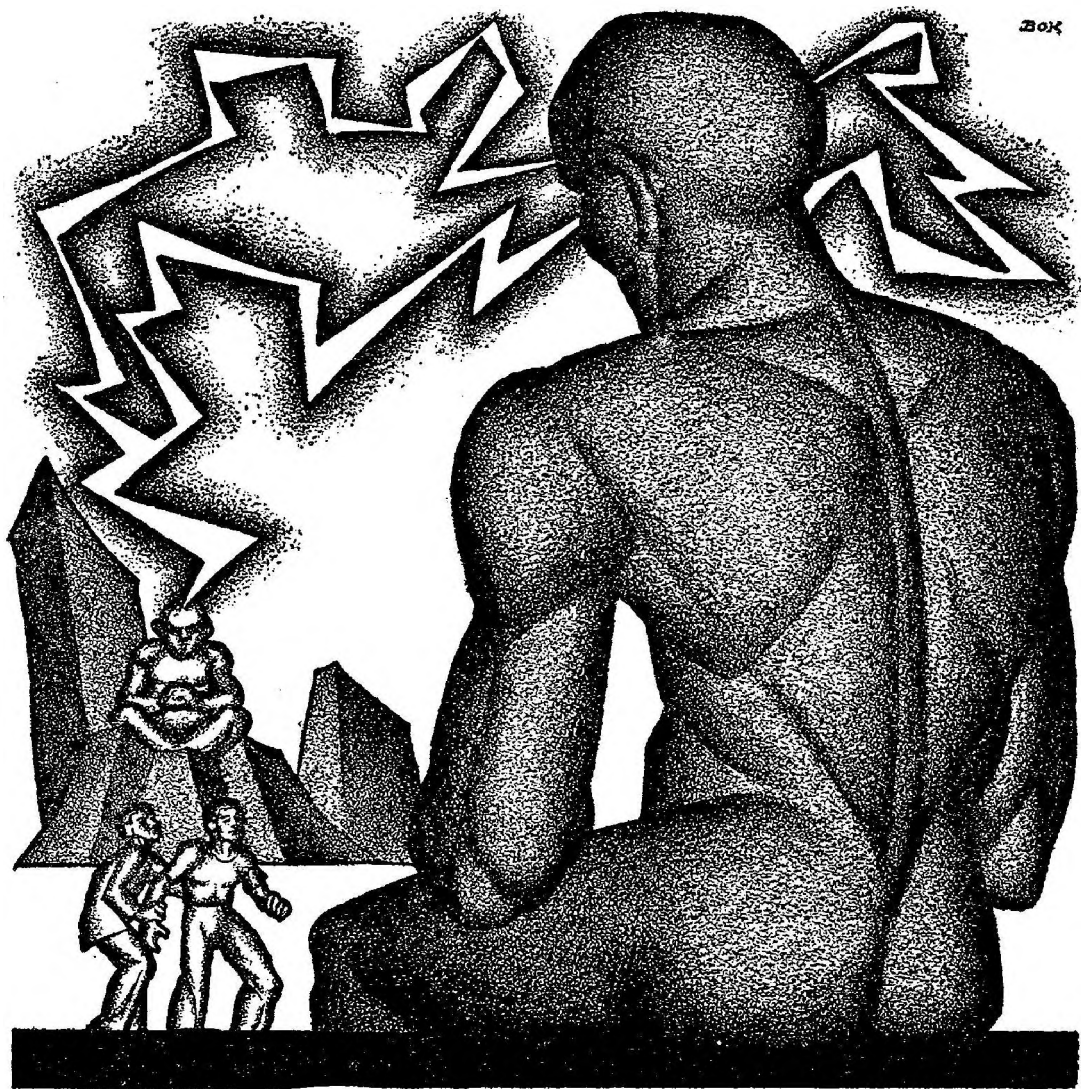
No further connection with Earth was established—old Polter stood firm against that. But Alan and Phil secretly felt that they would like to go, of course. Perhaps, some day, they would go back. . . .

THE END.

# VENDETTA ON VENUS

By KERRY LASH

For twenty thousand years the Super-Egos of Venus had been stalemated—until a tiny-brained Earthman came along and was given a command secret even from himself!



**T**OM MATTHEWS, round faced veteran Cartographer of the Venusian Survey, bobbed his head forward on his neck and stared at the instrument panel of the speeding Triplecath plane. With the dancing red point of the

altimeter as a focus, a little picture had formed on the panel. Little black demons hopped around and around, protruding miniature tongues at Matthews.

The Cartographer stared in horror for a second, until sudden realization made

him curse softly. He had been partially hypnotized again!

Matthews spun around on the control seat and glared at the grinning rookie attending the Cenax topographic recorder.

"Listen, Mind Master," growled Matthews. "None of your questionable Psychic Research Institute jokes. This job is important."

"Keep your mental shirt on, Chief," said young Alan Trevor with the informality of the Survey branch of the Space Service. "I'm just trying to illustrate a hunch."

"A hunch?" queried Matthews suspiciously. The veteran could not quite tag this new recruit who had set the entire personnel of Drome No. 6 of the Survey in the colonial capital of Terrestria, by the ears with his telepathic pranks.

"Yes, a hunch," replied Trevor. "This Mirage Peaks mystery," he added, "the phenomena that has us stumped—this shifting of mountains and valleys—cannot be due to atmospheric refraction. The Cenax plates would record genuine mirages. As it is, we see the Solars in this sector one way, the Cenax scanner eye sees them differently."

"That doesn't come under the heading of news!" muttered Matthews, sliding a look out of the glassene cowling of the plane.

**T**HE fast little Triplecath flyer was driving east alongside the summits of a stupendous range. For fifteen Terran miles did these mountains, the Solars, climb out of the steaming muck of the Venusian sea levels, to hump their shoulders into clean air, into the yellow light of the great luminary forever invisible to the denizens of the jungle spawn of the planet.

Matthews said: "Just what are you getting at, son?"

Trevor shrugged. By chance, during his apprenticeship on Earth, the young space-

man had gained a smattering of 24th Century principles of cerebral wave projection, a knowledge with which he had amused himself and his comrades. Matthews was definitely of the old school and would scoff at connecting a harmless trick of hypnosis with the Mirage Peaks mystery.

"I get a *feeling*," said Trevor finally. "Of some great intangible *mental* force that plays about in this Mirage Peaks region. It might be," he added, "that we never see the panoramas the Cenax records because we are hypnotized into seeing something else." At Matthews' snort of incredulity young Trevor became pugnacious in defense of his theory.

"Why can't it be? Why couldn't some great mentality produce a mirage in our brains—"

He did not finish the line of argument. He was violently interrupted.

Neither Trevor nor Matthews actually saw the long quick stabbing lance of greenish flame that drove up from the tumble of peaks below to strike the Triplecath flyer. But both were thrown with stunning force, when fused jet rims, along the plane's power keel, kicked back the cathion drive.

**T**REVOR recovered first. Finding his bearings in the rapidly gyrating cabin, the rookie scrambled over Matthews' prostrate form to the controls—but found that the lobbing flyer could not be maneuvered.

The summits of the Solars were driving up past them like great fangs. They crashed.

The impact, fortunately was glancing—a sliding continuous collision aslant a long bare slope. Trevor, jammed in the control seat, was braced for the shock. Like a huge sled, ripping open its power keel and bottom, the plane slewed over the mountain face. An outjut of rock sent it careening—a narrow ravine yawned and the crumbling flyer nosed abruptly down,

gouged a basalt like wall of the cleft, and settled.

The silence, then, after the long drawn screaming of tortured metal, seemed painful. On the smoking, buckled floor of the plane cabin Tom Matthews stirred and cursed, lifting his hand to a bump the size of a goose egg on his forehead. Trevor, who had jammed his face into the instrument board at the last sharp impact, shook his head to clear it, untangled himself from the control seat. The rookie kicked open the fuselage door, lifted Matthews and went out.

Still somewhat mechanical in his motions, Trevor carried his chief down the ravine. Matthews kicked his legs. "What the—?" the Cartographer said. "What goes on?"

Trevor dropped the veteran abruptly, as he saw the apparition. Trevor just stood there, staring.

The rocky ravine was steep sided, narrow, but opening up in the distance to a strange vista—a tableland held on the flanks of three peaks. On the level were the ruins of a city. For the moment, however, Trevor noted few details of the far view. His gaze was focussed on the Figure that had appeared, not thirty feet from the two Terrans.

"Hey!" growled Matthews, getting up to his knees. Then he saw the form ahead and his jaw went slack. "Great balls of Jovian fire!" whispered Matthews. "I've gone bugs. I'm seeing Buddhas!"

"He does look like Buddha, at that," muttered young Trevor, his muscles taut, his right hand moving toward the deadly little Brei beam gun at his belt.

The Figure was huge, almost filling the narrow gorge. A great bronze colored shape with crossed-lower limbs, an apparition that rested on—nothing. Immense arms were folded over the huge torso which was topped by head and features of proportionate size. The features were blandly amused, conveying a vast

self assurance and the large eyes were so jet black that Trevor had a feeling of vertigo looking into them.

The most disturbing characteristic of the Figure, however, was that Trevor could see *through* it.

Matthews was on both knees now. "A trick!" he whispered. "Our friend is a phantom. Some projection rig—"

*"Earthlings—your confused thoughts are idle. You deal now with Great Hob."*

Matthews jumped to his feet. The words had sounded inside his head but the Cartographer's mind worked in familiar ways. "An amplifier," he muttered. "They're ribbing us!"

"Who are *they*?" asked Trevor, flicking his gaze over the surroundings.

Above the right wall of the ravine was nothing but a slope that climbed and climbed. That vast mountain face, on which nothing moved, was curiously scarred as if a great blow torch had played over it and Trevor, in his swift appraisal, had a sense of distortion. Plants grew here and there, totally unlike the fauna of any world—little stems, fused, and polished leaves, glowing like colored glass in the sun, like the fanciful creations of some mighty mind!

To the left the ravine wall shut out all view but ahead, past the ghostly Great Hob and the weird rubble of a city, far off over the mountain shoulders and down, could be seen the steaming mists of the jungle lowlands.

Trevor said: "The growth around here—it seems—artificial."

"This whole region is cockeyed," growled Matthews, increasingly uneasy.

"We should try beaming Hob, just to get his reaction," suggested the younger man. Scarcely were the words out of Trevor's mouth when his arm jerked. He drew the Brei beam pistol out of his belt. And threw the weapon with great force, over the left wall of the gorge!

"Are you crazy?" indignantly de-

manded Matthews. And immediately repeated Trevor's action.

Then the Cartographer really began to sweat.

**T**REVOR said: "What do you think of my hunch now? Hypnotism, super-hypnotism—that's what we're up against. We both blindly obeyed a mentally projected order—"

Matthews' reply was still somewhat pugnaciously skeptical, but his eyes were widening.

"Earthlings," said the weird voice in their skulls, "I have use for one of you."

"What use?" asked Trevor.

"As a pawn," answered the voice of Great Hob. "As my pawn in destroying the Super-Ego, Hoburu."

"Where is this Super-Ego?" asked Trevor, his mind racing.

"Hoburu sits facing me across the Gorge of Meditations," replied the apparition in the ravine. "For twice ten thousand of your Terran years has Hoburu striven to best me, Great Hob. His hyper-intellect has gone from refinement to refinement of strategy in mental combat. Now I will trick him by a simple device—the use of a Minus-Ego."

"What is all this?" growled Matthews. "Boy—he's insulting you!"

"Hoburu does not know," chuckled the fantastic voice in the heads of the two Terrans, "that I have set my cerebro shields to Stasis X 4, Defensive and under cover of electronic veiling, taken this astral excursion down the mountain to meet you."

"A mad Buddha!" muttered Matthews. "Talking of a feud twenty thousand years old. Astral excursions. Gibberish!"

The Cartographer was talking to hear his own reassuring voice. Inwardly Matthews was more and more uneasy. He had never even heard of any such creature as the one before him and his physically trained mind was baffled to account for

the situation. Matthews' thoughts began to focus on a strong desire to get away quickly.

"Let's leg it," he said.

"Suits me," agreed Trevor, pivoting. "I don't like the look in our astral friend's eyes. *Run!*" he yelled.

Both started to sprint, back toward the wrecked flyer. And both, after the first spurt, began to tread thin air!

"Hey!" yelled Matthews, pumping his legs futilely. He was drifting. Then the motion slowed. Matthews was left suspended in midair. Quickly turning his head, the Cartographer saw Trevor drawn in the opposite direction and held by some eerie levitative force directly before Great Hob.

Trevor ceased his futile muscular efforts, waited.

"You are an impudent one, Earthling," said Hob. "Courage lies in your minute ego."

"Be careful—he's up to no good," shouted Matthews.

"I will make a bargain with you, Earthling," said Hob. "Your safety and your transportation along with your small brained companion back to Terrestria, in exchange for a simple act of volition. You are to walk, *of your own will*, to the site of the City of Hoob, and around the mountain to the Gorge of Meditations. Of your own will, then, you are to approach the Super-Ego, Hoburu."

Trevor knew he had to gain time to think. Matthews was yelling to him to make no bargain. But that Figure, the projection of some weird creature waiting somewhere beyond the ruined city, possessed power enough to levitate matter. It was plain that Great Hob, whatever and wherever he was, could kill them both by an act of will alone.

Trevor had no choice. "I agree," he said. "Lead on, Great Hob, to Hoburu."

"Impudent, for a pawn," chuckled the voice in his head. "Impudent."

GREAT HOB vanished—the immense, seated figure simply blanked out. “Now,” yelled Matthews, “Is our chance!” But both Terrans were still gripped in the intangible but powerful levitative force—a force that closed them around, lifted them, up to the right rim of the ravine. And then began a fantastic progression.

Trevor, once on the gorge wall, found all his muscles responsive again to his own will. But Matthews was not set down. The Cartographer's legs remained drawn up, his arms were forcibly folded across his chest. Thus, his language very pungent, Matthews floated on nothing.

Trevor made a try to get back to his companion. But immediately as he turned the compulsion of Hob's will was upon him. He found, by experiment, that he was free to move of his own volition only in one direction—toward the tableland to the south, toward the sprawl of the ruined city under the three peaks.

“Tom,” Trevor called over his shoulder, “stop fighting this thing—now.” But Matthews still cursed as he slowly floated forward.

“Your companion,” said the ghost voice of Hob, “will from this moment be an audio-apparatus.” And Trevor, feeling slightly chill, looking over his shoulder, saw all expression blank out of the Cartographer's face.

Trevor snapped: “If harm comes to my friend, Hob—the bargain is off.”

To his surprise it was Matthews who spoke, in a strange mechanical recitative tone.

“Impudent One—your mind is still seeking explanations—you were not prepared to encounter any such creatures as the Super-Egos. In Terrestria and On Earth the belief is general that the highest forms of Venusian life are the swamp amphibia and the creeping Beachers that live on the motile protein weeds of the tidal muds of the planet. Your biologists,” the

mechanical voice added, “have not come upon the evidence of the *one*, unique line of Venusian evolutionary ascent.”

Trevor, slowly walking, shifted his gaze, from the scene ahead, back to the transformed Matthews—he said: “The Venusian tree of life has but one branch, that culminated in this city, Hoob?”

“The Super-Egos are the culmination, Earthling.”

Set faced, Trevor moved, nearer and nearer to the ruins of Hoob. Matthews no longer spoke, but Great Hob adopted another means of communicating with his pawn. Trevor began to see visions, mental visions superimposed upon the actual sunlit scene.

He saw life evolve, ages before, in the lowlands of Equatoria. Out of the spawn of the swamps came curious chordates and vertebrates, transforming through the epochs into a species of highland bipeds. Then came a civilization of one region, of one city, with a bizarre, grim climax.

With a mighty effort of will, Trevor shook off the trooping visions. As the Terran turned, to face the shell that was Matthews, he could feel the beat of the great yellow sun in the sky. His long repressed feelings broke in the rookie. “Tom!” he yelled. “Tom!”

The Cartographer dropped, abruptly—he was a struggling heap on the ground. Trevor reached him in three quick leaps. Around them was profound silence. Nothing moved. “Tom!” snapped Trevor. “This—Hob—he knows the location of Terrestria, he is familiar with conditions on Earth. And—”

“He's a mass killer,” nodded Matthews. The Cartographer, still plainly dazed, looked around. “It was Hob and Hoburu themselves who helped destroy the civilization which produced them.”

Matthews, too, had evidently seen the trooping visions. Now the Cartographer pointed. “Look!” he said in a swift low whisper.



Trevor, turning, focussing his gaze, saw them—the Two. Beyond the ruined city, to the north. There the tableland fell away and between its rim and the mountain cliffs was a yawning space filled with bluish fog. Over this eerie mist they sat, broad bronze backs to the sheer walls overlooking the gorge. Hob and Hoburu.

**C**OMPULSION returned upon the Terrans. "Earthlings," said the ghost voice of Hob. "Approach!"

They walked slowly. The rookie's jaw set, Matthews cursing. "Evolution on Venus," said Trevor, "went haywire. Strangely enough, in that lies our hope. These Beings are the culmination of a distorted development—"

"Impudent One," warned the voice of Hob, "remember the bargain!"

Trevor flashed his glance over the ruins of Hoob, over the mountain sides that were everywhere scarred and spotted with flora that seemed the stuff of careless dreams. "Hob," said Trevor. "Was my vision true? Did you, then, know Hoob millenia ago?"

"Yes, Earthling. The evolutionary forces of our world, that had produced the City, found expression in the genius of a great scientist. By short wave manipulation of the genes of our unique lineage, this ancient scientist bred the Select Ones—twelve males—a great mutation."

"You destroyed Hoob?" said Matthews hoarsely.

"As the Select Ones grew to full mental powers, we saw that the achievements of our race were puny. We wasted no energy in trying for mass progress through the use of machinery. We destroyed the City and the small brained ones who were our ancestors and devoted ourselves to ourselves. We accelerated variation and yet kept the change in control—we achieved immortality—"

"But the other Super-Egos?" asked Trevor.

"Dead. Destroyed. Destroyed by a process of elimination in mental war, a war that lasted ages, till finally but I, Great Hob, and also Hoburu, were left. And for twice ten thousand Terran years have we two sought for the supreme, culminating mastery."

"What an anti-climax!" muttered Trevor. The abberant life force of Venus had ended fantastically in a blind alley of immense egoism. Beings with colossal powers had used these powers in a gigantic contest of wills, had more and more withdrawn from the order of Nature—

"Little Earthling," said Great Hob's voice severely, "you cannot comprehend our immense intelligences. Nor can a Minus-Ego ever conceive of the ambitions of a Super-Ego to reign alone. Think of the ambitions of your greatest Terrans, of your historical figures—think of Caesar, a Napoleon, a Hitler—"

"You think of them," said Trevor. "On Earth we are trying hard enough to forget them!"

**A** CHILL of disapproval was in his mind, like a cold wind. Trevor controlled his thoughts, silently he walked. Again the visions came to him.

The most stupendous of battles had been fought in these mountains. A battle of—phantoms.

Two titanic intellects had here contended. Wills that somehow had a direct connection to the gravitic warp of matter were able to levitate masses. They could send cerebro-bolts of pure energy for miles. But neither, with actual weapons had been able to penetrate the force shields each cast around himself. The feud had grown increasingly mental, and increasingly tremendous.

The great minds of Hob and Hoburu had knowledge of events and forces throughout the Solar System. They ranged over space and time in search of inspiration, conjuring against one another

all manners and troopings of apparitions, phantoms with so much potential that other phantoms had to successfully counter them to repel the assault upon the Will.

Thus, up the long bolt scarred slopes, over the shards of the long dead city, had come Red Berserkers of Mars. Phalanx after phalanx charging toward Hob, to be met by horses of fierce Jovian Tholks. Monster tanks of the Ganymedean Techmen, hurled by Hoburu across the tableland, were cut down by cathion flyers of Io conjured by Hob. When Hoburu, assembling a truly gigantic force compounded of levies from every inhabited planet, selected the Terran Alexander the Great as commander in chief, Hob countered with an array as gigantic led by Julius Caesar. In the vanguard of Hoburu's host rode Jenghis Khan, straight into the artillery fire of Napoleon's Old Guard.

So for millenia the hosts had fought, gaining or losing ground according to the mental forces exerted by the weird cerebral Titans that Trevor could now clearly see seated cross legged, impassive, over the blue mists of the Gorge of Meditations.

**T**HE Terrans, walking in the beat of the yellow sun, were now well around the ruined city. The cursing Matthews asked, "What's the matter, Alan? What's wrong?"

Trevor shook his head as if to clear it. Around them the silence was heavy. But inside Trevor's head was a curious disturbance. He seemed to feel Hob's mighty will probing in his, Trevor's mind. He knew suddenly, queerly, that Hob had given him a strong command but that the Super-Ego, by some weird technic of brain cell control had sealed that command beyond the comprehension of the very mind that held it.

"We've got to try another break," said Matthews, sweating.

They were nearing Hoburu.

Ahead of them, an esplanade of fused black rock lay like a dark ribbon flung across the perpendicular fall of the cliffs. Proceeding along this esplanade they saw ever more and more clearly the two Buddha like figures squatted on the blue vapor of the gorge under the rock walls. Twin figures, apparently identical—but somehow Trevor recognized Great Hob.

Hob was across the gorge, furthest from them, facing them. Hoburu was now not thirty yards away, visible in profile, a seated bronze giant. From the Super-Ego's great forehead streamed faintly visible banners and bolts of light that flicked continually across the gorge, coruscating against a shimmering aura that enveloped Hob.

Behind Trevor, Matthews yelled. Whirling, the rookie saw that his chief had been slammed around and down, seated forcibly on the esplanade, powerless to rise.

"Don't go any nearer those overgrown superiority complexes!" shouted the Cartographer.

"Silence, Cricket Brain!" sounded a new, arrogant mental voice that left Matthews staring, his jaw sagging. The voice of Hoburu!

Trevor, balanced on the balls of his feet, debated procedures.

"What kind of feeble strategy is this, Great Hob?" asked the new mental presence. "What sort of petty diversion, to throw yourself into Stasis Defensive and summon these Minus-Egos I blasted down?"

"So it was *you* who beamed our plane?" growled Matthews, scowling.

Trevor reached a decision. He could feel a malignancy in Hoburu—at any moment the Super-Ego might kill him. He had but one card to play—acting on the terms of his bargain with Hob. Trevor walked in the strong sunlight, his jaw set, his young muscles tensed and all damp

with sweat. And his tension increased as he *felt* Hoburu's malignant, searching presence in his brain and noted certain details of the two fantastic figures seated over the gorge.

"Brains, that's all they are—blobs of brains!" Matthews muttered, fighting futilely to rise.

Trevor's lips pressed together. The Buddha shapes of the Super-Egos were illusions. In the sunlight the actuality of them was visible—each was merely a huge dome with convoluted surfaces from which hung a tracery of opaqueness.

This macabre actuality was proof of the whole fantastic story of aberrant evolution on Venus.

Trevor controlled his thoughts, listened in, to a storm of imprecations which the Super-Egos were hurling at one another.

"These Minus-Egos," said Hob, "will judge between us. As you perceive, the nearest is under no compulsion."

It was the very audacity of the trick that was working. Hoburu could see no threat in the mortals. But in Trevor's head surged great tides—movements of Hoburu's super suspicions.

Matthews was silent now, in a great anxiety. Hob said: "I wearied of your feeble efforts and sought new toys—toys of Nature, Hoburu." With a serpent's cunning Hob continued. "Examine his brain, cell by cell, fibre by fibre. Open every nodule of his Unconscious. Perhaps I *have* tricked you, Hoburu."

Curiosity was a gigantic passion in Hoburu—instantly that curious challenge was accepted. A thousand tiny feelers were immediately at work in Trevor's head. Steadily, set faced, cursing inwardly, the young Terran walked. He was within ten feet of the huge dome and the shadowy Buddha shape.

Then the ghostly probing fingers of Hoburu's intellect found the knot tied in the recesses of Trevor's mind by Hob. They instantly unraveled the knot.

A mighty, imperious, irresistible command surged through Trevor's consciousness. "*Leap! Strike!*"

THE Survey rookie jumped. One great bound.

At that instant greenish banners of streaming flame, pale in the sunlight streamed from the head of Hob across the gorge. The glowing field that enveloped Hoburu was momentarily neutralized.

Trevor's body crossed the distance. He reached Hoburu. He kicked out, striking with terrific force that plexus, the nerve ganglion that hung from the huge brain of the Super-Ego.

The Terran was slapped, then, by a whirlwind of forces. He was tossed like a flake in strong gales, far out over the void of the gorge. Through the blue mists, headlong, he fell.

"Alan! Alan!" Dimly he heard Matthews' voice. The Cartographer had regained power of movement. He was running along the esplanade, a bug figure, high up.

"Hob!" shouted Trevor. "The bargain!"

"Well done, Impudent One," chuckled a sardonic voice in his brain. He was halted in midair by the grip of eerie forces. And high above him Matthews was still visible, running aimlessly, shaking his fist at Hob. Great Hob was now seated alone over the gorge. Hoburu had vanished. Only thin wisps of yellow vapor marked the annihilation of that titanic and malevolent Ego.

"For ages," chuckled the ghostly voice of Hob, "we were fairly matched and checkmated. The force of one Ego could not surmount the defenses of the other. But the Super-Ego that was, finally met defeat because I stored away part of my force in the living brain of a creature of so low an offensive mental potential that Hoburu could not conceive how its approach could be part of any strategy. Yet

you were the deciding factor, Impudent One. Stunned by your blow, Hoburu dimmed his Stasis Normal—and was annihilated.”

Trevor's thoughts were very emphatic, but he controlled them. “So now you rule the realms of Super-Mind, alone?” he asked.

“Now I depart this planet,” replied Hob. “And the System. I am weary of them.”

Hob was rising. A seated bizarre figure, the Super-Ego drifted up toward the stupendous peaks of the Solars. Up on the esplanade Matthews craned his neck, then suddenly yelled. He was swept out and over the gorge!

**T**REVOR surged up to meet him, slung by impalpable force. Together to the accompaniment of rising eloquence from the Cartographer, they were whooshed over the mountain slopes, southward, down, across the steaming jungles of Equatoria. Not ten minutes later they were both deposited, quite gently, on the small tarmac of Drome 6 of the Survey, on the edge of Terrestria, under the reddish glow of the Oxygen Layer.

Matthews was voluble all that day, but his words alone would never have convinced the skeptical Survey personnel. The whole Drome, however, was thrown into confusion after the fantastic arrival of the rookie and the Cartographer.

“Hypnosis—hyper-hypnosis,” chuckled the irrepressible Trevor, enjoying the situation that ensued. “You see,” he explained, “Matthews’ mind served for a long spell, while he drifted behind me on the borders of Hoob, as a medium for Hob’s will and his neo-pallium is now charged with power.”

Matthews voiced loud denials, but he became, for a week, an object of strong suspicion. For a week spacemen around the Drome emerged to service planes they heard and saw but which were not there, ran into walls where they saw doors.

Matthews set out seriously to control all his thoughts. But at night he dreamed. And not merely the Drome personnel, but all of Terrestria, dreamed with him. The entire colony became familiar with a curious vision.

A vision of a strange, bronze-colored Figure far out in illimitable void, scudding on and on, beyond the Sun. . . .

#### THE END

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# WILLIE WINS A WAR

Willie was only a thin blue haze of animated Mercurian ions, but he had definite likes and dislikes—and the ability to enforce his opinions!



**“K**NOCK, knock!” To put it mildly, Bob Courtney was surprised. He knew that he was alone in the communications room of the *Electra*. Then he realized that the words had come from the radiovisor behind him, and he sighed out loud with relief.

By E. A. GROSSER

“Go 'way, Willie,” he said wearily. “If the Captain hears you—”

“Knock, knock!” The sound was repeated, clearly, even though the radiovisor was turned off.

"All right—who's there?" Courtney asked resignedly.

"Willie," came the prompt reply.

"Willie who?"

"Willie ever get over it?" the voice cackled triumphantly.

"If you're speaking of the Captain—no!" said Courtney. "And the same goes for Willie if the Captain ever catches him. Now, scram!"

"But Willie don't wanna scram," clicked the radiovisor aggrievedly. "Willie likes Bob."

"Aw, g'wan! I'll bet you say that to everyone."

"No, no! Willie likes Bob."

The radiovisor hesitated for Courtney to go into raptures, and when he didn't, it continued:

"Willie don't like the captain."

"Neither does Bob, but I don't think the captain cares much," growled Courtney.

"Willie likes Bob!" the radiovisor cackled. "Willie likes Bob! Willie and Bob don't like the captain! Willie and Bob don't like the captain! Bob likes—" The radiovisor fell into a leading silence.

Courtney said nothing. The radiovisor cackled again: "Bob likes—"

Again it halted suggestively. Still, Courtney said nothing; and he stifled a grin. Then he remembered that Willie couldn't see, and he smiled.

"Bob likes—" The radiovisor cackled like a ruttled phonograph record.

"Oh, all right! Bob likes Willie," Courtney surrendered.

"Willie likes Bob! Bob likes Willie! Willie and Bob don't like the captain!" The radiovisor crackled with the joyful words, and Courtney could imagine Willie dancing abandonedly among the wiring. "Willie likes Bob! Bob likes Willie! Willie and Bob don't like the—"

"Shhhh!" hissed Courtney as the door of the communications room opened and the captain came in. Courtney came to

attention and snapped a salute to his superior.

CAPTAIN BRISTOW slopped one in return and, frowning, looked around the room. "Who were you talking to?" he snarled.

"I'm alone, sir," Courtney evaded.

Suddenly the tubes of the radiovisor glowed vividly and a burst of static crackled from the speaker and sent jagged angles and whirling spirals of light across the screen. The captain's eyes widened like a bird-dog's on a fresh scent, and he dived at the heap of junk.

"Bob! Bob! Bob! Save me!" crackled the speaker as the captain started yanking out tubes and removable coils like a madman.

"Help! Help!" cried a faint voice when the captain straightened with a triumphant grin. In his hand he held a vacuum tube. And it was from the tube that the faint voice was coming.

"Get hiccups on *my* electricity, will you?" Captain Bristow gloated, careful not to touch the prongs of the tube. He held it delicately by the metallo-glass.

"Help!" cried the captured Willie. Courtney edged closer to the captain.

The captain looked at him quickly with a frown.

"Attention!" he barked.

Courtney came to attention, eyeing the tube pityingly from the corners of his eyes.

"Help! Bob, help me!" it cried piteously.

Captain Bristow grinned like an ogre. "I'll fix you, you dirty little blue cloud! I'll toss you out a port personally." He started toward the door.

Courtney looked at the vacuum tube, then all of a sudden dropped his stiff pose of attention. He lurched into Captain Bristow, struck his elbow a healthy blow, and the tube fell to the floor to shatter into a thousand bits.

Captain Bristow dived for it, picked the remnants from the floor, but Willie was gone. Courtney came to attention again, and waited.

He didn't have to wait long. Captain Bristow turned the evacuated tube over in his hands, with disappointment plain on his face. Then he threw it away from him with a curse and turned to Courtney.

"You . . . You . . . You . . . *Guard!*" he shrieked.

The leatherneck came at a run, halted and presented his atomic rifle.

"Arrest this . . . this . . ." Captain Bristow choked with wrath. "Put 'im in the brig!"

The leatherneck saluted, stepped to Courtney's rear, and lowered his bayoneted rifle. Courtney marched quickly forward to a safe distance.

**T**HE heavy door of the brig closed with a suggestively final sound and Courtney slumped discouragedly to the bunk. To save an animated cloud of Mercurian ions, he had tossed away a couple of chevrons and a bright future. He knew Captain Bristow well enough to be sure that one Bob Courtney would never live this down.

And the U. S. N. Transport *Electra*, last ship out of Aphrodite, the capitol of Venus, with a full cargo of the invaluable *gleba* spores and various and curious refugees, would find its appointed place in history without mention of a certain ill-starred Sergeant Bob Courtney.

The *Electra* was drilling through space from Venus to Earth as fast as was inhumanly possible. And two days previously Bob Courtney had looked forward to a brilliant future. The expansion of spacial forces necessitated by war with Venus should have kicked him into an officers' training school and a commission, and a few close shaves should have seen him a captain. But now, all was lost. Just because a pretty little blonde from the Mer-

curian outposts had had the poor judgment to bring along a pet electric imp . . . and because said electric imp had conceived a case of violent love-at-first-sight with the aforementioned sergeant. It was a kiss of death! That's what it was, he bemoaned. It was unfair!

"Willie likes Bob!" simpered the light globe.

"Oh, go 'way and leave me alone!" moaned Courtney. "Haven't you caused me enough trouble already?"

"Willie likes Bob!" the light globe simpered again.

"All right, then! Bob likes Willie, too. But *go 'way!* You're bad news."

"News? News? News?" questioned the light globe.

"Something n—" Courtney started to define, then changed, "Information."

Willie maintained a puzzled silence. "I tell you nothing wrong," he grieved at last.

"You're still bad news," snapped Courtney.

Willie was silent for a minute or so, then returned to his refrain:

"Willie likes Bob . . . Willie likes Bob . . . Willie likes Bob."

Courtney's melancholia deepened to a black cloud of despair. On top of everything else, the Mercurian imp seemed determined to make him. He shuddered.

"Please go away, Willie," he pleaded. "Isn't it bad enough that you've got me thrown in the brig just when the damndest war in a hundred years is breaking out. Why, hell! This could have been my big opportunity! But you had to go and spoil everything. Please go away and leave me alone."

The light globe maintained a sorrowful silence for several minutes. Courtney had just about decided that Willie had complied with the frenzied request and was getting ready to sigh with relief, when—

"Willie's sorry. Willie didn't mean to hurt Bob. Willie likes Bob."

"I don't give a damn whether you like me or not! *Go away!*"

"But Willie likes Bob," the light globe argued gently. "And so does Missy. Willie likes Bob. Missy likes Bob. Bob likes—" Willie halted suggestively.

Courtney straightened. Being the object of affection for a cloud of ions, and being the same for a luscious little blue-eyed blonde were two different things—decidedly! His eyes lighted with an eager glow.

"Willie likes Bob," simpered the light globe, "Willie likes Bob. Bob likes—"

"Bob likes Willie," said Courtney sullenly. "What about Missy?"

"Missy likes Bob, too. Willie and Missy like Bob. Bob likes—"

Courtney grinned. "Gee! You sure like to be told often, don't you? All right, Bob likes Missy and Willie."

"Bob likes Missy and Willie! Bob likes Missy and Willie! Willie and Missy like Bob. Willie, and Missy, and Bob don't like Captain."

"Correct—all the way through," agreed Courtney. Then the glow died out of his eyes when he saw that he was still in the brig. This was a devil of a place to be confined when a lovely little blue-eyed, golden-haired angel was longing for your companionship. He lay back on the bunk and covered his eyes with his arm. There must be a way to get out of here! There had to be!

"Willie and Missy like Bob," chortled the light globe. "Bob likes—"

"Bob likes Missy and Willie," Courtney replied absently.

"I tell Missy right away," promised the globe.

Courtney came off the bunk in a bound. "Wait a minute!" he shouted. "Willie! Wait!"

But Willie was gone. The globe was again only an efficient device to furnish light in darkness. Cupid had departed on an errand which to his infinitesimal mind

was of all-embracing—practically of cosmic—importance.

COURTNEY tensed when he felt the generators cut out. He had become so accustomed to them that their humming was hardly audible, until it was gone. He sat up, wondering why the ship was coasting. The Captain was a damn fool, but not such a big one that he would try to save fuel when the whole Venusian fleet was trying to intercept the *Electra*.

He went to the door of the brig and peered between the bars. But he didn't see anything enlightening, and wasn't disappointed because he had hardly hoped to. The movement had been in the nature of an automatic reaction.

Then the light globe shrieked: "Venies got us! Venies got us! Venies got us! Willie don't like Venies!"

Bob Courtney shuffled back to the bunk and sat down. He was hopeless. Everything seemed to be turning out wrong. Now, if he was lucky, he'd spend the duration of the war in a concentration camp. And if he wasn't lucky, he'd— But he preferred not to think of that eventuality. Sufficient unto each day, the cares and worries thereof. And after all, death—even relatively slow death such as the Venusians delighted in dealing out—wasn't so *very* horrible.

"Willie don't like Venies," wailed the light globe.

"Neither does Bob," Courtney echoed bitterly.

"Willie likes Bob. Willie likes Missy. Missy likes Bob. Bob likes Willie. Bob likes Missy. Willie, Missy and Bob don't like Captain Bristow. Willie, Missy and Bob don't like Venies."

Willie waited for approval, and when it wasn't immediately forthcoming, he started all over again.

"Willie's right," said Courtney hastily.

The light globe again became an ordinary illuminating device, and when Willie



spoke again, it was from the metal wall beside Courtney's head.

"Willie li-i-ikes Bo-o-ob," the wall purred.

"Aw, Willie . . . For God's sake, shut up! I'm trying to think."

"Think? Think? Think?" questioned the wall.

"Huh, you *wouldn't* know anything about that," grumbled Courtney. "Be quiet for a few minutes, now. I hear someone coming."

"Is Captain Bristow," Willie informed, a faint note of panic in his voice.

**A** KEY grated in the lock and the door swung open. Courtney looked up at Captain Bristow and a slate-skinned, very odorous Venusian wearing a lieutenant's stripes.

"Come out!" snarled Captain Bristow.

"To whom do I owe this pleasure?" Courtney inquired formally as he got to his feet and sauntered out of the brig.

"Not to me, you . . ." snapped Captain Bristow. "Venusian light cruiser, *Torronal*, got us. We're turning back to Venus under full acceleration and need every man."

"Even me?" asked Courtney sarcastically. Nothing could make his position worse. And Willie had sure told the truth . . . Bob didn't like Captain Bristow, but emphatically!

"Evven yo'" hissed the Venusian, jabbing Courtney with his pistol.

Courtney immediately put more purpose in his movement. Captain Bristow chuckled and leaned against the metal wall of the corridor to let Courtney pass. Then he leaped about three feet into the air with a shriek of pain.

"Willie don't like Captain Bristow," chanted the wall.

Captain Bristow didn't like Willie either, and turned the air a delightful azure while he attested the fact. But the tyrant was careful to avoid the wall.

The Venusian watched and listened with an admiring expression, and there was a bit of envy to be seen on his fishy face. Then the scaly devil cocked his head on one side and eyed the wall questioningly. His hand started out exploringly.

Captain Bristow started to warn the fellow, but Courtney said "Psst!" and shook his head negatively. The Captain grinned and shut up.

The Venusian's finger touched the wall, then he too learned how in six easy lessons as Willie gave him full voltage. He did a super-rapid tap dance with an involute adagio for a finale, to the brilliant accompaniment of his own peculiarly melodious shrieks. Then he lay on the floor of the corridor, moaning half-consciously.

"Willie don't like Venies, either," Willie stated unnecessarily.

"*Whew!*" puffed Captain Bristow. "I was lucky. I'm glad you don't dislike me like that, Willie. You carry quite a jolt."

Courtney picked up the pistol that the Venusian had ceased to have any interest in. He checked and found that it was fully loaded, then he stepped to the side of the nearly-unconscious Venusian and with a laying-on of the pistol barrel, made him completely so. In a way, it was an act of mercy. The Venusian ceased to moan and lay very relaxedly.

**C**APTAIN BRISTOW looked curiously at Courtney. His eyes went to the pistol.

"What do you think you're going to do?—capture the ship single-handed?"

"Oh, Willie's going to help me," Courtney said confidently. "He can go through walls, and sense people even though he can't see them. How about it, Willie?"

But there was no answer. Willie was gone. Probably to tell Missy all about it, Courtney thought as his hopes sagged.

"All right, Sergeant," said Captain Bristow, "We'll do what we can. But it's pretty hopeless."

They went to the end of the corridor, then halted, facing the closed door. This was where Willie's aid would have been invaluable, Courtney knew. The little freak could have gone through the metal portal to see if the way was clear. As it was now, every door might be a Water-loo in disguise.

Courtney stooped and applied his ear to the panel. He held his breath, listening intently. He heard footsteps on the other side of the door. Then:

"Willie likes Bob!" boomed the panel in his ear.

The door opened before Courtney could straighten, and he looked up to meet Missy's blue eyes. Her lips twitched with a smile.

"What goes on here?" she asked.

Courtney straightened, feeling rather foolish. He colored.

"We're trying to find out if there was anybody out there," he explained weakly.

"Only me," said Missy. Then she looked around curiously. "Willie said there was a lot of fun down here?"

"He was having the fun," growled Captain Bristow, regarding the walls suspiciously and moving well away from them. "Did he guide you?"

"Yes," said Missy. She seemed to think the Captain hardly worthy of attention, but her eyes went often to Courtney. Courtney knew, because his never left her. He was wondering how talkative Willie had been.

"Willie!" he called, and there was no answer.

He muttered a curse. The little fool had run out on them again. The brainless cloud of electricity would have been the best ally possible—if he were dependable. But he wasn't.

The Captain seemed relieved, and incautiously stepped off the rubberoid carpet covering the central portion of the corridor. But he leaped back immediately with a hoarse yell.

"He-he-he!" chuckled the metal floor. "Willie don't like Captain Bristow. Willie likes Bob. Bob likes Willie. Bob likes Missy. Missy likes—"

"Willie!" snapped Missy. "Quit playing and help us!"

"Yeah," Courtney agreed, glancing at Missy to see if she had heard and understood Willie's revealing words. But he couldn't be sure. "Come on, Willie, help us. This is serious."

"Serious? Serious? Serious?"

"Never mind!" Courtney snapped. "Is there anybody in the corridor?"

There as a moment of silence, then Willie spoke from the door: "No."

THEY opened the door and went out. Courtney turned to Captain Bristow as they hurried along the passage.

"How many of them are aboard the *Electra*?" he asked.

"About a dozen," answered the captain. "And the cruiser is pacing us."

Courtney chewed his lip as they halted at the door of the control room. He felt a soft hand touch his arm, and looked down into a pair of troubled blue eyes.

"You better not take a chance," she warned. "It's hopeless. Even if we capture the Venies on the *Electra*, the cruiser still—"

"We've got to try," said Courtney. "Willie!"

"Willie likes Bob. Bob likes—"

"Thank God for that!" Courtney breathed. "Willie, how many Venies are in the control room?"

There was a moment of silence, during which Captain Bristow kept well away from all metal, then Willie spoke.

"Three," he said. "Willie don't like Venies."

"Wait a minute!" Courtney said quickly as Willie's voice faded. Willie came back more strongly: "Willie likes Bob."

"What are they doing?" Courtney asked.

"Venie stand behind pilot . . . behind navigator . . . behind—behind chart tank. Willie don't like Venies. . . ." Willie's voice faded into a low growl.

"Wait a minute, Willie," said Courtney. "We'll handle this. How about their guns?"

"All got guns," answered Willie.

"Sure, but where are they?"

"All guns in . . . in leather outside pockets," said Willie hesitantly.

Courtney straightened and reached for the doorknob with a meaning glance at Captain Bristow. "You stay back out of danger," he said to Missy.

She might have been inclined to argue the matter, but he didn't allow her the necessary time. He opened the door and burst into the control room with Captain Bristow at his heels. But quick as they were, Willie was quicker.

The Venusians turned to face the intruders, snatching at their holstered weapons in spite of the threat of Courtney's. Then one after another, the scaly-skinned half-lizards leaped into the air with a pained howl. It seemed that each one of them had acquired a hot-foot. Two of them dropped their pistols and Courtney neatly blasted the third out of the Venie's clutch.

Missy and Captain Bristow leaped forward to claim the weapons while Courtney lined the prisoners against the wall. And it was notable that Captain Bristow avoided contact with metal. Willie was laying in ambush, somewhere.

**C**COURTNEY and Captain Bristow bound the Venusians' wrists and legs with lengths of wire while Missy stood back and watched closely, pistol ready in her small hand. Her face was vividly colored by the excitement, and her breathing was fast. Courtney could hardly keep his eyes away from her.

"Venies coming!" warned Willie from the panel of the door.

Hastily they completed binding the captured Venusians, then leaped to the sides of the doorway. Courtney gave Missy a healthy brushing aside and she staggered halfway across the control room before coming to a very angry halt.

"Bob like Missy?" Willie questioned, puzzled at the violence.

"Sure," said Courtney. "That's why Bob wants her to stay out of the way. Will you help, Willie?"

"Sure," Willie agreed cheerfully, and an instant later Missy who had started back toward the door, returned to the rubberoid mat around the pilot's chair with one leap and a yell. She tried to approach from a different direction, and immediately retreated to the insulating mat. Her eyes sparkled with anger.

"Willie! Let me go!" she snapped.

"Willie likes Bob. Willie do as Bob say."

Courtney chuckled. "Good for you, Willie," he approved.

"It's mutiny," grinned the Captain as Missy tried again to escape and failed.

Then the door burst open. A Venusian burst into the control room with a pistol ready in his hand, but before he had a chance to use it Courtney parted his crown of scales with a healthy blow. The Venusian sank to the floor and took no more interest in the proceedings.

But his scaly body blocked the door so that it couldn't be closed, and those behind were more cautious, or more intelligent—Courtney didn't know which. But the effect was discouraging. They remained in the corridor, pot-shooting through the open door. Courtney and Captain Bristow were forced back from the doorway.

"Willie!" called Courtney.

"Willie likes Bob."

"Good! Then slip out there and take those Venies from the rear, will you?"

"Willie all tired."

"He means he needs a feeding of elec-

tricity," Missy interpreted from her place of safety.

They looked around for something to replenish their ally. Captain Bristow's eyes alighted on the chart-tank. It was electrical and drew a large current.

"Crawl into the chart-tank, Willie," he suggested. "I'll turn it on."

He stepped forward to help, then jumped backward, cursing.

"Captain go 'way. Willie don't like Captain."

Missy turned the current on while the two men guarded the door. The ammeter needle flipped away over, but no three-dimensional image appeared in the blackness of the tank. Willie was a voracious feeder—when he had the chance.

"How's that . . . *uh* . . . imp able to talk?" Captain Bristow growled.

"He feels the vibration in the metal he is inhabiting at the moment, then makes it vibrate magnetically when he wants to answer. He's really quite intelligent."

Captain Bristow grunted unbelievably and Courtney grinned. He was glad Willie liked him. The little fellow was a bad enemy.

**S**UDDENLY there was a shriek of dismay from the corridor and Captain Bristow bounced forward to look out. Courtney pulled him back to safety just in time to save his head from being blown off. But Captain Bristow was chuckling.

"Willie is a literal soul," he laughed. "I'll bet that poor Venie feels like he sat on a hot stove."

There was another shriek of pain, and the Captain chuckled nastily. "Two," he counted gleefully. Another shriek . . . "Three!"

"That isn't Willie," said Missy. "Willie's still in the tank."

Then Captain Bristow screamed shrilly at the same moment that a Venusian cried out with pain.

"Willie still don't like Captain Bris-

tow," the floor rumbled in a very nice bass voice.

"But Willie's still in the tank!" cried Missy. "He's still eating!"

"The hell he is!" the Captain disagreed. And he looked sympathetically toward the doorway when the next Venie howled.

Courtney listened intently. There was no more firing. He climbed to his feet just as the floor beneath him purred:

"Willie likes Bob."

An echo from the hall answered: "Willie likes Bob."

The chart-tank started, "Willie li—*burp*—" And the voice became voices which blended into a good duet. "Willie likes Bob."

"Three of them!" the Captain cried. "I mean, *four*!"

Courtney stood still, thinking. His eyes began to shine with eagerness. "Willie!" he called.

"Willie likes Bob," came the chanted reply. One voice from the hall, one from the floor beneath his feet, and *four* from the chart tank.

The Captain moaned. "Life'll be hell," he cried discouragedly.

"Willie's having Little Willies all over the place!" said Courtney excitedly. "Those two in the tank became four."

"Willie likes Bob," came the chant again, and this time there were a lot more than four voices from the chart-tank.

"Shut it off! Shut it off!" cried the Captain, running forward to sterilize Willie. Then he did a fantastic game of classic dancing cross-bred with hop-scotch, until he achieved the safety of the rubberoid mat around the pilot's seat. He lay back in the seat breathlessly, arms limp at his sides.

"Willie reproduces by fission—like an ameba," said Courtney. "Isn't that right, Willie?"

"Willie just eats—then he gets restless, and there are two Willies. Willie likes Bob."

"And Bob likes Willie, too," said Courtney, almost jittering with glee. "Where's the real Willie?"

"I am!" they all answered.

Courtney grinned. "And all Willies like Bob?" he asked. "Will Willies all do as Bob says?"

"Willie likes Bob," came the chant of nearly a hundred voices. "Willie do as Bob says."

Courtney's eyes widened at the number of the reply. He looked at Missy and tried not to show his fright. "Better turn it off," he advised.

The switch clicked, and for a moment there was silence. Then the chant: "Willie likes Bob."

"Yeah, and Bob's damned glad Willie does," Courtney breathed. His hands were shaking. Buck fever!—he snorted with disgust at himself. "How about those Venies outside?"

"Venies all lay still," came the multiple chant.

"Good!" Courtney approved.

"What d'ya mean, 'Good?'" Captain Bristow snarled. "I'd rather have the Venies on my neck any day. They're almost human; but Willie—" He choked with inadequacy.

Courtney grinned at his superior. "Yeah? But Willie and I are going to win a war," he boasted.

**H**E WENT to the emergency locker and pulled out a space suit and a big-barreled gun that was used to fire a line for rescue work. Courtney detached the reservoir of small, strong rope and tossed it back into the locker. Then he stuffed a box of charges into his pocket and slipped one into the breach of the rifle. Then he rummaged through the locker until he had collected about ninety or a hundred assorted bolts, washers, and nuts.

Missy and Captain Bristow had been watching him intently, and now Captain

Bristow snorted with disgust as he moved to the controls of the ship.

"You're crazy," he confided. "What do you think you can do? Lookut! We're heading down for Aphrodite, now."

"Fine," Courtney approved, winking at Missy. She smiled in return, though somewhat puzzledly.

Courtney slipped into the space suit, then placed the nuts and bolts and washers on the floor. "Willie!" he called.

"Willie likes Bob!" came the chant in reply.

"Fine, Bob likes Willie, too," said Courtney. "Now, Willie, I want one of you to crawl into each of these nuts, bolts and washers. Then I'll shoot you at—"

"B-Bob likes Willie?" the chanters asked doubtfully.

"Sure, I like you, Willie. It won't hurt you—not a bit. How can it?"

"Willie don't know."

"Bob likes Willie. Bob wouldn't hurt Willie," Courtney assured. "Now, do as Bob says. Then he'll shoot you at the Venie cruiser, and at the power stations of Aphrodite as we land. Then Willie can eat all the electricity he wants. Won't that be nice?"

"No! Willie don't wanna!"

"Willie!" Courtney snapped, getting tense with the need for haste. Already the atmosphere of Venus was shrieking around the hull of the *Electra* as Captain Bristow guided her toward Aphrodite under the guns of the cruiser. "Willie!"

"Willie I-likes Bob!" the chanters averred.

"Then Willie will do as Bob asks," Courtney insisted. "Hurry up."

"Willie don't wanna!" the chanters wailed.

"Willie has to!" snapped Courtney. "Hurry now, or Bob'll be mad at Willie. Think of all the nice electricity you're going to get!"

"Willie still don't wanna!" Chanted the nuts and bolts.

"But Bob wants Willie to, so Willie will," stated Courtney a lot more confidently than he felt. He gathered the nuts and bolts into a cardboard box, and dropped one into the muzzle of the rifle.

"Willie will," the nuts and bolts stated sadly.

COURTNEY shuffled down the corridor to the air lock. He went inside, closed the inner portal, then opened the outer after he had clipped his suit lines to the safety hooks inside the lock. The Venusian atmosphere swooped into the open lock and fought to lift him out.

Courtney braced himself. "Remember, Willie: Don't start eating on the cruiser until we land. That ship is our safe-conduct. They won't shoot at us as long as we're under its guns."

"Willie won't," the imps promised sadly.

Courtney fired a half dozen slugs at the cruiser, then they were hovering over Aphrodite. The tall, slender spires of the city scratched upward through the steaming clouds like the towers of a fairy city. Thousands, millions of lights made it a brilliant fairyland. Courtney looked at it with regret. Then he raised the rifle and shot at the massive target that was a powerhouse.

Again, and again, and again, he fired. And utter blackness swept outward from the places he hit, like great invisible waves. Willie was doing himself proud, Courtney thought. There must be millions of the little devil now.

Then the *Electra* and the Venusian cruiser were swinging in toward the landing field. Hastily, Courtney fired his last missiles, then closed the lock and sped back to the control room. The *Electra* landed lightly as he burst in on Missy and Captain Bristow.

Missy ran to him, threw her arms around his neck and pulled his head down

so she could kiss him. "It's working! It's working!" she cried happily.

"Uh-huh," Courtney agreed, holding her tight and showing some initiative of his own. She flushed and tried to withdraw, but he wouldn't let her. And shortly, she ceased to try.

They saw the lights of the cruiser black-out as suddenly and as completely as those of the city, and Courtney faced Captain Bristow.

"Have Sparks call in the Venusian fleet, will you Captain?" he asked. "Then when they are out of commission, we'll call the Earth fleet. This war's ended almost before it begins."

Captain Bristow went to the communicator, relayed the message, then his muscles went rigid and his body almost vibrated to the current going through him. He couldn't let the communicator go. At last he slumped weakly back to the pilot's chair as the communicator growled: "Willie don't like Captain Bristow!"

"Willie!" said Courtney. "Clean the Venies out of this ship."

There was no answer, and Courtney took it for granted that Willie was obeying. He returned his attention to Missy. He nearly lost himself in her blue eyes, and shook his head dazedly.

"Bob likes Missy . . . Missy likes Bob," chanted Willie.

"Willie, go after those Venies," Courtney ordered.

"Bob likes Missy . . . Missy likes Bob," Willie said again.

Courtney looked down at Missy. Her soft lips parted in a smile that showed even white teeth.

"You bet, Willie," he agreed happily.

"Missy likes Bob?" persisted Willie.

"Yes, Willie. Now do as Bob says."

"Willie likes Bob," stated Willie happily. Then Captain Bristow shouted with pain. "Willie don't like Captain Bristow. And Willie *don't* like Venies!"

# INVADERS FROM NOWHERE

The Alans looked like so many comic, good-natured Mickey Mice, but they had the brains of a dozen Einsteins, and their good nature had some curious twists!



By L. SPRAGUE DeCAMP

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Crusading Alans

**W**ILLARD BUTLAND did not yet know about the Alans as he surveyed Antonio's with riotous distaste. The proprietor had called the

restaurant that to distinguish it from the seven M a n h a t t a n restaurants named Tony's. Butland would have called the place a den of iniquity—or perhaps a sink of iniquity; more picturesque—except for the fact that the word “iniquity” was, to his lay friends and acquaintances in the States, a comic one. This fact distressed

Willard Butland. To him, iniquity was not at all a light matter. He often wrestled with his soul on the question, to wit, resolved: that it was unreasonable to spend his young life carrying the gospel to the heathen of India when so many of his godless fellow-Americans were in obviously greater need of it.

For instance, he thought, coughing from the smoke of the vile weed, there was his cousin Rex Piper across the table. Rex Piper was tall, thin, and dark, whereas Willard Butland was of medium height, plump, and sandy, with adolescent freckles lingering on a stub-nose of the kind one sees on funny-paper characters. Rex Piper would have called Antonio's a joint or dive, though the place with its orderly clientele and handsome modern furnishings did not deserve such contumely.

Rex Piper looked up from his highball and said: "Hi, Kitty!"

A tall, professionally good-looking brunette came over and sat down. She said: "Hello, Rex." She looked at Willard Butland's glass of milk and added: "So I'm not the only milk-drinker. Order me one too, Rex darling."

Piper introduced his cousin to Miss Kitty Blake. He added in a stage-whisper: "Her name's really Ophelia but people make too many jokes about it."

Butland frowned in honest puzzlement. "I think Ophelia's a pretty name, and I don't see how anyone could make a joke out of it." He said hopefully to the girl: "You don't drink?"

"No. I'm in the stage-show at the Megapolitan, and I have to keep in shape. But just you wait till my vacation!"

"Oh," said Butland. "I thought you might have a higher reason."

The girl looked at him, then at Piper. She said: "Say, what is he?"

"Will's an authority on Sin."

"Really?" said Kitty. "That must be interesting. Mr. Butland, what kinds have you tried lately?"

Willard Butland reddened. Piper said: "He doesn't practice Sin; at least he's never been caught at it. He tries to extirpate it. Missionary. We were arguing on the subject of Sin when you came in. You know: If God made everything, and if everything He made was good, how come Sin into God's good world?"

"I told you," said Butland patiently, "God made man capable of choosing between good and evil, so he has a chance to earn his salvation—"

"Good Mohammedan doctrine" said Piper.

"Mohammedan!" said Butland. "The only good ideas those bloodthirsty heathens ever had were borrowed from Christianity—"

Then the Alans appeared, and neither the serious missionary nor the cynical chemist nor the blithe chorine thought about Sin for some time.

**T**HE manner of the Alan's arrival was upsetting: one minute they were not there; the next they were, in a solemn black-and-white row on the unoccupied half of the red imitation-leather crescent around the table.

The three newcomers were about the size of people, and had a similar number of most things. They had projecting, upturned noses and hairless tails. They wore shoes on their feet, gloves on their four digit-hands, and large muffs on their ears. The effect was strikingly like that of a trio of Mickey Mice.

One of the things said: "Holl dool youl dool?"

Butland asked the girl: "Do you see them too?"

"I'm afraid so. Maybe we'd better ask Rex."

"He can't help. He's been drinking."

"Drinking!" snorted Piper. "One highball, and he calls it drinking—"

The thing repeated: "Holl dool youl dool?"



"Uh—very well, thanks," said Piper. "And you?"

The thing hesitated. It unzipped a pocket in what appeared to be its skin, and brought out a small book. It leafed through this, and replied: "Very vell, I thank you. Is this thee Earth?"

The waiter arrived with Kitty's milk. He set it down with obsequious cordiality. He had started to leave before he took a good look at the visitors. He continued to depart, but slowly, staring back "like one who on a lonely road doth walk in fear and dread . . ."

"Is this thee Earth?" repeated the thing.

"That's what we call it," said Piper.

"The city of Nil York?"

They nodded helplessly.

The thing studied its book, and said: "We are friends. See!" It opened another pocket in itself and brought out three small objects that looked like magnifying-glasses. It handed them around. "These are for youl."

Butland put his glass to his eye. He almost dropped the object. The glass made everything seen through it semitransparent. The partition that separated their table from the next disappeared almost; Butland could see the people at the next table, and through them to the next, and so on until people, walls and furniture merged into a dim blur. Will Butland looked sideways through the glass at Kitty Blake. He quickly looked elsewhere, and worried a little about whether that look would damage his chances of salvation.

**T**HE thing that had done all the talking asked: "Is this thee city with thee temple of Ng?" The last word was pronounced like "sing" without the "si."

Butland asked: "Who or what is Ng?"

Another thing, the smallest of the three, spoke up: "Ng is thee sovereign of thee ulniverse. He made thee egg from vich

thee ulniverse was hatched, and himself brokke thee shell. In my humble vay I serve him—"

"Some false god of theirs," said Butland lightly. "I'll—ouch!" He bent over and rubbed his shin and looked reproachfully at Rex Piper.

Piper said: "Would you mind telling us who and what *you* are?"

The giver of the glasses said: "I am Zrap. Ve are Alans."

Kitty Blake said: "I thought Alans were members of a Scythian tribe whose descendants live in the Caucasus Mountains."

"What?" cried Butland. "How would you happen to know that?"

She turned on him. "So because I dance for a living, you don't think I know anything, Mr. Butland? Thank you, I've got a degree from Radcliffe—"

"Here, here," said Piper. "Let's let our friends go on with their story."

Zrap continued: "Ve are from thee planet Ala. Since in thee English language youl make Culbans from Culba and Australians from Australia, ve thought you vould understand if ve made Alans from Ala. Ve are traveling throughl thee serial ulniverses, and ve stopped at this one because ve vere told that Ng is vorshipped here. This—" He indicated the middle-sized Alan "is Vlik, whool represents our government. This—" He indicated the smallest Alan, "is Sfong. He is vot—hoo—wot—what you vould call a missionary." As they talked, the Alans' accents rapidly disappeared.

Butland started off: "We've got enough false g—" before another kick from Piper silenced him.

"Where's this Ala?" asked Kitty.

"Right here," said Zrap.

"I don't see it."

"Of course you do not. It is in one term of the series of universes, just as the Earth is in another. We, the Alans, knol

holl—know how to pass from each term to the next. The natives of the different terms are often surprised to see us.”

Kitty asked: “Is Zrap your full name, Mr. Zrap?”

“No, it is Zrap Hlef Pfiln Gofalt Rim Byelning Vruhk Hsingong Gzhipnik Srolb Ngulp Bvolndam Ringgup. That is a short name where we come from. Now, if you please, will you lead us to your Senator?”

The people frowned. Piper said: “Our senator? We’ve got two, Murray and Dahl, but they’re not—”

Zrap continued unruffled: “We mean, the head officer of the Earth.”

Piper answered: “No such thing. There were one or two guys who thought they’d like to be, but they’re dead.”

“You mean here is no one head officer of the planet? Then we will see the one who is head of this political unit.”

Kitty said: “I’ll have to leave; the next floor-show goes on pretty soon.”

“No,” said Zrap softly. “You will not leave, madame.” And the Alan looked at the girl. Kitty sat where she was. An expression of horror came over her face.

“Say,” said Piper belligerently, “You can’t—” The eyes were turned on him and on Butland. Willard Butland felt a fearful terror steal over him: a deadly, choking, nauseating fear that was all the worse for not being fear of any particular thing. After a few agonizing eras it left him.

Piper said feebly: “The government’s in Washington.”

“Then,” purred the Alan, “you will take us to Washington.”

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Great God Ng

**T**HEY rose and paraded out, all six. The Alans attracted much attention. Willard Butland mentally went over sev-

eral theories to account for his experiences. The most promising one seemed to be that there was a personal devil after all, and these were his agents.

Near Antonio’s stood the Megapolitan Theater. Along the nearest wall of the theater was a row of bronze frames containing advertisements of current and coming attractions.

From one of these beamed the face of Mickey Mouse, who had entertained the old and young of five continents for nearly a century.

The Alans saw Mickey and stopped, chattering among themselves and saying “Ng! Ng!” Zrap told their escorts: “This must be the temple of Ng that one of our intra-universal explorers reported! We must go in at once to pay our respects, and see how nearly correct his worship is.”

In they went. Butland fumbled for ticket-money, but the Alans urged him on. They walked up to the ticket-taker, who looked horrified but did not demand tickets, and in.

The Alans did not seem to mind being stared at. One of those who stared remarked:

“Say, ain’t that a wonderful piece of makeup? You’d think they really was Mickey Mice!”

When they had been seated for some minutes, Sfung the missionary said: “It is not seemly to use a temple of Ng for frivolous entertainment. I see where you poor creatures will afford a fertile field for our activities.”

The Alans were silent until the animated cartoon appeared. Then they bounced out of their seats crying “Ng! Ng! Ng!” They pushed out to the aisle, threw themselves prone, and went through that diabolical exercise which the U. S. Army misleadingly calls the “leaning rest”; in other words, a series of pushups.

When they had completed these they

rose. Sfong said loudly: "What is the matter, people? Why do you not do obeisance to the great lord Ng?" People shushed them, and ushers came in to eject them. The first ushers went cringing away under the impact of their unexplained power to inspire fear. But the power would not, apparently, work on many ushers at a time. And there were plenty of ushers. . .

The picture went off and the lights on. Zrap said something in his own language to the other Alans, and they ceased their resistance.

The ticket-taker pointed out Kitty Blake, Piper, and Butland, who tried to look inconspicuous. They were ordered to come along.

It was Willard Butland's first ride in a paddy wagon. He sat on the hard, narrow seat with his head in his hands. Piper told him to cheer up. Butland moaned: "But me—of all people—"

The Alans were quite composed. Sfong said in a kindly tone: "Do not fear, it was not your fault. It was the will of Ng. All will be well. But still I do not understand the customs of your people, to display such heathenish indifference to a cinematic representation of Ng."

Piper tried to explain that Mickey Mouse had been invented many decades before by a man named Disney, and that the character had no theological connotations.

This seemed to perplex the Alan missionary more than ever.

THE desk sergeant at the police station showed incredulity when confronted by the Alans, and more when they gave their names and origin. He looked them over carefully and called the zoo. The director of the zoo arrived, saw, and refused to take any responsibility for the Alans. The desk sergeant then called the



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commissioner. The commissioner called the mayor. The mayor called the President of the United States. The President dispatched an undersecretary of state named Wilmington Stroud to New York by airplane to look into the matter of the alleged visitors from another planet.

By the time Wilmington Stroud arrived it was morning. Kitty Blake, Piper, and Butland were asleep on each others' shoulders.

The undersecretary of state was a tall, baldish man with pince-nez. He faced the Alans with a sang-froid equalling their own. "How do you do," he said. "Am I to understand that you wish to communicate with the government of the United States?"

The Alan named Vlik replied: "That is right. My Senator, the Great Black Father of the world of Ala, sends greetings to your Senator." Vlik opened a pocket in his skin and took out a small black disk, which he handed to Stroud. "This is for you. You adjust for distance with that knob, and hold the device against your ear."

Stroud did so, then jumped. "My word! I seem to be hearing things out in the street!"

The Alan smiled. "That is precisely what you are doing. That receiver, being set for fifty feet and aimed toward the street, hears what you would hear were you fifty feet away in that direction."

"Amusing," said Stroud, and dropped the object in his pocket. "And now, my dear sirs, what other evidence have you to substantiate your story?"

The Alans looked at one another. Vlik said: "That is easy. We will take you back to Ala with us."

"Oh, now really—"

"It will not take long. We need merely go back to the eating-place where we broke through into this universe."

Wilmington Stroud smiled a superior smile. "If it's as simple as all that, I'll

give you chaps a chance to demonstrate."

The police-sergeant said: "Better take those three along, Mr. Stroud. If it's a put-up job they're in on it. They was with the Mickey Mice foist."

Back they went to Antonio's, Stroud in a luxurious State Department car and the rest in the paddy-wagon.

A man in an apron opened the door. Two other men were cleaning the floor of Antonio's. The chairs were stacked, the tables were bare, and the restaurant—or sink of iniquity—had a cheerless air.

The Alans found the alcove in which they had appeared. They and the undersecretary slid themselves around the red-leather seat. The cops pushed Kitty Blake, Willard Butland, and Rex Piper toward the seat. These three protested that they did not want to go to Ala. They were forced into their places nevertheless.

"Now," said Zrap, "we go to Ala."

**WHICH** they did, just like that. The Alans gave no visible signal, and manipulated no visible gadgetry. There was no sound, no jar, no anything. Yet the sink of iniquity disappeared and was instantly replaced by an entirely different room, as quickly as a shift of scene in the movies. One second they had been in Antonio's; the next second they were in a circular room whose yellow walls bulged outward spherically. The room contained a table, a couple of chairs, and two more Mickey Mice.

Butland abandoned the theory that the Alans were genuine devils. This place did not look at all like Hell. It had no visible doors or windows. It was well lighted, but no lamps or other sources of illumination were visible.

The young missionary observed with rising alarm that his companion's color-schemes had changed in bizarre fashion. Kitty Blake's reddish-brown hair was an unpleasant olive-green, and her skin was lemon-colored.

He said: "Miss Blake, your hair is green."

Kitty Blake squeaked with dismay, then recovered herself. She said: "So's yours. And your eyes are purple."

Wilmington Stroud said: "I say!" He took off his glasses and polished them. By the time he had put them back on his nose he had recovered his glacial self-possession. Rex Piper muttered something banal about going on the wagon.

Zrap, Vlik, and Sfong talked to the two other Alans in their own language.

Willard Butland had been moving his lips silently. He now said to his human companions: "Don't you think we all ought to pray to God?"

Piper shrugged. "I'm afraid this is out of Yahveh's territory. Ng's the boss here."

"Rex, you're a hopeless—"

"Don't talk rot, you two," snapped Stroud. "Nothing's happened to us."

"Yet," added Kitty Blake.

Zrap addressed the quartet in English: "Friends, as we are back in Ala, my colleague Vlik outranks me. He will conduct you to the Great Black Father."

Vlik started off. The four followed him. Vlik walked toward the curved wall, on which a thin red line defined a rectangle about the size of a door. Instead of opening anything, Vlik marched through the wall and disappeared. The others halted.

"Go on," said Zrap. "Put your trust in Ng."

Stroud extended a cautious finger. It went into the wall without resistance. The undersecretary followed. So did the others.

Butland had an instant of total darkness. Then he was in another spherical room, much like the previous one. A Mickey Mouse sat behind a desk. Vlik talked into its ear. At least, the people assumed that Vlik was the one standing; the Alans all looked as much alike as a bucketful of crabs.

VLIK straightened up and said: "Friends, this is Senator of Ala, Bvin Drula Vunyup Ghob Hlong Sam Dzak Hmelk Froebvet Ing."

Stroud said coolly: "We're very much honored, I'm sure. Are we supposed to bow from the waist or stand on our heads or what?"

"No," said Vlik. "Such punctilio is not expected of aborigines. The Senator wishes you to know that, because of our admiration for your struggle toward civilization, we have decided that you deserve a helping hand. We shall therefore establish a mission near the portal between this term of the universal series and yours, to spread the true worship of Ng among you."

Stroud said: "You will, eh? Very kind of you. I shall have to consult my government about that, though."

The two Alans spoke in their own language. Vlik said to Stroud: "That will be quite unnecessary. We shall establish the mission entirely with our own resources, without making any demands on your tribe for labor or materials or anything else."

"I'm afraid you don't understand," said Stroud. "You see my country has things called laws, which determine who is allowed to enter it and under what conditions."

More consultation. The whiskers that stuck out from the sides of the Alans' noses quivered with a suggestion of amusement. Vlik said: "If your tribal government wishes to put its official approval on our acts, it is quite welcome to do so."

Stroud said: "My good fellow, has it occurred to you that my tribal government, as you see fit to call it, may disapprove?"

More quivering of whiskers. Vlik said: "Disagreement between master and pupil would be unfortunate, do you not think? There is no sense in it, since we

have only your best interests at heart. To convince you of this, will you step this way?"

As they did so, wondering what was up, a section of the wall vanished, or at least became transparent. In front of them was a flat plain stretching out of sight in all directions. On it grew plants that suggested a desert: barrel-shaped spiny things. Overhead tall banks of clouds rode through a purple sky.

"You see the plains of Ala," said Vlik. "Now watch."

Over the rim of the horizon came a number of dots, which swiftly grew into armored vehicles. These rushed straight at the window. Some of them were small, and rode on a dozen doughnut-shaped wheels. Others were a thousand feet long, and were supported on a single huge belt or caterpillar track as wide as themselves. They swelled to huge size and vanished.

Piper said: "Look as though they were doing a hundred. But I wonder how the big ones with the single track turn?"

The Alans' whiskers quivered. One of the large machines rushed back into view and described a wide figure-eight, throwing up clouds of sand and broken rock.

"Now how," said Rex Piper, "did the driver of that thing know I was going to ask that question? Are we looking at the real thing, or a movie, or what?"

The catwhiskers trembled. Vlik said: "Look up." The sky was filled with drifting dots. These were presumably flying machines.

"WHAT'S that?" asked Kitty Blake. "A Lombardy poplar? It wasn't there a minute ago." She referred to a dark column that had sprung up on the horizon. Others appeared. They became larger, and were seen to be tall slender clouds of dirt thrown up by ex-

plosions. As they came closer, the four human beings gasped at their magnitude. Any one of these explosions would have wiped a terrestrial county off the face of its earth.

The explosions came closer until the audience flinched at each one, expecting the next to blow them up. The explosions ceased, leaving the landscape dotted with pits big enough to hold a fair-sized town.

A vast herd of animals trickled into the picture, trotting in streams of thousands of individuals around the edges of the pits, stopping intermittently to nibble at the cactus-like plants. They were nondescript, unspectacular beasts, with blunt muzzles, mule-like ears, leathery hides, large flat feet, and long thick tails. They looked somewhat like a lizard, a bear, and a rabbit rolled into one.

Then all at once these thousands of beasts dropped dead and melted and ran down the sides of the pits. The sight was not pleasant. When the Great Black Father saw that his visitors were on the verge of digestive upsets, the wall became opaque again.

"You see," said Vlik, "how regrettable would be a disagreement between us."

"I see," said Wilmington Stroud grimly. "What, besides the establishment of your mission, do you want of us?"

Vlik spread his hands. "Practically nothing. Save perhaps some of the substance you call wood. The plants of our world are all soft-bodied, and we could use some of the harder woods of yours."

Stroud said: "With such advanced science, I don't see why you need such an inferior material as wood."

"Ah, that is because wood is so common on your world that you do not appreciate its properties. We shall pay for the wood, of course, with things that you lack, such as the—I suppose you would call them parasopes and paraphones; those seeing and listening devices we have shown you."

"I'll tell my government," said Stroud noncommittally.

"That will be fine," beamed Vlik. "This way, if you please." He walked through the wall again. When the others followed, they found themselves in a third spherical room with four couches and other furnishings. Vlik said: "Here you will remain for some days, as the portal is unfortunately in use. We shall return you to the earth as soon as possible."

Piper and Butland looked at one another. Each had a question he wanted to ask, but Butland was too inhibited a person. As Vlik's tail was disappearing through the wall, Piper called: "Mr. Vlik!"

"Yes?" The Alan's tail vanished, and his head popped through the wall. It looked like a mounted head, except for its lively speech and expression.

"We—uh—if you're going to leave us here for some hours—"

"Ah, I understand." Vlik pointed at the opposite side of the circular room, on whose wall at once appeared a green rectangular line. "Through there." The head vanished, leaving nothing but smooth yellow wall. Piper extended a finger. The wall was solid to the touch. He walked across the room and touched the wall within the green rectangle.

This time his hand sank without resistance into the wall.

"Damn clever, these Alans," said Piper.

"Rex," said Butland, "I wish you wouldn't use such language—" His three companions gave him such withering looks that he subsided.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Hostages on Ala

**T**HEY explored the small room—spherical like the rest—beyond the green rectangle, and found it adequately furnished but without means of egress

other than the marked-off section of wall through which they had entered.

Piper said: "The walls turn solid or not, whichever the Mickey Mice happen to want. And when you step through a wall you always find yourself in the room you happen to want to go to."

"Damned convenient," said Stroud.

Kitty Blake asked: "What are you going to do when you get back, Mr. Stroud?"

Stroud shrugged. "Tell the President what I've seen."

"What'll he do?"

"How should I know? But my notion is that we'll be very careful not to antagonize our rodent friends."

"Why" said Butland.

"You saw what sort of armament they have and still you want to know why!"

Butland persisted: "But mightn't all that show they put on be just a show? Something done with a miniature set, like those prehistoric animals they have in movies about that absurd evolution theory?"

"Absurd!" barked Rex Piper. But Stroud silenced him with a gesture.

Stroud said: "That might be so. We have no way of telling. But it's a fair inference that if they can put on such a convincing show, their science is also capable of delivering the real thing if necessary."

Kitty Blake said: "Mr. Butland, don't you see a parallel between the way they've treated us and the way you approach your heathens in Africa or wherever it is?"

"Not at all," replied Butland stiffly. "I preach the true gospel, whereas these things worship a false god—"

Stroud slapped his knee. "Of course! You've put your finger on it, Miss Blake. Our friend Butland gives the natives bits of cloth and glass to win their confidence; the Alans gave us those gadgets, which to them are no doubt just toys. Everything they've done shows that they regard

themselves as vastly superior to us, with good reason."

**P**IPER grinned at his cousin and said: "How does it feel to be on the receiving end for once, Will?"

Butland dissembled his indignation and asked Stroud: "What's going to happen to the world?"

Stroud smiled a thin, cold smile. "What usually happens to aborigines when more civilized people invade their country?"

"We could fight."

"Sure. The aborigines usually do fight. But the result is the same."

"You think we ought to give in right at the start?"

"What I think doesn't matter; it's what the President thinks after he's received my report. But if I were in his place, I can easily imagine deciding that giving in was better than fighting a hopeless fight."

Butland turned to Piper. "You, Rex?"

Piper shrugged. "Lost causes never appealed to me much."

"You, Miss Blake?"

"I don't know yet."

"Well," said Butland, "that's not how I feel about it. You can sit around and watch these heathens put up their idolatrous temples and send our peoples' souls to perdition. But I'll fight them every chance I get."

"I wouldn't," said Stroud. "So far they've threatened us with nothing worse than missionarying and a little trade. If you cause trouble, you may give them an excuse for taking us over lock, stock, and barrel." The undersecretary got to his feet as his anger rose. "You missionary chaps cause the State Department enough headaches by sticking your noses in where you're not wanted all over the world, and getting yourselves killed. I'll be God-damned if I'll let you interfere in our very delicate relations with the people of this cockeyed world of Ala."

That started an acrimonious argument that lasted until Kitty Blake threatened to subdue the arguers with a chair. She looked capable of doing it. She added: "Maybe it hasn't occurred to you yaps, but the Mickeys are probably listening in on all your talk."

They fell silent. Even the glacial Stroud looked apologetic. "Speak of the devil," he muttered as Vlik stuck his head through the wall.

"Friends," said the Alan, "I have here something wherewith you can amuse yourselves." He handed Stroud a box. "I apologize for the delay. But you will be returned to earth as soon as the portal is clear."

Stroud opened the box. The other three crowded around. "Puzzles!" cried Kitty Blake. The box was in truth full of puzzles: interlocked rings, pieces of bent wire, and other contraptions designed to be taken apart and assembled with a minimum of speed and a maximum of exasperation.

Stroud laughed shortly. "They're consistent. Where a southern colored woman will smear her kids' hands with molasses and give them feathers to play with, to keep them occupied, the Alans give us puzzles. Let's see how this one works." Wilmington Stroud interestedly picked up and fiddled with a bunch of metal pieces resembling bent nails.

**V**LIK said: "Ah, friends, at last I am able to return you to your home universe. I am sorry that you have had such a boring wait. Will you follow me, please? Mr. Stroud first; Mr. Piper next."

They jumped to their feet and lined up. Stroud noted the point at which Vlik's receding tail disappeared into the wall, and marched through. Piper followed him. Kitty Blake next in line, bumped hard into a wall that resolidified as soon as Piper had disappeared through it.



"Damn it to Hell!" said that forthright young woman.

"Please, Miss Blake, your language!" said Will Butland.

Kitty Blake felt the wall to make sure it had no soft spots. Then she turned and planted her right fist in Willard Butland's eye. "That," she said, "is only a taste of what you'll get if you make any more remarks about my swearing."

Will Butland reeled back, clapped a hand to his eye, and sat down. He felt utterly miserable; he really tried to do the right thing, and people punched him in the eye for it. It wasn't even a man who had hit him; any man under 200 pounds Butland could handle. In India he had once beaten an obstreperous Pathan chief into a jelly before he remembered those texts about loving one's enemies, turning the other cheek, etc. In remorse he had then gone around to the hospital where the Pathan was recuperating, and proselytized the unfortunate chief until the Pathan turned Christian in self-defense.

To add to Butland's unhappiness, he could not get out of his head his cousin Rex's remark about this universe's being out of Yahveh's territory. The Bible mentioned Heaven and Hell, but nothing about a series of parallel universes. Was or was not the same deity in charge of all of them? If not, then he was indeed lost and abandoned.

"For heaven's sake," said Kitty Blake, "stop pacing the floor. You give me the williejitters. What's the matter with you?"

Butland told her. She laughed. "Will, if I hadn't known you I wouldn't have believed you. Here you're imprisoned in another universe by things out of one of the late Mr. Disney's dreams, and all you worry about is whether you have an immortal soul and if so how to save it. A big strong man like you ought to be ashamed of himself."

"What's your idea, Miss—may I call you Kitty?"

The girl laughed. "Why *Mister* Butland, this is so sudden!"

"Oh, all right, make fun of me. I can take it. What I was going to ask was, why do you think we've been left behind?"

"Now you're talking sense. I'd say that they overheard us, and decided that you and I weren't as sold on their invincibility as the other two."

Butland said: "They look pretty invincible to me; I just didn't want to give up without a fight." He stood up and began feeling around the wall. He said over his shoulder: "They probably have some perfectly simple system of dematerializing the walls. . . ."

VLIK stuck his head in. "I regret, friends, that it was not possible to send you back with your colleagues. We will tend to the matter soon. Meanwhile will you come this way to the study chambers?"

They followed him through the wall. This time they found themselves in an unusually large sphere. It was in fact a two-story sphere, divided into upper and lower hemispheres by a great yellow disk floating unsupported. Treads and handholds allowed one to climb from the lower to the upper hemisphere through the yard-wide space between the edge of the disk and the wall of the sphere.

They climbed to the upper story, where they were met by another Alan. Vlik said: "This is Ngat, the studier. He will study you."

Butland frowned. "You mean this is a laboratory?"

"Of course! How stupid of me not to remember the name. This is the first time I have ever forgotten a word of a foreign language, once I had heard it." Vlik stepped through the wall and disappeared.

Butland asked: "Do you speak English?"

"Yes," said Ngat. "I learned it yesterday."

"Could you tell us how we get from one of these rooms to another?"

"I should be glad to, but there are no words in your language to express the concepts involved."

"I don't mean the theory; I'd just like to know how to do it."

"It is done by a special kind of thought," said the Alan. "These objects worn over our ears amplify this thought. That is the best explanation I can give—it is like trying to explain to your pet cat how to work the locks and latches in one of your houses on earth." The creature said this without hostility. "And now may I ask you some questions?"

SOME hours later Butland remarked that both interrogatees were getting hungry. Ngat exclaimed: "Of course! It is that deplorable absentmindedness of mine." Then Alan led them back to their room.

Butland asked: "Don't you take notes?"

"For such a short little interview? No; I remember."

When their interrogator had gone, Kitty Blake said: "He seems like a friendly enough sort."

Butland replied darkly: "Never trust a heathen."

"Maybe he regards you as one."

"Then he's ignorant."

"Yeah? Whose world is this, anyway?"

"Unh." Butland fell silent while he hunted down a small doubt roving about in his mind. When he had squashed the doubt, at least for the time being, he said: "Don't you see, Miss—Kitty, I mean, I can't admit any such possibility. It would mean that my whole life's work had been wasted."

"Suppose it has been?"

Butland squirmed. "You're not deliberately torturing me, are you? No, I won't doubt my mission. It's my duty to make this deluded denizen of another world see the truth."

Kitty Blake said: "When I was a little girl, I used to argue with my brother. As I remember, the arguments usually ended up with one of us yelling 'it is, it is, it is,' and the other hollering 'tain't, 'tain't, tain't. It was good lung exercise, but it never settled anything. And most religious arguments seem to me to make just about as much sense. Goodnight." She curled up on one of the couches. Butland had an instant of scandalized feeling. Then he adapted himself to the necessities of his situation, and went to sleep on another couch.

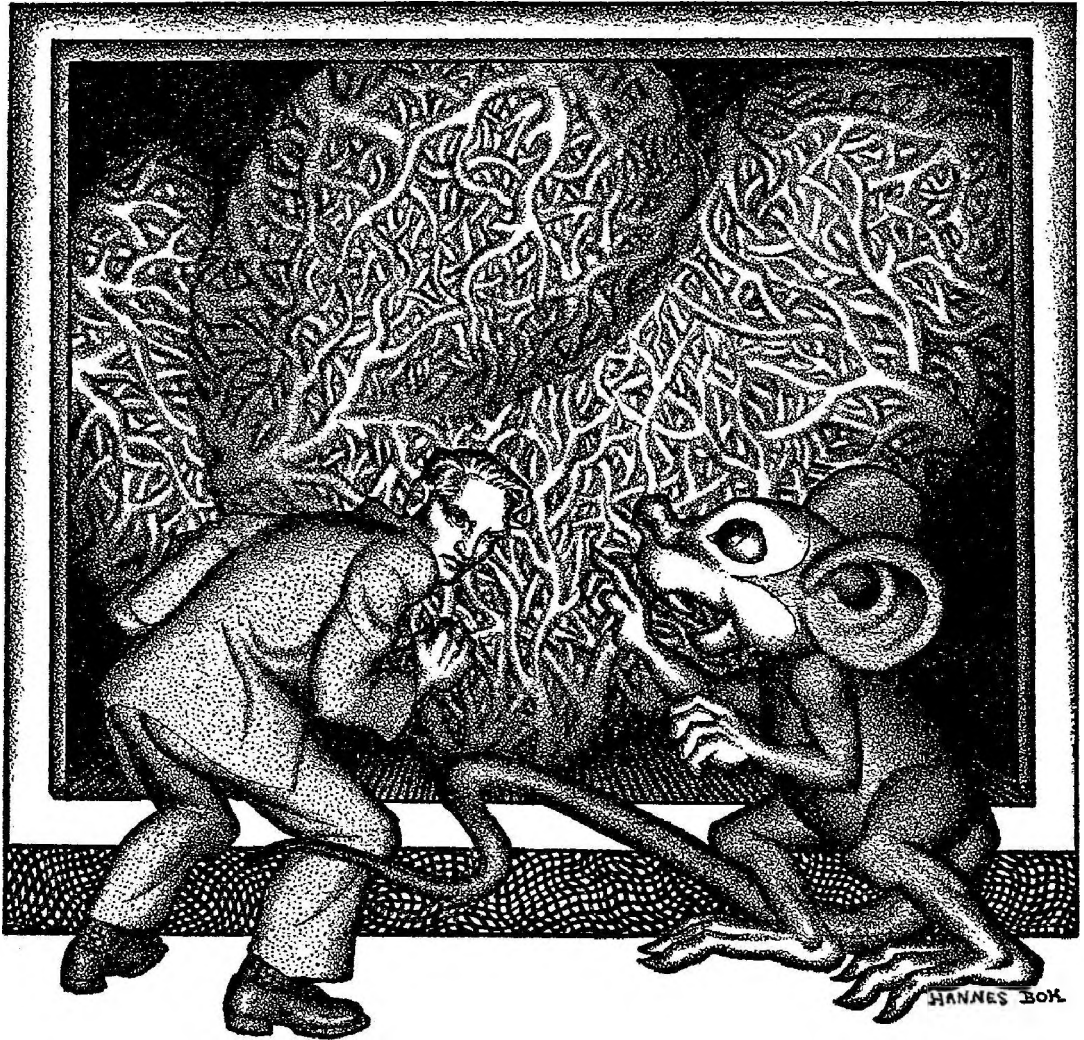
## CHAPTER FOUR

### Specimens

THE scientist, Ngat, called for them the next day and continued questioning. All went well until he inquired about earthly religions. Butland jumped up and gave him a hell-fire-and-damnation sermon. When he could get a word in edgewise, Ngat insisted that this would never do; Butland would have to go somewhere else so that the questioning of Kitty Blake could proceed. Butland demurred. Ngat got up and, regretfully, gave him a violent push toward the wall. Butland fell off the edge of the yellow disk that constituted the floor of the upper story of the inquisition-sphere. He threw up an arm to break the shock of hitting the wall of the sphere. But he hurtled right through. Wham!

He was lying on the floor of the biggest sphere he had seen yet. It was divided into several stories. Each one was full of exhibits. It was evidently a museum.

An Alan helped Butland up. It said: "Did you trip? I was expecting you, but



I did not think you would arrive so precipitously."

Butland gave up trying to figure out the rationale of this world, where nothing seemed to follow the ordinary sequence of cause and effect. He let the Alan—an assistant of some sort of Ngat—show him the exhibits in the cases.

One series of cases held a row of things that were Alans at one end and lizard-like things at the other.

"Evolution," said the Alan. "These are reconstructions of our remote ancestors. Do you understand?"

"Unh." Here too, the godless delusion of evolution was held! Butland did not

have the energy to argue the matter though. Suppose he asserted the world had been created in six days, as he had really believed; what would he say when his guide brought up the fact that this was *another* world?

"This," said the guide as they climbed to another floor, "is an exhibit of forms of life from other terms of the universal series—of which your universe is one." There were a lot of cases, each containing a thing, sometimes with two legs and some times with many; sometimes with wings, sometimes with fins, and sometimes with tentacles. Some of them were mounted beside their skeletons, the skele-

ton and the mounted skin in the same attitude.

**T**HE guide pointed to a thing rather like a devil with bat-wings. "This one is from the  $x$  to the  $n$ th powerth term of the series. The planet in that term corresponding to Ala is very large, though of low density. Hence the atmospheric pressure is enormous—several hundred times that of Ala and your world, which have similar surface conditions. Since the surface gravity is not much greater than that here, while the atmosphere is much denser, a flying organism of that size is quite practical. These are an intelligent people—much more so than you of earth; they even compare in some ways with the Alans."

Butland asked: "Is that a real specimen or an imitation made of wax?"

"Oh, a real one of course."

"How did he die?"

"He was killed specially," said the Alan.

"Oh. You mean you killed an intelligent being just to mount in your museum?"

"But naturally! It was done painlessly; our society for the prevention of cruelty to non-Alans saw to that. Ah, I see they have moved the cases to make room for the next two specimens." So they had. There was an obvious gap.

Butland shuddered. "Let's look at something else," he said.

The guide showed him cases full of mechanical objects. These, he explained, were old-fashioned weapons. The planet had not had a real war in a long time, and had practically eliminated crime. Butland thought uncomfortably that if this were true, the Alans *were* superior. The guide said: "This one projects a ball of steel at high speed, so that it penetrates deeply into the body of any organism that it hits and kills it. There is a package of the propellant and some of the balls."

Butland asked: "If a ball of steel from it penetrated into you, would it kill you?"

"Undoubtedly," said the guide. Just then a siren wailed somewhere. The guide flung himself down on the floor and did pushups. When he had done ten, he looked up reproachfully at Willard Butland. "What no, obeisance to the great lord Ng?"

"No. I serve the true God, and don't bow down to false ones."

The Alan scrambled up. "Oh, you are very much mistaken! You will go to the place of never-ending pleasure when you die."

"What?"

"The place of never-ending pleasure, where bad people go."

Butland said: "We believe in something called Hell for sinners, but nobody ever described it as a place of pleasure. It's hot. You sizzle. Where's the punishment in never-ending pleasure?"

"You just experience pleasure without cease for a few thousand years and you'll see. We can imagine nothing more wearying. But look, even if you are of an inferior people that is barely able to reason, will you not put your faith in Ng?"

"No," said Butland. They argued for a while. Butland had never been proselytized, but he gave a good theological account of himself.

**T**HEN he remembered the arguments wherewith Rex Piper always used to upset him.

He said: "You say that Ng is omnipotent?"

"Yes," said the Alan.

"And omniscient?"

"Yes."

"And all-good?"

"Yes."

"And he made everything?"

"Yes."

"But still evil exists?"

"Y-yes."

"Well, who made the evil, then?"

The Alan was stumped, as Butland had been on previous occasions. The Alan fidgeted nervously. Finally he threw himself down on the yellow floor, kicking his heels and wailing in his own language.

"What are you saying?" asked Butland.

The Alan left off his wailing long enough to translate. These were an indomitably polite race. "I was begging Ng's pardon for having doubted him! This is terrible! Nobody ever brought up that point of yours before! I must go to our learned doctors, to have the truth expounded!"

"You'd better take me back to my room first."

The Alan did so. Kitty Blake had already returned. Butland told her what had happened to him. He added: "If I ever gambled, I'd bet you that we're the next two specimens to go in their museum."

"That sounds likely, Will. When do you suppose they'll kill us?"

"I suppose when they've finished questioning us. There won't be anything malicious about it."

"Maybe we can stall; keep the questions going."

During the following days they practiced the technique of stalling on the unfortunate Ngat; speaking slowly, digressing widely, and holding interminable arguments with each other over trivial points.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Too Dangerous to Live

ONE day Butland propounded to Ngat the question that had so upset Ngat's assistant. Ngat sat motionless for a long while. Then he said: "You must excuse me for the rest of the day. I do not feel well. I will take you back to your room."

Back in their room they found Rex

Piper awaiting them. They threw themselves upon him; Kitty hugged him and Butland wrung his hand. Then they saw that he looked very serious.

"What's happened in our world?" asked Butland.

"Plenty." Piper told them how the religion of Ng was advancing by giant strides. "These Alans have got every earthly preacher, salesman, advertising man, or what have you licked in matters of mass psychology. They give away tons of junk to get worshippers to come around. They hold a kind of bingo game. They use colored lights and smells and music."

"Aren't they under any sort of control?"

"No; we don't dare say boo, after that little military demonstration they put on. Already they've got a tenth of the people of New York City converted. They've installed a kind of siren in the tower of the Empire State Building, in charge of one of their priests of Ng. Every time the priest gets inspired he yanks the cord, and the siren goes off, and all the converts in the city drop what they're doing and do pushups."

"That must be tough on the rest of you," said Kitty Blake.

"It is, especially when the convert is the motorman on a train, for instance. And—you know five is their sacred number? They won't let us sell anything for five cents or five dollars or any multiple thereof. Nickels are holy, and the priests of Ng wander down Fifth Avenue collecting them with those little gadgets that motormen on the Fifth Avenue busses used to snatch our dimes with." He turned to Butland. "You really ought to be there, Will. You'd know what your poor heathen feel like when you get to work on them."

"What else is there?" asked Butland.

"Oh, they think our marriage-customs are most immoral. They haven't figured out new ones for us yet, but they will.

The trouble is that we have only two sexes, while they have three."

Kitty Blake said: "You mean like ants, male, female, and neuter?"

"No; three honest-to-God sexes. I'll tell you about it when Will's not around; I don't want to shock him. How's he been behaving?"

"So good it hurts," said Kitty Blake. "Not one little pass has he made."

"Okay. Your father will be waiting at the portal with a shotgun on your return, but I'll go ahead and explain things. By the bye, do you mind if I speak to Will alone?"

**T**HE girl went through the wall at the point marked by the green rectangle. Rex Piper pulled out an automatic pistol. His face got very tense and serious, and he said: "I'm sorry, Will, damned sorry, but I've got to kill you."

"What?" yelled Butland, jumping up.

"Kill you, I said. I hate to do it, but—"

"You're crazy!"

"Not at all. The President of the United States himself ordered me to. We feel that—"

"Then he's crazy too!"

"—you're too conscientious. With your profound convictions you'll make trouble with the Alans; try to interfere with their damned Ng or something, and they'll take it out on the poor earth. You're too dangerous to be left in their hands. And since we can't rescue you. . . ." Piper raised the pistol.

Butland, backing away from the menacing muzzle, tripped on the nearest couch and fell backward. The shot missed him and flattened itself against the yellow wall. Butland scrambled to hands and knees. The couch hid him from Piper temporarily. He tugged at it. It was light. He picked it up and ran at his cousin, holding the couch for a shield. The pistol roared again, but as Piper was unable to see the upper part of Butland's body the

shot went through the couch and missed Butland. Butland slammed the couch down on top of Piper, crushing his lanky cousin to the floor.

A fist holding the pistol stuck out from under the couch. Butland grabbed at the pistol. It went off; the slide scorched and bruised his hand. He shifted his position to kick the hand. He kicked the pistol out of it, but in shifting he took enough weight off Piper for the latter to get his knees under him. Piper heaved both Butland and the couch off himself.

They both got to their feet and swung. Butland landed the first real punch, on Piper's nose. Piper staggered and ran into a clinch. That was an error; Butland picked him up and slammed him down on the floor with terrific force.

When Rex Piper came to, Will Butland was standing over him with the pistol in his hand. "Get up, damn your soul," said the missionary.

Piper shook his head. "What did you say?"

"I said get up, damn your soul."

"Did you say damn, Will?"

"You're damn right."

Piper shook his head some more. "I still don't believe it. You must have dropped me on my head when you threw me." Piper mopped his nosebleed with his handkerchief. "I think you loosened one of my teeth. But it was worth it, if I've lived to hear you say 'damn'. What's come over you?"

"I've decided that you're right about this being out of the Lord's territory. Or maybe I'm just mad about the treatment the world hands out to those who try to save it. Anyway, from now on I'll do what I think best, whether it agrees with the books or not. Get up."

Kitty Blake stuck her head through the door. "Have you boys finished—Rex! Your nose! What's going on?"

Will Butland told her. He finished: "Are you on my side?"

"I—I suppose so—though I can't believe Rex would hurt a fly, let alone shoot—"

"I *wouldn't* hurt a fly, but Will's not a fly," said Piper.

Butland snapped: "Do you want to stay here till they mount you in the museum, Kitty?"

"Of course not. But how—"

"I have an idea of how these Alans' minds work, even if they are cleverer than we. For one thing, having no crime to speak of, they won't know how to defend themselves against it. Kitty, you take this gun and cover Rex while I catch some sleep. Shoot him if he moves toward you."

**W**HEN Ngat appeared for the next interrogation, Butland was twirling the pistol on his forefinger. He asked if Rex Piper might go along. Ngat said certainly, Piper was an honored guest of the Senator, who was sorry to have had to lodge him in the old jail while a new room was being blown—"

"This is the jail?" burst out Kitty Blake.

"Why yes; or it was before we got rid of crime."

"Most comfortable jail I was ever in," said Piper.

"Is that so?" said Ngat. "Strange; an Alan would find it horribly uncomfortable. Of course non-Alans are different. Let us proceed to the interrogation. By the way, Mr. Butland, what is that black object you are carrying?"

"A perfume sprayer," said Will Butland. It was the first deliberate lie he had told in fifteen years.

"Ah, I understand. Now let us resume our questioning. This should be the last day thereof."

"But," cried Kitty Blake, "there's lots of things about the earth that we haven't told you yet!"

"True, but those things either are not

important or can be inferred from what you have told us. Let us—"

Butland interrupted: "What's going to happen to us starting tomorrow?"

"You will be turned over to another examiner, who will undertake the study of your somatic characteristics. But do not be afraid; everything will be done to make your last hours painless. Now let us proceed—"

Butland shouted: "You can't do that! I'm a servant of the Lord, not of your imaginary Ng either, and if you kill me you'll roast forever in Hell—"

"I insist, Mr. Butland, that you contain yourself. Otherwise I shall send you to the museum again."

"—with devils dancing around and poking you with red-hot pitchforks, along with the other unrepentant sinners—"

## CHAPTER SIX

### Escape

**A**GAIN that push, that fall through the wall of the sphere, and that landing on the floor of one of the stories of the museum sphere. Butland, as he picked himself up, remembered vaguely speculative talk from Rex Piper about multi-dimensional space-manifolds and other scientific fantasies—Butland had had no great faith in science, since it so often disagreed with Holy Writ. The Alan city must involve a multi-dimensional manifold or something. Otherwise how was it that one passed from one sphere instantly to another without experiencing any intermediate stages?

The curator, or whatever he was, was there again. He said cheerfully: "Back again, I see. We shall take up where we left off last time."

"Oh no we shan't" said Butland, pointing his pistol. "You remember those old-fashioned projectile weapons you showed me? Well, this is a thing of that sort.

If you don't want to have a small blob of metal penetrate your body at high speed, raise your hands."

Instead of complying, the Alan argued: "That device does not look like one of ours. How do I know that you are telling the truth, not being an Alan and therefore incapable of lying?"

Butland fired at one of the cases. As the echoes of the shot died down, he pointed out the two holes the bullet had drilled in the case.

Another Alan appeared, and made noises that evidently constituted a question as to what was going on. Butland moved to cover both the creatures, and said to his acquaintance: "Explain it to him, and tell him that if he doesn't put his hands up too he'll be—ah—plugged, I think the slang term is."

The curator, whose name was Zvelk, did so, meanwhile raising his own hands. His colleague started to obey, then bolted for and dove through the wall of the sphere.

Butland fired, but too late; the wall had resolidified.

**B**UTLAND grabbed the skinny forearm of his remaining Alan. He felt a tremor of the terror that Alans could instill by some unknown means. "Turn it off!" he grated, digging the pistol into what would have been the Alan's ribs if he had had ribs. The Alan complied. Butland continued: "You're not going to get away like that! What was that you said about Alans being unable to lie?"

"It is t-t-true," yammered the Alan, who was dithering with fright and indecision. "Our chromosomes were treated many generations back, when we abolished crime, to make lying impossible."

"That's just fine. Now, answer some questions. Where did your friend go?"

"To get help."

"How long should it take him?"

"He should be back any time now."

"Can you take me to a place where he won't find us?"

"Y-yes."

"All right, do so. I'm hanging on to you, so don't try anything unrighteous."

The Alan led Butland through the wall to a small dwelling-sphere, which he explained was his own quarters—or rather, those of him and his two spouses, the terms "wife" and "husband" having no exact equivalent in the triangular Alan marital relationship. The spouses would be out for some time.

"All right," said Butland, "explain about that portal."

"I do not know the details—"

"Then explain what you do know." Butland poked his prisoner with the pistol.

"Are you familiar with the universal series?"

"Mmm—yes and no; I've heard about it but I don't understand it."

"It is an equation that defines the relationship of the parallel universes, each universe corresponding to one term of an infinite series. The portals between them correspond to the operative signs—"

"What?"

"You know, the things like plus and times, though in intra-universal mathematics you do not add or multiply. You use operatives meaning, as nearly as I can translate, before-inside-perpendicular, or after-among-rotated-with. As I was saying, the portals correspond to the operatives of the equation; you pass through them from one universe to another."

"Any other?"

"Any other on your pseudoplane. To get to another pseudoplane one must pass to the metacenter of hyper-rotation of one's own pseudoplane, and thence—"

"Here, here, stop the math. Get back to how you use the portal."

"One picks a universe where the corresponding portal is just above the ground-level; if the other side of the portal is below ground, it is choked with



rock and cannot be opened. Then one gravitizes one's not-inertia—"

"One's what?"

"One's not-inertia; you have no exact word—"

"Never mind, I think I have what I want. Take us to Ngat's office."

**N**NGAT was interrogating Kitty Blake when Zvelk and Butland popped through the wall. The latter explained to the startled scientist about the damage that could be wrought by bits of metal traveling at high velocity. Ngat took the hint and raised his hands.

Rex Piper burst out: "You crazy fool, the President was right. I should have bumped you off without warning."

"Too late for that. Put your hands up too. No, first grab all those little round cases. They're textbooks, aren't they? Kitty, you catch hold of Ngat, so he can't duck through one of these heathen walls." He told Zvelk: "The minute your colleague shows up with the help he went for, you take us all through the nearest wall."

His instructions were none too soon. Six Alans burst in through the wall of Ngat's sphere. Butland fired a shot over their heads. They jumped back through the wall; then cautiously stuck the muzzles of their weapons through.

"Come on!" said Butland. He got all his gang through the opposite side of the sphere. They burst in on a trio of Alans of assorted sexes who were making love in the curious Alan fashion.

"Excuse us," said Butland hastily, "Zvelk, take us to your sphere." Zvelk did so. Butland said: "We're going to the portal next."

"Suppose it is open to a world other than yours?"

"Then you'll change the opening," said Butland firmly. "And when we pass through to the earth, you and Ngat stay behind. As soon as we're in Antonio's we're going to start shooting at any Alans

in sight. Hey, Rex, have you got any more cartridges?"

Piper handed them over, and the five individuals marched through the wall into the room containing the portal.

The Alan in charge of the portal had just admitted another of his kind in a great hurry. This Alan wore a thing like a tropical helmet and carried a thing like a rifle. He or she or it (Butland had not yet learned to distinguish the sexes by sight) was chattering something at the Alan in charge of the portal.

"The purple square in the middle of the floor," muttered Zvelk. They were moving into it when the six Alan pursuers also appeared in the room. They pointed their weapons.

Will Butland seized Ngat around the waist, used him for a shield, and fired a shot at the six representatives of the law. Ngat squealed something in his own language. The armed Alans conferred for three seconds and raised their weapons.

Ngat squeaked in English: "They are going to shoot anyway! And me with my will not made out!"

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### The Fatal Paradox

**J**UST then there appeared in the portal the thing that had been the cause of the flight of the Alan with the sun-helmet. It was a feline beast the size of a tiger, with a single enormous hooked claw on each foot. It snarled and sprang. Rex Piper ducked as it whizzed over his head. The weapons of the Alans went off with one deafening crash. The beast landed among the Alans. That part of the sphere became a blur of frenetic turmoil. Butland saw a black-and-white head with its absurd ear-muffs go bouncing along the floor, shorn off by one of those sickle-shaped claws.

Then they were in Antonio's.

Antonio's had changed much since it had become the portal between the earth and Ala. Gone were the restaurant tables and chairs and the bar. It now looked like the waiting-room of a bus or airline terminal. The limits of the portal were marked off on the floor. There was a telegraph desk, a U. S. customs officer, a U. S. immigration officer, and a policeman.

Butland spoke to the last of these, quickly, while the cop was still feeling for his gun: "You're a human being, aren't you? Those heathens wanted to skin us and mount us, and we just barely escaped. Don't tell 'em which way we went!" And he started for the door. Kitty was with him; Rex Piper hung back. Then the beast with the four great claws appeared. Rex yelled, jumped two feet in the air, and came down running.

The beast ran after the fleeing trio before the others in the erstwhile sink of iniquity could react. The trio stepped up their speed to college-record figures. Hitched to a fire-hydrant on the curb was one of the Alans' vehicles, a black egg-shaped thing the size of an automobile body that simply floated in the air two feet from the ground. Butland yanked the door open.

Piper said: "But nobody would dare steal one of these—"

"Get in!" snarled Butland. He shot the beast as it bounded up. It did not seem to mind in the least. He bolted in after the other two, and slammed the door.

"How do you operate this thing?" he asked.

Piper said: "I think you just sit in the driver's seat and control it with your mind."

**B**UTLAND tried. The egg lifted, snapped the strap that tied it to the hydrant, and rose.

"It acts kind of logy," said Piper.

Kitty looked out one of the windows and screamed. "Look! No wonder it's

logy!" A long furry tail swished back and forth across the window. The beast was on the roof.

"Up high and then do a barrel-roll!" cried Piper. Butland did the best he could. Slowly the egg rose, until New York was an irregularly-shaped pin-cushion of skyscrapers below. Then he gripped the sides of his seat and imagined a roll. Over they went. The feline, with a despairing scream, came loose and plunged toward the scattered clouds below.

"Where now?" asked Piper.

Butland imagined that they were going to Washington, D. C. At once they were on their way to Washington. Butland said: "We're going to call on the President. Say, what time is it?"

"About seven A. M.," said Kitty Blake.

"Good. We'll catch him at breakfast."

**B**Y THE evening of that day, every Alan in and around New York City had been stopped by an F.B.I. man and asked the following questions: "You believe that Ng created everything?" "Yes." "And that he is all-good and all-powerful and all-knowing?" "Yes." "And that everything he did was good?" "Yes." "But that evil exists?" "Oh, yes indeed." "Well then, who created this evil?"

Whereupon the Alan, after puzzling for some minutes, would throw a mild fit and dash off to the portal, to return to his home world for instruction on how to handle this unprecedented question.

Butland, Piper, Kitty Blake, and the immigration officer checked the Alans off as they departed. They came in such a stream that they made a line reaching into the street.

". . . two thousand forty-nine, two thousand fifty, two thousand fifty-one, two thousand fifty-two, two thousand fifty-three, and I think that's all," said the immigration officer.

An Alan burst out of the portal. "What has been going on here?" he cried. "For

hours our people have been coming back so fast we have been unable to get through from the other side."

Butland gave the signal, and the huge concrete-mixer was backed up to the door of Antonio's. He cautioned the Alan: "Better get back to Ala quick. We're going to close the portal."

"What? But you cannot! We will not allow that!"

"Let 'er go!" shouted Butland. The mixer tipped, and wet concrete sluiced down a trough and spread out on the floor. Everyone in Antonio's but Butland and the Alan bolted for the door and squeezed out past the trough.

"Stop!" screamed the Alan, wet concrete piling up around his ankles. Butland made for the door. He glanced back just in time to see the Alan, and a large gob of concrete around him, disappear. More concrete flowed into the vacant space left.

They stood outside watching successive concrete mixers systematically fill the whole building with concrete.

**WHEN** it was all over, after midnight, Butland had his hand wrung by the President of the United States, the Secretary of State, Undersecretary Wilmington Stroud, the mayor of New York, Bishop Sutherland, Cardinal O'Toole, Rabbi Rosen, John Capman of the American Association for the Advancement of Atheism, and dozens more people. The President took charge personally of the books that Piper had looted from Ngat's laboratory. He said: "By the time they figure out how to open the portal with all that concrete blocking it, I hope we'll be able to meet them on more even terms. And, Mr. Butland, any time you want a job with the government, drop a line to Mr. Stroud."

When Butland finally got back to the Y.M.C.A. where he lived, and was having his swollen right hand treated in the

lounge, Rex Piper, after many humble apologies, asked: "Are you going back to missionarying, Will?"

"Nope. You see, Rex, in the course of selling the President on that argument to upset the Alans, I incidentally convinced myself. So from now on I'm a hard-boiled materialist like you. Maybe I'll become an anthropologist, and study the backward peoples instead of sermonizing them. Or maybe I'll get an ordinary job like selling insurance."

Kitty Blake said: "That earnest air of yours ought to be useful at that."

"Maybe." Butland put the wrong end of a cork-tipped cigarette in the exact center of his mouth, lit it, and coughed himself blue in the face. "By the way, Kitty, one of these days I think I'll ask you to marry me."

"Ree-ally? Why Will! But you'd better practice being a normal human being a while longer. Ask me again in six months."

"I will. I wouldn't propose in front of my licentious cousin Rex anyhow, for fear he'd—what's the slang expression?—gum the works with his cynical remarks. As for the practice, it'll never be earlier than it is now." He caught her wrist and hauled her to him with more determination than finesse. In fact so awkward was his initial attempt at love-making that Kitty was too helpless with laughter to resist.

Rex Piper said: "Hey, guy, you're embarrassing me. It's not decent."

Mrs. McCulloch, the Y.M.C.A. house mother, stopped in the doorway of the almost empty lounge with a tray of tea and fixings that she was bringing the returning hero. At the sight of said hero, the tray sagged, tilted, and slid to the floor with a fearful crash of samovar, cups, saucers, lady-finger plates, sugar-bowls, cream-pitchers, and teaspoons.

The hero did not even notice.

# HIGGLEDY'S PIG

Jason Higgedy, when put to the test, won out and brought home the bacon. But the "bacon" proved more dangerous than the starvation its presence averted!

By MYER KRULFELD

**A**FTER two years of acceleration on her sixteen-year voyage to unexplored Sirius, the converted space freighter *Isaac Newton* was travelling through the black void of space at a speed approaching that of light.

In one of her remoter holds a flashlight blinked, and Jason Higgedy's slight body cautiously approached his secret laboratory. Captain Storm had forbidden experiments after Higgedy's last fiasco, of course, but Higgedy had reached the point where that no longer stopped him. Captain Storm might be happy with his planning for Sirius and the company of his pet turtle Epicurus; Percy Green, second in command, could content himself dreaming of romances with girls who would be grandmothers by the time the *Isaac Newton* returned to Earth; but Jason Higgedy, after the hundredth reading of Dr. Frain science fiction novels, would be satisfied with nothing less than scientific experiments.

A moment later he was puttering happily over an improvised detonation chamber containing a pilfered and highly doctored gallon of atomic fuel from the ship's rocket blasts, his mild blue eyes ashine under a mop of blond hair. Silly ignoramus, huh? Fatheaded amateur, was he? He'd show them!

Drawing a long breath, he threw down the detonator switch.

BLAMM! Flame gouted from the chamber. Higgedy felt himself lifted, hurled into chaos. A wall leaped at him,

Pain tore at his nerves, and then he was falling into grateful blackness. . . .

**"A**ND don't say a word or I'll lose control of myself and kill you!" Captain Ferdinand Storm raved. "All our stores of anti-scorbutics! Most of our meats! All blown into kingdom come, mixed in with acids, inks, and varnishes from the stores! Know what it means? Inside of four months we'll all be dead of scurvy. At least you'll go first! From now on you're on an exclusive diet of bread and distilled water—"

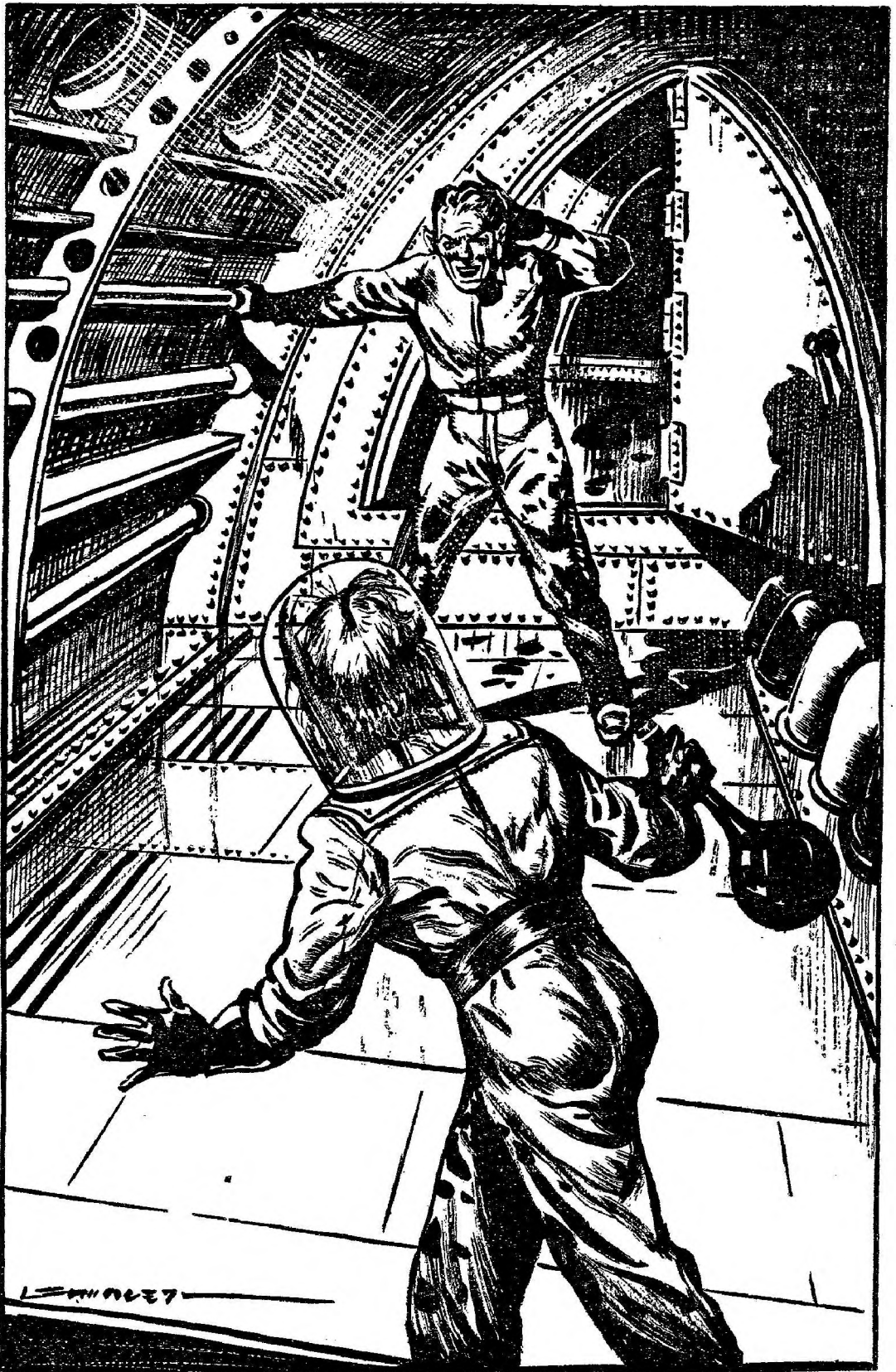
The captain stopped to catch his breath. Higgedy bowed his head still miraculously intact, but aching like seven devils.

"You sure did it up brown while you were at it, Higgedy," Percy Green contributed glumly. "Epicurus is about the only fresh meat left on board."

"Listen!" Storm bellowed. "Hands off Epicurus! If anything happens to him I'll personally throw the one who did it out into space without a suit! You let that turtle alone, understand?"

Dismal days followed. Vegetarian diets did not improve the temper of the captain. Higgedy became gaunt, his eyes feverish from a diet of bread and water, and from his frantic, hopeless search for some way to conjure up anti-scorbutic vitamins from the canned and old vegetable foods remaining to them.

On the fifteenth day Higgedy spent several hours among the ship's scientific books.



On the sixteenth day Captain Ferdinand Storm woke to find that his pet turtle had disappeared during the sleeping period.

"You've killed him!" he howled, glaring at his two companions.

"Not me!" Green snapped.

"I dud-didn't touch him!" Higgledy bore up bravely under the captain's suspicious glare.

"Maybe you're both telling the truth," Storm conceded grimly. "You'd better be! You two look for him in the holds. He might have wandered off. I'll search up here."

Higgledy wiped his brow with a shaking hand and tottered off to the holds. If Storm caught him in the act now!

He went straight for one of the least accessible of the holds, where, the day before, he had prepared by making another crude laboratory of piled up, empty storage cases. Within the small chamber he had ready a powerful portable X-ray generator and a conglomerate mess of tubes, small bottles, and flasks, all containing differently colored fluids. Also, lying flat on his back with indignantly waving legs, was Epicurus.

One of the flasks contained alcohol. With the help of a medicine dropper Higgledy fed some to Epicurus, and shortly the small beast was in a pleasant stupor.

Higgledy picked up a sharp scalpel. By working from the underside and taking advantage of every narrow opening, he managed to push the knife up so as to cut into the turtle's flesh just under the shell. He did this in several places, always making the cut as small as possible, gouging off small pieces of flesh where the wounds were hidden by the shell. When done he had five pieces of flesh, none larger than a small pea. There was no outward sign of his work on the turtle. Epicurus, in his drunken state, showed no sign of pain.

Swiftly Higgledy cut each piece of flesh into even tinier fragments, and each frag-

ment was put into a small tube, bottle, or flask.

The important part of the job finished for the present, he picked up Epicurus and walked to another part of the hold, where medical supplies were stored. The bottom of one box near the floor was slightly wet, and an alcoholic odor was in the air. A kick on the box made a small, pungent puddle on the floor.

Satisfied, he walked off with Epicurus. It was a lot easier to manufacture a smile now that the most dangerous part of his job was over. He wore a broad grin on his mild face as he walked into the living quarters with the sliding gait made necessary by the magnetic soled shoes which kept travelers on the floor in a weightless ship.

**S**TORM'S dour face lit magically. He grabbed the turtle. "Where did you find him?"

"Know where the medical supplies are stored? Well, one of the boxes contained a gross of pint alcohol bottles. A couple of the bottles broke. Epicurus found it and got drunk!"

"What?" Storm glared. "Epicurus drunk? You're crazy!"

"Smell his breath!" Higgledy suggested, grinning.

The turtle was still sleeping drunkenly when Captain Storm bored a small hole in the back of his shell and hitched him securely with a couple of feet of string to the foot of his bunk. The wandering days of Epicurus were over.

The days went on, dull days, heavy with the doom that approached so surely and so subtly with each meal they ate which did not contain anti-scorbutic elements. Storm and Green became more and more savage with each savorless breakfast, dinner and supper.

Higgledy became gaunter than ever, even though Storm relented so far as to let him eat any vegetarian messes which

he and Green could not stomach. Every day Higgledey wandered for hours in the holds, supposedly still on the hunt for non-existent anti-scorbutic foods. The others left him to his fruitless search.

Storm and Green were half way through with a meal compounded of cheese, condensed milk, and potato flour on a certain red-letter day, when a sudden new odor lifted Storm's head as at a battle cry.

A wild, unbelieving look came into his eyes.

He plucked at Green's arm. "Can you smell anything?"

Green sniffed. "Bacon! Fresh bacon!"

Storm came to his feet, plunged across the room, and thrust the door open.

Petrified, Storm and Green looked at Higgledey who bore a covered platter. With a slow, dramatic movement he lifted the cover from the platter, revealing crisp brown strips rivalling in succulence the ambrosia of the gods.

No questions were asked. Storm grabbed for the platter.

He juggled it. With no gravity to hold them down, the strips of bacon flew to the ceiling. They bounced merrily back at different angles.

No hunter ever sought prey with more lively and concentrated attention than Storm and Green displayed now. Strip after strip of flying bacon was deftly captured on the wing, to be gulped down forthwith.

Not until the last morsel had been devoured did they pause to question Higgledey. "Is there any more?"

"All the bacon you'll want, and later other kinds of fresh meat, for the rest of the voyage," Higgledey announced triumphantly.

"Where did it come from?" Captain Storm demanded.

Higgledey gave him a tolerant, superior smile. "I made it!"

"Made it how?"

"From Epicurus."

THE captain turned white. He dashed for the sleeping quarters where the turtle was tethered. In a moment he came charging back.

"Epicurus is gone! You've killed him!" he yelled.

Higgledey ducked behind Green. "I haven't touched him for over a week! Honest!"

"You said—"

"I said I made the bacon from Epicurus, but I didn't hurt him to do it!"

"Where is he, then? What have you done with him?"

Higgledey's voice wobbled. "Maybe he's got into the holds again."

Storm grabbed his elbow in a grip that made him wince. "All right, then we'll look in the holds."

They marched, Green bringing up the rear. "And how," Storm demanded grimly as they went, "did you make bacon from Epicurus without hurting him?"

Higgledey smiled wanly. "There are good texts on the whole field of science aboard the *Isaac Newton*. Have you ever read anything about physiology and histology, Captain Storm?"

"Out of my field," Storm growled.

"I'm only a dumb amateur myself, so nothing is out of my field. I read about a certain Dr. Carrel, who lived in the twentieth century. He removed a piece of chicken heart and placed it in nutritious fluids. By pruning off the excess growth as the tissue grew, and changing the fluids, he kept grafts of that original piece alive and growing for decades. That gave me an idea. All organic stuff is cellular in structure. Every animal is just a highly differentiated one-celled organism growing by fission, with the new cells assuming different functions. Well, I found vegetable fluid compounds which might serve to keep pieces of flesh alive and growing. Then I removed a piece of flesh from Epicurus—"

"Hmph!"

“—and cut it into several tiny scraps. I tried each in a different fluid. In several the flesh remained alive and grew. I redivided the growing tissue and placed it in hundreds of flasks. By subjecting them to powerful radiation I caused mutations. Nine-tenths of them died, but the remaining tenth left me with fourteen new forms of growing organic stuff. Some of them are edible. One of them I call my pig. Fried, it made the bacon which—”

Ker-whop!

The sound was like a sodden slap on the metal flooring of the holds. It came from ahead.

“My pig!” Higgledy cried. “The tissue! I was so busy frying the bacon this morning that I forgot to turn off the radiation!”

He broke into a run, Storm and Green after him.

**H**E PULLED an empty packing case out of an apparently solid wall of stores and dashed into his hidden laboratory. On a table made from another packing case stood hundreds of tubes and jars, under the glowing ray generator. One big jar five gallons in size was tipped over and reddish liquid dripped from it into a spreading pool on the floor.

All eyes went to the thing on the floor. It was a swelling ovoid, already over two cubic feet in bulk, with a moist, pinky shining skin. It bounced swiftly toward the small greenish form of Epicurus the turtle, who plodded slowly across the floor.

Ovoid reached turtle, and Epicurus became part of his own mutated flesh. Through the pink stuff of Higgledy's Pig showed the darker mass of Captain Storm's pet turtle.

An anguished yelp came from the captain. He dashed in and delivered a hearty kick at the ovoid.

His foot went into the stuff as if it were soft dough. With a howl he tried

to pull free. In vain. The pink stuff crept with incredible speed up his leg, covering it with a moist, horribly avid film!

He slapped frantically at it while Green and Higgledy stared, petrified. A second later he glared at his hands, covered with a moist smear which began to spread like a plague up his arms.

Higgledy was the first to realize what had happened. “The excess radiation changed the tissue again, made it come alive as a single animal!”

He leaped forward. Even in that short time Storm's one leg and both arms were almost covered by an ever thinning, ever spreading pink film.

Higgledy ripped at the stuff. So did Green.

They could not grip it. Their fingers sank into it as if it were jelly, moist, cool, and slippery.

Horror prickled through Higgledy's nerves. Storm had become strangely immobile and silent. The pink mass covered almost half his body now, and was beginning to flow up over throat, head, and face.

Higgledy realized suddenly that some of the stuff through which his hands passed so vainly was left on his fingers. Like some evil paint it stained upward over his own hands and wrists.

Little hammers of fear began to beat at his brain.

“It's on my hands! I can't get it off!” Green's voice was a shrill scream.

Higgledy's mind worked with an inhuman clarity. The pink tissue had to have oxygen. While in the jar it had absorbed food and oxygen through its entire surface area. . . .

He ran to a big bottle on a shelf. His fingers felt numb, encased in gloves of red slime, but he could still handle the bottle.

He threw alcohol from the bottle into a wide jar which he covered to keep the liquid from bouncing out again. Already



the pink plague was up over his wrists. He dipped his hands into the alcohol until every particle of the tissue on his hands was saturated.

**T**HE pink stuff contracted, wringing a yelp of pain from him. Then, with equal violence, it expanded. It separated from his flesh, became a writhing sheet which knotted into a small, convulsed ovoid moving jerkily in the alcohol. He covered the jar as part of the liquid slopped out. Pain smarted through his hands where the alcohol wet his raw-feeling skin.

He turned to his companions. "Alcohol kills the stuff!"

Green started toward him, moaning. The pink tissue was already half way up his arms. It covered and penetrated his sleeves.

Storm stood immobile. He was almost solidly covered. Only a mask-like opening left his mouth, nose, and eyes uncovered.

As Green started to run, Storm's expression, which had been passive and stupid, became suddenly moved by some amorphous emotion. His arms went out stiffly, like those of some wooden toy. His livid pink fingers caught Green's throat!

For a split second they remained, a frozen tableau. The tissue on Storm's fingers already moved in avid waves up over the helpless man's throat! Then Green fought, but he was no match for Storm.

Higgledy darted forward, the bottle of alcohol in his hands. It was all he dared do. The only one of the three now untouched by the pink horror, he dared not risk getting infected again, lest they all succumb. Half the bottle's contents splashed over the hands and throat of the transformed captain and his writhing victim.

The pink stuff contracted spasmodically at the touch of the liquid. The fingers of what had been Ferdinand Storm tight-

ened and sank horribly deep into Green's throat.

Green went limp.

The tissue expanded convulsively. As the alcohol shook off in a thousand drops into the gravitationless air the tissue became its sinister self again, though its rate of growth had perceptibly slackened.

Storm's hands came stiffly open. Green dropped to the floor. With rigid pace Storm strode toward Higgledy.

Half the yet remaining contents of the bottle arched full into the mask-like face. A single cry of pain came from the automaton as the raw alcohol seared his eyes. Still clutching the bottle with what remained of the alcohol in it, Higgledy fled the holds. He had to have time—to think, to plan.

Storm ran stiffly after him.

Higgledy got to the living quarters first. The door between holds and living quarters could be shut and locked. In the *Isaac Newton's* freighter days it had served to separate officers from the rest of the crew. Higgledy slammed the heavy door and rammed home the massive bolts.

He heard a thump. That would be Ferdinand Storm charging. But the door was immobile. He heard scrabbling, saw the twisting of the doorknob. A sigh of relief came from him.

The long breath was still in his nostrils when, from under the door, through the thin space between door-bottom and casing, came a creeping flat sheet of livid pink, thrusting its way into the room!

**H**IGGLEDY was shocked to frozen stillness. There was no respite in flight. The only way to overcome the nemesis was to destroy it utterly.

His time-limit was desperately short. Sooner or later the tissue would fasten upon him, and that would mean the end, not only of him, but of Storm and Green as well.

He set down the last precious drops of

alcohol in the nearly empty bottle on the table farthest from the door. Bleakly, mind keyed up to sharp, hard logic by the tension, he considered the strength and weakness of the pink life-stuff.

It was primitive. It sensed, breathed, and ate through its outer membrane. Cutting would only cause a new membrane to form at the cut. Burning would destroy it, but would also destroy Storm and Green, who by now were both incorporated with it. That method he would never use. Clubbing might destroy a few cells, but the tissue as a whole would remain unhurt, since it had no vital organs to be damaged . . . all of it, every part of it, was equally vital, and any cell could assume the function of any other that was destroyed.

And yet it must have a weakness. The alcohol had overcome a small mass of it, and had slowed down a larger mass when only sloshed onto it.

That meant — The entire surface breathed and ate, was at once mouth, nose, eyes, and the organs of touch and taste. Saturated in alcohol through every organ it would become paralyzed, then die. When splashed on, the tissue merely became—drunk!

The stuff thrusting under the door was the size of an egg now, and growing larger. Suddenly it broke off, formed into an ovoid like some impossible Easter egg, and rolled with its curious jerky bounce along the floor toward him. Behind it more tissue oozed into the room.

Higgledy ran the whole length of the forward compartments until he came to the air lock. Hastily he donned one of the space suits kept there. Arming himself with an impromptu club made out of a long-necked bottle, he went back.

He paid no attention to the two small ovoids which hungrily roved the chamber next to the holds. With a twist of massive bolts and a sharp thrust, he flung the door wide open.

Storm was still standing there stiffly. A gleam of understanding passed through the mask-like face. The arms lifted swiftly.

Down went the bottle on Storm's skull.

Almost without sound the vividly pink man slumped, unconscious.

The film was still alive and active, however. With the speed of spilled water a large section peeled off and threw itself across the floor at Higgledy.

It clasped his legs, spread upward in an ever thinning sheet. Within the space suit, however, Higgledy remained untouched.

He strode down the holds. Weaponless now, he was suddenly confronted by another livid apparition. Green!

Higgledy was a peaceful man, but this was no time for argument. Out shot a metal-clad fist. Green met it with his jaw. He staggered and fell as Higgledy went past him.

When Higgledy looked back it was to see a pink human shape staggering groggily in pursuit of him.

**T**HROUGH the holds they ran until they arrived at a section devoted mostly to medical stores. Hastily Higgledy looked over the solidly packed cases. He tore several boxes down and flung them back toward Green, a flying, crashing barrier. Green dodged, ducked, shoved, and came more slowly on.

At last Higgledy found what he was after. He pulled out a large wooden box just as Green's stiffly questing fingers fell on his shoulder.

He turned and threw a blow at the pink automaton. A fist came back in return, rapping viciously on the glass face plate. Another fist slammed home in the same place, leaving the glass covered with a smear of pink. Green was trying to make a crack through which the tissue could invade him!

Higgledy twisted around. A beating

fist struck repeatedly at his face plate, solid, relentless blows, heedless of pain to pulping knuckles. Sooner or later there would be a crack, and then—

With desperate speed Higgledy pulled down the box and smashed it to the metal floor, hanging to one corner to keep it from bouncing all over the place. It cracked. Another blow and it split open. Round cans rolled out and flew all over the weightless holds.

Green tried to throttle Higgledy with one hand as the other fist beat at Higgledy's face plate.

Higgledy caught one of the cans as it flew lightly through the air and hurled it with all his strength at the metal floor.

The cover flew off. Colorless liquid bulged out in small and large drops, since there was no gravitation to make it pour. Fighting the compulsion of Green's rigid arms, Higgledy stooped, caught the partly emptied can, and threw what liquid was left back on Green.

Seconds ticked off. Green's beating fist came slower and slower. It stopped altogether.

Higgledy wrenched around. Green staggered and fell.

Higgledy wiped the pink smear from his face plate. It was torpid and un-stirring.

The man in the space suit stooped. His metal-clad fingers tore at the pink stuff. Like taffy beginning to harden, the tissue came away in messy sheets from Green's body.

Higgledy worked at top speed. It took only minutes to get rid of the entire mess covering Green. As he worked the livid life-stuff which had been clinging to his space suit dropped away of its own accord.

He carried Green to another part of the hold and left him there to recover at leisure. Breaking open two more cans of the liquid he went to the living quarters. Storm still lay unconscious in the doorway.

As Higgledy approached pink cell-tissue oozed from the inert body toward him.

He poured the liquid onto Storm's body. Rippling convulsions went through the livid pink slime covering the captain. Two minutes and it became quiescent, un-stirring. Higgledy was able to pull it off the unconscious man without resistance.

It remained only to shovel the inert pink stuff into a box, to leave the box in the air lock, and then open the outer door. The outward rush of air removed box, pink slime and all, into the dark, cold death of space. . . .

“SO I figured out that if alcohol would act so swiftly on it, other more potent drugs would act even faster. Since the stuff had to breath through the entire surface area of its skin, a volatile drug like ether would work quickest. I tried it, and it happened to work. It was only a good guess,” Higgledy concluded modestly.

“Am I glad you're a good guesser!” Green said fervently. Both he and Captain Storm looked raw and sunburned. “You can't imagine how queer it felt, to think and understand, and yet have your personality lost to something as primitive as an amoeba!”

“Well, it's all finished now,” Higgledy declared.

Storm couldn't very well grumble at Higgledy after the man had saved his life. So he glared down at Epicurus. “You're the one who led us into this mess,” he told the turtle. “I'll bet if we hadn't showed up at just the right time that mutant would have died before it came upon something on which it could feed.”

Higgledy shook his head. “I've got an idea that mutant was a lot tougher than that. Anyway, it wasn't Epicurus' fault. I was the one who got him started. My guess is that he went into the holds again because he's got a good memory. He just wanted to get drunk again!”

# GALILEO'S REVOLUTION

**Astronomers are like blind clockmakers — they know the speed and direction of every part of the universe, but the secret of the spring — gravity — is a mystery even today.**

By **WILLY LEY**

“**W**HY do you ask that question again, oh my pupil Galileo Galilei?” the learned professor asked somewhat nervously. “You must know by now what Aristotle taught—that bodies fall the faster the heavier they are. We read his discourse together.”

“Then, oh learned *magister*,” replied Galileo, “I may expect a stone weighing twenty pounds to fall twice as fast as a stone weighing ten pounds?”

“*Certissimum est!*”

It was then that Galileo felt ready to ask a carefully considered question: “Pray tell me, *magister*, what would happen then if I took a stone weighing twenty pounds and a stone weighing ten pounds and bound them tightly together with ropes? I surmise that they would fall more slowly than a twenty-pound-stone alone, since the smaller stone would impair the movement of the heavier stone.”

“Quite so.”

“But together the two stones weigh thirty pounds and therefore they should fall faster than a twenty-pound stone alone.”

The answer of the professor is not recorded.

Thus embarrassed young Galileo Galilei his teachers the learned philosophers of Pisa. They did not dislike the questions, but their anger was finally aroused when the young man suggested that experiments be tried out. That of course, was impossible. It was impudent, demagogic, revolutionary.

The professors blandly refused to ex-

periment because their ancient Greek masters had never done it. They even refused to *look* at experiments, and Galileo Galilei was quite alone—at least as far as a learned audience was concerned—when he carried a heavy iron cannon ball up the winding terraces of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Having arrived at the top he took a small leaden musket ball from his pocket. Then he dropped both projectiles.

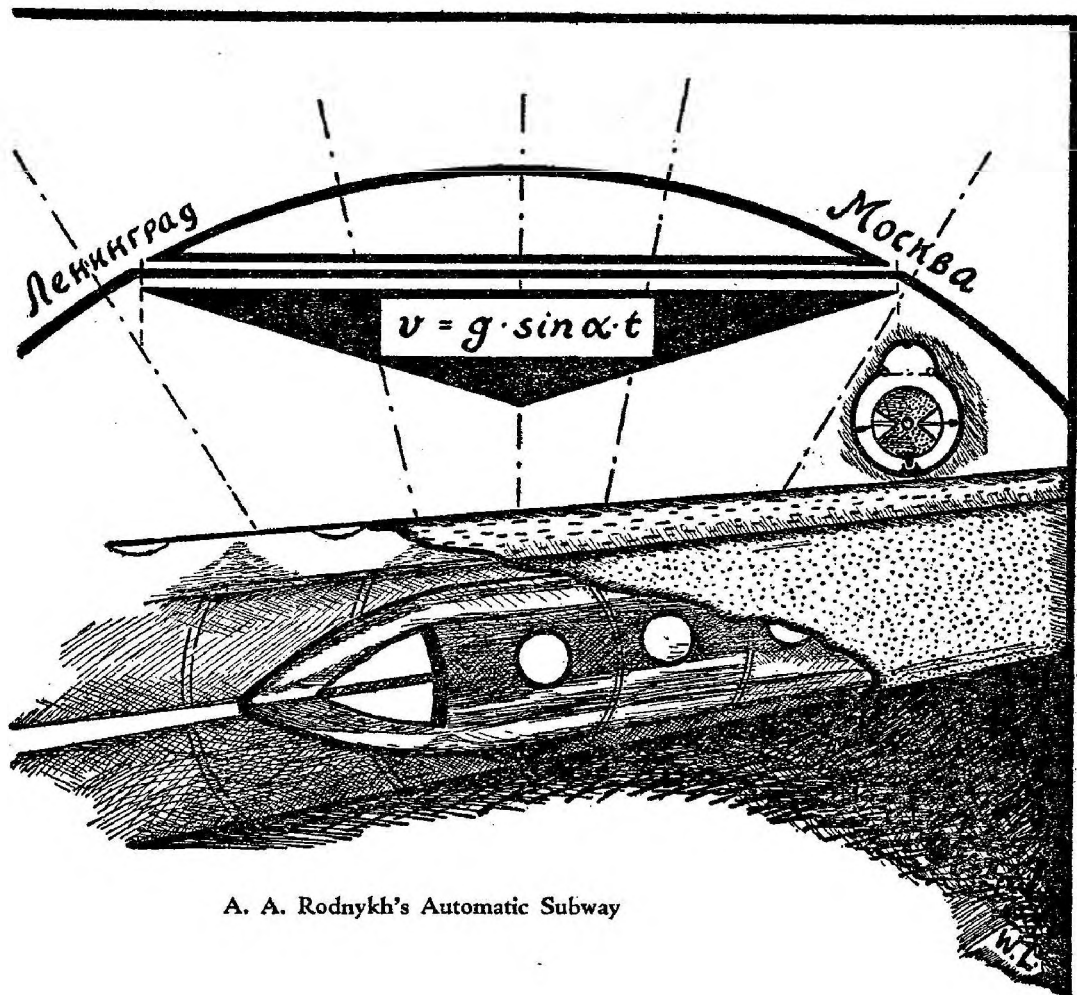
They arrived together!

The novel and undignified method of experimentation had given a new answer to an old question. An answer that contradicted Aristotle.

And Galileo Galilei was expelled from Pisa!

**S**INCE then all science has changed. Problems are still pondered and discussed at length—but *after* experiments have been made. The experimental results are then condensed to figures, the figures are used for more experimentation (experimentation on paper this time; it's called mathematics), and after that the researchers again go back to actual experiments. Thus knowledge really accumulates and understanding of the principles of nature progresses.

How this method works is illustrated especially well by the example of gravitation. Astronomy is one of the most accurate sciences,—not as far as opinions about details of the planets' surfaces or theories about the origin of the solar system are concerned, that is, but as far as the prediction of movements go. That



A. A. Rodnykh's Automatic Subway

is one field where we really know something, even though nobody knows what gravitation really is.

The astronomer may be likened to a blind watch maker who has carefully examined a beautiful and complicated clock. He may not be quite certain whether one particular part is made of silver or brass or another alloy, he may not know whether the bearings are rubies or diamonds, but he does know how fast each part moves, and in what direction and manner. Thus can he predict every single movement.

The "spring" of the whole thing, to return to astronomy, is, of course, the force of gravity. What it is, he does not know, but he knows in each and every instance how strong that spring is and how it works—even if the why is a mystery.

We know now that all bodies fall with

equal acceleration, no matter how much they weigh or what they are. Apparent differences in speed are always due to a secondary influence, usually air resistance.

Discounting secondary influences, the figures are: 978 centimeters per second at the equator, 979.3 centimeters per second under 30 degrees latitude, and 981.9 under 60 degrees; while it would be found to be 983.2 centimeters per second at the poles.

This, of course, is due to the fact that the Earth is not a perfect sphere. And for that reason things do not weigh the same everywhere on Earth, if tested with a spring scale (the weights of balancing scales change weight too, so nothing can be proven by them.) The differences are very slight, but they become visible when large quantities are involved.

On the islands of Spitzbergen, North

Norway, there are a number of coal mines. They produce about 300,000 tons of coal per year in peace time in addition to their own needs. If the whole year's production were bought by a customer living on the American or African coast near the equator a law suit might conceivably be filed for 1200 tons of missing weight . . . not of missing quantity, however.

Even a large ship would show a noticeable difference in weight. The Russian physicist Dr. Jakov I. Perlman once calculated that Soviet Russia's largest battleship would lose not less than 80 tons of weight in that manner during a trip from Iceland to the Ivory Coast.

**I**F THE results of the many experiments with gravity are properly assembled and looked at from a distance one discovers with much surprise that they usually show only what gravity does *not* do.

It does *not* change with the nature of the matter involved. It does *not* change with temperature, it can *not* be influenced by electricity, magnetism, light or darkness or whatever you can think of. It can *not* be screened by any known means.

That gravitational force follows the same rule as light, magnetism, and sound in decreasing in intensity with the square of the distance does not mean that any conclusions may be drawn as to a resemblance. That is the result of the geometrical fact that the area of a sphere is proportional to the square of its radius. Small wonder that Dr. Paul R. Heyl of the National Bureau of Standards once called gravitation an "intractable phenomenon" and continued: "Gravitation appears to be a function of nothing but the masses involved and their space coördinates. As to all other properties the evidence is negative, in most cases of a high degree of precision, reaching a few parts in a billion. The cause of gravitation is hidden in a protective armor on

which there is not even a projection upon which to hang a hypothesis."

It was Le Sage of Geneva who made what may be called the "classic guess" about the cause of gravitation. He believed the entire universe to be filled with "ultra-mundane corpuscles" flying at high speeds and exerting pressure from all directions at once on all bodies. The obvious present-day question would be what happens to the heat generated with the impacts . . . but in 1750, when Le Sage advanced this hypothesis, nobody knew anything about the law of the conservation of energy. In addition to that, there should be screening effects if Le Sage were right and they certainly do not exist.

But Le Sage's idea popped up in various modifications again and again. In fact, science lists about fifty attempts of that kind.

It was Albert Einstein who was the first to have a novel thought. He looked around for another "force" misbehaving in a similar way, and found it: inertia, especially in the form of centrifugal force. An observer in a rotating circular room, he said, would find himself in a kind of gravitational field turned inside out, forcing him away from the center and becoming stronger the farther away he is.

In that case the observer would, of course, know what is happening to him. He would know that the "force" does not originate in the center of the disk but within the objects (including him) themselves and that it therefore cannot be "screened." Einstein then proceeded to say that a "gravitational field is equivalent to an inertial field produced by a suitable change of coördinates." And he succeeded in finding mathematically, such a suitable transformation.

His idea is usually explained by comparing matter in space to stones forming cusps in the otherwise flat surface of a frozen lake. Another stone set in motion

on that surface (assumed to be frictionless) would follow a straight line until it grazed another's cusp, when the motion would continue in an altered direction. If the stone got fairly deep into a large cusp it would not leave it again at all, but would revolve around the larger stone.

That would look like gravity, caused by a three-dimensional effect in an otherwise two-dimensional world. If space were four-dimensional the presence of matter might cause similar cusps that would appear like what is termed gravitation in our three-dimensional world.

That Einstein's thought is novel does not prove that it is true. Eddington has said that at this point Einstein's theory stops explaining phenomena and starts explaining them away. And Einstein himself has admitted that "No amount of experimentation can ever prove me right. A single experiment may at any time prove me wrong."

The trouble is that four-dimensional space is a mathematical concept but not a proven fact. It seems to become understandable if compared to three-dimensional space as three-dimensional space is compared to a two-dimensional surface, to "Flatland."

"Flatland" is also an assumption, however, and while there is no proof either way, it is perfectly possible, even probable, that reality can only be three-dimensional.

**A**ROUND the beginning of this century there appeared in Russia a novel by a professional mathematician by the name of Alekzandr Alekzandrejevitch Rodnykh. It had the title "An Account of the Automatic Subway between St. Petersburg (now Leningrad) and Moscow. Imaginative Novel, up to now only in three not quite finished chapters." That promised to be at least unusual in the theme. It was.

A. A. Rodnykh informed his readers

that tunnels are hardly ever straight and that in fact they should not be straight but curved. If a tunnel of considerable length—say a mile or more—were really straight the rain water would run into it from both sides and assemble in the middle for good, unless it were pumped out.

The reason is simply the curvature of the Earth's surface. A perfectly straight tunnel's center would be nearer to the center of the earth than its ends which are at the surface. Naturally rain water would get into it, running "downhill" from both sides to the center.

If such a straight tunnel were long enough—and consequently deep enough in the middle—not only water would run in. Everything that can flow or roll would do so, including railway cars. No fuel would be needed—the train would gather speed until the half-way mark was reached, and then continue on out of the tunnel with gradually diminishing speed.

"But at first it would move *very* slowly," you might say.

"That does not matter, because the speed will be very high in the central portion."

"But friction in the bearings and air resistance in the tunnel would eat up energy and prevent the train from reaching the opposite end."

"Nothing prevents the train from having also some power of its own so that it could travel the last few miles under its own steam. This may also be used to apply the initial push to overcome the friction and to accelerate a bit faster in the beginning."

"But why begin with such an ambitious project as a tunnel from Moscow to St. Petersburg? Why not try it out on a small scale first?"

"Because, in accordance with the laws of nature, the train would always need the same time for one trip, no matter how long or how short the tunnel. That time would be around 85 minutes if there were

no friction. With friction it is somewhat longer. Naturally the tunnel would not pay if its length could be travelled by surface trains in a shorter time."

Rodnykh was absolutely right with everything he said. Only such a tunnel cannot be built. Or, if we prefer to say "cannot be built at present," the thing still won't work. If the tunnel were sufficiently long to be interesting, the velocity in the central portion would be so excessively high that even wheels made of the toughest steel would be torn apart by their own centrifugal force. And there would hardly be another way of moving it than with wheels.

Modern electrical engineers might say that they would not permit the speed to accumulate too much. They would equip the train with electric motors that also work as dynamos. When the train has reached a certain high speed they would

connect the motors with the wheels by means of suitable gears. The energy needed to turn them would keep the speed low and the electric energy generated could be stored somehow, either in the train itself or outside of it. Later the current would be used to supply the energy needed to complete the trip.

But even if that scheme (other applications of which actually exist) were to be adapted, Rodnykh's tunnel would still be a failure. The centrifugal forces created by the Earth's daily rotation would form one important obstacle. If that could be overcome there would still be air resistance in the tunnel.

Then again there is the little matter of financing.

And for all these annoying reasons there is no hope that the three chapters of Rodnykh's novel will never be finished.

THE END

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## THE THOUGHT CHARIOT

Recent experiment with thought-waves and theories about the driving forces behind thoughts are neither new nor original. Thoughts and thought-waves have been a subject for thought as far back as the days of Greece prior to the Roman conquest. Even in the Middle Ages men tried to harness thought waves to serve them. As early as 1376 Jacques de Lusane, a Belgian sage, tried to convert will-power into horse-power. Many months of experimentation and years of gathering stories had convinced de Lusane that thoughts were a force and that they could transport an object in the same fashion that ocean waves or wind currents push a ship from port to port. In March

of 1376 de Lusane had constructed a small wickerwork basket on four wheels. He then gathered together more than 100 friends and hirelings. They were instructed to concentrate on a spot about two hundred yards ahead of where the empty basket stood. They were to will the basket to move from where it was to the designated goal. De Lusane entered the thought chariot and the experiment was begun. Whether a declination in the land, the Belgian's weight, or a strong gust of wind was responsible we cannot today say but it is a matter of record that the basket did move in the direction of the desired goal, though no more than eleven feet.

—SIMPSON M. RITTER.





# THE PSYCHOPATHIC MARTIANS

By **ALLAN  
INGVALD BENSON**

**A Super Science Brief**

**S**TEVE BARDON awoke suddenly and stretched his stiff body in the hospital bed. Gosh, how he hurt! What had happened, anyway?

Steve was a tall, lanky youngster of eighteen with freckles, red hair, and a

likable grin. Usually he was a tornado of activity, but not now!

"How ya feelin', kid?" asked a heavy voice.

Steve's neck creaked like a gate as he turned his head to look at the heavy-set, beetle-browed, derby-topped individual who sat at his right. It took no second glance to place *that* worthy as a detective, perhaps even a chief of detectives.

"What happened," Steve demanded. "What—"

"You talk first, and then *we'll* talk. Go ahead, kid," said the detective, and settled back comfortably in his chair. "Oh, by the way," he went on, "I'm McGillicuddy, and the gent across the bed is Swanson. Doctor Swanson, from the Physics Department, University."

"How do you feel, son?" asked Swanson, and Steve turned his stiff neck to inspect *him*. Swanson was a mild-looking old man, with a kindly, wrinkled face.

"Fine!" Steve lied. "What happened, anyway? Did the Martians—"

"Oh, so that's what they were," interrupted McGillicuddy. "Look, kid, I've got to go back down town just as soon as I get your statement. Now you talk, and then Doctor Swanson will explain everything to you. Now, come on kid."

So Steve told them his story.

**I** HAD been out sailing my boat (Steve said) and had fallen asleep. When I awoke I was out beyond the sight of land, and the wind had died down. I fretted some, but it didn't do any good. By-and-by the wind sprang up from the north, and I headed back.

It was dark by then, and I ran into the Martians' float before I saw it. As soon as I scraped along the side, a searchlight jumped on me and somebody started jabbering like mad. Before I knew what was going on I found myself hustled aboard the float, and surrounded by the most outlandish crew I ever hope to see.

The Martians were all about seven feet tall, thin, scaly, with chests that made them look like pouter pigeons. And every man-Jack of the whole crew was jumping up and down, waving his arms, jabbering and screeching and making no end of racket. It sounded like the asylum down at the point. I was scared stiff.

They hoisted my boat aboard the float and lowered it down a hatch. That's the last I ever saw of it. Then we all went below.

They put away their hand-lights and gathered around me. By that time I was pretty calm again, and I inspected them just as thoroughly as they were inspecting me.

They were seven feet tall, as I said, and their skins were scaly. More than that, they changed colors like oil on water. And when they got especially excited they got all red and luminescent like a fire-fly! Their eyes were as big as saucers and looked like glass. The pupils rolled around in those saucers like dice in a shoe-box.

They jabbered some more, and poked me, and felt my clothes, and one of them even tried to bite me. And *say!* They wore the *funniest* clothes you ever saw! Not one man-Jack of them was dressed like the next one. Two of them were so wrapped up that you couldn't see anything but eyes.

Well, they stuck me in a big machine that looked like something in Buck Rogers, and clamped wires to my wrists and ankles and head. Next they poked me to make me wiggle, and they jabbered and screeched and looked at the dials on the machine.

Finally they stuck a helmet on my head and turned on the juice. I thought sure they were trying to electrocute me! But no, when they took it off, I could understand their language! No kiddin'! What had just been noise before was words now.

All of them started asking questions at

once. All about Earth and how developed were the people and could they fight and what kind of weapons did they have, and everything like that. But I shut up like a clam and tried to pretend I didn't understand them. But they weren't fooled a bit. They stuck me with a syringe that had some kind of truth serum in it, and in a jiffy I was telling them everything I knew. I couldn't help myself, no more than a fly in a spider's web. They asked a question, and I answered it.

I remembered a lot of things I thought I had forgotten, too. Things like what is the population of New York, and what is the capital of Maine. You know, stuff they teach you in school.

Well, then they put me to sleep, and when I woke up they gave me some honey-like stuff to eat and told me that I could have the run of the float if I wouldn't be foolish and try to get away. I promised, figurin' on getting away if possible. But I couldn't find my boat and it was too far to swim.

**T**HE Martians were a funny lot. I think they were all crazy. They were smart people—I learned their civilization was almost a million years old—but they didn't have any self-control. They were just like maniacs, screeching and yelling all the time.

They'd come to Earth to get water. They got it. Every night a big cylinder of it—thousands of gallons, I know—was tugged straight up into the air by a little black vessel that didn't show any running lights and that didn't make any noise. I never did find out how it worked.

The Martians slept in air-tight chambers every night. They had their regular Martian air and gravity in them. I was in one once, and about asphyxiated before I could get out. My nose bled for a long time.

But the Martians *were* crazy. My dad breeds stock and he says if you breed

too long with the same strain you'll get animals that are too high-strung for their own good. The Martians were like that. I had lots of time to watch them in the weeks I was there.

They'd need some sort of machine. O. K., they design it, just like that! Snap, snap! But then they'd forget to provide a foundation for it, and it'd fall over and burn holes in the deck before they could stop it. It's a wonder they weren't killed half a dozen times a day. They were the worst mixture of brains and nobrains that I ever saw.

Once they wanted a boat for something. They designed it in a jiffy. Their automatic machinery made it right up. They were proud of it because it seems there is no water on Mars and their race hadn't sailed in ships for nearly a million years. They designed a swell engine too. It was about as big as a suitcase, and to hear them talk, it could pull the moon right out of the sky. But the dopes forgot to include a drive-shaft and a propeller! I noticed it, but I didn't say anything. Let them figure those things out for themselves.

They turned on the engine after the boat was in the water and the poor engine blew up from centrifugal force. Smart people, these Martians!

And the funny thing about it was that they were *smart* in lots of ways. But they were always pulling some boner like forgetting to put on the propeller.

Well, they must have stolen lots of water before the Coast Guard showed up. The patrol boat sailed around the float a couple of times, and then hailed us.

The Martians had some sort of projector on deck that looked more like a harpoon gun than anything else. They ran over to this, jabbering like mad, and turned it on the Coast Guard. A beam of light lashed out and the water just to starboard of the Coasties blew up in a huge explosion of fire and steam. The Coast

Guard skipper could see that that was no place for *him*. He turned his boat on its tail and *really* went away from there!

The Martians grabbed me and started asking questions. I was going to lie, but a jab of truth serum prevented that.

Well, I told them that probably the Coast Guard would call the Navy Yard, and *they* would send over a destroyer or a cruiser—whatever they happened to have—and then it would be kinda bad for the Martians. There might even be a battleship in for repairs. When I finished describing a battleship, all the Martians were kinda quiet and every man-Jack of them was a subdued blue in color.

"Well, we'll have to ask Bo-jah," they said, and went off to get him. Bo-jah was an old, old Martian, who was so awful old that he slept most of the time. They broke him out, rubbed him down with oil, and woke him up. He was the worst-looking thing I've ever seen.

**H**E WAS so thin he looked like a coating of scaly varnish on a framework of bones. His tremendous chest was just one protruding rib above another, and his head looked like a skull on a stick.

"Bo-jah," the Martians said, "we are in trouble. We need your help."

The old Martian wagged his head back and forth on his thin neck, mumbled, "It won't work," and went back to sleep. They rubbed him down with oil again and woke him up.

"Bo-jah," they said, "stay awake! This is serious! We are threatened by a huge fighting machine of this world. If we are wiped out there will be no water for Mars! That would mean the end of our race! Now stay awake and listen!"

"It won't work," said the ancient Martian, and again went back to sleep. They rubbed him down with oil once more and woke him up again.

"Bo-jah," they said, "stay awake! We need your help."

"All right," said the old framework of bones, "give me some water." They gave him a small cup of *sea water*, and he drank it! It was the only time I had ever seen a Martian eat or drink anything.

He asked them questions. They told him everything they knew. He asked *me* questions. The truth serum told him everything *I* knew. Then he thought.

"It is simple," he said, after a moment's silence. He raised his skull's-head with its huge staring eyes and began to explain.

"We will make an anti-catalyzer. A sphere of force to inhibit all chemical reactions within its range. The Terrestrials' guns will refuse to fire; their shells refuse to explode. The fires in their ships will refuse to burn. All the chemical reactions upon which they depend for power will stop. They will be helpless.

"But we of Mars, my sons, will not be affected. Our energy comes from the disintegrating nuclei of Uranium 235. *Our* ship and all its weapons function on atomic energy, *physical* energy, and the anti-catalyzer will not hamper us. But the Earthmen with their chemical tools will be helpless before our might!

"To work, my sons! To work, for the glory of Mars!"

Then he gave 'em some technical dope and went back to sleep.

They built the anti-catalyzer in three hours; designing and all. It had a range of fifty miles in every direction, down, up, and four ways by the compass. All I know about it is that it put out a sphere of some kind of force that slowed down chemical reactions.

Well, they waited around for the battleship, and were disappointed as heck when only a destroyer and two airplanes showed up.

The head Martian stood by the controls of the anti-catalyzer and let the three dots on the horizon grow to two roaring planes and one plunging destroyer.

"We'll wait till they are on top of us,

just ready to fire, and then we'll turn on the anti-catalyzer," he exclaimed. "Ho-ho, but it will be merry to see their engines slow and die, their ship stop, their airplanes fall, their guns refuse to work. Hee-hee, hee-hee!" he cackled in shrill laughter, his color a merry, cherry red.

The destroyer's guns swung to cover us. Immediately the head Martian snapped on the anti-catalyzer. I heard a buzzing in my ears; a great numbness overcame me, and I knew I was falling. Then I went out, cold.

STEVE turned to McGillicuddy and said, "Now you tell me what happened."

"That's the complete story, huh, kid?" the heavy-set detective asked.

"Yeah. Now it's your turn."

"Swanson will explain. I've got to go." And McGillicuddy pushed his derby down further on his square head and strode out. Steve turned to Swanson, who was scratching his neck and looking thoughtful.

"Well?" the youngster demanded, "How about it?"

"All right," Swanson said, "Here it is.

The destroyer drifted out of the sphere of influence built up by the anti-catalyzer. Ocean currents, you know. The planes, unfortunately, sank. No survivors. I was called in when the military received the report of the destroyer captain. They had wit enough to realize that something unusual was up.

"After considerable experimentation, we finally built a small anti-anti-catalyzer, which produced a local neutralization of the Martians' field, and then we sailed a small launch up to the float. The Martians were all dead, of course. The excessive gravity and an alien atmosphere were too much when they went into—shall we call it a coma? You were nearly dead, but once the anti-catalyzer was smashed, the destroyer came in and the ship's doctor saved your life. And that's about all."

"But how come the Martians died?" Steve demanded.

Doctor Swanson smiled and shook his head. "It was like the boat they built, for which they forgot to provide a propeller. They overlooked the fact that life, is also just like an engine's combustion, a chemical function."

THE END

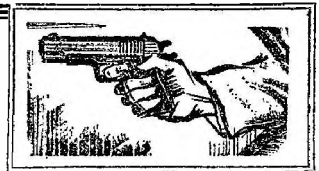
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# THE SCIENCE FICTIONEER

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## The Denver Convention

**A**S MOST science fiction readers know, the 1941 World Science Fiction Convention is going to be held in Denver, Colorado, on July 4th, 5th, and 6th. It is sponsored by the *Colorado Fantasy Society*, a state-wide organization of science fiction and fantasy fans. The Convention Committee issues a blanket invitation to all science fiction readers to attend if possible.

Following is the last-minute information on this gala event.

It will be held at Denver's fashionable hotel, the Shirley-Savoy, in the Colorado and Centennial rooms. All fans who write ahead will be met at the bus station or depot and driven to the hotel. The convention will begin promptly at 9 A.M. on Friday, the 4th.

Friday morning from 9 to 12 will be an informal gathering where old acquaintances are renewed and new ones made. Here you will meet many of the editors, authors, and fans that you have seen in the various science and fantasy magazines, and, above all, the Convention's Guest of Honor, Robert A. Heinlein. Besides Mr. Heinlein, those who are expected include Frederik Pohl, Raymond A. Palmer, F.

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In the afternoon there will be speeches, mostly informal, by leading authors and editors present. That evening will be held the traditional costume party, those attending coming dressed as their favorite science fiction character. Refreshments will be free, and after the party the equally traditional auction will be held, where the fans attending may buy the original cover

paintings and interior illustrations of their favorite fantasy artists, and numerous other collectors' items to grace their den and collection.

Saturday (the 5th) will be a meeting of *The Colorado Fantasy Society*, limited to members only, in the morning. The afternoon will be devoted to an open business meeting of fans, discussing various problems, such as where the next convention will be held. The rest of the program is not as yet definite, though at least one of the following items will probably be presented: A humorous science fiction play written and produced by author Willard E. Hawkins, the showing of H. Rider Haggard's "She," or the showing of the motion picture, "The Mysterious Island," from Jules Verne's book.

Sunday evening the Convention will officially terminate with the banquet in honor of Robert A. Heinlein.

Incidentally, a prize of \$25.00 has been offered to the fan who overcomes the greatest handicaps to get to the Denver Convention.

Anyone requiring further information should contact Lew Martin, Secretary-Treasurer of *The Colorado Fantasy Society*, at 1258 Race Street, Denver, Colorado.

—Olon F. Wiggins.

### News from Our Branches

**A** NEW branch of *The Science Fictioneers* has been chartered in Columbia, South Carolina. Its name is *The Columbia Camp*, and it becomes Branch No. Twenty of *The Science Fictioneers*. The organization meets once a week at the home of the Director, Joseph Gilbert, 3911 Park Street, Columbia, South Carolina. Director Gilbert writes: "We are out to make this group one of the most active and best known in science fiction. We are writing all our letters to the fan and professional magazines in a group, working on

fan articles and illustrations, and plugging our circle in everything we write. Watch for South Carolina to become the center of Southern fandom in the near future, as far as activity is concerned." The membership of the new club is four: Gilbert, Harry Jenkins, Lee B. Eastman, and W. B. McQueen.

*The Futurian Society of Melbourne* has been chartered as Branch No. Twenty-One of *The Science Fictioneers*. Its membership is also four. Besides the Director, Warwick Hockley, 183 Domain Road, South Yarra, S.E. 1, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, the members are Keith Taylor, Marshall L. MacLennan, and Peter Macbridge.

The Toronto, Ontario, branch of *The Science Fictioneers* has been suspended "for the duration", due to several of its key members being called into military service, Director Ted White reports.

Other branches of *The Science Fictioneers* exist in New York City; Los Angeles, California; Chicago, Illinois; Westwood, New Jersey; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Baltimore, Maryland; Denver, Colorado; Chelan, Washington; Detroit, Michigan; Memphis, Tennessee; Elkhorn, West Virginia; Long Beach, New York; Oakland, California; Dayton, Ohio; Sydney,

### THE SCIENCE FICTIONEERS

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## Fan Magazine Review

ECLIPSE, published by Richard J. Kuhn, 13598 Cheyenne, Detroit, Michigan. Bi-monthly; 10c. A new magazine, but a comer. The first issue contains an entertaining article on "Superstitions in the Pulp" by Harry Warner, Jr., plus interesting features, departments, and columns.

FAN-ATIC, published by Charles Beling, Harrington Park, New Jersey. Bi-monthly; 5c. The second issue of this pleasing little job contains a seven-year-old article by Forrest J. Ackerman, now printed for the first time, and other articles and columns by Art Widner, Jr., D. B. Thompson, etc. While the appearance of this is not as good as that of some other fan magazines, its contents reflect the light touch typical of the new fan magazines in general.

SPACEWAYS, published by Harry Warner, Jr., 303 Bryan Place, Hagerstown, Maryland. Occasional; 10c. The latest issue of this top-ranking periodical contains material by H. A. Ackerman, Tom Wright, Walter Sullivan, James Blish, Bob Tucker, Earl Singleton, and other leading science fictionists. As always, the articles are of the best.

SPECULA, published by Arthur Louis Joquel, II, 1426 West 38th Street, Los Angeles, California. Bi-monthly; 10c. This newcomer is an all-fiction magazine. Its appearance is splendid, at least equal to that of any other fan periodical. The contents do not entirely come up to the standard set by its excellent make-up, but improvement in this regard seems very possible.

ULTRA, published by Eric F. Russell, 274 Edgecliff Road, Woolahra, Sydney, N.S.W., Australia. Bi-monthly; 10c. The latest issue to hand of this Antipodean fan

magazine contains articles on science, a fantasy crossword puzzle, some fiction, etc. Neatly mimeographed in several colors.

VOICE OF THE IMAGI-NATION, published by Forrest J. Ackerman and Morojo, P.O. Box 6475, Met. Station, Los Angeles, California. Bi-monthly; 10c. As usual, the contents are almost exclusively composed of letters on every imaginable subject, written by a score of fans from all over the country and abroad. One of the letters in the current issue complains that the quality of the letters presented has gone down. This may be true, but the magazine is still a good bet.

ZEUS, published by Ronald B. Levy, 18 Dudley Street, Coogee, N.S.W., Australia. Occasional; 10c. This is the semi-official publication of *The Futurian Society of Sydney*. Among its excellent articles is a digest of the minutes of recent meetings of the club. Like the other Australian fan magazine mentioned above, this is mimeographed in three colors.

## New Members

Cecil Snyder, Jr., 408 West 16th Street, Tyronne, Pennsylvania; Carol Hebrew, Lexington, Nebraska; Gilbert Swann, Jr., 916 Ramsay Street, Baltimore, Maryland; John Grottinger, 4504 Pasco, Kansas City, Missouri; Elgin L. Gates, Cactus Gardens, Flagstaff, Arizona; Robert G. Dichmann, University Hospital, Portland, Oregon; Frank Roantree, Jr., Mount Assumption Institute, Plattsburgh, New York; and A. R. Logan, Hotel Adelphia, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

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Billy Wyke, Penn Theatre, Conemaugh, Pennsylvania; Milton Kershner, 369 Henderson Street, Jersey City, New Jersey; Henry Mitchell, 431 East 7th Street, San Angelo, Texas; Charles Hidley, 2541 Aqueduct Avenue, New York, New York; Larry Shaw, 1301 State Street, Schenectady, New York; Fred Stang, 2231 23rd Avenue, Oakland, California; Katherine Baum, 1243 Juniata Street, N. S. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Bill Arata, 739 Irving Street, San Francisco, California.

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Williamson, National Military Home, Box 246, West Los Angeles, California; Francis Fisk, Kensington, Kansas; and Richard Rowland, 6938 Howard Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

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Gene Risher, 382 Ferndale Avenue, Johnstown, Pennsylvania; Eric Rolaff, Moon Valley Farm, Flat, Missouri; Martha Bradleigh, 217 South Sixth Street, Newcastle, Indiana; Leonard J. Moffett, Central Delivery, Ellwood City, Pennsylvania; Lovelle Summers, R. F. D. 1, Wampum, Pennsylvania; and Nick Risko, 203 Martin Avenue, Ellwood City, Pennsylvania.



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Take a look at the line-up for the September issue. There's "Mars-Tube," a complete novelette by S. D. Gottesman, "Farewell to Fuzzies" by Henry Hasse, "Super-Neutron" by Isaac Asimov, "Radiation Trap" by Harry Walton, and six more complete stories by Paul Edmonds, Frank Belknap Long, James MacCreigh, and others. And every story new, never before published. We use no reprints!

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# STRANGER FROM SMALLNESS

Ralph Blake's surprise kidnapping flung him into fierce adventure in the torrid Sahara. Then a strange creature from Mercury stepped in—and even Ralph's death couldn't prevent him from unravelling the network of intrigue!

By OTIS ADELBERT KLINE

## CHAPTER ONE

Hagg Nadeem

FOR some time now, as he passed from stall to stall in the sweet-smelling Suk al Attarin, the Street of the Perfumers in the Arab quarter of Cairo, Ralph Blake, American microbe hunter, had been conscious that he was being followed. The young bacteriologist, a tall, slender, sun-bronzed chap with dark brown hair that was bleached at the temples by exposure to the sun, had received a week's furlough from his gruelling labors. He was trying to find the cause of and cure for a mysterious malady that was decimating the native population of lower Egypt.

He had hurried through tiffin after his late arrival at Shephard's hotel, anxious to make the most of the brief time allotted him for diversion in the Moslem metropolis, and had decided to tour the bazaars. The afternoon and evening had passed with many of the bazaars still unexplored, and now, it was near closing time.

Observing the two who had been following him, from the corners of his eyes, he saw that one was short and slight, with a patch over one eye beneath his red *tarboosh*. The other was as tall as Blake himself, but fully twice as wide, and

walked with a rolling gait. His rotund countenance might have been jovial, save for the ferocious aspect imparted by three livid scars, two on the left, and one on the right side of his face.

These two, it appeared, were no strangers to hand-to-hand fights, and their cloaks, no doubt, concealed curved, razor-edged *jambiyehs*.

What could be their motive in following him? Robbery? Assassination? That might be it. He had a particularly bitter enemy—Hans Friedl of Vienna—not only jealous of his fame, but filled with undying hatred because Blake had once exposed a ridiculous error he had made.

Twice before, Blake's life had been attempted by obviously paid assassins, once in China and once in New Guinea, and both times he had suspected Friedl. But he had been unable to prove anything because he had been compelled to kill his attackers in order to save his own life.

He began to wish that he had brought his favorite weapon—a Colt forty-five. But, as it still reposed in the bottom drawer of his wardrobe trunk, he could only rely on nature's weapons.

He could, of course, call a policeman. But he had not been attacked, and could not even prove that he was being followed. Besides, every native policeman now seemed suddenly and mysteriously



to have disappeared. There were only a few straggling shopkeepers and their employees about.

**K**EEPING close to the nearest of these, Blake, with an effort to appear nonchalant, followed them out of the Suk al Attarin, and turned right on the Sukten Nahhasi. He kept a wary eye on the two villainous looking cutthroats who were following him. It was during one of his quick glances backward that the group he had taken to be harmless shopkeepers suddenly jumped on him. A cloak was thrown over his head, and he was borne to the ground by the sheer weight of numbers.

Blake instantly lashed out from the ground with fists and feet, flinging them in all directions, then tore the stifling folds of the cloak from his head and leaped erect. They were on him again in an instant, like a pack of wolves around a stag, and he saw that the monocular and the scar-faced ruffian who had been following him, had joined them—were apparently the ringleaders. He clipped the former on the jaw, sending him reeling against a wall, then punched the latter in the belly, doubling him up in agony.

Yet the odds would have been far too heavy had it not been for the sudden appearance of the newcomer. He was slender, of medium height, and wore a closely-cropped, jet black beard. Save for his green turban, his clothing was European. He sprang into the fray, laying about him on the heads and shoulders of the rabble with a thick Malacca cane, and shouting in Arabic: "Dogs and sons of dogs! Scum of the *suks*! I'll teach you to attack a friendly stranger!"

At this, Blake's assailants quickly took to their heels, bearing with them the still unconscious monocular, and helping his groaning, scar-faced companion.

The newcomer helped Blake to brush his clothing and put it in order.

"*Yukliff*—" began Blake gratefully, when the other interrupted.

"Don't thank me. It was the least I could do after this unwarranted attack by my countrymen. I am devastated. I am ashamed that such a thing could occur on the public streets. And not one of my police officers in sight."

"Your police officers?" wondered Blake.

"Permit me to introduce myself, *effendi*. I am Hagg Nadeem."

Hagg Nadeem! The name was legendary. Blake had often heard tales of the mysterious head of Cairo's secret police, reputed not only to be an *ulema*, a Moslem holy man learned in *ed din*, the faith of Al Islam, and a *hagg* who had made the holy pilgrimage, but an Oxford graduate, well versed in the arts and sciences of the occident, and a descendent of an ancient line of Egyptian magicians who had communicated their esoteric knowledge from father to son since before the days of Mena, the first pharaoh.

He had regarded many of the tales of this man's exploits as pure fabrication—utterly preposterous—and the man himself as a myth. Now he stood before him in the flesh, suave and smiling.

**B**LAKE returned his infectious smile. "I've heard of you, Hagg Nadeem," he said. "I'm Ralph Blake, bug hunter."

"And I've heard of your brilliant work as a microbiologist, doctor," replied the *hagg*. "Will you join me in a spot of refreshment? There is a cafe nearby."

"I'll be delighted," Blake replied.

They rounded the corner of the next side street, and the Egyptian led the way into a crowded, smoke-filled cafe, where a Moghrebi dancing girl swayed and wiggled her well-rounded curves to the wailing of hautboys, and strumming oudhs, the rattle of tambors, and the throbbing of small drums.

The patrons of the place, Blake noticed, were mostly natives, many of them smoking bubbling *shishas* and sipping small cups of black, syrupy coffee.

"A table for two, Ali," Hagg Nadeem told the obsequious head waiter. "And send Husayn."

Ali seated them on a cushioned divan behind a small circular table, and hurried to summon the proprietor, who lost no time in coming.

"My poor place is honored, *ya hagg*," he said. "What is your pleasure?"

"Coffee for me. For my friend, perhaps, something stronger?"

He looked inquiringly at Blake.

"A double arak, neat," Blake replied.

Hagg Nadeem proffered a curiously carved ivory cigarette case, yellow with age and obviously a valuable antique.

Blake took a cigarette. Hagg Nadeem followed his example, and a watchful waiter quickly held a light to each.

A moment later, the proprietor himself came up followed by two more waiters, one bringing the coffee, the other the arak.

Blake poured four fingers of the powerful anise-flavored date brandy, and tossed it off neat. A pleasant glow went through him as he splashed more of the clear, colorless liquor into the tall glass.

"I needed that one," he told the *hagg*. "Now I'm ready to dawdle over the next in the approved fashion."

"I quite understand," smiled Hagg Nadeem. "A brave man faces danger without flinching, but once it is past there is a reaction."

While the *hagg* talked, Blake suddenly felt a peculiar sensation come over him. At first he felt as if he were shrinking to infinite smallness, while the smiling, bearded face beside him assumed gigantic proportions. The next instant, it seemed that it was he who was swelling to incredible size, that the *hagg* was scarcely larger than a mosquito, and had receded very far away.

Blake was not a toxicologist, but he knew the symptoms. *Bangh*, the subtle oriental drug that changes and distorts the senses! He had been doped either by the cigarette or the drink.

He clutched the table, tried to rise. But the cloth came away in his hands, spilling coffee and liquor. He sank back, inert, as consciousness left him.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Mysterious Host

**B**LAKE awoke with a splitting headache, and a thirst which he knew could not have been engendered by four fingers of arak. He opened his eyes and squinted around him. He was lying on a low divan, clad in embroidered silk pajamas that must have cost a small fortune. Silken coverlets and pillows spoke also of opulence. Antique rugs, every one a collector's piece, Bokharas, Kashgars, Kashans, Kerman-shahs, Feraghans, Daghestans, and many others, completely covered the walls as well as the floor.

The room was lighted by an antique oil lamp suspended from the ceiling by four golden chains, the oil containing a perfume which scented the room with heavy fragrance. The ceiling was decorated with ornate arabesques.

Blake sat up. His head swam dizzily and a feeling of nausea attacked him. But this gradually subsided, and he got to his feet. No door or window was visible, so he began systematically drawing back one rug after another. The first two revealed only bare expanses of wall. The third showed the outlet of what was obviously an air-conditioning system, which accounted for the comfortable temperature of the room as compared to the terrific heat of the outdoors.

Behind the fourth rug was a heavy mahogany door. He tried the handle and found it locked. Just as he was about to

pound on the door to attract attention, the lock clicked and the door swung outward.

A giant negro, naked save for turban and loin cloth, held the door open. A light skinned Abyssinian girl held a tray on which was a steaming copper pot, a small cup, and a package of cigarettes.

"Your coffee, *sidi*," she said.

Placing the tray on a small teakwood taborette inlaid with mother of pearl, she filled the cup with steaming, spiced coffee, and withdrew.

Blake heard the door softly closed and locked.

After a second cup of coffee and half a cigarette, the American began to feel a bit better. He was about to go and pound on the door once more, when he heard it open. This time a young Arab entered.

"*Salaam aleykum*," he said with a polite bow. "Your bath is ready, *sidi*."

Blake followed the bath boy along a dimly lighted hallway, with stucco walls, mosaic tiled floors, and flickering alabaster oil lamps which hung from the ceiling at intervals of about ten feet.

The bath room again reflected the wealth and magnificence of his host, with its walls of black marble and sunken tub of pale green tile. All metal fixtures were gold plated.

After a bath, shave and massage, Blake's *bangh* hangover had practically disappeared, and he was ravenously hungry. The bath boy then opened the door of a connecting dressing room.

Here another young Arab had laid out his clothes, neatly pressed. Obviously, his abductors must have obtained his baggage at Shepheard's, perhaps by faking his signature on a note and paying his hotel bill. He found his wallet and small change intact, and the boy who had brought his clothing produced his wrist watch.

Another door, opening into the hallway, swung wide, and the Abyssinian girl announced: "Breakfast awaits in the *salamlik*, *sidi*."

She ushered him along the hallway once more, then down a winding stairway into a large room, circled at the top by a screened balcony, and fully two stories in height. It was furnished in oriental splendor.

A MAN was seated at the far end on a high cushioned divan behind a large taborette. As the American drew near, he stood up to greet him. He was big and powerful of frame. His features, however, save for the eyes, were veiled by a corner of his *kufiyeh*.

"*Salaam aleykum, ya shaykh*," said the American.

"*Wa aleykum salaam, Hakim Blake*," the man replied. "*Fadl*," motioning him to a seat on the divan. His voice was pleasant and well modulated.

His guest seated, the big man resumed his own place on the divan and clapped his hands. A serving man entered, bearing a tray on which was a plate of *khubs*, bread baked in flat round loaves and cut in narrow strips, and a small dish of crystalline rock salt.

The big man tore two small bites from one of the strips, and dipped them in the salt. He passed one to Blake with a pious "*Bismillahi!*" and ate the other, himself. Blake accepted and ate the bite of bread, and the serving man withdrew.

Blake was well aware of the "law of the salt". If a Bedouin ate bread and salt with a guest, he not only signified that he was his friend, but that the guest was under his protection. A Bedouin who broke the law of the salt would consider his face blackened, himself disgraced in the eyes of God and man.

Once more the big man clapped his hands, and three more servitors entered with melons, fruits, eggs fried in butter, *khubs*, assorted pastries and coffee.

Not a word was uttered during the meal. When it was completed the host thanked God with a fervent "*Alhamdu-*

*illah!*" which was echoed by Blake. After they had laved their hands in cool water poured from the thin neck of an earthen vessel by a serving girl, two tall, ornate *shishas*, topped by glowing charcoal, were brought.

Blake placed the amber mouthpiece between his lips, and inhaled the water-cooled smoke while waiting for his host to speak. The latter did so after exhaling a wisp of blue vapor.

"The sun of my day is darkened," he said in Arabic, "and the moon and stars of my night are muffled in clouds."

Blake readily interpreted this to mean that his host was afflicted by a great sorrow, and that, perhaps, there was something he could do about it.

"Allah grant you the power of peace," he replied, "but after, it may be that, *inshallah*, I can be of some small assistance."

Blake felt that this was his best course. No indignant questions as to why he had been abducted, no blustering about his rights as an American citizen, but a frank and friendly offer to try to help this man who had proffered undying friendship and protection according to the custom of his race.

"May Allah return your kindness a thousand fold," said the *shaykh*. "I deeply regret that I was compelled to use the only means left to bring you here. But, as you are aware, I had no choice left after your three refusals—"

"My three refusals!" interrupted Blake. "I don't quite understand."

"I still have your written answers to my three letters, which were signed 'Shaykh Subhan', though that is not my name, requesting your assistance," said his host.

"But I never received or answered any requests for assistance," said Blake. "I'd like to see those letters."

The black eyes of the *shaykh* regarded him keenly for a moment above the concealing *kufiyeh*.

"There is much in this that puzzles me, *sidi*," he said. "Despite the letters, I believe you. And you shall be shown them in due course. But, at present, we have before us a far more important matter—a matter of life and death."

"Suppose you tell me about it," Blake suggested.

"My daughter has lain like one dead for more than three months. Yet the learned *hakims*, the doctors of your race and mine, say she is not dead. She is my only child, the jewel of my home and the salt of my life. She does not speak or move or even breathe. She takes no food or water, yet does not waste away, nor does her body temperature change. One of our Arab *hakims* said she had been bewitched by a *jinni*, but, as every one knows, there are no *jinn* in these days.

"The *Feringhi hakims* are confounded, and can do nothing, but recommended your services. That is why, when I received those three refusals, I had you brought here through the contriving of my lifelong friend, Hagg Nadeem."

"I'll examine your daughter. But first, where am I? And what about laboratory equipment?"

"You are in my humble house on a certain oasis in the Arabian desert, brought hither in my airplane. I cannot reveal more, as I do not wish you to know this location, or my name. But if you succeed in healing my daughter, I promise to make you wealthy beyond your most extravagant dreams. I had a complete laboratory installed here two months ago."

He clapped his hands, and a servitor appeared in the doorway.

"Send Marjanah," he commanded.

The servitor withdrew silently, and a few moments later, a portly, capable-looking Soudanese woman appeared in white uniform.

"This is my daughter's nurse," said the *shaykh*, "who has cared for her since birth. She will conduct you to her."

THE OLD nurse led him up a winding stairway to the balcony that circled the top of the large *salamlik* and was screened from the observation of any one below by *mashrabiyyeh* lattice work.

"Destooir!"

She shouted the warning to all females within hearing to veil their faces, as a man other than their master approached. An instant later the door facing them was swung open by a huge black eunuch, armed with a scimitar and *jambiyeh*, and as tall and muscular as the one who had been on guard at Blake's door that morning.

Marjanah waddled past the eunuch into the *harim* and Blake followed. They passed several curtained doorways which exuded the scents of exotic perfumes and from which came the subdued murmur of female voices. At the end of the corridor, a slave girl drew back a curtain, and Blake followed Marjanah into the richly furnished boudoir of the *shaykh's* daughter.

Waddling up to the bed, the old nurse crooned: "Nuralayn, my little white dove, the great *hakim* has come at last to heal you. Awaken, my little pigeon."

Nuralayn. Blake translated the name automatically as he stepped forward. *Nural ayn*—Light of the Eyes. And, as he saw the slender, youthful figure that lay on the bed, he realized that the name was well deserved. The thin silken coverlet failed to hide the lovely curves of budding young womanhood. Nor did the *yashmak* of lace and tiny strung pearls which the nurse had placed over the girl's face, covering all but the eyes and profusion of wavy, night-black hair which lay on the pillow, conceal her exotic beauty.

"Light of the Eyes! She's a knockout!" thought Blake. Then he recalled that his visit was purely professional, and tried to recover from his surprise sufficiently to act the part.

He was well enough acquainted with Moslem decorum to refrain from lifting the *yashmak*, however, he drew back a

corner of the silken coverlet, picked up the limp arm that lay next to him, and felt for the pulse. No heartbeats were discernible.

"Tell your master I'll need a stethoscope," he informed Marjanah.

"Right here, doctor."

He turned at the sound of a new voice behind him, and saw a white clad nurse, her features concealed by a surgeon's mask. She had wheeled in a small table, on which surgical instruments lay in a porcelain tray. She was proffering the stethoscope.

Blake listened for heartbeats and sounds of breathing. Both were inaudible. He raised an eyelid, not unmindful of the beauty of the long, curling lashes. Then he raised the other. The eyes were turned upward and inward, as if in deep hypnosis.

Catalepsy, he thought. But what can have caused it?

"We'll take a blood specimen," he said.

His capable assistant handed him a tuft of cotton and a bottle of alcohol. When he had sponged the white skin just above the crook of the elbow, she handed him the needle with plunger set. As it slowly seeped into the glass barrel of the instrument, Blake saw that the blood was rich, red, and healthy looking as that of a normal individual.

"Where's the laboratory?" he asked.

"I'll show you immediately, doctor."

Marjanah held back the door curtain as the nurse wheeled out the table, Blake following. They passed the curtained doorways of the *harim* and the big eunuch, then circled the balcony, presently entering a room on the far side. It was a clean, white-tiled laboratory with the latest and best equipment, lighted by a row of large windows that let in the sunlight. Looking out, he saw a rolling expanse of desert sand dunes, with the heat devils quivering above them in the hot sunshine.

Blake set to work at once, making the routine tests and examinations, but could



find nothing wrong. The blood seemed perfectly normal and he was about to remove the last slide from his compound microscope when a tiny, an unbelievable figure near the center of the drop of diluted blood he was examining, caught his eye.

It was a living, moving, microscopic replica of the girl from whom he had just taken the blood sample!

### CHAPTER THREE

#### The Stranger

**B**LAKE was dumfounded. A tiny human figure smaller than a blood corpuscle, less than one twelve-thousandth of an inch in height! And one which perfectly reproduced the form of the girl from whom it had been taken. What could it mean?

He blinked, and looked again. Perhaps this was a hallucination induced by the *bangh* with which he had been doped.

Now the figure was moving. It was raising its tiny arms toward him. One hand pointed to its mouth. The other rubbed its stomach.

"Good God!" he exclaimed. "It's—she's hungry."

"I beg your pardon, doctor."

His assistant, still masked, was standing at his elbow.

"Eh? Oh, nothing. I mean—our patient is hungry. She must be, after three months without food. Blood shows starvation symptoms—hunger toxins."

He didn't quite know why he had said that. Something inside him, it seemed, was warning him not to tell this masked assistant of his what he had seen. A telepathic message, perhaps! The tiny figure in the water droplet had now laid its finger on its pouting lips.

He turned to his assistant. "Go and attend the patient. Let me know at once if she should show any sign of returning consciousness."

"Yes, doctor."

Alone, Blake turned his attention once more to the tiny figure in the drop of water. It was still signalling for food. But how could he feed this minute being?

He hunted around, found some sterile glucose, and mixing a small quantity with a little distilled water, added it to the droplet on the slide. As he removed the dropper, he thought he saw a tiny creature smaller than a midge, circle upward from the slide and fly toward the sink.

Once more he applied his eye to the microscope. The little figure had disappeared! Had he killed or dissolved it? Or had it sprouted wings and flown away?

He went over the slide very carefully, moving it to bring the field of the microscope around the edges of the drop, and gradually spiraling to the center. But there was no sign of the tiny individual he had seen before. He then made an examination with the polariscope, but could discern no trace of the glucose he had dropped.

As he worked, he was increasingly aware of a slight rustling sound behind him. However, he was so absorbed by what he was doing that he paid no attention, until he suddenly heard a deep bass voice say:

"Thanks for the lift, doctor."

He turned and saw, not a man, but a plant! At least, it resembled a plant. It was a bright green in color, though quite unlike any plant he had ever seen. Its grotesque, fluted, barrel-shaped body was supported by six corkscrew shaped tendrils, each about three feet in length. Another fringe of tendrils grew from around the upper rim, like the tentacles of an octopus. One of these, he observed, was attached to the opening of the water faucet. A second was twined about the handle. All others ended in large, spade-shaped leaves which were swaying gently in the bright sunlight, making the rustling sound which he had heard.

Up from the center spiraled another

tendrils about an inch in thickness. It was surmounted by a pear-shaped head, with grotesque features that looked remotely human. The head was crowned with fern-like leaves that curled upward and outward.

The creature was growing swiftly, the body swelling like an inflated balloon, while the head expanded in proportion, and the leaves and tendrils lengthened.

**S**PEECHLESS with amazement, Blake watched it grow until the leaf crown touched the ceiling. Then the tendril beneath the water faucet was withdrawn, and the one which gripped the handle turned off the water.

The head, now larger than a bushel basket, spoke.

"You seem startled, doctor. But I observe that you are not afraid."

"Why should I be," Blake replied. "You are only a hallucination like the little figure I saw on the slide. It disappeared, and so will you."

"You are expressing a hope rather than a conviction," grinned the huge head. "You don't like my looks, and so you hope I'll disappear. But tell me, why did you drop that glucose onto the slide?"

"I, er, there was an appeal for food. I didn't know what else to use for a microscopic creature."

"You did wisely," rumbled the giant. "I was that microscopic creature. You responded to my appeal for food, and I will not forget it. In fact, I am going to help you."

"Just who and what are you?" asked Blake. "And how could you change from a protozoan to a giant plant?"

"Simple enough when you know how to control natural laws," was the reply. "As to who and what I am—all in good time. For the present you may consider me a *jinni*. That's what the Arabs have always called my people. No doubt you've read 'The Thousand Nights and a Night'."

"I regard those stories purely as works of the imagination," said Blake. "And, frankly, I consider you a figment of the imagination. You have no real existence, but are the result of suggestion, perhaps by that wily magician, Hagg Nadeem, brought about through hypnosis or drugs. You are a hallucination; your voice is telepathic."

"Even for a scientist, you are unusually narrow and dogmatic," rumbled the deep voice. "If I weren't obligated to grant you three wishes by the ethics of my people, I might refrain from doing so on that score, even though you now blindly stand in deadly danger, arguing with me about whether or not I exist."

"If you are not a hallucination or a hypnotic suggestion, you might tell me who and what you are."

"A complete explanation would be beyond your power to grasp," was the reply. "You don't believe in the *jinn*, and I didn't tell you I was a *jinni*—only that my people are so called by the Arabs, and surrounded with superstitious legends. In other lands they have been variously called elves, fairies, leprechauns, and a host of other names, when they revealed themselves. I am a visitor from another planet—the one you call Mercury."

"That's preposterous," said Blake. "There could be no life on Mercury, with its perpetually broiling day on one side and its unchanging terrifically cold night on the other."

"Not life as you biologists know it here," was the patient explanation. "But life, nevertheless, infinitely more intelligent than anything on this planet. It has had to be, from the beginning, because of the difficulty of survival under such conditions. You, as a microbiologist, are aware that there are microorganisms on the earth that can live and reproduce in boiling water."

"Granted," said Blake. "I've seen them."



"My people, normally, are sub-microscopic. We are smaller than electrons—smaller, even, than photons."

"And I presume you traveled here from Mercury on an electron."

"Your guess is closer than you realize, but not quite accurate. My space ship was towed here by a controlled positron, with the speed of light," came the stranger's deep voice.

"And where is your space ship now?"

"Moored in one of the molecules of this form which I have temporarily assumed. I can always get it when I want it, can go back instantly to sub-microscopic smallness. When you extracted me from the vein of that lovely creature whom I was investigating, I was smaller than a filterable virus. However, I swiftly built up a unicellular body the size of a microbe, physically, a protozoan. I knew you would be interested in a strange protozoan—that, in fact, was what you were looking for and half expecting to find. But I knew, also, that you would be definitely more interested in a body of microscopic size shaped like the girl. So, as a single celled animalcule, I assumed that shape. Like an amoeba, it was easy for me swiftly to assume almost any shape."

"Why did you want to get my attention and communicate with me? And why were you 'investigating' the girl?"

"I'LL ANSWER your last question first, since it forms the background for the other. I am here on a scientific expedition. It has been some time since any of my people visited your planet, and I was delegated to check up on evolutionary progress here. Originally, I fell into the lily pond that surrounds the fountain in the courtyard. I investigated the protozoans and took notes. Then I examined more complex creatures and the plants that grew around and in the water.

"I was investigating a lotus flower when Nuralayn came into the courtyard, sat on the rim of the fountain, and plucked the flower. Before placing it in her hair, she inhaled its fragrance, and me with it. I was, at the moment, smaller even than one of the minute osmophores of floral aroma she drew in through her lovely nostrils.

"After she had returned to her room, I put her in a state of suspended animation, so she wouldn't be moving about and disturbing me during the examination, which

took quite a long while. You humans are tremendously complex organisms, as you know. And there was a lot of checking to be done in order to note what evolutionary changes, if any, had taken place since her ancestors were investigated."

"Reasonable enough," said Blake. "But that doesn't explain your subsequent actions. They seem entirely illogical."

"And so they are if you lack a sense of humor. I observe that yours is not overdeveloped. However, we *jinn*, as the Arabs call us, do have a highly developed sense of humor. We are fond of playing pranks, and frequently of assuming shapes which frighten and mystify men. I had been grubbing along for many weeks and was ready for some relaxation when you happened along.

"I didn't have to have that glucose. But it was tremendously useful to me, and I gave you the chance which many of my people have given yours, to do me a favor, in return for which, if performed, you would be granted three favors or wishes. As a biologist, you should be able to guess what I did after that."

"As a protozoan, you absorbed the glucose, a highly concentrated organic food compound. You expanded the single cell you inhabited, or perhaps, multiplied the cell by fission, making a more complex organism."

"Right the last time."

"Then you sprouted wings, flew to the sink, and there began your present growth."

"By what process?"

"There is none which even begins to explain it, except photosynthesis."

"Photosynthesis it is. I required only carbonic acid gas, air, water and sunlight, in order to build up the various carbon and nitrogen compounds of which this experimental body is composed, and all were here in abundance. It is true that there were a number of elements lacking, which I might have utilized, had they been

available. But the carbon and nitrogen compounds are ample for my purpose. I can assume any shape or color I wish, with them alone. And I don't even need to get my water from a tap. There's plenty of it in the air. The tap was easier, it was available, and I was feeling a bit lazy after my strenuous investigations.

"But I perceive that you are worried about Nuralayn. She is unharmed and is now conscious and taking nourishment. I removed the hypnotic spell after you put me on the slide. However, her recovery has put you in deadly danger. I must warn you that—. Ah! Too late. It's here already."

Blake turned involuntarily at the sound of the opening of the laboratory door. Standing in the hallway was the masked, white-clad form of the nurse. The right hand held a long-barreled Luger, to which a silencer was attached, and it was leveled at his head. There was a coughing sound accompanied by the click of the recoiling breech, and the heavy bullet smacked him between the eyes, passing through his brain and out through the back of his head, blacking out all consciousness.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Mortal Enemy

**B**LAKE'S lapse of consciousness, it seemed, had lasted for but an instant. For he saw the assassin still standing in the doorway, smoking gun in hand, looking down at his body. The latter raised the white skirt, revealing a pair of man's trousers, rolled up above the knees, and thrust the gun into a holster.

Behind him stood a man wearing a red tarboosh—the big, scar-faced man who had shadowed Blake in the bazaar. He said in guttural German:

"Did you get him, Doktor Friedl?"

"Between the eyes, herr captain," was the response of the white clad figure, in

the same tongue. "He won't cross my path again. But we must get away quickly. *Raus!*"

Further vision of the two was cut off by the closing of the door. From where they had stood they had not been able to see the sink or the photosynthetic creation of the Stranger.

So it was his mortal enemy, Friedl, who had had him captured and brought here. Evidently, the Viennese bacteriologist had tried his best to determine the cause of the girl's coma, and had failed. As a last resort, he had advised her father to send for Blake. But he had seen to it that the requests had never reached the man he envied and hated, and that forged letters of refusal had come to the *shaykh*. He wanted Blake to come as a prisoner, not as a friend, perform his task, then fall easy prey to his pistol.

The recovery of Nuralayn and Blake's preoccupation in the laboratory had given him the opportunity he sought. As for the other, evidently a Nazi officer, his scars received in the customary student duels, Blake knew his presence in Arabia in disguise meant that some secret plans directed against the Suez Canal or the Irak oil fields, or both, were being carried out.

As these thoughts raced through Blake's mind, he suddenly remembered that he was supposed to be dead. Yet, here he was, standing erect, and looking toward the door which had just closed. It didn't make sense. He turned around and saw the reason. His body still lay on the floor as it had fallen, the head lolled over to one side. There was a round, blue hole in the forehead, and the back of the head was a bloody mess that made him shudder. He was dead! There could be no doubt of it. He tried to pick up a test tube on the table beside him. His hand, though it seemed substantial enough to him, passed through it as if it had not been there at all.

So shocked was he by the swift sequence of events, and the realization that he had

passed into another plane of existence—a plane in which, as a practical scientist, he had never believed—he had forgotten the presence of the Stranger. But the deep, bass voice of the latter made him look up.

“I intended to warn you,” he said, “but your enemy acted more swiftly than I anticipated. I am still ready, however, to grant you three wishes, whenever you choose to express them.”

“What good are three wishes or any number of wishes to me, now?” asked Blake dejectedly. “I’m dead. This is the end.”

“It is true that you are dead according to the standards of the materialistic world into which you were born,” said the Stranger. “But this is not the end.”

“Just what and where am I?” asked Blake.

“You are now inhabiting your astral body, which accompanied your other organic shell. It is just as material as the one on the floor, but in a different space, coëxistant with the one you just left. Ordinarily, in the new space, you would not be able to see your body, this room, or this photosynthetic experiment I have built up—let alone hear its voice. However, I have bridged the gap for you between the space you are now in and the one I am at present inhabiting, by amplifying your undeveloped inherent power which your scientists call ESP, or extra sensory perception—a power of the subjective mind, or ego.

“But that will be enough explaining for now. I perceive your fervent wish to return to the spatial existence you just left. Shall I grant that wish for you, as number one? I can build a new body for you, or repair the old one. What is your pleasure?”

“I’d prefer the one I had.”

“Granted. That makes my work a bit less complicated. While I do this repair job, I suggest that you go to the *salamlik*. Something is about to take place there

which will be of considerable interest to you.”

Blake turned and walking to the door, tried to open it. But the handle was like thin air to his touch.

“Walk through it, man,” said the stranger. “Have I been talking to you for nothing?”

**B**LAKE went through the door as if it had not been there, traversed the balcony that circled the upper half of the *salamlik*, and descended the stairway.

The big man known to him as the *shaykh* was seated where he had last seen him. But now, his face was not veiled. And Blake instantly recognized the hawk nose and flaming hennad beard of Sidi Abudul Hafiz al Hasani, direct descendent of Mohammed, and the head of his desert tribe. His picture appeared frequently in papers all over the world, and by some, he was regarded as more powerful than the king, himself.

Beside him sat Nuralayn. As there was no one else present, her lovely features were unveiled. The *yashmak* and scarf lay on the taborette before her. As he had seen her before, he had felt attracted to her, and had fought off the feeling. Now, as he observed her, bright-eyed and vivacious, chatting with her father, the feeling returned with overwhelming force, and he realized that there was a bond between them which not even death could sever.

The *shaykh* said: “Can’t you tell me which man with Allah’s aid, brought about your marvellous recovery?”

“I wish I might, father. I did not see the strange *hakim*, yet, somehow I seemed to sense his presence. I sense it even now. I picture him as tall, slender and handsome, with dark brown hair that has been bleached at the temples by the sun. I dreamed of him as I lay there unconscious; I feel that he is here with us, now.”

“But that is impossible,” said her father. “He is up in the laboratory.”

"According to the learned *hakims*, my illness was impossible, also. I know only that when I awakened Marjanah was with me. Hakim Friedl came in a few moments after, disguised as a nurse. He looked surprised when he saw me awake, and so when he told me that he had cured me I did not believe him. He told Marjanah to bring me some broth, and then went out rather hurriedly, as if he had just thought of some matter he must attend to at once."

"There is much in this affair that confounds the reason," said the *shaykh*. "I am beginning to have doubts of the sincerity of my declared friend, Hakim Friedl. And it seems a strange coincidence that your healing should take place with the advent of the new *hakim*, whereas, Friedl was here for two months, and could do nothing."

At this moment, one of the sharif's giant negro guards appeared in the doorway and cried:

"*Destoir!* Then he announced: "Hakim Friedl and his servants, Abdullah and Selim."

As Nuralayn hastily adjusted the *yashmak* and scarf, concealing her hair and the lower part of her face, Blake turned and saw Friedl, now undisguised and wearing tropical whites, enter the room. He was followed by the huge, scar-faced man who had shadowed Blake in the *suk*, and his companion, the little, wiry monocular. Blake recalled that Friedl had addressed the big man known as Abdullah as 'captain', and judged that he must be a Nazi officer in disguise. What mischief could these two now be planning, here in the Arabian desert?

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Unmasked

**F**RIEDL, though slight in stature for a man, was quite good looking. His smooth-shaven features were regular in

outline, and his manner was suave and polished.

"*Fadil*," invited the *shaykh* politely, as they came up. "Please be seated."

Friedl took the seat on the U-shaped divan on the side nearest Nuralayn. The others sat down on the other side.

"I have come to congratulate you, *sidi*, and to claim my reward," said Friedl.

Abdul Hafiz replied: "Your congratulations I accept, and, *Alhamdulillah*, I thank God for the blessing He has seen fit to bestow upon his servant. But your mention of a reward puzzles me."

"Surely you have not forgotten that you promised me anything I might ask, in case I should heal your daughter," said Friedl.

"I have not forgotten," replied Abdul Hafiz. "But I have no proof that you healed my daughter. It was only after Hakim Blake arrived that she recovered her health."

"Hakim Blake had nothing to do with her recovery," said Friedl. "He was not even in the room when she regained her senses."

"Why not send for Hakim Blake and let him speak for himself, father?" suggested Nuralayn.

"I have already done that," the *shaykh* replied. "I told Mahmood to go and summon him as soon as he should admit Hakim Friedl. Here he comes, now." He raised his voice. "Admit Hakim Blake, Mahmood," he commanded.

The big eunuch came in, and Blake saw that his hands were trembling and his eyes were big with fear.

"There has been a most calamitous happening in your household, master," he said, his voice quivering. "Hakim Blake is dead, shot through the head and lying on the floor of the laboratory. And there is draped over him a strange and most horrible looking plant, the like of which I have never seen before. It looks like a creation of the *jinn*, and it has a big head larger than a watermelon. It roared at me, and

I believe it is about to devour the body of Hakim Blake."

Abdul Hafiz looked closely at the big negro, observed the expression of fear in his rolling eyes and the trembling of his huge hands.

"What old wives' tale is this, Mahmood?" he asked fiercely. "No member of my household would slay a man with whom I have eaten salt. And you know as well as I that there are no *jinn* in these days."

"Only Allah is all-seeing and all-knowing," quavered Mahmood, yet added resolutely: "Perhaps the master will look for himself."

At this, Blake saw a look of understanding pass between Friedl and the scar-faced Abdullah. Simultaneously, the three men whipped out Lugers, covering Abdul Hafiz, his daughter, and the eunuch.

"No need to look, *shaykh*," said Friedl. "Blake is dead, and I killed him, as I will you, and all of your household if you don't do as I say. You have refused to pay me the reward so I'll take it by force."

Ignoring the leveled pistol, the *shaykh* looked at Friedl, and Blake saw that he was unafraid.

"I will die with resignation if it is the will of Allah," he said. "But I will die with sadness in my heart because I have entertained a false friend. You have blackened my face and disgraced me with my people by slaying a guest with whom I have eaten salt. Shoot us all, then, and have it over with. But you and your servants will not escape this house alive. At the first sound of a shot, my people will tear you to bits—you and your henchmen."

"You are mistaken, *shaykh*," said Friedl. "All other members of your household are now the prisoners of our men. If you need proof, look."

A man wearing the uniform of a Nazi corporal, and carrying an automatic rifle, stood in the doorway. At a sign from Friedl, he stepped aside and barked a gut-

tural command, whereupon, a dozen soldiers carrying rifles with bayonets fixed, marched in.

FRIEDL'S companions now threw off their Arab disguises. The big scar-faced man wore the uniform of a captain in the flying service; the small man, who also discarded his eye patch, was a lieutenant.

"Captain Speyer and Lieutenant Hess," announced Friedl.

"I'll take over, now, Herr Doktor," said the captain. "*Shaykh*, we have finished with subtlety. You, and all of your household are our prisoners. We will use your castle and your oasis as an air base and radio station. Underground hangars will be built. The caravan from the coast, which was secretly landed several days ago, has just arrived with men, tools and supplies. Look out the window."

"The Saudi government will not submit," said the *shaykh*. "You and your men will be slain or driven out."

"The puny government of Ibn Saud will not be in existence much longer," sneered the captain. "He is only a puppet of the British, anyway. As soon as this base is ready, five thousand of our planes will come. Parachute troops will quickly capture all of the smaller cities. The larger will, if necessary, be subdued or destroyed by bombs. Egypt will be crushed between Italian Libya and German Arabia. Then we will develop this country as it should be developed. The Suez Canal will no longer be a British ditch."

Blake saw the whole plan instantly. Arabia turned into a German colony. Italy holding Egypt. The British life-line broken—England cut off from India and Oceania, save by the long and hazardous route around the Cape, or the still longer one through the Panama Canal. The British Empire partitioned among the dictator-nations. Then there would be nothing left, save the Americas, and that would mean



a fearful struggle to the death for his own countrymen. He must do something about it—must try to save his country from the frightful ordeal of such a war. But how?

"You will go to your *harim* now, *shaykh*, where you will remain a prisoner," said the captain. "So long as you make no resistance or effort to escape, it will not be violated. I claim only the reward promised the Herr Doktor, which you declined to give—your daughter. Nuralayn will go with me to my quarters."

Abdul Hafiz had been listening with patient resignation. But when this affront to the honor of his daughter was mentioned, his face became a thundercloud of wrath, and the large vein on his forehead which marked him as a descendent of the Prophet, stood out like whipcord.

He rose to his full height, and said:

"You filthy *Feringhi* swine! My daughter is not for you!"

With the speed of a striking serpent, surprising in a man of his size, his hand flew to his belt—came up with the keen, silver-mounted *jambiyeh*. Then he sprang straight at the captain, ignoring his leveled Luger.

The captain fired, point blank, just as Blake who, in his excitement had forgotten that he was powerless to aid, leaped at the officer and attempted to wrest the pistol from his grasp. His leap carried him, not into the midst of the fray, but into a cold, whirling black void.

When he could see once more, he found that, instead of standing in the *salamlik*, he was lying on his back looking up at the ceiling of the laboratory.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Second Wish

**A** STOUNDED at his sudden transition from the *salamlik* to the laboratory, Blake sprang to his feet. As he did so, he clutched at the edge of the porcelain-top-

ped table for support. It tilted slightly, and the bottle of glucose he had left there some time before slipped off and fell to the floor.

For a moment, the significance of this accident did not impress itself on his consciousness, so filled was his mind with what had taken place in the *salamlik*. Then he suddenly realized that he had moved a ponderable object with his hand. He was back in his earthly body once more, and could give battle to Friedl and his companions.

He rushed to the door, and turning the latch, found it locked. He was about to charge it with his shoulder, when the deep voice of the Stranger halted him.

"I wouldn't try that, doctor."

Blake wheeled around, and looked for the plant monstrosity which the Stranger had created some time before. It had disappeared completely, and he could see no sign of this strange entity from Mercury in any other physical form. A low chuckle, however, told the American that he was nearby.

"Why wouldn't you try it—wherever you are?" he asked.

"Because," replied the voice of the Stranger, "you would only get yourself shot again, and I just got through repairing you. A splendid job, too, if I do say so, myself. That's reason number one. And, reason number two: the events which you witnessed in the *salamlik* took place more than a half hour ago. The struggle is all over. I had to let you get accustomed to your body and the new cells I assembled and installed, before waking you. And that took about half an hour."

"Then you locked the door so I couldn't rush out?"

"Precisely."

"But what happened after I—er—left?"

"Captain Speyer's bullet passed through Abdul Hafiz' *kufiyeh* and grazed his ear, but did him no harm. Then Lieutenant Hess struck the *shaykh* on the head with

the butt of his pistol, rendering him unconscious. Soldiers carried him up to his *harim* and left him there. And Nuralayn, fighting her captors like a young wildcat, was taken to the quarters of Captain Speyer."

"Hell's bells! Let me out of here!"

"Wait. Nuralayn has not been harmed. And Speyer will be busy for a while with military matters. The caravan which arrived some time ago consisted of about two hundred Nazi soldiers disguised as desert Arabs. The men of the *shaykh's* household have been disarmed, and put to work, constructing underground hangars for the first fleet of planes that is to be summoned by radio as soon as construction is completed. Captain Speyer, disguised in *kufiyeh* and cloak, in case British airmen should pass over, is superintending the work."

"And I suppose the house is full of Speyer's armed guards."

"Right. Furthermore, Friedl, who is overseeing the installation of the new radio station, will remember about your body being here in the laboratory, and will bring soldiers to remove it soon, as he wants the laboratory for himself. You still have two wishes left, and I'll consider it a personal favor if you'll make them and get it over with. I have important duties of my own to attend to."

**A** NUMBER of wishes flashed through Blake's mind. A gun. A suit of bullet-proof armor. A disguise. A regiment of soldiers. Then, he reflected, all of these things might or might not save Nuralayn and defeat Doctor Friedl, Captain Speyer and their confederates. He must make his wish take in a lot of territory.

"For wish number two," he said, "I want you to help me defeat the purposes of Captain Speyer, his confederates and associates."

"I felt that one coming," said the Stranger. "But I don't blame you. It's a composite wish, and one not so easily grati-

fied, even by me. I could, of course, bring certain forces to bear, and instantly destroy Captain Speyer and his confederates. But that is not my way—it would be like a man ruthlessly shooting a harmless song bird or a helpless domestic animal, unable to defend itself."

"I don't get the analogy," retorted Blake. "This bunch is more like a nest of poisonous snakes than a flock of harmless birds or beasts."

"That is from your prejudiced viewpoint, only," said the Stranger. "I look on them more tolerantly. However, they are your enemies and you have expressed your wish, which I am ethically obligated to perform. But, I must tell you from the start that the outcome will be in doubt until the end. We *jinn* are powerful, but not omnipotent."

Suddenly, at the point from which the voice had been coming, Blake saw a human figure appear. It was an exact replica of himself, even to his clothing and the sun-bleached hair at his temples.

"What the—!" began Blake in amazement.

"How do you like it?" asked the figure, in the deep voice of the Stranger, whirling around at the same time so he could get a complete view.

"What's the idea of mimicing *my* looks?" Blake asked. "And how did you do it so quickly?"

"All part of my plan," the Stranger told him. "I can't bring myself to destroy these conspirators, any more than you could bring yourself to shoot an unsuspecting man in the back. It wouldn't be sporting—would be entirely too easy.

"As for materializing quickly, as a matter of fact, I didn't. But, while I was materializing this primary body, I remained invisible to you. It is not as complicated as yours, inside. However, as it will serve as a parent body, it had to be endowed with a lot of extra cells."

"A parent body? What do you mean?"

"Watch."

While Blake looked on, dumfounded, the body suddenly divided—became two identical bodies.

"Multiplication by fission," said the Stranger. "Although you complicated organisms can't do it, many protozoans of your world do it right along. A parent becomes two daughters, or sons—it doesn't matter which—for they are sexless. They, in turn, divide in two, and so on."

The body on the left had been speaking. Now, the body on the right interrupted.

"Why tell him all that? He's a microbiologist."

Blake's astonishment increased, as the body on the left replied:

"True. I'd forgotten that for the moment, I was so busy creating us. All right, get over there in front of the window."

The body on the right walked over and stood in front of the window, facing the door. The one on the left strode to the door, then wheeled about, facing the other. In the right hand blossomed a silenced Luger. It coughed once, and the body in front of the window collapsed, drilled between the eyes. It lay just as Blake had lain only a short time before, apparently dead.

"I DON'T know whether to call that fratricide, parricide, infanticide, or just plain homicide," said Blake. "Why did you do it?"

His double grinned at him from the doorway, as the voice of the Stranger replied through its lips:

"Had to have a body, didn't we? The whole show would be given away, otherwise. This body, which will be carted off and buried by Speyer's men, will make them think you are dead. Also, it will help me to carry out some initial plans I have in mind."

"But the other body spoke—showed intelligence. It was alive, and you killed it."

"It contained a part of my ego—or life

essence," said the Stranger. "But I have taken that back. It is nothing, now, but a lifeless conglomerate of matter without mind."

"Where did you get that pistol?" Blake asked. "You didn't split that off from you by fission."

"True. I materialized it, as I did this primary body. But it is much simpler. A ferric compound lubricated with a carbon compound. The grips, also, are a carbon compound, the ammunition, carbon and nitrogen compounds with some brass and lead. The water pipes in this place are a bit thinner because of the metals. The rest came from the air and the H<sub>2</sub>O and CO<sub>2</sub> in suspension in it. I don't need it any longer."

He hurled it away from him, straight at the window, and Blake waited for a crash of glass that would arouse the guards. But none came. The weapon vanished before it reached the window.

"That will add a bit to the thickness of the water pipes," said the Stranger.

To Blake, it seemed more incredible that an individual with such powers should be absent-minded, than the marvellous powers, themselves. But the Stranger certainly showed signs of absent-mindedness. Evidently he sometimes concentrated so deeply on what he was doing that insignificant details, for the moment, were blanked from his consciousness.

At this moment, the tramp of heavily shod feet sounded on the tiled floor of the hallway outside.

"They are coming for the body," said the Stranger. "I'll make us invisible. Say nothing and leave things to me."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Fire of the Eyes

AS THE sound of advancing feet drew closer, Blake's companion suddenly disappeared from sight. So, also, did

Blake. He couldn't even see his hand held in front of his face, though he could see all other objects in the room clearly, save the Stranger.

The door latch rattled, there was a muffled exclamation, and then some one turned the key, which was on the outside. The door swung open, and Friedl stepped in. He still wore his white suit, and on his head was a cork helmet, set at a rakish angle.

Behind him came four goose-stepping guards.

"Pick up that carcass," commanded Friedl. "And take it--"

His words were cut short as his helmet was suddenly and violently jammed down over his ears by an invisible hand.

"Who did that?" he barked, looking accusingly at the four guards.

The nearest replied:

"We don't know. It was not one of us."

"It was a poltergeist," said the man next to him.

"*Esel!*" said Friedl, adjusting his helmet. "There is no such thing as a poltergeist. Pick up this carcass and throw it to the jackals. Don't bother to bury--"

Again his order was interrupted, this time by something which seized his ankles and jerked his legs out from under him. As he struck the floor, both of his shoes were violently pulled off, then flung out through the doorway into the hall. His helmet, which had fallen off, was picked up and also thrown into the hall.

"Pick it up yourself, Doctor Friedl," ordered the deep voice of the invisible Stranger. "You are the murderer."

For a moment, Friedl lay there, dazed.

The four guards with cries of: "The poltergeist! It will get us next!" turned and fled.

Scrambling to his feet, Friedl attempted to follow them, but was caught by the scruff of the neck and jerked back.

Again the deep voice commanded:

"Pick up the body. Take it out and give

it decent burial—or you'll hear from me again."

Pale with fear, Friedl stooped, lifted the body to his shoulder, and staggered out through the door with it. The door slammed shut behind him, and the Stranger, holding the latch, suddenly became visible once more, as did Blake.

"I don't like to destroy these creatures of puny intellect," mumbled the Stranger, grinning, "unless it is necessary. But sometimes it amuses me to chastise them a bit—when they deserve it."

"I kinda got a bang out of it, myself," admitted Blake. "What do you think he'll do, now?"

"Undoubtedly he now believes in poltergeists. He'll probably give the body decent burial, and try to exorcise the ghost which he believes attacked him. And now, to make us invisible once more, so we can clean up this job."

"By the way, how do you do it?" asked Blake, as both he and the Stranger seemed to dissolve into thin air once more.

"Always the curious scientist," twitted the Stranger. "You want to know the how and why of everything. I do it by changing the reflective angles of skin, hair and clothing, so that they will no longer reflect or absorb the visible light rays. Instead, they bend them. The single octave of light rays visible to the human eye now passes entirely around this body and yours, without being either reflected or absorbed. And now that we are both invisible once more, we'll go to Nuralayn. Come on."

THE door swung open, and Blake started to walk through, but collided with the Stranger.

"Here, this won't do," said the latter. "You'll be getting in my way. I'll just make the infra red rays emitted by our bodies visible to you, so that won't happen again. Stand still for a minute."

Blake stood still, and in a moment, the outline of the Stranger's body glowed a

dull red. Also, he could now see his own body with the same weird coloring.

"The human eye is sensitive, normally, to only one light octave out of fifty-five," said the Stranger. "I've extended your vision a bit on the red end of the spectrum, so you can see rays which are invisible to other humans, though they could be seen by some insects, or recorded by a properly sensitized camera plate."

They circled the balcony, passing six guards armed with rifles and posted at various intervals on the way, and, at its farther end, the Stranger paused before a door which stood open, and from which came the sound of guttural German voices.

"From now on," said the Stranger, "we'll communicate by telepathy. Don't speak. Just *think* your speech, and I'll do the same. You will seem to hear me, and will understand, but it will not be perceptible to the minds of others."

He walked silently into the room, Blake at his heels.

Friedl, his usually immaculate clothing disheveled, and smeared with blood from the body he had been compelled to carry, was pouring himself a stiff brandy from one of the captain's bottles, his flushed face indicating that this had not been the first.

Captain Speyer, his Arab disguise discarded in favor of his uniform, was seated in an easy chair, smoking a cigar.

"Stuff and nonsense," the captain was saying. "Poltergeist! And you call yourself a scientist and a practical man."

"But I tell you there is no other explanation," expostulated Friedl, after gulping the liquor. "The four men who now have charge of the body saw and heard what happened."

"And so you want me to get the chaplain to bury the body, and lay the ghost. All right, I'll do it to humor you. Clear out, now, and send the chaplain to me. Then get busy and help superintend the digging. I'll be otherwise and more pleasantly occupied for the next hour or so. The fair

Nuralayn is impatiently awaiting my presence in the next room."

He rose, and walked over to the tabor-ette, where he helped himself to a brandy and soda.

"Have another with me before you go, Herr Doktor," he said, pouring a neat four fingers for Friedl, "and wish me joy."

"I can use another," Friedl replied, picking it up.

The Stranger silently walked to the doorway which separated the two rooms of the captain's apartment, and drew back the curtain for Blake to enter.

**N**URALAYN, bound hand and foot, lay on a divan among the silken cushions. Although her eyes showed that she had been weeping, the tears still clinging to her long, curved lashes, no sound escaped her, and there was a defiant look in her eyes as she struggled to free herself from her bonds. Her clothing was torn and disarranged as if she had had a terrific struggle with her captors, and her beaded *yashmak* hung loose at one side.

"You'll have to appear to her naturally, so she won't think you a ghost," telepathed the Stranger. "Go over to the head of the divan so she won't see you until you speak to her."

Blake complied, and an instant later, his body became fully visible.

"Don't be afraid, Nuralayn," he said softly. "It is I, Hakim Blake, come to rescue you."

She looked up at him, her eyes wide with astonishment, as he took out his pocket knife and cut her bonds.

"My *hakim*," she said softly, as he chafed her wrists. "I knew you would come, even though they told me you were dead. You look exactly as I saw you in my dreams, even to your hair that has been bleached at the temples by the sun."

She raised her hand and softly stroked his hair, and Blake, looking down at her lovely face, saw a starry light in her eyes

that drew him irresistibly. Suddenly, he took her in his arms, crushing her warm, red lips with his. She responded to his kiss with a passion that sent him into a seventh heaven of ecstasy, and, for the moment, the peril which menaced them both was forgotten. Then she went limp, and he saw that she had fainted.

"All right, break the clinch, and don't try to revive her, now," telepathed the Stranger. "We'll have to work fast."

Blake put the girl down, then turned and gasped in amazement. A living duplicate of Nuralayn was looking at him, and the infra-red outline of the Stranger had disappeared. Swiftly, the new body divided into two which looked exactly alike. One spoke in a voice that exactly mimicked that of Nuralayn.

"I am Naralayn," said the figure. "I will take the place of Nuralayn."

"And while she does that," said the deep voice of the Stranger, issuing incongruously from the other female figure, "we'll take Nuralayn to her father."

"*Nar al ayn. Fire of the Eyes,*" Blake translated to himself. "Oh, boy! I'll bet this will be good!"

"It will," rumbled the Stranger. "Too bad you can't stay to witness it. Bring your beloved, and we'll go."

As Blake picked up the unconscious Nuralayn, the Stranger once more rendered them both invisible, save for the infra-red which Blake could now see.

The Stranger opened the door which led into the hallway, and they went out, just as the heavy tread of Captain Speyer sounded at the doorway which connected the two rooms.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### The Magician

OUT in the hallway the Stranger telepathed:

"I'll leave you, now, as I have some

matters to attend to. Go straight to the *harim*, and when you have passed through the door, you and Nuralayn will become visible once more."

With these words the Stranger disappeared.

Silently, Blake trod past guard after guard, carrying his precious burden, until he came to the door of the *harim*, where two soldiers stood guard with bayonets fixed. He walked between them without making a sound, then raised the curtain and stepped inside the hallway. As he did so, both he and Nuralayn became visible once more, and Mahmood, the eunuch, who had been dozing on a bench at one side, sprang to his feet and cried: "*Desttooir!*"

Then, suddenly recognizing the two who had just come in, and believing Blake to be an apparition, he sank down upon his knees, trembling violently with fright.

His first shout had brought a number of curious, veiled faces to the curtained doorways. At sight of the two who had just entered, there were murmurs of surprise and incredulity.

"Get up and take me to your master," Blake ordered. "Can't you see that I am alive? Could a spirit carry the daughter of Abdul Hafiz?"

Shamefacedly, the eunuch got to his feet.

"Harkening and obedience, *sidi,*" he said, then drew aside the curtain of the first doorway on the right for them to enter.

As Blake stepped through the doorway, he was met and welcomed by the *shaykh*, himself, who had heard the commotion and was coming out to investigate. The folds of a white bandage showed on his brow beneath his *kufiyeh*, but he appeared as vigorous as ever.

"*Alhamdulillah!*" he exclaimed. "Praise God for one true friend among so many deceitful enemies!" He looked

down at the senseless girl in Blake's arms. "Is she—" he began anxiously.

"She is unharmed, and has only fainted," Blake told him.

"*Ya, Marjanah!*" the *shaykh* shouted.

The big, capable nurse came bustling out of Nuralayn's suite, and at sight of Blake's burden, began alternately praising Allah and cooing over her little white dove.

Blake placed the girl tenderly in her bed, and then left her to the ministrations of her capable nurse, insisting that the *sharif* come with him.

"She has had a terrible shock," he told the old man. "Let her rest for a while. You can come in to see her after she has recovered consciousness. It would not be wise to awaken her now."

"I bow to your superior wisdom, Hakim Blake," Abdul Hafiz said. "Come to my apartment. We'll smoke a pipe and discuss the predicament in which we find ourselves. Perhaps there will be some way out of the trap."

**CAPTAIN SPEYER**, about to enter the room where he believed Nuralayn to be lying, bound and helpless, was interrupted by a rap on the door of his apartment.

"Who's there?" he called.

"Sergeant Weiss with a prisoner."

The captain was annoyed by this interruption, yet curious as to who the prisoner might be. He decided on a swift investigation.

"Bring the prisoner in," he commanded.

The sergeant opened the door, and an old, gray bearded *darweesh* was pushed roughly into the room by his two guards.

"Where did you get this, sergeant?" asked the captain.

"He just rode up to the gate on a white mule, and told the guard he wished to pay a visit to the *shaykh*."

"So. Who are you, old man?"

"Shaykh Yahya of the Ahmediyeh Darweesh, excellency, at your service," the old man replied.

"Indeed. And pray, what service can you perform for me?"

"I can perform feats of jugglery and magic to amuse your household," said the old fellow. "Behold."

So saying, he plucked at the end of the sergeant's nose, and produced a silver coin. This he appeared to thrust up his own nostril, but a moment later brought out a long black cigar. He rubbed this between his palms and opening them, disclosed a small ivory cigarette case, which he presented to the captain with a bow. Then he paused, as if waiting for the officer's approbation.

The latter stared intently at him for a moment—then suddenly stepped forward and grasping the long white beard, gave it a terrific jerk. It came away in his hand, and he followed up by knocking off the tall dervish hat, and stripping off a pair of false eyebrows, revealing a man who looked not much more than thirty-five, with a jet black beard.

"Hagg Nadeem," he said. "So you thought you could fool me with that childish disguise."

"I admit I was doubtful," replied the *hagg*, returning his stern gaze unflinchingly. "However, I did not expect to be brought before you—did not, in fact, expect to find you in charge here so soon."

"So—my plans were known to you. Then why didn't you take action before?"

"You *Farangh* have a saying: 'Give a dog enough rope and he'll hang himself,'" replied the *hagg*.

"So you were not sure, and came here in this ridiculous disguise to investigate."

"Perhaps."

"Ah. You wish to be evasive. Well, we have means of making you talk. However, I haven't time to bother with you for the moment. Take him away, sergeant. Lock him up and set two guards to watch

him. He is a magician, and a master of illusion, so see that he plays no tricks on you. I'll attend to him later. But first, to more pressing business."

As the *hagg* was dragged out, he turned once more to the door which led to his bedroom.

Passing through, he was amazed to see that his fair prisoner was unbound, and reclining on the *divan*, smoking one of his cigarettes.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, my dear," he said, advancing toward her. "However, we can make up for lost time now, can't we?"

"Of course, captain, if you wish it," she responded, with a sweet submissiveness that astounded him. "Here, sit beside me and let me make you comfortable."

Scarcely crediting the evidence of his senses, the captain sat down on the *divan*.

**S**HE took one of his cigarettes and placed it between his lips. Then, ignoring the lighter that stood on the *tabelle*, she held a pink fingertip to the end of the cigarette, and it began to smoke and glow.

"What the—"

But she interrupted: "You've been holding out on me. How about a drink?"

"Sorry. I didn't know you used liquor." He started to rise, but she pushed him back.

"Don't bother. I'll get it. Make yourself comfortable."

She went into the other room and returning with the brandy bottle and glasses, poured a drink for each of them.

The captain took the proffered glass, and they clinked the rims together.

"To our love," he said.

"To our burning love," she replied, and touched her red lips to the liquid, whereupon a blue flame sprang up on its surface. She palmed it, and the flame went out.

The captain was goggle-eyed.

"Pretty tricks you have with fire," he said. "Where did you learn them?"

"Pooh. Those were nothing," she replied. "Watch."

She took the drink of brandy into her mouth, and a moment later, exhaled blue flames through her lips and nostrils.

"Good God, girl! You'll burn yourself!" exclaimed the captain.

"Not at all," she replied. "Naralayn never burns herself."

"Naralayn! But I thought your name was Nuralayn."

"A mistake," she replied. "And now that we have enjoyed a drink and a cigarette together, I'll run along."

"No you don't, young lady," he replied. "I see it all, now. You and your father's friend, Hagg Nadeem, have cooked up some magical tricks to frighten me. But I am not easily frightened. You remain in this apartment with me. You are mine."

He sprang to his feet, seized her in his arms, and pressed his lips to hers. But in that instant, he drew back and released her with a howl of pain. It was as if he had embraced a being of white hot metal. His uniform was charred and smouldering; his hands and lips were blistered from the intense heat.

"You she-devil!" he roared between blistered lips, as he beat out the sparks. "You have gone too far." He whipped out his Luger, but before he could raise it to fire, it too became white hot, exploded in his hand, and turned to a cloud of intensely hot gas.

As he recoiled, roaring with pain, from the terrific heat of that cloud of gaseous metal, Naralayn suddenly disappeared—melted into nothingness before his eyes.

The captain sagged down on the *divan*, then reached for the brandy bottle with his left hand; the other was useless. He took a huge pull at the bottle, then another and another, until he had drained it. Hurling it against the wall, he got to his feet and staggered into the other



room, bawling loudly for the guard. Two soldiers came running.

Captain Speyer confronted the first.

"Look at me," he said. "Have I been burned, or is this an illusion?"

"It is obvious that you have been badly burned, herr captain," said the soldier. "Your uniform, your face and your hands. I'll call Doctor Friedl."

"Get him quickly, for I am in great pain. The black magic of Hagg Nadeem has done this, and he'll not live long to boast about it."

While Captain Speyer was waiting for the doctor, a Galla slave girl wearing a white veil was admitted by the guard.

"Well. What news from the *harim*? Speak up," said the captain.

"The white *hakim* is not dead," said the girl. "A short time ago he came into the *harim* carrying the master's daughter, who had fainted. I was unable to get away to tell you until now, as I believe they suspect me of spying for you."

"So Blake isn't really dead? More of Hagg Nadeem's magic, eh? We'll put an end to this, once and for all. Before this day is over they'll all be dead, and this time they won't come to life."

## CHAPTER NINE

### The Colonel

**B**LAKE had drunk a cup of coffee, and was smoking and chatting with the *shaykh* when Nuralayn, accompanied by the hovering Marjanah, came into the room, and running to her father, flung her arms around his neck.

Both wept with joy at this miraculous reunion and Blake, feeling a lump rising in his throat, poured himself another cup of the blistering hot syrupy coffee and downed it at a gulp. Then, while he puffed vigorously at his bubbling *shisha* to hide his emotion, Nuralayn told her father all she remembered about her res-

cue. When she had concluded she looked at the young scientist with proud love-filled eyes and said:

"And now my *hakim*, there is something you would say to father."

"That's true," Blake replied. "I love your daughter, *ya shaykh*, and ask her hand in marriage, if and when we get out of this alive."

Abdul Hafiz looked shocked and amazed.

"You are my best friend, Hakim Blake," he said, "for no other has done me such a great favor during my lifetime. It pains me, therefore, to tell you that I cannot ever consent to such a marriage. A *Ferrenghi* cannot marry a *Muslimah*, and particularly, the daughter of a descendent of the Prophet. You know that would be contrary to our laws and customs."

"I respect your feeling and your beliefs," Blake answered. "But, *sidi*, love is something which recognizes no barriers. I—"

He was interrupted by the sudden and precipitate entrance of a squad of soldiers, headed by Sergeant Weiss.

"You are all under arrest," he said. "Seize them, men."

As they sprang to their feet, Nuralayn, the *shaykh* and Blake were seized by the soldiers, who quickly bound their arms behind them. Marjanah, when she attempted to accompany her mistress, was pushed back by the sergeant.

"We only want these three at present," he said. "The others will be attended to later."

They were hustled down to the courtyard, where Captain Speyer, wearing a new uniform, with bandages on his hands and gauze patches on his face, sat at a table with Lieutenant Hess on one side and Doctor Friedl on the other, flanked by two squads of soldiers.

In front of the table, with his hands bound behind him, stood Hagg Nadeem.

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As the other three prisoners were ranged alongside the *haag*, Speyer glanced at each in turn with equal malignancy. It was obvious that he had not only been cured of his infatuation for Nuralayn, but that he hated her as thoroughly as the others.

"I am a man of few words," he said. "All four of you have conspired to play tricks on me which no man could forgive, and which I have the power to punish. And, since you saw fit to burn me, why you'll all get a dose of the same medicine. I hereby sentence you all to be burned at the stake. That, regardless of the magical powers of Hagg Nadeem, will put a fitting end to your tricks."

At a sign from him, four men came in bearing a large post from which strong chains dangled. Others brought firewood and cans of gasoline, and placing these in readiness, took up several flagstones and began excavating a hole for the post.

Blake was wondering, at the moment, what had become of the Stranger. The latter, after agreeing to fulfill his second wish, had completely disappeared. Could he be somewhere nearby, waiting to come to their assistance? Or had he left them to their fate?

The digging progressed rapidly, and the post was soon tamped into place. The wood was heaped around it, and the four condemned prisoners were boosted up on this and bound with the chains.

**S**ERGEANT WEISS was opening one of the gasoline tins when suddenly the roar of a huge trimotored plane became audible. A moment later, the radio operator hurried down from the station and handed a message to Captain Speyer.

After perusing it, the captain called to the sergeant.

"Hold the execution," he said. "Colo-

(Continued on page 140)

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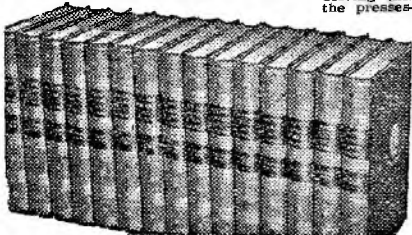
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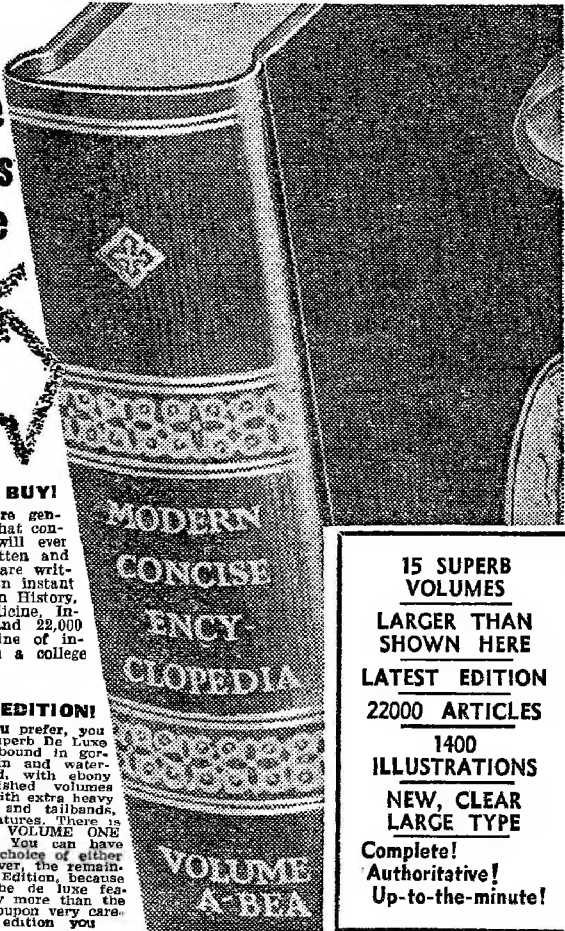
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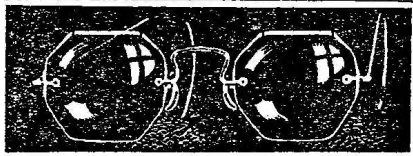
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## STRANGER FROM SMALLNESS

(Continued from page 138)

nel Grebner will be here in a few moments, to take command of the garrison, and he desires to see it."

The plane landed a few minutes later, on the smooth sand outside the courtyard walls.

All officers and men snapped stiffly to attention as the colonel, followed by two aides, came pompously through the courtyard gate.

Colonel Grebner was a short, stocky man, with a tiny, bristling moustache and an underslung jaw. A shell-rimmed monocle dangled from a thin black cord in his breast pocket. His bearing reminded Blake of the strut of a bantam rooster.

"What's this I hear about an execution, captain?" he said. "Ah, four prisoners bound to the stake. And one a girl. Well, well. What dastardly crimes have they committed, and what is the military necessity for this execution?"

"Espionage, and conspiracy to burn the commanding officer to death," replied the captain.

"You do look as if you'd been pretty badly singed," said the colonel, eyeing the captain's bandages through his monocle. "How did it happen?"

"It was done through the black magic of Haag Nadeem, after he came here to spy on the encampment. I can offer no logical explanation for the tricks that were played upon me and upon Doctor Friedl. Only a magician could explain them. All I know is that their results were unpleasant, and decidedly dangerous."

The colonel cocked an eyebrow, fixed the monocle in his eye, and stared for a moment at the four chained prisoners.

"Hm. Desperate looking characters," he said. "But I must remind you, Captain Speyer, that we don't burn prisoners

## STRANGER FROM SMALLNESS

at the stake. A barbarous custom. We are a civilized race."

He let the monocle fall from his eye and turned to the sergeant.

"Remove the chains," he ordered.

"Do you mean that you are going to let them go free?" asked the captain, amazed.

"Free? Of course not. We'll shoot them in the approved civilized fashion. And we'll let their swift demise be a lesson to the rest of the natives, so there'll be no recurrence of such tricks against officers. Have every living soul in the castle brought into the courtyard to witness the execution."

Captain Speyer saluted, and gave the necessary orders, while the colonel, once more fixing his monocle in his eye, watched the unchaining of the prisoners with no more emotion than if he had been watching an orderly polish his boots.

## CHAPTER TEN

### The Firing Squad

WITH everyone assembled in the courtyard the four prisoners were lined up against the wall. Every soldier with a rifle was pressed into the firing squad. They formed two lines of a hundred men each, one line kneeling in a semicircle, the other standing in a slightly wider semicircle behind them.

As he stood facing this double crescent of rifles, Blake's heart sank. Obviously, the Stranger had deserted him—left him to his fate. Now he must not only go through the unpleasant ordeal of dying once more—in addition, he must witness the violent death of the person he held most dear in all the world, as well as her father and Hagg Nadeem.

The colonel himself, standing to one side, gave the orders.

Cartridges clicked into the chambers at his command. Rifles were raised, and

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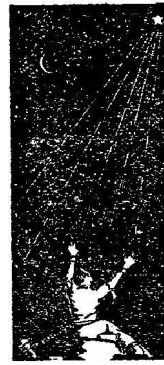
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## SUPER SCIENCE NOVELS MAGAZINE

the four doomed prisoners suddenly found themselves looking into two hundred deadly black muzzles.

Then suddenly, an astonishing thing happened. The rifles began to writhe in the hands of the soldiers as if alive. Staring in astonishment, Blake saw that they were not rifles, but serpents, huge, thick-bodied pythons, their powerful constrictor muscles showing beneath their flashing scales as they turned on the men who held them.

In an instant, the entire company was struggling, screaming, rolling about on the ground in a mad tangle of frightened men and squirming, slithering serpents, each slowly but surely pinning a man in its crushing folds.

Captain Speyer, standing beside the colonel and his aides, with Lieutenant Hess and Doctor Friedl, suddenly went berserk.

"More of Hagg Nadeem's magic!" he shrieked. "The ancient black magic of Egypt. They turned rods into serpents, why not guns? But this black magician shall not live to boast of it."

He whipped out his Luger, leveled it at Hagg Nadeem. But before he could pull the trigger, it, too, became a serpent, smaller than the others but more deadly—an African cobra. It twined its tail about his wrist, then struck once, plunging its fangs into his cheek.

The captain collapsed, and writhed on the ground in agony, while Doctor Friedl and Lieutenant Hess looked on helpless, afraid to draw their own pistols lest they, too, should turn to serpents and destroy them.

Standing back near the ring of frightened and awed natives and members of the *harim* with an orderly on each side of him, Colonel Grebner watched the scene impassively through his gleaming monocle. It did not seem to excite, or even interest him, and Blake, noticing this,

**STRANGER FROM SMALLNESS**

wondered if he and his two aides had been hypnotized.

Then the scientists and his fellow prisoners suddenly saw another amazing transformation. The serpents coiled around their helpless victims began to turn to ropes, and every soldier present lay on the ground, bound and helpless, save the colonel, his two orderlies, Dr. Friedl and Lieutenant Hess. Even the captain's cobra had drawn his hands behind his back, where they were tightly bound to a loop around his ankles, and had turned to a stout rope.

Blake knew that this could not be the magic of Hagg Nadeem. He knew that the Stranger must be somewhere nearby, and momentarily expected to hear his deep chuckle. Perhaps he was invisible. Or it might be that he was one of the people standing in the courtyard. In any event, he decided that it was about time to take some action, remembering the Stranger's injunction to help himself if he wished to be helped.

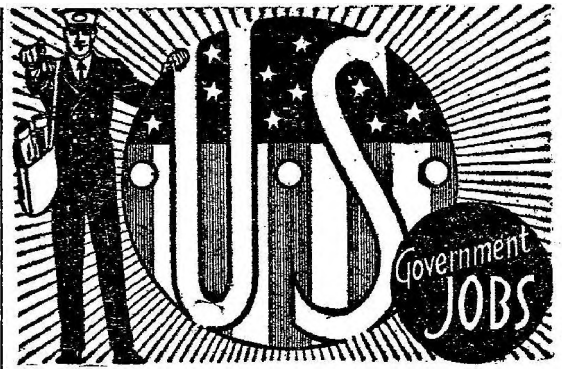
Come on," he shouted to the awed, staring natives. Seize and bind these others. Make them all prisoners."

They needed no second invitation. Mahmood, the eunuch, leaped at Doctor Friedl from behind, seized his pistol, and pinioned his arms behind him. Other stout retainers of Abdul Hafiz quickly subdued Lieutenant Hess. But when, led by Blake, they charged the colonel and his aides, they suddenly were not there. In their places stood a tall, scrawny Bedouin between two large camels.

Blake stopped, facing the camel driver.

"So, it was you!" he exclaimed. "I thought you'd gone away and forgotten me."

"You did me an injustice," replied the camel driver, in the deep voice of the Stranger. "Entering the plane of the colonel, making him and his aides my prisoners, and impersonating all three as



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## SUPER SCIENCE NOVELS MAGAZINE

we flew toward the castle took some time. I have been quite busy on your behalf."

BY THIS time, the *shaykh*, Nuralayn and Hagg Nadeem had come up.

"Wallahi!" exclaimed the *hagg*, looking closely at the Stranger. "I know you now. I am of the people who have known yours for a thousand years."

"A seventh son of a seventh son for more than a thousand generations," replied the Stranger. "I recognize you, Hagg Nadeem, as a member of one of the families that have always cooperated with my people, and who have thereby earned the reputation of being black magicians."

"Astagfurullah!" exclaimed the *shaykh*. "I take refuge with Allah! A *jinni*!"

"The same, O cousin of the Prophet," rumbled the Stranger. "And fortunately for you and yours, a friend of your friend, Hakim Blake. I should have said, your future son-in-law, Hakim Blake."

"But that is impossible, O emir among the *jinn*," said the *shaykh*. "Our laws—"

"Need not be violated," interrupted the Stranger. "With Allah all is possible. You object to him on religious grounds. Yet, if he were to testify to the unity of Allah—"

"If he were to testify, I could accept him into my family."

"Then it is simple. Blake, my friend, since you are a Unitarian, I'm sure you can testify with conviction, and bless the Prophet without equivocation."

"La illallah ilullah. Mohamed ur rasul ullah. Salah alahu aleyhi wa selem," testified Blake.

"And that settles that," said the Stranger. "Now, Hagg Nadeem, you have only to load your prisoners on these camels, with the help of the *shaykh's* men, and take them to Mecca. You'll find the colonel and his two aides lying bound in their plane."



"But, all these men and only two camels!" exclaimed Hagg Nadeem. Then he turned with a surprised: "*Subhanullah!*" For, instead of two camels there were now sixty-four. While they talked, the two had been swiftly multiplying by fission.

The *hagg* turned and bowed to the Stranger.

"May Allah return your kindness a thousand fold, O prince of the *jinn*," he said.

"And after, what shall I do with the camels."

"They will accompany you to the city gate—the Bab el Ma'la," the Stranger told him. "After that, there will be no camels."

As Hagg Nadeem hurried off to give orders about loading his prisoners for the trek across the desert, the Stranger turned to Blake and smiled when he saw him standing with his arm about the slender waist of Nuralayn.

"And now, friend Blake," he said, "what is your third wish? I've other matters to attend to, so think fast."

"And I," replied Blake, "thanks to you, have everything a man could wish for, and more than I could ever have hoped for. My third wish, then, is to wish you luck, and a safe and pleasant journey home when your investigation is ended."

The Stranger, without another word, faded from view. The *shaykh* hurried away to assist Hagg Nadeem in overseeing the loadings of his prisoners on the camels. Blake, looking at the nearest of these, was astounded to see it wink at him. The Stranger, he mused, or at least one of his descendants, was still near him, carrying out his wish—no, not one, sixty-four of them.

Together, he and Nuralayn turned and entered the castle.

**THE END.**

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# THE PREVIEW

PHIL HUXLEY completed the check against the results. "Perfect!" he announced, with strained triumph in his voice.

Dr. Ben Coburn said, "Whew!" very expressively. "Telepathy, instantaneous calculation, direct perception, maybe even levitation without any mechanical aid. And you taught a perfectly normal subject to use her mind to do those things! It's—why, it's fantastic! Even though obviously true."

Huxley nodded seriously. "And that's not all. Remember Valdez—he lost his mind-reading power when a so-called 'unused' section of his brain was injured in an accident?"

"Yeah."

"That indicates, doesn't it, that these functions of the mind have organic basis in that section of the brain—just as the eye and sight centers in the brain are the basis for normal sight?"

"Yes, of course." Coburn was getting impatient.

"Well, organs as complex as this develop only through use. In an evolutionary sense, function begets organ. Don't you see what that implies?"

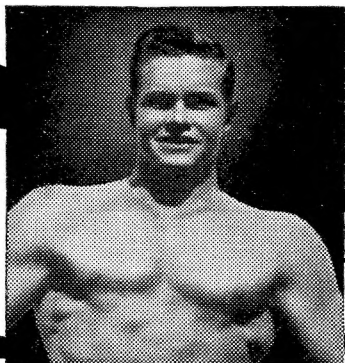
Coburn looked puzzled for a moment or two, then a look of comprehension spread over his face. Phil Huxley went on: "The conclusion is inescapable. There must have been a time when *the entire human race* used these functions as easily as they heard or saw. Individuals couldn't do it any more than I could grow wings. It must have been done racially, over a long period of time. Somehow, some time, the powers were lost, until now they're only vestigial. *But maybe we can restore the full powers of the mind to the whole race!*"

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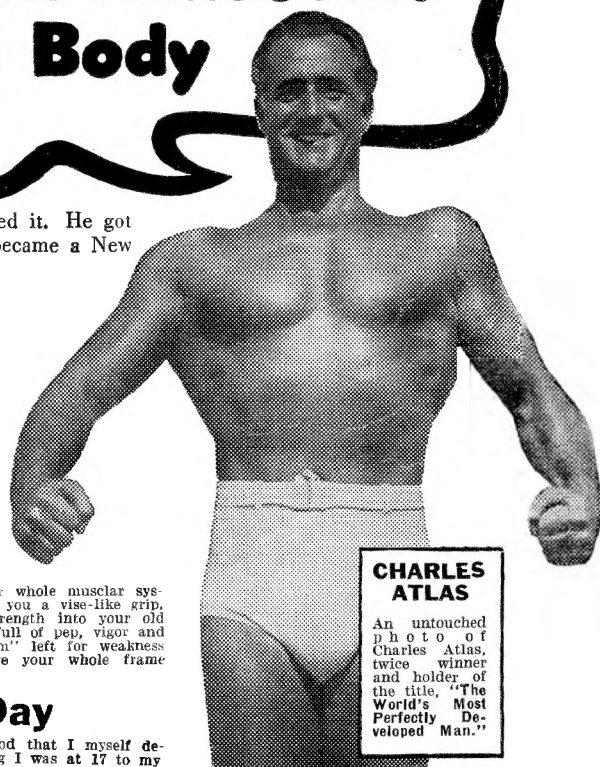
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