

20¢ MAY

# SUPER SCIENCE NOVELS

MAGAZINE



**MISSION  
UNKNOWN**  
by HENRY HASSE

WILLARD E. HAWKINS

now get

# NATURAL SUN TAN

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Itself  
is Your Lamp

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Think of it! You can now indulge in natural sun baths and tan any part of your body with the newest revolutionary invention, "SOLAR TAN" the portable solarium. More astonishing is the fact that without the use of electricity or any other accessory (the sun itself is the lamp) . . . you get the full, natural precious sun rays (greatly magnified) which bring with it many natural qualities. Sounds uncanny . . . almost magical . . . but it's true and the greatest surprise of all is that the cost is only One Dollar. You quickly dispel that nasty, pale face look and replace it with a radiant healthy tan. Improves your appearance with a flattering, bronze tan men and women admire.

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SOLAR TAN provides a new simplified way to give you your share of natural sun conveniently, safely and economically. Order yours RUSH COUPON. The price is \$1.00 plus postage C.O.D., or send a dollar and we'll send yours postage paid. Order several for all members of your family. SOLAR TAN is fully guaranteed so don't hesitate . . . you risk nothing. But hurry while this introductory offer is open.

## Vitamin "D" Benefits at Your Door

Many doctors agree VITAMIN "D," which sun rays throw off, are beneficial to the body and helpful to the complexion . . . these healthy qualities are now available through SOLAR TAN . . . the price is so low you can't afford to be without one. Order yours today! Enjoy the thrill of this new invention. You'll look bright and feel right.

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If your doctor ordered you to get more VITAMIN "D" to help relieve head colds and nose sinus disturbances, get it from nature's sun . . . get it with "SOLAR TAN" in just a few minutes a day . . . the sun itself is your lamp.

### A Relaxing Pleasure You'll Treasure

There is no substitute for rest for the tired body . . . that's nature's demands. Yet there is a tonic effect that the natural sun has on the body . . . helps to pep you up and increase energy. Get your sun tan almost for nothing by ordering a SOLAR TAN . . . what a difference a few minutes will make.

### Get a Tropical Tan at Home

Takes only a few minutes a day. In 15 minutes you'll be as brown as a berry. Safe for anyone to use . . . marvelous for kiddies, too! It's portable . . . place it in your grip for trips. Use it for the face, arms, legs or any part of the body.

**GUARANTEE** Guaranteed to satisfy or money back within 5 days. Fully tested by Electrical Testing Laboratories.

Enclosed find \$.....  Send C.O.D.  
 NAME .....  
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 NOTE: Outside of U.S.A. \$1.25 cash with order

# Be a RADIO Technician



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Many make **\$30 \$40 \$50** a week

## I Train *Beginners* at Home for Good Spare Time and Full Time Radio Jobs

Are you looking for a chance to get into a growing field with a future? Then investigate what Radio offers beginners—*inexperienced men who take N. R. I. Training.* Mail the coupon below. Get the good news about how you can train at home to be a Radio Technician; how you can prepare to cash in on the prosperity of Radio—one of the country's fastest growing industries. Hundreds of millions of dollars in defense orders are giving Radio its biggest boom in years—are opening new opportunities for trained men. What's more—trained Radio Technicians, when selected for military service, can get in line quickly for better ratings with more pay, more prestige. Radio Technicians in the Army and Navy can earn up to 8 times a private's base pay.

### Why Many Radio Technicians Make \$30, \$40 \$50, A Week

Radio Technicians use their minds as well as their hands. They *THINK* on their jobs. It takes trained minds and trained hands to repair a home or auto Radio set; to operate and maintain a Broadcast or Commercial transmitting station; to install, operate and repair Loudspeaker Systems, Police and Aviation Radio equipment. That's why so many Radio Technicians earn good pay, get good jobs, steady work. That's why, too, a trained Radio Technician has opportunities to run his own full time Radio Service business, or make extra money in spare time by fixing Radio sets from his own home.

### Beginners Quickly Learn To Earn \$5 To \$10 A Week In Spare Time

When you train at home with N. R. I. to be a Radio Technician you don't have to wait until you finish your Course to begin making money. No indeed! N. R. I. has prepared special instruction material just to show you how to make extra money quickly. Many students report making extra money in spare time within a few months; others tell how they paid for their Course with extra money made in spare time while learning.

### Equipment Furnished Gives Practical Radio Experience

Learning through N. R. I. to be a Radio Technician is not aviation work. Practical experiments with Radio parts we supply is a very important part of our Course. You build circuits as used in Radio receivers, transmitters and test equipment; conduct numerous fascinating experiments which make learning interesting. You learn by doing. You get testing equipment as part of your Course

to help you earn more in spare time and to make more money when you begin regular Radio work. Find out about this **TESTED WAY TO BETTER PAY, BETTER OPPORTUNITIES.** Mail the Coupon **RIGHT NOW!**

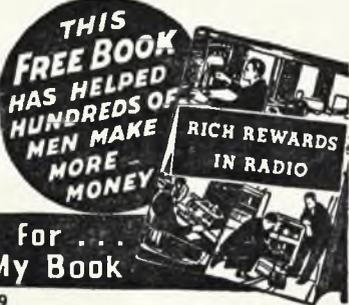
### Go. Facts Without Obliging Yourself—NOW!

Mail the coupon today for your **FREE** copy of "Rich Rewards in Radio." No salesman will call, and you'll be able to judge for yourself why Radio is today's and tomorrow's field of opportunity. You'll see letters from men who got into Radio this way and made more money. They'll tell you what learning Radio has meant to them; tell you what they are doing and earning. You'll see why the N. R. I. Course is easy to study, fascinating to learn, practical to use. You'll see the opportunities offered in Radio's many fields. You'll see how much you'll miss if you fail to grasp the opportunities **RADIO OFFERS YOU!** You'll get facts on Television and other fast-growing branches of Radio. **Act NOW.** Write your name and address on the coupon below. Paste it on a penny postcard or mail it in an envelope—**RIGHT NOW.**

### Draft Registrants!

Hundreds of men who know Radio when they enter military service are going to win specialist ratings in the Army, Navy and Marine Corps. These ratings pay up to 8 times a private's or seaman's base pay, in addition to carrying extra rank and prestige! Whether you enlist or wait for conscription—**IT'S SMART TO LEARN RADIO—NOW!**

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National Radio Institute  
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National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.**

Mail me **FREE**, without obligation, your 64-page book "Rich Rewards in Radio." (No salesman will call. Write plainly.)

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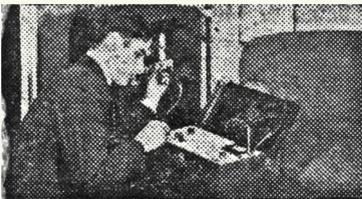
NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY.....STATE.....



Broadcasting Stations employ operators, installation, maintenance men and Radio Technicians in other capacities and pay well.



Set Servicing pays many Radio Technicians \$30, \$40, \$50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make \$5 to \$10 extra a week in spare time.

## I Trained These Men



**\$10 to \$20 a Week in Spare Time**  
I repaired some Radio Sets when I was on my tenth lesson. I really don't see how you can give so much for such a small amount of money. I made \$400 in a year and a half, and I have made an average of \$10 to \$20 a week—just spare time.—**JOHN JERRY, 1629 Arapahoe St., Km. 17, Denver, Colorado**

### Makes \$50 to \$60 a Week

I am making between \$50 and \$60 a week after all expenses are paid, and I am getting all the Radio work I can take care of, thanks to N. R. I.—**H. W. SPANGLER, 156 1/2 S. Gay St., Knoxville, Tenn.**



**Operates Public Address System**  
I have a position with the Los Angeles Civil Service, operating the Public Address System in the City Hall Council. My salary is \$170 a month.—**R. E. GOOD, R. 198, City Hall, Los Angeles, Calif.**

20c



ALL STORIES NEW

VOL. 2

MAY, 1941

NO. 4

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# "FLAMES DROVE US INTO THE INKY SEA!"

A true experience of WILLIAM H. CRANE, West Columbia, Texas



"A TERRIFIC EXPLOSION rocked the boat on which we were riding out to an oil drilling rig in Galveston Bay," writes Mr. Crane. "Instantly, the six of us—a drilling crew and the skipper of our craft—were surrounded by flames."

"FIGHTING THE FIRE was hopeless. As tongues of flame seared us, we strapped on lifebelts. Our driller grabbed a flashlight. Then we hurled ourselves overboard into the black water."



"AFTER HOURS OF SIGNALLING, the piercing white beam of the flashlight guided a searching party to us. Without the flashlight and its dependable 'Eveready' fresh DATED batteries it could have been 'curtains' for us."

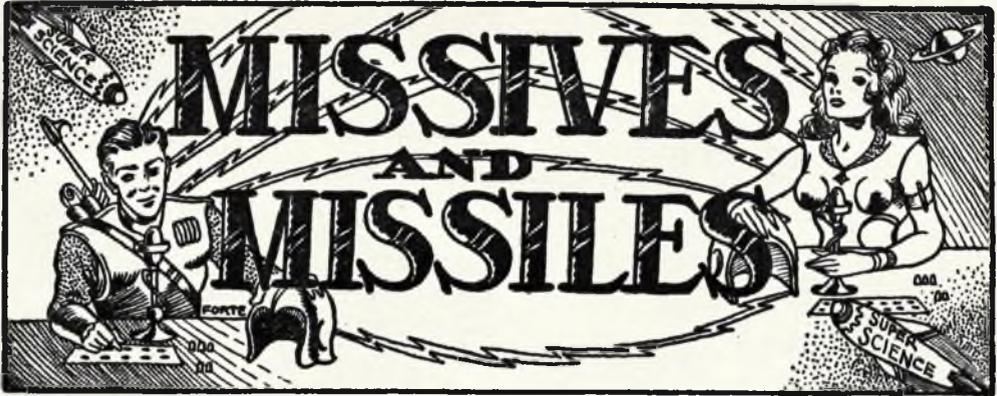
(Signed) *William H. Crane*

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



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"Sapient"

Dear Editor:

I yama fan 24 yrs old and this is not my first letter to a "Missiles and Mistletoe" Dept. in a sci-fic mag.

"Genus Homo" was a sapient story. It had an atmosphere that took me back ten years to great tales like "The World of the Giant Ants," "The Bridge of Light," and "A Voice Across the Years." And above all, it was adult.

I shall now descend to the depths of juvenility (in the opinions of some) by making one pun: The question is, if our haressed handful of humans in "G. H." had abruptly met up with a metamorphosed mastodon of a million years hence, would they've named it a "mastoid"? . . . I liked, a lot, Thorp's picture of the g'llilla Lord Percy—the genus with the lite brown hair.

Asimov's offering was alrite; "A Voyage in Time" interesting. Some of the other storys I've espeshly enjoyed in *Super* and your companion publication in the past months have been "Strange Playfellow", "Beings Like These", "Half-Breeds on Venus", and "The Element of Logic". This little listing is intended to show U that out of the welter of scienti-fantasy mags—I get every one—I actually have read the storys in yours.

What about Perri and Marconette? After turning out a good picture apiece, I have seen no more illustrations by them. Bring 'em back—and, still more Bok!—4s

4

J Ackerman, (The Mad Genus), 236½ N New Hampshire, Hollywood, California.

"—And What Do I Get?"

Dear Mr. Pohl:

Once upon a time, someone said—"It's the long novel that is killing Science Fiction." I object, because it isn't true. It isn't the length of the story, it's the handling, plot, and writing that count. So you decide to print full-length novels: well and good. Maybe now I can read some good stuff, I say. Okay, I buy your mag, and what do I get? The following—

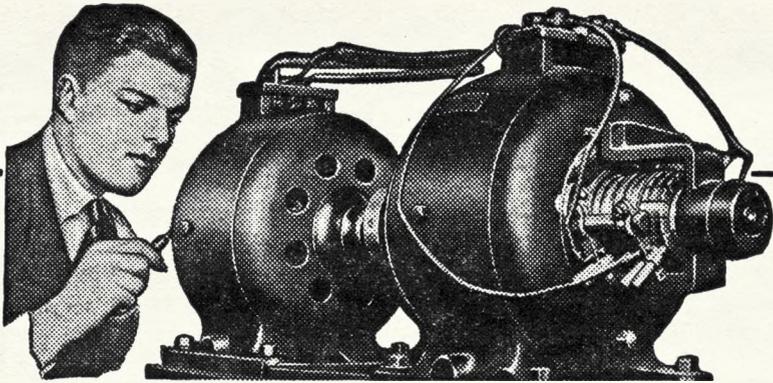
1. A 76½ page novel.
2. One four page article.
3. One two page letter department.
4. Four pages of *The Science Fictioneer*.
5. 14½ pages of advertising.
6. 43 pages of short stories.

Well, 120 pages of story is pretty good, but you could give us a larger article and enlarge the letter department.

But your pix—ye gods, gadzooks, etc., you deserve a lambasting. Four pictures for the long novels and not one full page one at that. There should've been 8 pix at least; of these, one should have been a double-page, two full pages, and the rest any way you want.

And how about a two-way readers' column, huh?—A. R. Brown, 139-09 34th Road, Flushing, L. I., N. Y.

(Continued on page 6)



# Amazingly Easy Way to get into **ELECTRICITY** **I'LL FINANCE YOUR TRAINING**

Don't spend your life hoping for a better job and a better salary. Let me show you how to train for positions that lead to \$35.00, \$40.00 a week and up in the great field of Electricity. NOT by correspondence but by actual shop work right on real electrical machinery. Then on my "PAY AFTER GRADUATION" PLAN YOU CAN PAY YOUR TUITION AFTER YOUR TRAINING PERIOD IS OVER IN EASY MONTHLY PAYMENTS.

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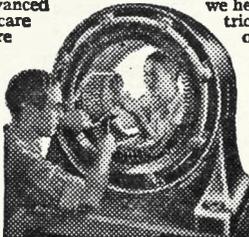
Lack of experience—age, or advanced education bars no one. I don't care if you don't know an armature from an air brake—I don't expect you to! It makes no difference! Don't let lack of money stop you. Most of the men at Coyne have no more money than you have. That's why I have worked out my astonishing offers.

### Earn While Learning

If you need part-time work to help pay your living expenses I'll help you get it. Then, in 12 brief weeks, in the great roaring shops of Coyne, I train you as you never dreamed you could be trained...on one of the greatest outlays of electrical apparatus ever assembled...real dynamos, engines, power plants, autoes, switchboards, transmitting stations...everything from doorbells to farm power and lighting...full-sized...in full operation every day!

### No Books—No Classes

No dull books, no baffling charts, no classes, you get individual training...all real actual work...building real batteries...winding real armatures, operating real motors, dynamos and generators, wiring houses, etc., etc. That's a glimpse of how



**PREPARE FOR JOBS LIKE THESE**  
Our Employment Bureau for graduates gives FREE lifetime employment service.  
Armature Winder  
Sub-Station Operator  
Auto & Aviation Ignition  
Maintenance Electrician  
Service Station Owner  
Air Conditioning  
Electric Refrigeration  
Radio Servicing  
and many others

we help to make you a master electrician so you can cash in on the opportunities ahead.

### Jobs, Pay, Future

To get a good job today you've got to be trained. Industry demands men who have specialized training. These men will be the ones who are the big-pay men of the future. After graduation my Employment Department gives you Lifetime Employment Service. J. O. Whitmeyer says: "After I graduated, the School Employment Service furnished me with a list of several positions...I secured a position with an Electrical Construction Company, paying me 3 to 4 times more a week than was getting before I entered Coyne and today I am still climbing to higher pay."

## RADIO

Right now I'm including an extra 4 weeks' Radio Course at no extra tuition charge.

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Coyne is your one great chance to get into electricity. Every obstacle is removed. This school is 40 years old—Coyne training is tested and proven. You can get training first—then pay for it in easy monthly payments after you graduate. You can find out everything absolutely free. Simply mail the coupon and let me send you the big, free Coyne book...facts...jobs...salaries...opportunities. This does not obligate you. So act at once. Just mail coupon.

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This is our fireproof, modern home wherein is installed thousands of dollars' worth of the newest and most modern Electrical equipment of all kinds. Every comfort and convenience has been arranged to make you happy and contented during your training.

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Dear Mr. Lewis:  
Without obligation send me your big free catalog and all details of Free Employment Service, the 4 weeks Radio Course and how you will finance my tuition and how I can "earn while learning." I understand I will not be bothered by any salesman.

Name.....  
Address.....  
City.....State.....

(Continued from page 4)

### End of Year One

Dear Editor Pohl:

You no doubt have read by now my remarks on the progress—and otherwise—of the companion magazine, *Astonishing*. This is to be another of that kind; it is surprising how decidedly the ups and downs of the two publications resemble each other. I do hope you see this because I was most enthusiastic and put much effort into the tally.

But first I must make the most favorable of reports on the first issue of your new venture, *Super Science Novels*. Unlike *Astonishing*, *Super Science* had a pretty tough year and there were few really excellent stories and only one superior issue out of the six; you might assume, then, that it was a rather open field for any better-than-average yarn to take. This was not the case, though, for there were such masterpieces as "Before the Universe", "The Girl in the Bottle", "Venusian Tragedy", and "Trans-Plutonian Trap". And yet the magnificent co-authorship of de Camp and Miller produced a wonder that stole the show for the year. This sounds much in the same vein as the raves I made over Jameson's serial in *Astonishing*; it might come from the fact that at last my wishes—serials and book-lengths; in other words, novels—have been partially granted. I don't think that this is the only deciding factor, though. "Genus Homo" was such a believable assortment of real characters and the weird and horrifying predicaments that would confront such characters. De Camp's usual stifling verbosity was happily absent from this epic and Miller contributed all that is good of his workmanship. This was the only story with which de Camp has dallied in any way that I have actually enjoyed. The Thorp pix were adequate but too few in number; the cover is described by a word that I have not had the pleasure or courage to

discover as yet. It was tenth out of twelve covers; "Collision Course" cover was equally bad, ninth out of eleven. Were they both by the same artist, and is he Thorp? Personally, I would have preferred the elfin enchantments of Bok for this—they seem to fit the mood.

Further facts about the terrifying Durna Rangué were ably—albeit gruesomely—related by the thrilling proximity of Mr. N. Jones. It was second and could have had illustrations of an extremely better nature by Mr. Morey—the scene where all the horrors attack at once, for instance—but didn't. He slipped here once again.

The Brief is surprisingly third and exquisitely "artist-rated" by Mr. Bok, as was the very clever No. 4 Cummings short, "Almost Human". Asimov's "History" is last and a bit of a disappointment from this usually ever-pleasin' author.

I was very pleased with the issue's format: novel, short novel, two shorts, *Super Science* Brief, and the article, and the three departments. It was a sorrow to find that this will not be the precedent—seven stories next time.

As I mentioned before, the six *Super Science Stories* did not compare with their companion mags. The best yarns of the year were: "Before the Universe"—Gottesman; "The Girl in the Bottle"—Williamson; "Venusian Tragedy"—Sheridan; "Trans-Plutonian Trap"—Rocklynne; "Trouble Shooter"—Vincent; "A Stitch in Time"—Long; "The Monster on the Border"—Temple; "Guardian Angel"—Gallun; "Strange Playfellow"—Asimov; "Invisible One"—Jones; "The Invasion"—Willey; and a few others. Gottesman, Rocklynne, Gallun, and Vincent contributed constant entertainment during the first year.

The first four covers—Binder, Mayorga, and two Sherrys—were perfect; the last three—Morey, Mayorga, and Sherry

(Continued on page 142)



GEE what a build!  
Didn't it take a long  
time to get those muscles?

No SIR! - ATLAS  
Makes Muscles Grow  
Fast!

# Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a New Man?



LET ME START SHOWING YOU RESULTS LIKE THESE

<p><b>5 inches of new Muscle</b></p> <p>"My arms increased 1 1/2", chest 2 1/2", forearm 7/8". —C. S., W. Va.</p>	<p><b>What a difference!</b></p> <p>"Have put 3 1/2" on chest (normal) and 2 1/2" expanded." —F. S., N. Y.</p>
<p><b>Here's what ATLAS did for ME!</b></p> <p>John Jacobs <b>BEFORE</b>      John Jacobs <b>AFTER</b></p>	<p><b>For quick results I recommend CHARLES ATLAS</b></p> <p>"Am sending snapshot showing wonderful progress." —W. G., N. J.</p> <p><b>GAINED 29 POUNDS</b></p> <p>"When I started, weighed only 141. Now 170." —T. K., N. Y.</p>

**CHARLES ATLAS**

Awarded the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" in international contest—in competition with ALL men who would consent to a physical against him.

This is a recent photo of Charles Atlas showing how he looks today. This is not a studio picture but an actual unretouched snapshot.

## Here's What Only 15 Minutes a Day Can Do For You

DON'T care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add **SOLID MUSCLE** to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system **INSIDE** and **OUTSIDE**! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

### What's My Secret?

"**Dynamic Tension!**" That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—my way. I give you no gadgets or con-

traptions to fool with. When you have learned to develop your Strength through "**Dynamic Tension**" you can laugh at artificial muscle-makers. You simply utilize the **DORMANT** muscle-power in your own God-given body—watch it increase and multiply double-quick into real solid **LIVE MUSCLE**.

My method—"Dynamic Tension"—will turn the trick for you. No theory—every exercise is practical. And, man, so easy! Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of "**Dynamic Tension**" almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to **BUILD MUSCLE** and **VITALITY**.

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"Everlasting Health and Strength"

In it I talk to you in straight-from-the-shoulder language. Packed with inspirational pictures of myself and pupils—fellows who became **NEW MEN** in strength, my way. Let me show you what I helped THEM do. See what I can do for YOU! For a real thrill, send for this book today, AT ONCE, **CHARLES ATLAS**, Dept. 83E, 115 East 23rd St., New York City.

**CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 83E**  
115 East 23rd St., New York N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of "**Dynamic Tension**" will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "**Everlasting Health and Strength**"—and full details of your **TRIAL OFFER**.

Name.....  
(Please print or write plainly)

Address.....

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



# MISSION UNKNOWN!

By HENRY HASSE

## CHAPTER I

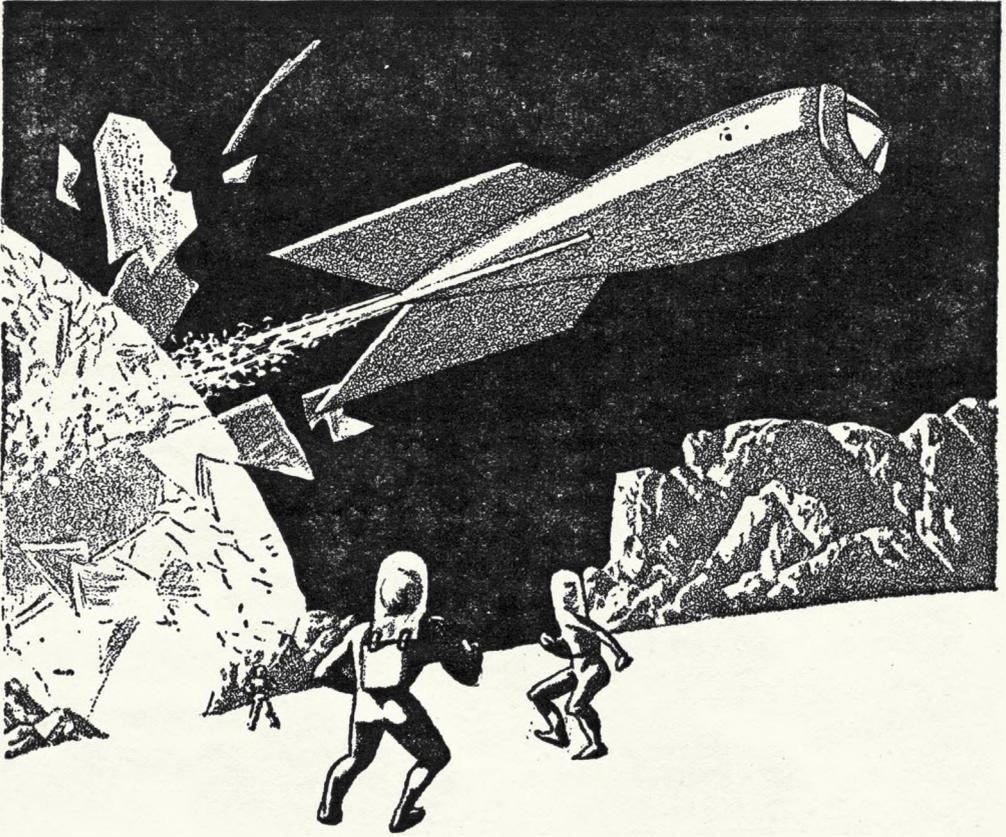
### The Man in Green Glasses

**D**AVE RANDALL stood a short distance away from the customary crowd, and looked out across the vast paved plaza of the Chicago Spaceport. The night was dark and moonless, but out there under the floodlights everything seemed a confusion of activity. Endless lines of electric trucks were hauling

the cargo aboard the *Martian Princess*, and near the spaceship tall cranes were in operation.

Randall leaned on the iron railing and watched, fascinated. And he was just a little awed at the thought that when the ship hurtled up and away from Earth he would be in it.

Suddenly Randall felt his arms pinned to his sides in a tremendous grip, and he jerked backward off his feet. He opened his mouth to yell. A large hand



closed over it. He felt someone's hot breath on his neck. He writhed and struggled with all the strength of his six feet of hardened muscle, but the assault had been too sudden, and he was off balance. Then the hot breath was close to his ear and a voice whispered warningly: "Shhh! Thalia!"

At that word Randall immediately ceased struggling. So—it was "Thalia" already, huh? The grip loosened and the hand came away from his mouth. Randall whirled around, but his assailant put a finger to his lips and nodded meaningly toward another figure walking casually away in the darkness.

"All right," Randall said in a low voice,

but angrily. "You've got the password, but did you have to come at me in that way?"

The man looked a moment longer at the third figure walking away, then turned to Randall. A wry smile was on his lips.

"See that man? He's been staying close to you all evening. So have I: but I've been watching him. I saved your life just now, young fellow. I saw him try to get you with a blaster, and I had to act quickly! Sorry if I was rough."

"An atomic blast!" Randall gasped. "But they're outlawed, they're—" And then he stopped suddenly, confused and conscious that he sounded frightened and a little childish.

**It was strange that Dave Randall should be given an important, secret diplomatic letter to deliver. But the contents of the letter—he found after months of voyaging through space and across the continents of three planets—were even stranger!**

His rescuer was still smiling grimly, and he answered very simply: "Yes. Now you know what you're up against. I'd advise you to keep in the light, with the crowd."

But now Randall was smiling too—with all but his eyes. In the clear gray depths of those eyes was something grim, and there was a stubbornness in the way he held his chin.

"Then why," Randall demanded a bit pugnaciously, "didn't you tackle him instead of me? Don't ever do that again."

The other man shrugged. "Those weren't my instructions. Isn't your life worth anything to you?"

"Come over here in the light," Randall said, "I want a better look at you!"

They walked toward one of the field lights. Randall saw a man a good two inches taller than his own six feet, very dark, and with a suggestion of wiry strength which Randall had already felt demonstrated. The man wore huge green glasses, but Randall studied the face beneath, trying to memorize it.

"Then suppose you tell me what *were* your instructions," Randall said. "You've got the word all right—Thalia. But how do I know—"

"Those weren't my instructions either," the man said, still smiling; but as he saw swift anger come across Randall's face he added quickly: "But I don't mind obliging. In your pocket you have a letter. This letter was handed to you by Felix Reynolds, President of Inter-Continental Stratoplane Lines, with certain explicit instructions for delivery on Mars. Right so far? He also told you to trust any person who approached you with the word 'Thalia', but under no circumstances to surrender the letter to any but the proper hands. Furthermore—"

"That's enough, I'm satisfied," Randall said with a disarming frankness. He was far from being satisfied, but he wanted the fellow to think so. "But I wish you'd

have let me go after that fellow who took the blast at me. Damn uncomfortable feeling, and now he's liable to do it again! What about him, is he making the trip?"

"Of that I'm certain."

"Are you?"

The man didn't answer, but looked at Randall with that enigmatic smile that was fast becoming annoying. Then, without another word he turned swiftly and walked away into the crowd.

Randall started to follow, but hesitated. Then he called, "Thanks!" The man looked swiftly back, his glasses flashing greenly, and Randall was sure he saw that curious smile still on his lips. He shrugged with an uneasy little laugh.

"Well," he said aloud, "it's begun! I had an idea things were going to happen, but not this soon!" His hand went automatically to his inside coat pocket, and he felt the bulk of the mysterious letter that was fastened securely there. Satisfied, he walked over to the inner gate, showed the guard his pass, and sauntered onto the field.

It was still a few hours until take-off time.

**R**ANDALL stood in the half-dark at one end of the loading platforms. The ten-minute signal had just sounded, and he was trying to make up his mind whether to go aboard now or wait until the last minute. He laughed softly to himself as he remembered his mysterious rescuer's advice to keep in the light. He preferred to keep in the gloom where he could see, but not be seen. From here he commanded a view of the inner gate through which the passengers had to come.

Just as he decided nothing else was going to happen tonight, and that he'd better get aboard—he saw the girl. She had just come through the gate with the last minute passengers. She pressed hurriedly past the guard, nervously stuffing

her pass back into a handbag. She hesitated, peering back into the crowd anxiously. Then, instead of going to the waiting-room with the others, she hurried toward the shadow of the platform where Randall was standing. Again she glanced back nervously as though fleeing from someone, trying to reach the shadow before being spotted.

Randall followed her gaze to the gate. Then he straightened up, suddenly very interested. For, pressing through the throng, he saw—the man in the green glasses! It was the same man, Randall was sure. The fellow snatched his pass back from the guard and hurried forward, peering into the crowd searchingly. The girl had seen him too, but she had reached the shadow now. She stopped only a few feet from Randall; her hand went nervously to her throat, and she sighed with relief when she saw her pursuer go the other way.

Randall looked back at the girl—just in time to see the electric truck bearing down swiftly and silently upon her. "Look out!" he shouted. At the same time he sprang forward and jerked her out of the way just as the truck whizzed by.

She uttered a little gasp and looked up at him with wide, startled eyes, too surprised to speak.

"Whew!" Randall said. "We have to be careful tonight, don't we?" There was a double meaning in his words. He nodded back toward the gate and said, "It's all right; he didn't see you."

The girl stared at him a moment longer before she sprang swiftly away without uttering a word. But into her eyes had flashed a look that told Randall she knew what he meant.

And Randall frowned, for in those eyes had been something else. He was sure of it. It had been a momentary flash of—recognition! So the girl knew him, then! But Dave Randall was very

sure he had never in his life seen her before. . . .

He stared after her, still frowning puzzledly. Then he smiled. For it hadn't been *too* dark there in the shadow, and as he thought of that white and frightened face—but a very pretty face!—he suddenly realized he wanted to know her better.

And he was very sure he was going to. . . .

## CHAPTER II

### The Man Minus Green Glasses

RANDALL was awakened by a soft but insistent clangor close to his ear. He sat bolt upright, and it took him several seconds to realize he was in his stateroom aboard the *Martian Princess*. He had gone straight there after coming aboard, leaving instructions on his door to be awakened in six hours.

Now he felt refreshed, but still he didn't want to get up yet. He felt a need to think things through from the beginning again. Things had happened a little too swiftly last night, and—well, he thought, shrugging mentally, he was only beginning to realize how serious this mission must be!

His mind went back to Felix Reynolds. Felix had been like a father to him ever since his own father had died fifteen years ago. So Randall had grown up, as it were, with the Stratoplane Line. At nineteen he had taken one of the regular pilot jobs instead of the executive position he might have had for the asking. This had seemed to please old Felix very much, and it's what Randall wanted.

But four years of this had been enough. The daily routine was beginning to get him. Then, just two days ago, had come the change for which he'd been hoping. Randall had just completed his Tokyo-Chicago run, and, as usual, had popped into the office to say hello to Felix. But

this time he had found the old man pacing the floor, waiting for him.

"Ah, it's you, Davey. Sit down, boy."

Randall sat down, but Felix continued to pace the floor. "Well, Davey, I guess this is what you've been waiting for. Oh, I know what's been bothering you lately. Routine. You want excitement. Well, this ought to satisfy you. It's—Mars."

Randall had leaped up, eager questions on his lips, but Felix had frowned. "It won't be a picnic," he said, "and you're going only because I can trust you above all persons. I've a letter here which you're to deliver at the embassy at N'Voshl. It must not leave your hands, understand? Utmost secrecy, and I'm sorry I can't tell even you more than that. You'll have trouble, that I can promise you. *But get the letter there!*"

Randall had nodded, and Felix continued. "There will be others in this, whom you are to trust, and we'd better have a word by which you'll know them." Felix stopped his pacing, reached for the dictionary on his desk and ran his finger down one of the pages. "Now, let's see—a suitable word. Any word. Ah, here we are. *Thalia*," he announced, closing the book. "That will do very well. Remember that word, Davey."

And then things had happened much too fast. His assailant with the atom-blast. His rescuer in green glasses, who knew that password but whom Randall did not trust, somehow, in spite of it. And the girl who was somehow connected with the man—an enigma, but a very pretty enigma, Randall remembered. So here he was on the *Martian Princess*, six hours out from Earth, and for the hundredth time he wondered what possible interests his uncle Felix, or Stratoplane Lines, could have on Mars!

But very suddenly Dave Randall ceased to wonder about this. He sank slowly back to his pillow.

He had heard no sound, but he knew

someone was slowly, carefully, opening his stateroom door. . . .

RANDALL quickly turned his head on the pillow in that direction. He tried to simulate the slow, steady breathing of a sleeping person. Then he saw the door open slowly . . . saw the dim glow of light from the corridor beyond . . . saw the dark blur of a figure step quickly inside, and shut the door just as silently.

For a full minute there was no sound, and Randall knew the intruder was listening to his breathing. Then came a sibilant sound as the shape moved slowly forward. Randall saw it dimly now in the darkness. Someone was fumbling about the chair close to the bed. And with a sudden, bursting comprehension Randall knew what the intruder was after.

Randall tried to spring from bed silently, but he became tangled in the covers. As it was, he struck out blindly at the vague figure, felt his fist connect solidly, and had the satisfaction of hearing a surprised grunt from the fellow's lips. Randall fell heavily to the floor, clutched at a leg and tried to hang on, but felt it escape from his grasp as the figure jerked away violently. Then the door was open and the intruder was gone, but Randall could have sworn he heard a low chuckle.

Then he was at the door himself, fumbling for the light switch he remembered seeing there. He found it, and light flooded the room. Bed covers were on the floor, the chair was overturned and his coat had slipped from the back of the chair where he'd hung it. Frantically Randall snatched up the coat, fumbling for the inside pocket. Then he sighed in relief as he found the bundle containing the letter.

But just to be sure, he produced the letter itself. First he unfastened the outer, flexible mesh-metal wrapping in which he'd placed it for safety. Then the folded leather wallet. And inside the wallet was

the all-important letter, addressed in Felix's own familiar handwriting: "TO THE EARTH EMBASSY, N'VOSHL, MARS. STRICTLY PERSONAL."

Randall quickly dressed. He was angry, mostly at himself. "Well, it serves me right," he muttered. "But I've learned my lesson. From now on this letter stays with me closer than paint on a wall. And I'll deliver it to the embassy in spite of hell or high water or all the atom-blasts or green spectacles in captivity!"

He consulted the chronometer on the wall and saw that it was early morning according to Earth time, but he supposed it made no difference out here. As he hurried to the door his foot struck something which skidded lightly across the floor. He walked over and picked it up. And this time it was he who chuckled.

In his hand he held a pair of large green spectacles. . . .

Randall made his way to the upper deck and walked forward to the navigation room. But upon reaching there he was annoyed to find that no passengers were allowed in there without special permit. He could only look through the

Crystyte paneling, and this was too far away for him to follow the various processes of charting the course and other such matters.

Disconsolately he wandered again to the upper decks. The few other passengers who were up this early nodded or spoke cheerfully to him. He tried to interest himself in the automatic dials showing their speed, time-schedule, and relative position from other heavenly bodies. But the *only* heavenly body of interest was the little blonde who strolled past just then and glanced at him meaningly. He probably could have made friends with her, but by this time he was in anything but a friendly mood, and that was not the sort of excitement he craved this trip. Gone was the glamour of space-traveling, of thrill-crammed days, which he had built up in his imagination.

He stopped a moment to listen to the newscast. The announcer was telling about another daring raid the pirate Hogarth had made on an Earth-bound freighter only one day out of Mars. The pirate ship had escaped—as usual. Two Martian Patrol ships had chased it to Mars, then lost it, and again as usual its base of operations was still being sought.

## From the Private Diary of Gloria N---



**3** Slept wonderfully all night. Ex-Lax worked fine this morning. No upsets or anything. Headache's all gone, too. Sure hope Jim calls me tonight.



**1** Broke a date with Jim for to-night. The way my head aches, I don't feel like seeing anybody! Guess I need a laxative, but I dread the thought of taking one.



**2** Aunt Helen told me to try Ex-Lax. I hate the taste of laxatives—but Ex-Lax was a pleasant surprise. It tasted just like fine chocolate.

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Randall, as he listened, found himself almost hoping they'd encounter Hogarth; he had often wanted to see how this increasingly famous pirate got away so easily.

He had just about decided to go back in search of that blonde after all, when he saw something that caused him to forget her abruptly.

### CHAPTER III

#### "My Name Is—"

SHE saw him, also, "Hello," she said cheerfully. "Don't tell me you've taken in all the sights so soon!"

Damn it, Randall thought, she knows this is my first trip and she's laughing at me. And what's she being so friendly about? It surprised him, and he didn't like being surprised. Especially by girls as pretty as she. He didn't answer her greeting, so she went on blithely:

"Oh, come now. I know you remember me, and we're going to be friends aren't we? You made up your mind to that when you first saw me last night! You were going to break down my resistance slowly but surely, isn't that it? Well, I believe what is to be is to be, so why waste time about it?"

Now Randall was sure she was mocking him, and he felt a hot resentment rising in him. He decided on a bold stroke. "So you don't believe in wasting time?" he said abruptly. "All right, we won't waste any more. What do you know about the man in the green glasses?"

It was with immense satisfaction that Randall saw the stroke take effect. She tried to stammer something, blushed very prettily, and turned hurriedly away in confusion.

"And why are you afraid of him?" Randall persisted almost viciously.

She turned back to face him, and was

smiling again. A different kind of smile. "All right," she said. "Serves me right for walking into that. You win the first round."

Randall nodded, but persisted, "Then you're not going to trust me? I thought we were to be friends." And almost at once he realized how selfish the words sounded. Why *should* she trust him indeed? He found himself not trusting her, simply because she was somehow connected with the man in the glasses, whom he had been instructed to trust in the first place! The man knew the password Felix had selected, and Randall suddenly wondered if this girl knew it. He was tempted to pronounce the word "Thalia" and watch her reaction to it, but he decided to wait awhile.

"MAYBE," she was saying in answer to his question, "maybe it's— it's not quite time for us to trust each other. Shall we let it go at that and be friends anyway?"

"Oh, we'll do that, by all means!" Looking at her, Randall had suddenly decided this game, whatever it was, would be worth playing out to the very end.

"Good. Now tell me what you think of the *Martian Princess*." She smiled, and this time there was no mockery.

"The *Martian Princess*!" Randall exclaimed disgustedly. "There's nothing on this spacer but staterooms and decks and closed doors and signs saying 'Keep Out!'"

"I'm afraid you're a little too impetuous!" she laughed.

He scarcely heard her words. When she laughed like that her slightly turned-up nose crinkled funnily and her eyes sparkled in rivalry to those stars in the blackness out there. Her hair was brushed smoothly back from the forehead, then fell in waves to her shoulders. Randall was trying to decide if it were auburn or not, but he could only see that it some-

how seemed more than one shade of color at the slightest movement of her head.

She saw his interest and turned deftly away to the Crystyte panelling, waving her hand outward in an over-emphasized gesture. "Isn't that what you came up here to see?" she said lightly. "After all it is the observation deck, you know."

"I have been observing," Randall said, still looking at her, but she preferred to ignore his meaning.

"Well," she said at last, "aren't you surprised?"

Randall came out of his reverie, and looked outward again. "Oh, I suppose you mean about the stars being so tiny; only pinpoints, hardly one-fifth the size they appear to be from Earth. No, I'm not surprised, I'd heard about that, of course. It is rather disappointing, though."

"It's because their light is refracted by the Earth's atmosphere. Out here, there's no such illusion."

Randall nodded. "Logical." Then looked at her again, and said, "You seem to know a lot about it."

"This is my fifth trip," she said without affectation.

Again Randall nodded, looking at her, then said, "There's one thing I wish you'd answer me. Don't if you'd rather not. But for some reason you recognized me last night—knew who I was. Don't deny it, I could tell—"

"Why should I deny it? Of course I know who you are. Your picture was in most of the papers about a month ago when the Stratoplane *Valiant* crashed in the Pacific. Quite a hero you made yourself, Dave Randall."

"Oh, that sort of stuff's always exaggerated," Randall found himself saying guiltily, a little uncomfortably. "But do you know, that was the only excitement I've had in all my years with Stratoplane Lines?"

"How many years is that?"

"Well, only four, but that's enough. But you take *this*, now," he said enviously, waving his hand in an all-encompassing gesture. "I'm in my fourth year at the Government Spacer School, too, you know—just waiting for a chance out here."

"Not very exciting, I'm afraid. I've made this trip four times, remember."

"No, no, I mean—well, being a part of all this. The future really lies out here, you know, and there's so much yet to be done! Anyway it would make *me* feel like something important. . . ."

"You'd really give up Stratoplane Lines for this? Same routine as yours, on a slightly larger scale. Everything's routine nowadays."

"But look here," exclaimed Randall, warming to his subject, "it isn't at all! Why, just as an example, take this tricky pirate, Hogarth. I've been hearing a lot on the newscasts lately about him. Before long, colonization and shipping is going to extend beyond the three planets, and then his sort of lawlessness is bound to increase. And there'll be others besides him."

"But," she persisted, "from all I hear there's not much excitement about Hogarth. They say he strikes and is gone again so swiftly that nothing can be done about it."

"And that," Randall said triumphantly, "proves my point. You say nothing can be done about it; what you really mean is that nothing *has* been done."

"And I suppose you, Dave Randall, if you had the chance would do something about it?" She looked at him steadily.

"I'd at least try to," Randall said a bit hotly, wondering if she were mocking him again.

"You might get the chance sooner than you think."

Randall looked at her quickly. "What do you mean by that?"

She laughed. "Nothing. I was just listening to the newscast a little while ago, that's all."

"Yes, I heard that too. But I doubt if Hogarth would bother to touch the *Martian Princess*. He usually goes after much larger cargo than we're carrying this trip."

"Usually. But sometimes the larger cargoes aren't the most important, are they?"

**R**ANDALL was startled, and now he was sure there was some special meaning behind her words. He was about to reply something, but he never got the chance. His attention was forced to something much more personal; *distressingly* personal.

It came abruptly, in a sweeping, all-engulfing wave of vertigo. He had been looking innocently out into space, and suddenly it seemed that all the limitless black void came rushing in to swallow him, to surround him, to drown him in its pitiless depths. It seemed suddenly there was no longer the protecting shell of the space-ship, that he was alone and helpless in the greedy void. He felt himself growing very green and very sick. Randall remembered seasickness, but this was ten times worse. He could no longer feel anything beneath his feet as the vertigo surged over him in wave after sickening wave.

She saw Randall's distress as he tried to turn away. "I might have known!" she exclaimed, in real sympathy. "I guess *this* is something they didn't teach you at the Spacer School!"

"They did," Randall gasped in contradiction, "but I—I thought I—could take it. Hits you quick—doesn't it!"

"You mean you deliberately—! But yes, that's just like you. You knew very well you weren't supposed to be up here yet! I oughtn't to have a bit of sympathy, but I will." She searched in the pockets

of the sports suit she was wearing, and finally found a couple of tiny white pellets which she handed to him. "Here, you take these—and believe me, they'll help a lot. And mind you, stay in your stateroom for twelve hours more. After that, you're over this sort of thing for good."

"But I—I don't really need—"

"Dave Randall, stop trying to be a great big hero, and do as I tell you!"

Randall moved away unsteadily, but turned and managed to say, "All right. But here I am letting you push me around, and I don't even know your name yet!" He managed a sickly grin. "After all, I intend to see a great deal of you on this trip, and I don't want to say 'Hey, you,' whenever I talk to you."

And as Randall turned away he heard her call, "No, that wouldn't do at all, and I was wondering how long before you'd ask. My name is—Thalia."

## CHAPTER IV

### The Signal Bombs

"**T**HALIA MARTIN," she told him next day, as they sat at lunch in the main salon. And Randall, observing her closely, saw that she was utterly unaware of the significance that first name had for him. Or at least she seemed to be.

"Thalia—that's rather an unusual name," Randall ventured. "Has it any meaning, precisely?"

She was really sincere or else a very good actress, Randall thought, as she looked at him steadily and replied, "It's from Greek mythology, I think—originally one of the nine Muses, or something. Why?" she added, smiling. "Don't you like it?"

"On the contrary, I like it very much!"

Randall thought of that often in the following few days. She had spoken her

name seemingly in the utmost innocence. Again Randall could not help thinking of Felix, back at the office, on the day he had broached this secret mission. Pretending to select that word at random! It was all too absurdly obvious now—almost childish. Felix had known that Thalia would be aboard. But why? Now, in addition to his mistrust of "Mr. Smith," and his puzzlement over Thalia, Randall found himself growing resentful toward Felix for not confiding in him further.

Randall kept his word and did see a great deal of Thalia, and she accepted him at his word. But here again Randall was puzzled. She was almost too friendly, too glad of his company. He never caught her secretly laughing at him again, but rather he felt that she was surreptitiously studying him. He noticed too, that Mr. Smith seemed to regard them rather too frequently, but not a sign of recognition passed between the three of them. Randall wondered if Thalia were accepting his company only because she was afraid of this man, but he hoped it was a reason more personal.

For several days everything went smoothly, and Randall was beginning to think Felix had exaggerated the dangers of this mission. He frequently touched the letter in his pocket and smiled. In two more days they'd be at Mars, and he could deliver it. He had expected the man in the glasses to make another attempt at it, but apparently the fellow had given up. Or was he just biding his time? Randall frowned, then shrugged. He'd be ready.

**B**UT that very night his complacency was shaken and he was plunged into deeper mystery. He and Thalia had just emerged onto the empty deck from the rather crowded ballroom. It was nearly midnight, and Thalia bade him good-night, saying she was rather tired. Ran-

dall smoked a cigarette and then headed for his own stateroom.

Just as he reached the darker shadow of the escalator-service, about mid-deck, a man's voice stopped him.

"Dave Randall!"

He peered ahead into the shadow, and saw a vague blur of a figure.

The man spoke again: "The letter, Randall."

Randall was startled, and immediately on the defensive. "What about it?" he asked, still trying to peer into the gloom.

"I'll take it now, please," the voice said very matter-of-factly.

"I think not," Randall replied.

"Come, this is a very serious matter. The letter, please." The voice was impatient. "There's at least one other person aboard who wants it, and I assure you it will be much safer in my hands."

Now Randall saw the figure a bit better. He had thought at first it might be the man, but now he knew it wasn't, for the man was not so tall.

"You refuse?" The voice took on a note of anger.

Randall didn't answer.

"Even when I pronounce the word—'Thalia'?"

Randall was startled, but now his own voice was angry as he exclaimed, "Everyone aboard this spacer seems to know that word!"

"And you were instructed to trust any who approach you with it, Dave Randall. Are you going to follow those orders or not?"

"I'm not," Randall said mockingly. "Because I had one other instruction which maybe you don't know about. The letter stays with me—permanent! As for trusting you, I trust you about as far as I can see into that shadow. If I'm to trust you, step out here and let's see who you are!"

The figure didn't move, but when it spoke the voice had changed. "You were

instructed better than I thought. All right, Randall, how much to hand over the letter? You can name your own price. Ten thousand? Fifty thousand? Ten times that if you wish. To be paid to you the minute we land on Mars. In gold."

Now Randall felt hot anger surging in him, not so much at the attempted bribe as at the fact the man continued to lurk there half-seen.

The fellow took Randall's silence as refusal, and now his voice was abruptly hard, menacing. "All right, Randall, you've had a good offer and you won't get another. We don't want to use violence, but now I'll tell you something: you'll never deliver that letter, because—"

But Randall had heard enough. He leaped forward, aiming a blow at the vague white face he could see. It caught the man a glancing blow that staggered him against the stair railing. But as Randall pressed forward, the man recovered his balance and shoved him violently away; keeping his head low, he leaped for the swiftly ascending escalator. Randall saw the fellow's heels disappearing over the edge of the upper deck, but by the time he got up there no one was in sight.

And it was not until Randall reached his stateroom that the startling truth burst upon him. This man could be none other than the fellow who had taken the blast at him back at the Spaceport that first day! And Randall had not even had a good glimpse of him yet; he might pass him on deck the next morning and not know him.

It was a decidedly uncomfortable feeling.

**T**HEY were only one day out from Mars when, without warning, all the blackness of space around the *Martian Princess* seemed to leap into light: a brilliant, intensely white light that hurt

the eyes. Passengers near the outer panellings staggered back in surprise or fear at the sudden, blinding contrast. Shouts and screams arose above the clanging of bells in all parts of the liner. Some of the passengers, panic-stricken, rushed for the emergency locks.

Captain Bowen leaped from the navigation room, his voice sounding through the din: "Quiet, please! Everyone! There's no danger." He turned and called to the first mate, "Kennett, order half-speed ahead. And who turned on that alarm? For God's sake shut it off!" Then the Captain turned again to the passengers who were quickly gathering. "It's merely a signal flare," he explained. "One of the crew must have launched it accidentally. Nothing to worry about."

The *Martian Princess* was now plunging through a veritable sea of white light that continued to spread outward in all directions for miles. A few minutes later, however, they were out of its range and in the utter, outer darkness again. But through the stern panels as they sped away could be seen the huge luminous sphere of light, still spreading. It could be detected thousands of miles away.

Kennett followed Captain Bowen's orders, then stood at his side. "What do you make of it, sir?"

"Very strange, Kennett. That type of signal hasn't been in use for twenty years."

"First time I ever saw one work," the officer replied. "Seems rather effective, though."

"Yes, they used to be necessary. And that's quite a huge one, too. Kennett, were you aware that any of those flares were aboard?"

"No, sir. And I'm very sure they weren't supposed to be."

"Of course not. Did you happen to notice from which side that flare was launched?"

"Seemed to come from starboard, sir; from the lower deck."

Captain Bowen nodded, a frown on his face. He peered sternward again and saw the signal far behind, hanging like a tiny toy balloon in the blackness.

"Kennett, I'd like you to take a few men to the low deck and search for those flares. There may be more. Question all the crew down there. I don't like this at all!"

**T**WENTY minutes later Kennett came back to report failure, although a thorough search had been made. "Perhaps it was just an accident after all, sir."

"Maybe you're right," Captain Bowen replied—and hardly were the words out of his mouth when another of the light-bombs was launched, and they were again surrounded by a sea of spreading light. This time it had seemed to start from the port side.

Captain Bowen leaped to the communication tube and slammed over the switch to the rocket rooms. "Full power!" he shouted. "We're changing our course!" He turned swiftly to the instrument board. The entire hull of the liner shivered as the tubes thundered into full power. They swiftly left that second light-sphere behind, but this time it was far to the starboard as the *Martian Princess* swept from its course in a huge curve.

"Kennett," Captain Bowen barked to the first mate, "someone aboard this liner is signalling another ship, showing them the way to us! That can only mean one thing: that damned pirate, Hogarth. He has a confederate aboard here, and it must be one of the passengers. Take every available man and search all the quarters—especially passenger quarters. I want those signal-flares found! From all I've heard Hogarth has a very fast ship, and we can't outrun him, so we'll have to

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dodge. I hope we've already tricked him by changing our course, but once we get within his detector range we're surely sunk!"

Kennett hurried away to carry out the search, and Bowen sounded the alarm bells himself this time, bringing all the passengers hurrying forward again.

His face was stern as he addressed them, and his voice harsh with authority. He told them tersely about his suspicion of a conspirator aboard, and ended with: "The criminal code, as enacted by the Tri-Planet Federation, gives the Captain of a spacer the absolute right to take the law into his own hands if any of the crew attempts treachery. That applies equally to passengers. I consider this such an attempt, and I wish to emphasize that I shall enforce that law to the fullest extent!"

Some time later officer Kennett, shaking his head, came to report to the Captain: "No flares found at all, sir; and not a single clue."

And ten minutes later the third light-bomb burst forth around them, again from the port side.

Now in baffled rage, Captain Bowen again changed the course sharply, barking orders to the rocket room. But Kennett had clicked on the detector, and now he said: "Captain! I'm afraid it's too late. Something at our stern, and it's coming on fast. Must be Hogarth, all right."

Captain Bowen had to peer closely at the cosmograph to discern the vague, dark shape moving swiftly across it, blotting out a few pinpoints of stars. The dial read three thousand miles, and even as he looked, the distance was steadily lessening.

"May as well get it over with," he muttered, and ordered one-quarter speed. "You may all leave the deck now if you wish," he said to the passengers. But now none wanted to leave; they remained standing there in an excited

group, waiting to see the fun, wanting to see this pirate they had heard so much about.

In a few minutes a spacer came alongside. It was trim and tiny and so black it could hardly be discerned even at this close range. It fastened magnetic hooks to the *Martian Princess* and clung to her like a monstrous black leech.

## CHAPTER V

### Hogarth

AT THE first gentle vibration of that contact, Captain Bowen had clicked on his trans-hull speaker. Now a blurred voice sounded through it.

"Captain, we've made contact with your locks. You will now open them. But first you will instruct your officers to make no show of resistance. We're coming through with atom-blasts ready, and at the first sign of resistance we'll blast you to dust. I shouldn't like to do that; I hate violence, but I can use it if the occasion arises."

"Very well," Bowen replied through clenched teeth, "you'll have no trouble." He pressed down on the lever opening the inner lock doors, then said to his gathered crew and passengers, "You heard what he said. We haven't a chance this time, so if we hold our peace we'll be on the way again shortly."

Slowly the lock doors swung open, and five men stepped onto the deck. The foremost was of average height and build; he held a hand-blast lightly at his side, and a black mask covered his entire face. His rough clothing was also black. The four men behind him did not wear masks; they carried atom-blasts in their belts, and their hands hovered near them.

The man in black stopped abruptly when he saw the gathered throng. He gazed at them a moment and then laughed shortly. "Well!" he said to no

one in particular. "Quite a welcoming party this time. But I forgot—I'm so accustomed to dealing only with the freighters." Then he shrugged. "It shouldn't make any difference." He turned to where Captain Bowen was standing with his crew grouped around him. "Captain Bowen?"

"At your service—I'm sorry to say," replied the Captain. He glanced through a panel at the black ship outside, then back at the pirate, surveying him calmly from head to foot. "I suppose you're Hogarth. You seem to like black!"

Hogarth laughed, this time with sincere amusement. "I do, Captain! But if you mean this," he touched his black mask, "it's merely force of habit—and one other reason." He pulled the mask from his face. "Just to show you there are no pretenses, Captain."

Several of the women passengers gasped. The "other reason" was obvious. The entire left side of the pirate's face was a livid, red scar-tissue which extended even up into his hair. On the other side a deep white scar extended in a zig-zag from the corner of his eye to his mouth, and the mouth on that side was twisted into a perpetual leer. The rest of the face was incongruously white above the tan of his throat, evidently because he wore the mask always. The only effect of black left here were his heavy eyebrows above deep-set, very black eyes.

"I don't know why I showed you that, Captain; I usually don't. Maybe it's because this is an event. So I'll just take what I came for now, and be on my way."

Randall, watching, felt his heart leap. He wished now he'd hidden his letter somewhere, for he was sure it was what Hogarth meant.

"And what did you come for?" Bowen asked calmly. "I've been wondering about that. We're really not carrying much cargo, you know."

"If you were I should not want it—this time. You will conduct me to your quarters, Captain, and I'll be satisfied with the little box you have there in your safe." He gestured with the hand-blast.

Randall was startled at these words, but no more so than Captain Bowen. The latter stood a moment, puzzled. "The box—? Oh, now I know what you mean. But do you mean to say that's all you want? They're really of small value, comparatively! I don't understand—"

"Of course you don't, Captain. You do not need to. We're wasting time!" The atom-blast gestured again imperatively, and Bowen, with a shrug, led the way; he noticed that the pirate's four men drew their blasts in readiness.

**W**HEN Bowen and Hogarth came on deck again the latter carried a small cloth-covered box. At that moment a small, pompous man in the group of passengers caught sight of it. He stepped toward Hogarth indignantly. "Look here, my good man, this is simply going too far! You can't—"

But at almost the same instant one of Hogarth's men raised his atom-blast and pressed the button. There was a slight humming sound, a smell of ozone, and the indignant passenger stopped abruptly in his tracks, a hole drilled neatly through his neck from which came a little swirl of dust. He tottered a moment in his forward movement, then fell in a crumpled heap. But he was dead even before he hit the floor.

Hogarth whirled to the man who had fired, his eyes blazing angrily through the mask. "You'll pay for that, Jeffers. I promise you!"

"But, chief—"

"Shut up! I should have left you in the Venusian sink where I found you. You like killing too well." Hogarth turned to the Captain. "I regret this incident exceedingly, Captain. I hate violence

when it's unnecessary. Can't be helped now. You, Captain, step over here with me. The rest of your crew will go over with the passengers." Hogarth, his blast levelled, herded them all over to the far wall.

"What now—?" Bowen started to protest.

"Don't be alarmed," Hogarth said to them collectively. "We are merely about to leave, and there's a little ritual we always go through first. Quite harmless, but—necessary. I should like you, Captain, to see it, as a reward for being so obliging with me."

"Before you leave," Bowen said angrily, "there's one person I wish you'd take along with you! The dirty accomplice of yours who came aboard in order to send out those light buoys and guide you to us!"

"I assure you, Captain, I haven't forgotten that point. Well, the man's work is finished here now, so he'll be leaving with us. I need him back at headquarters."

"Let him step forth now! I'd like to see who it is!"

Hogarth chuckled. "You mean he did the job so well you can't even guess?"

**R**ANDALL, standing there with the other passengers so absorbed in the scene, thought he could guess. In fact he had already made up his mind who this pirate's aide was. He felt Thalia's hand clasp his own tightly, and wondered if she were thinking the same thing.

"Very well," Hogarth said, amusement in his voice; "my worthy aide may now step forth and surprise the Captain."

There was a moment that seemed an eternity, in which everyone seemed looking at everyone else. Then the first-mate, Kennett, a grin on his face, walked over to where Hogarth and Bowen were standing. He shook hands with the pirate and said, "Hello, chief. Neat job?"

"Very neat."

"Thanks. You too."

Captain Bowen stared at his erstwhile first-mate unbelievably, then said bitterly: "So it was you, Kennett! I can't believe it. I would have trusted you above all men!"

"Exactly, Captain, that's what we counted on," Kennett said with a callous shrug. "It's your misfortune. I've learned a few things in the year I've been on this Spacelane."

"How did you do it, Kennett?"

"You mean the light buoys?" Kennett grinned again. "That was easy. Had 'em planted, with an automatic timer set to launch one every half-hour. I had your moves planned just right, Captain. You changed your course too late."

"You two can reminisce next time you meet," Hogarth said impatiently. "We'll have our little ritual now and be on our way." He turned to his four men. "Ready?"

They nodded, grinning in anticipation. Captain Bowen between Hogarth and Kennett, they stood near the outer wall, facing the group on the far side of the deck. "Better use two this time," Hogarth said to his men. "There are more here than we counted on."

Two of his men raised metal tubes. They weren't atom-blasts, they were shorter and thicker. And they were aimed over the heads of the group opposite. Bowen tried to leap forward, but the two men restrained him. Then Hogarth said, "Fire."

Two projectiles sped from the tubes and burst high on the opposite wall. A pink gas sprayed swiftly down over the group. The effect was almost instantaneous. Some of the women had started to scream, but the screams were cut in half. A few of the crew had leaped forward, but were caught in midstep. The entire clustered group sank down in a grotesque, tangled heap.

Dave Randall, without quite knowing why, had a sudden intuition of what was going to happen. And just as the pirate said "Fire," Randall took a deep breath and held it. As the others fell around him, he fell too—fell outward, rolled over twice, and lay a little apart from the others, his head resting on his outflung arm. He held his breath as long as he could, then slowly exhaled. By the time he breathed again, very cautiously, the gas had thinned out around him. He still got a faint, sweetish odor that made him a little drowsy, but he retained consciousness.

He heard Hogarth explaining. "You see, Captain, it merely gives them a few hours' pleasant sleep. By that time we shall be far beyond your detector range, and pursuit practically impossible. I shouldn't want anyone to find my hide-out! I've found in the past that caution is the better part of valour, and it's stood me in good stead."

Then Hogarth observed Randall lying a little apart from the others, and strode over to him. He prodded him with his foot, and Randall rolled part way over and lay inert, his head banging rather hard upon the floor. Satisfied, the pirate turned away—and as he did so he observed Thalia. He stared a moment, bent and peered closer. Then he turned swiftly.

"Kennett! Didn't you know this girl was aboard?"

"I—I don't know, chief! Why? Who is she?"

"Doesn't matter now." The pirate turned to Captain Bowen, his eyes bright beneath his mask. "This is my lucky day, Captain! I not only get what I came for," he patted the box under his arm, "but more! I'll take her along too."

"No!" Bowen started to leap forward, but Kennett miraculously produced a hand-blast from somewhere and jammed it in his ribs.

The pirate chief looked surprised. "Your interest seems almost personal, Captain!" he said mockingly. "But I assure you my intentions are not what you think. I *do* know the young lady, in a way."

"She doesn't know you!"

"No, I'm sure she doesn't. But I merely wish to have a little conversation with her. She will not be harmed—if the conversation turns out well." Hogarth's eyes glittered.

Two of his aides stepped forward. Randall, through narrow lids, saw them lift Thalia's inert form. At the same instant he saw Captain Bowen shove Kennett violently away, oblivious of the menacing atom-blast. One leap carried him to Hogarth, and his fist lashed out. It caught the surprised pirate a glancing blow on the chin that sent him spinning against the wall.

Randall, lying there, longed to leap into the fray, but restrained himself. He had formulated a plan of his own that he didn't dare risk.

The melee was short. The pirate's men came rushing in, not daring to use their blasters. But Hogarth recovered quickly, and as Bowen came blindly in again the pirate chief stepped back and brought up his left fist in a short but potent uppercut. As the Captain fell forward Hogarth caught him and eased him gently to the deck.

"Pleasant dreams," he said amusedly, "to you all!" He glanced around once, then followed Kennett and the others who were carrying Thalia through the air-lock.

## CHAPTER VI

### Pursuit

**R**ANDALL waited until he saw the black pirate ship cast off. Through the panelling he saw the fire of its rock-

ets as it leaped swiftly away. Then he moved quickly to the Captain's side, but saw that he would be out for quite a few minutes.

Randall had little time to waste. He wished he had an atom-blast, but doubted if he'd find one aboard. Quickly he searched the navigation room, then the Captain's quarters, but naturally found none. He cursed the law that made possession of an atom-blast punishable by a long prison term, but did nothing about pirates like Hogarth; and while he was at it he cursed himself for not bringing along so much as an automatic on this mission.

But minutes were precious and Hogarth had a fast ship. Randall hurried to one of the forward locks, stepped inside and closed the door behind him. He viewed the rows of life-boats racked against the walls of the corridor, and was gratified to see that these were the tiny two-man cruisers that were reputed to be very swift. He pressed a lever and one of them swung down on a long arm from the wall, fitting snugly against the starting block.

Randall climbed in, pressed the button that started the mechanism opening the outer door.

The door slid slowly back. Randall, in the tightly closed cruiser, knew that the air in the lock had rushed out into space and there could be no turning back now. But still he hesitated there a moment on the brink of the void, remembering his previous horrible spell of space-sickness. He'd be very much alone out there now, in this flea-cruiser; he hoped Thalia were right when she assured him that sickness would not recur!

Randall clenched his teeth and, leaning back in the shockseat, pushed forward the lever supplying the Tynyte to the tubes. They flashed fire against the starting block and the cruiser leaped outward.

**I**T WAS easy! Randall grinned with relief, and thanked heaven for his training at the Spacer School. His only mistake had been that he gave a little too much initial power to the tubes, so that the tiny shell was nearly jerked asunder. But now he experimented with the different speeds, feeling a savage exultance at the power under his hand. Then he gave all his attention to the detector, swinging the directional finder in eccentric parabolas across the heavens before him.

At last he found the pirate ship. It showed up on the very edge of his plate, and was so dark his finder had twice passed it by. He discerned it now only as a darker shape that blotted out a few pinpoints of stars. But now that he had it on his plate he determined to hold it. He increased the power to three-quarter speed, and as the distance between them lessened, the black ship came over slowly to the center of the plate. There Randall held it. He consulted the dial and saw that this meant approximately fifteen thousand miles. And he noticed, thankfully, that the pirate ship maintained a constant speed.

Now Randall realized he had a long vigil ahead of him. He locked the controls and spared a few minutes to search the narrow quarters. He found nothing of interest save a box of concentrated food tablets, and he was thankful for these! He stuffed a handful into his pocket and nibbled at them as the hours passed.

Now, too, he had time to think back over the swift and surprising events. And most surprising of all was the fact that he still had Felix's all-important letter safe in his pocket! His first thought, when Hogarth boarded the *Martian Princess*, was that he had come to get that letter. But now he realized the pirate hadn't been after it at all, indeed could not even have known about it. Also, Randall had thought the traitorous Kennett to be the man who had tried to

bribe him for the letter and threatened him; but now he realized that was wrong, too, for Kennett could have easily gotten the letter while Randall was supposedly lying unconscious. It could only mean, then, Randall concluded, that the pirate Hogarth had no connection whatever with the secret letter.

But no! That was not right either. For Hogarth had recognized Thalia, and Randall was very sure *she* was connected somehow with this mission. The pirate had taken her away to have a "conversation" with her. What was the information he wished to extract from Thalia? And what was in that box he had taken from the *Martian Princess*? Could Felix have known these pirates would board the spacer? Moreover, could he have known that they'd take Thalia away with them, and was *that* why he'd deliberately chosen the password "Thalia" and told Randall to remember it?

Randall stopped trying to answer this multitude of questions. After all, he still had the letter, and was carrying out Felix's instructions. But somehow that didn't seem to matter as much as it had. What mattered now, to him, was that he had a sudden empty feeling when he thought of Thalia in that pirate's hands. And that brought another question: *what did Thalia mean to Captain Bowen?* The Captain had battled valiantly to prevent her abduction, and Randall admired him

for it; but even as he thought of this he felt a sudden stab of jealousy.

Now he looked at his cosmograph-plate again and was startled to see the pirate ship looming up quite largely; less than ten thousand miles, the dial showed. Quickly Randall cut his speed and lagged behind a few thousand miles more. Now Mars had swum across the edge of his plate, too, standing out redly, about the size of a silver dollar on the foot-square panel.

There could be no doubt now that Hogarth was heading for the red planet.

**A** FEW hours more and Mars was looming up largely in Randall's plate, and the black pirate ship was easily visible in the exact center of the red disc. Now Randall threw caution to the winds and closed in as fast as possible. If the pirates hadn't detected him by this time, they wouldn't at all.

The trim black vessel veered around to the night side of the planet, slowing perceptibly, as Randall came on swiftly after it. By the time the pirate ship touched the atmosphere Randall was close enough to see the rocket flares cease and stubby flat wings unfold from the side. Now, with a thrill of anticipation Randall remembered his Spacer School instructions; this required precise manipulation. He waited, one hand on the rocket cut-off and the other on the wing lever. At what



**TOPS 'EM ALL!**

**BIGGER DRINK • BETTER FLAVOR**

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he judged the right moment, he threw one and then the other.

It was a thrill he would never forget when he felt the wings take powerful hold of the atmosphere. His cruiser slowed abruptly. He had made a perfect negotiation. He planed noiselessly for a minute, then switched on the forward motor.

Far ahead he could still see the pirate ship, and it seemed to be heading for a tiny cluster of lights miles away. As they drew nearer Randall saw it was a city; it might have been the Martian capital, N'Voshl, but he couldn't be sure. The pirate ship passed high over it, and Randall did the same, cutting his motors for safety. Now he was sure it was N'Voshl; he had seen it like this many times in the newsreels, and besides it was the only city of this size on Mars.

The black ship ahead slowed at the far edge of the city, where all seemed dark and quiet. It glided downward, and Randall lost sight of it for a minute. He glimpsed it again as it hovered over the wide, flat roof of a low building. That roof was black as if it had been painted that way. Randall had to admire Hogarth for his cunning use of black in all things. It made detection very nearly impossible.

Then Randall, looking intently, saw that flat roof divide in the middle and swing upward. The pirate ship dropped swiftly into the black maw, and the roof closed again.

Randall hovered a few minutes longer, keeping his eyes on that building. It was one of an identical row, seemingly long, one-story warehouses. Nothing else happened, so Randall set his cruiser down on the roof and stepped out. He easily found the line where the two sections of roof joined, but now they were fastened tight. Obviously it had been opened by someone within. After a little search in the dark Randall found a rough wooden stair leading down to the ground. He descend-

ed, and staying close to the building, moved around to the front.

There he found a sliding door; tried it, and to his surprise it opened silently. He peered into the darkness beyond, listening intently. There was no sound. He stepped inside and stood a minute, letting his eyes become accustomed to the darkness. Dimly he saw a few boxes and broken crates scattered around—but that was all.

Then, across the room, he saw a thin line of light that obviously came from beneath another door. He moved swiftly to it and listened. Again there was no sound. This door, too, opened at his touch.

And there, startlingly, just a few feet from him was the black pirate ship. Its locks stood open. Obviously Hogarth and his men—and Thalia—had departed. But departed where? The room was long and narrow, the black spacer fitting snugly into it. Randall walked completely around the room, but there were no other doors or openings of any kind. The walls were solid, except for the door through which he had come; and he was sure he would have seen them if they'd made their exit that way.

Randall began to wonder if he hadn't made a mistake; if this were indeed the spacer he had followed. But there was one way to make sure, he thought suddenly. He entered the open lock of the black spacer and hurried along the inner deck, his footsteps ringing hollowly. He flung open the rocket room door.

No, he hadn't been mistaken; the room was almost insufferably warm, and the rockets still showed dully red. It could only mean, then, that there was somewhere a secret exit from this room.

It suddenly flashed on Randall that he'd found Hogarth's secret hide-out, for which the Patrol had searched so long in vain. But he hadn't quite found it yet; he must find more

He hurried back to the spacer's lock. Just as he reached there, and was about to jump down—he saw a man standing in the open doorway of the room below. . . .

## CHAPTER VII

### Polar Retreat

FOR a long moment they stood there regarding each other in silence, Randall looking down, the fellow looking up. Then Randall jumped lightly down to the floor, still facing the man warily. He was a Martian; Randall knew that at a glance, by the thin limbs, heavy chest, and over-large head with thick-lidded eyes. The fellow continued to regard him in silence—but cunningly, Randall thought. Randall spoke first, knowing that most of these Martians knew English fairly well.

“Did you see the men who left this spacer?”

The fellow shook his head.

“Not more than five minutes ago,” Randall went on. “They had a girl with them.”

Again the Martian's head moved in silent negation.

“Don't lie to me! This spacer came down through the roof. The tubes are still hot. You're one of their men, aren't you? You opened that roof when they signalled!”

This time the Martian didn't answer, but Randall saw the truth in his eyes. He took a step forward, and the Martian retreated. “There's a secret way out of this room; you're going to show it to me.” He leaped forward and caught the startled Martian by the throat. The poor fellow uttered a thin squeak of terror. That neck was so slender Randall could almost encircle it with one hand; with both hands he could have snapped it like a stalk of celery.

“Come on,” he snarled, “time's wasting! You understand English, so

you probably speak it.” He still held the thin neck tightly. The Martian's huge eyes bulged and he tried to nod his head. Randall's grip loosened.

The Martian took a gulp of air, and a cunning look came into his eyes. “If,” he gasped—“if—I show you—it oughta be worth something—”

“You rat,” Randall yelled, shaking him violently, “you'll show me, and damned quick—!”

“But the girl,” the little Martian squeaked between shakes, “you're after the girl ain't you? Time's wasting, you said, and Hogarth's getting farther away—”

Randall saw the fellow was determined to get his price, so he plunged his hand into his pocket and brought out all the loose money he had, amounting to five or six dollars. “All right, here!” The Martian accepted it eagerly in his cupped hands. Randall knew he would soon be spending it back at N'Voshl, taking in the Spacer-front dives and perhaps having a Martian *sreh'lah* girl.

Now the little Martian wasn't reluctant. Quickly he led the way along the side of the black spacer, to a point where the nose of it almost touched the narrow wall. Here he bent, moved a loose flagging in the floor, and Randall heard a rumbling sound. Then the entire section of wall before them slid slowly down from the ceiling in well-oiled grooves. Beyond was a stone landing, and about a dozen steps leading downward. At the bottom of the steps was a light in the wall.

Randall looked at the Martian suspiciously, but the fellow only gestured toward the steps impatiently, saying, “They went.”

Randall stepped onto the landing and peered down. At the same instant he heard the rumbling sound behind him again, and whirled back. The wall was rising to the ceiling much faster than it

had come down. He leaped for it and caught the top edge, but it carried him upward and he had to let go just in time to prevent his hands being crushed. As he dropped back he heard the Martian's thin cackling laughter on the other side of the wall, then heard him scuttling away.

Randall turned back to the steps. He didn't mind much, for he knew the men *had* come this way; he saw the dim, damp imprint of many feet on the stone.

Reaching the foot of the steps he saw a wide, low tunnel extending straight before him, to disappear in the gloom. Along the floor of the tunnel was a little groove a few inches deep, and in this groove was a single, heavy wire. Probably a live wire, Randall thought. He glanced around him. To the right was a little alcove, and he hurried to it. There in the gloom he found several electric cars, rubber-tired and apparently in working order. He wheeled the lightest of these out into the center of the tunnel, climbed in and tried the controls. The electric motor whined into life as contact was made, and the car moved forward as Randall manipulated the rheostat. He touched a button and a beam of light leaped ahead, illumining the tunnel for half a mile.

**A**T TIMES the speed dial showed two hundred m.p.h. as he sped along that tunnel hour after hour. The whine of the motor was scarcely audible. Occasionally an overhead light flashed by.

Now, as Randall noticed how straight and undeviating the tunnel was, he thought he knew what it was. *It could be nothing else than one of the barren canals*, some of which had been filled a few years ago by the mountains of slag from the Martian mines! Someone—probably Hogarth himself—had conceived the unique idea of burrowing through this one again, thus making a perfect retreat! But retreat to where?

Randall knew the Martian capital, N'Voshl, was very nearly on the equator, but he hadn't noticed which direction this tunnel led. He still didn't know. He only knew that at his present speed he was hundreds of miles from N'Voshl now.

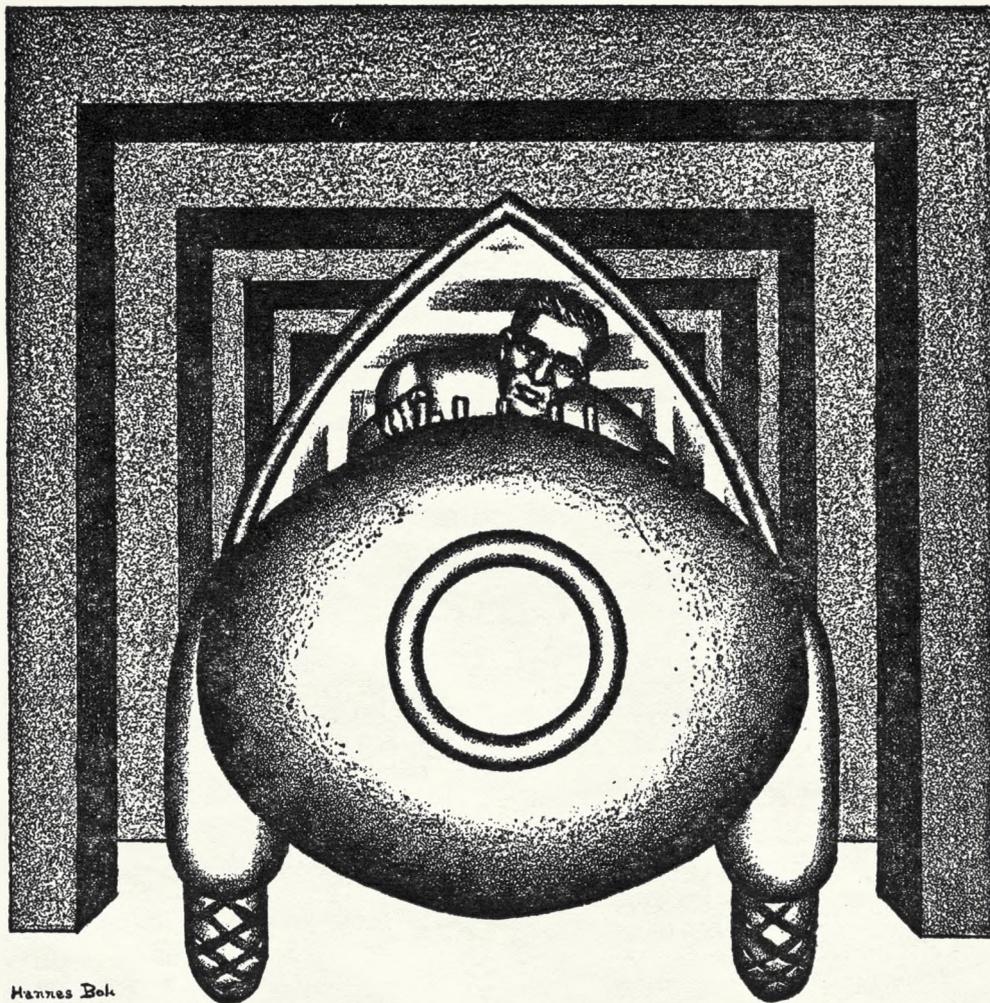
He grinned as he thought of the sensation this news would be on the three planets—the news that Hogarth's hide-out had been discovered at last. Why, right now there could hardly be more than fifteen or twenty feet of earth between the floor of this old canal and the surface of the planet! Again he found himself admiring Hogarth's ingenuity.

Suddenly he started. With a quick movement he applied the hand brake, then clicked off the light beam as the car jerked to a shuddering halt. Far ahead, under one of the ceiling lights, he had seen the car he was pursuing—and it was standing still. He switched off his lights and slowly crawled up on it. It was empty. Beyond it, leading upwards, was another flight of stone steps.

Randall leaped from his own car and hurried forward, but ever watchful; pursuit had been comparatively easy this far, but this was it and he must be super-careful. He had formed no plan yet—couldn't until he reconnoitered. At the foot of the steps he paused, crouched against the wall. A light came down the steps, but it was a natural light, not artificial; and it hurt his eyes, so recently emerged from the darkness.

Presently he mounted the steps, noticing that the light was not so bright as he had thought. He emerged into a room, or rather a place where four crumbling stone walls stood, for there was no roof. Above was the dark blue of open Martian sky, and it seemed to be a sort of twilight. He noticed, too, a pronounced chill to the thin Martian air.

He moved across the broken floor to a wide, crumbling doorway, and stood looking out upon a limitless expanse of white.



HANNES BOK

And suddenly Randall understood the twilight and the chill to the air, for he knew where he was.

He was somewhere in the Martian polar cap. And this must be one of the ancient, ruined cities he had heard so much about!

Again he surveyed the room behind him, and saw a door in the opposite wall. He hurried over to it and peered within.

Two grinning figures grabbed him by the arms and jerked him forward. A third figure wearing a black mask stepped from somewhere and stood before Randall.

"Greetings, fellow," said Hogarth; "we've been expecting you!"

## CHAPTER VIII

### Blasting Back!

**I**NWARDLY Randall was cursing himself volubly for walking into this trap, but he tried not to give the pirate the satisfaction of seeing his anger. He stood quite still between the two men, and said not a word; instead, his eyes moved quickly about the space before him, which in ages past had undoubtedly been some vast auditorium. In the middle of it now rested a huge spaceship—ten times as large as the trim, black craft he had trailed. And

this one was not black, it was silver. A dozen or more of Hogarth's men were busy moving huge crates aboard. Through nowhere in sight.

Hogarth, standing there before Randall, patiently watching him survey the room, must have read his mind. For he said, "The girl is already aboard. We leave soon."

"She'd better be safe," Randall said simply, looking straight at the pirate.

"I assure you she is," Hogarth replied a bit amusedly. "But my dear fellow, you don't know how much you surprise me. I mean, I thought it was the valiant Captain Bowen all this time, and it turns out to be you! I recognize you now. And I congratulate you; that little pretence of yours back on the *Martian Princess* was very excellently done."

"I thought so. And save your congratulations, you may need them for a better occasion than this. Do you mean you knew all the time I was trailing you?"

"Knew?" Hogarth laughed mockingly. "My dear fellow, I led you here. Our stern plates picked you out not two hours after you left the *Martian Princess*. I was so pleased at my double success there that I thought it would be amusing to see how far you would dare chase me. I knew you were very close when we set down at N'Voshl. I instructed Kueelo to stall you a few minutes, but to allow you to come on if you were persistent. You saw Kueelo, of course?"

"The Martian? Yes, I saw him. The little rat fleeced me out of all the money I had before he'd show me the way here."

Hogarth threw back his head and laughed heartily. "Kueelo did? Well, I didn't tell him to do that, but good for him!"

"Yes," Randall replied mockingly, "he seems to have learned his thievery well—from you!"

Hogarth's eyes glittered menacingly beneath the mask and he reached quickly for

his hand blast. Then he stopped. "You almost tempted me that time, fellow," he grunted. "Lucky for you I hate violence. Anyway I have other plans for you. I've allowed you to follow me this far, but our little game of tag ends right here. We leave in five minutes, and obviously I can't take you along. The girl, yes, but not you. What am I to do with you, eh? What do you suggest?"

"What does it matter? You've made up your mind anyway."

"You're right, I have. I shall simply leave you here. You will have plenty of time to reflect on your foolhardiness."

Randall scarcely heard the mocking words, for his gaze had been sweeping the room again, and he had spotted something; a familiar object, lying half under a broken crate near the entrance lock of the huge spacer. His only hope now was that none of the men or Hogarth would see it.

THE pirate chief was still speaking, and Randall listened. "I see what you're thinking. That you'll get back to N'Voshl, eh? But you won't. Not by the tunnel. By the way, what do you think of our tunnel? We bored it through the soft fill-in in less than a week, rigging up a large portable blaster. Ingenious, don't you think?"

Randall admitted that it was, still keeping his eye on that object he had seen under the crate.

"Yes," Hogarth continued proudly. "On more than one occasion the Patrol has trailed us to N'Voshl, but we always disappeared, to their complete bafflement. It amuses me—the Patrol. Naturally no one sees us leave 'way up here at the polar cap. But I'm not sure I shall need the tunnel again, this might be our last trip. As for you, I don't think even you would be so foolish as to try to make it back to N'Voshl across two thousand miles of the Red Waste! And you can't make it by the

tunnel, for I've smashed the generators and there's no more current. Even if you tried it afoot down the tunnel you wouldn't get far. There are things in there—hungry things—that would have you stripped to the bone in an hour. Maybe you heard some of them.”

“Got it all figured out, haven't you?” Randall said.

“I think so. But don't worry too much about it. I doubt if you'd like it much better where we're going! You should last it out here for about a week before hunger or the tunnel gets you. Or, if madness comes, there are always the polar wastes. One of my men wandered out there one day and we never saw him again.”

Randall imagined that the pirate was grinning evilly beneath his mask.

One of the men approached Hogarth and spoke a few words. He nodded and turned again to Randall. “We leave now. I advise you to keep a safe distance away

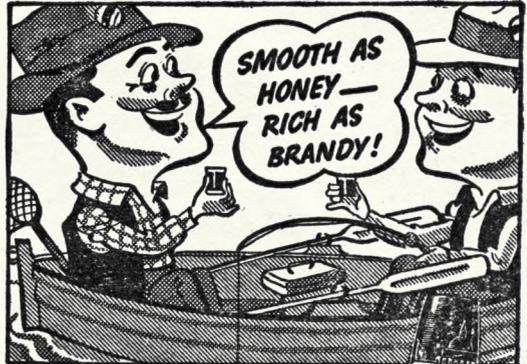
from our back blast. Unless, of course, you prefer to go out quick.”

Hogarth was the last man to go aboard, after giving a final quick survey of the room. He turned his back carelessly and walked to the entrance-lock. When he had almost reached there Randall leaped after him. Hogarth whirled in surprise when Randall was very close. He started to use his blaster but changed his mind. Instead he brought it up and down, the flat of it crashing against Randall's head.

Vaguely Randall felt himself being dragged across the floor, and he heard Hogarth mutter, “You're a blasted fool!” Then he went completely out.

When Randall struggled up again his head ached fiercely and he was lying against the farthest wall. The big spacer was gone, the roomed smelled acrid from the back blast, and his clothes were scorched a little from the heat. He wondered why the pirate had taken the trou-

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# OLD MR. BOSTON APRICOT NECTAR

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ble to drag him out of the way—but he had already learned Hogarth was a man of sudden impulses.

He looked quickly to where he had seen the object half hidden under the crate, and observed thankfully that it was still there. He had feared Hogarth might see it. He walked over and picked it up, turning it over in his hands. It was a girl's shoe—Thalia's. And now with a burst of elation Randall saw what he had hoped to see, and he knew that shoe wasn't there by accident.

For, scratched into the leather, were six scrawly letters: M-E-R-C-U-R. Obviously Thalia had been interrupted before she could complete the word, but Randall didn't need that last letter.

**M**ERCURY! So *that* was Hogarth's real base of operations, and not here! And that's what he had meant when he said Randall wouldn't like it much better where they were going.

No, Randall didn't think he would. Suddenly he remembered things he had heard about the little hot planet. A few of the early expeditions had landed there and proven it utterly worthless. Now he wondered what interests Hogarth had there, and how he managed to subsist there very long!

But Randall turned his thoughts to his immediate predicament. He found the generators, and saw that they were hopelessly smashed as Hogarth had said; that means he couldn't use the electric cars. And it was obviously out of the question to attempt the trek afoot back to N'Voshl.

Still he didn't despair, for something in him felt that there must be a way out of this. He began a search of the various rooms, not knowing quite what he was looking for, but knowing he would recognize it when he found it. He came upon a scattered profusion of junk of all kinds. The rusty hull of an old space-freighter with most of the plates stripped away; a few tiny life-boats, battered and useless,

with all the control-boards gone; a pile of ripped and twisted rocket tubes in one corner.

Randall's eyes lighted up when he saw the tubes. Quickly he delved into them. Most of them had long rents in the side caused by over-blasts, and others were battered hopelessly out of shape. These he cast aside impatiently. At last, near the bottom of the heap he found two tiny life-boat tubes that were a little battered, but still whole; and, what was infinitely important, the firing heads were still intact! One was a little loose, but Randall thought it would hold.

No whe found an old five-gallon water can and moved quickly among the tiny life-boats scattered around. From the tubes he scraped all the black, caked carbon he could reach. Most of it he got from the larger, ruined tubes of the old freighter. Then he spread the stuff out over the floor and began to sift through it carefully. When he had finished he had a good-sized heap of greenish, glittering grains. Bits of hardened carbon still clung to most of it, but Randall was sure the Tynyte grains would be serviceable. Those grains were worth more to him now than gold!

He packed it all as tightly as he could into the two firing heads, then carried the tubes back to the tunnel where he'd left the electric car. He fastened the tubes to the rear of the car as firmly as possible with bits of wire and metal cable. He was thankful for the metal-backed rear seat, for the firing heads fitted tightly against it.

At last all was ready. He had difficulty creating enough heat to get the slow-burning Tynyte started, but at last it sputtered into life and the car leaped forward. Randall kept his eye on the dial; it registered a constant speed, a little in excess of the speed he had made along the electric cable. For several hours all went well, and Randall was congratulating himself on his ingenuity.

Then the car gave a sudden lurch, spun

crazily for a moment and banged against the wall before he could apply the brakes. His head hit against the panel and he left a little trickle of blood coming down his forehead. He was conscious that the car was still skidding along sideways. He hurried back and disconnected the firing head of the left-hand tube that was still blasting away.

He knew what had happened. The loose head of the other tube had blasted off, sending the car off balance. Wearily Randall climbed out, noticing that by pure luck he had stopped beneath one of the overhead lights. Now he removed the good tube and fastened it again in the exact middle of the car—a task that cost him an hour's time and several painful burns from the hot metal. Meanwhile he heard the increasing sound of little animal squeals and scuffings, and saw a gathering host of baleful red eyes watching him from just beyond the circle of light.

**WHEN** he finally got away again it was at half speed, but he reached the end of the tunnel without further mishap. Here he mounted the stairs and was confronted again by the sliding wall. He felt around the base of it, as the little Martian had done, and was finally rewarded by feeling one of the stones move. He pulled it out slowly and the wall lowered before him.

And then he saw the trim, black pirate spacer, resting where he had left it. He laughed aloud, joyously. He had almost forgotten it! But now he was already planning his next move.

The little Martian, Kueelo, was nowhere around. Probably lying drunk somewhere over at N'Voshl, Randall thought. He hurried aboard the black ship and examined it more thoroughly than he had heretofore. It was even tinier than he had thought. A five or six man vessel. It could be piloted by one man, all right, but it would be a tough

grind. This was a speedy ship, Randall knew, but the best time he could hope for to Mercury would be a week; and he was already dead for sleep. He hurried to the power-board and saw that it was equipped with robot control. That would help considerably; allow him to catch some sleep. Navigating "robot" was rather dangerous business, but he'd have to chance it.

Then he thought of fuel. Hurrying to the rocket room, he found the heads nearly empty. He searched the supply lockers and found one flexible metal bag of Tynyte—a little over three gallons of the grains. Randall remembered his equations on fuel consumption back at the Chicago Spacer School. Quickly he measured the tube displacements, and regarded the bag of fuel again with a quizzical eye. He observed Mereury's present position on the chart with which all spacers are equipped by law. He made swift calculation—and then let out a slow whistle. This ship had just *better* be as fast as he thought it was, Randall decided.

He had seen no name on the hull of this spacer, but now he saw it emblazoned across the top of the power-board. *The Falcon*. Yes, that suited Hogarth. The falcon, a predatory bird trained for hunting. But now *he* was the falconer, Randall thought grimly. He found the lever opening the roof. It was no longer night on this part of Mars, but Randall no longer cared. He brought the *Falcon* swiftly up to the mile level, then blasted away across the horizon.

And not until he had been an hour out of the atmosphere, with Mars dropping swiftly behind him, did Randall remember.

He had been twice in N'Voshl, but hadn't delivered Felix's letter to the embassy!

He felt it now, still in his inside pocket; but shook his head grimly as he increased

the rocket power. Strange how unimportant that letter had become when he thought of Thalia in Hogarth's hands. . . .

## CHAPTER IX

### Mercury

**A**N EARTHMAN, muttering curses beneath his space helmet, made his tortuous way along the dark little gully. Finally he reached the open end. He stood a moment looking out upon the barren, gray wastes of Mercury's two-mile-wide shadow strip. The three Flaccids were nowhere to be seen, and again the man cursed volubly beneath his helmet. This made the ninth Flaccid to escape in the past four days, and he hated to face Hogarth's wrath when he returned to report failure. But it couldn't be helped.

Damn it, they treated the Flaccids well, they didn't work them too hard, and they paid them generously with glittering trinkets! But the thick-skinned and dull witted beasts just couldn't concentrate on the work very long at a time. They always seemed to escape in groups of three, and once they got beyond this gully they were gone for good. Again the Earthman peered out across the grayish, convoluted, ugly lava-waste. Those Flaccids might have been no further than fifty yards away, but they blended so well against that background he couldn't have seen them.

Damn, but he hoped they'd finish the work here soon. Hogarth's hundred men still worked faithfully at the furnaces, but they were beginning to tire of it and grumble a little. Two year's on this hellish planet—yes, some of them had even been here three years, cooped under the glass dome—was enough for any man.

He walked out upon the wastes for about a half mile, flashing his torch

around. But he knew it was useless. Finally he turned back, careful to keep the glass face of his helmet averted from the sun's flames that leaped up, slowly flickering, for a thousand miles beyond the horizon on the molten side of the planet. He had seen one of the new men, about a year ago, look carelessly in that direction just as one of the huge flame-tongues flared up—and that man had never used his eyes again; in his agony, a few hours later, he had committed suicide.

Suddenly the helmeted man stopped in his tracks and peered ahead. Low along the shadow strip, almost directly over their gully, he had glimpsed the flare of rocket tubes. Only a few miles distant. In a few seconds a black spacer was directly over his head and beyond him, but plunging downward fast. It seemed partially out of control, veering dangerously close to the sunward side, then back across the shadow strip to plunge out of sight into the frozen wastes beyond.

The man hurried back along the ravine. The Flaccids were forgotten now, as he thought of the news he had for Hogarth. He reached the Crystyte dome, entered the air-intake and divested himself of the cumbersome helmet. Then he hurried to the chief's office.

"They escaped, eh?" Hogarth said when the fellow entered without the Flaccids. "Damn it, at this rate we'll have to make another trip out to the caves and get more of 'em! I was hoping we'd be through here in another two months!"

"But I saw something else, chief. A spacer! And I think it crashed—on the dark side—about twenty miles out, I should say. And"—the man hesitated—"it looked to me like the *Falcon*!"

Hogarth leaped to his feet. "You sure about that?"

"I don't think I could be mistaken about the *Falcon*, chief."

Hogarth paced the room angrily.

"More trouble! I told Kueelo to get rid of the *Falcon*! And I showed him how, and where. If that little rat of a Martian has double-crossed me—!" Suddenly Hogarth stopped, and fingered his mask thoughtfully. "I wonder if that fellow— But no, that's out. No way he could have got back to N'Vosh! Well, if someone's found the *Falcon*, either Kueelo sold me out, or got awfully careless. But no one knew that our base is here, not even Kueelo!" Hogarth whirled. "You say about twenty miles out?"

"Yes, just beyond the end of the gully. It was trying to brake as it came down, so they may have made it all right."

Hogarth nodded. "Dollens, get five or six men. Those on the relief shift. And take one of the tractor cars—the fastest. Go out there and find the *Falcon*, and if anyone's alive bring 'em back."

As Dollens saluted and left the room, Hogarth muttered, "I'm too near my goal to have a monkey-wrench thrown in the machinery now!"

RANDALL raised himself wearily off the floor and peered out of the starboard panel. He wondered how long he'd been unconscious; but it couldn't have been very long, for the room was still rather warm from the sun. "Damn," he muttered, "it's as dark out there as—as the dark side of Mercury!" And he grinned at the aptness of the simile. "I wonder what all those little white patches are? Guess the only way to find out is go out there and see." He found a heavy space-suit in one of the lockers. As he turned back to the panel, he saw a tiny pair of lights approaching across the dark terrain outside.

So—he hadn't been mistaken after all! He had thought he glimpsed some kind of glass roof deep in one of the gullies, just before he crashed. Probably this was someone coming from there. The lights stopped about fifty yards away. Randall

saw that they were headlights on a car that was mounted on caterpillar treads for easy transit over the rough surface. Four men in space-suits debarked and came carefully across to the *Falcon*. Randall noticed they had atom-blasts held ready. They saw him peering out. He gestured toward the lock, and they moved around to it.

"Welcome!" Randall greeted as they came through the lock and threw back their helmets. They didn't answer, but moved quickly about, searching the ship.

"Oh, I'm the only one aboard," Randall said cheerfully. "So this is Mercury, huh? Aren't you going to bid me welcome? Or ain't I welcome? Oh isn't this Mercury? It had better be, after all the calculations I made to get here. First trip, you know."

"It'll be your last after the chief sees you," Dollens said, regarding him. "Say, you seem pretty chipper for a guy with a busted head."

Randall's hand went to the side of his head, and he felt the hair sticky with blood. "Funny, I didn't even know it. To tell you the truth I'm happy to be here at all. I nearly went over to the sunward side, you know. Had my cooling system in operation but it didn't do much good; I must have passed out from the heat."

"I know, I saw you," Dollens replied. "A half-mile more and you'd have burned to a crisp. Hard to navigate along the Strip. Well, climb into your suit." He gestured imperatively with the hand-blast.

"Sure," Randall replied cheerfully.

On the way back to the tractor Randall stopped to observe one of the white patches he had seen. The stuff seemed to exist only in the very lowest parts of the terrain.

"Frozen atmosphere, what remains of it," Dollens explained obligingly through the helmet phones. "The sun pulled most

of it off eons ago; but since Mercury never turns this side to the sun, a little bit remains. In several places there are vast caverns where a lot of this frozen stuff exists. The Flaccids live there, and they use it."

"Flaccids? What are they?"

"Probably the screwiest creatures in the solar system," Dollens chuckled. "You'll see 'em."

Randall wanted to examine the thin, frozen stuff more closely, but Dollens gestured impatiently. "No time to waste. Let's be going."

"Sure," Randall said again. "Back to see the chief, huh? Didn't I hear you mention the chief?"

"You did, mister. And he was pretty sore when I left him," Dollens added significantly.

Randall smiled. "Well, I hope he's over it by the time we get back. Because the chief, I promise you, is going to be plenty surprised when he sees me!"

**H**E WAS. Randall was gratified to see it the minute he stood in the doorway. Hogarth started, stared a moment, and Randall wished he could see the man's face; then he relaxed and slowly sat down behind a desk as the men brought Randall into the room.

Hogarth waved the men out, and told Dollens to wait outside. Then he turned to Randall. "So *you're* the monkey-wrench." Randall looked puzzled, and the pirate continued: "Never mind. But you *are* a persistent chap, aren't you! I thought I'd seen the last of you, that's why I didn't bother to ask your name. Now I'd like to know it. Do you mind?"

Randall didn't mind, and he told him.

"So, Dave Randall, you managed to get from the polar cap and back to N'Voshl, after all! Nearly two thousand miles. I wonder how you did that?"

"Maybe I'll tell you some day," Randall said grimly.

Hogarth merely nodded, smiling beneath his mask. "And you managed to bring the *Falcon* clear across. Alone? That was a very capable feat, almost a prodigious feat; one I would be proud of myself. But how did you know we were coming here, Dave Randall?"

"Maybe I'll tell you that some day, too," Randall said with immense satisfaction.

"No need. The girl informed you, of course. How she managed that doesn't matter now. Oh, she's quite safe, so don't get excited, Dave Randall. Perhaps you shall see here after awhile. And I hope you're not as stubborn as she; I haven't the information yet that I want from her, but there's still plenty of time—and ways. What matters now, is what I do with you? You're really beginning to get in my hair, you know!"

"And I'm beginning to enjoy it!"

Hogarth chuckled. "And I, Dave Randall, am beginning to like you. Very much. I wonder if I should tell you what I have in mind. . . . Yes, I think I will, for it can do no harm, and I have a proposition that I think will interest you. . . ."

But the pirate chief didn't approach it directly. Instead, he opened a drawer and took out a small object, which he handed to Randall without a word. It was a piece of metal a few inches square.

Hogarth watched Randall intently as the latter weighed the metal in his hand and examined it closely. It was a peculiar grayish color, Randall noticed, and startling light. He rubbed it with his thumb; it even had a peculiar feeling to the touch. Everything about it was peculiar. He was sure he had never seen a metal like this before. It was utterly alien, and there was something about it that suggested tremendous strength.

He looked up quickly. "So *this* is what interests you on Mercury! You're getting this stuff here?"

Hogarth was pleased at Randall's interest. "Exactly. But not in any great quantity, and not easily. And not in *that* form, by any means. The piece you hold there has undergone our processing. Dave Randall, that's probably the toughest stuff in the solar system, and I doubt if it's to be found anywhere but here. Its qualities are probably due to the close proximity to the sun. It might be that on the sunward side of Mercury this stuff is molten, but naturally we can't get to it. We've only found a few veins of it here along the shadow strip, and it's extremely hard to get out. The vein we're on now seems tougher than ever, and that's why I grabbed those diamonds from the *Martian Princess*. We're using them now in our drilling, and I wish I'd thought of it sooner. And getting the stuff out's only half. We've got to shape it under terrific heat. We have a couple of special furnaces for that."

"That's a lot of trouble you're going to," Randall said. "It's very peculiar metal, yes, but what good is it? What do you do with it?"

In spite of the question Randall thought he knew, and Hogarth confirmed his suspicions.

"Three spacers, Randall; hulls, rocket tubes and all. We have the hulls already shaped and assembled. Nearly three years' work. We're just finishing the tubes now, and it's a good thing, for we're running into the end of the vein. We tested one of the finished tubes a few days ago, and the metal's so tough it's even slightly resilient under stress! Absolutely blast-proof! Result, we'll have three super-spacers able to run rings around anything in the solar system."

"Seems to me you've been doing that pretty well already," Randall said, experimentally.

"Running and hiding!" the pirate said contemptuously. "But with these ships I won't have to do that any more. Before

I'm through I'll have every Earth corporation eating out of my hand!"

## CHAPTER X

### The Flaccids

THERE was an unnatural bitterness to Hogarth's voice that was startling. Now, Randall decided, was the time to find out what was behind this fellow's daring piracy. He had often wondered. That it was something personal, he felt certain.

"But you could get a fortune for this metal!" Randall cried, simulating surprise. "If you were to take it back to Earth, any corporation would—"

Randall saw at once that he had struck the right note. Hogarth grew tense with anger, and rose from his chair, gripping the edge of the desk. He spat out two words, *v e n o m o u s l y*. "Corporations! Earth!" Then he tried to control himself, but Randall saw the anger still seething within him. He reached up swiftly and pulled the mask from his face, then jerked it into place again. "Look at that face, Dave Randall. I shall tell you how that happened! I have not told many persons."

He moved from behind the desk, and paced the little room as he talked. "Perhaps you have guessed that I am English, Dave Randall. Well, my parents were English, but I have never been on Earth and I have sworn never to set foot there. My parents were among the first of the little pioneer groups to come to Mars. I was born about a year later. My father had found a vein and was trying to take out the metal—iridium, mostly. That was before the vast Tynyte fields were discovered. But it was slow, hard work in those early days, and equipment was scarce. He trusted no one, and tried to work it alone. That was his mistake. I was eight years old when my father be-

gan making real progress, buying more and better equipment. Then the corporations came; a few Earth millionaires banded together to buy out the fields; and those they couldn't buy they simply—took. I don't need to tell you about those lawless days, you've read all about it. My father was one of those caught in the first sweep. He had a 'claim', but claims didn't mean much. I remember the day four men strode into our camp. I was nine years old. They seemed to be threatening my father, and he talked back angrily. Then one of them jerked out one of the old-fashioned flame pistols, and used it. I was standing right behind my father when he fell, and part of the flame caught me here—on the face. I still remember my mother's scream as she came running out of the shack toward us. We lived in N'Voshl after that—my mother and I. She died three years later, in poverty and dishonor, and I was left alone there. I grew up with that lawless town. Men at first laughed at my burned and twisted face, but they soon learned not to. Some who laughed died with the laughter on their lips. And I made plans and I swore an oath, for across my brain was seared a memory just as my face was seared. . . ."

"But that was thirty years ago!" Randall exclaimed. "Surely you've had your vengeance by now—"

"Vengeance? What can you know of that word, Dave Randall? I'll admit I've been a slight source of annoyance in the spaceways the past few years—but it isn't enough. I've hardly begun. The corporations still exist."

"And will continue to!" Randall exclaimed, ignoring the menacing glitter of Hogarth's eyes. "Good heavens, man, the old order has changed! The corporations are in many hands now, not a few—and I dare say the men who were directly responsible for your misfortune have long since passed from the picture."

"I know at least one of them has," the pirate said viciously, "for I attended to it myself—when I was fifteen years old. But look, Dave Randall, it's become more than that now. What do you suppose is left for me, on *any* of the three planets? I'm a hunted man. I couldn't stop now if I wanted to, and I won't be satisfied until I have harried the Companies to death. When I get these three new spacers of mine manned, they'll think twice before sending out their freighters."

"You can't win a game like that indefinitely! There'll be convoys—"

"Maybe not indefinitely, but I think I can for a long time, and I'll be enjoying myself hugely for that time! It pays, too; you should see some of the cargoes I've got stored away here already. And some others on Mars."

Randall was pondering what he had heard. He shook his head. "You must be mad," he said half to himself.

Hogarth's eyes glittered menacingly and his hand hovered around his atom-blast. "No man here calls me mad, Dave Randall. . . ."

"And no man," Randall replied, "tells me what you have told me without a purpose. What is it?"

Hogarth's hand dropped as he nodded. "You're right. I have a hundred men here now, men with adventure in their blood, men with everything to gain and nothing to lose. Some were already hunted men when I picked them up, others joined me voluntarily. I'll want more men when the space routes begin developing—out to Jupiter and beyond. That'll be soon, I think—very soon. And Dave Randall, I want you. I need a man like you."

Randall didn't feel flattered, but he asked, "Why me?"

"Because anyone who can do what you did with the *Falcon*—alone—wins my admiration. And when you get to know me better, you'll realize that isn't empty

praise. I doubt if I have another single man here who could have managed that flight, not even Kennett. Here's my offer: as I told you, we'll soon have three super-ships. I am to command one, Kennett another; and you, Randall, may command the third, if you come in with us. That means with a full crew, who will respect you, upon my orders."

**R**ANDALL still wasn't flattered, but he was thinking fast. If he could only stall for awhile, pretend to be considering the proposition, he might learn much more of Hogarth's plans. And first he wanted to see Thalia. Just as he was formulating an answer, the shrill blast of a whistle sounded from somewhere outside.

Hogarth started, then muttered, "Damn! Another accident at the furnaces." He hurried out, but spoke a few words to Dollens who was waiting just outside the door. Dollens stood watchfully in the doorway and Randall hadn't even a chance to leave the room.

Hogarth returned in about ten minutes. "Two more men disabled—burned—for at least a week," he said grievously. "I'll need you badly, Randall, at the rate things have been going of late. What do you say to my proposition? Of course there's much more to it—remuneratively."

"Sounds good, but it needs thinking over. For example, just what are you going to do next—after those three spacers are finished?"

Hogarth stared at Randall, then shook his head sadly, as if to say that were a very amateurish attempt.

"Well, then," Randall said, smiling a little, "at least I'd like to see one of those new rocket tubes you mentioned."

This time Hogarth laughed harshly. "No, Randall, it won't be as easy as that. We have one of them in the testing blocks now, and you shall see it in operation as soon as I have your answer—

if it's the right answer. And I think it will be, for you're a man after my own heart. I'll give you just one day to consider. And your word will be sufficient with me, for no one double-crosses me and lives long afterwards. A few have tried it."

Randall nodded. "One more thing," he said calmly. "I want to see Thalia."

Hogarth's eyes narrowed, and he shook his head. "I don't like that, Dave Randall. No, not at all."

"Then in that case," Randall said bluntly, "you won't have to wait a day for my answer. I'll give it to you now, and it's no."

The pirate regarded him shrewdly for a long moment, then threw back his head and laughed. "I really think you mean it! All right, Randall, I'll concede that point. After all, as long as you're both here, I think I'd rather have you and the girl together than have you apart, for you're a very precipitous young man. Dollens will take you where she is."

But before they left Hogarth spoke a few low words to Dollens. And just as Randall followed the man outside, Hogarth called: "One more thing, Randall; don't think that I need you *too* much. And don't get too many ideas. I can see that you're getting some already."

**O**UTSIDE, Randall took a deep breath and coughed a little.

"Don't do that," Dollens cautioned. "Breathe slowly. Our air here's a little musty and a little thin, but it's comfortably breathable after you're acclimated. What about Hogarth's proposition, you gonna accept?"

"You heard?"

"A little. I'd advise you to accept, for Hogarth usually gets what he wants. And if you don't agree to come in"—Dollens shrugged—"well you won't leave Mercury again. I guess you know that."

"You mean he'd exterminate me? But

I thought he didn't like violence. I heard it from his own lips."

"Except when it serves his own ends, and when he doesn't have to watch it. He never has to. Some of the crew he has here would be only too glad to blast you."

Randall didn't answer, but looked up at the Crystyte dome. At the very zenith it was only a hundred yards above the floor. A huge mercury-vapor light was fastened there, sending an artificial daylight spreading over the entire quarter-mile diameter beneath the dome. Just outside, bordering it, towered the walls of the ravine. The entire sky beyond was pitch black, except far to the right, where an occasional faint glow was visible when one of the titanic sun-flames flared.

"Must have been a tough job getting this dome up," Randall commented.

"No," said Dollens. "We did it in a few months. Crystyte's pretty malleable, you know. But getting this metal out, *there's* a tough job. Peculiarest stuff I ever saw."

Now, near the opposite end of the dome Randall noticed a wide building, evidently housing the furnaces, for he could see the glow of them through the open doors and could hear a roaring sound. A short distance away was a long row of stone huts, the men's living-quarters. But in the exact center of the quarter-mile space was the largest building of all, and Randall guessed that therein reposed the completed hulls of the super-spacers. He wished he might get a glimpse of them, but Dollens marched past this building without a word.

Then Randall stopped suddenly and peered ahead. "Good Lord!" he muttered.

Dollens stopped too, and looked in the direction of Randall's stare. Then he chuckled. "Oh, those are the Flaccids I was telling you about. Watch 'em a

minute, and you'll see why we gave 'em that name."

One of the air-locks toward the end of the ravine had opened, and through it came a score of the Flaccids in single file, each pushing an ore-car before him. They were dwarfish, heavy-muscled brutes of enormous strength, appearing strangely human except for little pig-eyes and protuberant noses. A grayish, leathery skin seemed to give some of them a bloated appearance, but on others it hung loosely in wrinkled folds. They pushed heavy ore cars into the furnace building, and came out a few minutes later with the cars empty.

As the Flaccids moved again toward the air-locks, Dollens pointed suddenly and said, "There—that's what I meant. Watch that one."

One of the flabbiest of the Flaccids had stopped. His short protuberant nose extended stiffly outward. Then, what little human resemblance the beast had, slowly vanished. Randall saw the loose skin all around him slowly unfold, expand, and take shape! In less than five minutes the creature had developed into something like a tiny toy blimp.

"Good Lord," Randall exclaimed, "they're perambulating filling-stations!"

"Yes, he has enough air there for a day, maybe two. But they don't seem to need much; in fact I've seen some of them go without it altogether for an amazing length of time. *We* have to work in space-suits when we're drilling back there, outside the dome, but nature supplied the Flaccids with their own. However, over in the caves on the dark side, where they live, that frozen atmosphere is getting scarcer all the time—so I guess they're becoming slowly adapted."

Now Dollens stopped before a little stone building scarcely fifty yards away from the furnaces. Unlocking the door, he motioned Randall inside, then snapped the lock behind him. "Sorry," he said,

when Randall looked surprised. "The chief's orders!"

## CHAPTER XI

### The Letter Changes Hands

**R**ANDALL glanced around the room. It had probably once been a tool room, now made over into a rough sort of living-quarters. A window in the door, and a small opening high in the wall, were the only sources of light. In the gloom of the farthest corner he saw a little cot and someone lying on it asleep. He hurried over, and saw it was Thalia. He grinned as he bent down to wake her.

She sat up with a little startled cry; but it changed to a glad one when she saw who it was, and she leaped to her feet. "Dave Randall, so it is you! I thought it was my—that it was Captain Bowen following us, but right after we left Mars Hogarth told me it wasn't, so I thought it must be you. Oh, I was never so glad to see anyone in all my life!"

"You're no gladder than I am! But wait a minute, I think you'll be gladder yet. I have something here for you!" Randall fumbled in one of his pockets and finally produced the object he meant.

"My shoe!" Thalia exclaimed delightedly when she saw it. "And it's just what I need—look!" She raised one foot. "I've been hobbling around here for a week with one shoe on and one off. And to think that you bothered to bring it all this way—Dave, I could kiss you for that!"

"I won't mind," Randall said, so she did.

"Now I wish you'd left both your shoes," Randall said. Then he added, very seriously, "But look here, young lady, I think I deserve much more than that. I deserve explanations, and plenty of them. Remember that first day on the

*Martian Princess*, when you said maybe it wasn't time yet for you to trust me? Well, it's about time now, don't you think?"

She hesitated a moment; but seeing the sudden hurt look on his face she said quickly, "All right, Dave; after all, it can make little difference now. What is it you want to know first?"

"I'll tell you what I want to know first! Just a minute ago you started to say, 'my—' and then changed it to, 'Captain Bowen.' Who is—I mean—well, just what does Captain Bowen mean to you?"

She laughed delightedly. "So that's been bothering you! Well, no doubt you'll be glad to hear that he's nothing but just merely my *brother*, so get that jealous look off your face."

"Whew, I'm relieved!" Randall said, and showed it by grinning happily. "So your name's really Thalia *Bowen*, not Martin."

Thalia shook her head. "Sue Bowen," she said.

"Sue!" Randall was thunderstruck. "Then why the 'Thalia', in heaven's name?"

But Thalia was frowning now, as she said, "Please, Dave, don't make me explain that quite yet; because it would only lead to other explanations, and they to others, and when you put the whole thing together it seems—well, silly."

"All right," Randall nodded, "but I'll tell you one thing: you're Thalia from now and forevermore. You've adopted yourself a name!"

"Besides," Thalia went on, "we might stand a chance of escaping from here and getting back to Mars after all; and if we should, I'd rather you'd find out about it in that way."

"Escape from here?" Randall said bitterly. "I wish I knew how. Looks like I'm in the habit of jumping from the frying-pan into the fire. Have you anything in mind?"

"Nothing much, but—well, did you notice that biggest building out in the center of the dome? I'm sure it must hold the hulls of Hogarth's new super-spacers!"

"Yes, I thought as much," Randall said dully. "But he told he's just finishing the tubes now."

"But Dave, some of them *are* finished," she went on excitedly. "Only yesterday I saw some of the men carrying six or eight of the tubes over there. Huge things! And when they came out of that building they left the tubes there."

Randall nodded, his eyes gleaming now. "Then we've got a chance," he said grimly. "We'll keep our eyes open and wait for it."

"And now, Dave, would you mind answering just one question for me? It's something I just have to know."

"Shoot!"

"Well, it's—did you bother to take the time to deliver Felix Reynolds' letter when you were at N'Voshl?"

"Of course not," Randall said. "It became suddenly very unimportant compared to you!" And then with a little shock it came to him that this was the first time she had ever mentioned that letter. "So you do know all about my mission!" he exclaimed.

"Of course, Dave Randall."

"And the man in the green glasses? What about him? Were you working with him or against him?"

"That's one of the unanswerable questions. Oh, it's—it's all so absurd, I tell you, in the light of what's happened!"

"Well, maybe you'll answer this," Randall persisted. "Hogarth certainly recognized you—I saw that! Why did he bring you here? What's the information he wants from you?"

**Y**ES, I can answer and I will. Hogarth's recognizing me was the purest accident, I assure you. You see:

he realizes that before long the Federation is going to become more than Tri-Planetary; that the space routes will be operating far out to Jupiter. Those are vast territories out there, and undoubtedly rich ones; and he's completing his three super-spacers so he'll be heady to carry on his pirating out there. I guess he's told you all this. But here's something he hasn't told you, for he doesn't know it yet himself: *already* an expedition has gone out to Jupiter; five hundred men. Exploration, mostly."

"And how do you know all this?" Randall asked in amazement.

"Because my job is with Tri-Planet Mining and Developing Corporation."

"You?"

"Oh, don't be so surprised. Only in an advisory capacity as to the values of certain metals. A few weeks ago, when Earth was in a favorable position, the Company got a message by heliocentric coordinates from their Jupiter expedition. Even now one of the freighters is on the way back to Mars loaded with rich specimens of their findings. But something pretty bad has happened to that freighter. That's why the Company was sending me to Mars to meet it. It should arrive in another week—if it does arrive—and here I am side-tracked away off on Mercury simply because Hogarth happened to recognized me! He has spies on the three planets, you know, so I guess that's how he knew I was with Tri-Planet Mining. Lord, how he hates the corporations! He guessed that an expedition was due to go out there, and he wants me to tell him when! Good thing he doesn't know this specimen-freighter is heading back already."

"This is positively amazing!" Randall said, looking at her with sudden new interest. "Then if you know metals, what do you think of this new stuff Hogarth's found here? I suppose he showed it to you?"

"He did, and he positively gloated over it. He doesn't know my real status with Tri-Planetary Mining, however, so I pretended not to be too interested in his metal. But just between you and me, his gloating is perfectly justified. It's a very good thing there's so little of that metal here. As it is, he's going to play havoc in the shipping-lanes before long, with these new spacers. It would help a little if we could only get back to Mars in time with the news. . . ."

Randall nodded. "But my letter," he said, getting back to the subject that puzzled him, "and my entire secret mission, has nothing whatever to do with Hogarth? Or with your own mission to Mars?"

He tapped his pocket where the letter still reposed safely.

Thalia frowned again, searching for the right words. "Well, yes—something to do with both—but only vaguely, and in a most indirect way. It's simply—" But very suddenly she stopped speaking, and looked toward the door. Then she hurried silently over to it and stood a moment, listening. She came back, shaking her head and still frowning. "I could have sworn I heard somebody out there. It'll be too bad if Hogarth learns much of what we were saying. We had better be careful."

"Right now," Randall answered, "I don't much care. I'm too dead for sleep.

You've no idea what navigating a spacer solo does to a man. Do you mind if I knock off about twelve hours' sleep?" And without waiting for an answer he threw himself wearily on the cot and turned his face to the wall, while Thalia paced up and down the room nervously, occasionally glancing out the single small window.

**R**ANDALL was awakened by a heavy hand on his shoulder, and looked up to see one of Hogarth's men.

"Come on," the fellow said, "the chief wants to see you. And he says he'll see *you* a bit later," he added, looking at Thalia meaningfully.

"How long was I asleep?" Randall asked her, as he came to his feet.

"You didn't miss it much on your guess. About ten hours, not twelve. And you snore something terrible," she added with a smile.

This couldn't be the showdown, then, Randall thought as he followed the man across to Hogarth's quarters. Hogarth had promised him a whole day in which to consider. Unless, of course, he'd changed his mind and wanted the answer now.

Hogarth was pacing the room when Randall entered, and he said without preliminary: "Dave Randall, when you get to know me better, as I'm sure you will, you'll learn that none of my men



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are in the habit of withholding important information from me."

"How interesting," Randall said. "Did you wake me up to tell me that? Anyway I'm not one of your men yet, for I haven't made up my mind."

"And whether or not you become one, Dave Randall, is for the time being unimportant in the face of this document." Hogarth stepped to his desk and picked up a folded sheet of paper.

And Randall, watching him puzzledly, was suddenly startled to see his own leather wallet lying there on the pirate's desk, and beside it the flexible metal wrapping in which he'd carried it. Automatically his hand flashed to his pocket, but the movement was unnecessary. His letter was gone.

"Yes, I have the letter," Hogarth went on. "You are surprised? And I'm surprised at you, Randall, for being so careless in a thing as important as this. One of my men overheard you talking to the girl. A secret mission, you said. What was this letter about, Randall?"

Randall felt hot anger seething in him, but he managed to say calmly, "Why ask me? You have the letter now."

"Then you don't know?"

"Of course not."

Hogarth looked at him steadily for a moment. "Yes. You are telling the truth. Well, Dave Randall, there seem to be extraordinary precautions in this matter. Look." He unfolded the letter and held it up for Randall to see.

The paper was perfectly blank!

Randall reached for it, but the pirate folded it carefully and placed it in his pocket. "No, Randall; I'll keep this for awhile." He chuckled. "You're as surprised as I was at first. But really, it's a trivial point—almost childish, in fact. Because, when I take this letter to my laboratory and put it through certain chemical tests, I dare say it won't be difficult to get the message. Meanwhile,

Randall"—the pirate's eyes narrowed beneath his mask—"we shall just forget the proposition I made to you, until I find out what this is all about."

## CHAPTER XII

### Through the Dome!

**A**NGRILY Randall paced up and down their locked room, glancing occasionally at Thalia. He hadn't told her what occurred, and was determined not to especially as she didn't seem much interested. He simply couldn't understand how Hogarth had obtained that letter so easily. He was sure it had been safe in his pocket right before he slept. That's when they had got it, of course; he had slept soundly: But it was strange Thalia hadn't known of it—or that she hadn't told him if she did know. Unless she had been asleep too, when they had come in. That was possible, of course, but it was all very queer, and Randall suddenly felt his old mistrust of her growing again.

He wished now that he'd remembered to deliver the letter at N'Voshl; he could have done so in an hour. He remembered again Felix's warning that it was of the utmost importance. And that he'd have trouble. Could he have meant Hogarth? Whether he had or not, he had betrayed Felix's trust right into the pirate's hands, and Hogarth was one to make the most of it, whatever it might be. Randall wondered how long it would take him to find that hidden message. And he knew his future, and probably Thalia's, depended on what that message might be. . . .

"Dave! Come here, quick!" Thalia's voice was excited. She was standing on a box and peering out the small open space in the stone wall. That opening faced the furnace building, scarcely fifty yards away.

Now, as Randall peered out, he saw a

man coming stealthily into the shadow of their wall. Evidently he had come from the furnaces, for he was clad in a heavy suit, probably asbestos. He crouched a moment in the semi-darkness against their wall, then came swiftly over beneath their window.

"Hey, you," he called cautiously. "In there!"

"All right, I hear you," Randall called back. "What is it?"

"Just this. Maybe you and me are thinking the same thing, see?"

"What's that?" Randall was startled.

"Escape! Listen: is the girl there too? Good! It might take the three of us to make it. A long chance, but I'm ready to risk it if you two are!"

"Say, who the devil are you—"

"Does it matter? I haven't much time, so listen. The big building out there—that's where the three new spacers are. I think the tubes were installed on one of 'em yesterday—not sure, but we've got to chance it. Big problem is getting you two out of there. Have you got blasters?"

"Do you suppose we'd be in here if we had?"

"Damn! And I can't get any except by special order. Not easy. Hogarth keeps some locked up over at his office . . . I've got to hurry back to the furnaces now, but I go off shift soon. Watch for it; if I see a chance I'll get back over here again. Try to think of something."

They saw the man scuttle over to the edge of the shadow, where he hesitated a moment; then he sped across the open space to the furnace building, and around the corner.

"Try to think of something!" Randall repeated as they left the window. "It's as simple as that. All we have to do is get out of here, across to the spacer building, blast our way in there, and pray that the tubes are intact. And then there's the minor problem of getting out of this dome—where's the spacer-lock, anyway?

Why, we're practically back safe on Mars." He looked at Thalia and said half-facetiously, "You don't happen to have an atom-blast, do you?"

"No," she answered seriously, "but I have this." She fumbled in her pockets and from somewhere produced a tiny automatic. "I was saving it," she said.

Randall stared a moment, and repressed a smile at the sight of the ineffective-looking instrument. "Oh, well," he shrugged, "you keep on saving it. You may need it yet, but I hardly think it can get us out of here."

FROM the window Randall could see the Flaccids still pushing the ore-cars through the air-locks and back again, stolidly and systematically. A little later he saw men in space-suits coming in, and others going out to continue the drilling. Then the men at the furnaces, twenty-five or thirty of them, emerged from the building opposite, while a new shift took their places.

Randall, watching for the mysterious visitor to return, could see a half-open door in the building almost directly opposite his window. Through it came a dim fire-glow from furnaces somewhere beyond, which alternately flared up and died again as though doors of hell were being opened and closed. Occasionally he could see vague shadows of men flitting past the open door.

Then, as he watched, he gradually became aware that one man always appeared nearer the door than the others—systematically, at regular intervals. With a sudden prick of interest Randall kept his eyes on that dark space, and gradually the movements just within the door became clearer. Again and again, at about ten minute intervals, that same man passed the door. Once the fires beyond flared up, and Randall saw that the man was employing a long rod, by which he seemed to be guiding or retarding a huge

receptacle which passed along a sliding beam above his head. That receptacle, Randall thought, might contain either the raw ore going to the furnaces, or the molten metal coming from it.

And Randall hoped it might be the latter, for he was beginning to form a fantastic plan. . . . The longer he watched that dark doorway, with the man passing, and the more he considered his plan, the more confident he became that it might work.

He wondered what might happen if that one man lost control of the huge overhead receptacle he was guiding? Surely something *ought* to happen! But it would be to no avail if their visitor didn't return; his plan depended on that third man. . . .

And suddenly the vague figure was there again, just beneath the window. Randall hadn't even seen him come, and was startled when he heard the voice just a few yards from him. "I just came from the spacer shed," the man called. "It's locked tighter than a drum. Even if we get you out of here we'll have to blast in there."

"I have an idea how we can do both!" Randall called. "Are you quite sure Hogarth has the atom-blasts over at his office?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then listen; we'll have to time this just right. It may not work at all, but we'll see. You start walking over toward the office. Walk slow, time it to about three minutes. If and when you see Hogarth come out—use your own judgment. Does he always come running over here to the furnaces when there's an accident?"

"Almost always—"

"Good, that's what I thought! Then it may work! If it does, you grab two or three atom-blasts and get back here."

The man left, and Randall turned from the window. "Thalia," he said grimly, "I was wrong and I apologize; your auto-

matic may get us out of here yet! I hope it's loaded?"

"Yes," she replied, handing it to him, "but I don't see—"

"You just pray that *I* can see, in this gloom. And be ready to make a dash for it if our friend gets back."

He again took his place at the window, allowing his eyes to become accustomed to the gloom of the half-open door in the building opposite. He held the automatic levelled, resting his arm on the stone ledge of the window. He knew the man had passed that door about ten minutes ago, and ought to be due again.

Then the man appeared, reaching upward with the rod, either guiding or balancing the heavy receptacle overhead. "Sorry it has to be you, mister, but it's your tough luck," Randall muttered as he pulled the trigger twice.

The two sounds were lost in the deeper sound of the furnaces. Randall knew the first shot missed; but he had moved his hand quickly, infinitesimally, before he fired the second. Now he saw the man sink slowly to the floor, clutching at his thigh, as the long metal rod he was employing slipped from his grasp. At the same time Randall could barely glimpse the heavy receptacle, out of control, moving swiftly along the sliding beam.

He waited five seconds, ten seconds; and then it happened. He didn't know what happened, but he knew something had, for again he heard that shrill whistle blasting away which brought Hogarth running to the furnaces before. He could only hope it would do the same this time, and that their mysterious friend would be able to gain access to the atom-blasts!

**B**UT nothing happened for two minutes, for three. "Afraid it didn't work," Randall started to say—and then they heard footsteps quickly approaching outside.

A voice cried, "Watch out, I'm blasting



the lock!" They saw the lock crumble slowly away under a blaster impact, and the door flew open.

Randall thrust the automatic back into Thalia's hands as the three of them hurried across to the building sheltering the new spacers.

"Mister," their companion cried as they ran, "I don't know how you did it, but it worked! Hogarth hurried out the minute he heard that whistle, and he's at the furnaces now. He left a man at the office, but I got rid of him. Don't know how much time we have!"

"Not much," Randall replied. "I'm afraid Hogarth will learn what's wrong in no time at all, and be over here. What about the atom-blasts—did you get 'em?"

"Only this one—all I had time for!" the man grunted.

"Keep that gun handy," Randall said in a low voice to Thalia, as he glanced at the man suspiciously and a little angrily. But there was no time for argument now as they reached the central building and moved around to the huge metal doors.

But even as the other man was blasting away at the locks, Randall looked back toward the furnaces and saw a lone figure leaping swiftly toward them. It was Hogarth, who had been quick to see what was happening.

The blaster had demolished the lock now, and they were tugging at the heavy door. It slid slowly back, but by this time Hogarth was very close. Randall saw Thalia and the man squeeze through the narrow opening, and whirled to meet Hogarth's rush just as the pirate's hand flew to his side. The hand came up with

the atom-blast, and this time Hogarth had no reluctance to use it. He pressed the button just as Randall leaped toward him.

Randall heard a little singing rush of air as the blast passed very close to his ear. But one more leap brought him very close; with the skill of the experienced boxer Randall was balanced on his toes as his right fist came up from the hip, and all his weight was behind the blow. It caught Hogarth squarely, and Randall knew the potency of it as he saw the pirate slump forward on his face.

"That's the one I owed you," Randall muttered. Quickly he turned Hogarth over and searched through his pockets. He hadn't forgotten that he had one reluctance to leaving here quite yet: the letter! But the letter was nowhere to be found, and it was too late to go across to the pirate's office for it; already other men had seen what was happening, and were running toward him. Muttering his disappointment, Randall seized the pirate's atom-blast and slipped it into his coat as he hurried into the building.

Three huge spacers rested there, built entirely of the new, grayish metal. The tubes were intact on one of them, Randall noticed, and the other man was examining them frantically. "They seem to be all right!" he said as he saw Randall.

"We'll have to hurry!" Randall exclaimed. Even as he spoke, four or five men appeared at the door, closely followed by others.

Randall's companion turned, atom-blast levelled; the men at the door fell back. "Quick, inside the ship!" he said. "It's our only chance now. I'm not sure about those rocket tubes yet but we'll have to chance it!"

Thalia entered the lock first, followed by Randall; then their companion entered, still holding the men at bay. No sooner had the door closed than the group outside rushed forward.

"What do we do now?" Thalia asked anxiously as she peered out at the men pounding on the spacer's door.

"We're safe in here for awhile at least," the stranger replied grimly. "They'll never get through that metal except by concentrated blasts."

"How do we get this spacer out of here?" Randall asked. "There surely must be a way of opening the roof?"

"There is," the stranger replied laconically, "but it's outside there somewhere. I looked, couldn't find it. Anyway I have a better idea than that." He moved toward the power board. "We'll blast clear through this stone wall and out through the dome! It ought to be like busting through an eggshell if this metal's what Hogarth claims it is!"

"Wait a minute," Randall said, a little aghast. "Suppose we do blast through, you know what it'll mean to the men here when the air escapes? You'd sacrifice the lives of the men you've worked with and known—"

"Think about yourself, not them!" the man snarled. "They'll have time to get to their space-suits, at least most of them will, but this is your last chance!" He levelled the atom-blast at Randall. "Now, make up your mind quick—do you go or stay?"

Randall smiled, looked at the man and then at the blaster. "Put it away," he said, "of course I go. We'll be lucky if the three of us can handle a ship this size. . . ."

"They're coming back with blasts!" exclaimed Thalia, who had been watching. "They're training them on the door."

"All right," the man replied with grim humor, "we'll give them a surprise now." He turned to the rocket controls and gave a quick experimental blast. The men outside hurried away from the ship as they realized what was going to happen. "And now," he shouted, "for a real blast! Hold tight, for this might be

rough!" He gave the tubes full power, and the spacer leaped forward like a monster unleashed.

Randall watching out one of the stern ports, had a sudden, awed respect for Hogarth's new metal. There had been no shock at all, and yet he caught a glimpse of one of the building's stone walls shattering outward, and a second later saw the Crystyte dome falling away behind them, with a neat hole in the tough substance. He glimpsed tiny men scurrying away for their space-suits as they realized their air was escaping. Then the men, the dome, and the dark planet itself dropped swiftly behind them as they sped into outer space. . . .

### CHAPTER XIII

#### Forced Back

**R**ANDALL moved forward to the control room. "That was nice work, mister! You seem pretty anxious to get away from Mercury."

"I am, and you may as well know why," the man said, his voice toneless. "My name's Jeffers—I blasted a passenger back on the *Martian Princess*, and Hogarth didn't like that. He never does. He said I'd pay for that, and he always means what he says. I've seen him mete out punishment before. He's been pretty busy lately, but I know he hasn't forgotten, and in my case it would probably be death. He has a regular squad that attends to such sentences. . . ."

"Just the same," Randall observed, "his men seem to like him, work hard for him—"

"Why not?" Jeffers snapped. "They're better off now than before they joined with Hogarth. They have everything to gain and nothing to lose."

"Hogarth's own words."

"And true. Men are cheap to him, he gets them from the three planets when

he needs them—desperate men, usually. He rescued me and ten others from the prison swamps on Venus. Just the same I'd rather go back there than face Hogarth again; but I don't intend to do either."

Thalia interrupted them suddenly. "Listen!"

They had been conscious of a low, steady purr from the rocket tubes, but now the sound took on an ominous staccato note as the spacer jerked convulsively. Randall hurried back to the rocket room, while Jeffers worked frantically at the controls.

Randall returned a minute later. "A fine space crew we are!" he said disgustingly. "The rocket heads are nearly empty, not enough fuel to last us five minutes! Better head back to Mercury, Jeffers, we'll be lucky if we make it."

"But Hogarth—!" Thalia started to say.

"It's all we can do, Randall shrugged, "unless we want to get caught in a drift out here—that'd be worse than Hogarth! But don't worry, we won't go back to the dome."

"I'll say we won't!" Jeffers agreed grimly. He was already heading the ship back in a wide sweep. "I don't want to face Hogarth after this, and I don't think you do, Randall. I'll try to set down somewhere on the shadow strip, and we'll decide what to do."

"Think you can manage that without them seeing us?" Randall asked. "They'll be repairing the dome now, and we'll be visible if we come down too close."

Jeffers nodded. "I think I can. There's a little ragged mountain-range close to the dome which I know by heart, I've made five or six trips. I'll pass low to one side of it."

Five minutes later they were approaching the dark side of the little planet again, but by this time their tubes were sputtering badly, and Jeffers propelled them

onward with little jerks. Randall stood close to the fellow's shoulder by the controls, peering forward anxiously.

"I hit it just about right," Jeffers grunted in satisfaction as the spacer fell swiftly down in the grip of the planet's gravity. "There's the mountain-range I meant." He pointed far ahead. He gave a few final bursts to the rear tubes, and the spacer leaped low over the surface, the mountains falling away behind them.

"Be sure you hit the Strip just right!" Randall cried in anxiety at the other's recklessness. "It's plenty hard navigating it!"

Jeffers chuckled. "You're not telling me anything new, fella! That's because of the extreme heat on one side, and cold on the other, I guess. For that reason I don't care to attempt it. I'll come as close as I can, but that's all."

Jeffers reached out to apply the braking rockets, and cursed when there was no response. They were dead. Meanwhile the propelling tubes were still blasting feebly, and Randall saw they were already over the shadow strip and heading fast for the sunward side. Even as he looked forward he saw a huge sun-flame flaring up across half the horizon, and felt a searing pain in his eyeballs. Just in time he ducked his head, but reached blindly for the rocket controls and jerked them off.

The spacer plunged down in a long arc, struck a glancing blow, and plowed a furrow fifty yards long in the soft pumice before it came to rest.

**R**ANDALL was conscious of the floor under him, and Thalia's hands on his face. He heard her anxious voice, but when he opened his eyes all he could see was that sun-flame before him. He turned his head in all directions but still he saw it.

"I'm all right," he muttered, "just blinded a little. What about Jeffers?"

"Looks like he's knocked out," Thalia replied.

"Attend to him then; I'll be all right in a minute." Slowly the glare faded from his eyes, but they still ached fiercely. "I'll never want another dose of that!" he muttered as he came to his feet. At the same moment he saw Jeffers struggling up.

"Well, back where we started from!" Jeffers said, rubbing his head ruefully.

"From the frying pan into the fire," Randall supplemented. "Well, what now?"

"We'd better see if there are any space-suits aboard."

"Thalia's already attended to that. There are a dozen."

Jeffers nodded. "Good. We've got to get fuel, and the only place for it is back at the dome, much as I hate to go back there. Can't be far—about half a day's trek, I should say. But they won't be expecting us, and I've got a blaster," he patted his hip confidently. "A couple of us ought to go."

"I'll go," Thalia said, coming up in time to hear the drift of their talk.

"No you won't," Randall said with finality. "If you'll pardon my applying an old saying to our present predicament, a woman's place is in the spaceship. Jeffers and I'll go, and you have dinner ready when we get back. And if it's concentrated food-tablets, I'll change my mind about marrying you!"

The two men donned space-suits and saw that the oxygen tanks and helmet phones were in working order. But just as they were moving toward the lock, Thalia cried out, "Wait a minute! Looks like we have visitors!"

Through the panelling, on the dark side of the planet, they saw five or six figures approaching in the distance.

"Men from the dome?" Randall cried anxiously as he peered out across the dark terrain. "They got here quick!" But

as the figures came closer, it was apparent they were not men at all.

"It's those screwy Flaccids!" Jeffers exclaimed. "Now I wonder what the hell they want?"

The Flaccids stopped a short distance away, regarding the spaceship and apparently jabbering among themselves. Then they came cautiously forward, and finally reached the air-lock. Most of them, the three observers noticed, were pretty well oxygenized; that is, their thick skins were taut and bloated. All of them had big funny ears alert, and tiny black eyes agleam with childish interest.

"Do you suppose they want in?" Thalia asked. "They're harmless aren't they?"

"Well," Jeffers replied dubiously, "they're clumsy and childish and stupid, but they're tremendously strong, and if you arouse their suspicion—watch out! But I guess we can let them in. I think it's curiosity brought them over here; they must have seen us land."

He opened the lock. Six Flaccids filed through. They stood a moment, staring around, then began piping to each other in tiny childlike voices which were laughingly incongruous to their bulk. With little eyes gleaming they began to explore: the dozen or so staterooms, the rocket room, the lockers, the space-suits, the Crystyte panelling, the medicine chests. Randall surreptitiously closed the control-room door and stood before it. But they reached there eventually.

"Better let them in," Jeffers advised. Randall stood aside. The beasts examined the glittering instruments and dials, touched the controls with awed, childlike reverence, but disturbed nothing. One of them spied a gold-chain bracelet Thalia was wearing, and jabbered excitedly, looking at it with greedy eyes. She removed it and handed it to him.

"That was a keepsake," she sighed, "but I'd rather have him for a friend than an enemy."

Randall noticed that a few of the others had glittering glass necklaces entwined about their arms, and called Jeffers' attention to it.

"Yes," Jeffers said, "I guess those are a couple that escaped from us. They don't like it under the dome, and get back to their caves as soon as possible. They're all greedy beggars."

But now Randall had noticed something else, and he clutched Jeffers' arm. "Look!"

One of the Flaccids seemed less interested in the surroundings than did his companions. He stood a little apart, quietly absorbed in something he held in his hands. He poured something from one hand to the other, then back again, then held it quite close to his face. Greenish glittering grains.

"It's Tynyte!" Jeffers exclaimed, when he saw. "Yes, they like that stuff—because of its color, or because it's very slightly radioactive, or both. They steal it every chance they get!"

## CHAPTER XIV

### In the Cave of the Flaccids

**I**N RANDALL a sudden hope was dawning. "Then," he exclaimed, "if they like it so well they may have more of it back at the caves, or wherever it is they live! We'd better go there and see—safer than going back to the dome. Jeffers, can you talk to them, make them understand you?"

"No. Hogarth and a few of the other men could converse with them in their own language a little, but I never could manage the gibberish. Tell you what we'll do, though; simply follow them. When they see us following they'll take us there, they're very hospitable creatures. I was there once before. Long row of caves beneath those mountains we passed."

Finally the Flaccids filed out again, having satisfied their curiosity. The two men followed, pulling their helmets down over their heads as they entered the air-lock.

Outside, they stopped a moment, and it was then that Randall observed that Jeffers had shifted his atom-blast conveniently to the pocket of his space-suit. Smiling to himself, Randall reached into his own suit and brought out the blast he had taken from Hogarth. He watched Jeffers closely, and saw the man start when he caught sight of it. Randall gestured to the head-phones, and turned his own on. Jeffers did the same.

"Jeffers, let us understand each other. I don't trust you and I don't like you. I saw you blast that passenger on the *Martian Princess*. I want to get back to Mars as much as you do, and now," he gestured with the blaster, "we both have an equal chance. Is it clear?"

Jeffers' face beneath the glass had gone white, but Randall knew it wasn't from fear. The man started to say something, then shut his mouth with a snap. He turned abruptly on his heel. "Come on," he muttered, "those Flaccids are almost out of sight."

As they plodded after them, Randall was careful never to let Jeffers get behind him. He knew the man was biding his time, and thought it likely he would wait until they got safely to Mars, but Randall took no chances.

The Flaccids were very slow. Occasionally they looked back and saw the two men following, but didn't seem to mind. The men saw them talking among themselves, and Randall wondered if the jabbering beasts were discussing them! Once he saw one of them—less bloated than the others—stop at one of the white patches which dotted the lower depressions in the planet's dark terrain. With a light touch the beast broke the paper-thin, almost powdery shell. Bending low, he placed his

elongated nose over the hollow space—and Randall saw the loose skin around him expand a little as he took in the air. Randall noticed, too, that a sort of low-growing foliage, almost a fungus, flourished around these air-pockets. But it grew nowhere else. Occasionally the Flaccids stopped to examine it, and seemed to be gathering armfuls of the choicest growth to take back to the caves with them.

THUS it was that they didn't reach the caves until five or six hours later. By this time they were out of the shadow strip and well onto the dark side. But, as they entered the caves behind the Flaccids, Randall was startled to see that it was not so dark as he thought. The interior rock seemed to transmit a sort of light of its own; not phosphorescent, but unlike anything he had ever seen. It made the caves seem something like the twilights he had known back on Earth.

"Don't let that one get away!" Randall exclaimed, pointing to the Flaccid who had the Tynyte grains. He hurried forward and confronted the creature.

"Careful, damn it, *careful!*" Jeffers warned.

But the Flaccids didn't seem to mind. They had been allowed full reign aboard the spaceship, and in their crude way they respected and wished to return the hospitality.

Randall pointed to the Tynyte grains in the beast's hands. "More?" he asked. "More?"

But only Jeffers heard him, and Jeffers laughed. "He wouldn't understand that word, Randall, even if he could hear it through your helmet. Here, let me." Jeffers stepped forward. He knelt on the floor, and with the butt of his atom-blast scraped at the pumice-like surface until he had a good-sized pile of it heaped up. Then he pointed to the Tynyte grains, and back to the pile of pumice on the floor.

He repeated this several times, emphasizing it with heaping gestures of his hands. Finally the Flaccid understood, and pointed back into the cave.

"Come on," Jeffers said to Randall, "I think he gets it."

As the Flaccid led them deeper into the caverns they began to see more of the beasts, scores of them, who regarded them indifferently. Finally the cave they were in opened into a vast grotto, apparently the central chamber of the whole place. Here some of the creatures, in various degrees of oxygenation, lay on the floor asleep; others were bringing in foliage from outside, while still others were engaged in pounding it into a squashy pulp. Randall even saw a few baby Flaccids—fat little bloated ones with big flappy ears.

The fellow they were following led them across the grotto to some shallow niches in the wall. And here, in proud array, the two men saw glittering objects of all kinds—shiny glass and metal trinkets which the beasts had either earned by working back at Hogarth's dome or had stolen from there.

"Good lord!" Jeffers muttered when he saw the collection, "I recognize most of this stuff. These beasts live in such gloom here that they virtually worship anything bright and glittering. But where the hell's the Tynyte?"

He indicated the grains in the Flaccid's hands. The beast looked at them a moment, then moved along the wall, finally stopping before a deeper niche.

And the two men, peering in, gave simultaneous joyous cries. For there rested two metal bags of the stuff, each containing several gallons.

"Well, there's our fuel," Jeffers breathed tensely. "Either one of those bags would get us back to Mars!"

Now the Flaccid was reaching into the glittering stuff, fondling it, dripping it through his fingers, almost cooing over it, like some Mercurian King Midas.

"Can't we just—take a bag and leave?" Randall asked.

"Dangerous," warned Jeffers.

"I'm going to try it anyway." Randall reached into the niche and started to drag one of the bags out; but the Flaccid brushed him violently away, at the same time setting up such a piggish squeal of protest that some of his friends moved nearer to see what was the matter.

"See?" Jeffers said. "Careful, or we won't get out of here at all."

"Damn it," Randall muttered, "on Mars this stuff's as plentiful as coal; are we gonna be stranded here for lack of a few gallons of it? Jeffers, you know these beasts pretty well, can't we make them understand reason?"

"Afraid not. Those grains seem to be their proudest possession."

"Then couldn't we trade with them? Maybe we have something that'll appeal to them more. Look through your pockets and see."

"I doubt it," Jeffers replied, but he searched through his space-suit. He found nothing. Then he reached through the suit and searched the pockets of his inner clothes. "This is all I have that might do the trick," he announced, and brought forth a small pen-knife. It was pearl-handled, but not nearly so bright as the Tynyte grains.

**H**E HANDED it to the Flaccid, who who turned it over and over in his hands, obviously admiring it. Jeffers opened the blade and showed him how to scratch upon the wall with it, but this didn't appeal to the creature so much as the pearl handle.

"I wonder if it's a trade," Jeffers said. He placed the knife firmly in the Flaccid's hand. Then he grasped one of the Tynyte bags.

The beast stared a moment, then blocked the way, giving a slight selfish squeal.

"All right, damn you, then give me the knife back!" Jeffers held out his hand.

The beast couldn't hear the words, but the gesture was plain enough. He stared at the outstretched hand, then at the Tynyte, then at the knife. He fondled the knife a moment longer, pondering. Then he placed it meekly back in Jeffers' hand.

He had desired that knife intensely—but he was honest.

"First honest one I ever saw," Jeffers muttered, still angry. "Well, Randall, it's your turn. See if you've got anything to trade him. If not we'll have to grab a bag and blast our way through them. But I doubt if we'd get far, they're tough babies. . . ."

Randall searched through his inner pockets, but he had little hope. He found half a pocketful of the food-tablets from the *Falcon*; he had forgotten about them, but now he saved them. Then his searching fingers touched a cold, smooth, unfamiliar object. He couldn't imagine what it was, and drew it forth in puzzlement. Then he let out a glad yell of surprise, and Jeffers stared at the object wonderingly.

Randall held the pair of large, green spectacles he had confiscated from the intruder those many days ago!

The Flaccid was staring at them too, and the men saw his eyes light up. Very majestically Randall held the spectacles up before his face-plate, and peered through them around the cave. Then he held them up close to the Flaccid's eyes—but took care to hold tightly to them.

The beast gave a little childish cry of surprise, and reached up for the spectacles. Randall only allowed him a glimpse through them; then he jerked them away, put them deliberately into his pocket and started to walk away.

He felt a light, imploring hand on his arm, and turned back to face the Flaccid. The creature was jabbering distressfully but Randall didn't hear him. However,

the expression on the poor fellow's face was so meaningful it was almost ludicrous. Randall repressed a smile as he brought out the spectacles again. Again he placed them before the Flaccid's eyes, and with difficulty managed to fasten them over the huge ears so that they stayed there.

Now, with undisguised cries of ecstasy and new experience, the Flaccid turned in every direction; but no matter where he turned, to his delight, everything showed up in the bright green color! He examined all parts of the cave, he strutted proudly among his surprised companions, he rushed along the niches in the wall examining the various treasures which all seemed different now in this new light.

Finally Randall reached up and took the spectacles away from him again. The critter showed disappointment, but no resistance. Then Randall handed them back to him, at the same time grasping one of the Tynyte bags.

The Flaccid hesitated. He knew Randall's meaning clearly. Then he accepted the spectacles, but at the same time pointed to the knife in Jeffers' hand.

"You strike a hard bargain, old timer," Jeffers said as he handed him the knife too. "But it's O.K. this time!"

They dragged forth the bag, and there was no interference. As they hurried with it across the grotto they glanced back and saw the Flaccid calling his friends around him. They were passing the spectacles around, each awaiting his turn, and even through their helmets the two men could hear the squeals of delight and wonderment that rang through the cave.

## CHAPTER XV

### Crash Landing

THEY reached the spacer without further trouble and found Thalia awaiting them a little worriedly; but her mood changed when she saw Randall.

"Dave," were her first words, "I'm afraid I won't make a good wife at all. I couldn't even find concentrated food-tablets aboard this spacer. I *would* have had fried Flaccid, but I didn't know how to catch one!"

"It's all right," Dave said, "we've had enough Flaccid for one day," and he quickly told her what had happened. "As for the food problem—it's the man who always brings home the bacon. Here you are." And he emptied his pocket of the food-tablets. "Enough there to last the three of us to Mars, if we go easy."

Jeffers was in the rear of the ship installing the Tynyte, so Randall took the opportunity to say, "Another thing, Thalia: I don't trust Jeffers a bit, so keep your eyes open. I don't think he'll start anything until we arrive on Mars, for the simple reason that it'll just about take the three of us to get this spacer there. But I don't intend to leave *here* quite yet, and Jeffers might not like that."

"Dave! What do you mean?"

"Well, I've been thinking it over. We left the dome in a hurry because we had to. And I'll even admit I intended to go ahead to Mars. But since we're forced back here, damned if I'm leaving Mercury quite yet. Thalia, I'm going back to the dome. If Jeffers objects, I'll take him back with me—so watch out for trouble in just a few minutes."

"Dave Randall, you must be crazy. Whatever do you want to go back there for?"

"I have to. I didn't tell you this before, but Hogarth's got my letter. And I'm not leaving here this time without it!"

"Dave Randall, you're not going back there. You're leaving this spot the minute the tubes are ready, and we're heading for Mars."

"Now, listen!" he protested. "I'll have enough trouble with Jeffers without having you against me. I'm going back after that letter!"

"Dave Randall, you're trying to be that great big hero again. After all, what does a little teeny letter matter?"

He stared at her unbelievably, then hot words tumbled from his lips.

She laughed—a delighted laugh that stopped his words. "Oh, Dave, don't you remember once when I said you were impetuous? Well, I see you still are, so I guess I'll have to stop you. Here's your old letter, now for heaven's sake keep it—at least until you can deliver it!" And from somewhere she produced a familiar envelope and thrust it into his hand.

Randall stared, speechless and unbelieving. But there was Felix's own handwriting: "TO THE EARTH EMBASSY, N'VOSHL, MARS. STRICTLY PERSONAL."

He examined the seal and saw it had not been tampered with.

"Hogarth hasn't your letter, and he never did have! He has a perfectly blank paper, and I imagine he's going to be plenty surprised when he learns there's no message hidden there."

"But how—when—" Randall was stammering.

"Remember when I thought I heard someone listening at the door?" Thalia explained. "I was right. I watched and saw a couple of Hogarth's men coming. I thought they might be after your letter, if they'd heard us mention it. You were asleep then. To be safe I removed the letter and replaced it with the paper. Good thing now I did. I pretended to be asleep when they came in, and I saw them take it. I was going to wait until we got to Mars before I gave you your letter."

"Thalia," he said feelingly, "you remember what you said when I brought your shoe back to you? Well, I could kiss you for bringing this letter to me, and it's much more important—"

"And I'll repeat your words on that occasion," she said smiling. "I won't mind." And Randall acted accordingly.

"Now," she said a moment later, "I almost feel tempted to tell you what this letter business is about. This much I will tell you: the contents of that letter concerns *you* more than anyone."

"Me?" he looked at her incredulously.

She smiled mysteriously and said, "That's all I'd better tell you now. So just be careful of Jeffers and get back to Mars safely. No more now—here he comes."

"Not any too much fuel there," Jeffers said, coming forward. "But with the extra speed we'll get out of these new tubes we should make Mars all right. About four days, I'd say."

**F**AR below them lay the wide, wind-swept steppes of Mars. They'd made it in three days, blasting the tubes to what they thought was the danger point. It had been an uneventful but nerve-racking crossing, the two men hardly exchanging a word but each watchfully waiting, knowing what the other was thinking. Thalia had insisted on taking her regular turn at the controls, and she too had regarded Jeffers cautiously as the red planet drew ever nearer.

Randall was at the controls now; the steppes were about five miles below and they were dropping fast. He gave a few reckless blasts from the rear tubes, for he knew Jeffers was asleep now. If only once he could spot N'Voshl. . . . He peered anxiously ahead.

"All right, mister, get up from there. I'm taking over now!" Randall felt the authoritative end of Jeffers' blaster jammed hard against his back. He arose, angry with himself but angrier with Thalia for not watching. As he moved aside, Jeffers snatched the blaster from Randall's belt. "You made a mistake, wise guy, when you said you saw me blast that passenger. You're not taking me to N'Voshl to hand over to the authorities; not that one more rap makes any dif-

ference to the record I've got. I know a good hideout here and I'm heading for it—after I get rid of you two. Besides, I want this spacer."

"You damned idiot, if you're taking over, do it!" Randall exclaimed. "We're coming down fast!"

Jeffers moved forward, but in that instant there was a loud sound that went bounding about the metal walls. Strangely, Jeffers dropped both atom-blasts and clutched at his wrist from which blood had suddenly spurting. Randall whirled and saw Thalia standing there with the automatic still levelled, looking at it, as though marvelling at the accuracy of her shot.

Randall wasted a fatal few seconds to snatch up the atom-blasts. The spacer veered wildly, and then, out of control, took its final plunge Mars-ward. He lunged for the power-board but Thalia was there before him. She jabbed wildly at the buttons feeding the under-hull tubes. They blasted powerfully, the spacer made a valiant attempt to veer upward, but it was too late. Just before it struck they caught a glimpse of a vast red desert far ahead, and the plateau swinging up to meet them. . . .

**T**HANKS to the underblasts they struck in a long sweeping curve, but their speed had been terrific. They plowed over the surface, almost bouncing, for nearly a mile before coming to rest. Such a thing, Randall knew, would have ripped an ordinary ship apart; now he remembered what Hogarth had said about this metal being almost resilient under stress, and had good reason to believe it! They were battered and bruised, but that was the extent of the damage. Jeffers lay grotesquely in one corner, still clutching his bleeding wrist, and viewed the other two sullenly.

The spacer rested at a sharp angle, and as Randall moved over to peer out. it

started to shift. "We're on the steppes!" Randall cried from the starboard panel. "There's a precipice over here and we're sliding toward it—hold tight, this might be rough!"

Even as he spoke the spacer slid faster toward the brink, rolled over once, and plunged down. The drop was only about thirty feet, but they struck with a force that sent them sprawling.

"Damn it, I hope this is the end of the trip," Randall muttered, picking himself up. "I've had enough bouncing for one day! Again he peered out, and turned back this time with a groan. "Now we're on a wide ledge—a couple hundred feet of cliff below us! At least I can see the desert away down there. Fine mess we're in now, thanks to you, Jeffers!"

"Oh, you're welcome," Jeffers replied sardonically. He was at the medicine locker dressing his wounded wrist.

Randall handed one of the atom-blasts to Thalia and kept the other, as the three of them moved outside to inspect the damage. Thirty feet above was the steppe on which they'd landed. Hundreds of feet below, the Red Wastes stretched interminably to the horizon. The ledge they were on was about a hundred feet wide.

"We can blast off of here," Randall observed, "if we can only turn the ship around."

"Sorry to blast your illusion," Jeffers said amusedly, coming from the rear of the spacer, "but the tube-stanchions are torn loose. Too bad. Besides, do you have the faintest idea where N'Voshl lies from here? I don't."

"Don't mind him," Thalia said in a low voice, clutching Randall's arm; "for I think I know where we are. See that low mountain-range? It probably runs into this plateau." She pointed across the desert far to the left. "And you see the two peaks that curve up toward each other, like horns? I couldn't mistake them. Bob and I—my brother—were exploring

and prospecting near there a few years ago."

"And what has that to do with our present predicament?"

"Just this. Bob and I erected a portable shack near there. It ought to still be standing. If we can reach it, I can establish the direction of N'Voshl from there. Better still, there's a little mining town only a few days away, by foot."

"That still doesn't get us down off this ledge."

"Simply follow it! It's got to lead down sometime."

Randall peered far to the left again at the low-lying mountains. "It'll be a long trek," he said. "Fifty miles, anyway."

"Well, have you any better plan?" Thalia retorted.

He smiled, patted her arm. "Don't get excited. Of course I haven't." Then, turning to Jeffers: "Come on, we're leaving. You walk ahead. I don't quite know yet what I'm going to do with you, but I'm not leaving you here with the spacer. You see, I happen to want it too!"

Thalia looked at him quickly.

"The government ought to be interested," Randall explained.

## CHAPTER XVI

### The Chirps and the Vampires

**A**FTER a few miles they saw that the ledge was gradually leading downward. To their right, far below, the Red Wastes shimmered under a blazing sun, and to their left a rocky wall sheered ever higher as they came nearer the level of desert.

Then Jeffers, a few yards ahead, stopped suddenly.

"What's the matter?" asked Randall, pressing forward. But he needed no answer. To the left a little ravine led into the cliff, winding its way upward to the plateau far above. And down this ravine,

and out onto their ledge, came a strange procession.

Little furry creatures—dozens of them. They seemed nothing but rotund masses of gray silky fur, from which stared large, soft brown eyes. But somewhere beneath that fur were little feet, for they scampered out of the ravine and onto the ledge and followed it down to the desert.

“Oh, I recognize them!” Thalia exclaimed delightedly. “Bob and I saw a few of them that time, away off on the edge of the desert. Aren’t they the cutest things? But I wonder why they want to get down there?”

“Maybe for the same reason we do,” Randall grunted. “Come on, we’ll follow them. We’re sure to get down now.”

But it wasn’t as easy as that. A few minutes later the ledge suddenly curved, then widened into a slope that led down into the desert for the remaining hundred yards. There at the edge of the slope the host of little furry creatures were gathered—staring. And as the three came up behind them, they stopped too—and stared.

That entire slope was a veritable blanket of shimmering, iridescent, silvery flowers. They thrust upward on long stems of the same silvery color; the flowers themselves were wide, cup-shaped, with little sharp-edged filaments in the center. And they bore strange claw-like blooms. The blossoms seemed straining ever upward and the entire mass was in a constant, gentle swaying motion.

As they swayed and lightly touched each other there were tiny, musical, metallic clicks. Metallic—or crystalline.

Randall moved forward, through the gathered furry animals, and stood at the edge of the slope. There was something irresistably fascinating about those blossoms. The silvery metallic sheen caught his gaze and held it, as he had known certain sun-glinting objects to do on lazy summer days. But this was more than

that. He couldn’t tear his gaze or his mind away; he reached slowly out to grasp one of the silvery stems.

The stem swayed out of his reach, but bent in a long arc as the flower darted down toward his hand. He felt it fasten there voraciously and felt a little sharp pain as the filaments punctured his skin. He heard Thalia’s shout of warning, “Dave! Be careful!” But still he couldn’t tear his gaze away.

Then he felt hands pulling him forcibly back. He heard Jeffers chuckling, and the sound broke the spell. Randall glared at him angrily, wondering why everything seemed to amuse him. He looked at the back of his hand and saw three or four little punctured red spots.

The furry creatures were still gathered there, hesitant, staring too—fascinated. Then one of them moved forward, darted through the stems. It had gone about thirty feet when the flowers ahead of him swayed down, dangled glitteringly before his eyes. The animal slowed, finally stopped, and stood there staring with its large eyes as though hypnotized. Instantly two of the crystalline cups darted down and fastened to him. The creature hardly had time to utter a sound before he went limp. The two silvery stems, and then the flowers themselves, slowly became blood-red. It reminded the three watchers of a soda being sucked up through straws. Then the two flowers sank prone upon the ground, apparently digesting the meal. Several others swooped down, then swayed upward again, disappointed; nothing was left of the little creature but an empty, furry husk.

Undaunted, others of the animals tried it—five of them this time all at once. Half-way down the slope two of them faltered, stopped. That was the end for them, but the other three made it through and scampered out onto the desert to safety. Then others ventured, en masse, a dozen or a score at a time. When all was over, about

two-thirds had made it through safely, the rest littering the slope amid the blood-red stems.

"Well, that leaves us," Randall said, with an involuntary shudder. He went over to the precipice edge and peered down, but it was still a hundred foot drop and he turned back. "No other way. We've got to make it through there, and I don't like it a bit!" He peered down the slope. "Over a hundred yards of those things, just waiting for us."

"Hell!" Jeffers spat out disdainfully. "They got a few of those animals, but they can't stop us."

"Us? Speak for yourself mister." Randall held out the back of his hand where the punctured spots were still oozing red. "What does that look like?"

Jeffers was still disdainful. "Your mistake," he said, "was looking directly at them, letting them hypnotize you. That's the way they work, of course. All you've got to do is keep moving ahead and you'll get through." He walked to the edge of the slope, looked back and said, "Coming?" And without waiting for an answer he started down.

**T**HE other two watched Jeffers dubiously as he strode through the massed stems, brushing the flowers aside and lifting his feet high to keep from becoming tangled. And he seemed to be making it all right. About one third of the way down he slowed, half turned back, and they saw him grinning confidently as he waved.

And that was Jeffers' mistake.

Three or four of the tall blossoms swayed up, serpent-like, a foot from his face. They held his gaze. Even then he might have plunged on, torn himself away; he started to; but the hand he waved was the one Thalia had shot, and the bandage was soaked red. With the speed of a serpent one of the blossoms darted out and fastened to it. As Jeffers

tried to tear it away, another fastened to his bare neck, the suction-like cup holding tenaciously. Others were now darting around his wounded wrist, tearing greedily at the bandage. Still others, maddened by the blood-lust, were brushing over his clothes, creeping in, fastening themselves to him. He twisted, tried frantically to plunge away, but the stems about his feet were now a writing mass. He fell headlong, and instantly dozens of the flowers—all that could reach him—darted down. . . .

It had all happened in the space of a few seconds before either Randall or Thalia could move. They saw him fall and heard him scream but once—horribly—before they turned away, sickened by the sight. The thing that had been Jeffers did not scream again, but they heard other little horrible suggestive sounds.

They waited, not looking at each other, until the sounds had quite ceased; then Randall turned a white face to her.

"We'd better rest a while," was all he said. Thalia nodded.

A short time later, as they sat there with their backs to the gruesome scene, Thalia felt something soft brushing against her ankles. Startled, she looked down. There at her feet was one of the tiny furry creatures, its wide eyes staring straight up into her own. And she could have sworn that those eyes were pleading. With a cry of delight she bent down and picked it up.

"Dave, look—he wants to get across! I'm going to take him!"

"Chirp?" the thing said almost intelligently, still looking at her. It was so tiny it fitted into the hollow of her hands like a rounded, grayish kitten.

"You'd better think of getting across yourself!" Randall said.

"But he can never make it alone!" she cried, holding the thing close to her cheek. "And the way he looks at me with those eyes—he's so darling, I want him for a pet!"

"Chirp?" the thing said again.

"You see," Thalia said defiantly, "he understood every word I said! I've got to take him now. And I'm going to name him Chirp!"

"Come on," Randall said abruptly, turning away. He was annoyed. But if he could have known how little Chirp was to later save Thalia's life, he'd have carried him across himself.

As he looked down the slope again, he suddenly became aware of what he should have realized before. The route that Jeffers and dozens of the Chirps had taken was now a little more accessible; many of the stems now lay, blood-red, upon the ground. But even as he looked some of them were becoming silvery again, the redness being digested somewhere in their roots, and they were beginning to stir.

"Hurry!" he called to Thalia. "We shouldn't have waited this long!"

But as she came to his side, and looked down that path where the flowers lay horribly red and bloated, she drew back with a shudder of loathing.

"Oh, I couldn't—"

"But you will," and seizing her hand, Randall started down, dragging her behind him. "It's now or never," he said. "Watch your feet, don't let them get tangled, and above all things keep moving!"

Thalia nodded, still hugging Chirp unconsciously close to her. They plunged on, skirting the place where Jeffers lay. After that the stems became thicker. The sharp, hard flowers sprang up before them at every step as they ran, stinging their faces painfully. Once Thalia faltered, slowed to a walk. Randall pulled at her hand, drawing her on. The glittering flowers were now darting around them tentatively from all sides. He looked into her eyes and saw the same staring look he had seen in Jeffers'. He slapped her face sharply, and she started and staggered on. "Sorry," Randall muttered;

but now he found himself staring at the silvery glitter around him, and it was with an effort that he forced his feet to keep moving.

Hardly a hundred yards, but it was the hardest Randall had ever traversed. When they had almost reached the end of the slope he stumbled and fell and lay there a moment from exhaustion. He felt the crystalline flowers feeling all around him and didn't even care. His face was cut and his clothes were torn and he felt intense pain as one of the cups fastened to his bare leg near the knee. . . .

Then he felt someone pulling at his hand . . . the crystalline cup was jerked from his leg, tearing the flesh, as he half staggered up and plunged forward on his face into the hot, powdery sand. . . .

## CHAPTER XVII

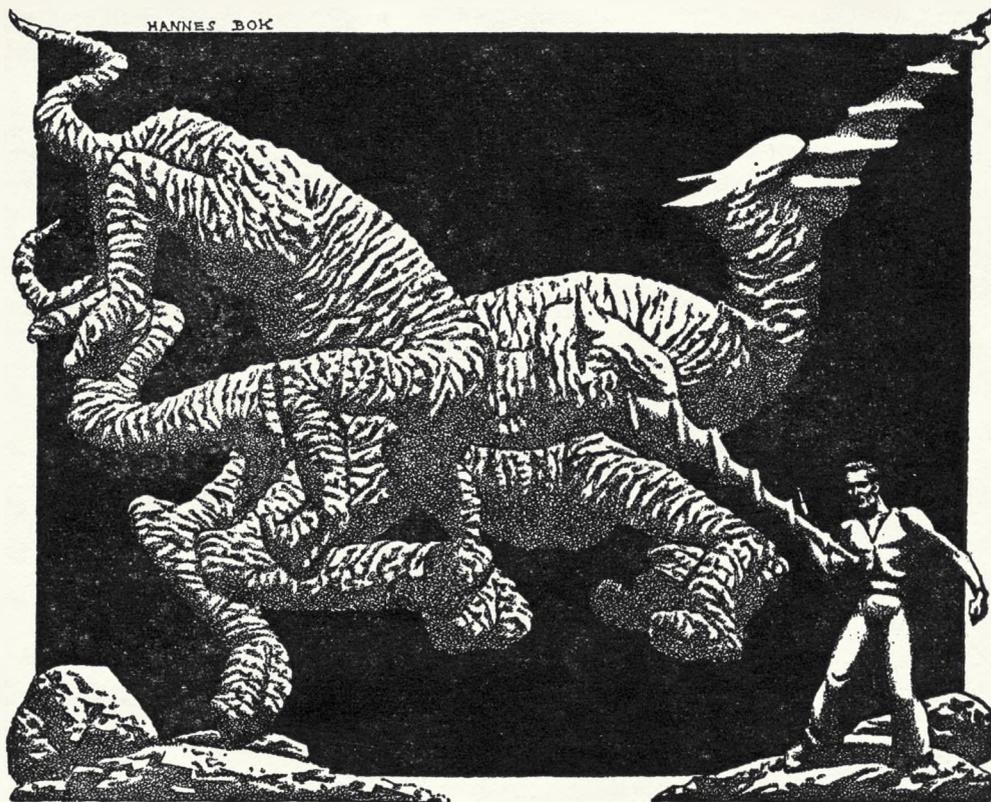
### The Screwies

**T**WO tiny figures stood in the lee of an overhanging cliff and shielded their faces against the red sand being whipped inward by the wind. They had plodded through that powdery stuff for more than twenty hours, part of the time under a blazing sun. Now it was nearly dusk again, and that wind had sprung up seemingly out of nowhere.

"Damn it, Thalia, why stop now?" Randall asked impatiently. "You say the shack is only a few miles from here!"

"You'll see why," she replied. "This wind is only a zephyr compared to what it's going to be in just a few minutes. Remember, I've seen them before. Lucky we found this little cove when we did!"

"When I think of all I've gone through!" Randall muttered angrily. "And all because of a damned letter that probably isn't important, anyway— If ever I see Felix again I'm going to tell him to take his letters and—oh, I'm sorry," he ended, seeing Thalia's shocked-



look. "Don't mind me. It's just that this damned knee is about driving me crazy!"

"I'm worried about that," Thalia said. "Let me look at it again." The flesh above his knee, where the vampire cup had torn the flesh, was now purplish and swollen. His long trek over the desert hadn't done it a bit of good, and every step had been an increasing agony.

"There's a medicine supply at the shack," Thalia said, "and we'll be there in a couple of hours. These winds usually don't last long."

"Look!" Randall exclaimed suddenly, peering out across the swirling sand.

The wind had almost reached its peak—and across the desert before it came a huge thundering herd of grotesque beasts. Squat, massive, with skin almost armor-thick, and what appeared to be flat, sharp-edged beaks protruding.

"Yes, I've seen *them* before, too!"

Thalia said, as the herd passed close to the cliffs. "But I can't figure out why they're running before the wind. They ought to be screwing themselves in the ground by now."

"They ought to *what*?" Randall exclaimed, looking at her in amazement.

"Those are the Screwies—Bob gave 'em that name. They always screw themselves in the ground when these winds become so terrific. Those beaks you see are screw-shaped. There! A few of them are doing it now!"

Some on the edge of the herd had stopped. They lowered their heads until the long beaks touched the ground. Then, using the beaks as pivots, they began running around in circles; and as they circled, the beaks screwed into the ground!

Randall shook his head unbelievably. "I can think of more than one reason for calling them Screwies!" he muttered.

But the rest of the herd didn't stop; and the few who had screwed themselves in, seeing their companions thundering past, hastily unscrewed themselves and ran on.

"I CAN'T understand it," Thalia said, shaking her head. "I never saw them run before. There must be some things else back there that they're afraid of. Look out!" she cried as some of them veered toward the little cliff-cove where they were huddled. "They're plenty dangerous!"

Two of the Screwies came sweeping in, their shell-like beaks leveled. Randall dropped to the ground as one of the beaks slashed over his head, and he saw that it was not only screw-shaped, but served as a sharp-edged weapon as well. Others were sweeping in toward the cliff now, and Randall drew a blaster. He gave them shock after shock, and they veered away. Soon the entire herd was past.

"I wonder what they're running from?" Thalia said. But suddenly little Chirp, whom she was holding, began acting very strangely and excited. He clawed to get down, but Thalia held him tightly.

"You don't want to go out there, Chirp!" she exclaimed. "That wind would blow you clear off of Mars!"

Now they saw something else. Night was coming on fast and they only saw them dimly: little round masses being blown before the wind like tumbleweeds. Hundreds of them, close upon the heels of the Screwies. By now the wind was fast dying down, but as Randall stepped out and looked up at the plateau above, he saw more of the masses being swept over the edge, to fall on the desert and tumble on. And then it was, with a sudden and distinct shock, that he realized what the things were.

"Those are Chirps!" he cried, turning back to Thalia. "Hundreds of them! No wonder Chirp wants to get out there."

He petted the soft furry thing with his finger; it was now chirping pitifully. "Why don't you let him go, Thalia?"

"No," she said stubbornly, "I want him! I saved him, and he's mine."

"Do you suppose those are what the Screwies were running from?" Randall asked, grinning.

"Of course not; don't be silly."

AN HOUR later they reached the sheet-iron portable shack, standing on a little point of desert at the mouth of a gully in the cliff. Sand was heaped high about the door; but when they had scraped their way in, Thalia found everything as she had left it a few years before. A couple of bunks, tables, chairs, medicine cabinet, and most important of all, canned goods. The tiny electric plant at the rear of the shack was unserviceable, ruined by sand, but they relied on the emergency kerosene lamps.

"How far did you say it was from here to that little mining town?" Randall asked.

"On foot—a couple of days. Right along this mountain range, following the desert."

"Good! Then the earlier we leave tomorrow, the better."

Thalia looked straight at him a moment, then shook her head sadly. "Sometimes," she replied, "you think of the silliest things. I'll be leaving in the morning, all right, but you're staying here to take care of that knee. I'll leave Chirp here with you for company."

Randall knew better, but for the moment he didn't argue. They ate heartily, she drained his badly swollen knee and put clean bandage on it, and they slept the sleep of exhaustion. But just before he fell asleep Randall couldn't resist calling humorously, through the darkness, "Did you remember to put out the cat?"

"Chirp?" she replied sleepily. "He's all right—wandering around here in the dark somewhere. G'night. . . ."

## CHAPTER XVIII

## The Truth About Chirp!

**B**UT when Randall awakened the next morning Chirp was gone and so was Thalia. She had pinned a note to his bunk, and it read: "You were sleeping so peacefully I just *couldn't think* of waking you. Now don't try to be a hero again and follow me! I'll make it all right and will be back in a few days with a plane. You'll find breakfast in the cans. Change bandage on knee twice a day—and take care of Chirp for me. Pleasant dreams!"

Since no one was there to hear, Randall cursed loud and violently. Then he espied: "Over."

He turned the paper over and saw a P.S.: "Now don't get mad!"

That made him grin and he forgot to be mad.

But where was Chirp? A glance around the little room showed him that he wasn't there. Randall sprang up—and then stood there a moment, tottering. His head was spinning dizzily and he clutched at the bunk.

"Whoowie!" he said, as he abruptly sat down again.

A few minutes later the dizziness had passed, and he walked to the door. But he was further astonished to find that he was so weak he could hardly stand. He stood leaning in the doorway, looking out. The sun was already high, and as he observed the shimmering Red Wastes he didn't envy Thalia her journey. He hoped she had taken along enough to eat!

He turned back to the little cupboard, and then groaned. She had! She had taken all the jars of potted ham, all the malted milk, and left him nothing but a dozen tins of sardines. Again Randall cursed and this time nothing stopped him.

He wondered where Chirp was! Prob-

ably Thalia had let him out without knowing it, and he had gone to join his companions, wherever they might be by this time. Randall ceased wondering about it.

But his strange weakness he couldn't understand. Those damned vampire-flowers must have had a strange poison. His knee seemed to be a little better, though, he noticed as he changed the bandage. He ate a can of sardines, then wondered what to do next. The thought of the days of boredom ahead was appalling. He began a search of the little room.

Finally, in the bottom corner of the cupboard he spied a thick book, covered with dust. His eyes lighted up. Here would be something with which to while away the hours. What could it be? Maybe the currently popular best-seller, *Martian Nocturne*.

But no, that would be expecting too much. Well, even if it were only one of the ancient classics, such as—er—well, *Gone With the Wind*, for example—it would be worth while. Gingerly, expectantly, hopefully, Randall reached in and brought the heavy tome out.

Then he slammed it to the floor, and the profanity which filled the room would have shocked even Chirp, who didn't understand English. The book sprawled there, and mockingly the title stared up at Randall: *Advanced Principles of Space Navigation*.

Not only had Randall read it before—in his third year at the Spacer School—but he had written a lengthy essay in criticism of several of the points. That essay had impressed the head-instructor profoundly, and won Randall a scholarship.

Nevertheless, Randall sat there at the table and began reading it again, and was surprised to find that he needed brushing up on some of the points. On the flyleaf was written the name, "Robert Bowen." Thalia's brother. No doubt he had left the book here on one of those exploring trips Thalia had mentioned.

Late in the evening Randall heard a tiny clawing sound at the door, and sprang up. He hurried over to it and stood listening. He opened the door cautiously—and in squeezed Chirp!

"Hello!" Randall said. "I don't know where you've been all day, but I'm glad to see you! Thalia would sure give me the devil if I didn't take care of you."

"Chirp?"

"Yes, that expresses my feelings exactly. Say! I wonder if you eat sardines?" Randall opened a can and placed them before Chirp, who sniffed and then backed away, his big brown eyes wide with astonishment.

"Chirp!" This time it was an angry chirp.

"Hah! I don't blame you," Randall said. "Sorry but it's all I can offer you. Guess you'll have to go to bed hungry."

He read a few hours longer, then went to bed himself. And just as he was dozing off, he felt something light plop into his bunk. He reached along the cover and felt soft fur. Chirp crept close to Randall's chin and lay there.

Randall listened a moment, almost expecting to hear him purr.

But Chirp lay very still and there was no sound.

"Guess you don't belong to the feline family after all," Randall muttered sleepily. "But you're kind of nice, anyway. G'night, Chirp."

**A** GAIN Chirp was gone when Randall awakened on the morning of this second day. He swung his feet out of the bunk—and then crumpled to the floor when he tried to stand.

He lay there a moment, weak and bewildered and more astonished than hurt; then he dragged himself over to the table and up into a chair. There he sat for a couple of hours, hunched over the table, as he felt his brain clearing and his strength slowly coming back. He found

half a can of malted milk that Thalia had overlooked, ate the powdery stuff, and that helped a lot.

Again he changed the bandage on his knee, noticing that the wound was still raw and ugly although the swelling was nearly gone. By noon he was able to move about again, and he saw how Chirp got out: in a far corner one of the thin iron sheets was so loose that Chirp was able to squeeze out, but not in again.

Randall went outside, managed to walk to the end of the little sheltering gully. There, on the edge of the desert, he saw some of the Screwies—feeding on a sparse vegetation at the base of the cliffs. Now, viewing them clearly for the first time, they were even more vicious-looking than he had imagined. Suddenly a few of them saw him, and although he hadn't given them the slightest provocation, they charged at him with the ugly, screw-shaped beaks slashing and tearing the air. Randall hurried back to the shack, and slammed the heavy door on them just in time. He saw them snouting around outside for awhile, but eventually they went away.

For the rest of the afternoon he read in the *Advanced Principles of Space Navigation*, then cast it aside. He had done enough brushing up, and it was all beginning to sound familiar to him again. He wished there were something else to read.

Ah—but there *was* something else! He remembered it suddenly. Reaching into his pocket, he drew out the mysterious letter, now so crumpled and worn from much handling. The letter which had travelled from Earth to N'Voshl on Mars, to the polar cap, back to N'Voshl, to Mercury, and now back to Mars again. He gazed at it, fascinated and wondering. Should he open it? After all, Thalia had said—what was it she had said? Yes—that it concerned *him*, Randall, more than anyone. Didn't that give him the right, then,

to read it? But suddenly he remembered Felix's words, Felix's warning, Felix's trust in him, seemingly so long ago—and with an effort he put down the temptation. Besides, he had a feeling somehow that Thalia wouldn't like it if he opened this letter quite yet. So he amused himself by propping it up on the table, then sitting back and pondering over it, chin in hand, like Rodin's "Thinker."

Just as it was growing dark he again heard the tiny scratching at the door, opened it, and again Chirp came in. Randall looked down at him a moment.

"Chirp," he said, "I can't quite figure you out. Could there be another little Chirp, maybe a Mrs. Chirp, that you go out there to meet every morning? I thought night was the time for that sort of thing—but maybe on Mars it's different."

"Chirp!"

"Yes. And why do you always come back here, anyway? Well, I don't care; in fact, I'm glad of your company. At least you're someone to talk to. I don't suppose you mind if I talk to you?"

"Chirp?"

"Hey, can't you say anything but chirp? That might mean yes or it might mean no. I can see this conversation is going to be pretty one-sided."

"Chirp!"

"Oh, all right, have it your own way. But I still think you oughta be saying meow instead of chirp. What are you, an animal, or a Martian canary?"

All this while Chirp sat looking at Randall; simply a little mass of grayish fur from which stared two big eyes wide with wonderment.

A few hours later, after he had blocked the loose iron sheet that was Chirp's exit, Randall said: "Well, Chirp, I'm going to bed. Tomorrow Thalia might—just possibly *might*—be back here, if she made good time. She'll be glad to see I took good care of you."

RANDALL had retired early, and as a consequence awakened with the dawn. That is, he thought he was awake, but he was still aware of a peculiar, disturbing dream he had had; so he lay there, his eyes half-closed, his mind still on that vague borderline.

Then, as his faculties finally adjusted, he opened his eyes wide and suddenly . . . and stared straight into a pair of large, lidless orbs hardly two inches from his own. . . .

For a moment he thought he was still dreaming, but at the same time knew he wasn't—for the horror behind that pair of lidless eyes was too real. The *thing* that owned those eyes lay flat on his chest and he could feel the somehow loathesome weight of it—a huge squashy mass that didn't move, but stared straight back into his own horror-stricken eyes. It was almost globular in shape, and seemed covered with a fine fur that might have been gray, but that fur was now damp, and soggy, and seemed somehow hideously—red. . . .

Then, as the whole horrible truth burst upon Randall's brain like a bombshell, he opened his mouth to scream. He didn't remember hearing any sound, but he must have screamed, for his throat was raw afterward.

*The thing was Chirp!*

Randall must have screamed that one word, "Chirp," for the thing lying so soggily on his chest tried to stir, but did so only feebly.

It was Chirp, but a Chirp so horribly bloated and distended that he was six times his normal size.

Randall felt his entire body so weak that it took a tremendous effort to twist it sideways so that the horrible thing slid off his chest. It alighted on the floor with a plop and moved sluggishly for a few steps.

Randall lifted his hand and let it fall weakly on his chest near the throat. His

skin was damp and his fingers came away red. He felt a sickening chill, and shudder after shudder shook him as everything became clear. Chirp was a vampire! Those fine silky hairs were tubular, and he had fed well for the past two nights. This third night he had fed too long. So that *was* what the herd of Screwies had been running from, after all—all those vampire Chirps blowing down from the plateau above. And no wonder Chirp had turned up his nose at the sardines! No wonder Randall had been so weak each morning! No wonder Chirp had been coming back here at nightfall, only to leave in the mornings to digest his nocturnal meals!

Hours later Randall arose, shakily, and observed the loathesome Chirp waiting by the door. Randall staggered over, opened the door, and gave the bloated thing a shove with his foot that sent it tumbling out. "And stay out!" Randall said, repressing a shudder. "To think that this is your gratitude, after Thalia saved you from those vampire-flowers; and you a vampire yourself! You were a clever devil, all right, weren't you?"

Just before closing the door he saw Chirp regain his feet, turn slowly, and look up at him with those wide eyes. And Randall could have sworn that in those eyes was a reproachful look, as though Chirp couldn't quite understand. . . .

## CHAPTER XIX

### Sacrifice

**T**HE rest of the afternoon Randall waited expectantly for Thalia's return. A couple of times he ventured out on the desert and scanned the horizon, listening for the sound of motors. But the Screwies were still gathered dangerously close, and he was still rather weak, so he didn't dare go too far from the shack.

Toward evening another of those winds came sweeping obliquely across the desert.

As it became stronger, a few of the Screwies came running past the shack and on up into the gully, seeking shelter; but most of the herd remained out there, screwing themselves grotesquely into the ground against the terrific impact of wind and sand. Apparently those vampire-Chirps were no longer near by, having passed far along the desert somewhere.

And then, just as the wind had about reached its peak, and Randall felt the walls of the shack trembling under it—he heard a faint sound of motors. Opening the door a crack, he saw a tiny rocket-plane approaching. Even as he watched, the forward motors ceased and the rocket-tubes flared, sending it forward and down against the cross-wind. It landed just within the little gully, hardly thirty yards from the shack.

Randall opened the door wide, but was sent staggering back. The wind, sweeping in, was so strong he could not have progressed far against it. He shut the door, leaving only a crack through which he observed the rocket-plane. He saw the door in it open, and a figure stepped out. Through the swirling red sand Randall could only see dimly, but he saw it wasn't Thalia. It was a man. The figure was nearly swept off its feet as the wind banged the plane door back on its hinges; but the fellow clung to it, and with difficulty climbed back into the plane.

Still Randall watched, and a minute later saw a small object hurtle from the plane door as though from a gun, and speed through the air toward him. It struck the metal wall of the shack with a *clang*, and clung there magnetically. Behind it was stretched a taut cable, connecting the shack and the plane. And now two figures—one of them Thalia—started slowly across the intervening space, pulling themselves along the cable against the buffeting wind.

And then it was that Randall saw something else, and his heart leaped in

horror. He shut the door and rushed to the narrow window in the side wall. Just around the corner of the shack, partly sheltered from the wind, one of the Screwies was lurking, waiting. It was unseen by the two out there, who came slowly along the cable with heads lowered against the swirling sand; and the magnetic plate of the cable had struck very close to that corner where the Screwie lurked. When the two reached there, the beast would leap out and dispatch them with a few slashes of the wicked, screw-shaped weapon which Randall even now could see was held ready. He had good reason to know the viciousness of these beasts; and from the window he could see the little beady eyes glittering and the thing shaking its head angrily, close to the ground.

Randall leaped to the door and shouted a warning, gesturing frantically toward the danger. But against that wind they neither heard nor saw him. He tried to move outside toward them, but the sand was blinding and sent him staggering back.

He hurried again to the window, shattered it with a blow. Snatching the atom-blast from his side, he levelled it at the Screwie a few yards beyond. But the blast was weak, the charge in the weapon almost gone, and before it could take vital effect the armored beast ambled out of range. Randall reached for the other blaster, then remembered Thalia had taken it with her.

The two must be very close now, he knew. In despair he saw the squat beast crouching, tensed. And then—Randall never knew quite how it happened, but seemingly out of nowhere a little dark shape came tumbling with the wind, to alight with a little thud against the wall only a few feet in front of the Screwie. Randall saw the huge beast back quickly away, as though in panic! And then he saw that the tiny dark shape was Chirp

—back to his normal size. Chirp seemed a little dazed by the impact, but he moved toward the Screwie as it continued backing away. Clumsily the huge beast tried to turn, but in that moment Chirp scuttled forward with amazing speed and fastened himself somewhere on the under side of it.

Instantly all was a frantic, churning mass as the Screwie tried to dislodge the thing that clung to him. But Chirp had reached a vulnerable spot, where the beast couldn't reach him with its claws, its beak, or its horny tail. For a minute the thing threshed violently; then it tried to run, but toppled over on its side, clawing frantically at its body with a scraping sound. All the while Chirp clung to it, growing larger and larger like a slowly expanding balloon.

Randall still watched, horrified. He saw the Screwie make a final, futile effort to stagger up, then fall back weakly; he saw Chirp clinging tenaciously; he saw Chirp's eyes staring up at him, and for a single moment he thought he saw that same reproachful look.

But of that Randall could never be sure. He turned quickly away, sickened. For in that moment . . . he had seen Chirp burst . . .

**R**ANDALL never liked to talk much about Chirp after that, but in days to come the memory of those two eyes was always with him, and secretly he held the belief that Chirp had made the sacrifice intelligently and deliberately. He opened the door just as the two figures staggered in. They were quite unaware of the drama that had just taken place, and of their narrow escape.

Standing there complacent and smiling was Thalia's companion. It was the man in green glasses. . . .

Almost Thalia's first words, after brushing the sand from her and looking about the room, were: "Where is Chirp?"

Randall turned away to hide the horror that must have been still apparent on his face. "Never mind, Chirp," he muttered, "I'll tell you about him later."

Minutes later the wind had died down enough for them to move back to the rocket-plane. Randall was still pale and a bit wobbly, and as he stepped out the door the man started to assist him. Randall jerked his arm away. "I can walk!" he snapped. "After chasing and crasing over half the damned solar system I guess I can make it back to N'Voshl under my own power."

Randall went first, preceeding along the cable; so behind him he didn't see the man smile at Thalia in amusement, and Thalia shake her head seriously.

## CHAPTER XX

### Mission Revealed

THEY were back at N'Voshl in a matter of hours, landing at the municipal Spaceport. Randall hurried to one of the waiting taxis, then turned to the other two who were close upon his heels.

But the man spoke first, smiling again. "To the Embassy, I presume? Well, we're coming too, you know. We belong at the finish of this."

Randall hesitated, then nodded without a word, and they climbed in. As they proceeded along the famous Canal Blvd. toward the center of the city, Randall was engulfed in a flood of emotions and speculations. So many things had happened that he had lost all count of time or days. But he thought it must be at least two weeks since that fateful day he had plunged from the *Martian Princess* in pursuit of Hogarth. Yet all that time he had clung to Felix's letter—with Thalia's help, he remembered gratefully—and now at long last he could deliver it. Surely nothing could go wrong now.

He was so confident he even removed

the rather worn envelope from his pocket again, oblivious of the presence of the other two, and stared at it in his hands, fascinated.

"It's not as important as all that," Thalia said bluntly, observing him. "And I'm just hoping you're not going to be too disappointed, that's all."

Randall hardly heard her. Arriving at the Embassy, he introduced himself to a rather startled official who looked at him a bit dubiously. Randall was still unkempt and a bit worse for wear. But he accepted the proffered letter.

Randall watched the man keenly and expectantly as he tore open the envelope. He extracted what seemed to be another sealed envelope, also a piece of paper on which seemed to be a terse message. The official read this message, looked at Randall a bit queerly, then crumpled the paper in his hand.

"This matter," he said, "has been attended to. Mr. Smith, here, brought us the news a week ago and we acted immediately. Although," he added, speaking to the man he had called Smith, "we have no report as yet. As for this letter"—he looked at the enclosed letter again—"it seems addressed to you. Dave Randall, didn't you say your name was?" He handed it to Randall.

So that was the first of the distinct surprises Randall was due to receive in the next few minutes. He turned to Smith and Thalia, disappointed and baffled. But they were looking expectantly at the unopened letter in his hand, and he could not guess the reason for it. But there were so many things he could not guess.

He opened the letter addressed to him. It was terse, and he saw at a glance it was from Felix Reynolds. He read it once to himself, then read it aloud: "Dave: No doubt Smith, and Miss Bowen too, will be at hand when you open this; they will explain everything better than I can here."

That was all.

Randall looked up at them both again. "Well," he said grimly, "either one of you may begin. Something tells me this will be a long story, but I have lots of time now."

Smith was frowning. "Not a long story," he said, "but kind of difficult. Let's go someplace where we can talk."

They repaired to a little cafe in the same building, and seated themselves at a table in a far corner. Smith ordered three Martian drinks, with a stinging peculiar flavor unfamiliar to Randall. "Where would you like me to begin?" Smith said.

"The obvious place," Randall answered, "would be at the beginning. But right now I'd like to know about this *matter* that has already been attended to. After all, I was to deliver Felix's letter, and now I find that you brought the same news here a week ago. From the way he talked I thought the fate of a world was in the balance, or at the very least a Martian revolution in the making. I'll settle for nothing less than that." Randall was almost jovial again, but Smith was suddenly very serious.

"THE FATE of a world," he repeated Randall's words. "Yes, it might easily have been that—and might still be. We won't know until we get the report. I suppose you know that an expedition went out to Jupiter some months ago? They landed on Callisto, the fourth satellite. Well, one of the first helios we got from them—Earth is always in a better position for these messages than Mars—told of a peculiar kind of *spore* they had encountered, which seemed almost magnetically attracted to metal of any kind. From the meagre report we got, the things seemed to work very slowly and insidiously. They had wrecked one of the spacers near the edge of a desert, and they left it there and proceeded some miles away. They had noticed a dozen or

so sponge-like shapes that drifted in from the desert and fastened to the wrecked spacer; but nothing happened, so they paid no attention. About a week later some men went back to the wrecked spacer to remove some supplies. As they approached everything seemed all right, but the minute they touched the spacer it crumbled into a metallic dust. They hastily moved their entire base of operations farther away from that desert and the drifting shapes. Apparently they weren't bothered again, for their next few helios didn't mention the spores.

"That is, not until their last one, received a few weeks ago. That message was frantic. One of the ships, with a small crew, had headed back for Mars loaded with rich specimens of the expedition's findings. As it left Callisto, it passed over an extreme edge of that desert. And the watchers had seen some of those sponge-shapes, apparently containing minute metal-attacking spores, float swiftly upward as though attracted magnetically, and attach themselves to the ship. It sped on into space, heading Mars-ward, the crew unaware of what had happened."

Smith paused a moment as though to allow the significance of this to sink in.

He continued: "You can see what it would mean if those spores were ever brought into the atmosphere of Mars; and it would be even worse if they were inadvertently transmitted to Earth. Of course it might seem that the Spacer would crumble or shake apart before it got here, but the men at Callisto, via the helio, seemed plenty worried; the stuff worked so slowly, said the message, that the ship might easily reach Mars intact.

"So, Randall, that was the message I brought here. It was apparent that the only thing to do was send a couple of the fastest Patrol ships out to meet that incoming Spacer, and to turn it back, or to blast it if necessary, even if it meant sacrificing the lives of the crew. That has

been done, and we're awaiting developments. The Patrol ought to have encountered it just this side or the other side of the asteroids."

Randall was nodding, but puzzledly. "Yes, that's clear enough. That was the message you brought. But—in just what capacity are you connected with this? And furthermore, why was *I* entrusted with this message too?"

Smith looked down into his glass. "Yes, I forgot you didn't know. As to my capacity—I'm with the Tri-Planet Patrol. Earth duty at present. But when that helio came through they sent me to Mars with the news, because I had been out here before. As to your other question—why *you* were sent—" Smith stopped, and a frown replaced his smile. "Well, you can either blame or thank Felix Reynolds for that. It's an entirely different story, Randall, and much more difficult to explain. And yet it's so simple, after all, when you know the answers. . . ."

"Well," Randall said impatiently, "you seem to know them all, so let's have it; you've been pretty expert at explaining so far!"

SMITH was looking grave and a little doubtful and plainly was trying to think of the exact words to say. Finally he spoke: "I think the best way would be to tell you very bluntly that the whole trip to Mars, insofar as you were concerned, was a hoax. But it got sidetracked when you went chasing off after pirates—"

Randall started to say something in protest, but Smith went on quickly: "For you to understand how it began, I'd better tell you, first, that Felix Reynolds is a very good friend of mine. Second, he seems to like *you* immensely, and even more important, he has an amazing faith in you. Did you know that for the past year he's been trying to get you into the Patrol? Well, he has—through me, most-

ly—and as a consequence I've heard a lot about you, Randall. Felix has a habit of pointing out to me your very excellent standing at the Spacer School. But the Patrol means more than Spacer School training, Randall; usually it means graduating through the Commercial Space-Lanes.

"Well, anyway, when Felix learned that I had to leave post-haste for Mars, he insisted that you go along; you needed a change or a vacation or something. Searching for an excuse for sending you, he suggested that you carry this message. Of course that was out of the question, for the matter was official, and critical, besides being secret; not very many people, even yet, know that there has been a Jupiter expedition. So I didn't like Felix's suggestion, and naturally he didn't like me not liking it. As I said, he has the utmost confidence in you.

"Well, I still don't know quite how it happened; but before I knew it we were outlining this entire hoax, password, mysterious letter, and all. I'm sure Felix suggested it, not I—but I realized it was only because of his enthusiasm to put you to the test for my benefit. The whole idea seemed ridiculous to me at first, but I finally agreed, more to humor him than anything, I guess. I knew that Miss Bowen was making the trip too—in the interests of Tri-Planet Mining—so the three of us devised the whole thing right there in Felix's office, the day before he entrusted his letter to you."

Randall was shaking his head a bit sadly, but still puzzledly. "You mean you and Thalia were only putting on an act for me?"

"Strictly speaking, Randall, you were the main actor. You were under secret test, on Felix's insistence, and for my observance. In view of what has happened since, I'd say that you passed it all right. Yes, with considerable margin." Smith chuckled.

"But I still can't figure some things out. At the Chicago Spaceport that first night—the man who took the blast at me—"

"That was all part of it. No one took a blast at you. I merely devised that as an approach, because I wanted to study you. I didn't think much of the whole idea at first, but when I saw your attitude on that occasion—your suspicion of me, and the way you watched me—I began enjoying it."

Randall shook his head dazedly. "Is there anything else? If so, spill it now or forever hold your peace. Nothing can surprise me any more."

**A**T THAT moment a messenger came to the table and handed Smith a dispatch. He read it, and looked up. "News just came in," he said gravely. "The two Patrol ships stopped that Callisto freighter, all right. Just this side of the asteroids. When the freighter applied its forward rockets to brake, the entire ship just seemed to crumble apart. The crew didn't even have time to get to their space-suits, it was so sudden."

"That's too bad," Randall said. "But if those spores can subsist in space, as they seem to, isn't it possible they're still drifting out there?"

"Yes, it's possible," Smith said. "That might be a future danger spot, all right, but the main thing is we stopped them from being loosed here. But do you know what seems most significant to me in this whole business? The fact that all three of us were carrying this news to N'Voshl and only one of us got here in time. Of course that damned pirate, Hogarth, didn't enter into our calculations at all. Who would have thought he'd stop a fast liner like the *Martian Princess*? It only shows the menace he and others like him are going to become in the System. And again, who would have thought that

you would pull the foolish stunt you did, Randall. Solo pirate-chasing."

Randall started to protest, a bit heatedly, but Smith stopped him with a gesture and a smile. "Oh, everything's well that ends well, and I realize you had good reason for it," he looked brightly and significantly at Thalia. "And I must admit, you've probably learned more about Hogarth than the entire Patrol has been able to learn in the past year. Off-hand I'd say you're a cinch for the Patrol if you want the job, and I think you do."

Randall grinned, suddenly remembering something. "You're right, I do. I think I'll like it lots better than the offer Hogarth made me."

"I'm sure of it."

Suddenly Randall remembered something else, and jumped to his feet. "Damn," he said. "Maybe it's this crazy liquor, but I almost forgot the most important thing of all. Back there on the plateau, about 800 miles from here. The new spacer. I know the Patrol's going to be interested in *that*. But I want you to see it first, Smith."

"All right, Randall, I will. But it'll wait 'til tomorrow, won't it?"

Randall sat down a bit sheepishly, and looked across at Thalia who was toying with her glass. She glanced up at him. "Is that really the most important thing, Dave?"

He looked at her a minute, not understanding.

Smith chuckled, and said, "I think, Randall, she's waiting for you to ask her to marry you."

"Oh, I—I was going to," he stammered. "Eventually. Well—will you?"

"Yes," she said.

Randall looked down into his nearly empty glass. "Say, I'm beginning to like this stuff after all. I thought I heard her say yes!" He slid the glass over to Smith. "Here. More!"

THE END

# SMUGGLERS OF THE MOON

You wouldn't expect to find Sun-stones on the Moon, but once you did you'd know what else you would find — Trouble!

By P. SCHUYLER MILLER

“**D**OCTOR Douglas West, eh? Harrumph!”

The steel grey eyes bored into him from under their shaggy brows. Doug West grinned back. That grin had pulled him out of some pretty tight places in the past few years, in the mountains of Tibet and up the Amazon. He didn't know why he had to come directly to the head of International Minerals for his permit, but he wasn't going to let Old Man Jorgensen's reputation as a man-eater faze him.

“Livin' on the Moon's no picnic for college boys, y'know,” the gruff voice growled. “No air up there—no water—nothing but bone-bare rock, day in and day out, cooped up in a stinkin' little air-shack or waddlin' around in a suit with a pin-prick between you and Eternity. Stand in the sun long enough and your brains fry; step into the shade and you freeze your gizzard. There's just fifteen men livin' on the Moon this minute—blasted fools all of 'em—but there's thirty-two more lyin' somewhere in that mess of deserts and shark-tooth mountains that no one's ever found, and likely no one ever will. Explorers they call themselves—pioneers—lookin' for the gold in the rainbow—and now you want to join 'em! Well—think you can take it?”

Doug's grin broadened. “Then I'm going, sir? You'll grant my permit?”

“Going? Johnny Palfrey picked you, didn't he? Went to school with him. Trust him with my watch. Not that that'd matter if you didn't have the stuff! Look you up—look up every blamed fool who wants

to be turned loose on that livin' tombstone. Tibet—Brazil—know all about 'em. The permit's been on my desk a week—here, take it. Now then—think you could take on a job for Minerals, on the side?”

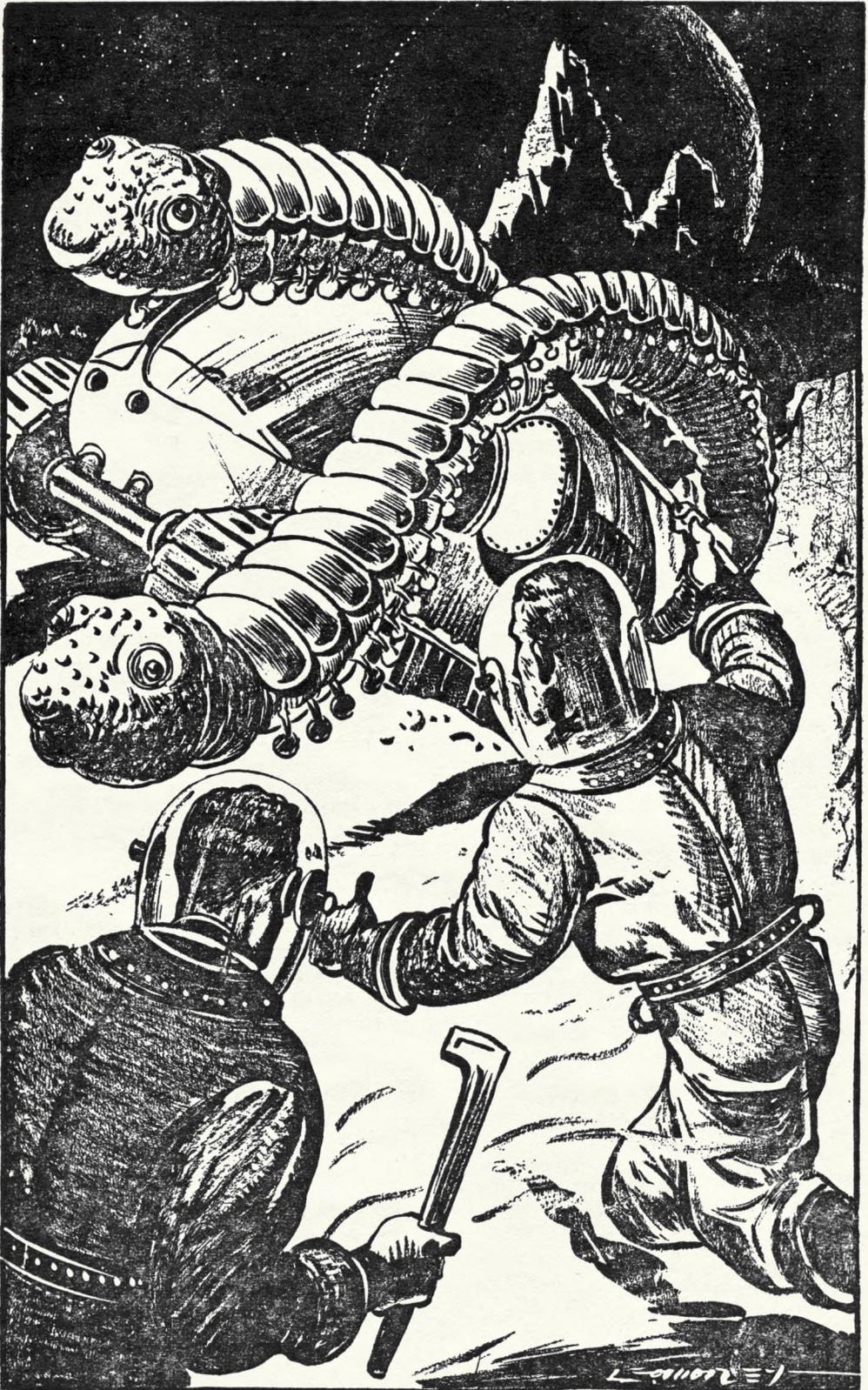
Douglas West's grin vanished. He'd be the University's sole representative on upward of four billion square miles of unexplored desolation. He was going to the Moon because Professor Palfrey and the Trustees of the University had picked him for the job, and trusted him to complete it.

“I'm sorry,” he replied. “I'm afraid I'll have my hands full making sense out of lunar geology. That's my job, and I guess I'd better stick to it.”

The Old Man snorted. “Young fool! Think I'm tryin' to bribe you? Think I care a whim-wham for your blasted rocks? I'm payin' for this little jaunt of yours, young-feller-me-lad—every stick, stone, and air-bottle of it! Or Minerals is, and I'm Minerals! Maybe we'll cash in on it and maybe we won't. Johnny Palfrey sold me the idea, and you with it. I asked him to do me a favor, and he said at was up to you. Call him up—there's the phone. Check up on me. Then forget this blinkin' nonsense about no time and give me an answer!”

Doug flushed. “Thank you, sir,” he said. “I'll take your word for it. But first—what is the job? I'm not going to tackle anything I don't think I can do.”

“Sensible answer!” The Old Man's massive head bobbed approval. “This is in confidence, mind you. Company secret—ours and yours. Think you can keep it? Well then!” He dug into a vest pocket



and spilled something out on the desk—an oval ball of changing crimson fire, streaked with smoky black and spangled with flecks of gold. Doug leaned forward, the Old Man's keen eyes watching him.

"Don't grow things like that in your bloomin' jungle!" Jorgensen exulted. "Don't grow 'em anywhere—except the Moon. That sun-stone wasn't registered. Don't exist, legally—and there's hundreds like it turnin' up every day—Paris, London—everywhere. We're bein' robbed—wholesale—and we can't stop it! There's corners in a rocket where you could hide an elephant. Nonsense huntin' for a bucket or two of stones in a place like that! Any man in the ground crew could have 'em off the ship ten minutes after it lands. There's just one place to catch it—where it starts—and that, my cocky young Doctor of Science, is your job if you'll take it."

The steely eyes never left his face. They read his hesitation. "We can't do it ourselves," the Old Man growled. "Brady's a good man—you'll meet him in a minute—but every mucker on the Moon knows him. You're new, a crazy professor breakin' up rocks, still a bit downy under the chin. They'll laugh at you, and while they're laughin' you keep your blinkers open. Don't neglect this science stuff; that what you're paid for and by blazes you'll hear from if Johnny Palfrey ain't satisfied when you're done! Only—keep your eyes peeled, and let me know what you see. There it is. What about it?"

Doug's hand gripped the gnarled one. "It's a go," he said.

**D**OUGLAS WEST prided himself on his ability to get along with old-timers, but Mike Brady was a tough proposition. In the fifteen hours that they had been cooped up together in the eight-foot cubby of the moon-rocket, he hadn't volunteered more than a dozen words.

Now, screwing down the quartz helmet of his air-suit, Doug studied the man's broad back. He was a giant in a trade that demanded giants. All through the voyage from Earth his blunt fingers had never faltered on the controls, his seamed, weather-beaten face had never changed expression. The huge ship had settled into the landing cradle at Archimedes without a jar. Mike Brady knew rockets—and he knew the Moon.

It was twelve years since the day Brady strode into the sanctum sanctorum of International Minerals and thrust a handful of shining pebbles under Old Man Jorgensen's outraged nose. Today every gem that was found on the Moon came to Minerals, to be registered and sold, and the mucker who brought it in had to be content with his cut of the price. Mike Brady was the man they came to—the man responsible for every sun-stone and lunar emerald that was brought to Earth—and it looked as though he were slipping up on the job. Doug wondered whether that accounted for his apparent hostility.

Crawling out through the entry-port, he stood a moment on the cradle platform, looking around him. Against the hard black sky towered the mile-high inner ramparts of the great ring-plain Archimedes. Here in their shadow there was freezing blackness more unfathomable than anything Doug had ever imagined. Only the steely white glitter of thousands upon thousands of unwinking stars, and the pale light of the great half-Earth that swam like a mottled silver ball above them lighted the barren plain.

Brady's mittened hand touched his arm. Fifty miles away the giant crater's western wall was touched with light—a blinding rind of white hung in inky blackness. But there at the base of the eastern cliffs a speck of light stood out among the shadows. Brady was already moving toward it.

In the heavy suits they moved slowly. Here on the Moon gravitation pulled with only a sixth of the force it exerted on Earth, but the inertia of the space-armor was as great as ever. At last Doug spied the dome of the air-hut, glimmering faintly in the Earth-light, dwarfed by the towering cliffs behind it. It was the biggest building on the Moon, Brady's headquarters as factor for International Minerals and the port of exit and entry for every rocket passing between the satellite and the mother planet. Even so, it looked woefully inadequate—a thin bubble of steel defying the pitiless hostility of this grim world.

Brady opened the hut's airlock and Doug crowded in beside him. The outer port spun shut, there was a hiss of entering air, and then a flood of light blinded him as the inner door opened.

**A** RED-BEARDED dwarf stood in the doorway, his shoulders as broad as Brady's, his thick legs bowed, his arms ape-like in their length. He greeted the factor hilariously, thumping his back with a beefy fist as he helped him out of his suit.

Brady jerked a thumb over his shoulder at Doug.

"Meet the Professor, Bill," he growled. "He's up here for the Old Man, diggin' up rocks an' stuff. Figures he can tell you muckers where to dig."

The man's gaffaw echoed in the steel-walled hut. Finding moon-gems was pretty much a hit-or-miss proposition. There was intense rivalry and no little lawlessness among the individual miners, and not even Brady knew exactly where their claims were located.

The dwarf thrust out a hairy hand. "I'm Bill 'Heber," he announced loudly. "Best mucker on the Moon! There's the proof of it!"

A pile of little canvas sacks was on the room's one table. One of them spilled

its contents across the greasy wood. Under the naked light of the fluorotubes the table seemed to burn with many-colored fire. Green of emeralds. Blazing blue of sapphires. And the dazzling, coruscating hues of stones that belonged to the Moon alone—star-eyes, moon-opals, and the rest.

Fascinated, Doug stared at the glittering heap. Heber ripped open another bag and another—poured the fiery gravel through his calloused fingers in a scintillating stream. He picked up a lunar ruby, a walnut-sized gem of the peculiar deep red that brought banner prices back on Earth.

"This'll bring me four figures in the Old Man's scrip," he boasted. "Whyn't you let the Professor help me mark 'em up, Mike? He'd ought to know about it if he's goin' to do any diggin'."

"I'm not after gems," Doug reassured him, "though I suppose I'd be foolish to pass one up if I found it. There's a geological reason why these stones are where you find them, and when we professors have figured out what's happened to the rocks up here we should be able to save you a lot of time and trouble. That's what I'm here for, not mining." He stirred the sparkling heap with his finger. "You must have a very rich claim," he said. "Do you get any sun-stones?"

Heber spat glumly. "Does it rain diamonds? Sure I get 'em—every mucker does once in a while when he can find a porky—but I'm not gettin' rich on 'em like King does!" He rubbed his nose hopefully. "I hear he ain't been turnin' in quite so many lately, Mike. How about it?"

"King? Is that the man I'm staying with?"

The factor nodded. He seemed less sullen than before. "Yeah," he admitted, "that was the idea. He's another of these college guys, an' I reckon the Old Man

figured you'd ought to get along together. But I been thinkin'—how'd you like to put in with Bill, here? He's got a claim up by Eratosthenes that ought to give you some mighty interestin' geology, an' he knows the Moon as good as I do. He won't be back here for close to three months, dependin' on his luck, but there's plenty of air an' water for the both of you, an' if I buzz the Old Man I'll guarantee he'll okay the extra time."

Doug shook his head. "Thanks," he said, "I'd like to, but in this business you have to stick to your plans. I have maps of the section around Mount Bradley, scaled and annotated by the experts back home, and that's where I'll have to work."

**T**EN days later Doug was wondering if he'd been right. Shuffling along the base of a rocky dyke that angled up the slope of an isolated peak, pecking distractedly at it with his hammer, he looked back to that first day when Heber had dropped him at the door of the little hut that would be his home for the next six weeks. King had been out; he returned to find Doug sitting on the heap of supplies he had brought with him, staring dubiously at a thing like a huge orange sea-urchin that was clinging like grim death to the only chair.

Philip King was in his thirties, lean and dark, with a neatly trimmed Van Dyke beard. No one on the Moon wasted water on shaving. Doug helped him stow the cases of food and extra flasks of oxygen in the shallow cave he had cut in the cliff behind his hut. As they were returning, King stopped suddenly.

"How'd you like a lime-rickey" he demanded. "A long cold one—with real ice?" Without waiting for an answer he disappeared around the side of the shack. Following, Doug saw that the rock was covered with large, liver-colored patches like leathery leaves, with a fist-sized ball

of greyish fibers in the center of each whorl. "Tweep weeds," King volunteered. "Every mucker keeps a patch of them growing outside his waste-valve. Come on in—I'll show you."

Horace the sun-urchin, the vivid orange pin-cushion that had contested Doug's claim to the chair, was forcibly removed and affixed to the wall. His mass of prismatic spines surrounded a body of cavity which secreted, layer on layer like a pearl, the priceless sun-stones of lunar commerce. Light-absorbing organs in those jeweled spines, plus the ability to assimilate solid rock, kept Horace and his kind well-fed and happy. It might take years for a perfect stone to form, but its deep, opalescent orange color, blazing with inner fires of red and blue and violet, made it the most popular of the lunar gems.

King laid the tweep weeds on the table and brought glasses and the crystals of lime-essence that every miner used as protection against scurvy. He half-filled each glass with water from his tank, and picked up one of the weeds. Shucking back the fibrous outer husk he revealed a slate-grey cube about two inches across. He pressed on its base, and immediately the hut was filled with a plaintive chirping. Doug saw a cluster of tiny root-like tendrils on the bottom of the leaves scrabbling feebly.

"They don't like to give," King observed. "That's how they got their name—that noise they make. It shows there was air here once. Animals don't evolve noise-making organs unless they can be heard, and it takes air to carry sound."

The shell had sprung open along dove-tailed joints. Its inside was dotted with fleshy bodies like tiny brown sponges, and in the center was a shining crystal cube. Ice—on the waterless Moon!

"**Y**OU'RE seeing straight," King assured him. "There's a little water up here, chemically combined in minerals,

or seepage from the interior. These tweept weeds have to keep their spore cells moist, so they sop it up and hold it in the form of ice. They're practically hermetically sealed unless you know the place to pinch them. We always look for a patch when we locate a claim, and build the shack where they can soak up any water that's getting out through the exhaust from the airlock. Funny Brady didn't show them to you—he's got about the biggest patch on the Moon back at the station. They're shipping them back home to the biologists—and at a pretty price, you can bet!"

Doug had left Earth near the beginning of the lunar day. He would have two weeks of light for intensive study in the Appenines before the two-week night set in. Then he was to follow the sun around to the other side of the Moon, to map and explore its almost unknown formations, perpetually hidden from the Earth. Returning with the sun, he had another two-week "day" before his permit expired. Little enough time for a geological survey of an entire world, but breathing bottled air and living on food and water that had to be rocketed up nearly a quarter of a million miles against the pull of Earth's mass was a costly affair. Muckers on the Moon paid their own way in dividends to International Minerals or they didn't stay there long.

South of King's hut rose the sheer wall of the lunar Appenines, whose ragged chain curved for hundred of miles across the face of the little world. Thirteen thousand feet above, a snow-white pyramid against the jet-black heavens, towered the summit of Mount Bradley, and between lay the tumbled hinterland in which King's claim was hidden.

Doug shivered. It was awe-inspiring, but it was terrible. A plugged valve—the tick of a pin-head meteor—a rip from a sharp rock-edge and he was done for. Out there beyond the mouth of King's valley, beyond the maze of clefts and

ridges that guarded it, lay the vast greyish brown expanse of the Mare Imbrium—"sea" of dead, unending dust. Out there, perhaps, was the answer to the question Jorgensen had set him, the question of the smuggled gems. Or was it a question?

He thought not. That conviction had brought him out here, hidden in the rocks of the mountainside while he watched the opposite slopes for signs of life. For unless he was greatly mistaken, King was the smuggler—and the Old Man knew it.

Everything fitted perfectly. Any of the widely scattered miners had plenty of opportunities to hide unregistered gems in the rocket. For days it stood empty in the shadow of Archimedes' walls. And anyone who happened to be in the station at the time of a take-off was expected to lend a hand with the loading. If there was any clue there Mike Brady was the man to uncover it.

But suppose he had uncovered it. Suppose he knew who the smuggler was, but couldn't prove it. Why else had Old Man Jorgensen picked Mount Bradley for his study and farmed him out here with King, one man out of the entire group of suspects? Heber, or any of the older men could have showed him more about the Moon, and Heber had been eager to do so where King had become morose and secretive, almost hostile at times. Most conclusive of all, King was the one man who seemed able to bring in sun-stones in quantities—and sun-stones made up the bulk of the smuggled gems.

**T**HE first few days had been pleasant ones. King had seemed glad to show him the ropes. There were tricks to living in a perpetual vacuum—ways of breathing that would conserve your air—tricks of judging distance on a world where the horizon was only half as far away as on Earth, and where the absolute

transparency of the void made distant objects loom fantastically sharp and clear. He learned to tell time by the changing markings of the great mottled globe that hung above him—the Earth. He learned the trick of walking where an invisible medium seemed to buoy you up, and you overshot every jump ridiculously.

They had talked far into the arbitrary “sleeps” as the miners called the arbitrary rest-periods which broke up the two-week lunar day. Doug was able to contribute some hair-raising experiences from his own career as an explorer, alone and with his father, and King was full of the yarns which were growing up about the Moon: legends of fabulously rich “lost” mines; of ancient cities built by an unknown race; of weird monsters of the airless deserts. Doug found especially fascinating his accounts of the strange creatures which inhabited this supposedly lifeless satellite. Silicon took the place of carbon in their body-chemistry, and they took much of their energy directly from the sunlight during the long days and lay dormant during the dark periods. The first explorers had given them names as queer as the creatures themselves: tweep weeds, air storks, sun urchins, penny plants, scollopers, and the like.

Then King withdrew into himself. He was still civil enough, but he slept or read instead of talking, while Doug pored over his notes and photographs. Little by little Doug’s suspicions had begun to take form, and now the show-down was coming.

Less than a mile from where he stood King’s sand-sled was hidden behind a huge block that had slid off from the cliff. Doug had spotted its tracks in a dust patch and followed them. A shallow ravine opened on a terraced slope dotted with small crater pits, running up in a series of terraces to the northern slope of Mount Bradley.

A flicker of motion on the slope

brought him to his knees under the dyke. It might be one of the not uncommon landslips, or a splash of dust where some meteor had plowed into the Moon’s unprotected surface, or it might be King. He caught it again, nearly two miles away, at the base of a peculiar lop-sided crater whose walls were riddled with clefts. It *was* King. The miner was picking his way rapidly down a path which he evidently knew well. It would be a good half hour before he reached the sled, and Doug thought he could reach the crater by a roundabout path and be back at the shack before King had time to grow suspicious.

He moved carefully until he was out of sight, then put on all the speed he could manage. By stepping up his oxygen consumption he could put more energy into the leaps with which he went scaling down the mountainside, floating down as gently as though he were riding a parachute. By the time he had reached the open slope King had disappeared. Doug soon found the scratches which the miner’s boots had made in the soft stone. They led to the crater he had noticed. One of the rifts in its wall was floored with a flow of sand, and King’s tracks led into it. Following them, Doug found himself on a narrow bench a hundred feet above the crater floor.

**T**HE mile-wide bowl was ablaze with color. The shadow of the western wall lay in a jagged curve across its floor, but the sunlit portion was crowded with porkys—sun urchins—giants of their kind. Some of the monsters measured a good six feet across their bristling balls of shining quills. There were colors which Doug was sure had never been recorded—shades of scarlet and pale lemon-yellow, deep orange veined with blue and velvety black—and he knew that the stones which the odd creatures secreted would be of the same exquisite hues.

Something made him turn. As he did a savage blow caught him on the shoulder and sent him to his knees.

It was King. Before the miner could strike again Doug was on his feet, slugging at his midriff. The blows sank into the inflated suit as if it were a pillow. Desperately Doug grabbed at the man's wrist, just as his legs were kicked from under him.

He went down on his back, pulling King violently over his head. There was a grating under his back and a moment later a section of the terrace broke away, catapulting the struggling pair into the crater.

The momentum of King's lunge had carried both men over the falling block. Still clinging together they crashed into a lower ledge, rebounded like giant rubber balls, and spun dizzily outward. The fall seemed to last an eternity. Then King struck, headfirst, with Doug on top of him, and a moment later the front of the landslide plowed into them.

On Earth they would probably have been crushed like eggs. Here the momentum of the falling rock counted for more than its weight, and both men were flung clear. Weakly Doug staggered to his feet. King lay crumpled on his face. There was an ugly bruise on his temple, and a trickle of blood oozed from between his lips.

The miner might be out for a while, but Doug was sure he was in no danger. On the other hand, he himself was in no condition to play jailer. The Moon lacked the Heaviside layer of ionized atmospheric gases which made long distance radio possible on Earth. A powerful transmitter could communicate with the mother planet, but as far as Brady and the Archimedes post were concerned, Doug was completely cut off.

He could see only one answer. It was a little over a hundred miles to Archimedes, but the sand-sled with its broad

caterpillar treads could cover it in less than three hours. They should be well on their way before King came to. And once the station was reached, Mike Brady would have his proof and Doug could wash his hands of the whole infernal mess.

Packing the unconscious miner to the sled was no easy job, but Doug made the two miles in record time. There were extra oxygen flasks and thin, stout rope with which he lashed the uneasily stirring King to his seat. There were no maps in the sled, but Doug thought he remembered enough of the way to make the trip back. By following the general course of the great cracks which ran off to the northwest he should be able to keep straight until he sighted the mile-high walls of the great crater. With Brady's aerial in sight his radio would have them on the lookout for him.

It looked easy. He had forgotten the maze of criss-cross crevasses and myriads of tiny craterlets which studded this part of the Mare Imbrium. Doug found himself in darkness, penned in between parallel ranges whose shadows, flung far out over the level floor as the lunar day neared its close, filled the valley with utter night. A chain of sunlit peaks off to the right was his only guide, with the wan light of the Earth to warn him of dangers in the road.

**A** GREAT rift, nearly a mile wide, cut across King's valley halfway to the sentinel peaks at its mouth. By zigzagging back and forth Doug at last found Heber's trail, marked indelibly in the never changing dust of the Moon's surface, and from that point on his heart beat more easily as the sled roared northward. King sat hunched in his seat, silently staring out through the quartz dome. Doug made sure that the man's air supply would last and left him to his thoughts. He had worries enough of his

own, following the winding track through a tangle of bottomless clefts any one of which could swallow them.

At last he sighted the little, isolated crater which marked the halfway point. Any moment now the beacon light on Brady's aerial mast should appear over the horizon. The road swung off to the east toward a buried crater wall and an anvil shaped plateau, where the dust was not so deep.

One moment the dusty plain lay bare before them; the next Doug stared up at a scalloped crimson banner that swayed over the sled. It swooped down and he glimpsed a steel-grey head studded with shining black dots before the dust worm struck.

It was huge—a good thirty feet long and eight feet across its armored back. Rings of scarlet tendrils trailed from its satiny underparts. As it settled on the quartz dome of the sled, they spread over it, clinging to the smooth surface, sucking the creature's body close against it. Almost at once Doug saw the clear quartz misting, dulling, etched by the powerful chemicals of the thing's digestive glands.

"West!" King was struggling frantically with his bonds. "Let me out of here! We've got to kill it—quick—before it breaks through!"

Doug wrenched mightily at the knots; they gave a little and King pulled his hands out and began to search in the sled's tool kit for something he could use as a weapon. There was a bundle of pointed rock drills on the floor beside the driver's seat. Snatching up the longest Doug slid out through the door on his side. He went into the dust up to his knees. Pulling himself up on the side of the sled he struck with all his might at the monster's back.

The drill glanced off and the force of his blow sent him rolling on his back. Panting, he struggled to his feet.

Before he could run the creature was

on him. He saw the velvety crimson underside, the lacy tendrils, and then it had him. Powerful muscles clamped the thing's flat body around him. Fringed suction cups plastered themselves against his helmet. He went down on his knees, struggling in the crushing grip.

"Doug!" King's voice rang in his ear-phones. Leaping down into the dust the miner dug his gloved fingers under the edges of the dust worm's armor and pulled. Reluctantly the thing gave way, squirming around to strike viciously at its assailant. King was ready. Snatching a long steel bar from his belt he drove it up into the soft crimson underbody that arched over him, deep into the veined patch of darker color near the center of the first segment. There was a tingling electrical discharge and the scolloper went limp.

Awkwardly they faced each other across its body. King gave a grating laugh.

"Don't let it worry you," he sneered. "I'll come quietly. Old Jorgensen's private Sherlock Holmes won't spoil his record over me."

They made the rest of the trip in silence. Doug's mind was in too much of a turmoil to think of the radio. King had saved his life, and risked his own doing it, but he must play the dutiful hero and turn the miner in.

An hour later they had made their way over the pass in Archimedes' walls and left the sled outside the steel dome of the station. As he opened the inner door of the airlock Doug's eyes went in astonishment to the man who was sitting at the table. Heber was supposed to be hundreds of miles away, up near Eratosthenes, at the western end of the Appenines.

The microphone in his suit picked up a plaintive chirping. There were half a dozen tweek weeds on the table in front of Heber, and more in a crate beside him, stirring uneasily and giving off their shrill

complaint. Then he saw the leather sack in the mucker's hand, and the stain of water on the table top.

He pushed King into the room ahead of him. "Where's Brady?" he demanded.

Heber stared at him for a moment before answering. "Outside," he said finally. "Fuelin' up. He's makin' the trip down in a couple of hours. You goin' back?"

Doug lifted off his helmet. The quartz was badly etched. "We had a close call," he said. "Scollopers. King here saved my life. I could use a drink if you've got the ice handy."

Casually he picked up one of the squirming little weeds. The insulating fibers were ruffled; evidently it had just been opened, yet it was not chirping. He poked his thumbs into the spots King had showed him; the grey cube popped open. He looked up, startled, into Heber's burning eyes.

Nestling in the hollow of the weed was a pale emerald twice the size of any he had seen.

"I wouldn't do that."

King's voice was hard. He had a gun and seemed to be pointing it straight at Doug's head. Fool that he was—he might have known the miner would have some weapon inside his suit! Then something clanged on the floor behind him. Big Mike Brady stepped slowly past him, hands high, his bearded face ugly.

"Pick his gun up, Doug, and then look 'em both over. Tough nuts like them usually carry a little extra hardware—and the Brady brothers are as tough as they come. Aren't you, Bill?"

The quiet mockery of King's voice stung him. Flushing, he searched both men and laid a gun and two evil looking knives on the table well out of the red-headed dwarf's reach. "Who is this man?" he asked bewilderedly. "I thought he was Heber."

KING smiled—the old smile that he'd had the first day Doug met him.

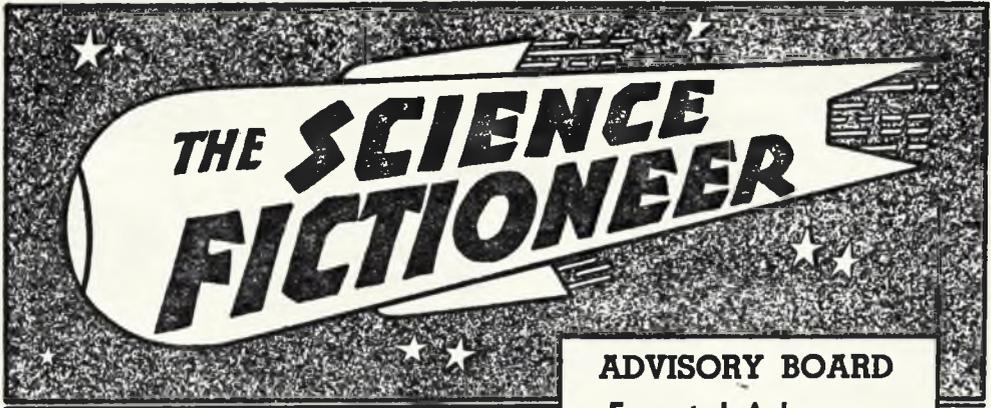
"That's what I wondered when you began talking with him," he said. "I thought maybe you were in with them. You see, I found Heber—where Bill here had left him after he sliced a hole in his air-suit. Bill is Mike's little brother, and he was Heber's partner until Heber's claim grew too rich to be split."

He picked up one of the fluttering little weeds. "Smart trick you had there, Mike," he admitted. "I knew you were on to my little experiment in growing my own sun stones, because I recognized the special tread of Bill's sled the last time some of my stones turned up missing from the farm. I saw one of those smuggled stones last time I was on Earth, and they were mine all right. They're like culture pearls; if you know the trick you can spot the nucleus I put in for the porkys to build on.

"Doug was the one who had me guessing. When he seemed so chummy with you I thought he might be one of the gang. We had us a little misunderstanding over that."

He fumbled with the tweep weed and a huge scarlet sunstone rolled out into his palm. It was covered with a thin, glistening film of ice. "That's one of mine, too," he observed. "There's a trick to getting that color, and I happen to be the lad that knows it. Now the cat's out of the bag, I think I'll stop in and dicker with the Old Man. After I present him with this pair he ought to be glad to listen to reason. Coming, Doug?"

Doug shook his head. "I guess not. I'll have to talk with Jorgensen first, if the radio's working, but I sort of like it here. Maybe I could take over Mike's job until you get back, and then we could look around a bit together. It'll be day on the other side of the Moon any time now, and I'd sort of like to see what's there."



**Official Organ of  
The Science Fictioneers**

**T**WO new branches of *The Science Fictioneers* have been chartered this month, bringing the total up to nineteen. One more to make it an even score!

The first of this month's new groups is *The Scranton Fantasy Society*, Branch Number Enghteen of *The Science Fictioneers*. Ray J. Sienkiewicz—better known to science fiction fans as “Rajocz”—is the Director of the Society. He asks us to invite, through the pages of *The Science Fictioneer*, any “reader of science, fantasy, or weird fiction who lives in Scranton, Pennsylvania, or the vicinity, and who wishes to join with us, to communicate with either Bob Meredith at 624 Lavelle Court, Scranton, or with me at 312 East Elm Street. (Also Scranton, of course.)” The present membership of *The Scranton Fantasy Society* is three, the minimum number necessary for a charter; however, the club is confident that it will expand rapidly.

Newest of our branches is *The Alpha Centaurians*, Branch Number Nineteen of *The Science Fictioneers*. This club is our first to be established in the state of Idaho, and begins life with a membership of four persons. R. E. Montgomery, Jr., is the Director; his address is 156 South University Street, Blackfoot, Idaho.

Branch Number One—*The Los Angeles*

**ADVISORY BOARD**

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*Science Fantasy Society*—reports on its activities for the year of 1940, in a letter from Walter J. Daugherty, its director: “1940 has been, without a doubt, the most successful year that Los Angeles fandom has seen. The highlight of the year was the meeting of September 12th, at which we had as guest of honor Dr. Edward E. Smith, Ph.D. Thirty-nine fans, authors, friends, and relatives turned out to greet science fiction’s master pensmen. Among those present, beside Dr. Smith, were Robert Heinlein and wife, Charlie Hornig, Arthur K. Barnes, Leigh Brackett, R. DeWitt Miller, Jack Williamson, and Edmond Hamilton . . . . Activities during the year have been of Nova form. Luminous periods have included numerous interesting talks by foremost men from the fields of science, economics, linguistics, historic, and aeronautics. Fan

magazine production hit a new high, with no less than eleven distributed to the far corners of the fan field. All of them rolled out, under the supervision of the various editors, with the help of other Angelenos. Attendance surpassed former years by an average gain of 35%. And we are looking forward to another year of gradual momentum toward the peak of science fiction organizations."

On the same topic, Forrest J Ackerman, a member of the Advisory Board, writes us, "Los Angeles fans who would like to meet Henry Hasse, author of this issue's lead novel, should attend a meeting of *Science Fictioneers Chapter No. One*. Here, too, you can get acquainted with other authors whose works you've read here—Jack Williamson, Miss Leigh Brackett, Lyle Monroe, Elma Wentz, and Ray Bradbury—the fan who discovered Bok. For full information about our club, local interested parties may receive an explanatory pamphlet from me for a stamp." Member Ackerman's address is 236½ North New Hampshire, Hollywood, California.

### Fan Magazines

ALCHEMIST, published by Lew Martin, 1258 Race Street, Denver Colorado. Monthly; 10c. Small-sized but large in in number of pages, this comparative newcomer ranks high in its class. Its specialty is serious articles on the more important phases of fan and professional science fiction.

FANTASIA, published by Lou Goldstone, 269 Sixteenth Avenue, San Francisco, California. Quarterly; 10c. Only one issue of this publication has appeared so far, but its first number gives promise of great things to come. Its neat and attractive makeup—some of the interior illustrations being in color—is particularly likeable.

FANTASY FICTION FIELD, pub-

lished by Julius Unger, 1702 Dahill Road, Brooklyn, New York. Weekly; 5c. The fan newspapers that were so numerous a few months ago seem to be slowly vanishing; but this more recent addition is competent to take their places. One of its features is a photographic reproduction of a forthcoming professional magazine cover on its first page each issue.

FUTURIAN OBSERVER, published by William D. Veney, 10a Sully Street, Randwick, Sydney, N. S. W., Australia. Fortnightly; 20c. Contains highly informative paragraphs on Australian science fiction's progress under the double handicap of the war and the loss of the American professional magazines.

NEPENTHE, published by Earl Singleton, M. I. T. Graduate House, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Quarterly; 10c. This all-poetry periodical contains verse by some of science fiction's top-notch names, A. Merritt, Charles R. Tanner, and Stanley G. Weinbaum among them. If you like your fantasy in metrical form, this is for you.

SHANGRI-LA published by Walter J. Daugherty, 1039 West 39th Street, Los Angeles, California. Occasional; 10c. This is devoted almost exclusively to the doings of the Los Angeles science fiction

#### THE SCIENCE FICTIONEERS APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP

The Science Fictioneers  
210 East 43rd Street  
New York City.

Sirs:

I am a regular reader of science fiction and would like to join *The Science Fictioneers*. I enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope for my membership card.

Name.....

Address.....

City & State.....

Occupation..... When Born.....

club, and their activities, as depicted in this magazine, are interesting indeed.

SUN SPOTS, published by Gereaux de la Ree, Jr., 9 Bogert Place, Westwood, New Jersey. Monthly; 5c. While the format of this magazine is improving, it still has a long way to go to catch up with the splendid jobs some other fans are putting out. The contents of the book are entertaining, but the heavy concentration of fiction could stand being slimmed down considerably.

## With the Science Fictioneers

On Saturday evening, February 1st, the Philadelphia Science Fiction Society celebrated its sixth anniversary. The club was organized in January, 1935 by Science Fictioneer Advisor Milton A. Rothman and has been an important part of the fan world ever since. The PSFS, along with the Los Angeles Science-Fantasy Society, are the two oldest existing fan organizations.

Over a period of many years, the South has been very inactive in science fiction fan affairs. However, Joseph Gilbert, Fred W. Fischer, Earle Barr Hanson, and several other boys from the deep south, are intent upon putting that part of the country back on the map. The first issue of their publication, *The Southern Star*, is now available from 3911 Park Street, Columbia, S. C. The boys are going to make a bid for the 1942 World Science Fiction Convention, and if they do sponsor it, it will be called the *Dixiecon*.

Two new fan magazines which deserve patronage are *Nepenthe* and *Specula*. Earl Singleton, editor of *Nepenthe*, spares no expense or effort on his all-poetry fan magazine, and is to be congratulated on the immense 62-page issue now available. This magazine can be obtained from the MIT Grad House, Cambridge, Mass. . . . *Specula* is an all fiction magazine edited by new fan Arthur Louis Joquel, 1426 W.

38th Street, Los Angeles. Art deserves a hand for the excellently mimeographed first issue.

A few more hobbies, occupations, or what have you: Erle Korshak (Chicago) is an authority on stamps and coins. He does a bit of weight-lifting, too. . . . Mark Reinsberg is editor of a Chicago High School Magazine, while his side-kick, Richard I. Meyer, is an amateur music critic. . . . Bob (Hoy Ping Pong) Tucker is a licensed motion picture operator. . . . Alexander M. Phillips, besides being a noted author, teaches bridge to a women's club. . . . Jack Agnew (Philadelphia) is an accomplished saxophonist. At the age of ten he was a semi-professional radio musician.

Items of interest are still welcome at 333 E. Belgrade Street, Phila., Pa.

—ROBERT A. MADLE.

## New Members

Hannes Bok, 5 Great Jones Street, New York City; Robert Wise, 642 Evergreen Avenue, Youngstown, Ohio; Mario T. Corti, 31-65 29th Street, Long Island City, New York; James Bush, 1978 36th Avenue, Oakland, California; Eugene Jorgensen, 2015 Harrington Avenue, Oakland, California; John Theis, P. O. Box 110, Botkins, Ohio; Jerome E. MacDonald, 314 Smith Street, Newark, New Jersey; Jack Lynn Jones, Steamer Cadillac, River Station, Detroit, Michigan; Arthur Louis Joquel, II, 1426 West 38th Street, Los Angeles, California; and Mickey Mason, U.S.S. Mustin, No. 413, Pearl Harbor, T. H.

Carl A. Long, 356 North 3rd Street, Lebanon, Pennsylvania; Richard Post, 4227 Magoun Avenue, East Chicago, Indiana; William M. Neslon, 1316 Summit Street, Kansas City, Missouri; Robert Mastell, 2611 Sixth Avenue East, Hibbing, Minnesota; George W. Kuslan, 170 Washington Avenue, West Haven, Connecticut; Glen Broughman, 204 East George Street, Arcanum, Ohio; Kitchell Harleman, 209 West Second Street, Arcanum, Ohio; Kenneth Kress, R. R. 3, Arcanum, Ohio; Dale Hiller, 410 West High Street, Greenville, Ohio; and Walter E. Marconette, 2709 East Second Street, Dayton, Ohio.

# BEST FRIEND

Moray's people were not slaves—yet, without their Masters they could not survive!



By S. D. GOTTESMAN

MORAY smoothed his whiskers with one hand as he pressed down on the accelerator and swung easily into the top speed lane. Snapping the toggle into a constant eighty-per, he lit a meat-flavored cigarette and

replaced the small, darkly warm bar of metal in its socket. He hummed absently to himself. Nothing to do after you were in your right lane—not like flying. He turned on the radio.

“—by Yahnn Bastien Bock,” said the

voice. Moray listened; he didn't know the name.

Then there breathed into the speeding little car the sweetly chilly intervals of a flute-stop. Moray smiled. He liked a simple melody. The music ascended and descended like the fiery speck on an oscillograph field; slowed almost to stopping, and then the melody ended. Why, Moray wondered plaintively, couldn't all music be like that? Simple and clear, without confusing by-play. The melody rose again, with a running mate in the oboe register, and like a ceremonial dance of old days they intertwined and separated, the silvery flute-song and the woody nasal of the oboe. The driver of the little car grew agitated. Suddenly, with a crash, diapasons and clarions burst into the tonal minuet and circled heavily about the principals.

Moray started and snapped off the radio. Try as he would, he never could get used to the Masters' music, and he had never known one of his people who could. He stared out of the window and stroked his whiskers again, forcing his thoughts into less upsetting channels.

A staccato buzz sounded from the dashboard. Moray looked at the road-signs and swung into a lower speed-lane, and then into another. He looped around a ramp intersection and drove into a side-street, pulling up before a huge apartment dwelling.

Moray climbed out onto the strip of fuzzy pavement that extended to the lobby of the building. He had to wait a few moments for one of the elevators to discharge its burden; then he got in and pressed the button that would take him to Floor L, where lived Birch, whom he greatly wanted to marry.

The elevator door curled back and he stepped out into the foyer. He quickly glanced at himself in a long pier glass in the hall, flicked some dust from his jacket. He advanced to the door of Birch's apart-

ment and grinned into the photo-eye until her voice invited him in.

MORAY cast a glance about the room as he entered. Birch was nowhere to be seen, so he sat down patiently on a low couch and picked up a magazine. It was lying opened to a story called, "The Feline Foe."

"Fantastic," he muttered. All about an invading planetoid from interstellar space inhabited by cat-people. He felt his skin crawl at the thought, and actually growled deep in his throat. The illustrations were terrifyingly real—in natural color, printed in three-ply engravings. Each line was a tiny ridge, so that when you moved your head from side to side the figures moved and quivered, simulating life. One was of a female much like Birch, threatened by one of the felines. The caption said, "'Now,' snarled the creature, 'we shall see who will be Master!'"

Moray closed the magazine and put it aside. "Birch!" he called protestingly.

In answer she came through a sliding door and smiled at him. "Sorry I kept you waiting," she said.

"That's all right," said Moray. "I was looking at this thing." He held up the magazine.

Birch smiled again. "Well, happy birthday!" she cried. "I didn't forget. How does it feel to be thirteen years old?"

"Awful. Joints creaking, hair coming out in patches, and all." Moray was joking; he had never felt better, and thirteen was the prime of life to his race. "Birch," he said suddenly. "Since I *am* of age, and you and I have been friends for a long time—"

"Not just now, Moray," she said swiftly. "We'll miss your show. Look at the time!"

"All right," he said, leaning back and allowing her to flip on the telescreen. "But remember, Birch—I have something to say to you later." She smiled at him and

sat back into the circle of his arm as the screen commenced to flash with color.

The view was of a stage, upon which was an elaborately robed juggler. He bowed and rapidly, to a muttering accompaniment of drums, began to toss discs into the air. Then, when he had a dozen spinning and flashing in the scarlet light, two artists stepped forward and juggled spheres of a contrasting color, and then two more with conventional Indian clubs, and yet two more with open-necked bottles of fluid.

The drums rolled. "*Hup!*" shouted the master-juggler, and pandemonium broke loose upon the stage, the artists changing and interchanging, hurling a wild confusion of projectiles at each others' heads, always recovering and keeping the flashing baubles in the air. "*Hup!*" shouted the chief again, and as if by magic the projectiles returned to the hands of the jugglers. Balancing them on elbows and heads they bowed precariously, responding to the radioed yelps of applause from the invisible audience.

"They're wonderful!" exclaimed Birch, her soft eyes sparkling.

"Passably good," agreed Moray, secretly delighted that his suggested entertainment was a success from the start.

Next on the bill was a young male singer, who advanced and bowed with a flutter of soulful eyelids. His song was without words, as was usual among Moray's people. As the incredible head-tones rose without breaking, he squirmed ecstatically in his seat, remembering the real pain he had felt earlier in the night, listening to the strange, confusing music of the Masters.

Moray was in ecstasy, but there was a flaw in his ecstasy. Though he was listening with all his soul to the music, yet under the music some little insistent call for attention was coming through. Something very important, not repeated. He tried to brush it aside. . . .

Birch nudged him sharply, a little light

that you might have called horror in her eyes. "Moray, your call! Didn't you hear it?"

Moray snatched from a pocket the little receiving set his people always carried with them. Suddenly, and unmuffled this time, shrilled the attention-demanding musical note. Moray leaped up with haste. . . .

But he hesitated. He was undecided—incredibly so. "I don't want to go," he said slowly to Birch, astonishment at himself in every word.

The horror in Birch's eyes was large now. "Don't want to! Moray! It's your *Master!*"

"But it isn't—well, fair," he complained. "He couldn't have found out that I was with you tonight. Maybe he does know it. And if he had the heart to investigate he would know that—that—" Moray swallowed convulsively. "That you're more important to me than even he is!" he finished rapidly.

"Don't say that!" she cried, agitated. "It's like a crime! Moray—you'd better go."

"All right," he said sullenly, catching up his cape. And he had known all along that he would go. "You stay here and finish the show. I can get to the roof alone."

Moray stepped from the apartment into a waiting elevator and shot up to the stop of the building. "I need a fast plane," he said to an attendant. "Master's call." A speed-lined ship was immediately trundled out before him; he got in and the vessel leaped into the air.

ONE hundred thousand years of forced evolution had done strange things to the canine family. Artificial mutations, rigorous selection, all the tricks and skills of the animal breeder had created a super-dog. Moray was about four feet tall, but no dwarf to his surroundings, for all the world was built to that scale. He stood

on his hind legs, for the buried thigh-joint had been extruded by electronic surgery, and his five fingers were long and tapering, with beautifully formed claws capable of the finest artisanry.

And Moray's face was no more canine than your face is simian. All taken in all, he would have been a peculiar but not a fantastic figure could he have walked out into a city of the Twentieth Century. He might easily have been taken for nothing stranger than a dwarf.

Indeed, the hundred thousand years had done more to the Masters than to their dogs. As had been anticipated, the brain had grown and the body shrunk, and there had been a strong tendency toward increased myopia and shrinkage of the distance between the eyes. Of the thousands of sports born to the Masters who had volunteered for genetic experimentation, an indicative minority had been born with a single, unfocussable great eye over a sunken nosebridge, showing a probable future line of development.

The Masters labored no longer; that was for the dog people and more often for the automatic machines. Experimental research, even, was carried on by the companion race, the Masters merely collating the tabulated results, and deducing from and theorizing upon them.

Humankind was visibly growing content with less in every way. The first luxury they had relinquished had been gregariousness. For long generations men had not met for the joy of meeting. There was no such thing as an infringement on the rights of others; a sort of telepathy adjusted all disputes.

Moray's plane roared over the Andes, guided by inflexible directives. A warning sounded in his half-attentive ears; with a start he took over the controls of the craft. Below him, high on the peak of an extinct volcano, he saw the square white block which housed his Master. Despite his resentment at being snatched away

from Birch he felt a thrill of excitement at the sensed proximity of his guiding intelligence.

He swung the plane down and grooved it neatly in a landing notch which automatically, as he stepped out, swung round on silent pivots and headed the plane ready for departure.

Moray entered through a door that rolled aside as he approached. His nostrils flared. Almost at the threshold of scent he could feel the emanations of his Master. Moray entered the long, hot corridor that led to his Master's living quarters, and paused before a chrome-steel door.

**I**N A few seconds the door opened, silently, and Moray entered a dark room, his face twitching with an exciting presence. He peered through the gloom, acutely aware of the hot, moist atmosphere of the chamber. And, on a cushion-backed metal chair, he saw his Master—tiny, shrivelled, quite naked, his bulging skull supported by the high back of the chair.

Moray advanced slowly and stood before the seated human. Without opening his eyes, the Master spoke in a slow, thin voice.

"Moray, this is your birthday." There was no emphasis on one word more than another; the tone was that of a deaf man.

"Yes, Master," said Moray. "A—friend and I were celebrating it when you called. I came as quickly as possible."

The voice piped out again, "I have something for you, Moray. A present." The eyes opened for the first time, and one of the Master's hands gripped spasmodically a sort of lever in his chair. The eyes did not see Moray, they were staring straight ahead; but there was a shallow crease to the ends of his lips that might have been an atavistic muscle's attempt at a smile. A panel swung open in the wall, and there rolled out a broad, flat dolly bearing an ancient and thoroughly rotted chest. Through the cracks in the wood

there was seen a yellowish gleam of ancient paper.

The Master continued speaking, though with evidence of a strain. Direct oral conversation told on the clairvoyant, accustomed to the short cuts of telepathy. "These are the biographies of the lives of the North American Presidents. When you were very young—perhaps you do not remember—you expressed curiosity about them. I made arrangements then to allow you to research the next important find of source-material on the subject. This is it. It was discovered six months ago, and I have saved it for your birthday."

There was a long silence, and Moray picked up one of the books. It had been treated with preservatives, he noted, and was quite ready for work. He glanced at a title page unenthusiastically. What had interested him in his childhood was boring in full maturity.

"Are you ready to begin now?" whispered the human.

Moray hesitated. The strange confusion that he had felt was growing in him again, wordlessly, like a protesting howl. "Excuse me, please," he stammered, stepping back a pace.

The Master bent a look of mild surprise upon him.

"I am sorry. I—I don't wish to do this work." Moray forced himself to keep his eyes on the Master. There was a quick grimace on the face of the human, who had closed his eyes and was slumped against the back of the chair. His sunken chin twitched and fell open.

The Master did not answer Moray for a long minute. Then his eyes flicked open, he sat erect again, and he said, "Leave me."

And then he stared off into space and took no further notice of Moray.

"Please," said Moray hastily. "Don't misunderstand. I want very much to read those books. I have wanted to all my life. But I—" He stopped talking. Very ob-

viously, the Master had eliminated Moray from his mind. Just as Moray himself, having had a cinder in his eyes, would drop from his mind the memory of the brief pain.

Moray turned and walked through the door. "Please," he repeated softly to himself, then growled in disgust. As he stepped into the plane once more he blinked rapidly. In the hundred thousand years of evolution dogs had learned to weep.

MORAY, looking ill, slumped deeper into the pneumatic couch's depths. Birch looked at him with concern in her warm eyes. "Moray," she said worriedly, "when did you sleep last?"

"It doesn't matter," he said emptily. "I've been seeing the town."

"Can I give you something to eat?"

"No," said Moray. With a trace of guilt he took a little bottle from his pocket and gulped down a couple of white pills. "I'm not hungry. And this is more fun."

"It's up to you," she said. There was a long silence, and Moray picked up sheets of paper that were lying on a table at his elbow. "Assignments as of Wednesday," he read, and then put down the sheaf, rubbing his eyes with a tired motion. "Are you doing any work now?" he asked.

Birch smiled happily. "Oh, yes," she said. "My Master wants some statistics collated. All about concrete pouring. It's very important work, and I finished it a week ahead of time."

Moray hesitated, then, as though he didn't care, asked: "How are you and your Master getting along?"

"Very well indeed. She called me yesterday to see if I needed an extension of time for the collation. She was very pleased to find I'd finished it already."

"You're lucky," said Moray shortly. And inside himself, bursting with grief, he wondered what was wrong between his own Master and himself. Three weeks;

not a single call. It was dreadful. "Oh, Birch, I think I'm going mad!" he cried.

He saw that she was about to try to soothe him. "Don't interrupt," he said. "The last time I saw my Master I—made him unhappy. I was sure he would want me again in a few days, but he seems to have abandoned me completely. Birch, does that ever happen?"

She looked frightened. The thought was appalling. "Maybe," she said hastily. "I don't know. But he wouldn't do that to you, Moray. You're too clever. Why, he needs you just as much as you need him!"

Moray sighed and stared blankly. "I wish I could believe that." He took out the little pill-bottle again, but Birch laid a hand on his.

"Don't take any more, please, Moray," she whispered, trying desperately to ease his sorrow. "Moray—a while ago you wanted to ask me something. Will you ask me now?"

"I wanted to ask you to marry me—is that what you mean?"

"Yes. To both questions, Moray. I will."

He laughed harshly. "Me! How can you marry me? For all I know I've lost my Master. If I have, I—I'm no longer a person. You don't know what it's like, Birch, losing half your mind, and your will, and all the ambition you ever had. I'm no good now, Birch." He rose suddenly and paced up and down the floor. "You *can't* marry me!" he burst out. "I think I'll be insane within a week! I'm going now. Maybe you'd better forget you ever knew me." He slammed out of the room and raced down the stairs, not waiting for an elevator.

**T**HE street-lights were out; it was the hour before dawn. Obeying a vagrant impulse, he boarded a moving strip of sidewalk and was carried slowly out to one of the suburbs of the metropolis. At

the end of the line, where the strip turned back on itself and began the long journey back to Central Square, he got off and walked into the half-cultivated land.

He had often wondered—fearfully—of the fate of those of his people who had been abandoned by their Masters. Where did they go? Into the outlands, as he was?

He stared at the darkness of the trees and shrubs, suddenly realizing that he had never known the dark before. Wherever his people had gone there had been light—light in the streets, light in their cars and planes, light even at night when they slept.

He felt the hair on his head prickle and rise. How did one go wild? he wondered confusedly. Took off their clothes, he supposed.

He felt in his pockets and drew out, one by one, the symbols of civilization. A few slot-machine tokens, with which one got the little white pills. Jangling keys to his home, office, car, locker, and closet. Wallet of flexible steel, containing all his personal records. A full bottle of the pills—and another, nearly empty.

Mechanically he swallowed two tablets of the drug and threw the bottle away. A little plastic case . . . and as he stared at it, a diamond-hard lump in his throat, a fine, thin whistle shrilled from its depths.

Master's call! He was wanted!

**M**ORAY climbed from the plane under the frowning Andes and almost floated into the corridor of his Master's dwelling. The oppressive heat smote him in the face, but he was near laughing for joy when he opened the door and saw his Master sitting naked in the gloom.

"You are slow, Moray," said the Master, without inflection.

Moray experienced a sudden chill. He had not expected this. Confusedly he had pictured a warm reconciliation, but there was no mistaking the tone of the Master's voice. Moray felt very tired and discour-

aged. "Yes," he said. "You called me when I was out at the fields."

The Master did not frown, nor did he smile. Moray knew these moods of the cold, bleak intellect that gave him the greater part of his own intelligence and personality. Yet there was no greater tragedy in the world of his people than to be deserted—or, rather, to lose rapport with this intelligence. It was not insanity, and yet it was worse.

"Moray," said the Master, "you are a most competent laboratory technician. And you have an ability for archaeology. You are assigned to a task which involves both these divisions. I wish you to investigate the researches of Carter Hawkes, time, about the Fifteenth Century Anno Cubriensis. Determine his conclusions and develop, on them, a complete solution to what he attempted to resolve."

"Yes," said Moray dully. Normally he would have been elated at the thought that he had been chosen, and he consciously realized that it was his duty to be elated, but the chilly voice of his conscience told him that this was no affectionate assignment, but merely the use of a capable tool.

"What is the purpose of this research?" he asked formally, his voice husky with fatigue and indulgence in the stimulant drug.

"It is of great importance. The researches of Hawkes, as you know, were concerned with explosives. It was his barbarous intention to develop an explosive of such potency that one charge would be capable of destroying an enemy nation. Hawkes, of course, died before his ambition was realized, but we have historical evidence that he was on the right track."

"Chief among which," interrupted Moray—deferentially—"is the manner of his death."

There was no approval in the Master's voice as he answered, "You know of the explosion in which he perished. Now, at this moment, the world is faced with a

crisis more terrible than any ancient war could have been. It involves a shifting of the continental blocks of North America. The world now needs the Hawkes explosive, to provide the power for re-stabilizing the continent. All evidence has been assembled for your examination in the work-room. Speed is essential if catastrophe is to be averted."

Moray was appalled. The fate of a continent in his hands! "I shall do my best," he said nervelessly, and walked from the room.

MORAY straightened his aching body and turned on the lights. He set the last of a string of symbols down on paper and leaned back to stare at them. The formula—complete!

Moray was convinced that he had the right answer, through the lightning-like short cuts of reasoning which humans called "canine intuition." Moray might have felt pride in that ability—but, he realized, it was a mirage. The consecutivity of thought of the Masters—not Moray nor any of his people could really concentrate on a single line of reasoning for more than a few seconds. In the synthesis of thought Moray's people were superb. In its analysis. . . .

A check-up on the formula was essential. Repeating the formula aloud, Moray's hands grasped half a dozen ingredients from the shelves of the lab, and precisely compounded them in the field of a micro-inspection device. Actually, Moray was dealing with units measured in single molecules, and yet his touch was as sure as though he were handling beakers-full.

Finally titrated, the infinitesimal compound was set over a cherry-red electric grid to complete its chain of reactions and dry. Then it would explode, Moray realized—assuming he had the formula correct. But, with such a tiny quantity, what would be the difference?

Perhaps—at utmost—the room would

be wrecked. But there was no time to take the stuff to the firing-chambers that were suspended high over the crater of the extinct volcano on flexible steel masts, bent and supported to handle almost any shock.

Moray swallowed two more pellets of the drug. He had to wait for its effect upon him, now, but he dared not take a larger dose.

He strode from the room, putting the formula in his pocket.

Wandering aimlessly through the building, he was suddenly assailed by the hot, wet aura of his Master. He paused, then nudged the door open a trifle and peered longingly within.

The Master was engaged in solitary clairvoyance, his head sagging down on his scrawny chest, veins and muscles visibly pulsing. Even in the utter darkness of his room, he was visible by a thin blue light that exuded from the points and projections of his body to flow about the entire skin.

The Master was utterly unconscious of the presence of his servant. Though Moray was not a child or a fool, he stemmed directly from the beautiful, intelligent creatures that used to hunt and play with men, and he could not stand up to the fierce tide of intellect that flowed in that room. With a smothered sound he turned, about to leave.

**T**HEN Moray heard a noise—quiet and almost restful at first, like a swarm of bees passing overhead. And then it rumbled into a mighty crash that made the elastic construction of the Master's house quiver as though stricken.

Suddenly he realized—the Hawkes explosive! It had worked! He looked at his Master, to see the blue glare fade as though it were being reabsorbed into his body. As the last of it vanished, lights glowed on around the room, bringing it to its accustomed shadowy twilight. The Master's head lifted.

"Moray," he whispered tensely. "Was that the explosive?"

A thin little ripple of delight surged along Moray's spine. They could both be blown to splintered atoms in the explosion, and the continent they were trying to save along with them—he didn't care! His master had spoken to him!

He knew what he had to do. With a little growl that was meant to say, "Pardon!" he raced to the Master's side, picked him up and flung him over a shoulder—gently. They had to get out of the building, for it might yet topple on them.

Moray tottered to the door, bent under the double burden; pushed it open and stepped into the corridor. The Master couldn't walk, so Moray had to walk for him. They made slow progress along the interminable hall, but finally they were in the open. Moray set his burden down, the gangling head swaying, and—

Felt unutterably, incontrovertibly idiotic! For the air was still and placid; and the building stood firm as a rock; and the only mark of the Hawkes explosive was a gaping mouth of a pit where the laboratory had been. Idiot! Not to have remembered that the Hawkes would expend its force *downward!*

Moray peered shamefacedly at his Master. Yet there was some consolation for him, because there was the skeleton of a smile on the Master's face. Clearly he had understood Moray's motives, and . . . perhaps Moray's life need not finally be blighted.

For a long second they stood there looking into each other's eyes. Then the Master said, gently, "Carry me to the plane."

Not stopping to ask why, Moray picked him up once more and strode buoyantly to the waiting ship. Letting the Master down gently at the plane's door, he helped him in, got in himself, and took his place at the controls.

"Where shall we go?" he asked.

The Master smiled that ghost of a smile again, but Moray could detect a faint apprehension in his expression too. "Up, Moray," he whispered. "Straight up. You see, Moray, these mountains are volcanic. And they're not quite extinct. We must go away now, up into the air."

Moray's reflexes were faster than an electron-stream as he whipped around to the knobs and levers that sent the little ship tearing up into the atmosphere. A mile and a half in the sky, he flipped the bar that caused the ship to hover, turned to regard the scene below.

The Master had been right! The explosion had pinked the volcano, and the volcano was erupting in retaliation—a hot curl of lava was snaking into the atmosphere now, seemingly a pseudopod reaching to bring them down. But it was thrown up only a few hundred feet; then the lava flow stopped; cataclysmic thunderings were heard and vast boulders were hurled

into the sky. It was lucky they'd got away, thought Moray as he watched the ground beneath quiver and shake; and luckier that no other person had been around, for the ship could carry but two.

And as he stared, fascinated, at the turmoil below, he felt a light, soft touch on his arm. It was the Master!—the first time in all Moray's life when the Master had touched him to draw attention. Moray suddenly knew, and rejoiced—he had found his Master again!

"Let us go on, Moray," whispered the Master. "We have found that the explosive will work. Our job, just now, is done."

And as Moray worked the controls that hurled the ship ahead, toward a new home for his Master and toward Birch for himself, he knew that the wings of the ship were of no value at all. Tear them off! he thought, and throw them away! His heart was light enough to bear a world!

THE END



Tim brought the bus to a skidding halt in the snow. Belle Tucker screamed. The sign said:

### "DANGER! DEAD MEN! DETOUR!"

Passengers debarked, anxiously. They found three corpses standing there as if hitch-hiking! One was Belle Tucker's long-dead dad. She rushed forward and touched it—and it exploded!

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That's the title of the thrill-a-minute lead novel in the May issue of *Strange Detective Mysteries*. It's one of the finest stories that has come from the pen of Day Keene, and we guarantee that the riddle of the Laughing Death will keep you guessing and gasping right down to the last word.

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# INTERSTELLAR WAY-STATION

**Even interstellar travel can become boring, and the passengers may need rest and relaxation. But the relaxation of the passengers won't help the peace-of-mind of the poor devils who have to relax them!**

“HEY, kid! She's going over!”  
“Hah?” I yelled.  
“The mail rocket. . . .” Pinko repeated. “She's just gone over!”

I dropped my paint brush, shoved the bucket over out of the way and beat it around the corner of the Guest Hotel in a bee line for the mail chute; it was our first mail this week. Those damned tight-wads on the Universal Council began trimming the overhead a couple of years ago, and daily mail to the Service was the first to go.

Pinko was at the chute ahead of me, flapping his wings excitedly.

“Ahhhh! Another letter from the little lulu over on '3,” I jeered. Pinko bobbed about and confirmed this without words. He went over by himself to read the letter. I would read her letter later; we always swapped our mail.

You see, Pinko and I are in the Universal Service—and that covers a lot of space and sins. Our particular branch and job is Refueling. Refueling the big liners that drop in here about once or twice a week, stay a few hours to give the passengers a quick peek at a gas station in space (and a dip in our pool if they like—real earth water!), meanwhile taking on a capacity load of fuel for the big push on to Alpha Centauri.

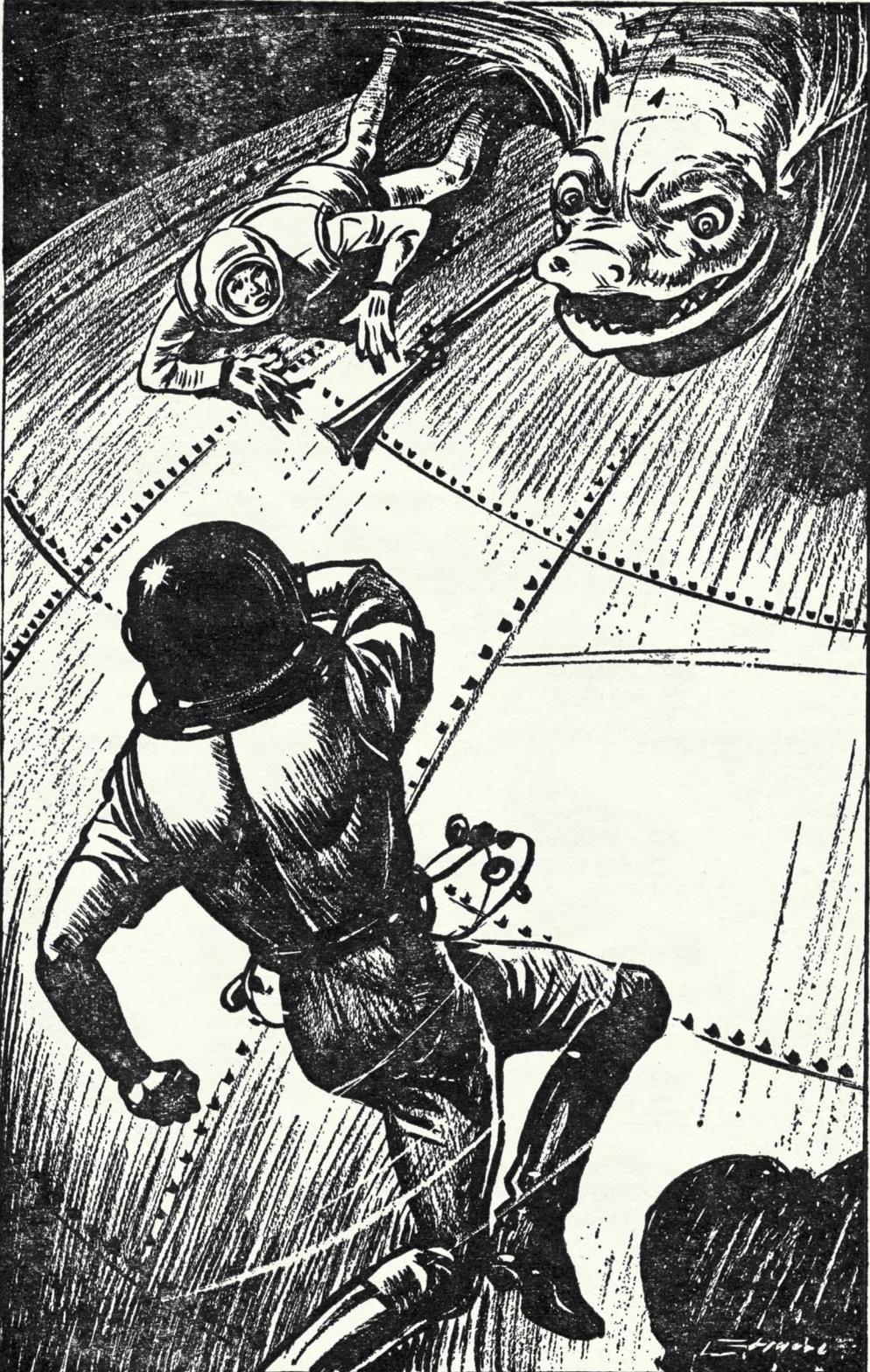
Get out your charts and space maps, and if you don't have one, phone, don't walk, to your nearest tourist agency. They'll have one to you in three clicks of a mail tube sounder. Find yourself . . . the big symbol 'Earth' in the near center of the map. Now swinging in a tight,

semi-circle toward the upper left-hand corner of the map, trace that dotted line that leads to the page margin (a little box on the margin tells you that line will take you to Alpha Centauri.) This little dotted line is known as the Lowden Line. Your ship, however, doesn't exactly follow that line. After all, no one has really faithfully followed a map since the first one was made thousands of years ago for foot travelers on Earth!

What isn't shown on that map are two Passages, known as the “Outer Passage” and the “Inner Passage.” All ships follow one of the two channels known as “passages;” ships *from* Earth to Centauri on the Inner Passage; and ships *from* Centauri *to* Earth on the Outer Passage. This is necessary, you understand, to prevent ships heading in opposite directions from bumping head-one into one another, and various other little things that aren't important enough to tell passengers.

Examine that map, particularly the Lowden Line a little more closely. At spaced intervals along the Lowden Line (and all other lines) you will notice a small black square containing a number: 1, 2, 3, and so on. A quick consulting of the key and index informs you that here, at these squares in space, are located stop-overs, where tourists may spend a few hours resting from the nervous strain of their first day in space (as in the case of our depot. We are “E-1-AC,” or, depot

By **BOB TUCKER**



number one, on the Inner Passage, approximately one day out from Earth on the long grind to Alpha Centauri up yonder.) We have on our little world, among other wonders, a small pool of genuine earth water, the last, by the way, that tourists will see until they near Earth again.

And undoubtedly, the tourists, are as amused by us as they amuse. I, I'm from Earth myself—Indiana. Only now and then does someone drop in who finds *me* a strange life form, and spends his hours trailing me around, colorgraphing my every move. But poor old Pinko comes in for more than his share of trouble. These gawks from Earth out of bounds for the first time—especially the children—find Pinko the very first Centaurian birdman they've seen outside the theatres.

“HERE'S at you kid,” Pinko called. He flipped the lulu's letter over to me. “What else in the mail?”

“Aw, the usual old stuff: coupla trade journals, sixteen letters from sixteen passengers, the said letters containing sixteen varied colorgraphs of you—” For Pinko's benefit, I displayed mock astonishment: “Say, here's a beaut! Somebody caught you with your beak open! Mmmmm. . . what charm.” If you've seen a Centaurian with his beak open, you can appreciate the candidness of the picture.

Pinko snatched the pic, stared long at it, and presently the hundred tiny pieces of the paper was floating softly down to the artificial lawn, pulled there slowly by the artificial gravity.

“Centaurians have a word for that!” he snapped. “What else? . . .”

“Two mash nots from some girls back home. They want to “correspond with some romantic young guardsmen of the spaceways!” Jupiter, why do we have to put up with that? Some advertisements. . . Oh, look for yourself.” I flung him the bundle after separating

from its mass a picture magazine, and rolled over on my belly. The letter from the lulu—a female of some species, who superintended the Guest Hotel out on E-3-AC (she and Pinko had struck up quite a cordial correspondence)—I let lay where it had fallen.

These picture magazines, designed as they are for Servicemen, display plenty of beauteous females—of every world imaginable, for we have servicemen from every one of those worlds—for the bored gentlemen who peddle gas in space. Cheesecake abounds, and honestly, if you could but glimpse the cheesecake displayed by *some* of the females, on *some* of the planets, you'd undoubtedly go off by yourself and have a nice little sick spell. I felt that way when I saw my first picture of a Trinorite. Never again will I look at a picture of a “girl” of Trinor unless she is fully dressed. You see, it's all in the point of view. . . . male Trinors probably find it interesting, but. . . . !

Staring up at my very interested gaze was an Earth girl. A very pretty girl, with “wealth” written into every pretty line of her face. Wealth, position, and of course a bit of snobbishness. I knew her. Oh, very intimately. Her name is Judith Maynard . . . aw, wait a minute. The caption explains that the name *was* Maynard.

“Well, I'll be damned!” I was disgusted.

“Hah?” the beak extracted itself from a profound study of a political advertisement. “Why?”

“Take a look,” I tossed him the mag. “Remember her? No . . . not that one, nitwit! *This* one.”

Pinko switched his gaze from the undraped legs of a Martian to the face of Maynard.

“So she married? You might of guessed it,” he stared at me.

“Yeah, I might of guessed it. But I didn't. I rather thought. . . .”

**A**BOUT EIGHT years ago the *Centaur-Maid* express roared into our outer port with a fused rocket stud. The mighty ship, then the crack liner on the Lowden Line, could have flown to hyperspace and back without half her studs but regulations required her to set down in the nearest port for repairs. It was our bad luck that she happened to be a few million miles from us, and down she came.

Her ace pilot hit the dimensions of the outer port not a foot over the lines, and Pinko on the cradle engine brought her inside as smoothly as one could want. The cradle brings the ship down thru the two locks to the surface of our mid-get world; and there she is serviced while the passengers take unheard-of liberties with our and the Council's property. If you can afford the luxury of the *Maid* you must be somebody on *any* world. No tourists here, but first class fares exclusively. And any Serviceman will gladly tell you that these fares are twice as nosey and twice as obnoxious as any tourist. I guess it's their wealth that makes them that way.

My Judith Maynard was one of the whirliest whirls on this boat, and immediately made up a colorgraphing party. This is where I came in, being one of their own kind (and Pinko long ago realized the safety of staying with the ship's crew); having bare notice of the *Maid's* coming, I had just skipped into my dress whites, hid paint cans and brushes under a tarp, and beamed according to Council Regulation S1317.

First stop of course on all tours about the station, is the cradle, the huge and complex bed that reaches up to our outer hull, almost snatches a ship from space, and brings it right down into the ground. Under the cradle proper is a maze of girders and beams, the engine and the controls for the bed.

Cameras clicked.

"Oh, I beg pardon ma'am. Don't touch those girders." I stopped her just in time. "Wet paint, you know. We have to freshen up these things every week. The children just love to carve their names on the beams with toy ray guns. Ha ha, our clever children!" (I had a few hours earlier just finished painting out the slogan "Gladrz wuv Zir" that a particularly premature-worldly youngster had etched into a girder with fire.)

"Oh, do you find children a nuisance?" she inquired ever so interestedly.

"Not at all, ma'am, on the contrary, they make life pleasant for we Servicemen out here. But they cause us much work with those real flame-throwing ray guns most of them tote nowadays. Only about two months ago we had a report from some liner over on the Riga run that it was afire in space. Seems some youngster had desired to carve his name into a bunk, and . . ."

But she was gone, half way through my explanation. I ran to catch up.

"Now *this* used to be an ammunition dump, several decades ago when the War was going on. (Cameras clicked.) The Council stored huge amounts of munitions here, and on every Depot like this between here and Centauri. But that was long ago—" I smiled deprecatingly "—and now forgotten."

"But porter," (I guess the fat woman meant me—!) "why hasn't the hole been filled in? Someone might get hurt!" and she looked hurt at the very thought.

"Nothing to fill it with, ma'am. Dirt just isn't a payload. There are many more precious things, things needed for life and service, that take up all available ships. Dirt is simply too cheap a thing to transport from Earth in a large enough quantity to fill that hole. So, it is left as is."

**W**E MOVED on to the next item of interest, the power house. "This is the power house. (Cameras clicked).

Every single unit of energy no matter what kind it is, or what it is used for, comes from this building. Here is gathered the power from the Sun, plus the stars, plus the storage batteries—yes mam, those black boxes over there are the batteries—that hold this depot in space, and permit us to live inside it. Here, in these machines and . . . uh, black boxes, is everything needed for our maintenance. Tremendous voltages are handled here. You will note the warning posted on the door”—and I directed their attention to the glaring big sign that read

**DANGER! KEEP OUT!  
SIX BILLION VOLTS!**

We handled nothing like six billion volts here, but Pinko and I had found that a bit of exaggeration paid dividends. A tourist who reports back to the medical officer aboard his ship with electric burns means demerits for us. And the darn fools actually invite electrocution.

“Hah? I beg your pardon madam, I wasn’t listening. Oh no madam, Senior Serviceman Pinko never lets me ride astride his back. Yes’m, he can fly. Well madam, possibly you do believe it to be a shame that a Centaurian has seniority over an Earthman; but you see, this is necessary. Serviceman Pinko has been on duty at this station nearly 46 years. He has four more years to serve until he attains his second class citizen’s rating; and at the same time I step up to senior attendant, and a rookie. . . . I mean a new man comes from some world to serve *his* 25 years as my junior. Now *this*, ladies is the control tower.” (Cameras clicked).

I shot a hasty glance around to note if Pinko had been in earshot when the overfed baby demanded to know whether Pinko and I played horse and jockey. He wasn’t in sight.

“This is the control tower. Into this

building comes all the power direct from the power house, and here it is split up and fed to many hundreds of pieces of machinery all over the depot. Up there on the second floor—you can see the levers thru the windows—are the controls themselves that cause every bit of apparatus to function when and how it is supposed to. No mam, we have no control for weather. You see, the weather is al-ways the same here, being as we are on the inside of an immense metal ball.

“From this tower can be controlled, by remote control of course, the landing cradle that brought your ship in from space; the check needed to hold a depot at a given spot in space; the machinery for putting under a finger the millions upon millions of volts we draw from the sun; and the very electric lights about the place. From this tower the water in the pool is purified every twenty-four hours and made ready for any ship at any time. From this tower the very air you are now breathing is cleansed over and over again to keep it free from fumes and bacteria.”

And so, amid the ever clicking of color cameras, we went clockwise around the grounds; my three-thousandth-and-ninety-sixth journey.

**A**T LAST I delivered this consignment to the gangplank and the purser. They filed in.

“Thirty-eight,” I gritted, “and they’re all yours, every damned one of them! I hope I never see you or them again!”

“My eye!” that worthy retorted. “you’ve snitched one. There should be thirty-nine.”

“Thirty-eight was all I counted. And I don’t want one of them . . . *any* of them! Check again.”

He did, from a list in his hand. The assistant purser joined him in head bobbing. Both looked solemn.

“One short. I’m positive of it. Thirty-nine left the ship. Thirty-eight returned.

We have both counted. Let me see . . . ah, yes. Miss Maynard. Miss Judith Maynard is missing. Maynard! Oh glory be . . . her old man has half the gold mines in . . ." he never finished, but hurried off into the darkened interior of the ship. His assistant appeared nervous.

Sighing disgustedly I turned and started off on a counter clockwise tour, half-wondering just what gear had tangled herself in. I didn't get far. Pinko came bounding out of the ship and an excited captain at his heels.

Prudently, I put a few steps between Pinko and myself. Having lived with him for something like twenty-one years, I recognize danger signals when I see them. His eyes turned a beautiful violet and bored right into mine. He swept the landscape for signs of her, and finding none, returned to me. Three more steps were put between us.

Six sailors tumbled out of the ship behind him on the double.

They were assigned to me, and we continued the counter clockwise movement; while Pinko, the captain and both pursers vanished back into the ship for a room-by-room check.

It had me scared before long. We didn't find her at the fuel tanks, the piping nor the pumps. She wasn't entangled among the levers and switches in the powerhouse, nor had she neatly or otherwise made a sizzled steak of herself in the powerhouse. With a premonition we approached the old dump, but the premonition was false; she hadn't fallen in there and broken her skinny neck. Nowhere under the cradle was she to be found, and the sailors even went clambering and climbing up into the maze of beams and cross beams in search of her. No luck.

By the time we had finished this, and were again emerging on the central plaza, Pinko and his party had come out of the ship, as emptyhanded as we. Together Pinko and I made for the pool. It had

been a long time since anyone had fallen in *that*—but . . .

Again nothing.

Pinko methodically and idiotically opened and closed his beak; the ship's master frankly sank down upon an artificial divan and wept. It was on the tip of my tongue to suggest that perhaps she had dug a hole and crawled into it, when it occurred to me that one doesn't dig holes in the artificial ground—not large enough to crawl into, that is. The "sod" was but four inches deep, and then solid, electrical-gravity-plated metal began. The hole underneath the "sod" was sealed solid and airtight, in fact a perfect vacuum existed between the bottom of our metal ball and the "ground" we stood on, marred only by that artificial hole in which ammunition was once kept. The men had silently and without orders taken their leave. If the gravity of the situation didn't penetrate their thick skulls, the sight of their captain crying did.

"Now by the four little hells of Centauria III," Pinko broke the silence, "she *has* to be here. And yet she isn't. She has to be here. And yet she isn't. She has to—Say! She's Outside!"

Roberds groaned: "Oh God!"

"Clumb the runs and sneaked out the mail chute door! I should have known!" It took something like this to reveal the the inner aspects of Pinko's character. It was fascinating to watch him, despite the emergency. After all, I'd spent twenty-one years with him and this was the first show he'd ever performed. "I should have known!"

SIX OF US broke out suits and rifles—the complete arsenal on hand—and followed him up; how long after her we could not guess. Perhaps *too* long. Again Pinko took unfair advantage: he flew up and we had to climb. It was funny to see his long beak sticking out of the suit, (with a special auxiliary covering for

the beak.) He looked like a man from Mars . . . . say, that was funny. If I lived I must remember to repeat it to him. I say, "if I lived."

Topside Pinko awaited us; despite that everyone took a hasty glance around as if foolishly expecting to find Maynard calmly sitting a few feet away star gazing. Unable to communicate except by gestures, he roughly grouped two men together and pushed them off in the left direction; two others he started the opposite way. I about-faced and began climbing up towards the slightly flattened "roof" if our metal sphere, while he, reasoning that she would do likewise, followed the line of least resistance and walked down underneath.

**I**T WAS dark and hard to see, but presently I could see her shadow. Oh yes, I had to find her! We were pretty close but still hardly discernible to each other. In fairness, I must admit I saw the shark first. I found Judy at just the moment she was a whoop and a holler ahead of a dish of mincemeat. She was to be the mincemeat.

This mess she had wandered into was the third shark I had ever seen! Description? Hah! It has a scientific name a light-year long among the learned men who admitted its existence; and was just a jeering "bah!" to the other side of the fence who denied such a thing can live in a void! *Space-shark* the Service called it. Almost everywhere in space it is, except in those zones surrounding the planets and their moons. There still remains to be written an accurate description of the thing!; some of the boys who have had glimpses of 'em claim it's a cross between a shark and a ghost; a description that can't be imagined until you've seen one, and then you realize that is it's *only* description!

Laying my gun down against the hell, I fired. Now if only some of the others

were walking, and "heard" the vibration of the shot!

Had Judy kept her presence of mind, or remembered her fiction heroes she'd've stiffened—played dead—and the chances are better than one in ten she would have lived to snap another camera. But like a fool girl she thrashed and kicked about in semi-hysterics in an effort to swim away from the beast; and as I came closer it began to nose her, a prelude to the kill. If that damn thing had any sense it wouldn't touch her with a hundred-foot fuel pipe; the air in her body and suit-tanks would give it one hell of a bellyache! Which goes to show you the loathsome devil had no more common sense than she.

I ran and swam ahead clumsily, threw up the rifle for another shot! Kill it? Don't make me laugh! But I did succeed in one thing: distracting its attention from her to me! The terrible phosphorescent "eyes" dropped her and fastened on me with a charge like high voltage.

Play dead! I ordered myself. Spreading arms and legs in slow movements, my body began revolving slowly like the human X it appeared, watching the beast and the girl from eye-corners. The shark rolled, forgot Maynard and nosed me! Oozy and wet sweat popped out to tickle the skin of my arms and legs. Sweat popped off my exposed body and floated near me!

Movement made itself felt at my boots and against my will I angled my head and watched! Long, shapeless nose eagerly quizzing the artificial leather in the boots, sniffing for the scent of life. Accidentally it touched bare skin and terror-locked muscles loosened—I jumped! The shark quivered in pure joy! Repeating the experiment it poked its shocking nose flat against my leg, and that leg jerked like a wild thing. Its body-fins rippled in anticipation. . . .

**A**BRUPTLY THE monster stopped nosing and backed away. From then on the moments of my life was a blueprint I knew by heart and hearsay! The shark would leave me—for the space of seconds and perhaps a half mile—and when it returned it wouldn't be taking its time! They rush at their hapless victim with the speed of the time-honored express rocket!, the great shimmering body exploding with internal fireworks, literally swallow a man at one gulp in a maw that promised hellfire and brimstone! My X wasn't doing me much good but I held it. This baby stopped just about a half mile away and angled in an attempt to catch me end-on. Why don't you close eyes? Oh, they still belonged to me, the will to close them no longer existed. They'd be closed soon—permanently! Yeah! Pinko and the Lulu certainly should be happy.

Then it came.

There was no mind-picturing necessary; I was helpless in front of a roaring rocket, a rocket that breathed and squirmed and devoured me with hellish eyes seconds before its mouth did! Glowing body was almost transparent as redfire lit up its insides; slapping tail streaked like a minor comet! It was so close and horrible I could look right into the mouth, so close the tongue was plainly seen uncurling, ready to lick me in and roll up my body even before the jaws closed over me!

And a streaking pain I knew was a bullet zipped across my forehead, drowning the sight out of my eyes with blood. And awareness from my mind. But not entirely out until I had flopped over on my belly and saw figures racing around the ball; and saw Maynard drop fainting to the surface, my rifle falling from her hands.

**R**EMEMBER? I said that was about eight years ago, more or less. "So she married some other guy?" Pinko repeated. "Yeah, you *should* have guessed it."

Me, what could I answer? He had me. Money she had tenderly pressed upon me, and just as tenderly I had pressed it back, according to Regulation S908. Herself she had tenderly pressed upon me for a few hours I held her, and just as tenderly pressed back into the care of the departing liner. (Regulation S37.)

Marriage? Yeah, I could get married when I had finished out my fifty years. She'd wait, sure she would. She loved me. And she'd pull a few wires, meanwhile, to see if I couldn't be transferred somewhere for a shorter service period or to a job allowing wives.

And she'd sent me an autographed colorpic which I had tacked up over my bunk.

Which, I guess, was all I could expect. . . .

THE END



10  
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# THE BROTHERS

A Super Science Brief

By MICHAEL D. SHEA

“LEBA! Leba! Do you know what that ship was?” Leba turned from his inspection of the horses that were to bear them on their visit to their father, and regarded his brother. “What ship was it, Niac?” he asked.

“The *Walter Boy*! The flagship of Harmon’s battle fleet. The serviceman just told me about it,” Niac added, pointing to a tall, kindly man in the uniform of the Services who was following Niac at a more leisurely pace. “Imagine, Leba, the old tub we came here in was once the deadliest fighting craft to sail the skies! Maybe that very ship took part in the bombing of Chicago here! Maybe Harmon himself took the controls as it soared over this city! For all we know, our cabin may have been the same one Harmon used—it was the biggest cabin in the ship, and right near the control rooms. Don’t you think it may have been that way?” he asked, turning to the Serviceman, who had now come up to them.

The green-uniformed man shook his head. “I’m afraid not, friend,” he said, smiling. “All those passenger cabins were added when the ship was refitted and made into an airliner, about two years ago. The old *Walter Boy* was on the scrap-heap for half a century and war, ever since the Last War, and there isn’t much left of her except the frame.”

“But it was the *Walter Boy*, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was that,” the Serviceman agreed. Then, to Leba, “Your friend here called you Leba. Are you, by any chance, Mada’s son?”

“Yes. This is my brother, Niac. We’re going to visit father now—if the Services

don’t mind our borrowing these horses.”

“That’s what the Services are for. But tell me—have you visited your father before? Do you know how far his home is from Chicago?”

“Not too far, I imagine,” broke in Niac. “An hour’s ride?”

THE Serviceman laughed. “I see that you haven’t visited your father before. I know where he lives—all the world knows where Mada lives. In fact, I’ve spent weeks with him when the snow or the cold made me take refuge during my winter rounds. His house is nearly thirty miles from here. It will take you a day, at least, to get there on horseback.”

“Why can’t we take a monocab?” asked Niac with irritation. “I can’t spend days just traveling back and forth to see my father—I have work to do.”

“Because no monocab can land in the forests around Chicago.” The Serviceman paused. “But if you like, I’ll go with you to your father’s. I shall have to go in that direction anyhow, two days from now. That is, if you don’t mind living at the Station till then.”

Niac stared around at the shattered buildings, which not even the fifty years that had passed since the Last War had managed to soften. The infiltration of moss and vines on the splintered masonry of the dead city’s towers was not a pleasing effect—it seemed a shroud over a tomb. Niac wrinkled his nose in disgust. Ignoring the Serviceman, he addressed himself to Leba:

“Let’s not stay, Leba,” he suggested—curtly. “I don’t think I could stand this place.”



"You may get lost," the Serviceman offered.

"I think not," smiled Leba. "Father wrote that his house was easy to find—he gave very explicit directions."

The Serviceman offered no more objections, and the two brothers turned to the horses. With the aid of the Serviceman—aid gladly offered, for who in this world would not wish to help the sons of Mada, who life was a shining model of the very virtues he himself preached?—they mounted the tall, docile Percherons and walked them slowly out of the rotting city, along the indicated trail.

**I**T TAKES a certain sort of muscle and training to be a good horseman, even when the mount is as slow-moving as were those of the brothers. After only a few hours of riding Niac begged for a rest. The two dismounted and tethered their horses.

It was early spring, still chilly. Niac, stepping gingerly around the mud-puddles in the wet forest path, gave forth a constant stream of complaints as he sought a dry spot for a seat.

At last, "Oh, shut up, Niac," said Leba wearily. "Complaining about things won't help them at all."

"But Leba, the animals *smell*," Niac said plaintively. "Why did our father have to abolish the Reign of the Machine? Why does he live out here in the jungle?"

"Because he is a wise man. When our father led the revolt against the Reign of the Machine it was for the best, Niac—everyone but you knows it was for the best. The stupid wars and struggles between nations—that curious, old term!—was all due to the mastery of the Machine over Man. When our father made machines the slaves of men, men reached true humanity. What machines we have left—and we have all we could need—are subordinate to our wills."

"What machines have we left, Leba?"

A few industrial gadgets—what good are they?"

"We have all the machines we need. . . . Niac, you're illogical! You know that no human being on the face of the Earth, or on any planet at all, need lift a hand in hum-drum labor. You know that all the routine, thoughtless work is done by machines. Men are free—for the first time in the history of the world. Free from the struggle to survive, because the machines allow us to devote our time to pure thought, and free from the hideous slavery of men to metal monsters that slew and spoiled, in the old days you love so much. Every week a new machine is developed—a good machine, one that can help men. Last month you and I watched the new continuous-flow food-products plant go into operation. All over the world new plants like that are starting up. What more can one ask?"

"Those—those ape-tricks are not what I mean by machines, Leba!"

Leba stared for a moment at the dank earth before replying. "I know those are not what you want, Niac," he said finally. "What you want are machines that kill and rend and break. You want weapons, Niac. You want to return the world to—chaos."

"I want to return the world to honor!"

Leba smiled gently. "To honor or to chaos—the word is unimportant. But what you want is to bring back war and petty thoughts of glory and courage. Niac, you are a throwback."

Niac laughed, taking no offense. There was something secretive about his laughter. A clever throwback, at least," he said.

**L**EBA became deadly still. "What do you mean?"

Niac darted an intense gaze at his brother. "I mean I am not the only throwback," he said finally.

Leba relaxed. "You mean your Sons of Glory? That group of malcontents and

children you have so assiduously organized?" He chuckled mildly. "I don't think I shall worry about them, Niac."

"Perhaps we can make you worry!" cried Niac, nettled at the slur on his group. "Perhaps we are not all children—perhaps we are men with strength to back our demands!"

Leba looked up again, and the faint breath of fear was in his eyes. "What do you mean, Niac?" he repeated.

Niac chuckled exultantly. "Look," he said.

A large brown hare was hopping through the trees, cropping grass and small plants where it could find them. Humans were scarce in these forests; the little animal, unafraid, paid no attention to these two.

"Watch, Leba," Niac called; and, with a lightning-fast motion, he drew a glimmering bit of metal from his tunic and thrust it in the direction of the hare. There was a fierce, sharp hiss of electric sparks, and the hare stood out in bold illumination for a second. Then the strange glow faded and the hare slumped to the ground—dead.

Niac turned from the corpse of the tiny beast and stared at his brother. "Now will you worry, Leba?" he asked vainly. "Now will you realize that we are more than children?"

"That was a Hadley gun," Leba murmured in a monotone. "They are outlawed. Where did you get it?"

"I made it from old plans! And I shall make more! Hundreds and thousands of them, enough to equip the Sons of Glory, enough to conquer your entire feeble world of puny science and soft dreams. Leba, the shot that killed that hare will some day slay your world!"

"Have you many of these guns now, Niac?" Leba whispered.

"Not now—but I will have thousands! If you had not dragged me from my work

to make this stupid visit to your father I should be making them now. Look—the plans. Here. And plans for an automatic machine to turn out a hundred of these in a day." Niac was becoming more and more heated with the discussion. His dream of conquest was drugging him. Only with an effort could he bring himself back to earth to hear what Leba said, very softly. "Then should you die, Niac, the guns—?"

He did not complete his questioning thought. As Niac, startled, strove to bring up the muzzle of the Hadley gun with desperate speed, Leba leapt. . . .

**L**EBBA rose from the body of his brother dry-eyed. His face was a mask of iron as he took the Hadley gun and examined it curiously. Its controls were simple, he found; he gently touched a button set flush in its side, and the long, hissing spray of blue sparks reached out and incinerated a thornbush.

Leba walked a few feet aside with the papers his brother had held and set them on the ground. Another flash of the Hadley gun, and they were white-hot ashes.

He picked up the corpse of his brother in his strong arms, lugged it to the side of the path. The head of his brother lolled drunkenly from side to side; the slight grating of the splintered bones of the neck resounded horribly in his ears. There was a spade in the baggage the Serviceman had given them, Leba found; with it he dug a hole, six feet long, five feet deep.

The Hadley gun he tossed in upon the chest of Niac. By the time he had spaded the last bit of earth back over the body, the day was almost over; it was growing dark. Leba looked wistfully at the sunset as he led the two horses on along the trail, toward the home of his father. He was not afraid to tell his story, but it would break Mada's heart to learn he had fathered a son like Niac.

# THE RANNIE

## CHAPTER I

### When the Barrier Failed

**D**AYONNA MARLAND swung herself lightly from the seat of her hunting copter, a scant few seconds ahead of the companion planes with which she had been racing to the landing field. Carelessly she tossed her bow and clip of arrows to an attendant, before condescending to notice the young man who had hurried onto the field to greet her. She was glowing with youth and vitality—a veritable goddess of the chase in her trim hunting costume of green trunks and brasket, gleaming silvery helmet, and sandals.

"Hi, Theron," she greeted him airily. "You should have been with us. Best sport I've had this season."

"What luck?" he inquired, a shade resentfully.

"Two fine bucks for Nedro and a female for Lantz," she recounted. "I ran down a couple, but they got away."

By this time the other two helicopters had landed. Her brother Lantz and Nedro Bane leaped to the ground.

"There's nothing this side of the range that can keep up with that little job of yours, Dayonna," acknowledged Nedro. "But you should have brought down those last two rannies. I'd have taken a whang at them myself if I'd known you were going to let them escape."

"They had a cub with them," Dayonna excused herself. "Anyway," she tossed her head, "I had my fun chasing them to cover."

Lantz gave a derisive laugh. "You can't combine hunting and soft-heartedness. The rannies are multiplying too fast

anyway. Father says the flame squad will have to be called out if the hunters don't do a better job of keeping them down."

Theron fell in beside the girl possessively.

"I hoped you would get back in time for Bishop Malcolm's lecture," he observed, lowering his voice. "He has some remarkable televisions from restored films of tremendous antiquity."

"Fortunately," came Nedro's voice maliciously in his ear, "Dayonna has more red-blooded interests than listening to lectures on ancient history!"

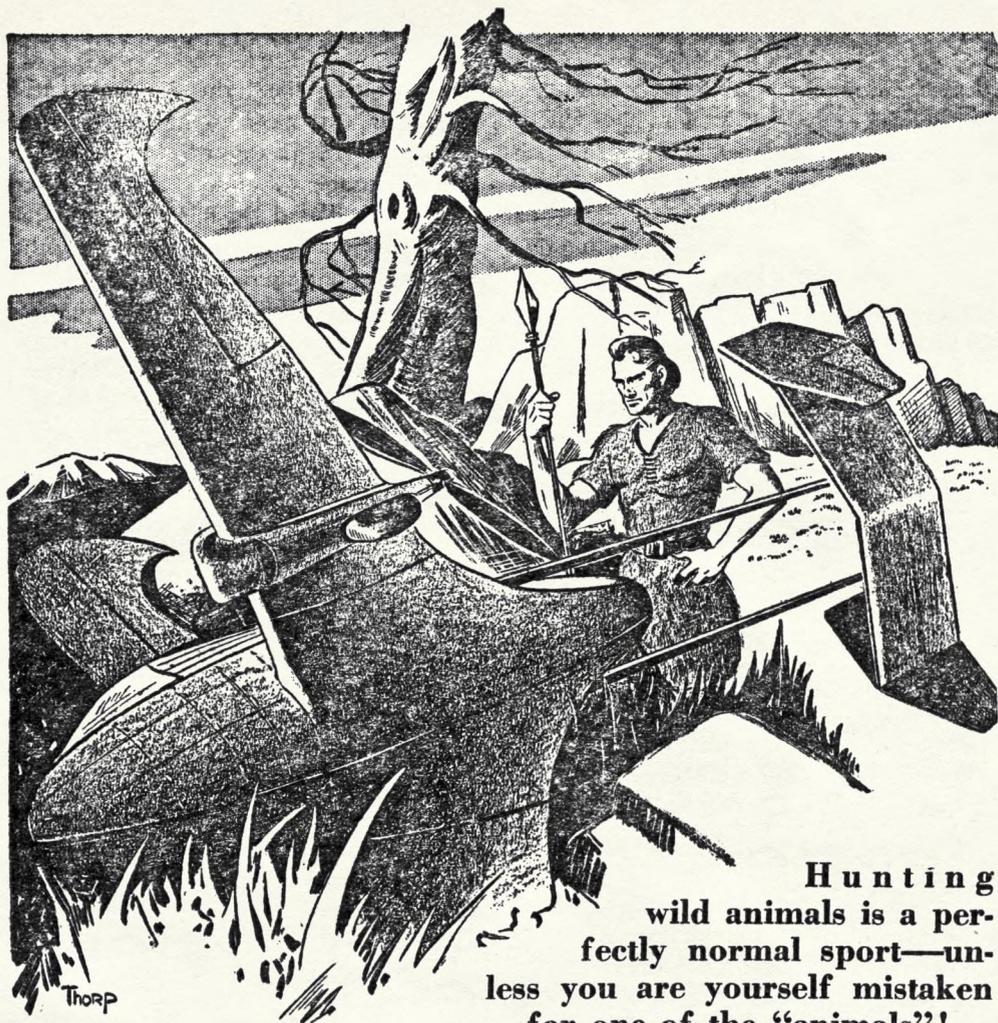
Theron bit his lip, but forebore to retort. All three were smooth-faced, clean, strong-limbed young men—Lantz just breaking out of boyhood, Nedro and Theron in their early twenties. Their costumes, in accordance with the prevailing style of the early 3950's, were similar to that worn by the girl, except that the men wore a vest-like torso covering which reached to the belt, instead of the wispy feminine brasket (probably derived from the terms, "brassiere" and "jacket").

Lantz took up the subject. "Bishop Malcolm is an old fossil. I heard him tell father that it would be more merciful to exterminate the rannies outright than to hunt them with bow and arrow. I ask you," he demanded indignantly, "what fun there is in merely exterminating game?"

"It seems to me a great deal more sporting to match one's skill against the cunning and speed of the creatures," contended Dayonna with spirit.

"It's too dangerous for a girl," retorted Theron. "These rannies have been known to turn on a hunter when wounded. One of the Minster crowd was badly mangled by a female last season."

By WILLARD E. HAWKINS



**Hunting wild animals is a perfectly normal sport—unless you are yourself mistaken for one of the “animals”!**

“Served him right for shooting her cub,” returned Dayonna. “Besides, I can take care of myself.”

“Certainly the young lady can take care of herself! Who claims otherwise?” demanded a jovial voice. They had reached a pine thicket surrounding the lodge, and a rotund figure soberly clad in black tunic and knickers, appeared before them.

“Thanks for defending me, Bishop Malcolm,” Dayonna responded gaily. “We were just hearing about your fascinating lecture.”

“I wish Dayonna could have heard that part of your talk,” Theron said, turning to the Bishop, “in which you produced

evidence that the rannies were once domesticated and lived in the same communities with man.”

“A VERY interesting point,” agreed the Bishop. “Recent restorations of primitive motion-film fragments support the conclusion that at one time—perhaps as recently as the twenty-first century—human beings were closely associated with the rannies. Some authorities go so far as to assert that they intermarried, though doubtless such matings were sterile.”

“You mean—they lived together?” Dayonna voiced the horrified exclamation.

Bishop Malcolm smiled tolerantly. “My

dear child, man was not always the highly civilized being that he is today. Under primitive conditions, distinctions which we now take for granted were hardly apparent. To the simple mentalities of our primitive ancestors, the distinguishing difference between animals and human beings was the erect posture. It was only gradually, as human society evolved, that the vast gulf between bipeds which were human and bipeds belonging to an inferior species was recognized. Actually, this recognition was not reached until the machine age was well advanced and biped labor had become unnecessary."

Bishop Malcolm pressed the tips of his fingers together. He was now fully enjoying himself.

"It became increasingly apparent that these inferior beings, for whom society had no further use, did not belong to the human race. We find references to the distinction in some of the primitive writings that have been preserved. Indeed, certain very definite references to aryan and non-aryans have been credited to the middle of the twentieth century. From the context, it is clear that aryan was a term synonymous with human. It is worthy of note—" the Bishop broke off—"I hope I am not boring you."

"It's extremely interesting," assured Theron.

"If you don't mind," interposed Nedro, "I'll run ahead and freshen up for dinner."

He hurried off, followed somewhat hesitantly by Lantz.

Theron shrugged. "You were going to tell us—"

"I had really come to the end of my lecture," the Bishop assured them smiling, "except that I might point out some interesting facts relating to the development of our present Amero-english language. First, we had the term non-aryan, apparently used to designate inferior bipeds which did not belong to the human

race. Tracing the term, we find that it was later corrupted to naryan, then to narran—which has now been reduced in familiar usage to ranny. So today, my dear—" he patted Dayonna affectionately on the shoulder—"although you say that you were hunting rannies, your pregenitors would probably have insisted that you were out exterminating non-aryans.

"For that, apparently, is the way that the problem was eventually met. The creatures were first herded into what were known as concentration camps, and later—as a more humane expedient—turned into huge preserves, or reservations, there to be kept down, when they multiplied too fast, through periodic extermination sorties by flame-gun battalions."

"I should think—" began Dayonna, then paused uncertainly.

"Yes, my dear, you should. Everyone should think," responded the Bishop with his becoming mild humor.

"It occurred to me," the girl went on slowly, "that if these rannies had been trained to—to work for their human masters as you describe—they would have kept on doing so for themselves after being driven out."

"So they did—to a certain extent. It is said that they tilled their ground and set up their little communities—even had their schools and churches. Amusing to contemplate—and yet pathetic. All pure mimicry, of course—an effort to ape the customs of the human beings with whom they had been associated. We often see children playing in much the same way—with, of course, much more real understanding of the activities of their elders than these dumb creatures could possibly have."

"There are stories that they still keep up such customs, in regions remote from civilization," commented Theron.

"Possibly," observed the Bishop, "although I doubt it. For one thing, the game laws making it permissible to hunt

them gradually discouraged them from living in open communities and converted them for the most part into nomadic packs.

"It is curious again," he added, "that on this matter of exterminating the pests there was for a long time much disagreement. It was only when scientists discovered that rannies were increasing to the point where they threatened to overrun the earth, that the sentimentalists were silenced. We now take rannie hunting for granted, though I incline to the view that the earlier plan of exterminating them wholesale was more merciful."

"But that's so cold-blooded!" objected Dayonna.

"Perhaps you are right, my dear," he returned placidly, "I've no settled convictions on the subject. No doubt the human race would become soft and indolent, if there were no outlets, such as rannie hunting, for our more virile instincts."

## CHAPTER II

### Two Who Dared

**I**NSTEAD of taking the tube to her suite, Dayonna passed around the lodge and entered a tree-bordered path on the far side. Some minutes later, she stood at the entrance of the compact control station near the main gate.

Her father, intent on the activities of the electro-toms, failed to notice her for a minute. When he glanced up, a frown crossed his ruddy face.

"There's something wrong with the barrier," he told her. "You'd better stay close to the lodge?"

"But how can there be any danger?" returned the girl, smiling sweetly. She stepped to his side and drew his arm around her. For a moment, they watched the deftly flying fingers of the three toms. They were undersized creatures, with expressionless faces, clad in neutral brown. One was rewinding an armature, one was

making intricate tests in a bewildering maze of wires, coils, and grids behind the opened switchboard, and a third was welding a framework of metal.

"How do they know where the trouble is and how to fix it?" she asked her father, after a moment.

"They know because they're toms," he answered. "They've been especially developed, from selected stock, in the conditioning-plants."

"Have there always been toms?"

"Always? Why, of course—that is, since man became civilized."

"I mean—did we have them back—well, back in the dark ages when rannies did the work—before machines were invented?"

He shrugged. "Ask your historians—ask Bishop Malcolm. As a matter of fact, I believe it was about the time of the machine age that scientists discovered the conditioning process which made automotons out of the lower animals. They experimented with different varieties, finally determining that rannies were the most adaptable."

"Then the toms are actually rannies?"

"Yes—or were originally. I've never bothered my head about such things, but I understand that the stock is renewed from time to time by capturing rannies while they are cubs. They're brought up in the conditioning schools, bred with other toms, and their cubs in turn are conditioned. It takes about three generations to turn out a perfectly conditioned tom. These creatures—" he indicated the three busy workers, who concentrated on their tasks, oblivious of the discussion—"have been so perfectly conditioned that they have practically no mental reflexes aside from those involved in electricity. The same with machine-tending-toms, domestic-toms, builder-toms, transport-toms, and all the rest. That's what the name means—tom—short for automoton."

The work was progressing rapidly.

Fused grids were replaced, connections were made, and order was being restored from chaos with what seemed miraculous speed.

"They'll have the barrier working in a few minutes," Marland observed. "Better run back and let them know. I'll be along for dinner as soon as I'm certain everything is all right."

After Dayonna's departure, Marland stood abstractedly contemplating the efficient workers as they made final tests preparatory to turning on the current. He was aroused from his reverie by a scream.

**I**NSTANTLY alert, he swung himself to the doorway, drawing his flame-gun as he emerged. Dusk was so far advanced that at first he could distinguish nothing definite in the grove of trees surrounding the control-station clearing. Then the scream was repeated, directing his glance.

Some distance through the grove, Dayonna was cowering back against a tree trunk. Half crouching before her were two figures, unmistakably rannies—their attitudes suggesting that they had dropped from an overhead limb in her path. Both were bucks—powerful-looking members of their species, their faces half covered with hair, their sun-baked bodies partly protected by skins.

Flame-gun in hand, Marland started running toward the two creatures. Prevented from burning them down where they stood because Dayonna masked the line of fire, he shouted to her:

"Out of the way, girl! Let me wither them!"

Quick-witted, and not accustomed to give way to fear, Dayonna dodged aside. One of the rannies broke and ran toward the barrier. The other hesitated, then pounced upon the girl, seizing her in his strong arms despite her screams and struggles.

Still foiled in the use of his flame-gun, Marland began warily closing on the des-

perate creature, at the same time shouting for help. Dayonna's first scream must have been heard from the lodge, because there were already nearby answering shouts. A moment later, several men, including Theron and Nedro, appeared, weaving through the trees.

"Surround them!" shouted Marland. "Don't risk your flame-guns. Cut him off!"

The intention of the skulking rannie was obvious. He was backing toward the barrier, holding the struggling girl tightly as a shield. The other intruder was already scrambling up the closely webbed wires forming the nine-foot barrier.

He had reached the top, and both Theron and Nedro, racing neck and neck, were within twenty yards of Dayonna's captor, when there was a blinding flash. The climber flung up his arms with an agonized scream. He hung, balanced across the top strands of searing wire, while sparks and flashes illuminated the sizzling corpse, and a stench of burned flesh filled the air.

"The barrier!" shouted Marland exultantly. "It's on! We've got him cornered now!"

The remaining rannie, with Dayonna clutched in his arms, cowered back at the sudden flash. His lips bared in a snarl at sight of his electrocuted companion.

Dayonna seized his instant of consternation to make a frantic break for freedom. She struggled from the rannie's grasp—would have eluded him, had she not slipped on the pine needles.

The rannie swung her over his shoulder, then turned and ran deliberately toward the deadly barrier.

"God! Stop him! He's going to impale her!" It was Theron who voiced the despairing cry.

**B**OTH he and Nedro, well in advance of the others, plunged after the running figure. Their progress was impeded

by a thick growth of scrub oak bushes. The creature's intention was obvious. If he could not escape himself, he would exact a terrible revenge by electrocuting Dayonna.

Marland started as if to head off the runner, then, realizing the hopelessness of the attempt, whirled and shouted:

"Shut off the current!"

A tom, standing in the doorway of the control station, caught the command his specialized brain was trained to grasp and disappeared inside.

Abruptly, the flashes which had brought the rannie corpse into intermittent relief, ceased. The rigid limbs relaxed; the body tumbled grotesquely to the earth.

With amazing agility, the rannie started climbing the wires, managing somehow to cling to the girl who, no longer struggling, hung limply over his shoulder.

"Run for the gate!" yelled Marland. "Head the beast off! You—Theron—Nedro—to the hangar! Get others—follow him in your hunting-copters!"

He himself led the dash for the gate. Some of the men followed the rannie's example by climbing the barrier. The wild creature had been lost to view in the thickly wooded hillside. Marland caught one final glimpse of him, as he dived into a depression, the girl still flung over his shoulder.

The search, aided by powerful lights focused from a dozen circling helicopters, continued throughout the night. But not a trace of Dayonna or the rannie was discovered.

### CHAPTER III

#### The Dark Way

**W**HEN Dayonna came to herself, she was lying on the ground in total darkness, while a panting figure crouched over her.

At the gasp which signaled her return to consciousness, a firm hand was clamped over her mouth.

The rannie muttered something, in a low voice. Although she did not understand the sounds, it was not difficult to interpret them as an imperative command for silence.

Her mind was working coolly. Accustomed by the hunt to the thrill of danger, she felt disdain rather than fear of her captor. On many occasions, with no other weapon than her bow and arrow, she had brought down from her copter animals as large and powerful as this one. The brute could be no match for a human. Unless he took a sudden notion to kill her, she could undoubtedly escape by using her wits.

And if he had intended to kill her, he would surely have done so before now.

Evidently, they were in some sort of a cave.

A faint evidence of light indicated the low entrance.

A stream trickled past, apparently losing itself in the depths.

The rannie's panting became less violent and presently subsided to normal breathing. Tentatively, he removed his hand. And Dayonna, because she did not want the sweaty palm to touch her face again, refrained from making an outcry, which would have been futile, at best. The wise course, she reasoned, was to wait until he should be off guard and a real opportunity to escape presented itself.

The creature straightened up and said something in an almost humanly questioning tone.

He had repeated the question, before Dayonna realized, with a start, that she caught its meaning. Though his words were strangely slurred, he was demanding:

"Will you walk, or do I have to carry you?"

"You—you!" She was going to exclaim, "You talk!" but checked herself, and slowly gained her feet.

At once, he started toward the interior of the cave, half guiding, half forcing her with a firm grip on her arm.

The trail was evidently familiar to him. They must be following the course of the stream, for its sound was audible at intervals. Now and then they squeezed through cramped passages.

The existence of this cave, with an entrance so near her father's hunting estate, was unknown to human beings, Dayonna felt sure. She could imagine the bafflement of the searchers who were no doubt combing the region for signs of her.

After her first surprise at discovering that the rannie could talk, she felt an impulse to demand where he was taking her—but the question remained unasked. There was something repugnant—unnatural—in the thought of communicating with this inferior type of being.

**T**HEIR way led through the darkness for what seemed to be miles, before a faint light in the distance presaged an opening of the cavern. The rannie's grip tightened. As he guided his captive across a narrow, bridge-like support, which swayed perilously, she felt a moment of panic—even welcomed the assurance of his tight clutch on her arm. A moment later, they were on solid ground and shortly emerged in a patch of moonlight between two cliffs—seemingly extensions of the cavern walls.

The rannie sniffed the air, studying the prospect warily. Dayonna eagerly scanned the almost cloudless sky, hoping to sight one or more of the helicopters which no doubt was scouring the country for her. In the limited expanse visible between the cliffs, however, there were no lights except the gleaming stars.

They picked their way along the stream for perhaps a hundred yards; then the

rannie gestured toward a low boulder and made some comment. She understood his gesture to mean that she could rest. As she sank down, thankfully, on the smooth surface, the actual words he had used cleared themselves in her brain. He had said: "You can flop there, sister, if you're tired."

No question about it—he could talk!

She watched him curiously. He must intend to camp for the night, because he at once set about preparations for a fire. This did not surprise the girl; she had often come upon campfires left by the creatures in the forest, and it was suspected that they sometimes used them to cook their food as well as for warmth. An instinct, no doubt, handed down from the primitive days when they had existed alongside of humanity.

For a moment, hope surged through her. The glow of a fire should be apparent, even from the depths between these cliffs.

The hope quickly died. The rannie's fire was laid well back in a natural grotto beneath an overhanging rock shelf. There appeared to be a rift in the rock which served as a chimney. In the blackened interior, he kindled the fire with a crude device apparently consisted of a chemically treated little stick which he scratched against the surface of the rock until it ignited.

When he had the fire blazing satisfactorily, the rannie turned and said something. Though her ears were becoming accustomed to his odd inflection, this was a complex observation which she failed to grasp.

"I don't understand you," she returned.

He spoke more slowly.

"I said, if you want to freshen up a bit, I'll be gone for a spell. If you'd like a bath, there's a natural pool where the stream rounds this boulder."

He turned and strode toward the cave entrance, leaving behind him a girl over-

come with astonishment. The revelation that a rannie could talk—using the accepted language of her kind—was startling enough. This faded into insignificance now at his exhibition of what appeared to be normal human delicacy. Although she was his captive, he had tacitly assumed that she would desire moments of privacy. Theron or Nedro—both of them well bred and obviously in love with her—could have been no more considerate.

But her bewilderment did not prevent her from taking advantage of the opportunity he had unthinkingly permitted. She confined her toilet to the barest essentials. The pool looked tempting but she could not afford to consume precious moments in taking a plunge. Hastening to the fire, she selected a blazing brand and ran into the open, waving it overhead. She darted from one spot to another, hoping that the moving spark might be observed from a roving helicopter.

## CHAPTER IV

### Rescue!

**A** VOICE raised in a wild sort of chant, not exactly melodeous to her ears, gave warning of the rannie's approach. Hurriedly, she thrust her improvised torch back into the fire. Was he singing purposely—to warn of his return? She dismissed the idea as fantastic.

When her captor strode into the moonlit patch surrounding the camp site, she was kneeling beside the stream washing the grime from her hands. The rannie sniffed the air as if slightly puzzled, then, with a glance at the fire, he tossed a bundle to the ground. Unrolled, it consisted of a fur-covered robe, a coarse blanket, a blackened skillet and pot, tin plates and cups, and items of food, presumably taken from a cache somewhere in the cave.

While she watched—at intervals expectantly glancing up at the sky-patch—he set about preparations for a meal. Slices of cured meat were cut and soon sizzling in the frying pan; the pot was set to boiling; some hard biscuits were produced.

Dayonna found her curiosity fighting a winning battle with her instinctive tendency toward reserve.

"Do you—always cook your food—as we do?"

He paused and regarded her curiously—his rugged features, with the characteristic rannie hair covering the lower portion—weirdly lighted by the blaze.

"What do you mean by we?"

His speech was becoming easier for her to understand.

"Why—human beings, of course."

He stared at her for a moment, then turned away with a grunt. The question remained unanswered.

But there was no resentment in his manner when, a few minutes later, he removed the meat from the fire, divided it between two tin plates, and passed the girl her share.

She ate with a healthy appetite. Cured meat was a novelty to her—accustomed as she was to synthetic foods—but she liked it. The drink he had brewed was less delicately flavored than those to which she was accustomed, but she passed her cup for more.

He was in the act of pouring it, when his ears caught an alien sound. He sat rigidly alert for an instant, then dashed the contents of the pot over the fire. With sandled feet, he stamped out the coals that still gleamed redly.

**R**ESCUE! Dayonna realized almost as quickly as did the rannie that a helicopter had circled into view overhead. She would have run into the open, but he caught her as she gained her feet. Throwing her to the ground, he subdued her

struggles by sheer force of corded muscles, one hand firmly clamped over her mouth.

The copter had evidently been attracted by her fire signal, for it circled in an ever-narrowing radius over their hiding place. It was one of the late models, its noiseless atomic motor especially designed to allow a hunter to slip up on game without giving alarm. The rannie's ears must have been wonderfully acute to catch the vibration of its approach.

Around and around swept the elongated disk, its operator no doubt hoping for a repetition of the signal. Gradually it settled closer to the ground, flying back and forth as if closely examining the rocky surface.

While Dayonna was frantically cudgeling her mind for a method of attracting attention, the pilot must have abandoned hope that the signal would be repeated. A searchlight blazed down—blinding the two with its intensity.

She renewed her struggles. The rannie's grip tightened.

The searchlight played back and forth, then stopped. It centered on the cut in which the two figures were pressed against the rocky floor. Whether or not the rescuer had actually sighted them, it was apparent that he picked this spot as a likely hiding place.

Slowly, the ovoid settled toward them. It was under perfect control. Muttering something between clenched teeth, the rannie attempted to draw Dayonna back into shelter. She resorted to an age-old ruse. Seemingly she yielded, went limp in his grasp—then, with an unexpected twist, wrenched herself free—stumbled into the open, shouting: "I'm here!"

As the rannie plunged after her, she turned and ran.

Clearly outlined as they were in the glare of the searchlight, the two figures could not fail to be seen. The copter paused in its downward course and darted

after the running pair. Ahead was the cave entrance. As Dayonna plunged into the dark interior, thinking only to elude the outstretched arms of the rannie, her rescuer was almost directly overhead.

A rending crash reached her ears. With a moan of dismay, she threw herself face down. The rannie stumbled over her.

Neither of them heard the second crash as the helicopter, partly recovering from the contact of its landing gear with the shelf-like roof of the cave entrance, rose in the air, then swooped head-on against a jutting spire farther up the slope.

## CHAPTER V

### A Desperate Attempt

**T**HE struggle in the cave was brief. Bruised and disheartened, Dayonna resigned herself to the inevitable. For a period, both listened intently for sounds indicating the fate of the helicopter. None reached their ears. There was no sign of the rescuer when at length they came forth into the moonlight.

The girl could have shrieked with vexation. The copter must lie somewhere nearby, a mass of wreckage—its occupant injured or dead. And she herself had brought on the disaster by foolishly running into the cave!

In her disappointment and anger, she turned and struck at the rannie with her bare fists. He was staring speculatively at the rock outcropping above the cave, and the only notice he paid to the tattoo of her fists against his hard-muscled torso was to capture her wrists in a grip of steel. A moment later, releasing his hold, he turned back toward the camp.

The night air was none too warm, but the rannie evidently had no intention of risking another fire. He picked up the fur robe and blanket.

"You can take your choice," he offered. "I'd recommend the blanket."

Snatching the proffered covering, she withdrew to the shelter of the fireplace grotto. The rannie yawned, wrapped himself in the somewhat inadequate robe, and curled up to sleep near the boulder beside the pool.

Dayonna remained awake for some time. Curiously, she felt no immediate fear of the rannie. There were men with whom the prospect of spending a night alone would have brought much greater apprehension. But that a rannie—one of the wild beasts of the forest—might have amorous inclinations toward a woman of the human race, was an idea so remote from her comprehension that it did not even occur to disturb her rest.

Mingled with anxiety concerning the identity and fate of her would-be rescuer, was a confusion of schemes for escape. She fell asleep without arriving at any definite plan, but woke in the darkness that precedes the dawn, still determined to make some desperate break for freedom. If she could slip away while the rannie slept, surely there would be a possibility of evading him and finding her way back.

Whatever she decided upon must be attempted quickly. Only two courses apparently were open to her. She might slip into the cave and lose herself in its fastnesses, or she could attempt to scale the precipitous cliffs.

As she raised herself on an elbow and studied the sleeping figure of her captor, a third course presented itself. With luck, she might brain him with a rock while he slept.

She felt only mild repugnance at the thought. The rannie was merely an animal—of the kind she and her friends had hunted many times for the thrill of the chase. This wasn't exactly a sporting method of attack—but it was his life against her own freedom.

With infinite caution, she gained her feet. Already, premonitions of dawn were

sharpening the outlines of her surroundings—of the sleeping figure beside the boulder.

In one hand, she gripped a jagged chunk of granite. A cautious step forward—another. She came to the realization that she was looking into a pair of unblinking, clear eyes.

**T**HE rannie seemed neither angry nor surprised. Though her intention must have been obvious, he stretched, tossed aside the robe, and gained his feet. The rock dropped from Dayonna's hands. She drew back in apprehension.

Paying not the slightest heed to her, he set about building another fire in the recessed oven. But before commencing breakfast, he addressed her.

"The place is yours," he observed. Then, with a shrug: "I don't think your signals will carry in the daylight." Turning, he strode upstream, to be lost quickly in the densely wooded canyon.

Her heart gave a bound. As soon as he was out of sight she ran to the cave entrance.

At the cave entrance she found what she had hoped for. Sheer and high—in some places actually sloping inward near the top—rose the cliffs. But the collision of the helicopter landing gear with the outcropping over the cave entrance had dislodged a slab of rock and precipitated a slide of debris. Half embedded in the rocks and gravel of the slide was a weathered tree stump. The combination might offer precarious hand and foot holds.

Cautiously inching her way over the sliding rock debris, she worked her body up to the tree stump. It seemed to be wedged into a fissure, and by its aid she was able to draw herself further, until her reaching hands touched a jagged outcropping which projected from the cave roof.

She was bruised and bleeding, her knees bloody and her hands and limbs painfully gashed. Her breath came gasp-

ingly from the exertion. But there was no time for rest. As soon as her escape was discovered, the rannie would surely follow.

**F**OR a moment she lay panting and exhausted, face down on the cool earth. As soon as her breath was coming a little easier, she sat up, ruefully examining her bleeding foot. With a strap from her helmet, she effected a temporary repair of the sandal and had started to regain her feet, when a strange sound froze her to immobility.

Tensely she listened. The sound was repeated—an eerie moaning which came seemingly from above—from a ridge which crossed the hillside at an angle.

Half prepared for the explanation, she crept forward. As she topped the rise, her apprehensions were confirmed.

At the base of the rock spire lay the wreck of a helicopter. A few feet away, as if he had been thrown out or had dragged himself clear, lay the motionless body of a man.

Dayonna plunged down the slope and fell on her knees beside the injured figure. One glance at his face—

“Theron!” she cried, compassionately.

The eyes opened, and the pain-wracked features lighted. “Dayonna!” he breathed. Then his lids fell, and a slight shudder swept his body as he again lost consciousness.

The girl glanced hastily around. The hillside offered no promise of water, but in the wrecked helicopter she found the canteen-like container intact.

She forced some between his lips, then with the handkerchief from her belt-wallet she began bathing his face.

The revelation that it was Theron, devotedly searching for her through the night, who had caught her signals—that he had hastened unaided to rescue her, and probably would have succeeded but for her ill-advised dash for freedom—

brought tears to her eyes and a choking sensation to her throat. For a long time she had known that Theron loved her. She had avoided letting him put his feelings into words because of a suspicion that he lacked the zest for red-blooded adventure that denoted manhood to her. It was very fine, of course, to have an interest in serious things—science and records of the past. But after all, this was an age which gave its plaudis to men—and women as well—who excelled in physical prowess and courage—the great athletes, the mighty hunters, the daring experimenters in rocket-flying.

Yet in an emergency it was Theron who had proved his devotion—had been prepared to stake his life in a battle with her powerful rannie captor. She was thrilled, even as she condemned herself for bringing him to disaster.

He was bruised and scratched, but she could not determine the extent of his injuries. The thongs of one sandal cut deeply into the flesh of the ankle, suggesting that it was swollen. As she bent to examine it, a shadow fell across her line of vision. She looked up.

The rannie towered above her on the ridge.

## CHAPTER VI

### “What Shall I Do With You?”

**T**HOUGHT of escape must be put aside, temporarily, at least. She needed help—needed it desperately. If she could make the creature understand—could somehow induce him to aid her in caring for the wounded man—that was all she would demand of the present.

Eagerly, yet fearfully, she scanned the face looking down at her. The stubble-disfigured features showed neither anger nor resentment—nor any other emotion, unless it might be mild curiosity.

“Come down here!” Dayonna called



imperiously. "Help me to do something for him—he's injured."

In a leisurely manner, the rannie descended the bank. His eyes were fixed on the helicopter. He strode over to the wrecked machine and examined it with fascination, fingering and peering at the twisted mechanism.

The pillowed head in Dayonna's lap moved—the eyes opened.

Theron stared up for a moment, then smiled.

"Saw—your signal—tried to reach you—" he breathed disjointedly. "Something—went wrong."

"It was noble of you, Theron," she as-

sured him gently. Then, abashed by the tremor in her voice, she added in a matter-of-fact tone: "Where are you hurt? Is it your ankle?"

He glanced down the length of his lean, muscular body, tried to move his foot—wincing at the pain.

"I guess that's the worst of it," she acknowledged. Then, startled: "Who's that fellow?"

"Nobody," explained Dayonna. "It's just a rannie—the one that carried me off."

With sudden access of energy, Theron raised himself to one elbow, fumbling at his belt for the flame-gun. Finding it gone, he struggled to hands and knees, his eyes searching the matted grass. The rannie made a dive—came up with the weapon.

"Sorry!" he observed, examining it curiously. "I'm afraid I'll have to take charge of this."

"Good God!" exclaimed Theron. "Can it talk?"

"It's very intelligent," Dayonna responded complacently. She felt a mild glow of superiority at having been the first to discover the unexpected gifts of the rannie.

"And we're at its mercy!" muttered Theron. The revelation that the creature possessed a form of cunning only emphasized the horror of their position.

"It has really treated me quite well," Dayonna remarked casually.

Theron stared. "What in God's name do you suppose he'll do with us?" he breathed.

A gleam that might have been interpreted as amusement flickered in the eyes of the rannie. He squatted before them.

"That's a question I've been asking myself," he observed.

"If we're such a problem," suggested Dayonna, "you can easily let us go."

"That's the trouble," returned the rannie. "I can't. If I let you go you'll find

your way back and disclose the secret of the cave. I can't afford to take a chance.

"Of course I could bash in your heads with a rock—as you would have done to me as I slept." He glanced at Dayonna, his voice hardening. "Or I could exterminate you with the flame-gun—I'm told your people find that a very entertaining sport! Or I could improvise a bow and arrow, and leave you here wounded to die an agonized death. Great fun that, from your standards! I might drag you back and impale you on the wires surrounding your father's estate. My faithful friend Jal would make good company for you there."

Dayonna shrank away from his glowering scowl. It was the first time his features had shown real emotion. Theron struggled to one knee.

"You vile creature!" he spat.

The rannie studied him, while the fury slowly faded from his habitually calm features.

"I AM curious," he remarked slowly, "to understand your point of view. It happens that I find myself incapable of doing any of these things, yet to you—who belong to a race which does them—I am a vile creature."

They had no answer to this. Theron sank back against the hillside, his eyes wide with apprehension—and bewilderment.

"So," resumed the rannie, "I find your presence a problem. I can't let you go; I have no heart to kill you; and you'll prove a burden if I take you with me. Besides, I don't believe you're in shape to travel. Let's see that ankle."

Before Theron could protest, he had taken the injured member in his hands and was deftly fingering it. "Hurt when I press here?" he demanded.

Theron winced.

"It's just a wrench," commented the rannie. "No bones broken. But you'll

have to go easy on it. Bad bruise over your left eye. That's probably what knocked you out."

He studied the pair speculatively.

"Nothing for it," he sighed, "but to take you along. The council will have to decide what to do with you."

He helped Theron to his feet, and slowly they began the descent of the hill, first taking from the helicopter the synthetic food and water containers.

"I wish Valthor could study that machine," the rannie commented regretfully. "If we had some of your science—"

Somehow bolstered by the comforting presence of Theron, injured though he was, Dayonna felt almost a zest for the adventure. It would be something to tell her friends—to be envied for. Already she could see their eyes open with astonishment when she told them she had talked with a rannie—found him intelligent, even possessing the rudiments of a conscience.

When they reached the shelf over the cavern entrance, she discovered that the rannie had followed her by throwing a loop of fibre rope over a gnarled tree root which projected from the slope. With its aid, they descended—Theron negotiating the downward climb without great difficulty by putting most of his weight on his arms. With a deft flick of the rope, the rannie disengaged it, and they returned to the camp.

He rekindled the burned-out fire and cooked a breakfast. Dayonna insisted on removing Theron's sandal and bathing his ankle.

Theron ate contemplatively, regarding the rannie with troubled eyes.

"Look here," he said abruptly, as they concluded the meal. "Are you—that is, are all rannies like you?"

"In what way?"

"As to talking—and having ideas about things—and—well—I don't exactly know how to put it."

THERE was an undercurrent of amusement in the rannie's voice, though he replied seriously. "I assure you, I am a very average, ordinary member of my race. What of it?"

"Only that—well, I had no idea you were so—nearly human. I suppose you have a name—and all that. Or do you?"

"Yes, I do."

He volunteered no further information. Dayonna's curiosity presently forced the question, "What is it?"

"My name? Well, it's very unusual. I was named for my grandfather, who in turn had it from some still earlier progenitor. The name is Billsmith."

"How quaint!" exclaimed the girl. "It has a sort of prehistoric flavor—like inscriptions on some of the old tombstones."

"It undoubtedly is a very ancient name," Billsmith acknowledged with pride. "Valthor ran across it once in a fragment of ancient manuscript."

Breakfast over, they set out for whatever destination the rannie had in view. The pack containing his robes and supplies was fastened by straps over his muscular shoulders. Outfitted with a staff, Theron walked with difficulty and could travel only a brief distance before stopping to rest. Though obviously concerned over their slow progress, Billsmith showed remarkable forbearance. During their frequent stops, Theron plied him with questions.

In answer to one of these, Billsmith volunteered:

"Yes, it's true that my people live primitively. Valthor estimates that we're hardly as far advanced as mankind living under frontier conditions in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Our science is in its infancy. The great catastrophe, which threw us out of organized society in the twenty-first century, left us baffled, absolutely crushed. It has taken centuries to make a beginning toward recovery. For one thing, we have been scat-

tered, suspicious of each other, hunted, and driven from place to place. People living a nomadic life such as ours cannot make great progress. But there has been a tremendous advance of late. We're becoming united—there is already a movement—” He broke off.

## CHAPTER VII

### “What Is a Human?”

**T**HEY made camp early in the evening. Theron's ankle was no worse, but the effort of walking on it even with the support of his staff, had taxed him until he was pale with fatigue.

Their way had led through a succession of canons, ever upward into the hills, until at the last they emerged at the crest of a ridge which bordered what seemed to be a broad mesa. Although the level plain below them offered more inviting prospects for camping, the rannie insisted on remaining within the shelter of the rocks. “Safer here,” he observed tersely.

“You mean—there's danger of some sort out there?” Theron gestured toward the flat country beyond.

Billsmith hesitated, then explained.

“Not all rannies—as you call us—are in an equal state of development. A good many bands still roam the country in a state of savagery. The pathetic hunted creatures surrounding your father's lodge belong to this category. Some of these outlaw bands graze their cattle on this table-land. We've never been able to overcome their suspicion sufficiently to establish relationship with them.”

“If you aren't one of these wild creatures, why were you snooping around my father's lodge?” demanded Dayonna.

“As a matter of fact,” responded Billsmith with a grin, “Jal and I were sent on a special mission—to test a device of Valthor's on a live-wire barrier.”

“Then it was you,” flashed Dayonna, “who put our transmitters out of commission?”

“The test was successful,” conceded Billsmith. “Valthor said it should have the effect of reversing the current upon itself—backing up the power with such violence as to burn out the transmitters. If it worked, it might prove a potent weapon when we—”

He stopped abruptly, but continued a moment later:

“I won't attempt to explain the principle. All I know is that I put down the box, then tossed the antenna over your barrier as Valthor directed. There was a flash. The box exploded, but the barrier was dead. Very foolishly, I climbed over. Jal followed—to his doom, poor fellow!”

Abruptly Billsmith turned away.

After sunset, they sat beside the fire while Theron plied their captor with more questions. Dayonna was acutely aware that, only twenty-four hours previously, it would have seemed utterly fantastic to conceive of talking thus companionably with a rannie. Theron put her thoughts into words, when he asked, with a touch of diffidence:

“How is it, Billsmith, that you seem to—well—that you bear us no particular ill will—belonging, as we do, to the race that drove your kind into this precarious life?”

The rannie considered.

“**F**RANKLY,” he said, “I don't hold you to blame. You've been conditioned—just like those poor creatures you take and train into toms—automotons. Conditioning is a powerful force. It was discovered away back in the twentieth century. As long as people lived under what they termed democracies, they were subjected to all sorts of ideas—ideas which pulled this way and that. Some of the ideas were shoved at them pretty hard—propaganda, the ancients called it—

but they could always hear the other side if they wanted to. At least, they knew there was another side. They could take their choice among the ideas offered, and as a result they did a certain amount of thinking.

"Then came an era of dictatorships. Here the pulling and pushing of all sorts of ideas gave way to something far more tentative—and deadly. People were given just one side of a question. Anything opposed to it was forbidden under penalty of death. Since the contrary idea never was suggested, it did not even occur to them to think—to question what they were told. Without knowing it, whole nations became automotons.

"It doesn't matter how absurd the idea—if you've been brought up to believe it and never hear a contrary suggestion, you'll accept it—unless you're one in a thousand, at any rate. Thus the myth of naryans came into being among your ancestors. The idea must have outraged their common sense at first; but it was forbidden to teach otherwise, or to express a thought to the contrary. By and by, people forgot their opposition to the idea; forgot that there could be any opposition. You've never heard it questioned. You've been brought up to believe that rannies are a lower animal—that they don't talk, don't have names, that they're interlopers on the planet you inhabit. How could you believe otherwise?"

"That's not fair!" protested Dayonna with spirit. "The truth probably is that in those prehistoric days people were conditioned to accept as human all creatures that walked on two legs. It wasn't until scientists disclosed its absurdity that they abandoned this idea."

"Science is a great thing," acknowledged the rannie. "Especially the science of mental conditioning. I'd like to know—purely out of curiosity—just how you human beings differ from us rannies. Are

we anatomically different? Is it a matter of wearing clothes? If so, I might observe that my people—the women especially—wear a good deal more than you do."

Dayonna, bare limbs gleaming in the firelight, glanced down with a momentary shade of self-consciousness at her abbreviated hunting costume.

"I'm not a scientist," she returned stubbornly, "but I suppose there are innumerable differences. For one thing, the human being has a soul."

"I see," dryly. "I'll concede the soul—for I'm not sure whether I have one or not. Any other differences?"

She flushed at his sarcasm. "You have hair on your face," she retorted sharply. "Only animals have that."

The rannie rose to his feet, vastly amused. "Too bad I didn't bring my shaving outfit," he grinned. "I might have passed for human then. What say we turn in for the night?"

**I**T WAS Theron who gave Dayonna the answer to her retort, while Billsmith was outside the circle of light gathering fuel for the morning fire.

"To be fair," he observed, "it was only a thousand or so years ago that the human race discovered efficient depilatory methods and succeeded in establishing hairless faces as the norm. Prior to that, men acquired smooth faces only by removing the growth at intervals. That's what the rannie means by shaving."

"But surely you don't believe—"

"Oh, I concede everything you'd say," Theron assured her. "Only—there isn't as wide a gulf as I've been led to believe. This creature, for example, could almost pass for human."

"Which makes it all the more dreadful!" Dayonna commented.

When Billsmith returned, they stretched out to sleep beside the dying fire, the rannie insisting that they take the robe and blanket. "It's no unusual experience for

me to sleep in the open without protection," he observed, silencing their protests.

Even after they had nominally retired, Theron continued the discussion. Billsmith finally caught him up on a frequently recurring word.

"You speak of those days as prehistoric," he observed. "Actually, you are speaking of a period scarcely more than two thousand years past. This should not have been before the dawn of recorded history. It's comparatively a short period."

"I have often thought of that," responded Theron. "You merely put my bewilderment into words."

"Surely you know the answer!"

"I only know it is strange that we have so few complete records back of the year 2100. Occasional discoveries come to light—accidentally preserved scraps of film used in their crude projecting machines; a crumbling fragment of book; half defaced inscriptions on rock or metal—but nothing that gives a comprehensive picture of those days—days which we have been led to believe immediately preceded our modern civilization."

"The answer," returned Billsmith, "is simple. Your recorded history dates from the great book-burning."

"You speak of something I know nothing about."

"It was a part of the era of the dictators—" returned Billsmith—"part of the conditioning. For it was early discovered that books—records of the past—contained ideas. They caused people to think. This interfered with the conditioning process. People must be allowed to read only books that presented thoughts of the prescribed type. There was only one way to bring this about—to scrap the old literature and issue new books that conveyed ideas which were considered suitable for the people to accept. Huge libraries were burned. It was a crime punishable by death to own one of the

forbidden books. The destruction, of course, was carried into all similar fields—even inscriptions on monuments were defaced.

"Your people—the privileged class who supported the rise of the dictators—in spite of your assured place in society, were the chief victims of this incredible blow to culture. Mine had already been driven into hiding—into preserves, caves, forests, isolated mountain regions. But they took with them, among their most prized possessions, their books. To us, the days you speak of as prehistoric are real and near. They represent our heritage, into which some day we shall come again."

Dayonna fell asleep trying to frame a retort to this prediction.

## CHAPTER VIII

### The Table-Landers

THE night was far advanced when Dayonna woke with a vague sense of alarm. She lay unmoving, listening tensely. Slowly her eyes became aware of a dark form standing motionless against the trees.

She glanced apprehensively toward her companions. One of them was cautiously rising. The rannie's alert senses must have warned him that some creature of the wild had stealthily crept up on the camp. And now, Dayonna perceived, there were three—four—a dozen—ominous shadows surrounding their camp.

With a lithe movement, Billsmith gained his feet. His voice, cool and peremptory, broke the silence.

"Brothers of the outland, greeting! Strength lies in union."

The speech brought no intimation of friendly response. There was a movement among the gathering—which now seemed to number fifteen or twenty figures—and an ominous growl. They closed in threateningly.

By this time Theron had wakened and scrambled to his feet. As Dayonna followed his example, he limped to her side and both edged toward the protecting bulk of the rannie.

"Show no fear," the latter muttered in a barely audible tone. "I'll try to parley with them." Aloud, he demanded: "Take me to your chief. We bring important tidings."

There was a confusion of excited responses. The creatures were now close enough so that the outlines of their shaggy heads and skin-clad bodies could be discerned. The guttural voices were unintelligible to Dayonna, but when one of the group silenced the rest, and spoke evidently as leader, she caught a few words of not too reassuring import, accompanied by threatening gestures toward herself and Theron.

"What do they want?" she gasped, involuntarily gripping Billsmith's muscular arm.

"He says they watched us while we sat around the campfire, and that you and the man are flame-devils—their name for your kind. They recognized you by your helmets. They are angry because you have been brought here to spy against them." He turned to the leader, declaring:

"You do well to hate the flame-devils; but these are not devils—they wear the dress of the hated ones because they have returned from spying upon them. We bring you plans for a great attack, in which all the outland people will rise in their might. The mighty Valthor has perfected a weapon which destroys their death-dealing barriers. Even now we return from testing its power."

There was a snarling response, growing into a vehement discussion. Dayonna pressed close against the rannie, thoroughly terrified for the first time since she had found herself his prisoner. Theron stood at her other side, with a protecting arm athwart her shoulders.

"The flame-gun is in my belt," Billsmith muttered. "Take it, but use it only as a last resort. They are too many for us—they'd overpower us by sheer force of numbers."

As Dayonna's fingers closed around the comforting bit of metal, Theron made as if to take the weapon from her. Billsmith checked him.

"Let her keep it," he breathed grimly. "It goes harder with a woman than a man."

THE parley seemed to reach some sort of a conclusion. The leader of the band addressed them. Dayonna caught occasional words: ". . . lies . . . flame-devils . . . kill. . . ."

But Billsmith pretended to find the answer satisfactory.

"That is well," he returned with approval. "As you say, if our words are false we should be put to death. Your chief will decide as to that. Let us start, for there is much to be done and we must counsel with him at once."

He gathered up the simple appurtenances of their camp. Roughly jostled into line by their captors, the three were then led through the darkness over a barely discernible trail.

This time, there was no favoring of Theron's injured ankle. At the cost of excruciating pain, he made an effort to keep up with the party, and succeeded, for a few hundred yards. Then, stepping on a rock which turned under his weight, he collapsed with a groan.

One of the savages turned with a guttural command and a kick at the fallen man; but Theron was beyond all caring.

With a cry of compassion, Dayonna dropped to her knees beside him. She was jerked unceremoniously to her feet.

At this point, Billsmith raised his voice in stern expostulation. There followed a heated argument. Billsmith insisted that the man was injured and could not walk.

The contention was obvious; so, also, was the solution—from the savage point of view. They would kill him and go on.

Vehemently, Billsmith opposed this course. The injured man was the bearer of important information. Their chief would be angry if they failed to produce him with the others.

Finally he brought the argument to a close by dropping his pack and hoisting Theron to his shoulders. Instantly the savages fell upon the pack. Its contents were scattered among them—the leader emerging from the snarling melee with a robe and skillet. This accession to their individual wealth apparently reconciled them to letting Billsmith have his way.

The rannie's strength must have been prodigious. He carried Theron—who, though spare, was nevertheless a solidly built man—with little seeming effort.

He was obviously tired, however, when, at dawn, they reached the camp of the table-landers. Dayonna, through her own weariness, had noticed a scattered herd of rugged, wild-looking cattle grazing in the open prairie over which they last trudged.

**I**N THE morning light, the savages were even more repulsive than they had appeared in the darkness—shaggy-haired, glowering, filthy, their faces covered with matted hair, their rank-smelling bodies partly protected with untanned hides. Glancing at Billsmith, Dayonna was forced to admit that among rannies there must be widely varying stages of development. These creatures looked and acted like animals. As Billsmith straightened up after relieving himself of Theron's weight, he towered above the gnarled, misshapen throng like a superior being.

She could not help thinking, too, of more amazing revelations concerning the rannie—his courage, his protecting attitude, his self-sacrifice for a man of alien race, an enemy whose kind would have destroyed him without compunction.

While the savage creatures went about preparations for a meal, she knelt beside Theron. He had regained consciousness, but his lips were compressed in a thin line of pain.

"The rannie—carried me—after I caved in?" he demanded.

She nodded. "They wanted to kill you. He wouldn't let them."

Theron turned his face to look at the towering figure of Billsmith who stood with his back to them, speculatively surveying the scene.

"Few of my own kind—would have done that."

Dayonna nodded. "I know." She would have added, "He's almost human," but the words somehow choked in her throat.

## CHAPTER IX

### Flame-Devil!

**T**HEIR progress throughout the day was slow. The savages appeared to be taking their prisoners to the tribal chieftain as Billsmith had demanded; but the cattle must be driven along with the band and allowed opportunity to graze.

Fortunately, the slow progress permitted Theron to keep up with the others. Though Billsmith maintained an outward air of impatience, the three actually were in no hurry to face the ordeal of meeting the chief. It might well result in their death rather than in acceptance of their ostensible mission.

At mealtimes, morning and evening, Billsmith shouldered his way among the rest of the motly throng and fought with them for a share of half-cooked meat, which he divided with his companions in misfortune. Their greatest discomfort occurred at night. Now that the robe and blanket had passed into other hands, the only covering for their huddled bodies was such as they could improvise from grass, leaves, and branches.

By the fourth night, Billsmith had managed to secure a couple of ill-smelling hides, which Theron and Dayonna fashioned roughly into garments. These protected them somewhat from the chill winds that swept the table-land and concealed the flame-gun which Dayonna still wore at her belt. Both had long since lost their helmets to covetous savages.

At times, while they rested, or even as they trudged along with the dusty van of cattle and herders, Dayonna found herself staring speculatively at the two male creatures with whom her lot had been cast—wondering—trying to reorganize bewildered mental concepts that had been thrown into chaos.

One of them was a product of the earth's highest civilization—the other a rannie, a creature surely not human—an animal to be hunted for sport or to be exterminated for the safety of mankind. Yet the rannie seemed as intelligent as the man she had known from childhood, and in some ways he was the better informed of the two. Both treated her with the consideration of brothers. She felt as safe, lying between them for warmth in the chill, dark nights as she would have felt in her own soft bed—and moreover, she knew that with either of them alone she would have felt equally secure.

The experience had drawn the three closer. Previously, even when they were talking together in resigned acceptance of the situation, there had been a strong undercurrent of antagonism. Now they were allies—three against the many.

**"IF I WERE** alone, I might welcome the opportunity to talk to their chief—to try to win him over to our federation of tribes," Billsmith observed, on the evening of the third day. "But there's no knowing what attitude he'll take—and besides, these fellows are treacherous and changeable."

He sat for a moment in brooding silence.

"Dayonna still has the flame-gun," Theron reminded him. Then: "Wonder why they haven't taken it."

"They failed to recognize it as a weapon. While they associate your people with those devastating flames, they have no idea how you create them. You'll note that they haven't even reached the bow-and-arrow stage. Their weapons are spears."

"And yet I suppose you claim these brutes are human!" observed the girl disdainfully.

Billsmith grinned. "Ingrained beliefs die hard, don't they? Throw your people into the desperate scramble for existence these unfortunates have faced—cut them off from their kind, from all current civilization—and in a few generations the survivors will revert to the same state of savagery. These are remnants of the first hundred years or so, when we outlanders were cut off from the civilization we'd helped to build. Naturally we retrograded into savagery—and where conditions were toughest, we're still there."

That evening, it seemed to Dayonna that more of the evil-smelling creatures crowded about her than had been their wont. Without quite knowing why, she shuddered at the furtive looks which were cast in her direction. She wakened during the night to discover a figure stealing up on them where they slept. Even as she stiffened in sudden panic, the rannie rose to his knees beside her. The skulking figure hesitated, then—perhaps fearful of rousing the camp—silently slipped away into the shadows.

In the morning, Billsmith broached the subject of escape.

"We'd better act today," he said decisively. "If we can drop far enough in the rear, a chance may come to break for freedom. We'll aim for the line of trees bordering the edge of the mesa. Once there, I think I can find a cave or similar hiding place. Your ankle—?"

"It's better," assured Theron. "At least it should bear me up for a quick dash."

He made a point, however, of limping more than usual and was greatly hindered by the injured member in keeping up with the others. At every stop, the three struggled up in the rear, and as the morning drew on, they fell farther behind at each advance.

The country through which they were traveling was, in the main, flat prairie land, though broken by ridges, gullies, and occasional clumps of trees. The boundary ridge which Billsmith had indicated lay perhaps a mile and a half from their course.

About mid day, when they had dropped well to the rear of the scattered caravan, Billsmith answered the unspoken question in the eyes of his companions.

"It's likely to be the best chance we'll get. Suppose we circle that clump of trees and make a break for it the instant we're hidden from their view."

They managed to escape notice long enough to slip into the outskirts of the tree grove and were cutting through toward the side which led to freedom when excited shouts warned that their disappearance had been noticed by the brute-people.

**F**URTHER concealment was out of the question. All three started running. Both Dayonna and Theron had demonstrated their speed and endurance in the athletic contests which were popular diversions among modern young people. Even disabled as he was, Theron was forcing his ankle to bear him up well.

"Keep it up!" encouraged Billsmith, close behind them. "We're holding our own."

Over her shoulders, Dayonna caught a glimpse of the pursuing band and at first thought the encouragement war-

ranted. A second glance brought a low moan to her lips. Already several figures were forging into the lead, closing up the distance which separated them from the escaping trio.

"Faster!" urged Billsmith—and Dayonna knew that if he had not been intent on protecting them from the rear, he could easily have outdistanced the speediest of the pursuers.

She was running abreast of Theron, and could see his features, tense and agonized. Surely he could not bear up much longer. Even as she harbored the thought, he stumbled, tried to recover, and fell head over heels.

"Foot—buckled under me. It's no use! he gasped, as she flung herself down beside him. Then, in frenzied haste: "Keep going! Don't stop for me. It's hopeless!" As she made no effort to obey, he cried in agonized appeal: "Make her go on, Billsmith! Save her!"

Without a word, the rannie stooped and swung Theron to his shoulders. "Run your best!" he exhorted Dayonna. "We'll make it yet!"

Even though he was burdened with Theron's weight, Dayonna found it all she could do to keep up with him. But the pause had been fatal. The pursuing pack was close, and drawing closer.

A final spurt brought the two runners to the top of a slight rise. Billsmith, slightly in advance, stopped abruptly. As Dayonna reached his side, he let Theron's body slide to the ground. She gasped as she realized what had checked his progress. They stood on the brink of a ravine.

"We'd have had to make a stand anyway," he observed panting. "No use dropping down there," he indicated the depths below; "they'd only trap us. You have the flame-gun. Turn it on yourself before it's too late."

Shouting triumphantly, the nearest savages, instead of rushing upon them

directly, now began circling. They leaped and danced and indulged in strange antics. Dayonna's eyes followed their gyrations with horrified fascination.

Painfully, Theron drew himself erect and stood between the two. "Just one thing—before we die together—" his hand closed over the rannie's shoulder. "I want to say—Billsmith—that—human or not—you're one of the best!"

The herdsmen, still cavorting in their barbaric dance, were converging in an ever-narrowing semi-circle. Suddenly one yelling savage ran forward, leaping high with brandished spear. Dayonna's flame blast caught him in midair. He flung up his arms with an unearthly screech.

As he fell, the triumphant shouts of the rest turned to a menacing roar. They ceased their wild capering and bore down on the trio in a mass. Dayonna swept them with the flame, but accounted fatally for not more than half a dozen before she was engulfed in the melee. In the thick of the struggle were Billsmith and Theron. The flame-gun was knocked from her grasp before she could even think of Billsmith's last admonition.

As she struggled futilely with half a dozen of the savages, each of whom seemed intent on taking her as a personal prize, warning shouts—shouts filled with a new note of alarm—penetrated to her dazed consciousness. Flung suddenly to the ground, then unexpectedly released, she sprang up to find the whole band in full flight.

Bewildered, she stared after them. Theron and Billsmith—inexplicably abandoned by their opponents—were staring in amazement at the frenzied rout of the savages.

**T**HEN a swift shadow flitted overhead—another, and others. Startled, she glanced up—and understood.

The air was filled with hurtling, ovoid shapes, and on a sudden, ahead of them,

the blue was crossed with streaks of orange. Now she recognized the shout with which the wild creatures had fled. "Flame-devils!"

Swift, unleaping joy surged within her. Her people had found her! The fleet of helicopters, equipped with devastating flame-guns, had come to her rescue.

The tribesmen had scattered widely, but there was no escaping the relentless searing of the flames. From a score or more of the aircraft, pencils of orange light were seeking them out, dropping them one by one, leaving the plain dotted with their blackened corpses.

The surprise attack was over in a scant few moments. Silently as the copters had swooped down on the savages, they were now ranging back and forth in the near distance, seeking out stragglers and survivors. The flame guns now flashed only intermittently.

While the three stared transfixed at the scene of carnage, two of the copters swung away from the rest and swooped toward them. Billsmith was suddenly galvanized into activity.

"Down! Down! Into the ravine!" he shouted. As Dayonna stared uncomprehending, he swept her into his arms and leaped into the chasm, half sliding, half falling down its precipitous slope. Theron was but an instant behind.

"This way!" the rannie gasped, quick eyes seeking shelter. And as Dayonna tried to break away, crying in her vexation, he picked her up and ran toward a rock outcropping. As he thrust her back into its shelter, Theron came limping after them. He had picked up the flame gun, which he thrust into Dayonna's hand.

"They can't get at us down here!" panted Billsmith. "At least not from a flyer. Keep back till they pass over."

As he spoke, the two helicopters circled over their heads, passing from view in a brief instant.

"If they return," he panted, "I'll make

a dash—draw them away. Keep hidden!"

"But don't you see—" Dayonna shrieked, regaining her breath—"they're rescuing me! They're friends! My people!"

The rannie looked startled.

"It's possible," he admitted. "But no!" His eyes roved over her. "They couldn't have recognized you. We'd have no time—"

Dayonna glanced from her own crouching body to Theron. Actually, there was little to choose between them and the savage beasts out there—or those who had been out there. They were dirty, blood-smeared, clad in tattered skins. No longer helmeted, their hair hung in tangled disarray. There was nothing to suggest that they belonged to the effete human class. And as Billsmith surmised, there would be no opportunity to make their identity known before the swift flame-guns took their toll.

"I'm afraid he's right," agreed Theron. "If they'd been seeking you, they'd have been more cautious. They were too intent on exterminating their quarry to have had any other purpose."

She returned his gaze miserably, choking at the realization.

"Down!" cautioned Billsmith hastily. "They're back!"

**A**GAIN the helicopters swooped overhead, lower, this time, as if landing. A moment later there were voices.

"... down here! I saw them duck into the ravine. Go ahead if you like; I'll clean out this nest and follow."

A helmeted head peered over the ledge. A moment later, the lithe figure of a man, bearing a flame-gun, swung into view. He scrambled down the slope, landing a few feet from the fugitives. He spied them even as he was recovering his balance.

"Don't wither us!" screamed Dayonna. "We're human! We're human, I tell you!"

The man—handsome in his hunting regalia—burst into uproarious laughter.

"Hear that?" he called to his companion. "Latest dodge of the rannies. Yelling 'We're human!' when you get them cornered!"

There was no response from above. As the man raised his weapon, Billsmith suddenly darted away. Before the hunter could act, he had flung himself out of range beyond the first turning.

"You skulking brute!" the hunter muttered, diving after him. Theron made an ineffectual lunge, attempting to block his way. The hunter ran stumbling down the rocky passage—flame-gun upraised—while behind him followed Dayonna, unconsciously giving voice to little moaning sounds.

That she was defeating Billsmith's purpose in drawing the pursuer away so that she might escape did not occur to her.

The hunter was well in advance when she saw him drop to his knees, sighting with his flame-gun through a narrow fissure in the cliffs.

Dayonna caught a glimpse of Billsmith, pocketed in a closed recess which branched from the ravine. He was attempting to climb over a rock slide to some niche of safety and was in full view of his coolly aiming pursuer. Without conscious volition Dayonna raised her own weapon and seared the hunter.

The man flung up his arms, partly turning. With an expression of incredulity at sight of the wild-eyed girl who had blasted him, he fell heavily, his flame-gun clattering against the rocks.

For a moment Dayonna stared at the weapon in her hand, then, overcome with horror, she flung it away.

When Billsmith slowly returned, he found her swaying over the corpse, an arm upflung to cover the sight from her eyes. At the touch of his hand she flung herself frantically against him, weeping hysterically.

The rannie stood immobile, his arms held rigidly at his sides, but in his eyes was an expression of bewilderment, tinged with awe, that this girl had slain a man of her own kind to save him, whom she regarded as no more than a form of lower animal.

Theron, limping up, looked from the prostrate man to the girl who was by now struggling to regain her composure.

His face went pale but he made no comment.

## CHAPTER X

### Hidden Village

THEY waited apprehensively for the companion of the man who had followed them, but at length Billsmith cautiously climbed to the edge of the crevice and surveyed the scene.

"They're gone," he called down. "Climb as far as you can and I'll lend you a hand."

When he had drawn both of them to safety, the three took stock of the situation.

The dead man's helicopter was poised near the edge of the crevice. No others were in sight. His companion must have decided to catch up with the main body of flyers.

"They're doubtless on one of those periodic sorties of extermination," was Billsmith's deduction, "and want to account for as many bands as possible. But they'll miss this fellow and return to look for him. That means I'll have to be on my way."

They looked at him blankly.

"Your way?" questioned the girl—still tremulous from the searing ordeal through which she had so lately passed.

He nodded toward the helicopter.

"You can fly to your father's lodge in a couple of hours."

"And you?"

"Back to my people. Where else would I go?"

"You can't operate a helicopter?"

He shook his head soberly. "That happens to be one of the arts we outlanders have had no opportunity to learn."

For a moment there was silence. Theron scanned the air apprehensively, but as yet there was no sign of returning flyers.

"You—have the flame-guns," Dayonna suggested, glancing at the weapons—her own and that of the slain man—which he had tucked into his belt. "If you ordered us—to take you there—we'd hardly be in a position to refuse."

Billsmith did not meet her eyes. Even when her fingers timidly rested on his arm, he sat unmoving, his lips compressed in a straight line.

Suddenly he sprang to his feet, turning resolutely toward the line of hills that rose beyond the far side of the mesa.

"It's dangerous to wait here. The time has come for you to go your way and me to go mine. My reason for taking you with me no longer holds—I know you won't betray us. I—I'm rather sorry to say it, strangely enough, but—good bye." He stood for a moment looking hungrily down at Dayonna's bewildered features, then, awkwardly turning, he strode away without a backward glance.

They watched his figure recede into the distance and finally disappear behind the clump of trees from which their dash for freedom had been launched. Turning to his companion, Theron saw that her eyes were swimming with tears. His features were drawn and there was an unwonted sag to his shoulders, but the touch of his hand on her arm was reassuring. Without exchanging a word, they walked to the helicopter and climbed in. Theron took the controls and they soared into the air.

A moment later, the copter came to rest a few yards in advance of Billsmith. He strode up to them frowning.

"Climb in," Theron said, in a matter-of-fact tone. "We'll make much better time than walking."

**B**ILLSMITH hesitated, his eyes on Dayonna. Though her face was streaked with tears, she returned his glance with studied indifference.

Theron assumed the burden of explanation.

"I have an overmastering desire to see your people," he observed; "to learn how they live. I want to meet this Valthor you speak of. I should like to study those ancient records—records that survived the great book-burning."

"Do you—wish to do this?" Billsmith abruptly demanded of Dayonna. "Your father—"

"Can wait," she finished for him, her voice hardening. "If it was his alarm—that caused them to send out the exterminating fleet—it will do him good."

"I still think it is folly—"

"Come!" interrupted Theron impatiently. "We're wasting time. Dayonna, you'd better take the controls. My foot action is a trifle uncertain."

The hunting copter of 3950 was an open-air craft designed to afford the driver utmost freedom to pursue and shoot down rannies or other game. The operator guided his aerial steed with foot controls, which left both hands free. He could shoot almost straight down with the bow and arrow of sport or the flame-gun of extermination. In addition to rising or dropping vertically, the helicopter could skim close to the ground. Little wonder that since the design came into vogue, copter-hunting had become the recognized sport of the pleasure-loving human population.

Though not built essentially for speed, the craft was capable of making from ninety to a hundred miles per hour. At such speeds, or in stormy weather, the occupants enclosed themselves in a trans-

parent dome. Two or three passengers might be carried. The copter body was oval-shaped. The stubby wings, in which the propellers were incorporated, flared from a spherical center shaft. A practically noiseless atomic motor furnished the power, and it was fueled to run for the copter's normal lifetime.

To Billsmith, the experience of flight was a keen novelty. "It is quite likely that I am the first of my kind in centuries to take to the air," he observed. "Some day—it will be the same commonplace to us that it is to you."

**T**HOUGH he was viewing the landscape from a new perspective, he had little difficulty in recognizing familiar landmarks and directing their flight. They had covered perhaps a hundred miles when Dayonna questioned: "How much farther to your village?"

"We're practically soaring over it at this moment," returned Billsmith. Then, at her glance of mystification: "See if you can discover it."

Both the girl and Theron scanned the landscape below, but could discern neither houses nor people.

"One of the arts in which we have had to become proficient is that of camouflage," observed Billsmith. "Circle closer—see if you can discover anything you'd consider worth investigating if you were carrying a flame-thrower."

Dayonna flushed, glancing at his face. But he was looking down eagerly and apparently had forgotten that she belonged to the hated race. She followed the direction of his eyes.

"There is something—a little peculiar—about the entrance to that canyon," she reported after a minute. "The trees and rocks don't look—altogether natural."

"That's the village," he admitted.

"But where are the peo—your fellow creatures?"

"Evidently under cover," he returned

grimly. "Our sentries have sharp eyes."

Dayonna allowed the copter to settle on a level stretch close to the camouflaged village. She and Theron stared at the seeming boulders, mounds of rock and dirt, which, on closer view, resolved themselves into irregularly shaped dwellings, with windows deep-set and shielded by branches.

Even before it touched ground, Billsmith leaped forth, shouting words of reassurance. When there was no answer, he hurried to a nondescript dwelling and looked within it—then to another. A moment later, he returned, his brows knotted with concern.

"They've evidently taken refuge in the canyon," he reported. "I've an idea the flame squad has been sighted approaching this way."

His eyes searched the sky, then turned to the helicopter.

"That would be certain to attract attention. For the safety of yourselves as well as my village, I'm afraid I must ask you to—"

"Isn't there a place to hide it?" Dayonna asked impulsively.

The rannie reflected. "We could run it into the storage cave." He pointed to a tangle of fallen trees lying at the base of the side hill. "That's the hidden entrance. I think you're foolish not to leave while you have a chance, but if you're determined—"

The tree-tangle camouflage was removed with ease, revealing an opening more than large enough to admit the helicopter. In the depths of the cavern, Dayonna caught glimpses of woven baskets, earthen pots, and wooden containers, stacked on shelves and in orderly heaps. They had scarcely more than closed the opening when Billsmith whirled with a sharp exclamation.

Both followed his gaze, to a swarm of dots over the crest-line of the distant hills.

## CHAPTER XI

### "The Girl's Bewitched!"

"UNDER cover—quickly," the rannie commanded. He lifted a section of the tree barrier and the three crowded inside the cave. From their concealment, they watched the oncoming fleet with bated breath.

"If they saw us, they'll probably drop down," Billsmith commented, his tone bitter with self-reproach. "In that case, my lack of caution has brought disaster on the village."

"They couldn't have—" Dayonna began; but her words were stayed by recollection of the remarkably effective telescopic observation lenses with which the flame-squad copters were equipped. Any moving object within visual range of the fleet was likely to be investigated. They could only wait—and hope.

The lingering hope vanished, as the fleet came in a direct line toward them and dropped on the level ground outside of the village.

"I'm sorry—friend," Theron observed gently. Then, "They may overlook us in here."

Billsmith glanced at him grimly. "What if they do? They'll find the village deserted and follow the trail up the canyon to the cave refuge where my people are hiding—"

A sharp exclamation—almost a cry—burst from Dayonna.

"Quiet!" admonished the rannie; then, at sight of her startled face, "What is it?"

"My father! He's one of them! And Nedro! I'm sure I saw Nedro step from that machine. They've come to search for me."

Theron peered intently. "In that case—"

Billsmith glanced at him curiously.

"In that case, what?"

"Everything will be all right!" Dayonna

na answered impulsively. "I can attract his attention—let them know that I am safe."

"Suppose you do. What then?"

"I could influence my father. I—I don't want him to burn your village—it would be horrible—after all that we've been through. I couldn't endure it even if—even if—"

"Even if we're not human!" Billsmith finished for her, harshly. "Thanks! I'd let you make the attempt—but it would be useless. They'd burn you on sight."

"Have you a better plan?" she demanded.

"Perhaps I have. We'll wait and see."

The invaders were coming closer, their gleaming helmets and sun-tanned limbs visible as they passed between the odd dwellings. Dayonna could even distinguish some of their shouted words.

"Look! These are houses! Fancy the cunning of the creatures! Any rannies hiding in that one?"

"No. Empty. But they're bound to be holed up somewhere nearby. Don't let any of the vermin escape."

The voices were not particularly grim. Rannie extermination was not warfare; it was merely a lark to these stalwart sons of the Fortieth Century.

**B**ILLSMITH turned to his companions, extending a flame-gun to each. "Take these," he commanded somberly. "I'm going to attempt something." Cupping his hands over his mouth, he called loudly:

"Gail Marland!"

A momentary silence followed, then a distant shout, "Who called me?"

Billsmith's strong voice rang out. "Gail Marland, your daughter is in our hands. Call back your men if you wish to save her!"

Tensely, the trio within the cave shelter awaited the reply. Dayonna recalled her own early difficulty in understanding the rannie, and wondered if his accent

would prove an obstacle to getting his warning across. She placed a hand over Billsmith's to reassure him of her cooperation.

"What's that?" her father's voice demanded—breathlessly, as if he were approaching on the run. "What's that about my daughter?"

"Wait here!" breathed Billsmith. He pushed through the leafy screen, emerging on the hillside in full view of the gathering flame-throwers.

When Dayonna would have followed, Theron placed a restraining hand on her arm.

"He knows what he's about. Keep hidden!"

Tall, almost godlike in his towering strength, Billsmith swung down the hillside toward the hostile group.

"Gail Marland," he announced, "we hold your daughter as a hostage. One destructive move toward our village, and she will die."

"Burn the rat!" came a cry from some member of the flame-squad. Weapons were raised as if to carry out the suggestion; but above the excited voices came Gail Marland's command.

"Hold it! Don't wither the brute till we get at the bottom of this! What's that about my daughter?"

Calmly, the rannie repeated: "She is in our hands—your daughter and Theron. Their safety depends on you."

"It's the one that carried her off!" came an excited shout. Nedro sprang to the side of Marland, flame-gun uplifted. "The filthy beast—let me burn him down!"

Encouraging shouts came from others, but Marland raised a restraining hand.

"Wait!" he commanded sternly. And when quiet had been gained: "There may be something to this. If the vermin have Dayonna, they'd be capable of murdering her to save their own skins."

*(Continued on page 134)*

# DO THE DEAD RETURN?

A strange man in Los Angeles, known as "The Voice of Two Worlds," tells of astonishing experiences in far-off and mysterious Tibet, often called the land of miracles by the few travelers permitted to visit it. Here he lived among the lamas, mystic priests of the temple. "In your previous lifetime," a very old lama told him, "you lived here, a lama in this temple. You and I were boys together. I lived on, but you died in youth, and were reborn in England. I have been expecting your return."



The young Englishman was amazed as he looked around the temple where he was believed to have lived and died. It seemed uncannily familiar, he appeared to know every nook and corner of it, yet—at least in this lifetime—he had never been there before. And mysterious was the set of circumstances that had brought him. Could it be a case of reincarnation, that strange belief of the East that souls return to earth again and again, living many lifetimes?

Because of their belief that he had formerly been a lama in the temple, the lamas welcomed the young man with open arms and taught him rare mysteries and long-hidden practices, closely guarded for three thousand years by the sages, which have enabled many to perform amazing feats. He says that the system often leads to almost unbelievable improvement in power of mind, can be used to achieve brilliant business and professional success as well as great happiness. The young man himself later became a noted explorer and geographer, a successful publisher of maps

and atlases of the Far East, used throughout the world.

"There is in all men a sleeping giant of mindpower," he says. "When awakened, it can make man capable of surprising feats, from the prolonging of youth to success in many other worthy endeavors." The system is said by many to promote improvement in health; others tell of increased bodily strength, courage and poise.

"The time has come for this long-hidden system to be disclosed to the Western world," declares the author, and offers to send his amazing 9000 word treatise—which reveals many startling results—to sincere readers of this publication, free of cost or obligation. For your free copy, address the Institute of Mental-physics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. 304N, Los Angeles, Calif. Readers are urged to write promptly, as only a limited number of the free treatises have been printed.

*(Continued from page 132)*

"It's a trick!" protested Nedro. "They've doubtless killed her long before this."

Dayonna could no longer restrain herself. "Father!" she called excitedly. "He's telling the truth. Father, do you hear me?"

"By heavens!" gasped Marland, his eyes searching the tree camouflage, "she's alive!" Raising his voice: "Keep up courage, girl. We'll rescue you."

"Finish this brute first!" some one suggested harshly.

"No! No!" shrieked Dayonna frantically. "Don't harm him! If you do—they'll—they'll kill me!"

There was a moment of uncertainty.

"WHAT a mess!" observed Marland in disgust. "If we rush them, they'll take revenge on her. If we don't, they'll keep her."

Billsmith's voice cut in upon him incisively. "You are wrong. All we ask is to live our lives in peace. Leave this place and we'll restore your daughter, safe and sound."

"Cunning beasts!" fumed Marland. "How do we know—"

"Please, Father," called Dayonna. "You can trust him. Promise to leave in peace if they let me go."

There was a buzz of excited conversation, then, finally:

"All right," Marland called with ill grace, "we'll agree."

Instantly, Dayonna burst through the leaf-covered opening. Followed more slowly by Theron, she plunged down the hillside, arms outstretched toward her father.

A moment later, she was sobbing in his arms. "My little Dayonna," he muttered huskily. "Girl, I'd given you up for lost!"

Nedro stepped forward to claim his share of attention. He caught Dayonna's

hand and pressed it eagerly. Then, swinging toward Billsmith, he raised his flame-gun.

"Step away!" he admonished several of his companions who surrounded the rannie.

"It's my privilege to even things up with this brute!"

There was a hasty scrambling to get out of line.

Startled and incredulous, Dayonna wrenched herself from her father's arms to confront Nedro. "What are you going to do?"

"Why—blast the creature out of existence!" returned Nedro, bewildered. "Isn't this the brute that carried you off?"

"But you promised!" she insisted. "You can't do it!" She turned appealingly to her father.

"We don't keep promises to rannies," he told her gruffly. "They'd have murdered you if I hadn't pretended to give in."

"You mean—you don't intend—to keep your word?"

"They're getting to be pests," he explained.

"It's nasty business, but they've got to be exterminated."

"No! No!" she insisted frantically. "You've no right—"

"What's the matter with the girl?" Marland turned to Theron in exasperation.

Theron shook his head. "There is much to be said—more, I fear, than the temper of this group will permit. I agree with Dayonna. You gave your word; it should be kept."

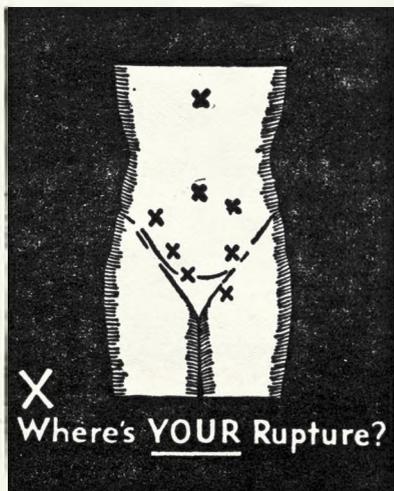
Nedro surveyed him scornfully and with amusement.

"Theron," he said maliciously, "I always said you were a weakling; this proves it. Hold the girl, some of you, while I wither this rannie."

*(Continued on page 136)*

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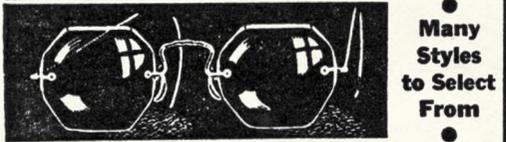
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(Continued from page 134)

**D**AYONNA, white of face, slowly backed toward Billsmith, who stood calmly facing the menace of the hostile gathering.

"You cowardly murderers!" she blazed. "If any of you blast him, you'll do it through my body."

"Dayonna!" protested her father in anguished accents. "Come to your senses! This is a rannie! A beast of the fields!"

"Beast! He's noble—brave—and human! Yes—human! Do you hear that! It's you who are the beasts! Oh, Billsmith!" Tears blinding her eyes, she flung her arms around him, clinging desperately. "I can't let them take you from me!"

"The girl's bewitched!" exclaimed Gail Marland.

With a fleeting caress, Billsmith's hand passed over her bare shoulder. Beyond this, he appeared oblivious of her.

"Gail Marland," he said slowly, "my people are a proud people—a brave people. For centuries you and your kind have hunted us, hounded us into holes, made our lives a terror. "You will never exterminate us; you will only create an enemy—one that in the end will prove more formidable than you realize. I ask only this. Leave us in peace. Take your daughter—and Theron. Listen to their stories. Then, if you still have it in your heart to return and complete your work of destruction, do so. You will find me, at least, waiting to give myself up. And when the word of my kind is given, it is honestly given."

"Insolent!" sputtered Marland. "Since when do we deal with animals?"

Nedro advanced determinedly. "Grab the girl," he commanded. "Hold her while I finish this business. Then we'll clean up the rest of his pack. Who's with me?"

"All of us!" came several answering shouts.

**THE RANNIE**

Dayonna released her frantic clutch on Billsmith, though still standing defiantly in front of him, her face livid with anger. She snatched the flame-gun fiercely from her belt.

"One step more!" she announced furiously, "and you'll have to blast me to save your own hides."

"Dayonna!" gasped her father. "Are you insane?"

"Call it what you will—I mean it!"

"What—in heaven's name—do you want us to do?"

She met his eyes levelly. "Must I repeat it?"

For a space, Marland stood looking at her. But it was his stern glance that wavered first. "All right, girl, you win!" Grudgingly he turned to the group under his command.

"Back to your coptors, everybody. Out of her senses or not—my daughter is worth more than a nest of filthy, insignificant vermin."

Reluctantly—bewildered—the hunters backed away. Only Nedro stubbornly refused to move.

"Are you going to let him escape?" he demanded, jerking his head toward Billsmith.

"We've no choice—the mood she's in," returned Marland sullenly. "Wait for me out there with the rest."

**CHAPTER XII**

**"A Place for Me"**

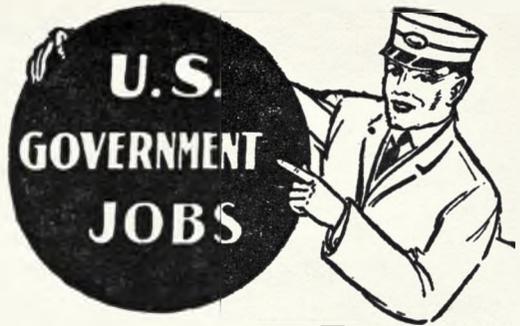
**W**HEN all the members of his company had withdrawn, Marland again addressed his daughter.

"Come, girl—there's room for you in my coptor."

She met his eyes steadily.

"Well," he insisted, "what are you waiting for?"

Slowly her words came, while the three



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men—Billsmith beside her on the hillside, Theron and her father below, watched her with varying degrees of dawning comprehension.

"I can't—go with you, Father. You gave your promise, and I want to believe you. But I don't trust the others. We have a coptor—concealed nearby. Theron will fly it for me.

"Here is what I ask: Join your men—take them to the far end of the valley. When you see Theron's coptor rise, swing toward home and he will follow. If Nedro—or any of your men—turn back, we will know that they intend to break the promise you have given, and they will succeed in their purpose only at the forfeit of my life."

"Dayonna, this is nonsense!"  
"I mean it, Father."

With a snort of impatience, Marland swung himself around and down the hill. They heard him shouting orders, and a few moments later the copters, one by one, left the ground. When they were sure that all had taken to the air, they silently returned and threw aside the tree-matted doorway of the cave.

When the helicopter rested on the open hillside, ready for takeoff, Dayonna turned hesitantly to Billsmith. Theron, after a questioning glance, climbed into the pilot's seat and busied himself testing its controls.

Dayonna spoke softly.  
"Haven't you anything—to tell me—before I go?"

Billsmith met her eyes briefly, then glanced away. "What can I tell you?"

"You wouldn't ask me—to stay?"

"Ask you to—!" Startled by his own eagerness, he checked the words abruptly.

"Why suggest such madness?"

"You know that I—"

"That you have at last admitted I'm human? All right, what of it? It's like

## THE RANNIE

tearing the heart out of me to let you go, but it couldn't be otherwise. I'll always remember you—and these days together. It will give me strength to go on—knowing that a world in which there are such moments of beauty won't always be a place of horror. Go back to your kind. Theron loves you. He's a real man, and you'll find—after a time—that you can love him too. You and I—are separated by a gulf of twenty centuries."

His concluding words were spoken almost fiercely, and after a moment, without a response, she turned and left him. Dropping dejectedly on a cairn of rocks, he heard the whirr of wings as the coptor rose in the air.

**A** TOUCH—so light that for an instant he fancied a leaf must have fallen on his brow—roused Billsmith from his stupor of grief. When he lifted his head, he knew that he must be quite out of his mind. He blinked—and still the vision persisted.

"Dayonna!" he breathed. "It can't be—!"

"Stupid!" she murmured derisively, close to his ear, "to imagine I'm the sort of girl who would give up the man she's set on having!"

"Theron—loving you as he does—helped you to do this?"

She nodded. "But he intends to stay too. He's going to give them the slip and try to rejoin us."

For a long moment their glances held. The doubt slowly faded from his expression. "Dayonna!" he whispered.

"Now that's settled!" she observed, decisively. "And—just to prove that I'm going to be a practical mate, don't you think we'd better find your people and begin the migration? Your people and—from now on—my people!"

THE END

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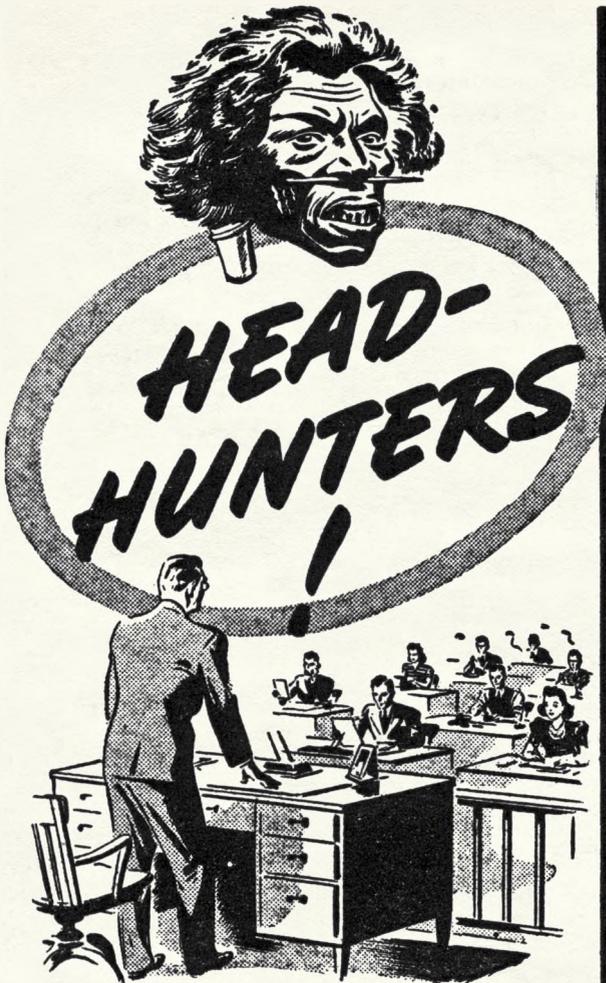
# THE PREVIEW

GRANT went into the side-show with the clear conviction that he was wasting his time. A girl with wings! A faceless boy from Borneo—a living mummy from the valley of the Nile. One was as impossible as the other; the photographs on the placards which announced all three were clever fakes. So he thought. . . . But when he stood before the dais which bore the slight figure of the winged girl, he felt a queer shudder of incomprehensible anticipation. It was as though something, somewhere, were warning him that this girl would lead him to strange adventure. For the wings, he could see quite clearly as she fluttered their twelve-foot span over her head, were *real!* . . . Those who remember Ray Cummings' stories of the Winged Girls of Mercury will welcome this brand-new addition to a classic series, "Aerita of the Light Country", the feature novel of the July issue of the new *Super Science Novels Magazine*.

Two more complete novels will appear in these pages in the same banner number. They are: "Invaders From Nowhere" by L. Sprague de Camp, the story of a super-scientific, semi-human race from another dimension, who come to Earth as missionaries for a new religion; and "Stranger from Smallness" by Otis Adelbert Kline, a novel of strange adventure in the torrid Sahara, where a creature from another planet provides a sudden twist to a network of intrigue.

Willy Ley's fact article on gravity, "Galileo's Revolution," which was crowded out of this number, will also appear in July.

These, together with short science fiction stories and our regular line-up of features, complete the July issue of *Super Science Novels Magazine*. It will appear May 30th.



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## SUPER SCIENCE NOVELS MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 6)

—were bad. Sherry, Bok, and Morey were best artists of the year.

The finest issue was the fourth (September) and contained five of the above yarns.

There are very few suggestions I can make about the policies of the second year; the first issue is just to my taste. I will be a bit repetitious and say: one full-page, framed pic for every ten pages of story; trimmed edges; no double-spread illustrations; smaller print and more pages in "Missives and Missiles"; more editorial comment; better covers; and an illustrating staff including Sherry, Bok, Morey, Mayorga, Binder, and Paul if you can get him. Dun and Eron rise and fall with the tides.

Suggestions that have been answered: Printless covers; two-way letter department—in *Astonishing*, at least; novels; serials—also in *Astonishing*; Bok and Morey; and some full-page, framed pix.

You don't need messages of good luck—the first issue proves that. Keep it up! —Charles Hidley, E5, 2541 Aqueduct Avenue, New York City.

### Report on No. One

Dear Mr. Pohl:

This is a report on the first issue of *Super Science Novels*.

1. Cover—not too good.
2. "Genus Homo"—"Captives of the Durna Range" and "History" were better than this.
3. "Captives of the Durna Ranguge"—best in the issue.
4. "History"—second best.
5. "Almost Human"—gets fourth place.
6. "A Voyage in Time"—last; too brief.
7. Article—very good. More articles of this sort and less based on biology. (I hate biology.)

**MISSIVES AND MISSILES**

8. Inside pix—fair. Best was Bok's for "Almost Human".

The May lineup sounds swell.—A. L. Schwartz, 229 Washington Street, Dorchester, Massachusetts.

**Footnote to Fiction**

Dear Editor:

The section of the Moon which forms the setting for my story, "Smugglers of the Moon", will be found in the Mount Wilson Observatory's photograph of the north-central portion of the Moon (No. H-8), made with the 100-inch reflector on September 15, 1919. Goodacre's atlas of the Moon has been used for more detailed information.

The astronomical convention with regard to compass directions on our satellite places North at the top of the lunar axis as we face the Moon in the sky, in the same direction as our own North Pole. However, they then place the Moon's West and East in the same direction as our corresponding compass points, with West on the Moon's right. As there seems to be no reason why an ordinary compass should not be used on the Moon as on Earth, provided the satellite has a magnetic North Pole in the same general region as its geographical North, I have reversed this convention and used the normal meanings, with East to the right.

In looking at the photograph some may also be confused by the effect of the telescope mirror in inverting the image. By turning the picture upside down it will correspond with what you see when you look at the Moon with the naked eye, or through an ordinary terrestrial telescope.

King's valley is the small oval space near the middle of the Appenines, southwest of the Palus Putredinus and southeast of Archimedes. Most of the other formations described, with the exception of very fine detail, are quite plain on the photograph.—P. Schuyler Miller.

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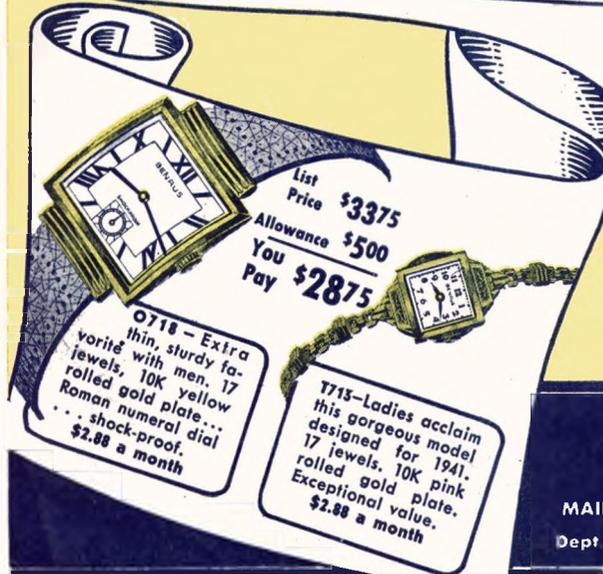
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