A STREET & SMITH PUBLICATION

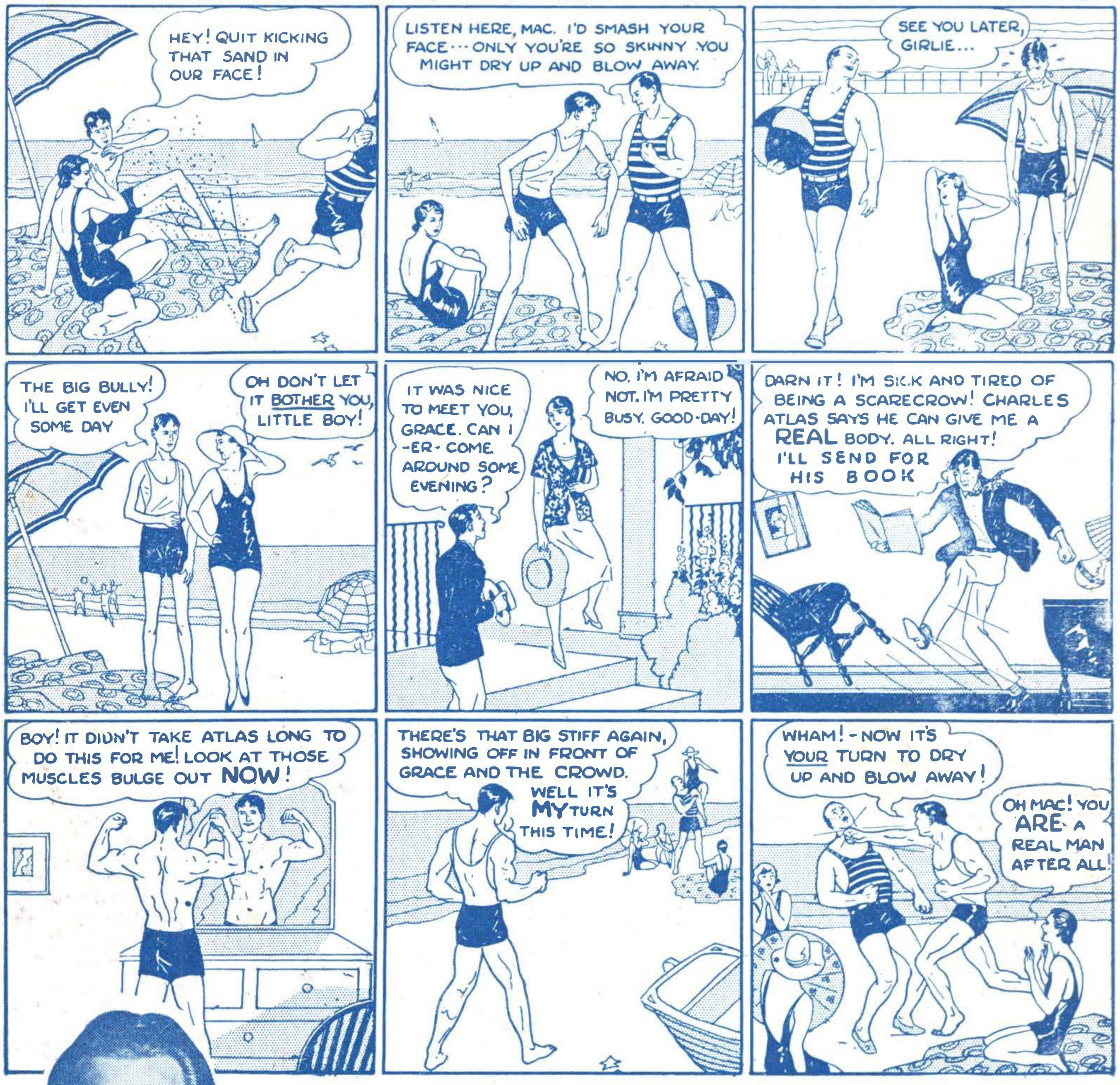
ASTOUNDING Science-fiction

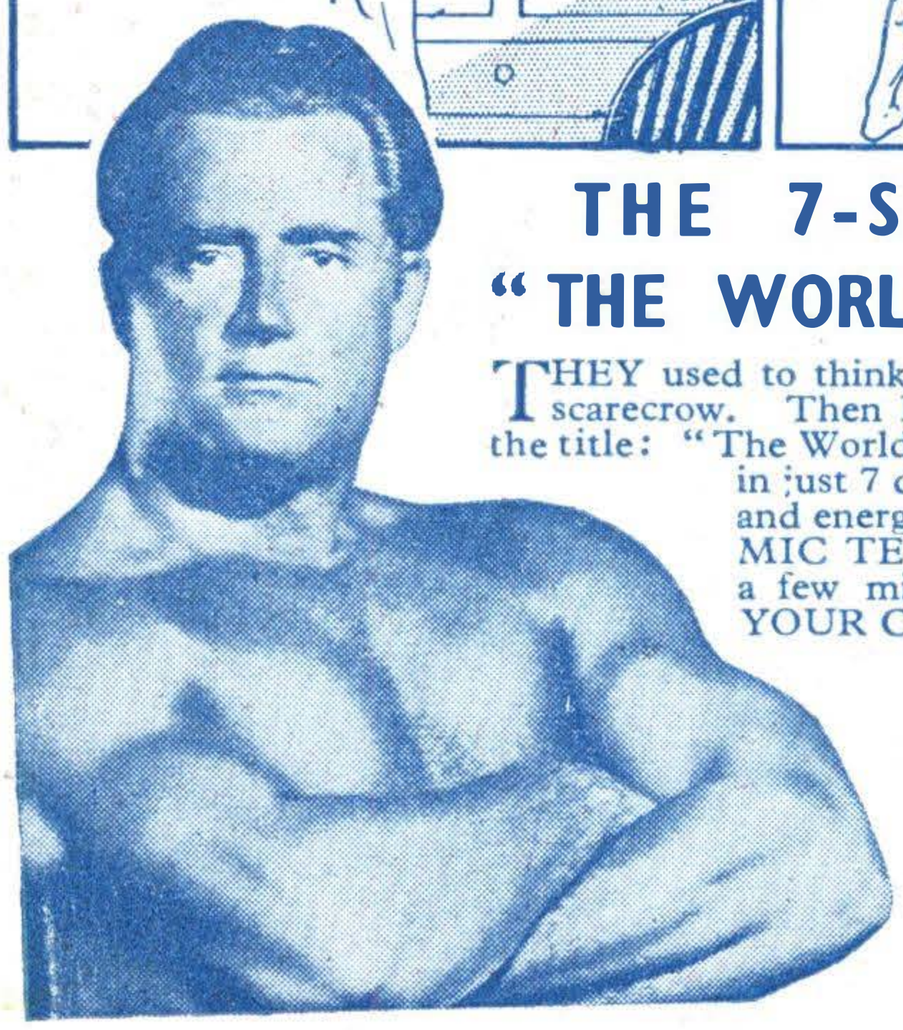
JULY

BRITISH 9D. EDITION

SPECIAL KNOWLEDGE
BY A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

THE INSULT THAT MADE A MAN OUT OF "MAC"





THE 7-STONE WEAKLING WHO BECAME "THE WORLD'S MOST PERFECTLY DEVELOPED MAN"

THEY used to think there wasn't much hope for me. I weighed only 7 stone. I was a sickly scarecrow. Then I discovered DYNAMIC TENSION. It gave me the body that twice won the title: "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." At my own risk I'll give you PROOF in just 7 days that my same method can make YOU into a NEW MAN of giant power and energy. **I'll Prove YOU Can Have A Body Like Mine!** I'll prove that DYNAMIC TENSION can make you a healthy, confident, powerful HE-MAN. In only a few minutes daily. Send for YOUR Copy of my 48-page book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." Post the coupon NOW— Send 6d. P.O. or stamps in sealed envelope (2½d. stamp) to CHARLES ATLAS (Dept. 125/G), 2 Dean St., London, W.1.

CHARLES ATLAS *Holder of the title: "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."*

CHARLES ATLAS (Dept. 125/G), 2 Dean Street, London, W.1.

I want the proof that your system of "**Dynamic Tension**" can make me a New Man. Send me your book, "Everlasting Health and Strength" and details of your amazing **7-Day Trial Offer.** I enclose 6d. P.O. or stamps.

Name.....

(Please print or write plainly)

Address.....

.....

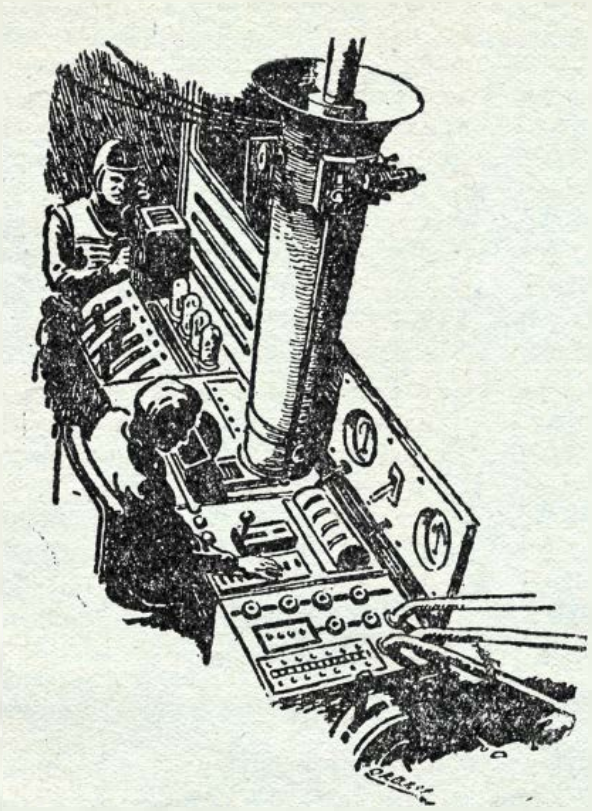
ASTOUNDING

SCIENCE FICTION

Vol. V, No. 5 (British Edition) July 1946

Contents

All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.



SPECIAL KNOWLEDGE

By A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

A good officer on a modern merchant marine ship has a great deal of highly specialized knowledge. But if that man somehow found himself an officer on a merchant spaceship, his special knowledge would seem pretty useless—ordinarily. But not that trip!

"EVERYTHING happens on my watch" thought Quentin Dale bitterly. If the converter had to give trouble he would far sooner it happened on his off-duty hours. Then he could go aft to give a hand. He was weak, he knew, on magnetronics — and feared that the Board's examiners would soon discover this when he sat for his Master Astronaut's certificate.

The Second Pilot slumped in his chair and gloomily, not without apprehension, regarded the power meters, whose needles seemed afflicted by St. Vitus' Dance. The Old Man would know what was wrong, he reflected. If he could see what the Old Man was doing about it he would learn far more than all the textbooks in creation could ever teach him. He— A sudden surge of power through the drivers cut short the train of his thoughts, forced him deep down into the thickly padded chair.

A groan made him turn his head. It was Chief Pilot Saunders. His cap was missing, and he looked more than unusually untidy.

"Ruddy nearly pulled my guts out, that one," he grumbled. "I wonder how the passengers are taking it—"

"What are you doing along here, Number One?"

"Far too many people in the engine room, Dale. The Old Man and the Commander are going at it hammer and tongs, can't

agree on the cause of the trouble. Pawson and Jenkins are doing the fetching and carrying, and all the cadets are standing around with their big, ugly mouths wide open. I was in the way—so I came along here for a little peace and quiet." He eased himself into the other chair. "Ah, that's better." Then— "How is she going, Dale?"

"As per plotting machine," the Second Pilot waved his hand in the general direction of that instrument. "And the screens have nothing to report."

"Good. I'll take over. You'd better trot along aft and watch the great minds at work. It's high time you learned *something* about magnetronics! Go on! If you don't, I'll wander down to the lounge and try to get better acquainted with the fair Leonora!"

"Not bloody likely!" Dale was out of his seat in a flash. "Thanks a million, Number One! I'll remember you in my will!"

He rose to his feet—a little unsteadily, for the erratic, intermittent changes in acceleration were not conducive to equilibrium —and made his way to the—ladder?—*no, companionway, I think . . . after all, she is a passenger ship . . . better throw in a few fancy trimmings* . . . companionway giving access to . . .

What was that, dear?"

"For the third *time, George, I wonder if we shall have a quiet night tonight?"*

. . the body of the vessel. He . . .

"George!"

"Yes, honey?"

"Must you pound that blasted typewriter? You've only got a short leave—and you think more of your stories than you do of me!"

"I do not. But I must have something in hand for when we get back to New York. That's the worst of these short runs—too little time for writing. And all your pay off goes in Income Tax, Wine Bills and Superannuation. No stories, no silk stockings, Jane my dear."

"It wouldn't be so bad if you did sell something. Cameron said that your last effort stank."

"He said nothing of the kind. "Anyway, I thought the love interest made the story. And I rather liked Natalya—"

"That was obvious. Rather like Natalie, wasn't she? I always suspected that you were sweet on her. Now I know."

"She was," said Whitley patiently—and carefully—"just a good boozing pal. Nothelse. She—"

A heavy explosion shook the house.

Windows rattled violently, but did not quite break. Flakes of plaster fell from the ceiling, some of them into the already clogged and dirty machinery of George Whitley's typewriter. From upstairs came the sound of a child crying. Jane rose quickly from her seat by the fire and hurried out of the room. Whitley heard her feet on the stairs, swift yet light.

He sighed, got up and went to the mantlepiece for a pipe cleaner. He began, halfheartedly at first and then with increasing enthusiasm, to poke among the springs and leavers of his ancient portable, among a dozen varieties of highly unsuitable lubricating oil and specimens of dust from the atmospheres of half the seaports of the world. He didn't mind the dust, it acted as a silencer of sorts. But great hunks of ceiling were another matter.

The door opened silently.

"It's all right," said Jane. "The beastly thing didn't wake her up properly. I wonder where it was?"

"Sounded Hampstead way to me. But we heard it, that's the main thing. It's the ones you don't hear—"

"I know, I know. And now you'll tell me that they aren't really weapons at all, but the first spaceships, and that Ley says that a man could go up three hundred miles in one. It's bad enough having you spending your leave hammering away at your old typewriter without your going into frenzies of admiration for these horrible V weapons." Her voice changed. "But can't you remember, George? Can't you remember? If only you could. It would be a shield over London —over England!"

"I've tried, my dear." The face he turned to his wife was suddenly drawn and strained. "You know I've tried. And they tried up at the Admiralty, too. In any other country I'd have had a really rough time—not that it wasn't bad enough here. All that they know, is that I made some kind of disintegrating ray out of bits and pieces—and wiped out a bomber squadron. If only Quentin Dale had had the savvy to put it down in writing!"

Jane ran her hand through her red hair.

"But he didn't," she said practically. A vertical furrow appeared between her brows. "But the others?"

"None of them saw the thing—though they saw it working. They're all back to

normal, now, by the way. All except young Watkins. He's still trying to get his release so that he can become a Commando!"

Jane persisted.

"But suppose you are dreaming of him again — Quentin Dale, I mean. Dreaming that you are *him—and you get a sudden shock, as you did before. Wouldn't—?"*

"No go, honey. I don't pretend to know yet if Dale was only something dredged up from my own subconscious, or if he did really come back in Time. But his world is dead—and he is dead. Or, at any rate, it is no longer on the main stream of probability—"

"How do you know?"

"I don't know*—it's all a matter of feeling. But I carried on with* my *dream whilst he was raising hell in my place. He . . . I . . . was captured by the Aryans. Alive. And they tried to make me talk. If I'd known the things they wanted of me, I* would *have talked." He buried his face in his hands. "It was too bad to tell anybody—even you, my darling. And then everything sort of faded out, and I was in a dim, gray Limbo till I was called back. And I've never been able to write about Quentin Dale and his world since—"*

"But this—" Jane picked up one of the typewritten sheets. "Quentin Dale!"

"Not the Quentin Dale. He was first cousin to the Gray Lensman. This is Quentin Dale II—strange, how I can't get away from that name — and he is Second Pilot of Martian Maid *and lives in a vaguely communistic, peaceful World State. Rather a useless young puppy, too—"*

"But perhaps he *knows something."*

"Not him!"

Whilst she was talking, Jane was laying the table for supper. Absently, George Whitley watched her movements. It was the kind of scene all too familiar to the man ashore — but something for the sailor to store in his memory against long, lonely middle watches. Then—

"Here!" he demanded, "what's the big idea?"

Jane colored.

"It was unintentional, George, I assure you. In any case, it's all we have. Unless you care to run round the corner for some fish and chips—"

"Too late—and too lazy. This'll do me."

He opened one of the bottles of beer on the table, filled Jane's glass and his own. Their glasses met, their eyes met, over the frugal meal of nightmare-inducing bread and cheese and pickles.

"Here's to my dream," toasted Whitley gallantly. "And here's to my dreams!"

"Here's to your dreams!" responded Jane.

It may have been a distant explosion that woke Jane, it may have been the strenuous efforts of her digestion to cope with the indigestible meal. In all probability it was her husband. He was twitching like a dog hunting dream rabbits, and he was talking softly but distinctly.

"Look at the meters!" he said as though to himself. "Look at the meters!" A long pause, then— "What are you doing here, Number One?" As per plotting machine— And the screens have nothing to report. Not bloody likely! Thanks a million, Number One! I'll remember you in my will!" His legs started to work and the bedclothes began to slide over the end of the bed. "Good evening, Miss Starr . . . Strange how I always get the feeling that I've known her before somewhere . . . somewhen . . . *No, I don't know what the trouble is; I've just come down from Control. Yes, I'll let you have the dope as soon as I can. Cheerio for now." Another long pause. "Hey! What's the rush? Where are you all going? I'm going in—"*

The V-2 landed at the bottom of the road. For those at the end of its trajectory there was a swift and sudden extinction. For those to whom distance lent a certain safety, but who were within the radius of blast, there was a brief but devastating fury of broken glass, fallen ceilings and flying debris.

In the next bedroom the infant Patricia set up a howl of sheer terror. Jane snatched up the emergency torch beside the bed, made to rush to the side of her child. She paused Something was wrong, terribly wrong. Sailorwise, George invariably awoke on occasions such as these with all his wits about him. But now—

Jane shone the torch full in his face.

Then, for the first time, she screamed.

Looking at her from her husband's eyes was a bewildered and frightened stranger.

When Whitley-Dale reached the engine room door he was almost bowled over by the rush of juniors and cadets from that compartment.

"Hey! What's the rush? Where are you all going?"

"Something's wrong!" shouted Pawson "They yelled to us to get out and get clear!"

"I'm going in!"

Later, he found it hard to analyze his motives. It was, he had to admit, curiosity rather than courage. And there was undeniably, a strong element of pure braggadocio. The door was sliding shut—not fast, but fast enough to make haste on his part necessary.

So it was that he was right in line with the narrowing opening when the converter let loose. Violet lightnings blinded him and he felt the sting of unknown radiations on his face and hands. There was very little sound—just a thin high whine, felt rather than heard. And there was a sense of unbearable tension which, mercifully, lasted only for an infinitesimal fraction of a second. Somewhere, something snapped.

He was still alive. His face and hands were smarting but, as far as he could judge, no serious damage had been done. But he felt a sense of loss, a dreadful sensation that he had been wrenched in two. For long seconds he floated there—for *Martian Maid* was no longer accelerating—gazing about him with a certain dim wonder at the familiar. yet weirdly unfamiliar, details of this part of the ship. At last he realized what was wrong. He was no longer seeing his surroundings through Quentin Dale's eyes. No, that wasn't it. He looked down at his uniform. it was no uniform that *he* had ever worn, would ever wear. He was seeing his surroundings through Quentin Dale's eyes—*but with his own mind.* He hoped hopelessly that it was all a dream.

"Dale! Wake up, man! Are you hurt?"

Whitley looked at Saunders appealingly.

"Hit me, Number One," he pleaded. "Give me a smack in the puss—as hard as you can!"

"Are you nuts?"

"No . . . I don't think so. Just dazed, I guess. A good, hard slap might bring me round."

Saunders grunted.

"This hurts you more than it hurts me," he paraphrased. The force of his blow brought tears to the other's eyes, slammed him with a bone-shaking thud against the bulkhead.

And he didn't wake up.

"Satisfied?"

"Er . . . yes. Quite."

"You still look groggy. I'll take charge here. Doctor!" A middle-aged man came forward, the red under the gold of his epaulettes denoting his profession. "Smear some of that goo of yours over Dale here, will you? And then you can carry on up to Control, Number Two, and get a fix and run up our probable orbit."

Whilst Saunders and the others busied themselves with tasks just outside Whitley's comprehension the doctor produced a jar of ointment from the satchel he carried. Its odor was pleasantly aromatic. It was not until he felt its soothing coolness that Whitley realized how much his face and hands had been smarting.

"Roll up your sleeves, Number Two. Hm-m-m. That's all right. Lucky for you, young man, that the shield was in place between the converter and the door—"

"But the others?"

"They'll not be worrying about burns—even supposing that there's enough of them left to get burned! Look!"

Whitley followed the surgeon's pointing finger. He saw a dial—and its needle registered zero in any man's language.

"The hull must have been ruptured. And they tell me that they weren't wearing spacesuits. You're fixed, now. Run along up to your Holy of Holies and do your sums!"

It was indeed fortunate that Whitley knew the ship. He had imagined—*or remembered*?—her so vividly that he was able to make his way to Control without any difficulty. Along the guide rails he pulled himself, past cargo compartments, past storerooms and accommodation, until he came to the lounge.

At the sight of the golden girl—for that was how he was always to think of her—he almost forgot his purpose. Her hair was the color of not too-new gold braid, warmly mellow, and her skin put him in mind of one of those luscious, golden peaches. The short, becoming nurse's uniform revealed rather than hid a disturbing figure. True—he had written of her, but his imaginings—or memories—fell far short of the gorgeous actuality. He envied the passengers, most of whom had been rendered hopelessly spacesick by the sudden transition to free fall, who were now the objects of her tender, albeit professional, solicitude.

She adjusted the straps holding an elderly archaeologist in his chair, gave him a paper bag together with full instructions, then turned to greet the Second Pilot.

"Well, Mr. Dale, what kind of mess has the executive department got us into now?"

"I can't quite say, Le . . . Miss Starr. But it's serious. The captain is dead, and the navigator—"

The little mocking lights died in the blue eyes.

"Not so loud—" she warned, waving her hand towards her charges. "Not that they're in any condition to overhear— But what's happened?"

"I can't say." He met her stare of incredulity with one of frank bewilderment. "Honestly, I can't. There was some kind of explosion—and I was just in time to get it bang in the face. I'm still a bit dazed, I guess—"

"Sounds like the converter. But—"

But George Whitley found the spectacle of the sufferers scattered about the lounge even more engrossing than that of the glamorous Miss Starr. It is said that *mal de mer* is as much psychological as physical. The same will, doubtless, be said about spacesickness. Quentin Dale had experienced free fall. George Whitley had known it only in his imagination. The actuality was worse, much worse.

"Give me one of those bags!" he gulped. "Better make it two!"

He grabbed a handful from the astonished nurse and fled up and away for the Control Room.

"Now what?" demanded George Whitley bitterly. "Now what?"

He tried letting his mind go blank, tried to let the memories of the egregious Mr. Dale take charge. But it was no go. The trouble, he decided, was that he had been too much in possession of his own faculties when the transfer had taken place. Had the strange little world of *Martian Maid* been utterly alien to him—George Whitley—he might have got somewhere by the simple expedient of letting Nature take its course. As it was, he was on the verge of knowing, trembling on the very brink of becoming a fully fledged astronaut, but—paradoxical as it may seem—he knew too much. And too little.

He looked around him.

There, in a rack, was an obvious sextant. Which meant that he got a fix by taking the angles subtended by—something—and —*something*. The Sun? Probably. And what else? The First Point of Aries?

He had a sudden rush of brains to the head. In his own time Nautical Almanacs invariably contained worked examples of all the standard navigational problems. The same should—*must*—apply to the ephemerae used by these latter day navigators. Eagerly, he looked over the Control Room bookshelf. But he was doomed to disappointment. He was not to know it—but every article of equipment carried by the liners of space was a legacy from the days of chemical fuel, of the time when—if a ship were to get anywhere—mass had to be reduced at all costs And formulas carried in the brains of the crew are, obviously, so much lighter than those same formulas printed on paper, be it never so thin and flimsy.

Finally abandoning his search for worked examples which would allow him to navigate by substitution Whitley found the plotting machine. How many times he had written the words— "He ran up a fresh orbit on the plotting machine," he would not like to say. But now he was face to face with one of the things. And he didn't know what to do with it.

It had a keyboard, rather like that of a typewriter. Above this keyboard was a frame, inclosing a cube of light-spangled nothingness. The bright light in the center was, he thought, the sun. The other lights, with their faintly luminous, almost circular orbits must be the planets.

He examined the keys. Some bore signs familiar to him, homely plus and minus, the orthodox symbols for multiplication and division. Others were strange, but not too alien. "V"s on their sides, facing this way and that, exclamation marks. And some seemed to be part and parcel of a mathematics far beyond his ken.

Experimentally, at random, he punched a key. The machine clicked to itself, and a spot of light appeared no more than half an inch from the central luminary. He punched one or two more, and a curve of violet incandescence extended itself from the tiny Sun to the outermost borders of the frame. Whitley felt happier. He had found out how to run up an orbit—there remained only to discover what data he had to feed into the enigmatic machine before him. He felt sure that if he cudgeled his brains for long enough he would be able to remember the gist of the several articles he had read, from time to time, in science-fiction magazines. He smiled wryly. He had always argued that the first astronauts would have a big edge over the first aviators, inasmuch as everything had already been worked out—even down to the technique of space navigation. He wished that, in his own stories, he had devoted more time to technicalities and less to personalities.

He strapped himself in to the chair that his body had vacated only a short while before, settled down for a good session of intense cerebration. In this he was less successful than he might have been, for the unfamiliar glory of the naked stars beyond the crystal clear viewprints claimed all his attention. He could not repress a feeling of exultation that he was among those who were pushing Man's frontier out to those same stars.

"I shall have to call you 'George'. People will wonder if I call you 'Quentin'. In any case, it's a foul name."

"It is not. It has been in the family for generations—"

"So has a tendency towards varicose veins in mine. Oh, I wish I knew whether you really are what you claim, or only the more interesting half of a case of schizophrenia. Perhaps— But that can wait till the morning. Good night."

"Aren't you—?"

"NO. I shall be sleeping in the next room. Good night."

"But she can't be!" Whitley was aroused from his reverie by the incredulous voice of Saunders. "She can't be. Look at the Sun, man!"

"Eh? Oh, the orbit— To tell the truth, old man, I've clean forgotten my navigation. Must have been the blast. Blast does funny things to you. I—"

"And you never dreamed of getting us on the intercom and asking me to send somebody else up. Oh, no. That would have been far too simple. *If* you're interested, it looks to me as though we've flung ourselves somehow into a fine cometary orbit—which means that in a few days we roast! Out of the way!"

Saunders grabbed the sextant. With rapid precision he took the angles subtended by sun, planet and star. Beneath his practiced fingers the scribbling pad became covered with a network of hieroglyphs. He went to the plotting machine, and those same practiced fingers played the kind of tattoo that Whitley was wont to play upon the keyboard of his own, long familiar typewriter.

Within the cubical framework all vanished but the similacra of Sun and planets. Then a spot of light representing the ship came into being. From it ran a curve of violet luminescence, close, too close, to the Sun. Saunders cursed. He punched yet another key, and from a slot beneath the machine a sheet of paper was pushed out. The Chief Pilot regarded it, puzzlement writ large on his broad face, then screwed it into a ball, and flung it from him irascibly.

"I wish," he said slowly and bitterly, "that you'd clear your offal from Pansy's innards when you've finished playing silly beggars with her."

Viciously he stabbed down with a thick forefinger, then again. The machine whirred and another sheet of paper emerged from the slot.

This one, obviously, was more satisfactory. Its formulas agreed with the curve displayed graphically in the three dimensional chart. But this gave no cause for satisfaction—rather the reverse, thought Whitley, watching Saunder's face

"And now what?" demanded the Chief Pilot. Obviously, no answer was required, but the other felt impelled to fill the breach in the conversation.

"The radio—" he ventured.

"A blinding glimpse of the obvious!" snarled Saunders. "And you know as well as I do that our chances of being reached and taken in tow before we roast are completely nil."

Whitley thought, hard. Weak though he was in dealing with these latter day technicalities he knew the ship well.

"The auxiliary converter," he suggested. "And the steering jets—"

"No good. Given the time—and the fuel —they'd kill our momentum. The latter we might manage, but the first— NO."

"Not kill it, Number One, but *use* it! Look, there's Venus. Couldn't we throw ourselves into a closed orbit around her? Or, perhaps, land. Grazing ellipses, you know—" He was rather proud of that one. I must write to Willy Ley about it, he thought.

"Land on Venus?" Whitley felt as though he had just uttered a gross obscenity in a refined drawing room. *"Land—on Venus*? Are you completely nuts? But the other idea . . . it's a chance. Run up all the dope, will you, while I go aft and get the auxiliary converted linked up with the steering jets? But I forgot. You can't. Are you sure you can't? What use *are* you, Number Two?"

"I don't know. But if I'm ever going to handle that thing I shall have to start at the bottom."

"Never mind. The quack can give you a run over later." He seized a telephone.

"That you, Pawson? Listen—is the skin airtight yet? Good. No, never mind the fancy trimmings, start straight away feeding the A.C. into the steering jets. Yes, you'll have to shut it off. What are the emergency batteries for, anyhow? I'll be along in a couple of seconds." He turned to Whitley. "Now, Dale, you stay here. If any bells ring, or *anything* out of the ordinary happens call me at once. On this phone." He thrust the instrument into the other's hands. "Pawson will be along to make the initial calculations."

Then he was gone, his gross form vanishing through the open doorway with surprising rapidity.

The next few days were a nightmare to George Whitley. He was not used to being a passenger, yet he had no choice but to stand to one side and watch the others engaged in tasks that, in spite of their being on the very verge of his comprehension, were still incomprehensible. The devil of it was that he knew the ship. She was *his* ship. Every smallest detail was as he had envisaged it for his story. He knew the crew and the passengers intimately, with the exception of those characters that he had not troubled to develop. In one thing only had his imagination been at fault. He had seen Venus as a populous world with great windjammers—on a planet with perennial trade winds what need for power?—plying their trade between the island empires. *Martian Maid* was to have made her forced landing in the Venusian sea, her crew were to have fallen into the hands of pirates. No, not space pirates—just the kind of buccaneer that one always associates with sail and salt water.

But Venus, obviously, was not colonized.

The very name of Venus, to put it mildly, stank.

He would have liked to have asked the others just what was the state of affairs on the Star of the Morning and the Evening but did not care to expose his ignorance still further. He would find out eventually, he knew.

And so he spent all of his waking hours in Control—not as a real watch officer but what, in his own time, he had been wont to call a glorified *puri wallah.* Just a lookout, pure and simple. There was no doubt about his simplicity.

He had his meals there.

And it was there that he was visited by the surgeon, accompanied by his aide.

"Well," said the officer, "if you can't remember, you can't remember. And that's all there is to it. As a matter of fact, if it's any comfort to you, such cases aren't too rare. The funny part about yours is not that you remember too little—but that you remember too much. The usual victim of this type of blowup—if he survives, that is—seems to have the idea that he's a man from some other age; just a temporal traveler dumped into an environment utterly alien to him. But you— You know all of us, you know the ship. It's only your specialized knowledge that has been wiped out."

"But he *has* changed, Doc." Whitley felt uncomfortable under Leonora Starr's close scrutiny. "He's not Quentin Dale as *we* knew him. He's more mature, somehow. And he's—different."

"Rubbish, Leo. Well, Dale, I must be getting down to look at the passengers. One or two are finding the prospects of a possible landing on Venus conducive to a nervous breakdown."

"Will you want me, Doc.?"

"Why, yes, Leo. You do more good to the men than I could ever do. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. It's just that I thought I might be able to drag Mr. Dale's lost memories back into the light if you left me with him."

"Hm-m-m. Possibly. As a qualified nursing sister you should know more practical psychology than a humble G.P. Yes, you can stay."

"This is the Admiralty, George."

"But they'll never see me. I've learned enough about this cockeyed world and time of yours to know that a mere Second Mate is practically a minus quantity."

"Yes, they'll see you. Look in your pocket, your breast pocket. That's where George always kept his cards. Now . . . here's a pencil . . . just write on the back of one, 'I remember.' That's right. Now sign it. No, not Quentin Dale, *you fool.* George Whitley. *That's better. Hey, you with the brass buttons! Will you take this card up to the First Sea Lord, or whoever's in charge? No, we have no appointment. Yes, it is urgent. And I can tell you right now that my Lords Commissioners are going to take a very poor view of you if we get turned away from their very doorstep. Mr. Whitley has been here before."*

"Here he comes back, Jane. Suppose they do let us in—what do I tell them?"

"That you've remembered how this ray of yours worked; that you can protect London from the V weapons."

"But I haven't remembered. And I told you that I was very shaky on magnetronics."

"You know more than any man alive today. And you'll have time to experiment. And if the gadget should blow up—then you stand a chance of getting switched back to your own time."

"Thank God for that!"

"What? Oh, so they'll see us, will they? I told you so. Come along George and tell your tale to the nice admirals."

"Cigarette?"

"Thank you, Leonora."

Whitley took a little cylinder from the proffered case, tapped the end smartly on his thumbnail to ignite it, then put it to his mouth. He looked sideways at the girl, who was strapped in the other chair. He was too shy to look at her directly. Contributory to his embarrassment was the knowledge that, in his other—but not more real—life, he had given the heroine of his story a rough passage.

"Leonora?" Fine eyebrows arched quizzically over the blue eyes. "Coming on, aren't we? Well, I'm going to cut out the 'Mister' and just call you Dale. I could call you Quentin, but it's a foul name."

"It is not. I thought of it. I mean it's been in my family for generations."

"So has a tendency towards varicose veins in mine. But you're not Quentin Dale. I'm sure of that. You may, of course, just be the more interesting half of a case of schizophrenia—but I don't think so. Besides—I've just heard Malinowski's 'The Mass Subconscious in Relation to the Space-Time Continuum.' And— But who *are* you?"

Whitley dragged at his cigarette. He looked away from the girl, out through the viewports to where Venus, a huge, flawless pearl, hung among the lesser gems in the black-velvet-lined jewel box that was interplanetary space. The temptation to drop the masquerade was overwhelming—but he had no ambition to find himself in a lunatic asylum, or its latter day equivalent. He looked again at the girl. There was something about her that reminded him of Jane, something that he could trust implicitly. Yet, professional teller of tall tales that he was, he hesitated to tell this tale the utter fantasy of which lay only in the fact that it was true. Had his companion been of his own sex he would never, in all probability, have told the truth.

"My name is Whitley," he said, "George Whitley. I come from the Twentieth Century. Dale, I suppose, is one of my remote descendants. Potential immortality of the germ plasm, you know; continuity of the world line and so forth—"

"Nuts," said the girl. "Completely, utterly and irrevocably nuts!" But there was that in her eyes which belied her words. "At least, that's what I'd say if I didn't know you weren't Quentin Dale. But go on."

"I don't know quite where to begin—"

"That's simple. Who are you, where do you come from, and how did you get here?"

"Do you have such a thing as science-fiction in *your* time?"

"Yes. Do you have fan clubs in yours?"

"Yes. Well, you know what a fan is, evidently. That's something towards it. I was . . am. . . one. Worse, I started to write the stuff. Not without," he said modestly, "a certain success. My real profession, however, is that of a ship's officer. Surface ships, of course, on Earth's seas."

"Oh! Windjammers and galleons and things! You know, that age of sea transport has always fascinated me."

"*Not* windjammers. And certainly not galleons. We wandered around in iron cargo boxes driven either by one of the forms of steam engine, or by internal combustion engines. There *was* glamour, I suppose, otherwise they'd have got nobody to sail their blasted ships. Unfortunately by the time it wore off it was too late to make a fresh start elsewhere.

"Well, I was at sea during World War II. My ship was in a very important convoy; so important that the future course of the war depended upon its getting through. At the time I was writing one of my science-fiction stories—a story of the future. I imagined the whole Solar System, with the exception of a colony of free men on Mars, under the iron heel of a fascist dictatorship. I got to the part where my hero, having stolen the plans of a secret weapon from the fascists, cracked up on one of the asteroids. He was being hotly pursued by the Aryan Navy, and his only hope was to try to assemble the weapon from makeshift materials and fight off all attempts to capture him.

"I was dreaming of this, with myself in my hero's place. As his weapon blew up in my dream—the alarm bells rang aboard my

ship. The shock of one or the other—or both—caused a transfer of personalities. I was him, and he was me."

"What happened?"

"He died. Unpleasantly. But it was *I* that died. Do you understand?"

"I think so. And what else?"

"Well, his mind was in my body, back on Earth, in the Twentieth Century. Apparently he was clever enough to pass himself off as me. But he was determined to make his beastly weapon and change the course of history."

"And—?"

"He did. He fought off a determined bomber attack. But the weapon, being made of makeshift materials, blew up—and back *I* came, completely dazed, to a scene of unparalleled confusion. And they've been trying ever since to get the secret of the blasted thing from *me.*"

"But how come you're here and now?"

"The same kind of thing happened again. I was home on leave in London, and I was writing a story about *this* future. I had a dream about it—with myself as Quentin Dale—and just as the converter blew up *here* a V-2 must have landed *there.*"

"V-2's? What were they?"

"The great granddaddies of this beast," he patted the control panel affectionately, "but *they* used 'em as long-range artillery."

He fell silent. Up till now he had not thought of Jane and Patricia. The bewildering wonder of his experience had driven all else from his mind. He realized dully that he should have thought of them long before this, but told himself that all the worry in the world would make not one iota of difference to what had already happened. But the mere fact that he was here, in Quentin Dale's shoes, was proof positive that Patricia, at least, had survived whatever unpleasantness had occurred. Or was it? He looked intently at his dim reflection in the polished control panel. There was, he had to admit, a certain faint resemblance to the central character of a long forgotten episode of his past.

"The ancestral ape from the family tree, in person," Leonora Starr's voice was faintly mocking. Then a note of solicitude crept in. "But what's the worry, Dale?"

"I'm wondering what happened to Jane and Patricia. They're my wife and daughter," he hastened to explain. "I feel just lousy clearing out like this and leaving them in a city under fire."

"Don't worry. It wasn't your fault. And if it comes to a showdown the London of your time is probably far preferable to an out-of-control spaceship hell bent for Venus!"

"Yes, Venus. I've been wanting to ask—but haven't dared to display my ignorance. In my story it wasn't a bad sort of a place—"

"But this isn't your story. Somebody else," she smiled at the fancy, "is feeding his thoughts into the dictograph. Do you know what they call Venus? The Planet of No Return. True, they haven't sent many expeditions—only six all told—but each one has been better equipped than the last. And their ships have just dipped down beneath the eternal clouds and—they've never come out again. If only radio communication were possible from the surface! Then the next comers would have known what it was they had to fight."

"Hm-m-m. Charming prospect. But we should be safe enough in a closed orbit."

"That's what *you* think. But please remember that all that kind of thing went out with the coming of atomic power. You people still have to know the theory of it all for your examinations — but not for generations has anybody done it in practice.

"Which reminds me. For an alleged man from another age you are remarkably well versed in some aspects of astronautics. Other cases of this temporal transfer of personality have been known—but invariably the victims have been completely lost and bewildered in the new environment."

"Moral: Read science-fiction," replied Whitley.

Broad on the beam, Venus was a snow-covered continent in the sky. Ever and again, intermittent, disconcerting, came the thunder of the steering jets. To Whitley they were almost terrifyingly violent, but to those accustomed to the full-throated roar of the main drive they were but a feeble echo of *Martian Maid's* rightful song of power.

Over the controls sat Saunders, his surprisingly agile fingers playing over the keyboard like those of some master pianist. At the plotting machine Pawson fed in data, called the resultant figures to his chief in clipped, staccato accents. Jenkins was aft in the engine room, anxiously watching over his little converter lest it follow the example of the late prime source of power. Fascinated spectators were the cadets and George Whitley.

Whitley watched Saunders. He saw how the beads of perspiration trickling down the chief pilot's face were driving him almost to desperation. He knew that the other would have sold his soul to have been able to put up a hand to wipe them away—and knew that he dare not take either hand from the controls. With the pitifully weak power at his disposal there would be no second chance if he muffed the maneuver.

Whitley put his hand in his pocket and felt for his paper handkerchief. He didn't care if Saunders did think that he was trying to curry favor—this was something useful that he could do. Before he could carry out his intention the engine room telephone buzzer broke the tense silence. The cadet who was nearest the instrument answered, saying "Control" in a boyish, striving-to-be-official voice. Then: "Mr. Saunders! Mr. Saunders, sir!"

"Yes?" The Chief pilot did not look up from his controls, but his voice was taut with anxiety. "Yes? What is it?"

"Mr. Jenkins says will you cut the drive, sir! At once, sir!"

"Tell him I can't!"

"Mr. Jenkins says that if you don't cut the drive fast, sir, there'll be no stern left to the ship!"

Saunders' hands made a last rapid pass over the instrument board, then fell limply to his side.

"That's mucked it," he said bitterly, to nobody in particular. "That's mucking well mucked it. Why they couldn't leave well enough alone and leave us with the old Mark VII converters, Heaven alone knows. And it would be us to make the first run with these mucking Mark VIII's!"

"What now, Number One?"

"Unless Jenkins gets the auxiliary converter fixed in time—"

"He says it will take at least six hours, sir"—interpolated the cadet. ". . . . It means the grazing ellipses that Dale here has been burbling about. And, personally, I think we should be better off if we let her crash. Was the parachute checked at Port Massingham?" he fired suddenly at Whitley.

"Yes," replied the temporal castaway automatically. It had been in his story, anyhow.

"And when do we make first contact, Pawson?"

"At 18.00 G.M.T. Just two and a half hours from now."

"Well, we'll go aft and try to get things straightened out before it's too late. Dale, you stay here and give us a buzz if you want us!"

Those two and a half hours were the longest that Whitley had ever spent in *his* life. They weren't the longest that he had spent in other people's lives—a like period as Quentin Dale I in the hands of the vengeful Aryans was several eternities longer. Still, this was quite long enough for the tastes of most people. Had he been able to make computations regarding the future course of events it would not have been so bad. But his status was that of a uniformed passenger.

Through the ports blazed the white glory of Venus. He would have thought it beautiful, were it not for the information he had gleaned concerning the state of affairs on that planet. It wasn't much—only that there was something there definitely lethal to visitors from outside.

And yet, it was beautiful. Relative to *Martian Maid* Venus was now in quadrature. Half of the sphere shone dazzling white, the other half was in darkness. But it was not darkness unrelieved. Electrical storms must have been raging below the eternal clouds, for every now and again an evanescent violet glow suffused the dark face with a fleeting opalescence.

Abruptly Venus was no longer a sphere. It was a vast bowl. The ship, apparently, hovered somewhere above its center. It seemed that she was motionless—until one looked at the racing shadow fast leading her on to the dark side. And then the little shadow was one with the vast shadow of the Venusian night.

Almost simultaneously a thin, high screaming became audible. It may have been imagination, but it seemed that the temperature of the control room rose suddenly and appreciably. Whitley picked up the phone and pressed the button.

"Mr. Saunders? First contact established," he said.

"Then that's that. Hang on there, anyhow. Even if the auxiliary jets can't pull us out of this mess now, they can, at least, help us to make a decent landing."

The screaming of tortured atmosphere ceased. The ship was once again in her native element. It would be several hours before the next contact—exactly how long he could not say. But there was nothing now to see on the Venusward side but the darkness lit by its flickering half lights. On

the other side were the stars—but Whitley had become blasé in a surprisingly short time. He felt in his breast pocket for his case and took out a cigarette.

"Thanks. I'll have one, too—"

Slim fingers took the case from his hand before he could return it to its resting place. Whitley turned. Standing—or, to be more exact, floating in the air—behind him was Leonora Starr.

"Thought you'd be lonely," she said. "So I came along to keep you company. Here's some sandwiches and coffee."

"Thanks!" Whitley gratefully accepted the packet and the thermo-carton. "But what about the others?"

"They're being taken care of. Don't worry about them. . . . And so we're the fools that are going to rush in where angels fear to tread."

"Who told you?"

"Saunders. I had the job of breaking the joyful news to the passengers. Oh, they took it very well. But I had a hard time tearing myself away from that old goat Dr. Gillespie, the archaeologist. Do you know—he has a theory that Venus is inhabited by an intelligent race?"

"And why not?"

"But that's not all of it. According to him these brainy Venusians once possessed the secret of interplanetary travel—he babbled a lot about mysterious lights in the sky and some scientist of what must have been your age called Fort—and they resent most keenly anybody else being able to do what they did in the past. So they just nobble them. Fantastic, isn't it?"

"Maybe. But remember that I am—or was—a professional fantasy hound. Doesn't seem too odd to me. And some of Fort's mysterious happenings do seem to prove to the fact that ships *have* come in from Outside. And the fact that so many of these suppositious vessels seemed to land in or take off from the sea presupposes an aquatic or amphibious race. And I suppose that Venus *is* nearly all water. We used to think so."

"We shall soon find out."

Whitley dozed a little after the girl left him. He possessed the faculty of instantaneous awakening in the event of anything's being amiss, and so it was that the second contact found him nervously alert with the first sounds of atmospheric skin friction.

There wasn't anything he could do about it except report it to those working aft. Saunders grunted an acknowledgment. But it seemed to Whitley that the period of atmospheric flight was appreciably longer than it had been on the previous occasion. But there was nothing that *he* could do about it.

Then he decided that there was. Something had been worrying him for some little time—something most definitely wrong on which he had tried to place a finger. He had tried to place it by having recourse to Quentin Dale's memories—but, they, as always, remained just on the wrong side of accessibility. It seemed hardly likely that anything in his own, Twentieth Century experience would supply the key to the problem. But he had read well if not wisely, science-fiction stories without number as well as standard works on rocketry.

Suddenly he saw what was amiss. *Martian Maid* was coming in bows first. This would mean that the steering jets would be useless to brake her momentum when she entered the atmosphere for the last time. There was, of course, a slim chance that Saunders would be able to swing her—but with only the feeble output of the auxiliary converter to oppose both inertia and air pressure that was doubtful. Furthermore—only when coming in stern first could the parachute be used.

He rang the engine room again.

"Yes?" Saunders' voice betrayed the fact that his nerves must be on edge. "What is it?"

"Hadn't we better swing her, Number One? Once she's inside the atmosphere for keeps we shan't have a chance."

"Swing her?" The chief pilot's voice was that of a man dog-tired and on the verge of collapse. "Swing her? You can do what you please with her!"

So that was that. It was obvious that he could expect no help or encouragement from aft. He didn't even know whether or not he would be doing the right thing. But, he told himself, the principles of practical rocketry could not be so vastly different from the mass of theory laid down in his own time. He had seen the little set of controls labeled *Gyroscope*. He had assumed they governed the motions of the flywheel with which the direction of the ships' head was set when falling free. Now he looked at them more closely.

There were three buttons. One was marked "Gyroscope in fore and aft plane," one "Gyroscope in athwartships plane" and the other "Gyroscope in vertical plane." He

found time to wonder how one decided which was port and starboard and which was up and down.

In this case he couldn't be sure whether to set the wheel to "Athwartships" or "Vertical." One of the two would mean that he was merely rotating the ship on her longitudinal axis. Unless all these ups and downs and ports and starboards referred to the axis of the gyroscope and not to the direction of rotation. There was only one way to find out.

He pressed the button marked "Fore & Aft." Somewhere in the bowels of the ship an electric motor hummed briefly. Good. The humming ceased. Whitley next pressed the button labeled "Start." The humming began again—this time on a slightly different key. He feared at first that he had made the wrong choice. This would not have mattered had there been ample power at his disposal—but lights and all kinds of auxiliary machinery had been running off the emergency batteries ever since the small converter had been called upon to usurp the functions of the main drive.

Right ahead was Orion, sprawling in lazy splendor across the frosty black of the airless heavens. The ship's nose—the intersection of the struts of the transparent structure made a good cartwheel sight—was centered fair and square on the nebula of the giant's Belt. As *Martian Maid* swung in her orbit around Venus an East-West motion should have been—and was—imparted to the fixed stars. But now her head was swinging from South to North as well. Castor and Pollux, the Heavenly Twins, came into view, then the great Sickle of Leo, the lion of the northern sky. The Great and Little Bears came next in the slow procession, followed, after an interval, by the Herdsman.

When the Eagle swung into view Whitley decided that he was far enough round. He pressed the button marked "Stop" and hoped for the best.

To him came Leonora Starr, bearing a thermo-carton of tea and a fresh supply of sandwiches. She looked apprehensively out of the ports to where the Planet of No Return hung vast, dark and menacing. She shivered. Then—

"You'll have to bring her down, Dale."

"Who? *Me*?"

"Yes, you. They had a flashback from that beastly little converter—and Saunders and Pawson are temporarily blinded. Doc says it will last for several hours—"

"But Jenkins—"

"You know . . . or do you? . . . that he's only just out of his time. Just a cadet with a smattering of engineering knowledge on top of his college training."

"But even the cadets—"

"You can't get out of it, Dale. You swung the ship just now; that shows you know *something* about the job. You probably know just as much about this grazing ellipse business as anybody here—which isn't very much, I admit. But here's the crux of the whole matter. In your own time you were a responsible officer. The ships in which you served were as different—as ships—from this one as chalk is from cheese. But you were a responsible officer with lives under your feet as you walked the poop or the bridge or whatever you called it. You couldn't afford to make mistakes."

"But—"

"There's no 'but' about it. Jenkins frankly admits that he hasn't got the nerve. The dogs would try their hands at it willingly—but I wouldn't trust those puppies with a cage of white mice. You do it—and that's final!"

Whitley lay back in his chair. He took a pull of the hot, strong tea through the tube of the thermo-carton. He grinned.

"After all, Leo," he remarked "it doesn't make much difference. As far as I can see it just boils down to a choice between accidental death in a crack-up and being murdered by some person or persons unknown."

Whitley knew, when *Martian Maid* grazed for the fourth time, that this was it. Had he known how to use the instruments they would have confirmed the hunch—but his hunch was so strong that he didn't bother to ask Pawson who, white and shaken, had taken his place in the other chair, to check up.

The almost intolerable keening of atmospheric friction did not die away as it had done in the past. Instead its pitch became appreciably lower. They could feel the ship vibrating as the molecules of air rushed over and around the countless little irregularities of what appeared to the eye to be a perfectly smooth metal skin. The periscope was now in use. Looking into it Whitley could see nothing but white, opaque cloud under his stern. Ahead, the stars were still visible. He heard one of the two cadets who were in Control say to the other—"Take

a good look at the stars, Bill. It's the last you'll ever see of them!"

"Cheerful little swine," thought Whitley absently. *"Trouble is that they're probably right. Wonder if Cameron would give me a good obituary in Stellar Stories if he knew? Look good, wouldn't it? One of our most promising young authors has perished whilst making a bollix of a landing on Venus. Meanwhile—what does A do next?"*

Abruptly the starry sky was gone. All that could be seen from forward was featureless mist—not white or gray but of a delicate golden tint. It reminded him of Leonora. *"Come off it,"* he told himself, *"this is no time for daydreaming. Even if it is only a dream."* He put up his hand to mop his face —for it had grown almost unbearably warm. He looked at the air speed indicator. It was no help to him—the needle was hard against the stop.

"This converter," he said to Jenkins. "I suppose—"

"Didn't I tell you? Well, it's like this. If you switch on, it will convert itself into power."

"And the result?"

"Number Six bulkhead should hold—after all, it's what it's built for. But there'll be no stern left."

"We'll just have to land without a stern. Look, Jenkins, we're coming down completely blindfold—and I must get the way off the ship before we crash into a mountainside—if there are mountains here. And I daren't release the parachute at *this* speed—"

As he spoke the golden light faded fast and then died. It was dark now, but a darkness lit by almost continual flashes from below. Unrelieved blackness would have been better than this intermittent effulgence, it confused rather than aided the senses. Whitley thought he saw, in the periscope mirror, a great, shadowy mass a little to starboard of their uncharted course. It may have been imagination, it may have been nothing more substantial than cloud, but it made his mind up. He pressed the firing key.

The deck came up and hit him. Dimly, as from very far away, he heard minor crashes and rendings as the sudden deceleration tore fittings of all kinds loose from the bulkheads. But, as he was to discover later, there was surprisingly little structural damage. The ship had been built to stand far greater accelerations, it was only the suddenness of it all that tested various unimportant gear to breaking point.

Dazed, he shook his head. Blood was streaming from his nose and tasted sickly salt in his mouth. He could not see—and then he was seeing dimly through a red mist. He shook his head again. The mist cleared, but his vision appeared to have impaired. Then an intensely vivid lightning flash forced upon him the realization that this was because only one lamp in the control room remained unbroken. By its light he could just see the air speed indicator. The needle had pushed past its central position of zero, was still recording a forward motion. Then, slowly at first, but with increasing rapidity, it fell back. As it passed zero Whitley pressed the button marked "Parachute Release."

Just below the nose a circular strake of plating slid sternwards. From the recess, which ran right around the hull, billowed the big parachute. They saw its folds and convolutions slide past the viewports, and then it was open above them. Annular in shape, it was. Through the opening directly above, an opening barely greater in diameter than the hull, they could have seen the sky —if there had been any sky to see.

The motion now was that of a descent in a not too rapid elevator—provided that one could imagine that the skyscraper which it served was being violently rocked by the worst earthquake in all history. Whitley expected the pendulum motion to diminish with the passage of time, but it became worse. The Venusian upper air must have been like a boiling caldron. The cloud was thinning now, and they could just see from Control the nearer guy ropes of the parachute. Outlined as they were with pale St. Elmo's Fire they stood out with startling clarity against the dark, formless mist. It was frightening to see them first on one side and then on the other, hang in bights as the ship swung, and then come taut with a jerk that must surely have snapped any Twentieth Century cordage. Whitley became aware that a definite rotary motion had been imparted to the ship in addition to her swing. The combination of the two was peculiarly nauseating. He gulped. But he couldn't afford to be sick.

More with the idea of occupational therapy than anything else he turned to Jenkins.

"What about some flares?" he demanded.

The engineer groaned.

"Flares, Pettigrew!" he ordered weakly.

The cadet addressed staggered feebly to a locker. He took from it a cylinder about six

inches long and three in diameter. He unscrewed the cover of a tube to one side of the control room, inserted the flare and replaced the cover. He did something—Whitley didn't see quite what—and with startling abruptness a blinding, blue-white sun burst into being beneath the ship. The intense radiance was reflected from the mists all around them and from the underside of the parachute. The interior of Control was as light as high noon in the tropics.

Whitley looked into the periscope. The glare was blinding—but that, in itself, was a good sign. It showed that some, at least, of the lenses and mirrors had escaped destruction in the explosion. He snapped a filter into place. He could see the flare itself now, a diffused ball of radiance drifting rapidly to one side. In the center of the field of view was a dark, circular patch. Those object glasses right aft must have gone.

Slowly at first, and then with increasing rapidity, the light of the flare diminished. The parachute lines were once again visible as lines of fire etched upon the circumambient night. Only the flickering barrage of the lightning relieved the darkness. It seemed that it was far brighter than before. It may be, thought Whitley, that it just seems so bright because the flare has gone. It may be—

Once again, he looked into the periscope. Coincident with his action a streak of lightning played in brief, incandescent splendor directly below the ship. It seared itself upon his retina in all its subtle tracery of veining and veiling—a tracery unblurred by any intervening cloud.

"Another flare, Pettigrew, quick!" Hard on his words the light was released, the projector was already loaded. "Look into the periscope, Jenkins, tell me what you see! That last flash of lightning has blinded me."

"We're out of the clouds, Dale. We're still a long way up. Can't see much, that blasted flare is hanging right under us."

"When do we land?"

Whitley swung at the sound of the voice that had come to mean much to him. He had often heard, and often used, the expression "a sight for sore eyes." Looking at Leonora he forgot that his own eyes were still watering and smarting

"What's it to you?" He had to be brusque, rude even. He did not want the others to see how much he cared for the girl. She would know that no offense was meant.

"Just idle curiosity. As a matter of fact the passengers, now that they've recovered from having their vertebrae power through the tops of their skulls, are getting rather restive. And it's all that we can do to restrain Saunders. He's convinced that you're plunging us all to certain destruction."

"I probably am."

"Look!"

There was that in young Pettigrew's voice which made instant attention imperative. They all swung, followed his pointing finger. They saw something vast and dark sail past Control on huge flat wings. It was gone before they could gain more than the most fleeting impression.

"What was it?"

"Don't know. It seemed to come flapping up from below somewhere."

"Was it a flying machine?"

"No. *No.* I saw its eyes—"

"Here it comes again," called Jenkins. "And it's brought all its pals with it!"

Like a squadron of huge, ungainly bombers the flying things winged into sight. There was some attempt at formation, even, although any regularity must have been hard to achieve in that maelstrom of conflicting aerial crosscurrents. They flew as fly certain Earthly seabirds, rising and falling, banking and turning, with barely a quiver of their broad, flat pinions.

There was little doubt that they were reptilian—or the Venusian equivalent of reptilian. Apart from their size they could almost have passed for living reconstructions of the pterosauria of Earth's past. The wings were not quite the same—they were broader, less graceful—but the general plan of the beasts was surprisingly similar.

Deterred by the tracery of the parachute rigging they hovered level with the control room, regarding its occupants with avid eyes. Their jaws opened and shut, revealing yellow teeth. From their mouths dripped a green slime.

"Wonder if the natives are friendly?" cracked somebody.

"They're certainly hungry," returned Leonora with a shudder, "I'm used to being stared at—but not in *that* way."

"Turn the light off, somebody," suggested Whitley. "Perhaps if they can't see us they'll go away."

Pettigrew complied.

The flare was still falling and burning

below them. There was no longer cloud all around them to reflect its radiance into Control, but the underside of the parachute still filled its functions in that respect. Turning off the one feeble lamp left to them made no difference. The flying reptiles still hovered, still stared in through the big ports with an interest that was purely gastronomical.

The flare died. With its extinction, as though the coming of the dark gave them added courage, two of the monstrosities came in to attack. Those in Control could still see them, for their eyes and mouths glowed with a green luminescence. It is doubtful whether they would ever have been able to penetrate the tough plasti-glass, but they never got past the rigging. This was still hanging slack and jerking tight with *Martian Maid's* pendulum swing, and it so happened that one of the creatures became inextricably entangled. It must have got at least a dozen round turns around neck, and wings, and tail.

It was tough. It seemed that it must be decapitated, torn to pieces, each time the cordage snapped taut. But it lived. It stayed in one piece. And it struggled.

To the motion to which all had become, to a greater or lesser degree accustomed, was added a new movement. The ship was shaken violently—as is a rat by a terrier. Leonora had left the door open when she came up from the body of the ship, and now from below drifted curses and frightened screams.

Stanley, one of the cadets who was helping to maintain order between decks, poked his head through the opening. "Mr. Saunders wants to know what is happening, sir. The passengers want to know—"

"Tell them 'nothing'," lied Whitley "Tell them that everything is under control!"

Pettigrew took it upon himself to release another flare. By its light the confused jumble of eyes, mouths and wings outside the port sorted itself out. They saw that the thing's mates had come to its assistance, that with tooth and claw they were tearing at the parachute rigging. As they watched, fascinated, they saw one guy rope part, and then another. They had been designed to stand up to all the stresses that *Martian Maid* would be subject to in any emergency —but she was a regular trader. A landing on Venus was not on her itinerary.

"I'd better go down," said Leonora. In her voice the desire to put metal decks between herself and the unpleasant sight struggled with the disinclination to remove herself from the ranks of those who knew what was happening. "I'd better go down. After all, it *is* my job. Don't breathe a word to the passengers, Stanley, *I'll* handle them. I'd better handle Mr. Saunders and Mr. Pawson, too. Let me know if the worst comes to the worst, Dale."

"I'll keep you informed. I'll—" He had his eye glued to the periscope eyepiece, was ignoring the struggle outside. "Looks like water down there. And plenty of it. And one or two islands."

"About twenty guys gone," reported Jenkins without emotion. "There go another two."

"We haven't far to go now."

The sea under his stern did not look inviting. Even from this height the wave crests were plainly visible. It seemed literally boiling around the islands, with their offlying reefs, that he could see. A dreadful thought occurred to him. What if it *were* boiling? *Really* boiling? Time enough to cross that bridge when he came to it. There was nothing that he, nor anybody else, could do about it.

With the breaking of most of the guys on one side the ship had ceased her gyrations. The undamaged half of the parachute filled and held the wind. By some freak of chance the whole affair achieved a certain stability. *Martian Maid* was still making considerable leeway, but now she was also gliding into the teeth of the hurricane. That was to the good. When she did hit—be it land or water—the force of the impact would be considerably diminished.

He became aware that the violent shaking had stopped. A sound like a cheer made him turn his head. "What is it?" he demanded, "the United States Marines?"

"I don't know what it was, Number Two. Something big, with a streamlined body and wings. It just swooped out of the night and nobbled the beast that was tangled in the guys—and a couple more with it. It looked like a flying fish."

"Maybe it was. But slip down, one of you, give Miss Starr my compliments and tell her *landing stations*. We'd better get strapped in, too."

He could not see very well now. With their accelerated rate of fall they had overhauled and passed the last flare, which now hung low in the sky to leeward. Below the ship was black mystery, and confusion worse confounded by the unsteady, fitful

glare of the lightning. Another flare, he concluded, would only dazzle him. And according to the rough estimate he had made of drift they should, with luck, just make one of the larger islands he had seen. They should—

The downward motion stopped, became an entirely new and utterly sickening movement. With her stern just skimming the crests of the heavy seas *Martian Maid* skittered over the surface, her nose upheld and dragged to leeward by the parachute. At times she would incline at a steep angle from the vertical, and then some freak gust would balloon the folds of silk and she would straighten with a jerk.

But it couldn't last. Even in this hurricane it couldn't last. Yet more of the guy ropes parted, the wind spilled from the parachute and the bows toppled and fell with slow deliberation into the chaotic welter beneath. As the ship assumed the horizontal a great breaker reared itself above her burst and twisted stern, broke with irresistible force against the already overstrained Number Six bulkhead. Had it not been already weakened by the explosion it would have held. But plates and frames buckled and gave. Through the central well poured a flood of warm, brackish water. The next sea did not break. Freakishly, the stern lifted to it. Before those in Control had time to collect their scattered wits they were struggling and drowning, hopelessly trapped by the very straps and webbing they had donned for their safety.

George Whitley's last thoughts, as he fumbled clumsily with the fastenings of his safety belt, were bitterly ironical. If he had come all the way in Time and Space only to be drowned, he might just as well have stayed put.

He thought at first that it was Jane bending over him. Then his eyes cleared, and he saw that it was Leonora. He heard the doctor say "He'll be all right now," and wished that the quack felt as bad as he did.

Leonora— But she belonged in that crazy dream about *Martian Maid*. He felt the deck lift and scend beneath him and knew that, wherever he was, he was aboard no spaceship.

He could hear, somewhere, the howling of the wind, the roar of a hungry sea, the ominous drumfire of almost continuous thunder. It must be somewhere in the Tropics, he thought. For the air was hot, and smelt of swamps and mud, and there was that indescribable spicy smell—but, somehow, far more sickly—that one gets on the offshore breeze from Java.

The woman—who was she?—was bending over him again.

"Dale, wake up! Wake up!" Then—"George! Wake up!"

"I am awake," he said irritably. "What's the hurry? Is it one bell?"

His eyes came ungummed properly and he was able to look at his surroundings. He looked first at the golden girl. Her once trim uniform was a mess, there was a long scratch over her right eye and her hair was wet and looked as though she had been dragged through a hedge backwards. She looked worried, so Whitley tried to force what he hoped was a reassuring grin. "There's nothing to worry about," he said vaguely and optimistically.

"There is! There is! Come and see!"

Why couldn't these people leave him alone? Why— He closed his eyes again, only to jerk them open when somebody's hand connected with his face with a resounding slap. This time he woke up properly. He rose unsteadily to his feet, glanced swiftly around at the scene of confusion. Gear of all kinds, personal effects, stores and cargo were littered around. What should have been decks were now overhead. It was hard to say which was the new deck, for the ship was tilted at an angle of roughly forty-five degrees from the vertical.

"I'm going aft," he said. "I can't see anything from down here."

"You might thank Leo for saving your life," said the doctor stuffily. "She pulled you all out, one by one."

"Skip it," said the girl. "The most important thing now is to help Dale to save everybody. Mind if I come along with you, George?"

"The pleasure is mine," he replied automatically. The feel of a ship in a seaway beneath his feet was making him feel himself once more. As they picked their way over the assorted wreckage he asked, "Any casualties?"

"None among the passengers. They're just badly shaken up and one or two of the women are hysterical. And Saunders and Pawson are out for the count. But—"

"Yes?"

"Young Pettigrew. I didn't get him out in time—"

"He's just the first," thought Whitley. *"Perhaps he was lucky. Perhaps—"*

His mind, trying to escape from the grim

forebodings that it had raised, began to take notice of the state of affairs inside the ship. The forward bulkheads of the cargo bins had burst. This was hardly surprising, as they were not constructed to stand any real weight. The after ones took all the strain during both acceleration and deceleration.

In spite of himself he began to become interested. To a seaman, the nature of an outward general cargo from Earth to Mars could not fail to be more than ordinarily intriguing. He saw broken cases from which showed the dull gleam of metal, of polished wooden butts. Rifles? In this day and age? The sight of several blocks and pulleys made him homesick for his own time. And there were coils of wire, thin and fantastically flexible.

And then they came to the twisted remains of the Number Six bulkhead. Whitley clambered through the most convenient opening, to find himself standing on a reasonably level metal platform. What it *had* been before explosions and the sea had bent and battered this part of the ship beyond recognition he could not say. But it was useful now.

It was very dark between the flashes of lightning. The continuous thunder was almost drowned by the screaming wind and the roaring, hungry sea. Surprisingly, Whitley's vantage point was well protected. Over his head, to windward, curved the remains of one of the big tail fins. All that reached him was an occasional shower of warm spray.

Gratefully, he inhaled deeply and filled his lungs with the fresh air. It had been hot and stifling inside the ship. And then he found that the same conditions prevailed outside. True, the air was in violent motion, but that could not conceal the oppressive warmth and humidity, the sickly stench of swamps and corruption.

"What do you make of it?" screamed a voice in his ear.

"So far, we're lucky!" he bellowed in reply. "With her nose down like this she'll tend to ride head to sea. And I suspect that the remains of the parachute are still out forward. They'll make a good sea anchor!"

"A *what?*"

"A sea anchor!"

He began to cough—overmuch shouting had always had this effect on him.

Leonora thumped his back.

"Never mind!" she said. Then—*"Is that a light?"*

Whitley strained his eyes to leeward. At this moment the lightning began to play almost continuously along his line of sight. Dazzled, he had to desist. He felt something thrust into his hands. He could tell what it was by the long familiar feel—a pair of prismatic binoculars.

"I found these among the cargo, sir," came Stanley's voice. "I thought they might be useful."

"They are. Good lad!"

The lightning ceased and there was a relatively long spell of darkness. He could see the light now, without the glasses, a little to the left of the line of drift. It was ruddy, and seemed to blink with mechanical regularity. He found himself counting, as he had so often done in the past to determine the period of a flashing or occulting navigational aid. And one . . . and two . . . and three. . . . But a lighthouse here? On Venus? Yet there was no reason why, presuming the existence of intelligent beings making the sea their highway, there should not be.

He didn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed when the powerful lenses showed him a distant, conical hill, topped with an intermittent glow and a plume of ruddy smoke. A volcano.

But it had, at least, served its purpose insofar as it had warned him that *Martian Maid* was driving fast on to a lee shore. And he was helpless. In a surface ship of his own time, engineless hulk though she may have been, he could, as a last resort, have let go his anchors and hung on like grim death. For frantic moments his mind played with the possibility of making some heavy weight fast to the end of the parachute lines, of thus converting his sea anchor into a sheet anchor. Sure, it was a fine idea. But how was he going to get it there?

"Any of those flares saved from the control room?"

"Yes," replied the cadet. "The locker was burst open and they floated up."

"Are they watertight?"

"Why, yes." There was a certain puzzlement in the lad's voice. Surely the second pilot should have been able to *tell* him things.

"Good. Nip down and grab a couple, will you?"

"I have two here, sir."

"Better still. Thanks. Let's see, how do I—"

"Just pull the cap off, sir."

As Whitley pulled he thought, *"Thank*

God that's something they haven't made needlessly complicated." The flare fizzed briefly, burst into sudden, blinding life in his hand. With a purely reflex action he cast it from him. The wind took it, and it must have sailed for fully half a mile before it fell into the water.

At first there was no improvement in conditions as far as an efficient lookout was concerned. The intense blue-white light, rising and falling on the wave crests, dazzled rather than aided, was even more of a hindrance than the lightning had been.

But the flare was subject to surface drift only. The ship, pushed before that terrific wind, was making appreciable way through the water. In a surprisingly short space of time she overhauled the light, and then she was down wind from its steady glare.

And less than a mile distant Whitley saw great columns of spray rise high in the air where the shouting seas drove to destruction on a long, low line of jagged black rocks.

The stranding, when it came, was surprisingly gentle. *Martian Maid* lifted on the crest of a sea that almost justified the hyperbole "mountainous," and for long seconds hung over the reef. It seemed that she must clear it, must ride the storm into the calmer water beyond. But from forward came the dreadful grating of metal on rock, the screaming of tortured plates and girders. The huge sea passed on in a welter of white water. And when it was gone the ship did not fall into the trough but lay with almost her full length exposed.

"We should be safe," shouted Leonora, "until morning!"

"We aren't!" bellowed Whitley. "This sea will soon pound us to pieces. And if we slip off the rocks we're done for. She must be hoied for'ard!"

"What do we do about it?"

"Abandon ship!"

"All right for those of us who can swim well. But these second-and third-generation Martian colonists— They always regard water as something far too precious to splash around in!"

"Nobody mentioned swimming!"

"A raft?"

"No!" Then he turned to the cadet who had been standing by waiting for orders. "Stanley! What's the breaking strain of those drums of fine wire among the cargo?"

"I don't know, sir, but it's M.M.C. cargo. Mr. Haydon is a mining engineer. He should know!"

"Ask him to report up here, will you?"

After a long interval the Martian clambered up among the wreckage of the engine room. By the light of the fresh flare that Whitley had just lit he looked badly frightened. He *was* frightened, and didn't care who knew it. Mars was never like this.

"I'm Haydon," he said. "What do you want?"

"Those drums of wire—I take it that they're consigned to your concern?"

"Yes."

"What's the breaking strain?"

"Can't say for sure. About a hundred tons."

"A hundred tons?" gasped Whitley. "Did you say a *hundred?*"

"Yes. What did you expect? A thousand?"

The other ignored the crack. He was trying to adjust his mind to the fact that wire rope of about the size and texture of boat lacing was stronger than the heaviest hawsers with which he had had dealings in his own time. This was better than he had expected. He toyed with the idea of working on an endless whip alone—but at a distance of close on a quarter mile—so he estimated the distance from the beach—there would be far too much catenary.

"Stanley! Organize a working party. If Mr. Pawson or Mr. Jenkins are in circulation yet ask them to come up here. And I want one, maybe two, of those drums of wire. And some of those blocks. And a differential purchase."

"What are you going to do, Dale?"

"A breeches buoy, Leo. You see that tree," he pointed to something like an oversized feather duster on top of a low cliff, "somebody will have to swim ashore with an end of this wire and make it fast to it. Then we set it up tight aboard the ship with a purchase. But you'll see it all done!"

"I shan't!"

"Why not?"

"Because I'm the one who's swimming ashore!

"Listen, George," she drew him further into the lee of the twisted tail fin where it was comparatively quiet and she did not have to shout, "please forget all your archaic ideas of chivalry. They're very sweet, I know, but in this case they just aren't practicable. I'm the only person here qualified for the job. The colonists hate water—and when you spacehounds are on leave you think more of getting outside liquids than

getting inside. And I—as you should know—was with Oscar Oberon's Aquacade before I joined the Service. Look!"—she pointed to the sea to leeward of the reef, a sea deceptively calm but with all kinds of treacherous eddies and undertows just visible in the harsh light of the flare—"could anybody who wasn't a first-class swimmer do it?"

"There may be one among the passengers—"

"Even if there should be—I'm an officer of this ship. It's my duty. No, don't say that you'll do it. Even if you could, which I doubt, we need somebody at this end to play around with ropes and things."

At last she had her way. Whitley demonstrated to her how to make her end of the wire fast—a clove hitch with a couple of half hitches on the standing part should suffice, he hoped. And then he modestly averted his eyes whilst she peeled off her already soaking uniform. His face was crimson when he had to make the line fast around her waist. He managed to force his fumbling fingers through the simple intricacies of a running bowline, then paused. "This will cut you in two," he said. His eye fell on her discarded uniform. The tunic boasted a broad belt of apparently tough fabric. He took this, buckled it around her in lieu of the wire, made the wire fast round the belt. Still embarrassed, he made sure that it would not slip down over her hips. But if—and this is doubtful—her figure had any faults it was on the side of fullness.

He took two of the flares, made them fast to the belt with odd lengths of the wire.

"You understand," he said. "When you get to the beach, set off one of the flares. When you get your end fast, set off the other."

"I understand."

And then briefly, she was in his arms. The kiss was short, satisfying—and yet unsatisfying.

"Just in case—" she said.

For a fleeting moment she stood poised in the light of the flare, still burning where it had been wedged among the wreckage. And with her going the night seemed very much darker.

It was a beautifully clean dive she made, one that proved conclusively that her claim to aquatic prowess had not been idle boasting. Whitley lived through centuries before the golden head reappeared on the turbulent surface. He would not let anybody else handle the wire. Fortunately, it came on its drum ready for use—whatever its use may have been. There was even a brake. He paid out with the utmost care. Too little slack and the weight of the wire would pull Leonora back, would drag her away from the shore where lay both her safety and that of every soul on board. Too much slack—and the bight would foul whatever obstructions might be on the bottom. And unless she could cast the end loose from her belt she would be doomed.

Stanley stood by his side, his glasses trained on the head of the swimmer. Unconscious of the effect on Whitley he began a running commentary. "She's going ahead fast, sir. She's stopped. She's down. She's up again."

"For the love of Mike, shut up!" barked his superior. "If you must make a noise, let me know when she's got there!" One hand on the brake, one on the wire itself, he paid out. He began to wonder if the one drum would be enough. Then Stanley shouted: "She's made it!"

Hard on the heels of his cry the flare wedged in the wreckage guttered and died. But from the shore came a light, intensely bright even at this distance. Whitley straightened up, seized the prismatics from the other's hands. At first he could see nothing for the glare from the beach. Then he shifted his line of sight slightly so that the flare was just outside the field of his glasses. And he saw a figure, whitely luminous in that blazing radiance, staggering up and across the black sand to the low cliff. Once she fell, and lay long seconds before she recovered. He felt that he got her to her feet again by his own concentrated will power. And then, at last, she was clambering up towards the tree. He saw her there, fumbling a while. Abruptly she dropped to the sand. And then the second flare drove back the rushing, windborne shadows to the limit of vision.

Now that he was no longer concerned about the girl's safety Whitley—in a perverse sort of way—was beginning to enjoy himself. This—even though it was an alien planet—was his world. He was no longer a mere, uniformed passenger obliged to grapple with problems beyond his comprehension. The fact that, so far, he had grappled with those same problems with success he dismissed as blind luck. But now he was dealing with forces and problems that he knew of old.

The end of the wire remaining aboard the ship was taken through a block made

fast to the upper extremity of the twisted tail fin. He had all hands that he could muster in the confined space tail on to it, but their combined efforts could not lift the bight far clear of the wat'er. More blocks and tackle were brought up from below, and with their aid the span was set up reasonably taut.

Among the blocks was one of the variety known as a snatch block in his own time. This he slipped over the bight of the wire, so that it ran along the span as on a rail. A cradle was rigged hanging below this. Meanwhile, an endless whip had been prepared, one of the Martian mining engineers having proved himself adept at splicing and handling the tackle used in his profession. All that remained was to get one of the blocks ashore and make it fast just below the span.

It was Stanley who volunteered for the task. Whitley would have gone — not so much because he doubted the lad's ability to handle the job but because, now that the immediate pressure of work had subsided, he felt that he should be with Leonora. But it was essential that he stay with the ship until the end.

It had been assumed that Stanley, seated in his cradle, would have to pull himself hand over hand along the wire until he reached comparative safety. But once out of the lee of the ship the wind took him and those aboard had to slack out the endless whip with caution lest he be dashed against the low cliff at the shore end. But he made it and the light of yet another flare proclaimed that his block was fast.

All that now remained was to set up the second block at the ship end. This was soon accomplished and then Whitley had at his disposal what was, in effect, a transporter bridge from ship to shore. In his own time it had been called a breeches buoy.

Standing on his parody of a quarter-deck he almost gave an absurd order, but checked himself in time. "Women and children first" was a rule sanctified by long centuries of precedent on Earth—but on Earth one could count on friendly, humane hands to receive castaways. But on Venus—

"Anybody here who knows how to use those guns in the cargo?" he demanded Then—"Mr. Jenkins! Slip below and see if there's anyone there who can use 'em!"

"They're M.F.C.—Martian Fur Corporation cargo," volunteered Pawson. "There are two or three professional hunters among the passengers. Pawson will find them and get them up here."

"Good."

Soon the hunters were standing on the wind-swept deck. Little men they were, with keen, long-sighted eyes. Brave men they undoubtedly were when facing the hazards of their own trade. But just now they were badly shaken.

But with a courage far greater than they had ever shown whilst hunting the savage, fur-bearing beasts of Mars they intrusted themselves to Whitley's outlandish contraption of wire and pulleys, allowed themselves to be swung out over the black water in the extemporized cradle—it had been one of the chairs in the lounge—clutching their weapons tightly, the one familiar thing in this wild, wet world. "Shoot at sight," Whitley had told them. "If anything, *anything*, shows up —let fly. Remember, I'm relying on you to keep the shore end clear for me."

Before the cradle swung in to where young Stanley was waiting to assist them to solid earth they were peering up and down the beach, thankful of orders that they could understand.

Once passengers and crew got the hang of things the work went with surprising smoothness. Dreading a shift of wind, Whitley had to work out a system of priorities. Had this been Earth, all that mattered would have been to get all hands ashore in one piece—but here he had to consider the rival claims of food, arms, equipment of all sorts. It would have been absurd to have landed with no immediate loss of life but with nothing to eat and no means either of self-defense or hunting whatever edible fauna, if any, were to be found.

The departmental heads made things no easier. Had the surgeon had his way the party would have been well able to set up shop as pharmaceutists. They would have had ample resources for the alleviation of the pangs of indigestion—but nothing whatsoever to cause it. On the other hand Miss Emerson, the buxom, bustling catering officer, was too prone to put creature comfort before all else. Be that as it may, she and her two hostesses and the huge, temperamental negress who was her cook performed prodigies of sheer, unrelieved muling. Whenever Whitley thought tha it was time to send ashore a load of foodstuffs or blankets instead of ammunition or human freight it was always ready and waiting.

The wind now was unsteady and gusty, backing and veering as much as four points. There was, of course, no break in the sky, but it was obvious that some change in the weather would soon be upon them. At times there would be almost a flat calm, and then a shrieking rain squall would be upon them to fill the air with a torrential downpour from above mingled with spindrift torn from the tortured surface of the sea. On these occasions the lightning would make their flares seem as but tallow candles, whilst the deafening thunder would make conversation impossible for minutes after the squall had passed.

As she was, *Martian Maid* was held immovably on the reef by the sheer weight of wind and sea. But should the wind back or veer to the opposite quarter she would slide off into the deep water outside the shoal, taking with her all on board.

When the lull came Whitley was not unprepared. He had discharged his ship strategically, something of everything. True, he didn't have nearly enough of anything, but the party should be able to meet almost any emergency.

He watched the last sling of food go swinging ashore, pulled by the now sizable working party on the beach, then climbed up on to the tail fin to see what he could of the weather conditions.

The wind had fallen, but the sea was not calm. It had become an ugly, confused, pyramidal swell. And from seaward came a low but increasingly distinct roar as the rear semicircle of the atmospheric vortex approached at a speed he had no means of estimating.

He climbed down from the fin.

"Abandon ship," he said.

The cradle had returned, and on to it he loaded Miss Emerson and one of her hostesses, hanging around them bundles of all manner of gear. He waved—Pawson on the beach could see the signal distinctly through his M.F.C. prismatics—and the load swung shorewards. Next it was the turn of the other hostess and the cook. Whitley saw that tears were streaming down the negress' face as he helped to lash her securely. "It's hard, Mr. Dale," she said in a surprisingly cultured voice, "to leave this ship."

"Cheer up, Amelia," he said, patting her back. "We have to leave before she leaves us. And it won't be long."

It was Saunders who almost finished the adventure for Whitley. Somehow, although useless in the work because of his still bandaged eyes, he had managed to evade being sent ashore. Whitley was unaware of his presence until he himself was about to take his seat in the cradle. Then—

"Number One! What are *you* doing here? Let me put you in the cradle."

"No, Dale. I'm staying. I'm master of this ship. And I'm going down with her."

"Don't be a bloody fool!" Dale swung himself down from the chair, made to grab the other's arm. Saunders swung blindly, instinctively, and by sheer chance the blow connected. Whitley never knew for how long he was out, but when he came round the chief pilot, who had torn the bandage from his watering eyes, was striving with inexpert, clumsy fingers to lash him into the cradle. The shift of wind had come, and a fitful, gusty breeze was already blowing from the land. *Martian Maid,* until now as steady as the rocks on which she had grounded, was becoming uneasy. Tremors ran through her hull, each one accompanied by a chorus of increasingly loud gratings and groanings from below decks. There was no time to lose.

Whitley swung his foot, viciously, catching Saunders full on the point of the jaw. It was the work of seconds to release himself from the other's bungled bends and hitches, to drag the bulky, inert form to the cradle. Getting him up into the chair took longer. By the time Saunders had been well secured the wind had steadied in direction, was rapidly approaching gale force.

Whitley threw a couple of hasty turns around himself, then signaled to the shore. Slowly, for those at the other end were pulling against the wind, the cradle swung out and away from the ship, over the black water that was fast being lashed to fresh turbulence.

Midway, the progress made was almost negligible. The wire above their heads was bar taut, and drumming with the enormous strain now put upon it. It seemed probable that it was holding the ship on to the reef in the teeth of the hurricane. Whitley found himself thinking that the tree to which the other end was made fast must be enormously tough.

The flare that he had left wedged among the wreckage was torn from its position and blown to seaward. He could see the ship in black silhouette against the glare of the floating light—looming huge and fantastic like a medieval castle against an impossible

dawn. Then she was gone, and only the flare, poised high on the crest of a sea, could be seen. Seconds later the cradle, held on the end of its line almost horizontally by the screaming gale, fell. Saunders was still unconscious and Whitley was hampered by the lashings he had thrown about them both.

"They're determined to drown me," was his last conscious thought.

When he came round it was some time before he was able to place himself. It was dark, very dark, but now and again somebody would flash a pocket torch. There was the noise of wind, too, but it was somehow muffled.

"He's coming round," he heard someone say.

Then Leonora was bending over him.

"It's a horribly conventional question," he said, "but where am I?"

"In a cave," she replied. "We'd almost got you and Mr. Saunders in, then the fastenings of the pulley"—Whitley winced a little—"on the tail fin came . . . er . . . unfastened. So we pulled you both in. You hadn't got much water in you, but you'd managed to get a bang on the head from somewhere."

"So it seems. But this cave?"

"It's just under the tree we used. Two of the hunters went in first in case there were any wild animals. There were—or was—one. A big thing like a crocodile. They shot it."

"Any sign of dawn yet?"

"No, as dark as ever. And the wind's bad—"

"It must get light some time. A revolving storm should mean a planet with some axial rotation. And if this were a permanent dark side it wouldn't be so hot. But I'm going outside."

Leonora helped him up. He was glad of her assistance, being weaker than he had anticipated. Guided by her pocket flash they picked their way through the castaways, huddled in random, dejected groups all over the floor of the cave. Whitley was not surprised to find that the entrance to the cavern belied the cathedral vastness of the interior. Had it been in keeping he must surely have spotted it from the ship.

And then they were standing in the gusty darkness at the foot of the cliff. The sailor took the little torch and flashed it around.

"What, no watch?" he demanded angrily. "Anything might creep upon us. And we don't know what the tides are like here. Stanley!" he bawled.

The little cadet must have been among those not sleeping. In a few seconds he was by Whitley's side. "Call the other officers," he was told. "Tell them I want them at once. And get one of those Martian hunters and have him keep a look-out in the entrance with one or two of those flares and his gun handy. I'm surprised that they didn't think of that without being told."

The lad vanished back into the cave. Whitley couldn't see Leonora, but the expression in her voice told him that her eyebrows must be raised. "Quite the little Hitler," she said. "Everybody needs rest after what they've been through."

"Of course they do. And if I don't succeed in stirring up some kind of watch on deck it'll be their last rest! Listen!"—he grasped her arm roughly—"you people have had far too soft a life. You just can't conceive that anything or anybody could possibly have any animosity against you. Your world is far too safe, too peaceful. It's better than mine—but there we knew that all kinds of animals, two- as well as four-legged, were ready and willing to do the dirty on us. We may have temporarily outwitted the insensate forces of Nature, but we still have whatever life this world boasts to deal with." He became aware that somebody was standing at their side. "Who's that?" he demanded.

"Taberner, skipper. And, though I say it who shouldn't, the best shot on the books of the M.F.C."

"Good. I want you to keep out here until you're relieved. If you hear or see the slightest sign of movement loose off a flare—I suppose Stanley gave you one—and let fly. Got it?"

"Yes, skipper." The man seemed relieved to have a job, to have somebody who would give him orders.

Whitley and the girl went back into the cave. Stanley's torch flitting here and there like a will-o'-the-wisp showed that he was finding and calling the officers. The thick darkness made the task no easy one. *"In all the books about shipwrecks he had ever read,"* thought Whitley, *"the castaways started off by building a fire. Not that, in this case, its warmth would be necessary, but it would give light and a certain cheerfulness."*

The almost dry debris entangling his feet made him think that a fire might be practical politics. A definite current of air from the mouth to the back of the cave showed that there must be ventilation of a sort, that

smoke disposal would not be too serious a problem. For matches—— In his own time he could have been sure of some means of starting a fire—pocket lighter or otherwise. But in this age of self-igniting cigarettes which just refused to ignite in the humid Venusian atmosphere—there was nothing.

Taking the little torch he squatted down and examined the decaying vegetation with which the cave was carpeted. It did not appear to be seaweed—a welcome sign—and was comparatively dry. How it had got there he could not say—it may have been brought in by previous occupants. He gathered an armful and carried it to the rear. A few more journeys, aided by Leonora, and there was a respectable pile. One of the invaluable flares thrust into the heap achieved results. Its fierce heat soon dried the fuel—and soon a cheerful blaze filled the gloomy cavern with dancing lights and shadows.

Some of the sleepers murmured and stirred, but most of them slept on.

Whitley sat by the fire in his steaming clothes, waiting for the others to report to him and watching the acrid smoke stream almost straight up to the high, crannied roof. By his side Leonora spread the contents of her cigarette case on the floor to dry. "This makes a difference," she said. "Wonder if we should have one outside, too."

"Can't decide. If I could be sure that it would scare things off I'd give it a go—but it might attract unwelcome attention. Ah, here's the doctor. Sit down and make yourself at home."

When the officers of all departments were gathered the conference was opened. It may well be that "conference" is a misleading word. It was more of a lecture on the correct procedure in the event of shipwreck. Watches were set, both for the cave entrance and the fire. Flares were not sufficiently plentiful to justify the expenditure of one every time the fire required relighting. A rationing system was worked out. And when at last, things were more or less shipshape Whitley allowed himself the luxury of a rest. He made himself a bed on the hard rock with a couple of blankets, sleepily told Pawson, who was officer of the first watch, to give him a shout in the event of daylight, a change of weather or any emergency, then dropped into a dreamless and almost instantaneous sleep. He thought dreamily that he should have given orders to be called at some set time.

Things usually come in threes. The first of the three was the change in the weather. Whitley did not awake with his usual swift transition from sleep to complete awareness when Jenkins called him. He felt like a corpse warmed up—warmed almost to the point of cooking. In his mouth was a dark brown taste and in his nostrils an unpleasant odor compounded of acrid smoke and what they were all to come to regard as the characteristic stink of Venus—a miasma of moist corruption.

He made an effort and creaked to his feet.

"Yes, Jenkins?"

"The wind, Dale. It's dropped."

"Good."

Guided by the other's flash he picked his way through the sleepers. Outside the cave mouth it was calm—with a stagnant airlessness. Down on the beach the swell rolled rhythmically on to the shelving sand, visible as a line of luminescence in the darkness as the seas curled over and broke. Further to seaward the reef shot fountains of living light into the black sky. Something big broke the surface and flopped back again with a loud splash, to be outlined briefly and unsatisfyingly with pale fire.

"Now what?" thought Whitley. *"Now what!"* He had a theory that on a planet with a slow axial rotation such as Venus apparently had all kinds of atmospheric disturbances could be expected along the line of demarcation between day and night. If this were the case, dawn could not be far off. But that, as the monkey said, remained to be seen.

He became aware that all kinds of people, passengers as well as his fellow officers, were around him. They had obviously awaited his awakening to ask questions and air grievances. But he was in no mood for this. He wanted to be alone to try and get things straight.

"I wonder if you could show me how that gun of yours works," he said to the hunter whose turn of sentry duty it was. The Martian demonstrated. It was not so very different from the automatic weapons of the twentieth century. There was a box magazine, and there was a lever which, in accordance with the position into which it was put, acted as a safety catch or gave single shot or full automatic fire. The weapon itself could be fired either from the shoulder or as a tommy gun.

"I'll take this," said Whitley. "You can get yourself another one from inside the cave." He had no intention of setting an

even worse example than that which he was already setting by wandering off alone *and* unarmed.

But he was not to be alone. He became aware that somebody had fallen in beside him. Rudely, he swung the beam of the torch he had requisitioned full in the other's face. He was neither surprised nor sorry to see that it was Leonora.

"Do you mind?" she said.

"No." Then, more graciously, "I'm glad you have come, my dear."

"Where are we going?"

"Just somewhere where we can be away from the mob. I've got to get things straight with myself. Now that the excitement's over I've got that let-down sort of feeling. I'm wondering if perhaps I shouldn't hand over to Saunders—after all, he *is* the senior surviving officer. As for me—if I'm me I'm just an outsider, and if I'm Dale I'm just an upstart puppy of a junior."

"Don't be a fool." Her voice was intense. "You've got them all eating out of your hand now. And, if you want an honest opinion, I don't think that anybody else, officer or passenger, could handle things. This is all as strange to us as it is to you. Stranger. Being wrecked on desert islands must have been a commonplace experience in your time."

"It was not. But shall we sit down? I'm tired of tripping over things and slipping."

By the light of their torches they found a smooth, flat-topped rock, standing up solitary from the black sand. By some minor miracle it was not covered with slimy algae, nor did it boast any gelatinous blobs that could have been *anything*. It may have been uncovered by the storm only a few hours previously.

On this they sat, not talking much, yet each deriving more than a little comfort from the close proximity of the other. Behind them was the cave, a hardly visible circle of dim, flickering light. Before them was the dark, mysterious sea.

As they watched, a slow change came over its face. First it seemed that the phosphorescence along the beach and the reef became more intense, and then this same phosphorescence seemed to shoot streamers of pallid moonlight into the surrounding water. These intermingled and coalesced, putting out yet more sprays and branches of pulsating flame. And as the living light swirled and spread color came, faint at first as a Lunar rainbow and then deepening until the sea, from the dark shore to the furthest horizon, was one chromatic glory. The low overcast shone with reflected crimson and azure, jade and amethyst.

"Like a dream in technicolor," said Whitley, as though to dispel the fascination of the scene by the cheapness of his humor. It was so uncannily beautiful that it frightened him.

Suddenly he tensed, stared hard at a point between the shoals and the beach. Leonora heard the faint, sharp clicks as he moved the catch of his weapon from *Safety* to *Automatic*. "Look!" he said pointing.

She followed his arm, black in silhouette against the radiance from the sea. At first she could see nothing, and then straining her eyes, she could make out a moving, oddly symmetrical patch of fainter light against the background of brightly luminous water. It dawned on her suddenly that the object, whatever it was, was shining by reflection only.

It came to a stop when it was almost abreast of the mouth of the cave. Then there was a sharp twang, as of a suddenly released bowstring, to be followed by a crash and a rattle of falling rubble. The murmur of voices that had been coming from the entrance—for almost everybody must have turned to witness the shining sea—abruptly ceased, was replaced by shouts and screams.

"What are they waiting for?" shouted Whitley.

He saw a line of faint, vague shapes in the water surging shoreward from what he had, by now, decided was a ship. There was another almost musical twang, followed by another heavy impact against the cliff face. Somewhere, loud, insistent, a little drum started beating with an odd, broken rhythm. It seemed almost like code. It probably was code.

But Whitley was not listening to the drum. He remembered it afterwards, remembered how the rattling song of his gun had blended with and finally drowned that of the other. But now all his conscious attention was focused on the sweeping flight of his little rocket projectiles — like the old, familiar tracers they were—as he hosepiped them upon the swimmers. He heard hoarse, croaking cries, saw the line of attackers dwindle and falter.

A bolt from the weapon aboard the ship hurtled past, almost knocking him and the girl flat with the wind of its passing. It buried itself with a dull, sodden thud in the wet sand. Whitley shifted his fire from the

surf to the dim, scarce visible outline of the ship. The Venusian gunners must either have been killed or driven under cover, for their weapon was not fired again during the course of the action.

Then, at last, a flare flamed into sudden, incandescent life by the cave mouth. In its hard, merciless glare the figures of the attackers could be seen. Like men they were—or like frogs. Like something out of a cartoon film by an evil, pervert Disney. The first line—or what was left of it—was already out of the water. Waving vicious glittering knives they charged up the beach. Whitley's fire took them in the flank, and from the cave three or more guns burst into stammering song. Of this first wave only one of the Venusians won to within a hundred feet of the defenders. And he collapsed suddenly, literally torn to pieces by the concentrated fire.

A second wave met the fate of the first—then a third. There were no more.

Still the cave gunners kept up their fire, raking the ship from stem to stern.

"Cease fire!" bawled Whitley. Then—"Come on! We must stop those fools before it's too late!"

"What's the hurry?"

"Plenty. They're wasting ammunition for a start. And I've got a ship, a *ship*! And I don't want her blown full of holes!"

In less than an hour after the attack the first, faint flush of dawn was visible to seaward. With surprising rapidity a dismal, wan daylight spread over sea and sky. Before it was properly light the spectacular phosphorescence of the sea abruptly went out—almost as though some unseen hand had pulled a master switch.

Whitley was pleased to see the light. He was having to burn flare after flare to keep the ship under observation. She was obviously lying to some kind of anchor and he did not want the survivors of the crew either to heave up at leisure or slip the cable and escape. And he did not want to launch his attack on the attackers until it was properly light. For there had already been casualties among the castaways. The sentry who had been on duty when the Venusians opened fire had been cut in two by the missile—a shaft about ten feet long, it was, with long, razor-sharp blades projecting out from the head. And—this was hard to take—two of the children had been killed by the second round.

"Four already," thought Whitley as he paced the ledge in front of the cave. *"Four out of sixty-four. And if we attack in the dark any survivors skulking aboard the ship will fight like cornered rats. And we shall lose more. She'll keep till daylight."*

To add to his worries a distant drum started to beat from what the coming of dawn identified as the nor'ard. It seemed to be some kind of code—and it seemed to have a questioning note. It seemed that somebody, somewhere, was trying to get in touch with the attacking party. After a while the disquieting sound ceased.

And then the dawn came.

The increasing light was the signal to Whitley that he must set his schemes for seizing the ship in motion. The end of the night meant other things too, entailed a task that he would have found most distasteful.

"But I can't," he told Leonora. "I have no right to. Don't forget that I'm not one of you."

"Perhaps you're right. Saunders will have to."

Somebody had gone down to the beach and collected the broad-bladed knives from the dead Venusians. Somebody else had found some flat pieces of driftwood. During the night the parachute had been washed ashore. From it lengths of the heavy silk were hacked to serve as shrouds.

Whitley looked from the three muffled figures — two of them pitifully small — to where a working party was scratching away with improvised tools at three trenches. *"Be honest,"* he told himself, *"call them graves. And the last one of us left alive will have nobody to bury him."* His morbid mood was accentuated by the sullen, yellow sky overhanging the sullen, yellow sea.

"Just part of the price," whispered Leonora at his elbow. "Just part of the price. And no matter who goes next, no matter if we all go, it's worth it! Can't you see? It's worth it!"

"Yes," he replied slowly, "perhaps it is. Do you read Kipling? Before your time, I'm afraid. But this is what he said:

" 'If blood be the price of Admiralty,
Lord God, we ha' paid in full—'

But they're taking them down to the beach—"

It was Saunders, standing by himself, who recited the brief Burial Service from memory. On the other side of the grave were fathered the rest of the party—the parents of the dead children, the mate of the hunter, officers and passengers.

The chief pilot, his full face strained and

solemn, reached the conclusion of his speech. "And so we commit the bodies of our brothers and sisters to"—he hesitated, groping for words more suitable than those of the official form—"the soil of an alien planet. We—" His voice trailed off into a horrible gurgle. His hands went up to clutch at his throat, from which protruded a vaned, metal shaft about nine inches in length. From the cave mouth came the frenzied chattering of the automatic rifle of the sentry on duty. The little rocket projectiles hissed and whined over the heads of the burial party. Other bolts came from the ship, but the aim of the unseen marksmen was spoiled by the fire from the cave.

Whitley caught Leonora Starr a swinging blow that knocked her flat on her face. "Down!" he bellowed. "Down, if you value your lives!"

Most of the others heeded his warning, but two of the men made a mad dash for the safety of the cavern. Before they were halfway there the Venusian bowmen—who had by now recovered their steadiness of aim—picked them off. The riflemen with the burial party tried to return the fire from a prone position. But they had no cover and dared not raise themselves sufficiently to take proper aim, whilst their opponents were firing through tiny ports and from behind many inches of tough wood.

On the fore deck of the ship appeared a cautious, crouching figure. It ran to where the anchor cable was led over some kind of windlass—doubtless with the intention of cutting or slipping so that the ship could drift to safety in the strong current. Here, at last, was something for the gunners to fire at. The grotesque, unhuman figure collapsed, literally torn to shreds.

"This won't do," thought Whitley. His mind, active once more, raced from plan to possibility, desperately sought some way out of the impasse. Much as he disliked the idea —for he was essentially a peace-loving soul who believed that the only gentlemanly way to fight a naval battle was at long range with big guns—a piratical boarding party was the only solution. He passed word round of his intentions. Reluctantly, he began to shrug himself out of his uniform, retaining only the belt, through which he thrust one of the Venusian knives. About a dozen of the men followed his example. He was glad that Leonora was busy with the casualties of this latest attack—although it is probable that she was running more risk than he would do. It is impossible to administer to an injured person from a prone position—and even though she was very careful not to stand upright she was a target.

A last, obvious thought struck Whitley as he edged his way down to the water's edge.

"Foxholes!" he shouted. Then—"Scrape yourselves trenches in the sand for cover!"

The sea, when he reached it, was stickily warm. He splashed through the shallows, trying to keep his body down. An occasional vicious splash too close for comfort showed that he was under fire from the ship. Over his head sang the covering fire from beach and cave. He tried, unsuccessfully, to ignore the missiles from both parties. He wondered where the rest of the attackers had got to, and then loud floundering noises from the rear showed that he was being followed.

He was never an expert swimmer and his amateurish breast stroke was painfully slow. From water level the ship looked huge—as big, almost, as one of the floating cities of his own time—yet distant. It seemed that he would never make it, that the strong current would sweep him down past the southern extremity of the reef. He tired, and tried swimming on his back. The blade thrust between belt and skin chafed him badly, inflicted several nasty little cuts on hip and leg. It was too easy to remember how the sharks of the seas of Earth are attracted by fresh blood, and hard indeed to refrain from a frantic, energy-wasting burst of speed.

When he turned over, the ship, looking much smaller, was close. He realized that for some time there had been no fire from the Venusians, assumed that from their positions they could not bring their weapons down to bear on anything at close range on the surface. That would make things very much easier.

The boarding party had reached the ship by her counter stern. There was no possibility of climbing aboard there—even if the hull had not been so slimy as to afford no grip, the overhang must, inevitably, have defeated any such attempt. Whitley hung for a while to the rudder to recover his wind. Around him the others trod water and looked longingly at the resting place he had monopolized. He could sympathize with them—but he had no intention of shifting until he had his wind back. Then—

"We'll have to make it for'ard," he said. "By the cable. They seem to have no ladders over."

As quietly as possible the boarding party

swam along the green, slimy side of the ship. Whitley was first to come to the anchor cable. It was not of metal chain but was apparently made of some vegetable fiber closely resembling coir. Like all else about the vessel it was thickly coated with algae, but the roughness of the rope afforded a grip in spite of this.

It was taut, but not bar taut, and made an angle of about thirty degrees with the surface of the water. Luckily it did not come down through a hawsepipe but through a fairlead in the low bulwarks. Though he had never claimed to be a gymnast the sailor thought that he could negotiate it without much difficulty. What he might have to face once he got aboard he preferred not to think about.

Hand over hand he went up the cable. It was easy whilst the water still supported the weight of the lower part of his body, but when he was clear of the sea Whitley had to throw his leg around the rope. Still, he went up it with reasonable alacrity. When his hands butted against the planking he swung himself round, hung for a moment in his prone position, and then clutched at the rail. He hoped that nobody was waiting with a sharp knife. A burst of enthusiastic fire from the shore showed that somebody might have toyed with the idea but had been effectively discouraged.

He looked down. Below him, like some smooth, hairless sloth, Stanley was hanging to the cable. Below *him* was Taberner, the little hunter. He grinned down at them.

"It's over the top now," he almost whispered. "Once I'm up the rest of you follow as fast as you can."

A quick, muscle-cracking heave and he stood on deck. His bare feet scrambled madly for purchase and for a few frantic seconds he executed a mad fandango on the slimy surface, finally falling with a bone-shaking crash. It was as well that he did; had he remained erect, he would have stopped the bolt loosed from the shelter of the deckhouse. On his back—the deck had a pronounced sheer—he slid aft, and before the Venusian could reload and fire the Earthman was upon him.

Stanley and Taberner, coming aboard a few seconds later, saw a mad tangle of flailing arms and legs among which two knives flashed and waved. It was almost impossible to tell one combatant from the other, so thickly was Whitley coated with the green slime. A little to one side stood another of the Venusians making cautious, half-hearted jabs with a long spear. He was hampered by his fear of doing his shipmate an injury and contributed nothing to the outcome of the battle.

Like Whitley, the cadet and the hunter slipped and staggered. But they succeeded in keeping their feet. Like schoolboys on a slide they slithered aft. They were upon the second Venusian before he fully realized what was happening, although he did make an almost successful attempt to bring his spear up to the ready. But the long-hafted weapon was thrust to one side, and one knife split his skull whilst the other buried itself in his body.

There was a stout door to the deckhouse entrance. This Stanley slammed. He wanted to make sure that the odds remained on the side of the boarding party for this little struggle at least. It did not occur to him until later that he was giving any surviving crew members an opportunity of barricading themselves in.

Taberner hovered above the fight, poised on the balls of his feet, his knife ready.

"I wish they'd keep still for a moment!" he grumbled.

"You try it!" came a strangled gasp from the squirming mess. "But you'd better do something—and do it quick!"

"Disarm them both," suggested Stanley. He looked forward. "Here come the others. Get both their knives away and then we can disentangle them. It will help, perhaps, if we get a prisoner."

But Whitley, fighting for his life, wasn't interested in such purely academic details. He knew that he could not hope to last much longer, that the instant his guard was down the other's knife would sweep or thrust once—and once only. He found it increasingly difficult to keep his grip on the slippery skin. And, even in danger of his life, he found time to feel the utmost horror and revulsion for the slimy body pressed against his, for the rank, swamp odor of the thing. And those two bloody fools talked about taking prisoners!

Then he heard Taberner talking in a low, intent voice. "Relax, skipper! Let him get you down! It's the only way!"

It was hard to allow himself to yield to his unhuman enemy. It was hard to let his knife hand be forced back, to feel himself pressed down by the noisome weight till his back was flat on the slimy deck. And yet it was an infinite relief to be able to stop struggling, to put the whole business in

another's hands. Nevertheless, he did not relinquish his grip on the Venusian's knife hand. He trusted Taberner—but not that much.

But if the native could not use his knife he had other weapons. The hideous, reptilian head was brought down, and down, and down. The wide mouth opened, revealing two serrated rows of needle-sharp teeth. The eyes shone with a naked savagery that sickened Whitley to the core. Ignoring all that had gone before, he knew with the utmost certainty that no peace would ever be possible with these people.

Then Taberner's knife flashed once. The grinning head rolled off the green shoulders, striking Whitley's face as it fell. The body on top of him started to jerk and twitch—and went on jerking and twitching. The sailor rolled from under the convulsed carcass. Staggering and slipping, he ran for the low rail. When he had finished he stood erect wearily. He looked around. Save for Stanley the deck was deserted.

"Where are the others?" he demanded.

"Gone below, Mr. Dale. "Mr. Taberner told me to stay up here with you." The youth was plainly disgusted at having to miss whatever further excitement might be in store. "He—"

"Never mind that now. We're going after them."

But as they started the descent of the ladder just inside the deckhouse door Taberner shouted to them, "Two more! And that's the lot!"

From the north came the staccato, questioning music of a distant drum.

For one in his predicament George Whitley was a surprisingly happy man. He had a ship. He did not know how many hours of daylight remained to him before the coming of the storm-tormented night, but he was determined to make full use of every minute of them. There was a lot to be done to the little vessel that had fallen into his hands. Another leader would have dispatched exploring parties to investigate the possibilities of the island—but this the sailor refused to consider until he had the means of making a quick getaway under his feet. He knew that there was a town or city of the natives to the nor-ard—it could be seen, on occasions when the misty drizzle thinned, from the hill above his beach. And he knew that the inhabitants of this settlement must inevitably prove hostile. When they sent a second raiding party to inquire after the fate of the first they would meet with a warm reception Until then—let sleeping dogs lie. Meanwhile—work, sleep, work and yet more work.

After the killing of the last survivors of the crew Whitley decided to careen the vessel. The current was settling down on a long split of sand running halfway out from the beach to the reef. All he had to do was veer his cable—the windlass was primitive but quite workable—until the ship grounded on the smooth, gently shelving bottom. Then it was a case of running masthead tackles out to convenient trees along the cliff top and heeling her to expose her bottom.

As he had suspected, she had no keel. This would mean—as her rig implied—that she was quite capable of making considerable speed running free but with the wind go crabwise. But with the bottom in its present disgusting state he doubted whether she could make a bare two knots in full gale. So everybody had to turn to with improvised scrapers to clean off the tendrils of weed and numerous mollusks which, in conjunction, conveyed the impression of a sort of marine rock garden. Having no anti-fouling composition he doubted whether this state of unnatural cleanliness would last for long—but he would careen at every available opportunity if need be.

The inside of the ship was far from suitable by Earthly standards. The slimy, green algae were everywhere. But some flat stones were found and used in conjunction with the fine, black sand—and so the holystone made its bow on Venus.

The vessel was about seventy-five feet in length with a beam of fifteen feet. There was a single mast, on which was hoisted one big, square sail. It was a primitive rig, one that argued a race little advanced in the long climb upwards from savagery. And yet there was so much about the ship that was not primitive; for example a magnetic compass almost the equal of anything he had seen in his own place and time. And the weapons—even the knives—showed a high standard of workmanship. The little crossbows were of metal—as was the larger version which fired the big, ten-foot shafts. They were the sort of things that a civilized man would make were he obliged by some circumstance to abandon his modern small arms and artillery. As for the crude, unseamanlike rig—it argued a people long used to mechanical propulsion having to relearn

the lost arts of their forefathers the hard way.

The rig could be bettered. There was the parachute to draw upon for sailcloth, what remained of the breeches buoy for standing and running rigging. There was a set of what could only be sailmaker's tools among the miscellaneous gear, some of it defying identification, left by the Venusians. It would be easy enough to contrive a decent suit of sails.

After much cogitation Whitley decided on a standing lug and a jib. He was no sailor, just a seaman, and thought it advisable to stick to a rig with which—it was the orthodox lifeboat rig of his own time—he was familiar. The original yard would have to serve as a gaff; the blocks, which were not in bad condition, he would leave standing, merely substituting his own wire for the dubious looking cordage he had acquired with the ship.

Then there was another idea he had in mind—one that would entail putting the sweeps—she could put out six to a side—to a use of which their late owners would never have dreamed. By the time he finished he would be able to outsail anything on the Venusian sea.

To him, whilst he was tracing diagrams in the sand with a piece of stick, came Leonora Starr. She stood for a while watching him, her expression of irritation deepening. She frowned. Truly, he had suffered a sea change. At first she had been drawn to him, he had been so lost, so bewildered, a fish out of water. Now he was a fish in its native element. A motherly compassion on her part had been replaced by feelings she did not care to analyze. But she could not deny that the fact that he seemed to have no time to spare for her hurt. She knew that the ungainly contraption out there on the sand spit was more of a rival for his affections—forgetting the long ago and far away Jane—than any woman could have been.

She coughed.

He gave her a cursory glance, said "Yes, Leo?" and went on with his drawing.

"Things are pretty well squared up inside," she replied. "We found some more of those awful, slimy things with legs—whether they were pets or pests I can't say."

"We'll leave that to the scientists. I'm afraid that the glorified crossbow affair on the foredeck is going to ruin the cut of my jib. Don't feel like dismounting it, though; it might come in useful."

"Can't you think of anything else but your beastly ship?" she flared.

He looked up with an expression of mild surprise. "Why, no," he said.

"I'm sick and tired of it. So is everybody else. People want to investigate this island, this world, to see what the Venusian town is like, to get some idea of the flora and fauna. But here we are, stuck on this ruddy beach, sweating and slaving away at *your* toys. And if she was good enough for the people who built her—and they should have known what they were doing—she's good enough for you!"

"She's not. When that ship is something like a ship we'll have time to nose around. But we don't know when the night is due—it's roughly thirty-six hours since dawn now—and we must get her finished."

"And then?"

"And then we get out of here. We aren't far from the equator—I unshipped a magnet from their spare compass card and use it as a dipping needle—and I think we shall find a healthier climate in polar regions."

"That's what *you* think!" she said with what he considered unjustifiable bitterness. "That's what *you* think!"

She turned sharply on her heel and strode away. For a few moments Whitley looked after her retreating figure, the beginning of a frown starting to furrow his brow. A few seconds later he was busy once more with his diagrams, all else forgotten but the problem of how to modify his sail plan to accommodate his armament

Leonora was in a vile temper as she paced along the beach. Halfway to the cave she was accosted by Miss Emerson.

"Oh, Leo," said the catering officer, "don't you think it's time that we thought about living off the country? My stores won't last forever, you know."

"Don't bother me, see Dale. He's the Big White Chief around here!"

"But I thought—"

"Don't. There's only one person allowed to do any thinking in this world!"

In the cave she tried to find something to occupy her mind. But the affairs of the hospital instituted by the surgeon and herself were running quite smoothly, the assistant nurses she had recruited from among the passengers had things well in hand. But she left one of them in tears and the other on the verge of attempted murder. The few adult patients watched the scene with con-

siderable amusement, the half dozen or so children found it all just one more bewilderment in what they had come calmly to accept as an incurably bewildering scheme of things.

When she came out into the open the misty rain had cleared. To the eastward, perhaps ten miles distant, lay a long, black archipelago. It had been seen before, but never so distinctly. She went back into the cave, found a pair of prismatic glasses and studied the chain of islands. It occurred to her that she might be able to see more—and perhaps something of interest—from the hill above the cliff top.

Whitley had made it a rule that nobody was to stir from the environs of the camp alone. In her present mood she felt that Whitley's rules were made to be broken. Another rule was that any party away from the main body was to be armed. She hunted around for a spare automatic rifle, but they had been restowed and were not in their usual place. And she would ask nothing of anybody—even a simple request for information would have been beyond her. Besides, the hill was of almost bare volcanic rock and she was confident that she would be able to see anything or anybody coming from the jungle below in ample time to make good her escape.

It was only a short climb from the cave to the top of the cliff. The hill, all of five hundred feet above sea level it must have been, took longer. Done in sweltering, humid heat the ascent was a major operation.

When she was on the summit she looked, first of all, all around her. Down on the sand spit she could see the ship with the figures of men and women swarming about her, ludicrously like ants about some huge insect that had blundered into their nest to its own undoing. To the north she could see the native town, just beyond the swamp, with the shapes of other vessels in its harbor. She wondered why the omniscient Mr. Whitley did not station a permanent lookout on the hill to spy out the enemy's shipping movements. She forgot that visibility was usually so poor that anybody there would have been wasting his time besides standing a good chance of being attacked and killed by Venusians creeping up unseen.

Southward, the volcano seemed more than usually active. She felt a thrill of premonitory dread as she watched its ever expanding plume of smoke. With her glasses she could distinctly see occasional spurts of lava spouting up over the crater rim. Once there was some kind of internal explosion which sent a shower of rocks high into the air.

But she had come up here to look at the distant islands. From one end of the archipelago to the other she swung here glasses, and then back again. She thought she saw smoke, although it may only have been a distant rain squall over the land. Her attention was distracted by a sudden movement in the sea about two miles out. Three huge shapes broke surface, the speed with which they had been traveling submerged sending them high out of the water. They spread huge, graceful wings, sored, and with lazy ease made off to the northeastward. She had seen the flying fish of Earth; these, too, were flying fish—but flying fish that could really fly.

Following their flight with the glasses she found herself looking at a flotilla of black shapes drifting down between the islands. She thought at first that this was a fleet of Venusian sailing ships, made to run down the hill to warn the camp of the impending invasion. But she restrained herself. They were miles off as yet and she would have ample time to estimate numbers and armament before there was any real danger. Furthermore, it was essential that she stay at her post until the last possible moment, for it had been found that fog or the thick, misty drizzle was liable to come down without a second's warning.

So she kept her glasses glued to the advancing armada whilst, with a fair northerly wind and the south setting current down the straits to aid them, they advanced with surprising rapidity. At the finish she began to have her doubts. There was a certain softness and irregularity of outline in both hull and sails. And when she saw the leading ship lift, on the end of a long tentacle, a struggling, fishlike form from the water and lower it into what could only have been its maw her doubts were confirmed. Still—it was interesting. She wondered whether the strange beasts were entirely at the mercy of wind and tide, or whether they could sail—what was it that Dale called it?— close hauled. Blast Mr. Whitley-Dale, anyhow. Him *and* his ships.

The scene before her was suddenly blotted out. Automatically she made to wipe the prismatics on the hem of her skirt, then realized that, without warning, the fog had shut down. She could no longer hear the

cheerful sounds of voices and hammering from the beach. It was, suddenly, very lonely on the hilltop. In spite of the heat she shivered.

But she was confident that she would be able to find her way down. She had been up here before, with Whitley. Now if *he* were here he'd try to steer a compass course or face the wind and tell you that the barometer was lower on your left hand than your right or something equally absurd. But he would be company. He would be able to laugh at you in a reassuring sort of way when you thought you heard slimy, slithery sounds on the rocks on both sides of you. And he would have come with a heavier armament than the pair of none too sharp surgical scissors that you happened to have in your pocket. And he would have known what to do when the slithery sounds closed in from all sides and the fog stank with the revolting, fish-carrion smell of the Venusians. He would—

Leonora tried to scream, but a slimy, webbed hand was pressed over her mouth. She tried to use her pitiful scissors, but her arm was brutally twisted and the little implement tinkled unheeded to the ground. She waited for the keen edge of a blade at her throat, but it did not come. Instead, half dragged, half carried, she was borne off silently into the fog.

"Where's Leo?" Whitley had roughed out his sail plan to his own satisfaction and now wanted somebody to talk to. "Where's Leo, Doc?"

"Don't know, Dale. She was in here a while ago, they tell me, raising Cain and making herself generally unpopular — but that must have been before the fog came down. Thought she was with you."

"No." Then—"I'll see if the sentries have seen her."

"Hm-m-m. Quite worried," said the surgeon, to nobody in particular, smiling to himself. "But Leo's too smart to get into trouble. And when he does find her they'll just have another row."

Meanwhile, Whitley was interrogating his sentries. Those to the north and the south of the beach were positive that she had not passed. So was the man who had been stationed at the head of the path from the cave to the top of the cliff. But somehow, his protestations failed to carry conviction.

"So you never left your post. You're lying. Never mind how I know. I'll deal with you later. Come on!"

Followed by Taberner and Stanley he started up the path to the hill. The mist had cleared considerably and the visibility was fair. He did not see what he dreaded to see —the body of Leonora transfixed by a crossbow shaft or hacked by a broad-bladed knife. It was only by chance that he saw the little pair of scissors, their brightness already dulled by the saturated air.

"There's been a struggle here," said Taberner. "These must have been the only weapon she had. Look! You can still see where the slime has been scraped off their feet by the rock." He was nosing around like an excited little terrier. He pounced on something that had escaped the notice of the others. Mutely, he gave it to Whitley for his inspection. It was a shred of cloth, once white but now stained dirty green by the slime from the Venusians' hands.

"We'll take the ship," said Whitley. "We'll sail her round and attack in force. And if . . . if—"

"No, skipper," said Taberner. "Too obvious. It's clear now, and they'd see us coming, be ready for us. But three men with rifles coming overland might, with luck, do something. A bigger party would be spotted."

Members of Leonora Starr's profession are not prone to panic. She was no exception to the rule—but on this occasion she found it hard not to lapse into a futile, energy-wasting struggle. Struggle she did, but with what she hoped was a certain calmness and deliberation. She went on struggling long after it became obvious that she would be better advised to save her strength. But she was no match for the four Venusians of the scouting party. Two held her arms, one kept his stinking, webbed hand tight pressed over her mouth, the fourth led the way down the hillside.

What made it hard for the girl was the knowledge that she was in a hopeless predicament unless help came from the camp. Had her captors been human—even the veriest dregs of humanity—she would have been confident of her ability to win clear by the use of weapons far more deadly than the little futile pair of scissors that had dropped unheeded to the ground, than the broad, sharp knives of the Venusians. But on these aliens the old, black magic would never work, even had she possessed command of their uncouth language.

Aliens? No—not quite. That was the worst part of it. She realized that she must have been taken prisoner for one purpose only—as a specimen. Woman dissects frog,

she thought. That's not news. But— The thought made her, almost involuntarily, start struggling again. The leading Venusian, who seemed to be in charge of the party, turned and gave her a stunning buffet on the side of the head.

The texture of the ground underfoot was changing. The rocks gave way to a more even and softer footing. She could not look down—the native whose hand was over her mouth had forced her head back so that she could see only the murky, yellow sky — but she could feel it through the soles of her thin shoes. Like moss, it felt.

As they progressed it became more marshy. The mud crept up over the tops of her shoes, slid down between foot and lining. She could hear the loud squelch as her captors set their broad, webbed feet down, the sucking noise as they lifted them. And the warm slime mounted to above her ankles, her knees. Inch by inch it climbed her thighs. The stink of corruption, of fecund life decaying even as it flourished, became overpowering. She tried to look down. Surprisingly, the Venusian with his hand over her mouth offered no resistance. She saw that she was being led across a swamp, a quaking quagmire of black, stinking mud.

Perhaps it was that the natives knew a secret path across its seemingly trackless filth, perhaps it was that their webbed feet gave them the support that a man would have lacked. But Leonora saw that she could not expect a rescue party to come *this* way—if there ever were a rescue party. She did not consider the possibility of a rescue by sea. Whitley's sailing ship was never more to her than a rather incomprehensible masculine toy.

With slow, uncanny rhythm the surface of the swamp heaved and pulsated. Now and again great bubbles would rise from its depths, break surface and burst. Once one of these floated up under the feet of the party, oversetting captors and captive into the stinking mire. And when the bubble burst the stench of the swamp was multiplied a thousandfold so that Leonora choked and retched. So concerned was she with her physical discomfort that she did not try to break free from the Venusians—had she succeeded in doing so it is almost certain that she would have sunk without trace into the noisome depths. In any case, slithering and floundering as they were, their grip on her arms never relaxed.

As the journey continued Leonora saw long, dripping tentacles rise questingly from the slime. Once one came close, undulating over the quaking surface like a snake. One of the Venusians slashed at it with his machete, slicing off its tip. It withdrew hurriedly. And then she saw another lift something small, black and amorphous from the mud. It struggled and squealed, and then was drawn from sight. Only a few, slow bubbles marked the place where it had vanished.

At last the gait of the Venusians became less of a swim, more of a walk. She felt her feet finding something like solidity. And then there was firm ground under them once more. She looked ahead to see a stockade in which yawned an open gate.

Her captors hustled her through the town or village far too fast for her to form any estimation of its size. Too fast, even, to acquire an idea of its nature. She had fleeting glimpses of huts apparently made of reeds and mud, of staring grotesques in every doorway. She heard the coarse croaking that preceded her and which died gradually away after her passage.

And then she was being taken along what must have been the waterfront. There was a quay of slimy stone, and alongside, moored in tiers, lay the ships. To Whitley the stark beauty of mast and standing rigging would have meant something. He would have been able to make a rough estimate of tonnage, of carrying capacity. But all this was wasted on the girl. What she *did* see—and who could have missed it?—was an unmistakable rocket-ship made fast alongside a wharf of her own. Of her earthy origin there was no doubt. In spite of the green algae thickly coating her hull she could see, blurred and distorted by the coating of slime, an unmistakable Hammer and Sickle. And the Russians had, she knew, been among those who had sent a recent expedition to Venus.

She tried to dig her heels in, to hang back and look at the ship of space, incongruous among the slovenly little surface craft. But the talons of her captors dug viciously into her arms and she was dragged, half sliding, along the quay.

One thing more did she see before she was hustled down a flight of slippery stone stairs. This was a basin, its seaward end fenced in. The fencing, as far as she could see, was of two different periods. There was an elaborate, fanciful tracery of wrought metal patched, in the frequent gaps, with a crude interlacing of rough laths. In this

basin swam myriad creatures. Some were merely a head and tail, some showed the beginnings of fore and hind legs. A few, their tails almost withered away, squatted at the water's edge, stared at her with great, mournful eyes. With a note of unmistakable interrogation they croaked at her escorts. Brusquely, her escorts replied. And then she was stumbling down the worn steps into the noisome darkness.

And then there was light of a sort. From concealed sources it came, a green, flickering glow. By its dim, fitful illumination her captors seemed more froglike than ever. Their appearance, combined with the watery quality of the lighting, made it seem that they were clambering down, down and down, fathoms beneath the sea surface. Womanlike, she found time to wish that this were so. She longed for clean water to wash from her face and body, clothing and hair, the muck of the swamp. As an ambassadress of humankind, albeit an unwilling one, she was acutely conscious of the fact that her appearance left much to be desired.

At length they came into a large chamber. Along one side was a huge, rectangular window. Through this came the dim, diffused light of the fathoms deep sea. Uncouth things swam within her range of vision, now and again pressing hideous heads against the glass. Those within the room ignored them.

The floor was running with little rivulets of moisture, whilst others trickled down the sweating stone walls. Over all were the ubiquitous green, slimy algae, hanging in festoons, even, from the low ceiling. There was a rank odor of moist decay.

Here and there, against the walls, were machines at whose purpose she could not guess. They appeared to be the essence of simplicity, just huge drums on their sides with one parchment covered face open to the inside of the room. By each one stood two batrachians, one holding a kind of stick and the other what appeared to be a pad and stylus. She became aware of a tapping in broken rhythm coming from one of the drums. Then its staccato song ceased with a flourish. He with the stick rattled out what must have been a reply or acknowledgment on the parchment diaphragm before him whilst the Venusian with the stylus scribbled rapidly and industriously. He brought his pad to the low, stone table from which, until now, Leonora's attention had been distracted. The frog man seated at its head snatched the pad from the webbed hand of the messenger, held it briefly before his eyes. He croaked rapidly to his fellows along both sides of the table, and some of them made guttural reply. He then barked what was obviously an order at the messenger, who made a sort of obeisance and withdrew. The Venusian with the stick beat a rapid tattoo on his instrument, and then, for a little, there was silence.

Leonora studied the group at the table. Although they were no different superficially from the other Venusians with whom she had come into contact these, undoubtedly, were among the rulers of this watery world. Authority sat on them like an almost visible garment. It was, in fact, their only raiment, although all of them wore, probably as symbols of rank, ornaments of bright gems and intricately worked gold. It was these jewels more than their incomprehensible machines that forced upon the girl the realization that these were no mere savages but newly arisen from the swamps, that she was face to face with the representatives of an ancient culture. And once again she became acutely conscious of her filthy and bedraggled appearance.

She need not have worried. At a command from the Venusian at the head of the table her escort gripped her arms even more brutally, hustled her a few paces forward so that the rulers might look upon her. Against her will she was forced down into an humiliating mockery of a curtsy. For scant seconds she was studied with a lack of interest that was insulting—although when she saw the four human skulls—one of them undoubtedly female—on the table she understood why her capture had not aroused any wild enthusiasm.

Then she was jerked around and hustled and prodded into the ascent of the slippery stone stairs.

To the north of the camp the beach diminished to the merest strip, and then ceased to exist where the cliffs marched down steep and sheer to the water, Whitley was forced to admit that his first plan for a march along the sand could be washed out. Approach by sea was more practicable —but this would be the quarter from which the Venusians would surely expect counter-attack. This left only the swamp.

And yet the disadvantages of this were so obvious that he was inclined to take the ship and all the rifles he could muster and attack in force. It was only the realization

that, by so doing, he would run the risk of robbing the party of its only means of transport, of escape, that made him cudgel his brains for an alternative plan. And every avenue he explored led him inexorably back to the one place he most wished to avoid—the swamp.

But there were planks in the ship. What their original use had been he could not say—possibly spares for repairs on the spot in the event of the hull being in stove in on some uncharted rock. Be this as it may —they would afford transportation across the morass.

Whitley gave his last orders to Pawson and Jenkins and then accompanied by Taberner and Stanley, set out. Each man had a rifle with ample ammunition, and each carried a Venusian knife. The hunter and the cadet had one plank each, Whitley carried two. He had to tell himself at frequent intervals that this fourth board would be necessary.

Taberner followed the trail of the raiding party with ease down to the swamp verge. Here it ceased. It could not be expected that the slimy mud would carry any permanent imprint.

They looked across the heaving expanse to where, on the further side, a row of tall growths, not unlike the tree ferns of an Earthy antipodean rain forest, marked more or less solid ground. It looked a long way. It was a long way. But it was a way that must be traveled.

Whitley went first. He waded in until he felt himself sinking, then threw himself flat onto his two boards, which he had lashed together. They supported his weight. Experimentally, fearful of losing his precarious balance, he kicked his feet. With painful slowness the planks moved forward. Having his face brought thus into close proximity to the stinking mud was unpleasant but unavoidable. At first he wanted to vomit, but in a short time he was so engrossed in the problems of propulsion that the smell almost ceased to register.

The passage of the swamp was not without incident. There were the questing tentacles rising from the fetid depths, although only once did they constitute a serious menace. One snaked along the surface unobserved and caught Stanley by the ankle. More by luck than judgment Taberner was able to bring his blade into action in time. And there was something which could have been a crocodile, except that it had broad fins which were almost wings on which it slithered over the surface. It followed them all the way to the further shore, but made no attempt to attack.

There was, after all, a sentry among the tree-ferns. Like Whitley, before he had worked out his plan of action, he had decided that the swamp was impassable. When they found him he was seated at ease under a low bush bearing huge, fleshy blossoms, from which came a scent of putrescent sweetness. Around these hovered a cloud of little flying things, scarcely larger than a terrestrial house fly. All the Venusian's attention was centered on them. At intervals his mouth would open and a long, whiplike tongue would flicker out and back with lightning rapidity. Each time the number of insects would be diminished by one—but the supply was seemingly inexhaustible. It lasted out for *his* time, anyhow. The humans left him with a cleft skull into which, already, were creeping long, pallid worms that had appeared as though by magic from the sodden earth.

The gate in the stockade through which Leonora had passed was still open. The guard here was more alert than the first one had been. And to have attacked from a distance, with firearms, would have been to raise a general alarm.

"Leave this to me, skipper," said Taberner.

Beneath the trees there was a thick layer of vegetable detritus. In this the hunter rolled, the pallid green leaves and rubbish adhered to the mud with which he was literally coated. The little hunter had taken the crossbow from the first guard, this he loaded and cocked, careful to do so as silently as possible. Taking advantage of every scrap of cover he crept closer and ever closer to the Venusian, until he was within such range that he could hardly miss if he tried, even with this unfamiliar weapon. There was a faint, musical twang, and the guard crumpled.

"Something else," said Taberner." I should have thought of this before." From inside his soaking clothing he produced a square of cloth that, somehow, he had contrived to keep clean. The three men wiped the mud from their rifles, improvised pull-throughs with long stalks of a reedy growth.

Then, cautiously at first but with increasing boldness, they passed through the stockade and entered the village. Taberner lagged a little. When he rejoined the others he said, "They won't be shutting that gate in a hurry!"

Had it not been for the sentry at the gate and the lived-in appearance of the crude, filthy houses they would have thought they had entered a ghost town. But as they penetrated deeper, threading their way through all kinds of rubbish and filth, they heard the sound of batrachian voices. Like a chorus of bull frogs it was—a sound somehow very homely in these outlandish surroundings.

Oppressed by a dread to which he did not dare put a name Whitley pushed on, his rifle at the ready. Caution was forgotten, for he knew that he would find Leonora at the place from which came the rhythmic yet unmelodious song of the frog people, augmented now by the throb and rattle of little drums.

In the center of the Venusian town was a clearing. The word *square* or *plaza* would convey an entirely wrong impression—for trees and assorted vegetation were inextricably entangled with dwelling places throughcut. In many of the houses the framework of the mud and thatch structure had burst anew into life, so that it was indeed hard to tell which were natural growths and which artificial structures.

But the humans were not interested in the vagaries of the indigenous architecture. What held all their attention was a wicker cage standing on a low mound in the middle of the clearing. In this was Leonora. Had they not expected to find her there they would never have recognized her—so blurred were her face and figure by the thick coating of filth. Around the cage milled an excited mob of Venusians. They were prodding her with sticks, scooping up handfuls of the mud from underfoot and pelting her with balls of slime. When it was all over Whitley thought of the barbarities practiced by Earthly children on hapless toads and frogs. But now his only concern was to get his rifle into action—and fast.

It was not much of a fight. The Venusians were taken unawares and fell like blades of grass before a scythe. Through the mass of the dead, careless of the blades that flickered up at him from those yet a-dying, trampled Whitley. His own blade was ready, and with it he hacked at the bars of the cage. He was dimly conscious of sporadic bursts of fire as Taberner and Stanley picked off such small pockets of resistance as remained.

Then the girl was in his arms. "What have they done to you?" he was saying over and over again. "Are you all right?"

At last she broke away from his embrace. "I'm quite fit," she said. "But hadn't we better be getting away from here?"

He became aware of Taberner's voice. "Time we left, skipper. They've called up the regulars!" As though to emphasize the little hunter's words a crossbow bolt whizzed by, scant inches from his head. Somebody loosed off a burst of fire from his automatic rifle. "Blast this place!" he heard Stanley mutter. "Far too much cover."

So began the retreat to the swamp. Rifle answered crossbow, vaned bolts and the little vaned rockets skimmed past each other on their opposed trajectories. On neither side was the shooting effective. As Stanley had said—there was too much cover. And once the humans were away from the clearing this was, under Taberner's expert guidance, a factor which helped them as much as it did their enemies.

A party, sent a roundabout way, did succeed in reaching the stockade before the fugitives. But the hinges of the gate, made of hide, they were, had been cut by Taberner. And while the Venusians were still struggling to push it into place they were cut down by the automatic rifles.

The four planks were where they had left them. Hard by lay what was left of the body of the first sentry—now only bones remained. Whitley spared it barely a glance. He gave Leonora hasty instructions in the technique of traversing the swamp, then—"Where's Taberner?" he demanded.

Even as he spoke the little hunter came on the scene and took hold of his plank. "Just been making that gateway of theirs a very unhealthy place," he explained. "It'll be a long while before any of 'em dares poke his nose outside the stockade. What a ruddy pity their hides have no market value."

"Good man!" said Whitley. "You—What's that?"

That was an earth tremor that all but threw them off their feet. It was repeated, with even greater violence. From the walled township behind them rose a crescendo of guttural cries, through and above which, staccato, insistent, throbbed and rattled the little drums

Whitley looked to the southward. The volcano, that by night had served as a beacon light, that by day had been a brooding, omnipresent pillar of smoke, had awakened to ominous activity. Great spurts of molten matter fountained from its crater,

and, in spite of the freshening northerly breeze, a portentous rumble was increasingly audible.

"Time we got back," he said.

The boards were launched, one by one, on to the surface of the swamp. It may have been imagination, but the warm slime seemed much hotter than before, the slowly rising bubbles from the fetid depths more frequent. And mixed with the rank odor of decay was the unmistakable tang of burning sulphur.

In spite of the portents of the burning mountain, the shivering earth, the Venusians did not easily give up the chase. Of this the fugitives became aware when they were, perhaps, about a third of the way across the bog. The first evidence of pursuit was a shower of bolts that, luckily, all went wide. It is hard to take accurate aim whilst treading water—or mud.

Nevertheless, succeeding volleys showed a marked increase of accuracy. And they were no longer coming from right behind the fugitives, but from both sides. It was obvious that the pursuit was gaining fast. Had they possessed the confidence to close in and fight it out hand to hand they would have made a finish of it—but it seemed that they had a healthy respect for the Terrestrial firearms.

When a bolt stuck, quivering in his plank less than an inch before his nose Taberner cursed. "This is no good," he said.

"No," agreed Whitley. "We'll have to stop and fight it out. Stanley, you carry on ahead with Miss Starr."

The cadet protested. "But, sir, if anybody's to make sure of getting out it should be you. They're all depending on you back at the camp. They—"

"Never mind that. I'm tired of being treated as a sacred cow. Get to the other side with Miss Starr, then you can loose off a few rounds if you like. And If Taberner and I are scuppered—don't stop. Get that?"

The sailor and the hunter stopped their paddling, disposed their bodies comfortably athwart their boards. Taberner fished out his invaluable rag and the rifles were given a hasty, superficial wipe. But they fired without jamming.

The Venusians had them almost surrounded. The main body of the enemy was still coming up behind, but on each side faster, or bolder, parties were attacking from the flank. But now they were at a disadvantage. Thanks to the boards on which they were resting the humans could shoot fast and straight. On the flanks the batrachians croaked and grunted, sank one by one into the black, hungry mud. The rearguard halted, seemed to pile up on itself.

"'*While those behind cried* Forward!
And those in front cried Back!'"

quoted Whitley.

"What was that, skipper?"

"Never mind, Horatius, Just keep on pumping lead into the baskets!"

A third rifle, close, added its song to that of the others. Whitley half turned. "Stanley! I thought I told—"

"So you did, sir. But—"

'It's not his fault," said the black apparition beside the cadet. "I—"

"You would. But come on. We've got a breathing space!"

The quartet flung themselves flat on their boards again, and, with feet going like outboard motors, resumed the slow creep over the mud. Fresh showers of bolts came from behind, but not with sufficient frequency and accuracy to cause any great alarm. The edge of the swamp, with its tall, rank growths, loomed ever closer and more desirable. It seemed that solid ground was almost within grasping distance when the black slime ahead of them erupted fantastically. Scaly, webbed hands rose from the ooze and clutched at their clothing, at the edges of the boards. Knives were out on both sides, once bright metal gleaming dully through the coating of filth. Taberner stared stupidly at a right arm that ended abruptly in a red-spouting wrist. By some miracle of contortion he got his left hand round to the rifle slung on his back, grasped the barrel and brought the butt crashing down across the bulging eyes staring at him from the mud Whitley and Stanley were cutting and thrusting desperately, trying to keep the girl between them. This was almost impossible when attack came from all sides and beneath Leonora snatched the sailor's rifle from its sling, followed the example of the dying hunter.

And now the liquid mud was alive with more than the frog people. It may have been the odor or the taste of freshly shed blood it may have been the frantic struggling and threshing. But, first singly and then in dozens, appeared the long thin tentacles. Blindly, inexorably, they snaked among the combatants, and once their coils had hold only a ready knife spelled salvation. And

for each one lopped short twenty uninjured ones made their appearance.

"Where's Taberner?" gasped Whitley, in a short lull.

"Where's Taberner?" repeated the others.

And then the deadly battle in the swamp flared up again, a fight to which, now, there could be only one possible conclusion.

So it was that when, miraculously, all opposition ceased they went on mechanically stabbing and hacking. But it was hideous, bloated corpses on which their blows fell, tentacles that sprawled limply, squirming spasmodically and feebly, over the bubbling surface. The *bubbling* surface. It was not boiling—yet, but the bed of the morass must have been already heated to the point of vaporization. The humans realized, suddenly, that it was hot. Not so hot that they—warm-blooded animals—could not endure a few moments more of it. But hot enough to have caused the deaths of their cold-blooded enemies. And hot enough to make it imperative to get out—quick.

Progress was less easy now than it had ever been. The belt of dead and dying batrachians was relatively narrow—but all kinds of obscene shapes had drifted up from the depths, sprawled in hampering tangles of limbs and tentacles in their path. And there was a thickening fog over the surface of the mud, a fog that, when breathed, caused exquisite agony in the lungs, that, for long seconds, left them hanging coughing, choking and helpless on their frail boards.

Leonora, who was leading, realized, almost without comprehension, that she was trying to propel herself through a tangle of coarse weeds and grasses. She got off her plank, stood shakily erect. The heaving ground threw her flat on her face. She picked herself up again. Through the mist she saw Whitley and Stanley, stationary in the slime, their legs still kicking mechanically, their hands making futile paddling motions. She waded out in the ankle deep, almost boiling ooze. One after the other she grasped their collars, pulled them to their feet. "We're here!" she had to say over and over again. "We've made it!"

None of the three was in any condition for a quick march back to the camp. But they forced their tired limbs and bodies into some semblance of speed whilst every muscle, every nerve, was shrieking for rest. Breathing had ceased to be a purely automatic function, every inhalation called for will power, for the determination to ignore the pain as the sulphurous air irritated the already smarting lung surfaces.

But it was plain that the island was in the throes of disintegration. To the south they could see, down wind, the column of flame-shot smoke overhanging the volcano. Frequent, heavy detonations shook the air and shook the ground. Almost unnoticed little, terrified things brushed past them at times almost oversetting them, flying madly for the north and nonexistent safety.

They came to the path leading to the cliff edge. But there was now no sharply defined brink—only a slide of rocks and rubble sloping down to the beach. The cave mouth must be buried. Sharp anxiety assailed them, quickened a pace that had already reached the seeming limits of endurance. They were sobbing as they slipped and scrambled down over the sharp stones, cutting and bruising feet and ankles.

At the bottom of the slide Whitley slipped and fell. He lay face down on the shuddering, quaking sand, lacking both the strength and the will power to get to his feet again.

He felt hands under his arms, protested feebly as he was jerked erect.

"Dale!" somebody was saying urgently, "Dale! We've got to get out of here. We've got to get out!"

He ungummed his eyelid, looked in the anxious face of Pawson. He forced himself to speak.

"Ev . . . everybody . . . in . . . the . . . ship?"

"Yes. Everybody and everything. Come on! Where's Taberner?"

"Dead," he heard himself say in a dull flat voice.

Others came from the ship to help Pawson. He was carried to the side of the little vessel. It was obvious that he could not negotiate the short Jacob's ladder, so somebody lowered a line. He had enough energy to insist on bending its end first around Leonora, then Stanley and then—for he had insisted on seeing the others aboard first—himself. The feel of a deck under his feet made him feel a little better, but he yet had to be convinced that anything mattered.

Somebody thrust a glass into his hand and said: "Drink this!" Automatically his hand went up to his mouth and he gulped down the acrid fluid. He coughed and spluttered — but he could feel his brain clearing almost as though he were watching a fog drifting from the outlines of a familiar landscape. His eyes opened. He saw the surgeon, holding in his hand a bottle.

'Any more?" asked that officer. Then— "You'll pay for this later, but it'll keep you going for a few hours."

"Thanks, Doc."

He was alert almost at once, looking around and taking everything in without effort.

"Get all these people below decks," he said. "And all this gear. No room to do a thing. Six of you get on to the windlass. That's right, start walking round it. No, not *that* way, you fools!"

As the cable tightened and the ship slid off the bank he found time to joke.

"This is her launching, really," he said. He patted the tiller affectionately. "I hereby christen you *Jane Elizabeth*!"

Those who heard the words wondered why he had not made the obvious choice in the matter of names, only Leonora knew the significance of those that he had chosen. And she felt a stab of jealousy. Even here and now she envied the woman who could still call to him across interplanetary distances and centuries of time.

But Whitley had no eyes for Leonora Starr. He was looking to the north and the south, weighing the chances of escape by either route. To the nor'ard the way between shore and shoal was clear. With power under his feet he would have taken this course without hesitation—but realized that he could not hope to buck both wind and current. Even had he decided to try there would have been barely room to tack, to beat to windward, in the narrow strait.

But to the south the way was not clear. From the burning mountain ran a torrent of smoking lava, pouring in a boiling cataract into the sea. It seemed, at this distance, that the entire strait must be choked with the molten rock.

Again Whitley looked to the north. He could, if there were no other way, put out his sweeps and pull *Jane Elizabeth* up the strait by sheer muscle power. And he couldn't see himself doing it with such an unskilled crew. And as he watched, this way was blocked. There was a deafening explosion and a great fountain of rock and boiling mud shot to the low sky. When the steam cleared he could see that the channel was now a seething caldron.

Luckily, the seismic disturbances were widespread. From seaward came rolling in a slow, heavy swell. Every now and again a huge sea, greater than its fellows, would roll over the reef with a smoothness that showed that the rocks must be submerged feet deep. While *Jane Elizabeth* stirred uneasily, tugged impatiently at her cable, Whitley watched this phenomenon. He frowned. Then— "It's the only way," he said, half to himself. "But first, steerage way—"

He barked orders. The crew, who had been drilled by him in what had seemed to them to be senseless routine, walked around the crude capstan. They tailed on to the mains'l halyards. Whitley caught himself singing the words of an old halyard chantey —how he had sneered at those who still sang them in the age of steam and steel!—as the big quadrangle of dirty parachute silk climbed jerkily up the mast. *"Way . . . hey . . . and up she rises. . . . Way . . . hey . . . and up she rises. . . ."* The grunts of the pullers, the rhythmic creaking of the blocks, kept time with his song. *"Ear-ly in the morn-ing*! Make fast your halyards, there! Now the tack — that's not tight enough! Bring the sheet aft!"

Something knocking metallically against the bows told him that the anchor was aweigh. Good. Experimentally he moved his tiller. At first *Jane Elizabeth* did not answer, although, under the influence of current only, she was drifting slowly down the strait. Then the sail filled with a thud that almost unstepped the mast and the little ship charged for the reef. Whitley desperately put his tiller hard-a-port and he saw *Jane's* nose swing to starboard. As she jibed the boom swept across the deck, almost carrying away the sheet as it was brought up at the end of its run.

That wasn't good enough. Whitley had hoped to be able to put his ship through her paces before he took her anywhere, had counted on being able to get the feel of her. But he was having to make up the rules as he went along.

More by luck than judgment he got her under control. The sheet was adjusted to his satisfaction and she was stecring not too badly. He thought of hoisting his job, but decided that that could wait. He looked ahead to the boiling sea, the glowing torrent of lava, that was growing ever closer. He looked to seaward, and realized with a heart-stopping shock that the heavy, seismic swell had died down as suddenly as it had arisen. "Stand by the halyards!" he shouted. "Stand by to let go the anchor!"

The order that would bring the sail down with a run, that would send his grapnel to the sea bottom, trembled on his lips. The unholy union of fire and water was dread-

fully close. Down wind as it was he could already feel its heat, already smell the acrid fumes. "Let—" he began.

"Wait!" Viciously, Leonora gripped his arm. She pointed to seaward. Humped well over the misty horizon appeared a hill of water. Swiftly, it sped shorewards. Taking his eyes from the caldron ahead Whitley watched intently. "Watch the sheet," he warner, without turning his head.

Now!

With deceptive deliberation he pushed his tiller to starboard. "Sheet!" he bellowed. The cadet whose post it was hastily pulled it taut. *Jane Elizabeth* heeled over as the wind cought her on the beam, swung to meet the onrushing sea. She and the wave met over the reef. Her nose rose until it pointed at the sky, her timbers and rigging groaningly complained. But she cleared the rocks with feet to spare and then fell into a sickening toboggan down the far side of the watery hill, down and out to the open sea. And when the big wave had passed the trough in its rear revealed the black, jagged teeth of the shoal in all their ugliness, and it seemed to Whitley that they were snarling their disappointment.

But he had no time for the weaving of poetic fancies. He had to decide where they were going—and why. Ahead, although not visible with his present height of eye, was the long archipelago that had been seen from the time when the weather was moderately clear. It was doubtful indeed whether its natives, if any, would prove any more hospitable than the first Venusians of his acquaintance had been—but there would be the chance of piracy and plunder. Before undertaking a long voyage he would have to explore the possibilities of living off the country. While he pondered thus his glance roved constantly, subconsciously. He took in the set of his sail, considered improvements that would have to be made. He glanced now and again at his compass, kept the lubber's line on the florid hieroglyph that must represent East. And ever and again he scanned the misty horizon.

Suddenly, he stiffened.

"Clarke," he said, "take the tiller, will you?" He gave the lad brief instructions on how to steer. He shouted for a pair of glasses. Then he looked long and steadily to the north.

"Strange," he said at last. "They're getting out by sea—but that was to be expected. Three sailing boats and—a steamer. Wonder where she's from."

"Nothing marvelous in steam," said somebody.

"No. But it's the thing she's towing. It can't be—"

"It is," said Leonora. Then—"I'm sorry. I should have told you before. But there hasn't been time somehow. But they had a rocket-ship in that harbor of theirs — a Russian. What shape she's in I can't say—but theirs was the last expedition to Venus. So she hasn't been here more than a year."

But Whitley ignored her. He was looking at the little convoy with which he was steering a parallel course. Strangely enough he looked at the steamboat with more interest than the spaceship. He watched her jealously, covetously. With steam and steel under his feet he could make himself undisputed master of the Venusian seas.

The drizzle became a thin rain and then ceased. Visibility was as good as it ever would be on Venus, and he was able to see things in better detail. On Earth the little, smoke-belching ship would have disgraced a slow, tramp convoy. She relied on paddles for propulsion, and as she rolled in the low swell sweeping down from the north her side wheels kicked and splashed with a foaming futility. She had a long, thin smokestack just abaft the paddle boxes, its top surmounted by some kind of spiky, allegedly decorative coronal. What she was burning Whitley could not say, but the dense clouds of black smoke billowing from her funnel argued incomplete and inefficient combustion. Yet to the man from the age of mechanically propelled ships she was more beautiful than the cleanest, sweetest clipper that ever ran the Easting down. Two sinister shapes, one forward and one aft, that could only be cannon made her even more desirable

Whitley ordered his jib hoisted. Now he had a purpose, now he could crowd on canvas. He satisfied himself that the foot of the triangular sail cleared the Venusian catapult on *Jane's* foredeck, then told those who had practiced with that weapon to ready it for action. He went aft again. He was confident that if he came up into the wind he could sail far closer hauled than the Venusians with their clumsy sail plan —the steamer, of course, had freedom of action. But she was hampered by her tow. Unreasonably, he gave the natives credit for human ethical ideas, assumed that she

would stay to protect her charges. And in this he was right.

Jane Elizabeth was cleaner than those who—but a short time past—had been her sisters. Her sails were better designed; and from her lee gunwale had been lowered a contraption made from sweeps and wooden planks—a leeboard. In the absence of a keel this served to keep her from drifting sideways as the others were doing. They, made fearful by the strange changes that had been wrought in the appearance and capabilities of one their number, tried to edge up into the wind. But they made more leeway than headway.

Had Whitley been the Venusian naval commander he would have ordered the sailing ships to fall back, to seek protection behind the guns of the slow, waddling steamer. But they made no attempt to heave to or to shorten sail. Whitley saw the little figures of their crews bending on all sorts of rags and scraps of canvas in a vain attempt to pull themselves away from the avenging Terrestrials. But he was disposed to let them escape. He wanted the rocketship—or the steamboat?—and could not be bothered to waste ammunition on these small fry. They were neither dangerous nor desirable.

He gave his riflemen instructions. "Any time you like now—aim for the bridge! Yes, that's it, that kind of platform between the paddle boxes." He looked aloft. Illogically, he wished that he had some kind of ensign at the peak. The illegality of opening fire without one's national colors displayed had been so drummed into the seamen of his age that a display of bunting on these occasions had become almost instinctive.

Before his rifles started their rattling song the drums aboard the Venusian ships awoke into staccato life. Obviously, orders were being passed between the vessels. As one their three huge crossbows fired, the bolts falling almost simultaneously in *Jane Elizabeth's* wake. It seemed that the batrachian gunners had not allowed sufficient deflection, had made too low an estimate of *Jane's* speed. But that mistake would not be repeated too many times. He gave an order to Clarke, who was still at the tiller, let the ship's head fall off from the wind a little. The change of course and rate of advance should help confuse the others. "Go for the sailing ships first," he ordered. "Sweep their decks—and put those blasted catapults out of action!"

That part of the engagement was almost too easy. The little rocket projectiles swept the crowded decks clear of life, brought clumsy sails down with a run as rigging was cut to flying shreds. In seconds the three enemy ships were reduced to lifeless hulks, wallowing in the long, low swell.

Whitley swept ahead of them, put down his helm and came round to the starboard tack. He was afraid that the almost untried *Jane Elizabeth* would find herself in irons, but thanks to his skillful handling of the jib she came round easily. He let her fall off from the wind until it was almost abeam, until his course was parallel with but opposite to that of the steamer and her tow.

He saw with approval that Stanley, who was self appointed gunnery officer, was directing a rapid and accurate rifle fire at the sidewheeler. Figures ran along her deck to try to reach the forward cannon but fell, one by one, whilst still yards from their objective. But— "Their bridge seems to be armored!" shouted the cadet. "We can't make any impression."

Looking through his glasses Whitley saw that this was so. Just forward of the funnel —now visibly perforated—was a box that could only be the Venusian's wheelhouse. He saw the rocket bullets striking with vivid gouts of flame, but saw no evidence of penetration. "Try the big crossbow," he shouted. "And the best shots can try to get their fire through those slits or peepholes!"

By this time he was almost abeam of the other. It occurred to him suddenly that there was no reason why the after gun should not be manned and ready, should not be trained round as far forward as it would bear. "Ready about!" he shouted. Then— "Down helm!" As *Jane Elizabeth* came round to the port tack once more he hoped that her crew now realized the value of the long, sweltering hours they had spent at sail drill before their ship was launched.

Before the sails filled on the fresh tack came a peculiar, dull detonation from the paddle steamer. It was like nothing so much as the soft explosion heard when overmuch pressure lifts the cap of a safety valve, or when a boiler gauge glass decides to blow.

He could see the gun now, he seemed almost to be looking down its muzzle. A cloud of white steam was slowly dissipating in the humid air. Out on the port quarter a solid projectile skittered from swell to swell, for all the world like a flat stone flung by an idle boy

"A steam cannon," he said, not without admiration. "And it works."

Stanley was directing *Jane Elizabeth's* fire on and around the gun shields. A figure staggered out from behind that of the forward gun and fell. Nevertheless, both cannon fired again, but their aim was woefully inaccurate. Then *Jane* was out of the field of fire of the after gun once more. On this tack she could not bring her own big crossbow to bear. On the superstructure its bolts had done no damage, but Stanley wanted to see the effect of one in the threshing paddles. But even if she were disabled it would still, thought Whitley gloomily, be stalemate. "We've got good rifles," he explained to Leonora, "and no armor plating. She's got cannon—maybe not very good but good enough to sink us—*and* armor. So what?"

"So what?" she echoed. *"This,* my dear. While you've been playing at admirals I've been keeping a general lookout." She pointed astern. "It seems to me that the shore—or what's left of it—of our late happy home is a lot closer. We're all going astern—and fast!"

The sailor followed her pointing arm. "You're right," he said. He could have sworn that they had been at least six miles from *Martian Maid's* island when he had opened the action—now they were—at most —three. And as Leonora had said, there was not much of the island left. A huge cloud of steam overtopping the volcano told its own story. The sea must be pouring into some enormous cavity that had opened in the ocean bed. It could not be long before the combination of water and volcanic fire produced a truly cataclysmic upheaval. It— A cannon ball fell just under the poop, the shower of spray drenching the three who stood there. "Ready About!" ordered Whitley automatically. Then— "No. I'll wear ship." Clarke put up the helm and brought the wind to the port quarter.

"What are you going to do?"

"Bring my crossbow to bear and put a shaft in his port paddle. Then ram and board!"

Mutely, she pointed again to the billowing clouds of steam, to the swirling vortex which even now was visible.

"I know. I could clear out to the south'ard, he could cut his tow and run any way he pleases. But we're both of us too stubborn. And I can't lose the chance of getting that rocketship!"

As *Jane Elizabeth* swept down the wind, the murky air ahead of her alive with tracer, the Venusian made no attempt to take avoiding action. Stolidly, she paddled on, for all the world like some ugly, deadly serious water beetle. Intermittently the two steam cannon spoke, but their crews were obviously inconvenienced—at least—by the concentrated rifle fire. Perhaps such sights as they possessed had been broken or deranged. Whitley saw Stanley forward, busied with the big crossbow. He laid and trained himself. "What are you waiting for?" shouted the sailor. "Wish you'd keep the ship still, sir," grumbled the other. Whitley thought that the swell, which was now almost astern, made it hard for one not trained in the art of naval gunnery to gauge the right moment to fire. But Stanley had managed quite well before. It was then that he realized that *Jane Elizabeth* was trembling continuously and rhythmically. He looked down at his feet— the seams of the deck planking were opening. Somebody poked up his head from below. "Dale! Dale! She's leaking like a basket!"

It could be, he thought, some effect of the undersea eruption. Experimentally, he ordered Clarke to swing a point off his course. The trembling ceased. A second or so later it started again—slight at first then rapidly growing in intensity. Between the two ships —and between the two ships only—the surface of the sea was strewn with dead and dying water things. It could only be some kind of sonic or supersonic beam projected by the Venusian—a directional submarine resonator. It was an effective weapon.

If he zigzagged he spoiled the aim of the unseen operator—but he was also reducing his own speed. And he had no time to spare. The roar of the maelstrom was now loud in all their ears—and one by one the three derelicts had been sucked into its boiling depths, sweeping round and round in rapid, ever diminishing circles before vanishing into the clouds of steam and spray. Besides, *Jane Elizabeth* was making water fast and—almost worse—becoming sluggish.

He called to Stanley: "If I throw her out of the beam again, can you fire?"

"I think so!"

For the last time *Jane* swung from her course. From forward came the loud twang of the suddenly released bowstring. Straight and true sped the shaft, to fetch up with a horrid grinding clangor in the flailing paddles. What happened then can only be explained by the assumption that the Venusian engineer had raised a head of

steam far in excess of the strength of his boiler plating, that he either had no safety valves or that they were not functioning. The port paddle was reduced in scant seconds to a mass of wreckage defying the already overstrained engines to shift it a fraction of an inch. The starboard wheel raced madly, the ship swung to port and, had she continued on her course, must inevitably have rammed *Jane Elizabeth.* With almost half of the machinery not working pressure mounted rapidly and catastrophically in the boilers. It was a slow, leisurely, sort of explosion. Tiredly and ludicrously the long, thin funnel bowed and toppled. Where it had been, a pillar of steam and wreckage climbed into the low sky. The hull seemed to cave in, stem and stern lifted from the water, hung for a while like two upraised arms, then vanished. And then there was nothing but a few swimming figures paddling frantically and in vain away from the hell of elemental fire and water opening behind them.

When Whitley brought *Jane Elizabeth* alongside the Russian rocket she was going down fast. Her decks were crowded, for the rapidly encroaching water had made the holds untenable. It was not easy for the crew to obey his shouted orders, but in spite of the congestion they managed to get the sails down, to snatch the tow line that still dangled from the Russian's fins.

Crippled ship of the sea and sleeping ship of space were already commencing the first, sweeping circle of the vortex when Stanley, who had scrambled on to the slimy hull, managed to get the air lock door open. Ordinarily the research ship would have been boarded with caution—but under these circumstances caution availed nothing. *Jane Elizabeth* was going fast, and the spaceship offered at least temporary refuge. And if her interior held unpleasant surprises—the certainty of the boiling whirlpool, the sure prospect of world-rending explosion, were more unpleasant than anything she could offer.

Whitley stood on his deck watching the survivors of *Martian Maid,* one by one, jump across the space between the two ships, scramble over the slippery, curved hull to the air lock door.

"If her engines aren't in working order," he thought, *"I'll stay here. May as well go down with my first, and last, command. You did well,* Jane Elizabeth—" With his right hand he patted the tiller, then grasped the hard, unyielding wood firmly. "And I'll stay with you," said Leonora beside him. He started, he was not aware that he had given his thoughts utterance. She slipped her hand into his free one. Jane and Leo, he thought. Funny that I should have them both with me at the finish. It was very hot, and the fog of sulphurous steam made them cough. The hot water crept over their ankles.

It was not quite scalding.

"Come on, you two!" It was Pawson, emerging briefly from the air lock. "She seems to be in perfect order!"

And yet they could not hurry. Some premonition, some warning instinct, made them savor each and every moment to the full. Slowly, reluctantly, Whitley released his grip on *Jane Elizabeth's* tiller and, hand in hand, he and Leonora stepped from the sinking deck to the smooth, slimy plating. With what was almost a tired sigh the little ship went down, but for seconds her mast protruded above the surface of the water, moving with slow deliberation like a beckoning finger. "She wants you," said Leonora jestingly. Then, bitterly, "*She* wants you!"

"Hurry up!" bawled Pawson.

He was almost beside himself with impatient anxiety when they finally made the air lock. He dragged them inside, then went hastily to the controls that closed the outer door. He left them there, and they heard his feet hurrying along the alleyway to Control.—This was his world, his job.

Whitley let his legs sag. He slid down the bulkhead until he was in a sitting posture. By his side he felt Leonora do likewise. They felt the deck beneath them tilt slowly and steadily. Leonora clutched his arm. "Is this . . .?" "No." He spoke with calm conviction, although he never knew from whence came his knowledge. "These research rockets are made to take off from anywhere, if it's water they tilt the nose to the right angle with ballast tanks aft. Stanley is taking her up. He is always reading books on exploration—he knows as much about these ships as the people who built them, the people who sailed them."

And then, from beneath them, came the thunderous murmur of unleashed power. It seemed that the gentle acceleration pressed them together. His arms were around Leonora, and hers around him. This was the end of the story. Now he could sleep. But first—He looked into the girl's eyes, and she looked into his. Now, with her face smudged and dirty, drawn and tired, she was infinitely more human, more desirable, than the

glamorous creature he had first known. Her grip about him tightened. Her lips were slightly parted. "My—"

"—darling," he said. Like a frightened child Jane clung to him. Temporarily, she was a child. Like most self-reliant persons, her dearest dream had been that of complete dependence.

The scene was unfamiliar, yet familiar. It seemed to be a flat roof somewhere in London. In one corner a vagrant eddy played with a handful or so of very fine metallic dust. And there were men, high officers of all the services and civilians, drifting about aimlessly, lost in their snug, happy little wish-fulfillment-dream worlds. Whitley heard an Air Marshal say: "Where are the stumps? I can't have been bowled first ball—"

The scene was familiar.

Whitley smiled a little bitterly. This is where I came in, he thought. I have been here before. But what has *Quentin Dale been doing? A burst of gunfire from the north refreshed his memory of this, his twentieth century life. It was less real than the other had been. Even Jane, in his arms, had less substance than the memory of Leonora Starr. Overhead, looking more like a cheap, ugly children's toy than the deadly weapon it was, sailed a robot bomb.*

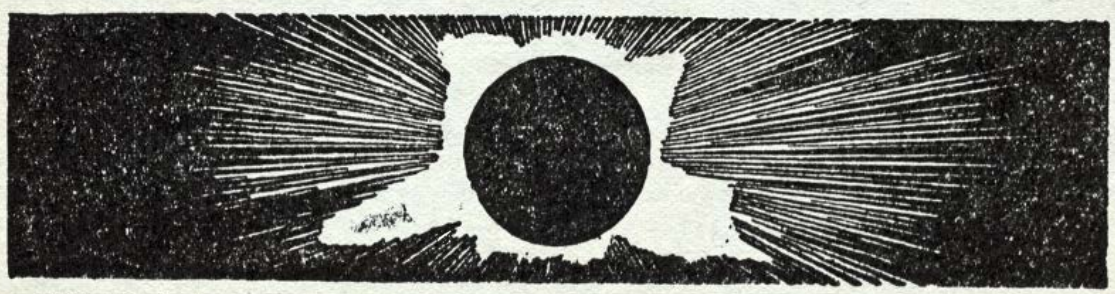
He listened to the noise of its motor receding in the distance, heard it cut out, waited tensely for the explosion.

His arms tightened around the inarticulate Jane. He looked again at the scene of confusion on the rooftop. He smiled. In spite of the credit that must accrue to him from the Venus adventure Quentin Dale would never be able to convince the examiners that he knew his magnetronics.

CROSSBOW COMEBACK

Weapon technology has slightly outstepped the crossbow era—but ye goode olde crossbow is back in technology. Westinghouse researchers found it the perfect answer to a tricky little problem. Quartz fibers have enormously high mechanical strength for their weight, and, unlike metallic fibers, return perfectly to their original dimensions when released from a distorting force. They make ideal suspension fibers for extremely sensitive precision instruments. They are also apt to get broken; the same delicacy that makes them so desired also makes them fragile. And it is very difficult to make fibers of uniform—not lumpy—cross section. The standard method being to heat the middle of a quartz rod in an oxy-hydrogen blowtorch, and then yank the ends apart, drawing the heated section into a fine fiber—you hope.

Comes the ancient crossbow system. The end of the rod is fixed in the bow as a projectile, the opposite end in a clamp, and the center section heated. At the appropriate moment, the crossbow trigger is tripped—and about thirty feet of extremely fine fiber is spun out in such a large hurry that the operation is completed before appreciable cooling of the incandescent quartz has taken place. The fiber is very fine indeed, quite uniform, and unbroken strands up to twenty feet long have been obtained.



THIS IS THE HOUSE

By LAWRENCE O'DONNELL

A house, it has been said, is a machine for living. The house they bought from its previous occupant had, very definitely, been made just that. But—not for human living!

MELTON walked somberley into the living room and headed for the front windows, where he remained brooding over some dark thought and twisting his hands idly behind him. His wife, Michaela, lifted her head and watched him, while the whirring of the sewing machine faded into silence. After a moment she said "You're in my light, Bob."

"Am I? Sorry," Melton murmured, and moved aside. But he still kept his back to the room, and his fingers still moved nervously behind him. Michaela frowned, sent a slow, rather questioning glance around the room, and pushed back her chair.

"Let's have a drink," she said. "Your silhouette looks vaguely rocky. A short, strong cocktail, perhaps . . . huh?"

"A short, strong snort of rye, I'd say," Melton expanded, brightening a trifle. "I'll fix it. Hm-m-m." He had taken a step toward the hall door, but now he paused, almost imperceptibly. Michaela remembered the refirigerator then. "I'll do it," she said, but Melton growled something and went on out, his footsteps heavy and determined.

Michaela crossed to the divan under the window and curled up on it, biting her lower lip and listening hard. As she expected, Bob was delaying opening the refrigerator. She heard the rattle of glasses, the clink of bottles, and a gurgle. The last time Bob had had occasion to investigate the refrigerator, there had been a gasp and a string of blazing, subdued oaths. But he had refused to tell why. Remembering other incidents that had occurred in the last three days, Michaela moved her shoulders uneasily. Not that she was cold. The house was warm, almost too warm, and that in itself, implied certain disturbing factors they had already noticed. Because the coal furnace in the basement was working rather impossibly well.

Melton came back with two highballs. He gave one glass to Michaela and slumped into a chair near her. There was a long silence.

"O.K.," Melton said presently. "So I didn't put any ice in the drinks."

"What of it?"

"Because there's ice today. There wasn't yesterday. But today the ice-trays are full. Only it's red ice."

"Red ice," Michaela repeated. "I didn't do it."

Her husband looked at her darkly. "I made no accusations," he pointed out. "I didn't really think you cut a vein and bled into the ice-trays, simply to worry me. I'm just saying that the ice is red now."

"That's easily solved. We'll drink the rye straight. Where's the bottle?"

Melton produced it from behind his chair. "I thought we could use several. Did you phone the agent today, Mike?"

"Yes. Nothing came of it. He got the idea we had termites."

"I wish we had. Better termites than . . . well, what about the former tenant? Hadn't he been able to find out anything at all?"

"No, and he thinks we're busybodies."

"I don't care"—Melton took a long swig from his glass—"what he thinks. We bought this house on the understanding that it wasn't . . . wasn't . . ." He slowed down and stopped. Michaela exchanged a long glance with him.

Melton nodded. "Sure. That's the way it is. What *can* we say?"

"Harmon kept talking about electricians and plumbers. He recommended several."

"That helps a lot."

"You're a defeatist," Michaela said, "and give me another drink. Thanks. After all, we're saving coal."

"At the expense of my sanity."

"Could be you don't understand this sort of furnace."

Melton put down his glass and glared at her. "I've handled furnace accounts at the office." He worked with a New York advertising agency, which was one reason they had taken this house, half an hour from Manhattan and pleasantly isolated on the outskirts of a small Hudson River town. "I've had to find out a little about how they worked. There's a place for a draft, there's a vent where the gases go out, and

there's a boiler built into the furnace. You put coal in, and, presumably, it burns out, heats the water in the boiler, and is circulated through the house radiators. There's also a blower that doesn't work. Look. If you light a match, it burns up, doesn't it?"

"Yes. It burns up."

"But the coal doesn't," Melton said triumphantly. "Three days ago I put a couple of shovels of coal in the furnace. I've had a red bed of coals ever since. The house is warm. It shouldn't be." He reached over to an end table and scrabbled at some papers. "I even figured out how long it should have taken the coal to burn. The answer is four hours at the outside. Not three days."

"What about that automatic stoker idea?" Michaela asked, "Did you look?"

"Well, I didn't use an X ray. But I looked. Yeah. I'll show you." He stood up, seized Michaela's hand, and they headed for the cellar, by-passing the eccentric refrigerator.

The cellar was capacious, cement-floored, and with six-by-six vertical supporting beams here and there. In one corner, by the coal bin, was the furnace, a bulging, dirty-white object with insulated pipes sticking out of it and wandering across the beams of the ceiling. All the draughts were shut, but the hydrostatic thermometer atop the boiler read 150. Melton opened the metal door. The bed of coals glowed red; ripples of wavy heat-motion ran across its surface.

"Where's the stoker?" he asked.

"Built in," Michaela suggested hopelessly. "It's a big furnace."

"The boiler's like a jacket. That fattens it out."

"Why not let the fire go out and start another? Maybe—"

"*Let* it go out? I can't make it go out. I can't even shake it through the grate." He seized an iron crank and demonstrated. "The house is too hot, even with all the windows open. When snow sets in, I don't know what we'll do."

Michaela turned abruptly toward the stairs. Melton said, "What's the matter?"

"The doorbell."

"I didn't hear it."

On the landing, Michaela paused to look down at her husband. "No," she said reflectively, "one doesn't. Hadn't you noticed?" She made a despairing gesture and departed, leaving Melton to stare after her. Now that he thought of it, not once in the past three days had he heard the doorbell ring. Yet, he recalled now, there had been callers—mostly salesmen determined to sell the new tenants insulation, paint jobs, extermination equipment, and subscriptions to magazines. Somehow it had always been Michaela who had answered the door. Melton had taken it for granted that he had been in a part of the house where it wasn't easy to hear the bell.

He scowled at the furnace, his thin, saturnine face set in troubled lines. Very easy to say, "Ignore the matter." But you couldn't. Not even the single matter of the furnace. And there had been others. What was wrong with the house?

Superficially nothing. Certainly nothing that a prospective tenant would notice on inspection. The title search had showed no flaws; an architect had approved Melton's plan to buy the place. So they had moved in, grateful for a *pied a terre* after months of vain house-hunting. During the war, when economic masses were artificially migrated, rents soared and housing was a vital problem.

But 16 Pinehurst Drive seemed exactly what they wanted. It wasn't ultra-modern; it had a certain solid air of assurance about it. It had sat for fifteen years facing the Hudson Palisades across the river, like a prim dowager austerely gathering gray stone skirts about her. The foundation was stone; the upper stories—it was a two story house—were wooden frame. And the layout of the rooms was ideal for their menage, Melton and Michaela and her brother Phil, who lived with them when he wasn't off on a binge, as he was, presumably, at present.

So they had moved in, the furniture had been installed, and the trouble began. Melton wished Phil were here. The guy, for all his erratic tendencies, had the ability to take things for granted; he exuded reassurance. But Phil hadn't even seen the new house yet.

He did not, therefore, know about the hall light, upstairs, which after a few experiments the Meltons had decided not to use at all. There was something about it. It altered complexions oddly, and had a quality of semifluorescence. Not quite that, but neither Michaela nor Melton liked to see each other in its illumination. The bulb wasn't at fault; they'd tried several—new ones at that—and the quality of the light was unchanged.

Now why in the devil—?

Yesterday, when Melton had gone to the refrigerator for ice cubes, he had got a tremendous shock. Electrical disturbance of some sort, obviously; but to see an aurora borealis effect in your refrigerator is inevitably disturbing. And there were other things, shading into subtleties of sensation and emotion, that couldn't be captured in words. The house wasn't haunted. It was rather, Melton felt, simply too efficient—in an extremely off-beam way.

The windows had been hard to open, extremely hard—for a while. Then, without any particular reason, they had all yielded as though greased, just in time to prevent the Meltons from dashing out of their overheated house to get a breath of fresh air. Melton decided to look up a friend, whom he'd met while handling the Instar Electric account. The man was a technician of some kind, and might be able to explain a few puzzling matters. Like the mice. If they were mice. There was something scuttling around at night, certainly too small to be a troll Michaela contended, and the traps Melton set caught nothing.

"Not those mice," Michaela had remarked. "They're too smart. One morning you're going down in the cellar and find a trap reset, with a tiny glass of whiskey as the bait. That'll be the end of you."

Melton was not amused.

A shrunken little man in baggy pants and a suede jacket appeared studdenly on the staircase landing and looked at Melton. Melton looked back in a baffled manner.

"Furnace trouble, huh?" the man said. "Your wife said you couldn't figure it out."

Michaela came into view. "This is Mr. Garr. I phoned him today."

Garr's leathery face cracked into a grin. "Got my name in the phone book under about everything," he said. "Wiring, plumbing, painting—plenty of folks get trouble that ain't just in one line. Like your furnace." He walked over to examine it. "Tinsmith—furnace man—electrician—you got to be all of 'em to get along. What's the matter with the thing?"

"The blower doesn't work," Melton said, avoiding Michaela's accusing stare.

Garr used a flashlight, traced wires, and did things with a screwdriver. Sparks scattered. He finally examined the hydrostat atop the boiler, lifted its cap, and clucked. "Leak," he said. "See the steam coming out? All rusted. The wires are grounded."

"Can you fix it?"

"Gotta get another hydrostat. I'll pick one up, Mr. . . . uh . . . Melton. You don't need a blower much anyway. That all?"

Michaela said firmly, "No, it isn't. We put a few shovels of coal in that furnace three days ago, and it's still going."

Garr didn't seem impressed. He looked into the furnace, nodded in a pleased sort of way, and asked, "How many shovels didja say?"

"Four," Melton told him.

"Ain't enough," Garr said helpfully. "You keep the coal a few inches lower than the door, see? That way, you get better heat."

"The house is too hot now. How do you make a furnace go out?"

"She goes out. Just leave her alone. Or shake her down through the grate."

"She won't shake. Try it yourself."

Garr tried it. "That's right. Guess she's fused. I'll have to get some tools and new grates to fix that, maybe." He straightened and peered around the cellar. "Darn nice house you got here, though. She's well built. Good, solid beams."

"Mice," Melton said.

"Li'l field mice. You get 'em all around this part of the country. You keep a cat?"

"No."

"Keep one," Garr advised. "I got one, but she's always having kittens. Next time she has a batch, I'll save one for you. Yep, you got a nice house here. Anything else need fixing?"

Melton refrained from mentioning that Garr hadn't fixed anything yet. "You might look at the refrigerator," he suggested. "It's been giving some trouble"

Upstairs, in the kitchen, the refrigerator looked as though butter wouldn't melt in its mouth, which was true. The ice cubes were still red, but Garr no doubt decided the Meltons were freezing strawberry pop or cherry juice. He produced a can of oil and squirted some into the motor. "Don't ever use heavy oil on this," he observed. "She'll gum up on you." He indicated bottles of beer in the refrigerator. "Good brand, that. I always get it."

"Have a glass," Melton said. He poured for the two of them. Michaela refused beer and went in search of the dregs of her cocktail. Melton perched himself on the edge of the sink, kicking his long legs idly, and watched the refrigerator balefully.

"I was thinking there might be a short somewhere," he suggested. "I . . . uh .

got a bit of a shock when I opened the thing yesterday."

Garr set down his glass. "Yeah? Let's see." He unscrewed the metal wall plate and blinked at what he saw. "Funny. I never saw a hook-up like that."

Melton leaned forward. "That so?"

"Hm-m-m. She's D.C., but—somebody screwed this up for you, Mr. Melton."

"How?"

"Amateur electricians," Garr said scornfully. "What's this wire doing here? And this thing—what is it, anyhow?"

"Plastic?"

"Part of a thermometer, maybe. *I* dunno. Hm-m-m." Garr wagged his head, made sparks fly with his screwdriver, and jerked a little. "I better throw the switch."

"I'll do it," Melton said. He went down into the cellar, studied a few fuse boxes, and located the master switch. He threw it to the Off position, yelling the news up to Garr. After a moment Garr yelped. Footsteps sounded on the stairs.

Garr, rubbing his hand, appeared. "You didn't throw the switch," he said reproachfully.

"Sure I did," Melton said. "Look."

"Oh. Yeah. Well, maybe . . ." He fumbled around. Presently he unscrewed some of the fuses. "You go up in the kitchen and lemme know when the refrigerator stops working. I plugged it in again."

Melton obeyed. Michaela came to watch. 'Find anything?" she asked.

"I dunno," Melton said, listening to the low purr of the motor. "The previous tenant probably rewired the house."

"Who was he?" Michaela murmured. "Einstein? Or a Martian?"

"Probably a ham electrician who thought he knew more than he did."

Michaela stroked the sleek white enamel of the refrigerator. "Only two years old. It really hasn't been weaned yet, Bob. The wrong kind of juice might upset its digestion."

"If I had the variety of food inside me that that icebox has in its innards, I'd be screaming for soda bicarb," Melton said. "Hello, Mr. Garr. Fix it yet?"

Garr's withered brown face looked troubled. "She's still running, huh?" he remarked. "Never stopped once?"

"Not once."

"She ain't on any of those fuses, then. I'd have to tear down the wall to trace the circuit." He looked doubtfully at the wall socket.

"Listen," Melton said, "I've a pair of rubber gloves somewhere. Would they help?"

"Yep," Garr nodded. "I'll just finish my beer while you get 'em. Goes flat in a hurry, don't it?"

"Mike," Melton said, "replenish Mr. Garr's glass." He departed.

"Yep," Garr said. "Mm-m . . . thanks, Miz Melton. You got a nice place here. I was telling your husband. Well built."

"It'll do, for a while. Later on I want to get a lot of new stuff in the kitchen. Those glass-fronted ovens and refrigerators—you know?"

Garr made a face. "I seen the ads. Ain't practical. Glass," he said plaintively, "what's the use of it? O.K. to let the sun in, maybe, but—nuts, if you'll pardon the expression, Miz Melton."

"Sure," Michaela said.

"A glass front on the icebox. She'll frost up. Same with the oven—steam. Might as well have good, solid metal. Visible this, visible that, all over the kitchen." He pointed to a metal container on the floor. "Visible garbage. That's where it'll end."

"I could do without *that.*"

"All that stuff's O.K., I suppose, but the average guy won't want it. *I* wouldn't. I got my house fixed up the way *I* want. I'm handy around the place. Got my lamps rigged so they'll slide up and down their poles. Fixed a cut-off on the phone so I won't be bothered at nights. A man monkeys around his house and fixes it up to suit himself."

"Here're the gloves," Melton said, coming back. "I think you can pretty much tell what a man's like by seeing where he lives."

Garr nodded emphatically. "That's right. A place fixed up like in one of them home furnishing magazines—it may be pretty, but you don't dare set down in a chair without dusting your pants."

"Well," Michaela said practically, "this house was empty when we moved in."

"First time I've been in it for ten years," Garr said. "People named Courtney lived here then. Contractor, he was. The whole family went to California, and a guy named French moved in."

"What was he like," Melton asked quickly.

"I never seen him. He didn't go out much."

"He never called you for repair work?"

"Guess he did it himself," Garr said,

with a scornful look at the wall socket. "I'll fix *this*." He did, with swift accuracy. After he had screwed the plate back in and plugged the socket into place. he stood up with a grunt. "That'll do it. Anything else?"

"The bell."

"Won't she work?"

"Not exactly," Melton said. "That is—"

"Mind going out and trying her?" Garr suggested.

"O.K."

Michaela watched Garr. After a few seconds Garr gave her a quick glance. "She's all right," he said. "No short there, anyway."

"You, uh, heard the bell?"

"Sure I heard it. Why? Didn't you?"

"I . . . yes, I heard it," Michaela said, though she had only felt it. "It works now, Bob," she added, as Melton came back into the kitchen.

"It does?"

"Right as a trivet," Garr said. "Well, I'll be getting along, then."

"What do I owe you?" Melton asked.

Garr named a low sum. Melton paid it, they had another beer, and Michaela said, "There's the bell. Excuse me."

Melton finished his beer in a hurry. He hadn't heard anything. Michaela reappeared, said, "It's Phil. He wants a drink," and left the cocktail shaker on the sink. Garr shook hands cordially and departed. Melton sighed, glanced up thoughtfully at the bell annunciator on the wall, and opened the icebox. A ghastly blue radiance hit him in the face. His left hand, outstretched to seize a tray of ice cubes, started to tremble. The skin and flash was gone from it. He slammed the door, then looked at his hand again. It had returned to normal.

Melton picked up a bottle, several glasses, and went into the living room, where Phil Barclay, his brother-in-law, was slouched casually on the couch. Phil was a small, slender man of forty, immaculately dressed as always, with a round, mild face that was slightly bloated at the moment. He cocked a blond eyebrow at Melton.

"Straight, Bob?"

"Straight," Melton said grimly. "You'll take it and like it."

"I always do," Phil said. He poured whiskey down his throat, shivered, and relaxed. "Ah. A hair of the dog. Oooh."

"Hangover?" Michaela asked sympathetically.

"Certainly," Phil said with dignity, fumbling in a pocket. He handed a folded paper to his sister. "Here's the check on 'Nymphs Secret.' Wesley had it for me down at the gallery Friday."

"Not bad at all," Michaela said, examining the check.

"Not bad for a week's work on that canvas. Well, put it in the family fund. No more work for me for months at least. Another drink, please."

"You look like you've had plenty," Melton said.

Phil gave him a long, probing stare. "You don't look too good yourself," he said. "In fact, you're sweating."

"It's hot."

"It's *too* hot," Phil agreed. "You'll use up all the coal in a month at this rate. Or is it oil?"

"Coal," Melton said, "and we won't use it up. Not in *this* house."

"I don't like it either," Phil said unexpectedly. Michaela put her palms together and leaned forward.

"What is it, Phil?" she asked.

He grinned. "Nothing. This is the first time I've been inside here, you know. No, I don't want to look around. I . . . came up here day before yesterday."

"Weren't we home? You had a key, though."

"I had a key," Phil said, staring at nothing, "but I decided not to use it. The bell wasn't working, so I knocked on the door. Then—"

Melton's tongue circled his lips. "What happened?"

"Nothing," Phil said flatly. "Nothing at all."

"Then why—"

"I was a little high. I was jittery. There weren't any ghosts. There was—" Phil paused. "I really don't know, Bob. But I decided to go back to town."

"Were you afraid?" Michaela asked.

Phil shook his head. "That was odd. I wasn't afraid, really. There was nothing to be afraid of. I simply decided against coming in."

"But why?" Michaela wanted to know. Her voice was high-pitched. "That's no reason, and you know it."

Phil poured the last drops from the bottle, and held it up. "See this! It's empty. But you know what's been in it. You can smell the whiskey."

Melton slammed his fist down on his knee. "That's it," he snapped. "That so-and-so

French! Who was he? And what did he do to this house? Hex it?"

Quite suddenly there was a sound, a mournful, hooting cry with a curious timbre of hollow distance. Melton felt a second's disorientation. Then he identified it; a tug, on the twilit river.

"You've got it bad," Phil said quietly. "If *that* can make you jump—"

"So I need a sedative. I've been working hard."

"Well," Phil said, getting up, "I guess I'll look around the joint, after all. Stay put, Mickey. I'll find my way. O.K., if you insist, Bob."

They went through the house. Melton said very little, but he switched on the light in the upstairs hall and waited for Phil's reaction. Phil didn't remark on it. But he was oddly intrigued by the cellar. He poked and probed around there a good deal.

"What are you looking for?" Melton inquired. "A secret vault?"

"Huh? Well, no." Phil gave a last, long look at the bare wall and headed for the stairs. "You say a chap named French lived here last?"

"John French. It's on the title search papers. But as far as I can find out, nobody ever saw French. He had his stuff delivered. Never had any mail. No telephone."

"What about recommendations? He must have had some when he moved in."

"Ten years ago. I checked that, too. Ordinary stuff—a bank, an attorney."

"Profession?"

"Retired."

Phil experimentally turned on the sink faucets. "It's a . . . bad house," he said. "Yet it isn't haunted, or evil, or anything in the Gothic line. Why is it so hot?"

Melton explained.

Then, on impulse, he looked up, through the open door of the kitchen. In the dining room adjoining someone was standing motionless watching him. His reaction, he felt with curious objectivity, was extremely odd.

For, at first, after a very brief doubt, he felt that the figure's presence was normal enough; his racing mind jumped at logic—a delivery boy, the mailman — and then, instantly after that, came a shocking sense of utter disorientation and realization that the person in the next room didn't belong there. Hard on the heels of that jarring impact came the sudden knowledge that the silent figure was—

Was Michaela.

That was the worst of all. He hadn't known her at all. For that short, shocking passage of time, he had seen her as a total stranger. His stomach was sweating, and he felt his heart pounding. The whole incident was over so quickly that no one noticed; Michaela came on into the kitchen, and Melton turned hurriedly to get a fresh bottle out of the cupboard.

"How do you like the place?" Michaela asked. Phil smiled crookedly.

"Very efficient," he said, and Melton swallowed.

"Do you believe in the psychic impregnation of the inanimate?" Phil asked two days later, as he pushed a pillow under his head and curled up on the couch.

"What?" Melton said. It was early morning, and Melton was drinking coffee and watching the clock. They'd brought out the tiny alarm clock, since the electric model didn't run too well.

"An old, old theory," Phil said lazily. "If a man lives in a house for a long time, his psychic emanations seep into the walls and spoil the wallpaper. Or something. You know."

"No," Melton said. "Shut up. I've got a headache."

"So have I. And a hangover, too. Hm-m-m. I can see that a coffin might acquire psychic emanations, but that's merely because it's functional. If a man sees a coffin, he knows what it's for."

"I'd like to see your coffin," Melton remarked without malice. "And you in it."

"Well, I thought you'd like to know I didn't believe in that crap either. It's my opinion that Mr. French fixed up this house to suit himself. He must have been a strange man. Man? Well, anyhow, have you noticed the woodwork?"

"It's got shellac on it, if that's what you mean."

"It's got something on it, but not shellac. I made some tests. You can't get the stuff off. There's a coating on every inside wall, ceiling, floor, and door in this house. Like insulation."

"Well, it isn't. There isn't even insulation in the attic. Maybe I'll have rock wool put down."

"If you do, we'll roast alive."

Melton was following his own train of thought. "Renovating's what the place needs. I think I'll have exterminators come."

"What for?"

"Mice. In the walls."

"Mice! *Oh*, no."

"What, then?" Melton inquired. "Rattlesnakes?"

"Machinery."

"You're crazy. I went up in the attic and looked down between the walls."

"Did you see any mice?"

"No, but they probably saw me. That's why I didn't see them."

"Now you're confusing me," Phil said unhappily. "Besides, we're not talking about the same thing. I don't mean turbines and dynamos and atom-smashers. Machines can be so simple they're unrecognizable. Like that poker over there."

"That's no machine."

"It's a lever, isn't it?" Phil said, and his brother-in-law snorted.

"All right, so we've got levers in the walls. Who uses 'em? That poker won't pick itself up and—" Melton stopped suddenly and looked at the poker. Then he met Phil's gaze. Phil was grinning.

"Yeah," he said cryptically.

Melton rose, flinging his napkin to the table. "Machines in the walls, hell," he remarked.

"Very simple and very complicated. And unrecognizable. Paint is just paint, but you can do a Mona Lisa with it."

"So French coated the inside walls with paint that acts like a machine?"

"Invisible and intangible—how should *I* know. As for those noises at night—" He hesitated.

"Well?"

"I think the house is just recharging itself," Phil said, and Melton fled, muttering under his breath.

He lunched with Tom Garrett, the technician from Instar Electric. Garrett was a fat little butterball of a man with a gleaming bald head and thick spectacle-lenses through which he blinked myopically. And he had little to advise on the matter of the house.

"Well, what have you?" he asked finally. "Some unusual electrical circuits. And, if you want me to be frank—"

"You will anyhow," Melton said. "Shoot."

"—a neurosis."

"Affecting three people?"

"Certainly. A house can do that. Environment is a pretty strong influence. *Br-r-rp.* Excuse me. I'd be more inclined to suggest a vacation or a doctor than a rewiring job."

"I had the place rewired. It didn't make any difference."

"Well, you're not crazy," Garrett said consolingly. "At least not yet. Your skeleton hand in the icebox—you know very well that in a strong light your hand shows translucent. You can see the outline of the bones."

"Yeah. Every time I look out of a window I expect to see something else."

"What?"

"I don't know. Just something different."

"Do you see it?"

After a pause Melton said, "No." Garrett stared.

"I wonder. I'd like to run up and take a look at that wiring of yours."

"Delighted to have you. When?"

Garrett consulted a notebook. "I'm tied up for a bit, but—suppose I phone you?"

"The sooner the better. I'm thinking about moving anyway, though."

"Where else could you find a furnace like the one you've got?"

"I wish that were as funny as you think," Melton said somberly. "And I'd like to see you check that wiring for me. I've a hunch you'll be surprised. My brother-in-law has even wilder ideas than I have, so—"

"What?"

Melton went into detail.

Garrett was surprisingly intrigued. "You know, his idea about machines isn't at all illogical. The farther we go, the simpler gadgets get. The klystron, for example—far less complicated than the average specialized vacuum tube. When we deal with electromagnetic energies, neutrons and so on, we sometimes find that the best sort of machine to handle them is—well, a plain metal bar."

"But—*paint!*"

"I've seen paint that is a machine," Garrett said. "Luminous. It gathers in sunlight during the day and releases it at night. Not that I take any stock in your brother-in-law's theories. I'm just riding my own hobby. Eventually the world of the future—*I* think—won't be burdened with immense, complicated gadgets. Everything will be so simple—or seem so simple—that a man from the twentieth century might find it quite homelike, except for the results."

"Yeah," Melton said. "They'd be a bit different, wouldn't they?"

"Quite a bit, I expect. Well, I must go. I'll give you a ring, Melton. And take my advice and have a doctor check you up."

"Don't tell me I'm sound as a bell," Melton said. "You might be thinking of the Liberty Bell. That's cracked."

Dr. Farr touched his mustache and apparently liked the sensation, for he began to stroke it rhythmically. "How should I know, Bob?" he asked. "Half of my patients are slightly nuts, and, as long as they don't know it, they get along fine. Just a matter of compensation and adjustment."

"Four-bit words."

"By the tests you may be a bit psychotic," Farr said, referring to his notes. "Especially on orientation. That's an especially significant symptom. However, I've known you for years, and I'd stake my reputation, such as it is, that this business is objective and not subjective."

"Then it's the house?"

"That may be the trigger. A fixation. You could have it about anything. It just happens to be the house. Get out of it."

"I intend to," Melton said.

Farr leaned back and looked at his diploma on the wall. "Your friend was right about environment. Lock a kid up in a dark closet, and he's apt to be afraid of the dark ever after. And why? Because it's the wrong environment. If the house makes you nervous, pack up and git."

"What about Mike and Phil?"

"They could catch it from you. Or the other way around. Phil's a dipsomaniac anyway. He'll be heading for D.T.'s presently. Too bad; he's a fine artist."

Melton said, rather defensively, "You know what would happen to Phil if he didn't live with us. And he certainly pays his way."

"When he works. A couple of pictures a year. Ah, well. I'm a doctor, not a reformer. Is he still on his binge?"

Melton scowled. "He hasn't touched a drop for a couple of days. That's funny, too Because he's high most of the time. I know the signs."

"Maybe he's got a bottle cached away."

"Not Phil. He does his drinking publicly; he's not ashamed of it. He'll get tanked any time, without apology. That *is* funny, now that I think of it."

"How does he act?"

"As usual. He spends a lot of time in the cellar."

"Maybe there are some bottles down there," Farr suggested. "Don't let him develop any guilt-complexes. Get him to drink with you, if he's got the urge. The psychological angle is pretty important. He trusts Mike and you completely, but . . . well. Tell him to drop in and see me. I want to check his heart, any way, and I'll buy him a drink at the same time."

"You're some doctor," Melton said, chuckling. "Well, I've got to do some checking up on a man. See you soon."

"Move out of that house," Farr called after Melton's retreating figure. "It's probably haunted."

It wasn't haunted. Yet, that evening, as Melton paused on the porch, his key out, he knew very definitely that he didn't want to go in. He remembered a line from *"de la Mare"*: " 'Is there anybody there?' said the Traveler . . . knocking on the moonlit door—" And—how did it go?

"Only a host of listeners . . . listening . . . to that voice from the world of men."

Something like that. Indefinable and intangible, as much so as dust motes in moonlight. Move your hand through the shaft, and there's no resistance; the motes swirl away and return.

Melton grimaced and unlocked the door. In the living room, Phil was slumped on the couch, half asleep. Michaela dropped her sewing and stood up to greet him.

"Anything?" he asked.

"Nothing new," Michaela said. "Let me take your coat. I'll hang it up." she went out. Melton picked up the cloth Michaela had been sewing on; she hadn't got very far. He stared at Phil.

"No remarks?"

"I am happy," Phil said. No remarks are necessary."

"Have a drink?"

"Nope."

"Doc Farr wants to see you, when you're in town."

"Why not?" Phil said. "Find out anything about John French?"

"Yes. How about that?" Michaela asked, coming back from upstairs. "You said you were going to check up."

Melton dropped into a chair. "I did check up. Through an agency. But it's no use. The guy simply didn't exist. Nobody ever saw him.

"Naturally," Phil said.

Melton sighed. "All right. Who was he? Santa Claus?"

"Timeo Danaos— The furnace is still going strong."

"And it's still too hot. Why don't you open a window?"

"They're stuck again," Michaela said. "We can't get 'em open at all now."

The lights went on. Melton said, "Did you do that, Phil?"

"No."

Melton went over to the switch and tested it. The lights stayed on.

"Good old John French," Phil murmured. "Good old Jack. This is the house that Jack built. And how!" He rose and went out to the kitchen. Melton heard footsteps on the cellar stairs.

"Yeah," Michaela said. "He's been going down there all day."

"He's high as a kite, you know."

"Of course I know. And—it isn't his usual binge."

"I know it isn't," Melton said. "Well . . . he must get the stuff in the cellar. Maybe Jack . . . maybe French left some bottles down there."

"Of what? Uh! Let's not think about it."

"What did you do today?" Melton asked.

"Nothing. Literally, nothing. I tried to do some sewing, but time passes too fast here. It was six o'clock before I knew it."

"Always tea time. What's for dinner?"

Michaela put her hand to her mouth. "Oh. Beat me, Bob. I forgot about dinner."

"I think you've been in the cellar, too." Melton said jokingly, but Michaela gave him a look of strained distress.

"No, Bob. I haven't—not once."

Melton watched her for a moment. Then he got up, went out to the kitchen, and opened the cellar door. The light was on, and he could see Phil in a corner, standing motionless.

"Come on up," he said. "We'll have to drink our dinner."

"In a minute," Phil said.

Melton went back to the living room. Presently Phil joined them, weaving a little in his walk. Melton nodded darkly.

"This is the rat that ate the malt," he remarked.

"Oh, don't," Michaela said. "I keep thinking about the man all tattered and torn."

"I keep thinking about Jack," Phil said. "Little man who wasn't there. Out of the everywhere into here. Look, Bob. If you spent ten years with the Ubangis, what would you do?"

"Give up kissing," Melton said.

"No, I mean it. If you had to move into a Ubangi hut and stay there. You wouldn't have anything in common with the natives, would you?"

"No."

"Well?"

"Well, what? What would *you* do?"

"Change the hut a bit," Phil said. "Especially if I wanted to pretend I was a Ubangi, too. I wouldn't alter it outside, but I'd fix it up a bit inside, for my own convenience, and I wouldn't let anybody else come in. Chairs instead of grass mats. I wonder how French had this place furnished?"

"Just who do you think French was?" Melton asked.

"I don't know. I don't think I *could* know, even. But I know what he wasn't."

"What wasn't he?"

"Human," Phil said.

Michaela stirred and sucked in her under lip. Phil nodded at her.

"We're in the house more than you are, Bob. Mickey and I. And it's alive. It's a machine, too. Sort of half and half."

Melton grimaced. "I suppose it's been talking to you."

"Of course not. It wasn't designed for that. Jack didn't build this house, but he moved in, and fixed it up to suit himself. To suit his special requirements. Whatever they were. He liked—or needed—plenty of heat. That's not too far off the beam. But some of the other things—"

"Like the refrigerator," Phil said. "There weren't any marks on the linoleum, and there would have been some, in ten years. I looked. Something else was hooked up to that socket. Rewiring won't help any, Bob. Jack didn't need wires. He may have switched 'em around a bit, for convenience; but I suppose all he had to do was juggle a couple of atoms and—he'd have a machine."

"A living house. Yeah. Nuts."

"A robot house, could be. A robot wouldn't have to look like a man. We've got robots now, really, and they're functionally designed."

"All right," Melton said harshly. "We can move."

"We'd better. Because this house was made for Jack, not for us. It isn't working just right. The refrigerator's acting funny, but that's because it's plugged into a socket meant for some other gadget."

"I tried it in some other plugs."

"Any luck?"

Melton shook his head. "It was still . . . uh . . . funny." He moved uneasily. "Why should French . . . I mean, why would he want to—"

"Why would a white man live in a Ubangi village? To study ethnology or entomology, perhaps. Or for the climate. Or simply to rest—to hibernate. Wherever Jack came

from, he's gone back there now, and he didn't bother to put the house in its original condition. Yeah." Phil rose and went out. The cellar door closed softly.

Melton went over to Michaela, knelt, and put his arm around her slim shoulders, feeling the yielding warmth of her. "We'll move, darling," he said.

She stared out of the window. "It'd be so lovely, if . . . well. The view's magnificent. I wish we didn't have to move. But it's the only thing. When, Bob?"

"Want to start looking for another place tomorrow? A city apartment, maybe?"

"All right," Michaela said. "A day or so more won't make much difference, will it?"

He could hear Michaela's soft breathing beside him, there in the dark. He could hear other things, too. They were not mice, he knew. Within the walls, there was a subtle, slow movement, at the threshold of hearing and consciousness. The house was recharging itself. The robot was preparing itself for the next day's work.

It was mindless; it was not alive; it had no consciousness or sense of ego. It was a machine so enormously versatile that only miraculous simplicity made its existence possible. How? A new pattern for electronic orbits? Or something quite unimaginable—

We can see into the microcosm with the electronic microscope, Melton thought. *But we can't see far enough. Beyond—*

There was an off-beat, distant rhythm in the quiet movement within the walls.

This is the house that Jack built.

This is the malt.

That lay in the house that Jack built.

And so on. Melton followed the nursery rhyme to its conclusion. The inevitable growth, line by line, acquired a sort of horror to him. Yet he could not stop. He finished it and started all over.

Who had John French been?

Or what?

Suddenly and sickeningly, he felt the disorientation. Without looking at Michaela, he sprang from bed, fumbled his way downstairs, and stood motionless in the hall, waiting.

There was nothing.

This is the house that Jack built.

This is the rat—

He went out to the kitchen. The cellar door was open. He could not see Phil, but he knew that his brother-in-law was at the foot of the stairs.

"Phil," he said softly.

"Yes, Bob."

"Come on up."

Phil mounted the steps. His pajamaed figure came into view, swaying slightly.

"What's down there?" Melton asked.

"Nothing."

"Liquor?"

"No."

"Then what is it?"

"Nothing," Phil said, his eyes glazed and bright. "I stand in the corner, my head against the wall, and . . . I . . . paint—" He slowed down and stopped. "No," he said after a moment. "It isn't painting, is it? But I thought—"

"What?"

"The house suited Jack, didn't it?" Phil said. "But then we don't know what Jack was or what he wanted. I wonder if he came from the future? Or from another planet? One thing—he certainly came from a place that was rather remarkable."

"We're moving," Melton said. "As soon as I can find a place."

"All right."

"Let's go to bed."

"Sure," Phil said. "Why not. Good night, Bob."

"Good night, Phil."

For a long time he lay awake, unable to sleep.

This is the house that Jack built.

I wonder if Jack might come back—sometime?

The house suited Jack.

The house was alive.

No, it wasn't. It was a machine.

Any house could be such a machine—with a little renovation. By Jack.

The machine suited Jack. Sure. But what effect would it have on humans? Mutation? Translation, eventually, into another world? Something thoroughly unusual, at any rate.

Melton was not tempted to find out.

I'll find an apartment tomorrow, he resolved. And, a little comforted, he went to sleep.

He got home the next evening somewhat early, and let himself into the house without hesitation. Michaela and Phil were in the living room. They were sitting silently, but turned to watch him as he entered.

"I've got an apartment," Melton announced triumphantly. "We can start packing right away. How does that sound?"

"Swell," Michaela said. "Can we move tomorrow morning?"

"Sure. Jack can have his house back."

The lights came on. Melton gave them a quick glance.

"Still at it, eh? Well, who cares now? Drink? How about a cocktail, Mike? I'll even tackle the icebox tonight."

"No, thanks."

"Mm-m. Phil?"

"No. I don't want any."

"Well, I do," Melton said. He went into the kitchen, decided against ice cubes after all, and came back with a straight shot in a tiny glass. "Are we eating out tonight?" he demanded.

"Oh," Michaela said. "I forgot dinner again."

"I think we'd better move tomorrow," Melton said, "if not tonight." He sat down. "It's too early to eat now, but we can kill time with a drink or two." He looked at the clock. It was 4: 20.

He looked again.

It was 10:40.

Nothing had changed. But the sky was black outside the window. Outside of that, nothing had altered; Michaela and Phil had not moved, and Melton's drink was untasted in his hand.

For a moment he thought wildly of amnesia. Then he realized that the truth was much simpler. He had simply let his mind go blank—he could even remember doing it —so that the time had, incredibly, slipped past until—

It was 10:40.

The shock of disorientation came, more slowly this time. It passed and was gone.

Neither Michaela nor Phil moved.

Melton looked at the clock. Simultaneously he felt a leaden, dull blankness, creeping over his mind. *This is like hibernation,* he thought; gray, formless, without—

It was 8:12.

The sky was blue outside. The river was blue. Morning sunlight blazed on green pattern of leaves.

"Mike," Melton said.

"Yes, Bob."

It was 3:35.

But it was not time that had altered. Melton knew that very clearly. The fault lay in the house.

It was night.

It was 9:20.

The telephone rang. Melton reached out and lifted the receiver from its cradle.

"Hello," he said.

Dr. Farr's distant voice sounded loud in the still, hot room. Michaela and Phil sat like carved figures under the bright overhead light. Presently Melton said, "No. No, we changed our minds. We're not going to move—"

He hung up.

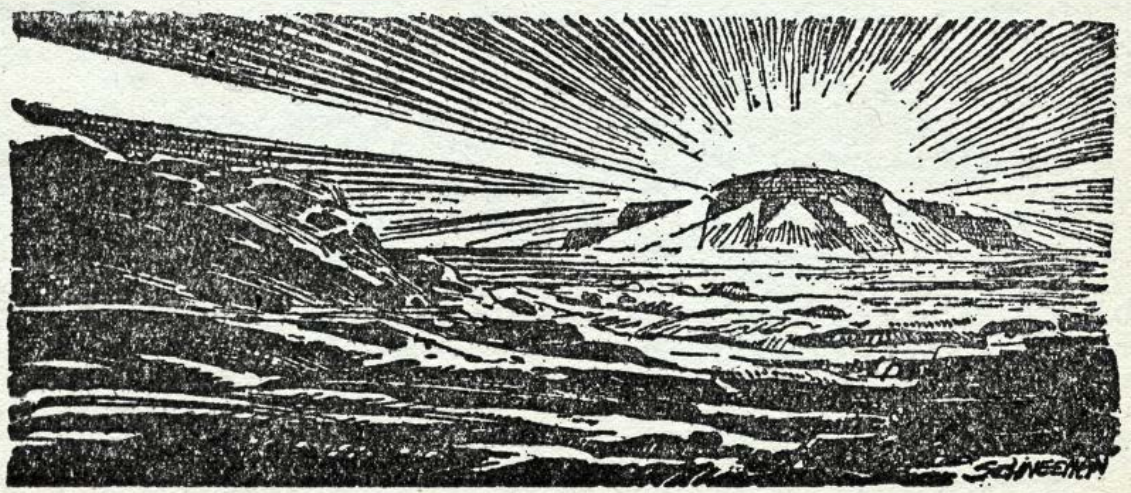
Hibernation, he thought. The process had cumulative acceleration. For this was the house that Jack built. This was the den that Jack built. Some races—not human races—may need periods of hibernation. And they will build robot machines—very simple machines — to care for them while they sleep.

Adaptable machines. Machines that can adapt to other organisms. Human organisms. With a difference.

Hibernation for Jack—yes. But for Melton and Michaela and Phil—It wouldn't work out in quite the same manner. For they were not of Jack's breed or race.

"We're never going to move," Melton said softly, and saw that it was 1.03.

Within the walls of the machine stirred, recharging itself. Moonlight came through the windows, distorted by some quality in the clear panes. The three figures sat motionless, not even waiting now, in the house that Jack built.



HUDDLING PLACE

By CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

A sequel to "City," this story suggests a new point of human psychology—one that may, in truth, become important in such a culture as Simak proposes. A man can't leave his home!

THE drizzle sifted from the leaden skies, like smoke drifting through the bare-branched trees. It softened the hedges and hazed the outlines of the buildings and blotted out the distance. It glinted on the metallic skins of the silent robots and silvered the shoulders of the three humans listening to the intonations of the black-garbed man, who read from the book cupped between his hands.

"*For I am the Resurrection and the Life—*"

The moss-mellowed graven figure that reared above the door of the crypt seemed straining upward, every crystal of its yearning body reaching toward something that no one else could see. Straining, as it had strained since that day of long ago when men had chipped it from the granite to adorn the family tomb with a symbolism that had pleased the first John J. Webster in the last years he held of life.

"*And whosoever liveth and believeth in Me—*"

Jerome A. Webster felt his son's fingers tighten on his arm, heard the muffled sobbing of his mother, saw the lines of robots standing rigid, heads bowed in respect to the master who now was going home—to the final home of all.

Numbly, Jerome A. Webster wondered if they understood—if they understood life and death—if they understood what it meant that Nelson F. Webster lay there in the casket, that a man with a book intoned words above him.

Nelson F. Webster, fourth of the line of Websters who had lived on these acres, had lived and died here, scarcely leaving, and now was going to his final rest in that place the first of them had prepared for the rest of them—for that long line of shadowy descendants who would live here and cherish the things and the ways and the life that the first John J. Webster had established.

Jerome A. Webster felt his jaw muscles tighten, felt a little tremor run across his body. For a moment his eyes burned and the casket blurred in his sight and the words the man in black was saying were one with the wind that whispered in the pines standing sentinel for the dead. Within his brain remembrance marched—remembrance of a gray-haired man stalking the hills and fields, sniffing the breeze of an early morning, standing, legs braced, before the flaring fireplace with a glass of brandy in his hand.

Pride—the pride of land and life, and the humility and greatness that quiet living breeds within a man. Contentment of casual leisure and surety of purpose. Independence of assured security, comfort of familiar surroundings, freedom of broad acres.

Thomas Webster was joggling his elbow. "Father," he was whispering. "Father."

The service was over. The black-garbed man had closed his book. Six robots stepped forward, lifted the casket.

Slowly the three followed the casket into the crypt, stood silently as the robots slid it into its receptacle, closed the tiny door and affixed the plate that read:

NELSON F. WEBSTER
2034-2117

That was all. Just the name and dates. And that, Jerome A. Webster found himself thinking, was enough. There was nothing else that needed to be there. That was all those others had. The ones that called the family roll—starting with William Stevens, 1920-1999. Gramp Stevens, they had called him, Webster remembered. Father of the wife of the first John J. Webster, who was here himself—1951-2020. And after him his son, Charles F. Webster, 1980-2060. And his son, John J. II., 2004-2086. Webster could remember John J. II.—a grandfather who

had slept beside the fire with his pipe hanging from his mouth, eternally threatening to set his whiskers aflame.

Webster's eyes strayed to another plate. Mary Webster, the mother of the boy here at his side. And yet not a boy. He kept forgetting that Thomas was twenty now, in a week or so would be leaving for Mars, even as in his younger days he, too, had gone to Mars.

All here together, he told himself. The Websters and their wives and children. Here in death together as they had lived together, sleeping in the pride and security of bronze and marble with the pines outside and the symbolic figure above the age-greened door.

The robots were waiting, standing silently, their task fulfilled.

His mother looked at him.

"You're head of the family now, my son," she told him.

He reached out and hugged her close against his side. Head of the family—what was left of it. Just the three of them now. His mother and his son. And his son would be leaving soon, going out to Mars. But he would come back. Come back with a wife, perhaps, and the family would go on. The family wouldn't stay at three. Most of the big house wouldn't stay closed off, as it now was closed off. There had been a time when it had rung with the life of a dozen units of the family, living in their separate apartments under one big roof. That time, he knew would come again.

The three of them turned and left the crypt, took the path back to the house, looming like a huge gray shadow in the mist.

A fire blazed in the hearth and the book lay upon his desk. Jerome A. Webster reached out and picked it up, read the title once again:

"Martian Physiology, With Especial Reference to the Brain" by Jerome A. Webster, M.D.

Thick and authoritative—the work of a lifetime. Standing almost alone in its field. Based upon the data gathered during those five plague years on Mars—years when he had labored almost day and night with his fellow colleagues of the World Committee's medical commission, dispatched on an errand of mercy to the neighboring planet.

A tap sounded on the door.

"Come in," he called.

The door opened and a robot glided in.

"Your whiskey, sir."

"Thank you, Jenkins," Webster said.

"The minister, sir," said Jenkins, "has left."

"Oh, yes. I presume that you took care of him."

"I did, sir. Gave him the usual fee and offered him a drink. He refused the drink."

"That was a social error," Webster told him. "Ministers don't drink."

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't know. He asked me to ask you to come to church sometime."

"Eh?"

"I told him, sir, that you never went anywhere."

"That was quite right, Jenkins," said Webster. "None of us ever go anywhere."

Jenkins headed for the door, stopped before he got there, turned around. "If I may say so, sir, that was a touching service at the crypt. Your father was a fine human, the finest ever was. The robots were saying the service was very fitting. Dignified like, sir. He would have liked it had he known."

"My father," said Webster, "would be even more pleased to hear you say that, Jenkins."

"Thank you, sir," said Jenkins, and went out.

Webster sat with the whiskey and the book and fire—felt the comfort of the well-known room close in about him, felt the refuge that was in it.

This was home. It had been home for the Websters since that day when the first John J. had come here and built the first unit of the sprawling house. John J. had chosen it because it had a trout stream, or so he always said. But it was something more than that. It must have been, Webster told himself, something more than that.

Or perhaps, at first, it had only been the trout stream. The trout stream and the trees and meadows, the rocky ridge where the mist drifted in each morning from the river. Maybe the rest of it had grown, grown gradually through the years, through years of family association until the very soil was soaked with something that approached but wasn't quite, tradition. Something that made each tree, each rock, each foot of soil a Webster tree or rock or piece of soil. It all belonged.

John J., the first John J., had come after the breakup of the cities, after men had forsaken, once and for all, the twentieth century huddling places, had broken free of the tribal instinct to stick together in one cave or in one clearing against a common foe or a

common fear. An instinct that had become outmoded, for there were no fears or foes. Man revolting against the herd instinct economic and social conditions had impressed upon him in ages past. A new security and a new sufficiency had made it possible to break away.

The trend had started back in the twentieth century, more than two hundred years before, when men moved to country homes to get fresh air and elbow room and a graciousness in life that communal existence, in its strictest sense, never had given them.

And here was the end result. A quiet living. A peace that could only come with good things. The sort of life that men had yearned for years to have. A manorial existence, based on old family homes and leisurely acres, with atomics supplying power and robots in place of serfs.

Webster smiled at the fireplace with its blazing wood. That was an anachronism, but a good one—something that Man had brought forward from the caves, Useless, because atomic heating was better—but more pleasant. One couldn't sit and watch atomics and dream and build castles in the flames.

Even the crypt out there, where they had put his father that afternoon. That was family, too. All of a piece with the rest of it. The somber pride and leisured life and peace. In the old days the dead were buried in vast plots all together, stranger cheek by jowl with stranger—

He never goes anywhere.

That is what Jenkins had told the minister.

And that was right. For what need was there to go anywhere? It all was here. By simply twirling a dial one could talk face to face with anyone one wished, could go, by sense, if not in body, anywhere one wished. Could attend the theater or hear a concert or browse in a library halfway around the world. Could transact any business one might need to transact without rising from one's chair.

Webster reached out his hand and drank the whiskey, then swung to the dialed machine beside his desk.

He spun dials from memory without resorting to the log. He knew where he was going.

His finger flipped a toggle and the room melted away—or seemed to melt. There was left the chair within which he sat, part of the desk, part of the machine itself and that was all.

The chair was on a hillside swept with golden grass and dotted with scraggly, wind-twisted trees, a hillside that straggled down to a lake nestling in the grip of purple mountain spurs. The spurs, darkened in long streaks with the bluish-green of distant pine, climbed in staggering stairs, melting into the blue-tinged snow-capped peaks that reared beyond and above them in jagged saw-toothed outline.

The wind talked harshly in the crouching trees and ripped the long grass in sudden gusts. The last rays of the sun struck fire from the distant peaks.

Solitude and grandeur, the long sweep of tumbled land, the cuddled lake, the knife-like shadows on the far-off ranges.

Webster sat easily in his chair, eyes squinting at the peaks.

A voice said almost at his shoulder: "May I come in?"

A soft, sibilant voice, wholly unhuman. But one that Webster knew.

He nodded his head. "By all means, Juwain."

He turned slightly and saw the elaborate crouching pedestal, the furry, soft-eyed figure of the Martian squatting on it. Other alien furniture loomed indistinctly beyond the pedestal, half guessed furniture from that dwelling out on Mars.

The Martian flipped a furry hand toward the mountain range.

"You love this," he said. "You can understand it. And I can understand how you understand it, but to me there is more terror than beauty in it. It is something we could never have on Mars."

Webster reached out a hand, but the Martian stopped him.

"Leave it on," he said. "I know why you came here. I would not have come at a time like this except I thought perhaps an old friend—"

"It is kind of you," said Webster. "I am glad that you have come."

"Your father," said Juwain, "was a great man. I remember how you used to talk to me of him, those years you spent on Mars. You said then you would come back sometime. Why is it you've never come?"

"Why," said Webster, "I just never—"

"Do not tell me," said the Martian. "I already know."

"My son," said Webster, "is going to Mars in a few days. I shall have him call on you."

"That would be a pleasure," said Juwain. "I shall be expecting him."

He stirred uneasily on the crouching pedestal. "Perhaps he carries no tradition."

"No," said Webster. "He is studying engineering. He never cared for surgery."

"He has a right," observed the Martian, "to follow the life that he has chosen. Still, one might be permitted to wish."

"One could," Webster agreed. "But that is over and done with. Perhaps he will be a great engineer. Space structure. Talks of ships out to the stars"

"Perhaps," suggested Juwain, "your family has done enough for medical science. You and your father—"

"And his father," said Webster, "before him."

"Your book," declared Juwain, "has put Mars in debt to you. It may focus more attention on Martian specialization. My people do not make good doctors. They have no background for it. Queer how the minds of races run. Queer that Mars never thought of medicine—literally never thought of it. Replaced it with a cult of fatalism. While even in your early history, when men still lived in caves—"

"There are many things," said Webster, "that you thought of and we didn't. Things we wonder now how we ever missed. Abilities that you developed and we do not have. Take your own specialty, philosophy. But different than ours. A science, while ours never was more than fumbling. An orderly, logical development of philosophy, workable, practical, applicable, an actual tool."

Juwain started to speak, hesitated, then went ahead. "I am near to something, something that may be new and startling. Something that will be a tool for you humans as well as the Martians. I've worked on it for years, starting with certain mental concepts that first were suggested to me with arrival of the Earthmen. I have said nothing, for I could not be sure."

"And now," suggested Webster, "you are sure."

"Not quite," said Juwain. "Not positive. But almost."

They sat in silence, watching the mountains and the lake. A bird came and sat in one of the scraggly trees and sang. Dark clouds piled up behind the mountain ranges and the snow-tipped peaks stood out like graven stone. The sun sank in a welter of crimson, hushed finally to the glow of a fire burned low.

A tap sounded from a door and Webster stirred in his chair, suddenly brought back to the reality of the study, on the chair beneath him.

Juwain was gone. The old philosopher had come and sat an hour of contemplation with his friend and then had quietly slipped away.

The rap came again.

Webster leaned forward, snapped the toggle and the mountains vanished, the room became a room again. Dusk filtered through the high windows and the fire was a rosy flicker in the ashes.

"Come in," said Webster.

Jenkins opened the door. "Dinner is served, sir," he said.

"Thank you," said Webster. He rose slowly from the chair.

"Your place, sir," said Jenkins, "is laid at the head of the table."

"Oh, yes," said Webster. "Thank you, Jenkins. Thank you very much, for reminding me."

Webster stood on the broad ramp of the space field and watched the shape that dwindled in the sky, dwindled with faint flickering points of red lancing through the wintry sunlight.

For long minutes after the shape was gone he stood there, hands gripping the railing in front of him, eyes still staring up into the steel-like blue.

His lips moved and they said: "Goodby, son"; but there was no sound.

Slowly he came alive to his surroundings. Knew that people moved about the ramp, saw that the landing field seemed to stretch interminably to the far horizon, dotted here and there with hump-backed things that were waiting spaceships. Shooting tractors worked near one hangar, clearing away the last of the snowfall of the night before.

Webster shivered and thought that it was queer, for the noonday sun was warm. And shivered again

Slowly he turned away from the railing and headed for the administration building. And for one brain-wrenching moment he felt a sudden fear—an unreasonable and embarrassing fear of that stretch of concrete that formed the ramp. A fear that left him shaking mentally as he drove his feet toward the waiting door.

A man walked toward him, briefcase swinging in his hand and Webster, eying him, wished fervently that the man would not speak to him.

The man did not speak, passed him with scarcely a glance and Webster felt relief.

If he were back home, Webster told himself, he would have finished lunch, would now be ready to lie down for his midday nap. The fire would be blazing on the hearth and the flicker of the flames would be reflected from the andirons Jenkins would bring him a liqueur and would say a word or two—inconsequential conversation.

He hurried toward the door, quickening his step, anxious to get away from the bare-cold expanse of the massive ramp.

Funny how he had felt about Thomas. Natural, of course, that he should have hated to see him go. But entirely unnatural that he should, in those last few minutes, find such horror welling up within him. Horror of the trip through space, horror of the alien land of Mars—although Mars was scarcely alien any longer. For more than a century now Earthmen had known it, had fought it, lived with it, some of them had even grown to love it.

But it had only been utter will power that had prevented him, in those last few seconds before the ship had taken off, from running out into the field, shrieking for Thomas to come back, shrieking for him not to go.

And that, of course, never would have done. It would have been exhibitionism, disgraceful and humiliating—the sort of a thing a Webster could not do.

After all, he told himself, a trip to Mars was no great adventure, not any longer. There had been a day when it had been, but that day was gone forever. He, himself, in his earlier days had made a trip to Mars, had stayed there for five long years. That had been—he gasped when he thought of it—that had been almost thirty years ago.

The babble and hum of the lobby hit him in the face as the robot attendant opened the door for him, and in that babble ran a vein of something that was almost terror. For a moment he hesitated, then stepped inside. The door closed softly behind him.

He stayed close to the one wall to keep out of people's way, headed for a chair in one corner. He sat down and huddled back, forcing his body deep into the cushions, watching the milling humanity that seethed out in the room.

Shrill people, hurrying people, people with strange, unneighborly faces. Strangers—every one of them. Not a face he knew. People going places. Heading out for the planets. Anxious to be off. Worried about last details. Rushing here and there.

Out of the crowd loomed a familiar face. Webster hunched forward.

"Jenkins!" he shouted, and then was sorry for the shout, although no one seemed to notice.

The robot moved toward him, stood before him.

"Tell Raymond," said Webster, "that I must return immediately. Tell him to bring the 'copter in front at once."

"I am sorry, sir," said Jenkins, "but we cannot leave at once. The mechanics found a flaw in the atomics chamber. They are installing a new one. It will take several hours."

"Surely," said Webster, impatiently, "that could wait until some other time."

"The mechanic said not, sir," Jenkins told him. "It might go at any minute. The entire charge of power—"

"Yes, yes," agreed Webster, "I suppose so."

He fidgeted with his hat. "I just remembered," he said, "something I must do. Something that must be done at once. I must get home. I can't wait several hours."

He hitched forward to the edge of the chair, eyes staring at the milling crowd.

Faces—faces—

"Perhaps you could televise," suggested Jenkins. "One of the robots might be able to do it. There is a booth—"

"Wait, Jenkins," said Webster. He hesitated a moment. "There is nothing to do back home. Nothing at all. But I must get there. I can't stay here. If I have to, I'll go crazy. I was frightened out there on the ramp. I'm bewildered and confused here. I have a feeling—a strange, terrible feeling. Jenkins, I—"

"I understand, sir," said Jenkins. "Your father had it, too."

Webster gasped. "My father?"

"Yes, sir, that is why he never went anywhere. He was about your age, sir, when he found it out. He tried to make a trip to Europe and he couldn't. He got halfway there and turned back. He had a name for it."

Webster sat in stricken silence.

"A name for it," he finally said. "Of course there's a name for it. My father had it. My grandfather—did he have it, too?"

"I wouldn't know that, sir," said Jenkins. "I wasn't created until after your grand-

father was an elderly man. But he may have. He never went anywhere, either."

"You understand, then," said Webster. "You know how it is. I feel like I'm going to be sick—physically ill. See if you can charter a 'copter—anything, just so we get home."

"Yes, sir," said Jenkins.

He started off and Webster called him back.

"Jenkins, does anyone else know about this? Anyone—"

"No, sir," said Jenkins. "Your father never mentioned it and I felt, somehow, that he wouldn't wish me to."

"Thank you, Jenkins," said Webster.

Webster huddled back into his chair again, felt desolate and alone and misplaced. Alone in a humming lobby that pulsed with life—a loneliness that tore at him, that left him limp and weak.

Homesickness. Downright, shameful homesickness, he told himself. Something that boys are supposed to feel when they first leave home, when they first go out to meet the world.

There was a fancy word for it—agoraphobia, the morbid dread of being in the midst of open spaces—from the Greek root for the fear—literally, of the market place.

If he crossed the room to the television booth, he could put in a call, talk with his mother or one of the robots—or better yet, just sit and look at the place until Jenkins came for him.

He started to rise, then sank back in the chair again. It was no dice. Just talking to someone or looking in on the place wasn't being there. He couldn't smell the pines in the wintry air, or hear familiar snow crunch on the walk beneath his feet or reach out a hand and touch one of the massive oaks that grew along the path. He couldn't feel the heat of the fire or sense the sure, deft touch of belonging, of being one with a tract of ground and the things upon it.

And yet—perhaps it would help. Not much, maybe, but some. He started to rise from the chair again and froze. The few short steps to the booth held terror, a terrible, overwhelming terror. If he crossed them, he would have to run. Run to escape the watching eyes, the unfamiliar sounds, the agonizing nearness of strange faces.

Abruptly he sat down.

A woman's shrill voice cut across the lobby and he shrank away from it. He felt terrible. He felt like hell. He wished Jenkins would hurry up.

The first breath of spring came through the window, filled the study with the promise of melting snows, of coming leaves and flowers, of north-bound wedges of waterfowl streaming through the blue, of trout that lurked in pools waiting for the fly.

Webster lifted his eyes from the sheaf of papers on his desk, sniffed the breeze, felt the cool whisper of it on his cheek. His hand reached out for the brandy glass and found it empty, put it back.

He bent back above the papers once again, picked up a pencil and crossed out a word.

Critically, he read the final paragraphs:

The fact that the two hundred fifty men who were invited to visit me, presumably on missions of more than ordinary importance, only three were able to come, does not necessarily prove that all but those three are victims of agoraphobia. Some may have had legitimate reasons for being unable to accept my invitation. But it does indicate a growing unwillingness for men living under the mode of Earth existence set up following the break up of the cities to move from familiar places, a deepening instinct to stay among the scenes and possessions which in their mind have become associated with contentment and graciousness of life.

What the result of such a trend will be, no one can clearly indicate since it applies to only a small portion of Earth's population. Among the larger families economic pressure forces some of the sons to seek their fortunes either in other parts of the Earth or on one of the other planets. Many others deliberately seek adventure and opportunity in space while still others become associated with professions or trades which make a sedentary existence impossible.

He flipped the page over, went on to the last one.

It was a good paper, he knew, but it could not be published, not just yet. Perhaps after he had died. No one, so far as he could determine, had ever so much as realized the trend, had taken as matter of course the fact that men seldom left their homes. Why, after all, should they leave their homes?

Certain dangers may be recognized in—

The televisor muttered at his elbow and he reached out to flip the toggle.

The room faded and he was face to face with a man who sat behind a desk, almost as if he sat on the opposite side of Webster's desk. A gray-haired man with sad eyes behind heavy lenses, eyes that were filled with the sadness and humility of having

looked on death and misery, compassionate eyes.

For a moment Webster stared, memory tugging at him.

"Could it be—" he asked and the man smiled gravely.

"I have changed," he said. "So have you. My name is Clayborne. Remember? The Martian medical commission—"

"Clayborne! I'd often thought of you. You stayed on Mars."

Clayborne nodded. "I've read your book, doctor. It is a real contribution. I've often thought one should be written, wanted to myself, but I didn't have the time. Just as well I didn't. You did a better job. Especially on the brain."

"The Martian brain," Webster told him, "always intrigued me. Certain peculiarities. I'm afraid I spent more of those five years taking notes on it than I should have. There was other work to do."

"A good thing you did," said Clayborne. "That's why I'm calling you now. I have a patient—a brain operation. Only you can handle it."

Webster gasped, his hands trembling. "You'll bring him here?"

Clayborne shook his head. "He cannot be moved. You know him. I believe. Juwain, the philosopher."

"Juwain!" said Webster. "He's one of my best friends. We talked together just a couple of days ago."

"The attack was sudden," said Clayborne. "He's been asking for you."

Webster was silent and cold—cold with a chill that crept upon him from some unguessed place. Cold that sent perspiration out upon his forehead, that knotted his fists.

"If you start immediately," said Clayborne, "you can be here on time. I've already arranged with the World Committee to have a ship at your disposal instantly. The utmost speed is necessary."

"But," said Webster, "but . . . I cannot come."

"You can't come!"

"It's impossible," said Webster. "I doubt in any case that I am needed. Surely, you yourself—"

"I can't," said Clayborne. "No one can but you. No one else has the knowledge. You hold Juwain's life in your hands. If you come, he lives. If you don't he dies."

"I can't go into space," said Webster.

"Anyone can go in space," snapped Clayborne. "It's not like it used to be. Conditioning of any sort desired is available."

"But you don't understand," pleaded Webster. "You—"

"No, I don't," said Clayborne. "Frankly, I dont. That anyone should refuse to save the life of his friend—"

The two men stared at one another for a long moment, neither speaking.

"I shall tell the committee to send the ship straight to your home," said Clayborne finally. "I hope by that time you will see your way clear to come."

Clayborne faded and the wall came into view again—the wall and books, the fireplace and the paintings, the well-loved furniture, the promise of spring that came through the window.

Webster sat frozen in his chair, staring at the wall in front of him.

Juwain, the furry, wrinkled face, the sibilant whisper, the friendliness and understanding that was his. Juwain, grasping the stuff that dreams are made of and shaping them into logic, into rules of life and conduct. Juwain using philosophy as a tool, as a science, as a stepping stone to better living.

Webster dropped his face into his hands and fought the agony that welled up within him.

Clayborne had not understood. One could not expect him to understand since there was no way for him to know. And even knowing, would he understand? Even he, Webster, would not have understood it in someone else until he had discovered it in himself—the terrible fear of leaving his own fire, his own land, his own possessions, the little symbolisms that he had erected. And yet, not he, himself, alone, but those other Websters as well. Starting with the first John J. Men and women who had set up a cult of life, a tradition of behavior.

He, Jerome A. Webster, had gone to Mars when he was a young man, and had not felt or suspected the psychological poison that ran through his veins. Even as Thomas a few months ago had gone to Mars. But twenty-five years of quiet life here in the retreat that the Websters called a home had brought it forth, had developed it without him even knowing it. There had, in fact, been no opportunity to know it.

It was clear how it had developed—clear as crystal now. Habit and mental pattern and a happiness association with certain things—things that had no actual value in themselves, but had been assigned a value, a definite, concrete value by one family through five generations.

No wonder other places seemed alien, no wonder other horizons held a hint of horror in their sweep.

And there was nothing one could do about it—nothing, that is, unless one cut down every tree and burned the house and changed the course of waterways. Even that might not do it—even that—

The televisor purred and Webster lifted his head from his hands, reached out and thumbed the tumbler.

The room became a flare of white, but there was no image. A voice said: "Secret call. Secret call."

Webster slid back a panel in the machine, spun a pair of dials, heard the hum of power surge into a screen that blocked out the room.

"Secrecy established," he said.

The white flare snapped out and a man sat across the desk from him. A man he had seen many times before in televised addresses, in his daily paper.

Henderson, president of the World Committee.

"I have had a call from Clayborne," said Henderson.

Webster nodded without speaking.

"He tells me you refuse to go to Mars."

"I have not refused," said Webster. "When Clayborne cut off the question was left open. I had told him it was impossible for me to go, but he had rejected that, did not seem to understand."

"Webster, you must go," snapped Henderson. "You are the only man with the necessary knowledge of the Martian brain to perform this operation. If it were a simple operation, perhaps someone else could do it. But not one such as this."

"That may be true," said Webster, "but—"

"It's not just a question of saving a life," said Henderson. "Even the life of so distinguished a personage as Juwain. It involves even more than that. Juwain is a friend of yours. Perhaps he hinted of something he has found."

"Yes," said Webster. "Yes, he did. A new concept of philosophy."

"A concept," declared Henderson, "that we cannot do without. A concept that will remake the solar system, that will put mankind ahead a hundred thousand years in the space of two generations. A new direction of purpose that will aim toward a goal we heretofore had not suspected, had not even known existed. A brand new truth, you see. One that never before had occurred to anyone."

Webster's hands gripped the edge of the desk until his knuckles stood out white.

"If Juwain dies," said Henderson, "that concept dies with him. May be lost forever."

"I'll try," said Webster. "I'll try—"

Henderson's eyes were hard. "Is that the best that you can do?"

"That is the best," said Webster.

"But, man, you must have a reason! Some explanation."

"None," said Webster, "that I would care to give."

Deliberately he reached out and flipped up the switch.

Webster sat at the desk and held his hands in front of him, staring at them. Hands that had skill, held knowledge. Hands that could save a life if he could get them to Mars. Hands that could save for the solar system, for mankind, for the Martians an idea—a new idea—that would advance them a hundred thousand years in the next two generations.

But hands chained by a phobia that grew out of this quiet life. Decadence—a strangely beautiful—and deadly—decadence.

Man had forsaken the teeming cities, the huddling places, two hundred years ago. He had done with the old foes and the ancient fears that kept him around the common campfire, had left behind the hobgoblins that had walked with him from the caves.

And yet—and yet—

Here was another huddling place. Not a huddling place for one's body, but one's mind. A psychological campfire that still held a man within the circle of its light.

Still, Webster knew, he must leave that fire. As the men had done with the cities two centuries before, he must walk off and leave it. And he must not look back.

He had to go to Mars—or at least start for Mars. There was no question there, at all. He had to go.

Whether he would survive the trip, whether he could perform the operation once he had arrived, he did not know. He wondered vaguely, whether agoraphobia could be fatal. In its most exaggerated form, he supposed it could.

He reached out a hand to ring, then hesitated. No use having Jenkins back. He would do it himself—something to keep him busy until the ship arrived.

From the top shelf of the wardrobe in the bedroom, he took down a bag and saw that

it was dusty. He blew on it, but the dust still clung. It had been there for too many years.

As he packed, the room argued with him, talked in that mute tongue with which inanimate but familiar things may converse with a man.

"You can't go," said the room. "You can't go off and leave me."

And Webster argued back, half pleading, half explanatory. "I have to go. Can't you understand. It's a friend, an old friend. I will be coming back."

Packing done, Webster returned to the study, slumped into his chair.

He must go and yet he couldn't go. But when the ship arrived, when the time had come, he knew that he would walk out of the house and toward the waiting ship.

He steeled his mind to that, tried to set it in a rigid pattern, tried to blank out everything but the thought that he was leaving.

Things in the room intruded on his brain, as if they were part of a conspiracy to keep him there. Things that he saw as if he were seeing them for the first time. Old, remembered things that suddenly were new. The chronometer that showed both Earthian and Martian time, the days of the month, the phases of the moon. The picture of his dead wife on the desk. The trophy he had won at prep school. The framed short snorter bill that had cost him ten bucks on his trip to Mars.

He stared at them, half unwilling at first, then eagerly, storing up the memory of them in his brain. Seeing them as separate components of a room he had accepted all these years as a finished whole, never realizing what a multitude of things went to make it up.

Dusk was falling, the dusk of early spring, a dusk that smelled of early pussy willows.

The ship should have arrived long ago. He caught himself listening for it, even as he realized that he would not hear it. A ship, driven by atomic motors, was silent except when it gathered speed. Landing and taking off, it floated like thistledown, with not a murmur in it.

It would be here soon. It would have to be here soon or he could never go. Much longer to wait, he knew, and his high-keyed resolution would crumble like a mound of dust in beating rain. Not much longer could he hold his purpose against the pleading of the room, against the flicker of the fire, against the murmur of the land where five generations of Websters had lived and died.

He shut his eyes and fought down the chill that crept across his body. He couldn't let it get him now, he told himself. He had to stick it out. When the ship arrived he still must be able to get up and walk out the door to the waiting port.

A tap came on the door.

"Come in," Webster called.

It was Jenkins, the light from the fireplace flickering on his shining metal hide.

"Had you called earlier, sir?" he asked.

Webster shook his head.

"I was afraid you might have," Jenkins explained, "and wondered why I didn't come. There was a most extraordinary occurrence, sir. Two men came with a ship and said they wanted you to go to Mars."

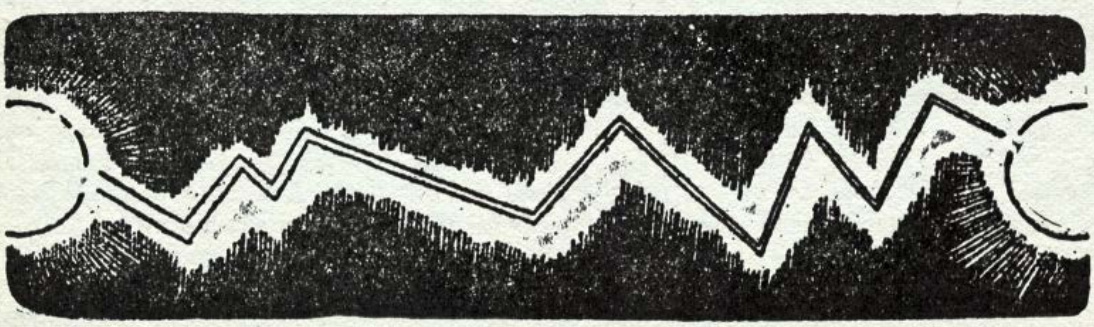
"They are here," said Webster. "Why didn't you call me?"

He struggled to his feet.

"I didn't think, sir," said Jenkins, "that you would want to be bothered. It was so preposterous."

Webster stiffened, felt chill fear gripping at his heart. Hands groping for the edge of the desk, he sat down in the chair, sensed the walls of the room closing in about him, a trap that would never let him go.

"I had a rather strenuous time, sir," said Jenkins. "They were so insistent that finally, much as I disliked it, I resorted to force. But I finally persuaded them you never went anywhere."



VITAL BOOKS

For Health of Mind

By *W. J. ENNEVER* and *T. SHARPER KNOWLSON.*

YOUR MIND AND HOW TO USE IT 5/6

A complete course of self-instruction. Deals with all essential mental needs: concentration, memory, self-confidence, fears, inferiority feelings, will-power, imagination, personality. It offers a plan by world-famous experts for developing a trained mind at a fraction of the usual cost.

By *T. SHARPER KNOWLSON*

SELLING YOUR ABILITY 11/-

A manual of applied psychology by an expert in mental training. We are confident it will enable you to reduce, if not remove, any obstacle now operating against your progress. "He has produced a wise, stimulating, thought-provoking book, full of practical advice presented with freshness and force"—a recent review.

PUT ON YOUR THINKING CAP 5/6

Designed to create and stimulate Thought and to suggest directions in which reflection may be pursued. Subjects covered include Psychology, Literature, Philosophy, Ethics, Science, etc. etc. A Book which every thinking person will enjoy.

CREATING NEW IDEAS 5/6

A new book designed to help those who have the urge to make changes. Invaluable to ex-service men and women on their return to civil life.

By *W. EDWIN BYWATER*

POWER OF THOUGHT 5/6

An examination in popular form of the Creation and Nature of Thought and its effect on Behaviour, Character, the individual, and on others.

By *J. LOUIS ORTON*

MEMORY EFFICIENCY and How to Obtain it 5/6

Tells how to acquire a photographic memory. In mastering its contents, doubt, indecision and fear disappear. Inferiority complex is conquered by a confidence based upon a well-trained mind.

By *W. WELBY*

MIND YOUR MIND Simple Psychology for the Layman 5/6

Provides an explanation of the principles of Psychology. The importance of this science is obvious and there can be no doubt that an understanding of its principles has become an essential factor in adult education.

For Health of Outlook

MORE THAN BREAD *By W. WELBY* 2/9

A Guide to the Achievement of Success and Happiness. A book which brings us back to fundamental truths which so many have forgotten, but which are utterly essential in this world of ours to all who seek understanding and peace of mind.

By *RENNIE MACANDREW*

ARISE AND LIVE 2/9

An inspirational and personal guide to mental well-being for young people on the threshold of the adventure of being alive.

For Health of Body

By *MEDICUS, M.A., B.Sc., M.B., C.M.*

KNOW THY BODY The Wonders Within Us 5/6

The most entertaining, psychological work ever written. This book explains the working of every human organ. You will understand yourself the better by reading this popular book.

By *NURSE EVELYN PANTIN*

PREPARING FOR MOTHERHOOD Training in Infancy and Childhood 5/6

Nothing is overlooked. Tables, diagrams and delightful photographs are features of the volume, which is printed on art paper throughout. The work, by an experienced maternity sister, is today's best guide to motherhood and baby-care.

By *JAS. C. THOMSON*

TWO HEALTH PROBLEMS— Constipation and our Civilisation 5/6

Herein is told in interesting and convincing manner how Constipation—the forerunner of most diseases—can be finally and completely overcome.

HIGH AND LOW BLOOD PRESSURE 5/6

The how and why of low and high blood pressure and the simple naturopathic home treatment for this prevalent condition is fully explained.

THE HEART 4/4

The prevention and cure of cardiac conditions by the new "Kingston" methods is lucidly explained.

HOW TO OBTAIN HEALTHY HAIR 1/6

Practical Home treatment for Hair and Scalp disorders, including Baldness, Dandruff, Alopecia, Falling Hair, etc. etc.

By *H. BENJAMIN*

BETTER SIGHT WITHOUT GLASSES 5/6

The author cured himself of rapidly approaching blindness, and has embodied his successful methods in this book for the benefit of all sufferers. Test Card included.

By *F. RAMSDEN, M.I.S.Ch.*

FOOT COMFORT 2/9

A practical illustrated book on the Care of the Feet. Provides easily followed advice for home treatment of most foot troubles.

By *J. LOUIS ORTON*

THE CURE OF STAMMERING, STUTTERING, and other Speech Disorders 3/4

There is no need to endure the misery of Faulty Speech or Harsh Utterance! This book *is the remedy.* The simple non-operative means which have cured thousands are clearly set out.

HYPNOTISM MADE PRACTICAL 5/6

In no other book can you find the facts given herein—it clears the ground of all fallacies and shows how to induce Hypnosis and how this remarkable science can be applied for the benefit of all.

Prices include postage. Get your copies of these important books NOW—through any bookseller or direct from

THORSONS Publishers Ltd., Dept. 91, 91 ST. MARTIN'S LANE, LONDON, W.C.2

Complete Catalogue available on request. Enclose two stamps

Join the Well-Paid Ranks of the I.C.S. TRAINED MEN

MANY THOUSANDS MORE ARE URGENTLY NEEDED. PREPARE YOURSELF FOR A BETTER POSITION AND BETTER PAY.

Ambitious men everywhere have succeeded through I.C.S. Home-Study Courses. So also can you.

55 YEARS OF SERVICE

We offer you the benefit of our 55 years' matchless experience as the creative pioneers of postal instruction.

If you need technical training, our advice on any matter concerning your work and your career is yours for the asking—free and without obligation. Let us send you full information about I.C.S. Training in the subject in which you are specially interested. DON'T DELAY. Make ACTION your watchword.

The successful man DOES to-day what the failure INTENDS doing to-morrow. Write to us TO-DAY.

——————USE THIS COUPON——————

(*Penny* Stamp on *Unsealed* Envelope)

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS LTD.

Dept. 18, INTERNATIONAL BUILDINGS, KINGSWAY, LONDON, W.C.2

Please send Special Free Syllabus on.....

.....

Name.....Age.....

Address.....

Addresses for Overseas Readers

Australia : 140 Elizabeth Street, Sydney.
Egypt : 40 Sharia Malika Farida, Cairo.
India : Lakshmi Buildings, Sir Pherozsha Mehta Road, Fort, Bombay.
New Zealand : 182 Wakefield Street, Wellington.
Palestine : 33 Mamillah Road, Jerusalem.
South Africa : 45 Shortmarket Street, Cape Town.

The I.C.S. offer Courses of Instruction in a wide range of subjects, including :

Accountancy
Advertising
Aero Engine Fitting
Aero Fitting and Rigging
Aeronautical Engineering
Aeroplane Designing
Air-Conditioning
Aircraft Eng. Licence
Architectural Drawing
Architecture
Auditing
Boiler Engineering
Book-keeping
Building Construction
Building Specifications
Business Management
Business Training
Carpentry
Chemical Engineering
Chemistry, Inorganic and Organic
Civil Engineering
Clerk of Works
Colliery Examiners
Colliery Overman
Commercial Art
Concrete Engineering
Cotton Manufacturing
Diesel Engines
Draughtsmanship (*state which branch*)
Drawing Office Practice
Electric Power, Lighting, Transmission and Traction
Electrical Engineering
Eng. Shop Practice
Fire Engineering
Fuel Technology
Garage Management
Gas-Power Design
Heating and Ventilation
Hydraulic Engineering
Hydro-Electric
Joinery
Journalism
Machine Designing
Machine-Tool Work
Marine Engineers
Mechanical Drawing
Mechanical Engineering
Mine Surveying
Mining, Electrical
Motor Engineering
Motor Mechanic
Motor Vehicle Elec.
Municipal Engineering
Office Training
Oil-Power, Electric
Plastics
Plumbing
Quantity Surveying
Radio Engineering
Radio Service Eng.
Ry. Equip. & Running
Refrigeration
Sales Management
Salesmanship
Sanitary & Domestic Engineering
Scientific Management
Secretarial Work
Sheet-Metal Work
Short Story Writing
Steam Power Design
Structural Steelwork
Surveying (*state which branch*)
Telegraph Engineering
Telephone Engineering
Textile Designing
Water-Power Elec.
Welding, Gas & Electric
Woodworking Draw'g.
Woollen Manufacturing
Works Engineering
Works Management

EXAMINATIONS—
Technical, Professional, Matriculation

(State your Exam. on Coupon for Free Syllabus)

Special Terms for members of H.M. Forces and discharged disabled members of H.M. Armed Forces.

I.C.S.

Published by The Atlas Publishing and Distributing Co. Ltd., 18 Bride Lane, London, E.C.4
Printed by Morrison & Gibb Ltd., London and Edinburgh.
Sole Agents for Australia and New Zealand: Gordon & Gotch (Australasia) Ltd.