

# CAPTAIN FUTURE

MAN OF TOMORROW

15¢

WINTER  
ISSUE



*Magic*  
**MOON**

An Astounding  
Full-Length Novel  
By **BRETT STERLING**

A THRILLING  
PUBLICATION

BUY WAR BONDS  
AND STAMPS  
FOR VICTORY!

# CAPTAIN FUTURE WIZARD OF SCIENCE

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VOL. 6, NO. 1

CONTENTS

WINTER ISSUE

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**Curt Newton and the Futuremen**  
in

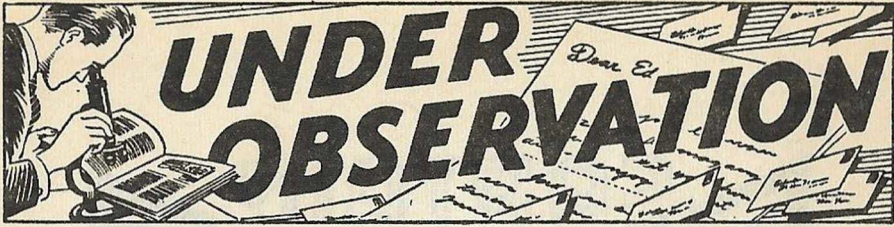
**A Complete Book-Length Novel**

**MAGIC MOON**

**By BRETT STERLING**



*A Cruel Plot to Seize the Satellite Styx, Third Moon of Pluto,  
and Enslave Peaceful Natives, Sends Captain Future and His Loyal  
Aides Out on the Most Dangerous Adventure of Their Careers!*



## Where Sergeant Saturn, Space-Pilots and Kiwis Meet

**B**EFORE we blast off on our usual dizzy whirl with you space merry-go-round riders striving to spear one of Saturn's rings let's do a little homework on THE FUTUREMEN CLUB. How many of you kiwis realize that membership in this organization implies more than simply writing in for a membership card to carry in your pocket?

In a way, membership in THE FUTUREMEN CLUB is comparable to membership in the SCIENCE FICTION LEAGUE. There are no dues or fees or obligations, but there is the moral obligation of doing your level best to further the interests of science fiction. And right here the old Sarge wants to take a minute out to salute Futureman Saul Stein of the Bronx, N. Y. Futureman Stein, because of failing vision, figured that he was no longer eligible to be a member of THE FUTUREMEN CLUB as he can no longer read CAPTAIN FUTURE, and he tried to surrender his card.

Sure, you kiwis have guessed it. Saul Stein got his card right back with the nicest note the editor knew how to write.

And here is a flash from a new member of the club. Futureman Benjamin J. Hackett of Brentwood, L. I., N. Y., writes in to say—"I am a regular reader of CAPTAIN FUTURE and your companion magazines. All of them are a constant source of inspiration and enjoyment. As a member I shall certainly do my utmost to abide by the rules! Yours in the Futuremen and all companion magazines together."

Nicely said, Futureman Hackett, and we welcome you to our space circle.

Which leads us quite naturally to the first communique of the day. Seal the ports, Wart-Ears; we're taking off.

## FIRST COPY OF CAPTAIN FUTURE

By Arthur D. Graves, Jr.

Dear Sarge: I thought my first copy of CAPTAIN FUTURE today. Please give my congratulations to Brett Sterling for his story "The Star of Dread." It is the best science fiction story I have ever read, and I have quite a collection of them.

From now on I shall and will give your magazine the highest recommendation to all my friends. Also, I wish to join the club of Futuremen. Thank you!—1519 South Mansfield Ave., Los Angeles, Calif.

Consider yourself a Futureman and a junior astrogator, Kiwi Graves. Draw your duffe from the supply chest and find a place in the circle of handsome faces which surround the

old Sarge like a garden of roses—with the usual amount of thorns.

We hear now from an Esperanto enthusiast in Pennsylvania.

## SPATIAL LINGUA FRANCA

By Conrad Fisher

Dear Sarge: I have just started reading some of the issues of C.F. and I've been enjoying them very much. I used to avoid the magazine, because I thought it would be like other magazines having a long story about a single character, in each issue. I see I was mistaken.

Say, Sarge; why do scientifiction writers use the word Venusian; shouldn't it be Venerian? The genitive is "veneris." And how do they pronounce Venusian: venoozhlan, ven-you-shun, veen-us-lan?

I notice the author of the C.F. stories mentions the "lingua franca" of space. I wonder if your readers know what the real "lingua franca" was? Its modern counterpart is "Esperanto" which is used throughout the civilized world, even by pre-Hitler Germans, Italians and Japanese scientists. It is derived from Latin, but has no irregularities to its sixteen fundamental rules. Its pronunciation is regular and phonetic. The alphabet omits Q, W, X, Y (represented by K, V, KS, J) and includes French J, Spanish J and the continental trilled R; otherwise English sounds, except that each letter has only one sound.

Here's what Esperanto looks like. Summer Issue, 1943; page 77; the inscription:

Sub la Prisma Monto, en la Kristala Montaro, kiu sidas preter la nigra maro de la nordo, kushas la Chambró de Vivo, en kiu bredighis novaj homrasoj. Ne serchu ghin senjard, char ghí estas gardata de ja senmortuloj, kaj, khi entenas en si la sermojn de fatalo.

Pronunciation: soob law pree-smaw moan-toe, en law kree-staw-law moan-taw-ro deh law nor-do, koo-shawss' law chawm-bro deh vee-vo, en kee-oo breh-dee-jees no-ve home-raw-soy. Neh salr-choo jeen sen-gar-deh, char jee es-tawss gar-daw-taw deh sen-mor-too-loy kie jee en-teh-nawss en see law sem-oln deh faw-taw-lo. Accented part is italic.

I didn't care very much for the two stories THE WHEEZERS and RAIN, RAIDS AND RAYS, altho I thought VENUSIAN QUARTZ was very cleverly done.

Please ask your readers to write to me if they are interested in learning the language of tomorrow, Esperanto. I'll be glad to help anyone free of charge.

yours for science and fantasy fiction  
via por sciencia kaj fantasta fikcio—  
229 East Spring St., Titusville, Pa.

The use of the word "Venusian" in place of all others has simply come about as a matter of common growth, consent and usage, Pee-lot Fisher, and the pronunciation is your first one. Thanks for the Esperanto lesson, but it strikes the old Sarge that you dropped a few accents in your phonetic pronunciation. But don't mind the old space dog. After learning a couple of dozen dialects on half a dozen worlds, old Saturn has acquired a jargon all his own that—I have been told by some few impolite kiwis—pidgin English sounds like parlor English by comparison.

Speaking of double talk, look at this!





Su Thuar raised his stone dagger in his hand (Chap. XVIII)

# MAGIC MOON

By **BRETT STERLING**

*A Cruel Plot to Seize the Satellite Styx, Third Moon of Pluto, and Enslave Peaceful Natives, Sends Captain Future and His Loyal Aides Out on the Most Dangerous Adventure of their Careers!*

## CHAPTER I

### *Menaced World*

**I**N LOUD tones, the dramatic voice of the telaudio announcer went flashing out on the broadcast wave to every world in the Solar System.

"Calling Captain Future!"

It issued from millions of receivers, startling listeners into alert attention as it again repeated the name of the most famous space-adventurer of the System.

"Calling Captain Future!"

That dramatic call went even beyond the limits of the nine planets, borne upon the powerful wave. It reached the receiver of a small, stream-lined spaceship far out in the interstellar abyss.

That ship had for many days been rushing homeward through the vast black emptiness, returning from an epochal journey to the fixed stars. The tall, redheaded young Earthman in its pilot-chair had turned on the telaudio, now that they were nearing the System.

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**AN ASTOUNDING BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL**

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His red head raised in astonishment as he heard the announcer's urgent call. His rangy figure stiffened in the chair. Astonished incredulity appeared in his tanned, handsome face and clear gray eyes.

"Otho! Grag! Simon!" he called sharply over his shoulder. "Come here—something's wrong."

Curtis Newton—this redheaded young Earthman whom the System knew as Captain Future—heard his comrades hurrying in answer. Then a booming, reverberating voice broke upon his ears as the first of the Futuremen entered the bridge-room.

It was Grag who spoke. Grag was not a man of flesh, but a man of metal, a robot. But he was no ordinary robot. His massive, manlike metal figure possessed superhuman strength. And within his bulbous metal head, behind the gleaming photoelectric eyes of his rigid face, was a mechanical brain and mind of human power.

"What's up, chief?" the towering robot demanded of Newton.

"I just picked up a call for us, that's being sent out on the standard broadcast wave," Captain Future answered in puzzled tones.

"Why in the Sun's name would it be on the broadcast wave?" demanded Otho, second of the Futuremen. "That's only for entertainment and advertisements. Why don't they call us on our own wave?"

**O**THO was an android, a synthetic man. He had been created long ago from artificial tissues in the laboratory. Yet in almost every way he was human.

His rubbery figure hinted of more than human agility and speed, and his hairless head and pale, aquiline face were faintly alien. But a wholly human curiosity and excitement sparkled now in his slanted green eyes.

The Brain, the third Futureman, had entered silently. He was the most un-human looking of them. Yet he had been human once. Years ago, he had been Doctor Simon Wright, brilliant,

aging scientist. Then his living brain had been transferred to an ingenious serum-case.

The Brain now resembled a square, transparent metal box, on the "face" of which were his lens-like glass eyes and resonator "mouth." These artificial organs were connected electrically to his living human brain, inside the case. He could jet beams of magnetic energy to use as arms, or could glide in swift movement upon similar emitted beams.

The three Futuremen and their young leader crowded close to the telaudio receiver in the cramped control-room of the flying ship.

"Calling Captain Future," repeated the announcer's voice for the third time. Then the voice went on. "We're not calling for the real Captain Future, of course, but for someone to take his place."

"Someone to take your place, chief?" echoed Grag, bewildered. "What does he mean?"

"It must be a gag of some kind," Otho declared.

"Listen," Curt Newton ordered, a frown on his tanned face.

The announcer was speaking once more. "You people of the System all know who Captain Future is. Everyone from Mercury to Pluto is aware that he and his Futuremen are the greatest planetees and scientists in our history. You've heard the tales of their wonderful exploits, their crusades against interplanetary pirates and criminals, their exploring trips to the fixed stars such as the one upon which they're away now.

"Soon all you people will have a chance to see the most brilliant exploits of Captain Future and his comrades, on the telepicture screen. Jeff Lewis, the telepicture producer who has made so many thrilling space-films, is preparing to make the super-picture of all time about Captain Future.

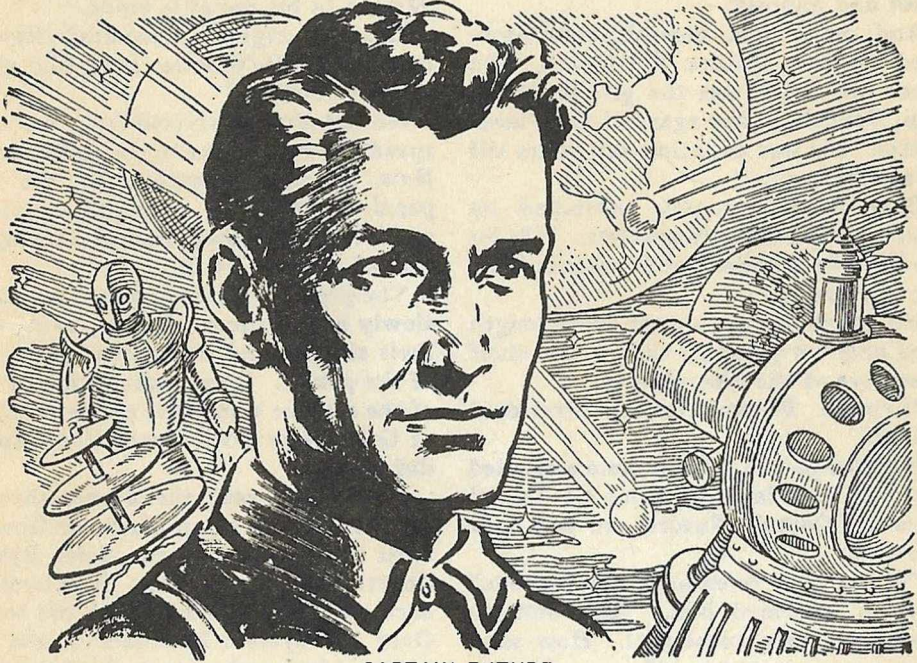
"This picture will be called 'The Ace of Space.' It will be filmed in the most remote and dangerous places in the System, places never before seen on the telepicture screen. The terrible Fire Sea of Jupiter, the strange submarine

cities of the undersea folk of Neptune, and even mysterious Styx—that distant and little-known satellite of Pluto which is called Magic Moon—all these will be the background for this super-film. Its cast will be a galaxy of the biggest stars in telepictures.

“But one role in the film remains un-

“Probably it will be a pack of fancy lies about us,” growled Grag. “If it is, I’ll sue ’em for defamation of character.”

“Listen to that—a robot worrying about his character,” jeered Otho. “How can a rusty old machine have any character to defame?”



CAPTAIN FUTURE

filled. The role of Captain Future himself. No ordinary actor can fill this role. It must be someone who looks like the great planeteer. So Producer Jeff Lewis is conducting a talent-search for a suitable man to play that role. If you think you look like Captain Future, if you are six feet four with red hair and features like his, come at once to Telepictures Studios in Great New York, on Earth. You may be the one selected for this greatest starring role of all time.”

Curt Newton switched off the telaudio in disgust. “I thought it was something important. And it turns out to be a publicity trick for a telepicture they’re going to make.”

“A telepicture about us, chief,” reminded Otho. The android’s vanity was flattered. “We Futuremen must be really getting famous.”

Nothing so enraged Grag as an intimation that he was not as completely human as other persons. He emitted an angry roar.

“Why, you miserable rubber dummy!” he cried to the android. “Your parents were a couple of test-tubes in a laboratory, and—”

**CURT NEWTON** paid no further attention to their bickering. And he had forgotten all about the telepicture announcement. For now their ship was nearing the Solar System, the end of its long homing voyage.

It had been long indeed, their voyage. Far, far out into the abyss of deep space had ventured the little *Comet*, in the last weeks. They had seen strange suns, had mapped wild worlds and moons. For they had undertaken an exploration

of some of the nearer fixed stars for the System Government.

Now, at last, they were coming home. Home, to them, was Earth's wild, airless Moon. On that forbidding satellite, Curt Newton had been born. There, after his parents' tragic death, he had been reared to manhood by the Brain, robot and android.

And more than homesickness beckoned Captain Future Earthward. On green old Earth was the girl he loved, Joan Randall, secret agent of the Planet Patrol. He was counting the hours till he saw her again.

Curt Newton eagerly switched on their own telaudio transmitter. "I'll let the President know that we're back from our mission."

He tuned to the secret wave-length used only for personal calls to the chief executive of the nine planets.

"Captain Future, calling President Crewe."

Minutes passed. Then came a startled reply in the familiar voice of Daniel Crewe. "Captain Future, are you back already?"

"We've just re-entered the System," Newton informed him. "Our star-explorations were successful. How soon do you want our report?"

"That report can wait, but I must see you as soon as possible on another matter," came back the President's anxious voice.

"Another matter?" Curt Newton asked. "What's up?"

"It concerns a telepicture expedition which is planning to film a picture about you Futuremen," answered Crewe.

Captain Future laughed. "Is that all? We already heard about that film. Let 'em go ahead and make it—we don't care."

"You don't understand," exclaimed the President's troubled voice. "That telepicture may bring disaster on one of the worlds of our System. I want to consult you about it."

Newton's face sobered. "Then we'll come straight to see you at once."

Captain Future looked at his comrades in a concerned manner as he switched

off the telaudio. "What does Crewe mean? How in the Sun's name can a crazy telepicture about us threaten disaster to a whole world?"

"It doesn't make sense," protested Otho.

"The President generally has some basis for his assertions," rasped Simon Wright in his metallic voice.

"Simon's right," murmured Newton uneasily. "We'd better hunt him up as soon as possible."

He had already shifted from the high-speed vibration drive to the rocket drive. Now, his foot pressed down the cyc-pedal all the way. Pluming a tail of white fire, the *Comet* flashed at top speed toward distant Earth.

The greenish globe of Earth expanded slowly before them. At last, he brought their ship around toward the night side of the planet. Upon that shadowed face of the ancient world, the clustered lights of Great New York blazed like a splendid jewel.

Deftly he eased the *Comet* through the darkness, to the pinnacle of Government Tower, seat of the Solar System Government. There was a little landing-deck on the truncated tip of the tower. Only the System President or the Futuremen had authority to land there.

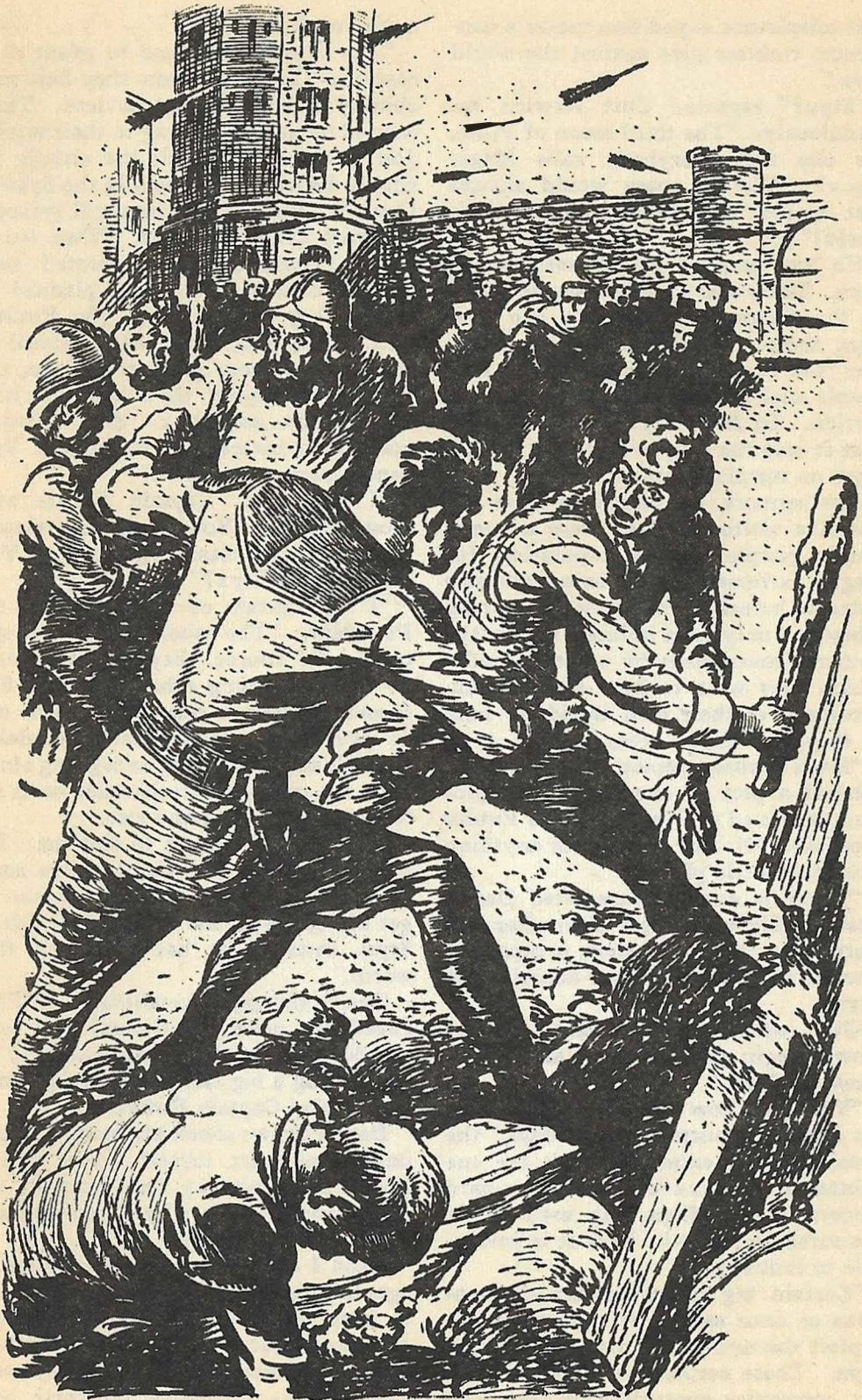
The little ship came gently to rest. Captain Future led his comrades rapidly down the private stair to the System President's office.

Daniel Crewe rose hastily from behind his desk. The chief executive of the nine worlds was not an old man. But tremendous responsibilities had lined his fine face deeply, had touched his hair with gray.

**H**IS greeting was warm. "You don't know how glad I am you Futuremen are back. I've been badly worried about this business."

"That telepicture expedition?" Newton queried. "I heard their announcement. It sounded like a legitimate film expedition."

"That's the way it sounds, but there's more to it than that," Daniel Crewe affirmed. His face darkened. "I believe



The Jovian's green face was a brutal, distorted mask of ferocity as he raised his war-club for a shattering blow (Chap. XVIII)



that telepicture expedition masks a dangerous, ruthless plot against the world Styx."

"Styx?" repeated Curt Newton incredulously. "The third moon of Pluto, the one that everybody calls Magic Moon? Why in space would anyone plot against that barren, remote little world?"

He was amazed at the mention of Styx. There was no more isolated world in the System. Almost no one ever went there. There was nothing to go for. The remote little moon had no rich metals such as drew colonists to other worlds. In fact, Styx was unique in that it was the only world that had almost no metals whatever.

Furthermore, the native Stygians did not like visitors. They were a queer, lonely people with a reputation for magic, extremely peace-loving but also extreme haters of mechanical progress. They had only been induced to join the System Government by a treaty under which they were to have complete authority over their own world, so long as they maintained order there.

"Even if that telepicture project does conceal a plot of some kind, the plot can't be aimed at Styx," Captain Future repeated. "No one could want anything from that little place."

"There is now," contradicted Daniel Crewe. "Six weeks ago, soon after you Futuremen left the System, prospectors discovered rich diamond-deposits on Styx."

Otho whistled. "Diamond-deposits? Now I begin to understand all this interest in Styx."

"You know how valuable diamonds are for industrial purposes these days," the President said earnestly. "It's the one substance that can cut the super-hard modern metal alloys. It used to be treasured as a jewel. Now it is invaluable to industry."

"Certain big interplanetary corporations at once asked for concessions to exploit the new-found diamond-beds on Styx. These corporations are all dummy companies controlled by Jon Valdane, the most notoriously ruthless fin-

ancier on Earth.

"The Stygians refused to grant concessions. You know how they hate machinery and mechanical devices. They wanted no miners coming to their world. Jon Valdane pulled all the strings he could—he has his puppets in the System Council. But the Stygians still refused.

Daniel Crewe frowned. "Two weeks later, Telepictures Incorporated suddenly announced that they planned to make a big picture about you Futuremen. They said it would be filmed in the scenes of your greatest exploits, the Fire Sea of Jupiter, the submarine cities of Neptune, and Styx. And Telepictures Incorporated is one of Jon Valdane's many companies."

"I see, now," Captain Future said thoughtfully. "You think this telepicture expedition masks a plot of Jon Valdane against Styx?"

"I feel certain of it," exclaimed the President. "The whole thing is suspicious. Of course, they say they must go to Styx among other places to film scenes, because it was the scene of one of you Futuremen's greatest exploits. And it's said that Valdane is going along with the party simply because he is interested in its feminine star.

"But it's all too pat to suit me. I'm convinced that Jon Valdane has some plot behind it that will enable him to get his hands on the diamond wealth of Styx, even if he has to wreck that world."

The Brain spoke metallically. "If the expedition masks a criminal plot, why should they give it all that publicity by conducting a big talent-search for someone to play Captain Future?"

Daniel Crewe shook his head. "I can't understand that myself. You understand, I haven't any real proof of my suspicions. That's why I can't simply forbid the expedition."

"And I can't assign any secret Patrol agents to go along with the expedition to keep watch on Valdane. It would contravene our treaty with the Stygians if we sent officers to Styx. They were granted sole authority on their own world by that treaty."

Captain Future stared at him keenly. "So you want us Futuremen to act as your secret agents in watching this expedition?"

"That's it." The President nodded. "You have no official status, so I can use you without breaking the treaty with Styx. And you and Otho are masters of disguise, and should be able to get into that expedition and find out what devilry Valdane is up to."

He added a warning. "Yet I won't conceal that it'll be highly dangerous. Valdane will have the expedition packed with his men. And it will be going out through the most dangerous places in the System."

Curt Newton's gray eyes gleamed with the light of adventure. With characteristic swiftness of resolution, he had decided his course.

He rose to his feet. "I'll be in that expedition, sir. And I'll find out somehow just what Jon Valdane is plotting against Styx."

"Remember, it would mean your life if Valdane suspected your identity," cautioned Crewe. "He's ruthless as a Venusian swamp-adder."

"He won't suspect," answered Captain Future, grinning. "Don't you see, I can join that expedition in an absolutely perfect disguise."

"Holy space-imps!" exclaimed Otho excitedly. "I get it, chief. It'll be the greatest impersonation feat in history."

## CHAPTER II

### *Daring Imposture*



THE big studios of Telepictures Incorporated, near New York Spaceport, were highly busy. In these mammoth metal buildings were made the stereofilm dramas that were televised to receivers all through the nine worlds. And busiest of all this morning was the studio devoted to the preparations that

were being made for the epic "Ace of Space" expedition.

Big cameras, krypton spotlights, powerful sun-arcs, and other highly complicated equipment of all kinds, was already being transferred from the studio to the space-ship which lay docked in the nearby spaceport. That ship, the *Perseus*, was a small liner which had been literally converted into a flying studio for this far-flung location trip.

Sam Martin, the weary-looking head "prop" man, prodded his men as they trucked anti-heat equipment, special space-suits, and all the other paraphernalia to the ship. Before it was taken away, each item was alertly inspected by Lo Quior, the little, spectacled Martian technical director who was one of the industry's greatest wizards in creating special effects.

Jim Willard, cynical-looking young assistant director, strode across the shadowy, noisy main studio and entered a room in which a crowd of nearly forty young men were nervously waiting.

They were all Earthmen, and all of them were tall and red-haired, the shades of their hair ranging from dark rust to flaming auburn.

"All right, Mr. Lewis will look you over now," Willard told the eager crowd. "Just walk past his desk and turn to face him."

Nervously, the crowd of young men followed him out into the noisy main studio. There they formed into single file and slowly walked past the producer's desk.

Jeff Lewis, director and producer of some of the most thrilling space-epics in telepicture history, was a middle-aged, stocky Earthman with a tight, wise face and brooding eyes. He dourly inspected the faces of the eager applicants.

A chance to break into telepictures, to star in the biggest space-film ever made! No wonder Jeff Lewis' talent-search for a young actor who looked like Captain Future had evoked such a great response. Every day, for the last fortnight, eager, redhaired applicants had come.

Lewis curtly turned down one after another of the hopeful young men as they reached his desk.

"You're too short — height can't be altered by make-up. And you won't do because your skull's the wrong shape—that's another thing that would show. No, not you. Nor you."

One by one, the crestfallen rejectees filed away. The others still in line obviously were losing hope at this merciless weeding-out.

But finally Lewis stopped one of them, a tall, pleasant-faced, shy-looking young fellow with dark red hair.

"What's your name?" the producer demanded.

"Chan Carson," replied the young man with trembling eagerness. "I haven't had any acting experience, Mr. Lewis, but I hoped—"

"We can teach a man to act, at least enough for this picture, but we can't teach him to look like Captain Future if he doesn't have a strong basic resemblance," barked Jeff Lewis. "You have it, in a way."

The producer compared the photographs of Captain Future on his desk with Chan Carson's face and profile. Jim Willard also eyed them.

"The color of his hair and eyes are a little off, but makeup can fix that," muttered Lewis. "His nose isn't aquiline enough, but that too can be remedied. Skull-shape, weight, height and features are otherwise the closest we've come across yet."

"Who are you, anyway?" the producer asked Chan Carson. "What do you do for a living?"

The tall, hopeful young man answered timidly. "I'm a clerk over in the Interplanetary Department Store."

"Good gosh," muttered Jim Willard under his breath. "Are we going to use a clerk who's never been off Earth to play Captain Future?"

**T**HE film director smiled.

"Didn't I take a big, dumb door-man from a hotel and use him as Black John Haddon in 'Star Pirate'?" retorted Jeff Lewis. "I can teach a man to act,

if he looks the part. This Carson fellow does. He's the only one we've found yet who looks even remotely like Captain Future. Make-up will erase the differences, and your coaching will get him through his scenes."

Chan Carson's earnest face flushed with eager hope as he listened.

"I'll do anything you say if you pick me for the part, Mr. Lewis," he promised in fervent tones.

His eagerness was not assumed. He had to get this part, Curt Newton was telling himself.

For 'Chan Carson,' underneath a slightly disguised exterior, was none other than Captain Future himself!

It was Newton's audacious scheme to get himself included in this mysteriously-motivated telepicture expedition which Jon Valdane was backing. He had explained it to the astounded President, the night before.

"It'll be a perfect disguise for me, if I can do it," he had told Daniel Crewe. "They're hunting for someone who looks like Captain Future, to play his part in their picture. If I can get that part, I can go along on the expedition without Valdane or his men dreaming that I'm really Captain Future. I'll have a real chance to discover and check-mate their plans."

Newton had known better than to look too much like himself when he applied for the role. That might arouse suspicion. So he had slightly altered the shape of his nose and the shade of his eyes and hair.

Jeff Lewis was speaking to the skeptical Willard. "Remember, this will be an action picture. He won't have to do any emoting in close-ups."

They were interrupted by the arrival of a stunning blonde girl who clung possessively to the arm of a chubby, middle-aged Earthman.

Curt Newton instantly recognized them both. He knew from posters around the studios that the girl was Lura Lind, one of the most popular feminine stars in telepictures. With her smooth platinum hair, flawless features and supple figure, she was dazzling.

The man with her was Jon Valdane. Crewe's description left no doubt. Yet it seemed incredible that this chubby little man with the kewpie-like face and beaming blue eyes could be the plotter who was scheming to loot a world.

Newton remembered the President's warning. "He doesn't look it, but he's ruthless as a Venusian swamp-adder."

Valdane was speaking in a piping voice to the producer. "I'm all ready to go with you when the expedition leaves, Lewis. My friend Kin Kurri, the Saturnian politician, is going with me too."

"That's fine, Mr. Valdane." It seemed to Newton that Jeff Lewis' words lacked heartiness. "Of course, you know that this will be no pleasure cruise. We're going into the most dangerous spots in the System."

If the producer was trying to dissuade Jon Valdane from the trip, he failed. The chubby little financier answered confidently.

"It's worth a few hardships to be near Lura," he said, with an infatuated glance at the blonde star. "And to make sure there's no risk, I'm taking along my own personal bodyguard, Su Thuar."

"Su Thuar." Captain Future repeated that name to himself with sudden dismay. He knew the 'bodyguard' to whom the financier referred.

Su Thuar was a young Venusian criminal with whom Curt Newton had clashed four years before. He had killed the Venusian's brother in an underworld rendezvous on Saturn, and had sent Su Thuar himself to prison.

He knew that Su Thuar wanted vengeance for that. If the Venusian's hate-sharpened eyes penetrated his identity during the trip, it might mean disaster.

Jeff Lewis was introducing him to Valdane and the blonde star. "This is Chan Carson, folks—our 'Captain Future'. He's only a drygoods clerk now, but I'll make an actor of him."

**C**URT Newton bowed to them. Lura Lind inspected him with scornful blue eyes, and then spoke to Lewis with strident resentment.

"If you think I'm going to play opposite a rabbit clerk who'll spoil all my



With a thunderous roar, the promontory exploded upward (Chap. VI)

scenes, you're crazy," she told the producer.

"Would I pick him if I didn't think I could mold him into the part?" Lewis demanded. "You leave the casting to me, Lura."

Curt Newton, the picture of nervous timidity, heard Valdane mildly support the actress' protest. But Jeff Lewis firmly overrode it.

"Take Carson over to the make-up department and fix him up," the producer told Jim Willard. "Then bring him back here."

"Come on," the assistant director told Newton half-contemptuously. "We'll soon have you looking like a real plane-ter."

In the make-up department, Captain Future was tense as the experts worked on him. Curt Newton had, by means of the infinite secrets of disguise known to Otho, so altered the shade of his hair by dyes, and the color of his eyes by pupil-stain, and the shape of his nose by injected waxite, that no ordinary make-up would discover or change his disguise.

Nevertheless, he breathed much easier when the make-up artists had finished their work. He looked into the mirror and felt like bursting into laughter. They had changed his hair, eyes and nose back to normal, never dreaming that this was his true appearance.

"Well, you do make a dead ringer for Captain Future when you have the make-up on," Jim Willard admitted reluctantly. "Here, put on the suit."

It was a gray zipper-suit such as Captain Future habitually wore. There was a slim atom-pistol in the holster at its belt.

Willard grinned. "You don't look like a dry-goods clerk now. Come on, and we'll show Jeff."

As they emerged from the make-up room, they came face to face with a handsome, sleepy-eyed young Venusian. Curt Newton recognized Su Thuar!

That Su Thuar recognized him as swiftly was evidenced by the sudden distortion of the criminal's handsome face. His eyes blazed.

"Captain Future!" hissed the Venusian. His hand darted to an atom-pistol inside his jacket. "I've waited four years for this chance."

Curt Newton's mind raced with lightning speed. He could beat Su Thuar to the draw. But if he did so, he would betray his real identity and his plan to join Valdane's expedition would be wrecked.

Newton gambled desperately. Instead of drawing his pistol, he recoiled with a pretended cry of terror from the Venusian's drawn gun.

Su Thuar was so startled by the unexpected sight of Captain Future afraid, that he hesitated. Then Jim Willard got between them.

"Are you crazy?" Willard stormed at the Venusian. "This isn't Captain Future — it's Chan Carson, the actor who's to play Future's part."

Su Thuar's face stiffened, and then the fierce blaze died out of his eyes. "Sorry," he muttered. "I didn't have time to think. I have an old score against Future, and I thought this man was that fellow."

"If this really was Future, you'd have been dead a second after you drew that gun on him," snapped Jim Willard.

He turned to Newton, who was pretending to tremble with terror. "Come on, Carson."

"Who—who was that?" Newton stammered fearfully as he followed the assistant director back across the noisy studio.

"Valdane's chief bodyguard," answered Willard. He added a dry comment. "Our esteemed financial boss is taking along a prize lot of strong-arm men to make sure nothing happens to his precious skin on this trip."

Jeff Lewis looked Newton over with keen, probing eyes when they reached him. The dour producer did not seem displeased.

"You'll do, for looks, Carson," he grunted. "But remember, you not only have to look like Captain Future but act like him. Let's see you draw your gun."

"It won't go off, will it?" Newton

asked timidly.

He was deliberately presenting himself to them all as a timid, scary clerk, so that no one would dream of connecting him with his real self. For he was aware that Su Thuar was still staring at him.

A burst of derisive laughter came from the whole group at his frightened question. It assured him that his masquerade was succeeding.

"Some Captain Future!" muttered Jim Willard. "He's about as much like the real thing as a mouse is like a lion."

### CHAPTER III

#### *Disastrous Discovery*



JEFF LEWIS patiently began to coach Curt Newton how to draw the atom-pistol, how to stand boldly erect, how to move quickly and softly.

"Try to think of yourself as the real Captain Future," the producer said earnestly. "Now go through it again."

Curt Newton went into an awkward crouch, and drew the atom-pistol so gingerly and clumsily that its barrel caught in his own belt.

He felt relieved when Su Thuar, who had been watching, followed Jon Valdane and Lura Lind out of the studio.

"Well, you'll have time to practice on the way to Jupiter, our first location," Lewis told him. "We'll be starting in a few days now."

They were interrupted by a loud, brassy voice. A man had forced his way across the busy studio to Jeff Lewis.

He was a swarthy Mercurian with a shock of bristling black hair, and bold black eyes. He addressed Lewis with conceited confidence.

"I understand you need an actor to play the part of Otho, the Futureman, in your new film," he said loudly. "Well, I'm your man. I'm Rizo Thon, the

greatest make-up artist you ever met. The only man who can play that android."

"Nothing doing," the producer said bluntly. "I'm hiring Ki Iquir for the part of Otho."

"Ki Iquir? — that clumsy Martian ham?" scoffed Rizo Thon. "He couldn't play this part in a million years. Wait till you see what I can do with it."

The conceited Mercurian dived into one of the dressing-rooms, carrying his make-up kit with him. A few minutes later, he returned completely transformed.

He was now a pale-skinned, lithe-looking man with a rubbery figure and sparkling, slanted green eyes in a hairless face.

"How this?" he demanded confidently. "Do I, or do I not, get the part?"

"Say, he is better than Ki Iquir," declared Jim Willard in surprise. "In that make-up he's the picture of Otho, the android."

Curt Newton grinned to himself. Rizo Thon not only looked like Otho—he was Otho. He had simply taken off a disguise, instead of putting one on.

It had been Newton's idea for getting Otho into the expedition. And it worked. Jeff Lewis was fascinated by the marvellous make-up, and hired "Rizo Thon" at once.

At the end of that day, Captain Future lurked in his dressing-room until the studio was deserted. Then Otho slipped into the room.

"So now we're actors, chief," grinned the impudent android. "I'm getting a kick out of this."

"You'll get a bigger kick when I tell you that Valdane's right-hand man is Su Thuar, and that he's going along on this party," Curt Newton said in a grim voice.

Otho swore. "That cursed Venusian snake. I thought he was still in prison. Still, if he doesn't suspect us, we're all right."

"He doesn't, but he will the first slip we make," warned Captain Future. "And the fact that Valdane has hired a criminal of Su Thuar's caliber proves

that there is a sinister purpose behind this whole expedition."

"I never doubted it," replied Otho. "But what about getting Grag and Simon into the expedition? Can we do it?"

"I haven't had a chance yet to find out," Captain Future said. He looked out. The studio was dark and deserted. "Come on, now's our chance to get into the prop department and see about that."

Unobserved, he and Otho made their way into the big property room where the sets and costumes for "The Ace of Space" were being assembled for transport to the *Perseus*.

They soon found the two objects they sought. One was a big metal dummy that was outwardly a replica of Grag. It was an ingenious automaton that could be made to go through simple movements by means of interior motors controlled by a tiny switchboard on its back.

The other object was a similar replica of the Brain—a square, transparent box with a 'face' and lenseyes like Simon Wright's. Inside it was a plastic gray copy of a human brain.

**T**HESE were the dummies of Grag and the Brain intended for use in the telepicture.

"They're nearly identical copies, and that makes it easy," Curt Newton said. "Tonight, Simon and Grag can slip in here and substitute themselves for these dummies—"

"And go along with the expedition, without anyone suspecting," Otho finished. He chuckled. "The four Futuremen, playing themselves in a telepicture. Wouldn't that producer's eyes stick out, if he knew?"

"This is no lighthearted game we're playing," Curt Newton reminded him. "We'll be in peril from the moment we leave Earth. That's why I wouldn't let Joan know anything about this mission."

He glanced out into the studio. "No one's around. Now is our chance to get these dummies out of here."

Two hours later that night, he and

Otho carried the two dummies with them into the guarded office of the System President, atop Government Tower.

Grag and Simon Wright were waiting for them there. And with them was an aging man in the uniform of the Planet Patrol, a white-haired, wrinkled veteran whose bleak old eyes lighted with pleasure.

"Cap'n Future," he exclaimed. "I thought you were still out in deep space, till I got your message today."

Marshal Ezra Gurney, old comrade of Futuremen, pumped Curt Newton's hand. "Wait'll Joan hears you're back," he chuckled.

"She mustn't know, Ezra," Curt Newton said earnestly. "We're up to our necks in a dangerous business and I don't want Joan tangled in it. And she'd insist on going with us, if she knew."

"Goin' where?" asked the old marshal keenly. "What's up?"

Captain Future rapidly explained. Gurney's weatherbeaten face lengthened as he heard. "Just name what you want done," said the old veteran promptly.

"I want you to take the *Comet* out to Styx and wait there for us," Captain Future said. "We'll need our ship."

"But won't the *Comet* be recognized, and give the show away?" asked Ezra Gurney.

"Paint it up to look like a battered little space-cruiser," Curt Newton told him. "You can be an interplanetary prospector who heard of the diamond-strike on Styx. Of course, you'll have to get yourself temporarily suspended from the Patrol so that you can legally go there."

Ezra Gurney nodded. "I can do all that. I'll be waiting for you right in Planet Town, the foreign colony on Styx."

Captain Future was hauling forward the two dummies which he and Otho had surreptitiously brought from the studio.

"These are the facsimiles of you and Grag, Simon," he told the Brain. "All you have to do is slip in tonight and take their places. No one will know the

difference, if you don't move when anyone's around."

Grag stared scornfully at the lifeless metal facsimile of himself. "It's disgusting that I have to impersonate a brainless automaton like this, but I suppose that I can do it."

"Why, that automaton would make a better Futureman than you," wisecracked Otho. "It only operates when you push its buttons."

Grag appealed indignantly to Captain Future. "Chief, are you going to let that cockeyed plastic android insult me like that?"

"Cut your rockets, both of you," Curt Newton ordered impatiently. "I'd for-

erty room. The Brain was resting on a shelf, and Grag stood stiff and motionless in a corner.

No ordinary human being could have endured the long periods of immobility which these two must preserve to maintain their imposture. But the Brain often spent days brooding in immobile silence upon his scientific reveries. And Grag had not the nerves of an ordinary man.

Still, the robot muttered a complaint when Captain Future entered. "This playing dead is going to be monotonous, in time."

"You'll soon have a chance for movement and action," Curt Newton reas-



### *"I Challenge You—Prove That You Are Captain Future!"*

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gotten about the little switchboard on the automaton's back. We'll have to put that on your back, Grag."

He soon had attached the switchboard to the broad metal back of the big robot. "Its buttons aren't connected to anything, of course. But when one of them is pushed, you must perform the appropriate action."

He coached Grag until the robot could respond stiffly to the pressing of the buttons, just as the real automaton would have done.

"That's good enough," Newton said finally. "Now, Otho will take you and Simon over and slip you into the studio."

"Sure, I'll pretend Grag is a load of old iron I'm delivering," cracked Otho, and then ducked the blow the irate robot aimed at him.

**N**EXT morning when "Chan Carson" reported at the telepicture studio, he glanced surreptitiously into the prop-

room. "The expedition will soon be starting."

Otho, made up again as Rizo Thon, darted into the property room excitedly. He brought dismaying news.

"Chief, I thought you were going to keep this whole business from Joan. Well, she's here in the studio at the present moment."

Curt Newton was thunderstruck. "Impossible! Joan doesn't even know that we're back yet from outer space."

"Nevertheless, she's here," retorted the android. "She's out there talking to Jeff Lewis now."

Incredulously, Captain Future hurried out across the noisy, big studio. He found Jeff Lewis by the door of his office.

And with the telepicture producer was a figure at sight of which his heart leaped. An Earthgirl, slim in severe brown jacket and space-slacks, whose dark hair was bare and whose firm,



lovely little face was flushed with emotion of some sort as she talked.

It was Joan Randall—the secret agent of the Planet Patrol who had been the gay, gallant comrade of the Futuremen on many adventures, and whom Curt Newton loved.

He wanted to stride forward and take her in his arms, but he forced down the impulse. He dared not let Joan Randall know of the hazardous enterprise on which they Futuremen were engaged. He knew only too well that she would insist on joining them, to her own grave peril.

Joan was speaking indignantly to the producer. "I won't stand for it, Mr. Lewis! As soon as I heard about this picture you're planning, I came here to protest against it. I won't allow you to make a cheap, silly thriller about Captain Future."

Jeff Lewis tried to soothe her. "It'll be a great film, Miss Randall—a tribute to the Futuremen. There won't be a thing in it that isn't true. Why, we're going to enormous risk and expense to film it in the identical scenes of their exploits."

"The Ace of Space!" said Joan scornfully. "It's absurd! Captain Future isn't a glory-hunting story-hero. He's a real man, the finest in the System, who has risked his life and endured every form of hardship to help the System peoples, to crush criminals preying on them and to push the frontiers of space further back.

"And you want to make money by glamorizing a man like that! I won't permit it! The Futuremen can't protest, for they're still out in deep space, but I'm here and I'll adopt every possible legal means to halt this silly picture."

Curt Newton's heart warmed to her staunch loyalty. And Jeff Lewis looked more worried.

"You couldn't legally stop the picture, because everything in it will be true," the producer answered. "The story of 'The Ace of Space' is based on the epic struggle of the Futuremen with the Legion of Doom, and every incident of the plot really happened."

Joan Randall was unappeased. "Unless I'm certain your story is going to stick to the truth, I'll ask for an injunction against your making the film. It will at least delay the thing until Captain Future returns."

"You mustn't do that," pleaded Jeff Lewis. "Our expedition is all ready to start. I have an idea. Come into my office and I think we can iron this out."

They came face to face with Curt Newton as they turned around. Newton held his breath. He wore his 'Chan Carson' disguise. But he was not sure that it would be proof against Joan Randall's keen glance.

**S**HE seemed startled by the sight of him. For just a moment gladness leaped into her brown eyes. Then it died away as she looked at him more closely.

"For a moment, I thought—," she began.

"You thought it was Captain Future?" Jeff Lewis finished for her, smiling. "It's no wonder, for we picked him for the close resemblance. This is Chan Carson, who is to play Future in the film."

Joan looked frowningly at 'Chan Carson'. "You don't look like a spaceman to me."

Newton answered timidly. "No, I've never been off the Earth. I hope I don't get space-sick on this trip."

Her brown eyes snapped. "And you are going to play Captain Future."

There was the ghost of a smile in Curt Newton's eyes as he watched her and Jeff Lewis enter the producer's office.

Jim Willard came up. "Ready for your space-exploits, Carson? The expedition is going to take off tomorrow morning."

Newton managed to look nervous. "So soon?" he gulped.

He did not see Joan Randall again but later that morning he heard Jeff Lewis speak of her to the assistant director.

"That Randall girl would have delayed the whole expedition," Lewis told

young Willard. "But I thought up a way to convince her that the picture would be true to Future's character."

Next morning, the *Perseus* lay ready for take-off. Crowds jammed the spaceport to watch the "Ace of Space" expedition depart. The publicity given the picture had interested the whole System in it.

Bands were playing, thousands of hands waving, as the last actors and technicians came up the gangway. Captain Future, with "Rizo Thon" and Jim Willard, watched from the promenade deck.

"There's Lura making her usual last-minute entrance," said the cynical young assistant director. "And Valdane with her, as usual."

The glamorous blonde actress was waving to the enthusiastic crowd as she came up the gangway. Behind her followed the chubby figure of Jon Valdane, a beaming smile on his pink face. He was accompanied by Su Thuar and by a tall, cadaverous-looking blue-skinned Saturnian.

"The Saturnian is Kin Kurri, one of Valdane's stooges in the System Council," remarked Willard. "He's coming along as Valdane's guest."

Curt Newton's eyes narrowed. The presence of the Saturnian politician more than ever convinced him that Valdane's conspiracy against Styx was on a big scale. But what was the nature of it?

The space-doors slammed shut. Bells rang warning, and the loudspeakers of the ship uttered their mechanical caution.

"Take-off time in five minutes."

Curt Newton pretended shaky apprehension. He looked at Willard fearfully. "Will the start shake us up much?"

"No, it'll be easy if you sit in one of these space-chairs," Willard told him, and added ironically, "Remember, you're the greatest spaceman alive—in this picture."

Newton huddled in one of the shock-absorbing deck-chairs, the picture of nervous timidity. Then with a thunderous crash of rockets, the *Perseus* rose

in the air and roared rapidly upward through the sunlight.

Curt Newton gasped and choked. "I—I'd better go down to my cabin. I'm afraid I'm going to be space-sick."

"Go ahead then, 'Captain Future,'" said Willard with a shrug of disgust.

Unsteadily, Newton rose to his feet. His real motive was a desire to inspect the lower decks as soon as possible.

Suddenly he stiffened. He saw, farther along the deck, a slim feminine figure in gray space-slacks who was looking down through the transparent deck-wall at the receding Earth. It was Joan Randall!

"She isn't coming with us, is she?" he asked Willard in dismay.

Willard nodded. "Why, yes, she is. Jeff told me this morning."

Captain Future felt stunned. He started along the deck, and then met Jeff Lewis and Valdane. The chubby financier was frowning.

"It's the first I knew of it," Jon Valdane was saying angrily. "Why in the world should you bring that snooping girl Patrol agent along?"

Lewis shrugged helplessly. "I had to. She was going to delay our starting, because she thought our picture would be a libel on her friends, the Futuremen. I finally had to offer to take her along so that she could check on the picture as we made it, and give it her okay."

Jon Valdane's ordinarily beaming pink face looked ugly.

"She could have been handled in other ways," he snapped. "But it's too late now."

They passed on. Joan Randall had disappeared. And Captain Future remained rooted, chilled by premonitory dread.

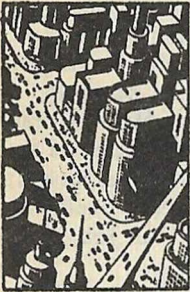
Joan's loyalty to himself had unwittingly catapulted her into this devil's-ship of conspiracy where her danger was extreme. Valdane did not want her aboard. He might take drastic means to get rid of her.

Curt Newton groaned inwardly. He could not reveal himself to her without entangling her further in danger. He must continue to play his strange part

if he was to penetrate the great plot against Magic Moon.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Peril on Jupiter*



**CAPTAIN FUTURE** leaped into the crumpled interior of the wrecked space-cruiser and crouched, his atom-pistol in his hand.

"Otho, where are you?" he called loudly.

"Here, chief!" answered the android. He

was lying, trussed up in heavy bonds in a corner of the wreck. "They left me here to be killed when the wreck crashes."

"And the rats got away from me," hissed Captain Future as he bent to untie the other. "By space, when we catch up to them—"

"Cut!"

It was Jeff Lewis' order that suddenly brought the scene to an end. The big, twin-lensed stereofilm cameras stopped grinding, and the krypton spotlights were snapped off.

Curt Newton and Otho turned toward the director. "How was it?"

"Rizo Thon was all right," Lewis answered. "But you still are too stiff and awkward, Carson. You still haven't learned how to act as Captain Future would act."

This big room looked like an ordinary telepicture studio, with the set that represented the interior of a wrecked space-cruiser occupying half its length. The rest was crowded with cameras, spotlights, technicians and other actors of the troupe.

This was the main hold of the *Perseus*. It had been converted into a small studio. And during all these days in which the liner had been speeding toward Jupiter, Jeff Lewis had here been busy upon interior scenes for "The Ace of Space."

It was hard to realize that they were in a ship going at tremendous velocity. The rockets had been shut off, and the

*Perseus* moved through the void in a swift, soundless rush.

"What you must do," Lewis was lecturing Curt Newton, "is to tell yourself, 'I am Captain Future.' Then you'll act more like him."

Curt Newton managed to keep his face solemn. "I'll try, Mr. Lewis," he stammered. "I've been space-sick so much, that it's made it harder for me."

Ron King, the exquisite-looking juvenile lead of "The Ace of Space," raised his eyebrows superciliously at Newton. "You really shouldn't have taken the part when you're such a bad space-sailor."

"He's about as good a space-sailor as he is an actor," gibed Lura Lind. "He's ruined every scene with me so far."

"Let Carson alone," growled the producer. "He'll be all right."

Joan Randall, slim in her gray space-slacks, had stood in the background watching the scene with a faint contempt in her brown eyes.

"Captain Future wouldn't use melodramatic language like that," she told Jeff Lewis now. "It's not like him at all."

"Miss Randall, will you please give me a little leeway in making this picture," begged the producer impatiently. "I'm keeping my promise to stick to the truth in depicting the Futuremen's exploits, ain't I? Please let me direct the dialogue myself."

Jim Willard, his young assistant, intervened diplomatically. "The 'day' is about over, Jeff," he remarked, glancing at his watch.

"All right, that'll be all for this time," Jeff Lewis said wearily to the troupe. "Hanged if I can get used to these ship 'days' and 'nights'."

Lo Quior and his technicians started stowing away the cameras. The actors streamed off to their cabins to remove their make-up before dinner.

'Chan Carson' and 'Rizo Thon' shared a cabin on the mid-deck—Curt Newton had contrived that. When they reached it, instead of taking make-up off, they began to put make-up back on, Otho resuming his disguise as a Mercurian, and Newton deftly making the slight change

in his appearance which converted him into 'Chan Carson.'

"Did you hear what Lewis said about my acting?" Otho said vainly. "He thinks I'm good. I'll bet I could be a telepicture star."

"You're turning into a stage-struck ham," Curt Newton accused him witheringly. "Get your mind back on our job. Were you able to get into Jon Valdane's suite?"

**O**THO slowly shook his head. "Chief, it's impossible," vowed the android. "You know he and his friend Kin Kurri, and Su Thuar and the rest of his tough 'bodyguards' have the whole aft part of this deck. Well, you just can't get back there unobserved. Some of Valdane's strong-arm men are lounging in the corridor there all the time."

"We've got to get in, somehow, and search Valdane's papers," Captain Future declared. "We've learned nothing at all yet, and here we are almost to Jupiter."

Curt Newton had begun to feel a little desperate. During all these days since the departure from Earth, he had not succeeded in penetrating the secret of Jon Valdane's mysterious conspiracy against Magic Moon.

Valdane was no fool. He had talked a lot but had never even mentioned Styx. Nor had Captain Future or Otho been able to spy upon him, since his quarters were always guarded.

"We'll slip down to the prop-room tonight and see Simon and Grag," Curt decided. "I have an idea that may work."

After dinner that night, the troupe of actors and technicians retired early. For Jeff Lewis warned them that they would land on Jupiter early the next day.

"We're landing at Jungletown, close to the Fire Sea," the producer informed the cast. "I want to make our scenes as quickly as possible and get out of that dangerous place."

When everyone had retired and the rushing liner was quiet except for the steady throb of the ventilators, Curt Newton and Otho stole out of their cabin and made their way down to the prop-



OTHO

room in the hold.

In that shadowy clutter of costumes, space-suits, strange weapons and grotesque objects, they found Simon Wright and Grag. The Brain was resting on a shelf, and Grag's mighty figure stood immobile in a corner.

"It's Otho and I," Captain Future whispered quickly.

Grag immediately flexed his mighty metal limbs and came stalking forward.

"How much longer have I got to stand down here like a frozen statue?" he demanded indignantly. "I'm getting bored with this."

"You'll be getting out of here tomorrow, Grag," Newton assured him. "For you'll be needed for the scenes they make by the Fire Sea."

"I have not minded this inactivity," rasped the Brain. "It has given me a chance to work out the mental solution of several complex astrophysical formula which I have long pondered."

"That's fine, but I've got a job for you tomorrow, Simon," said Captain Future. "When everyone is out of the ship, I want you to search Valdane's quarters."

There must be some clue in his effects as to his plan against Styx. Do you think you can get into his suite?"

"I shall do my best," replied the Brain in his austere way.

"Do, Simon—we must find out soon what Valdane and his crowd are planning against Magic Moon," Curt Newton said earnestly.

"Chief, what about Joan?" Grag asked.

"I want her to leave this ship at Jupiter. She must stay there. For she'll be in danger from Valdane's crowd if she doesn't. Valdane isn't going to let a Patrol agent like Joan go much farther on this trip, even though her status is unofficial."

"But how are you going to get her to leave the ship at Jupiter?" Otho demanded.

"Otho, that will be your job," Captain Future replied. "You won't be in these Fire Sea scenes, according to the script. So you'll have a chance to make sure that Joan stays on Jupiter."

Otho was dismayed. "How in the name of space am I going to contrive that?"

"A fake message calling her back to Earth would be your best bet," Curt Newton told him. "If that fails—well, then you'll have to try something else."

Next 'morning, the *Perseus* threaded through Jupiter's maze of moons and slid down into the vast atmosphere of the monarch planet.

Curt Newton looked down with the others from the promenade deck. He pretended a marvelling awe that fitted timid 'Chan Carson,' though he knew this planet better than any other man in the System.

Yet not all of his awe was assumed. Jupiter, even seen for the hundredth time, was a stunning spectacle. Its vast greenish sphere filled all the heavens beneath them, a majestic panorama of huge oceans and colossal continents. And upon the breast of the continent of South Equatoria, toward which they were dropping, burned the Fire Sea.

The Fire Sea, the most terrifying natural wonder in the Solar System. A flaming ocean of red, molten lava, it

stretched eight thousand miles in width and thrice that in length. This stupendous infernal sea was visible even from Earth, where it had once been called the Red Spot of Jupiter.

Jungletown lay in the dense fern-jungles only a little south of the Fire Sea. The place was a mining town, which constantly shifted its location and migrated northward to follow the uranium and radium diggings. It was now quite close to the flaming ocean.

The *Perseus*, riding the jets of its keel rockets, dropped down into the raw field that served the mining town as a spaceport. The doors opened, and the company started emerging into the sunlight.

The town lay just beyond the field, a few straggling streets of metalloy shacks hemmed in by the towering fern-jungle. Tough-looking, bronzed Earthmen miners and squat green Jovians crowded around the telepicture troupe. The air was hot and steamy, and laden with strange scents and fragrances.

"What an uncivilized-looking place," complained Lura Lind. The blonde actress wrinkled her nose. "What's that sulphurous smell?"

"It comes from the Fire Sea—that's only a few miles north from here," Joan Randall informed her.

**J**ON Valdane, standing with his tall Saturnian friend, mopped his plump, pink face. "This air is too soupy to breathe."

They did not feel the increased gravitation, of course. The compact gravitation-equalizers which every interplanetary traveller wore at his belt compensated automatically for that.

"Sam—Sam Martin!" Jeff Lewis was shouting through the confusion. "Get those trucks out and start loading the stuff. Where the blazes is that guide we arranged to have meet us?"

The guide, a worried-looking green Jovian, appeared. "All is ready, sir," he reported. "There's a trail through the jungle to the Fire Sea, which your trucks can follow. But it is dangerous by the Fire Sea right now. It is the time of the Meeting of the Moons, which means

there is risk of tidal eruptions. You had better wait a few days."

"Wait, nothing," Jeff Lewis retorted. "We've got a schedule to maintain."

Curt Newton stood, looking around in assumed bewilderment at this scene that really was perfectly familiar to him. Actually, he was looking for Otho. Otho had disappeared, but now he reappeared. Newton noticed Grag being loaded with other properties on one of the rocket-trucks that had been run out of the *Perseus'* hold. The big robot was playing his part of lifeless automaton perfectly.

Jim Willard shouted to the Martian technician. "Lo Quior, Jeff says we're to go ahead with the anti-heaters and set up location-camp on the shore. Come on."

The first rocket-trucks, loaded with the massive anti-heaters, rattled away. Property trucks followed.

Jeff Lewis had rounded up his actors. "We've a few short scenes to make here at the spaceport and in the jungle. They'll show Ron and Lura fleeing from the men of the Legion of Doom who are pursuing them."

Ron King and Lura Lind, the romantic leads of "The Ace of Space," soon had enacted those scenes. They were filmed fleeing desperately from the spaceport into the jungle.

"All right, folks—now to the Fire Sea," Jeff Lewis barked. "Into this truck here. And hurry—Jupiter's days are short, you know."

Curt Newton entered the truck with the others and they rattled through the bumpy streets of Jungletown. They followed the other trucks northward along a rude Jovian roadway through the jungle.

The great fern-forest was a towering, solid wall on either side of them. Sucker-flies swarmed out of the green vegetation upon them. They glimpsed grotesque tree-octopi flitting through the ferns, and bulbous balloon-beasts floated by above them.

"What's that place over there?" asked Ron King, pointing in awe at distant, cyclopean black towers that rose out of

the jungle.

Captain Future knew what it was. In that Place of the Dead, as the Jovians called it, he had once reached the climax of one of his most perilous adventures. But he pretended ignorance, as Joan Randall answered the question.

"It's an ancient, ruined Jovian city," Joan said, her brown eyes fixed on those crumbling, enigmatic towers. "I was there once."

Curt Newton knew what was in her mind. He and she had both been there, that terrible night when his struggle with the Space Emperor had ended.

Jon Valdane and Kin Kurri had come along, though Su Thuar had not. The financier's chubby face was crimson. "Is it going to be much hotter than this?" he gasped.

The air was rapidly becoming more sulphurously superheated as the trucks wound on along the jungle trail to the Fire Sea. The jungle itself was thinning, as though withered by the increasing heat.

"Don't worry—Willard and Lo Quior will have the anti-heaters going at our location," Jeff Lewis reassured. "They went ahead."

A mile more, and the jungle seemed to wither away around them. The trail emerged onto a black, rocky cliff of solidified lava.

A dozen voices exclaimed in astonishment and terror. They had come out into full view of the Fire Sea, that lay beyond the cliff.

"Gods of Saturn, we can't stay long here," cried Kin Kurri.

"Jeff, it's suicide to try to film scenes in this place," exclaimed Lura Lind, her voice shrill with fear.

**T**HE scene ahead was enough to justify their protestations. Below and beyond this high black cliff there yawned a crimson ocean of molten lava which stretched to the distant horizons.

That vast sea of burning liquid rock flung a fierce, lurid glare into the sky. Little, sluggish waves furrowed its surface, and upon it danced changing flames. The wind from it was like the

breath of a furnace, superheated air charged with sulphur fumes.

"See, the boys have got the anti-heat-ers going," encouraged Jeff Lewis. "We'll be all right in a moment."

On a promontory overlooking the fiery flood, Jim Willard and Lo Quior had prepared a temporary location-camp. They had set up the powerful anti-heat-ers. These machines "killed" radiant heat vibrations by a damping counter-vibration, greatly lowering the temperature.

With relief, the actors and technicians disembarked from the rocket-trucks into this slightly more comfortable zone. The spectacled little Martian technician, Lo Quior, was setting up the cameras.

"All right, folks." Jeff Lewis called his troupe together. "The sooner we get these scenes made, the sooner we'll get out of here."

Captain Future edged toward Otho, who wore his "Rizo Thon" disguise since he would not be needed to play in these scenes.

"What did you do about Joan?" Newton asked in a whisper. "Remember, I'm counting on you to see that she goes no further on this trip."

Otho grinned. "Don't worry, I fixed it in Jungletown. She'll get a hurry call back to Earth from the Patrol. I know the Patrol code!"

Jeff Lewis was barking at Curt Newton. "Carson, you're not listening. Will you pay attention?"

Then Lewis continued. "This is one of the most important episodes of our picture. 'The Ace of Space,' as you know, re-creates the struggle of the Futuremen with the Legion of Doom. Most of it we'll film on Styx, but the scenes here and in Neptune's submarine cities are vital."

Joan Randall protested indignantly. "I told you before that the Futuremen didn't touch Jupiter in the Legion of Doom case. That was in the Space Emperor case."

Jeff Lewis groaned. "I know, I know, but can't I insert a few of their former adventures into my script to heighten the effect?"

Joan Randall looked as though she would protest further. But at that moment a breathless Jovian youngster came running into the camp and handed her a slip of paper. "Message for you that just came in on the telaudio."

Joan Randall frowned as she read, and then turned. "I've got to go back to Jungletown."

"There's no truck ready to return—," Jim Willard began.

"I can walk," she replied. "I'm not afraid of Jovian jungles."

**S**HE hurried away and disappeared in the jungle trail.

Curt Newton felt relief. Otho's strata-gem was working.

Then he noticed Valdane whispering rapidly to Kin Kurri. And in a moment the tall Saturnian also turned to leave the location-camp.

"It's too hot for me here," he explained. "I'm from a chilly planet, remember. I'm going back to the ship."

Captain Future felt sharp apprehension as he saw Kin Kurri hastily take the trail by which Joan had left a moment or so before. Why had Valdane sent the Saturnian after Joan Randall?

He started to follow. But Jeff Lewis' angry bellow halted him. "Where the devil are you going, Carson? Come back here."

Curt Newton was stymied. He turned and whispered rapidly to Otho. "Kin Kurri is following Joan. I don't like it. Go after them."

Otho nodded swift understanding. The android slipped away while Jeff Lewis was angrily lecturing Curt Newton.

Otho, as soon as he was out of sight in the jungle trail, started forward in a run. He burst at full speed around the windings of the trail, anxious to get within sight of the Saturnian.

Always reckless, Otho this time underestimated his man. For as he rounded a turn, Kin Kurri stepped suddenly from the fern-forest with an atom-pistol that he held trained directly on Otho's chest.

"Why are you following me?" the Saturnian demanded suspiciously. Then

conviction suddenly flared in his eyes. "You're a spy!"

## CHAPTER V

### *Quest of the Brain*



AFTER the troupe had left the *Perseus*, the Brain remained in the dark property-room of the hold. Men had come and carried out Grag, along with other objects and equipment. But they had not disturbed the Brain, since he would not be

needed for the scenes that were to be filmed by the Fire Sea.

Captain Future had known that. And that was why he had asked Simon Wright to search Valdane's quarters during their absence from the ship. It was the Futuremen's first real chance so far to look for clues to the chubby financier's mysterious plot against Magic Moon.

Simon Wright remained upon the shelf until the last rocket-trucks rattled away outside. Then the Brain glided off his shelf, moving soundlessly on the magnetic traction-beams he could emit from his queer 'body'.

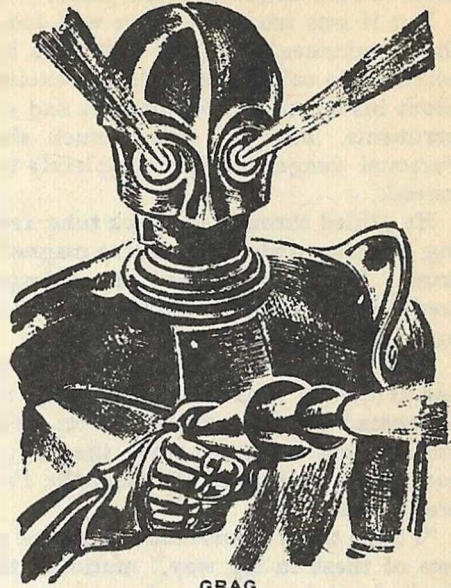
"Valdane probably left a guard outside his quarters," Simon thought as he floated to the door. "But perhaps not. I can soon see."

He extended an 'arm' that was a beam of magnetic force, and opened the door into the corridor. For a moment he poised, listening.

The ship was quiet. The telepicture actors and technicians were all gone, and the navigation-crew had been given leave in Jungletown.

The Brain glided along the corridors to the middle-deck passage. He hovered in its shadows, peering aft. A tough-faced Earthman with a belted atom-pistol, one of Valdane's 'bodyguards', stood outside his suite.

"That will make things a little more difficult," thought Simon Wright coolly.



GRAG

He glided back to the dark property-room. He had in mind a stratagem for entering Valdane's suite, which he had used more than once in similar situations, during the past.

He first procured a few small tools and instruments which he and Grag had hidden in a corner of the property-room. Then he glided up to the square grating that covered the opening of the ventilator.

The labyrinth of hollow tubes which forced re-oxygenated air through the compartments of the *Perseus*, were each two feet square. As soon as the Brain had removed the grating, he glided into the tube.

It was a close fit. He had known it would be. He also knew the amount of toil that lay ahead. But it was the one way by which he could enter Jon Valdane's quarters without being observed.

"The telepicture troupe will not return to the ship until late tonight," Simon Wright thought. "It should give me enough time."

Simon Wright was a strange personality. Some said that because he was a bodiless brain living in a mechanical case, he had lost all human emotions. That was not so. His emotions of love for and loyalty to Curt Newton had



never dwindled through the years.

But it was true that there was something unhumanly austere about his imperturbable calm. He could get excited about his scientific speculations and experiments, but not about much else. Personal danger left him completely unmoved.

He glided through the dark tube, feeling his way with his sensitive magnetic arms. The tube forked into a larger feeder-tube. He followed this unhesitatingly upward.

Presently he found his way blocked by one of the big fans which forced the re-oxygenated air through the system. The fan was not running, since the oxygenators had been shut off when the *Perseus* landed.

"I hope there are not more than one or two of these in my way," muttered the Brain, as he began to work.

With the tools he had brought with him, he proceeded to dismount the fan. It was a long, arduous task, working in complete darkness.

When he had removed the fan, he had to drag it back down to the property-room before he could again go forward. He reached the main feeder pipe of the middle deck and started aft. As he had expected, he soon encountered another of the fans.

This one was larger and cost Simon Wright considerably more toil and time before he had dismounted it. When he had finally won past it and turned into the port-side tube which served Valdane's quarters, he immediately ran into a third fan.

A man would have sworn, or at least uttered an ejaculation of annoyance. The Brain did neither. He set patiently to work once more, though he already had been in the pipes for hours.

**A** GAIN, when he finally got the third fan free, he had to haul it back to a point where he could get past it. Indomitably, he resumed his quest. And at last, success crowned his efforts. He came to the end of the tube, and looked out through the grating into the lounge-cabin of Jon Valdane's comfortable

suite.

Simon Wright watched and listened. It soon became evident that there was no one in the suite, though he could hear the guard shuffling outside its door.

Silently, he removed the grating. Then at last, he was able to glide down into the rooms he had expended so much toil to reach.

"*Hmph*, it's getting dark," he muttered to himself. "I shall not have much time."

Night was falling, outside the ship. Through the windows, the Brain could see four brilliant moons climbing into the sky to throw a flood of silvery brilliance upon the fern-forests around Jungletown. And the whole northern sky was a quaking, lurid red from the Fire Sea.

The dim radiance from the windows gave him sufficient illumination to conduct his search of the rooms. He looked around for a desk but there was nothing of the sort in this lounge-cabin, nor anything else of importance. Then he glimpsed a desk in the next cabin.

He glided into that room and began a rapid search of the desk. It contained many papers connected with Jon Valdane's multifarious financial affairs. But none of them seemed to bear on the Styx project.

Then the Brain found one paper which he keenly inspected. It was a map of Magic Moon. Upon it, the newly discovered diamond deposits were marked, as lying north of the interplanetary colony of Planet Town.

"This doesn't tell much," Simon thought. "Yet I hardly expected more."

Valdane was too clever to have left any details of his plot written down, he thought. Yet there was always a chance.

So the Brain was searching through the other papers, when he heard the corridor door of the adjoining lounge-cabin suddenly open.

Su Thuar's soft, slurred voice reached his ears. "Hurry," the Venusian criminal was surging. "Get those two cases in here before the others get back to the ship."

The Brain soundlessly closed the desk

and darted up to a place of concealment behind the door that connected the two rooms.

He heard something being set down in the lounge-cabin. Through the crack of the door he perceived that it was two small, oblong cases of light metal which Su Thuar and two others of Valdane's bodyguard had brought.

"What in space is the boss planning to do with this stuff?" asked one of the men curiously of the Venusian.

"That's none of our business," Su Thuar retorted. "You're paid to obey orders, and not to ask questions."

The man shrugged. "All right, all right—I just wondered why all the secrecy about the things."

"Valdane's orders were to buy them secretly from Jovians here, and bring them aboard the *Perseus* without being seen," said the Venusian.

Suddenly Su Thuar gave a loud gasp. "Has anyone been in this suite since I left?" he asked in sharp tones.

"Not a soul," replied the Earthman guard, Rosson. "I've been outside the door all the time."

"Someone has been here," snapped the Venusian. "The door into the next room was almost closed when I left. Now it's wide open."

The Brain, hovering in his precarious concealment behind that door, heard Su Thuar striding forward to investigate.

Simon Wright tensed himself mentally for desperate action. He could not escape discovery if Su Thuar searched the room. Nor could he regain the ventilation-tube without being seen.

Suddenly a wild yell rose in the night, outside the ship. It was echoed by a dozen excited voices.

"What's that?" demanded Su Thuar, stopping and turning around.

"I don't know—something must have happened," exclaimed the man Rosson. "Look, the whole north sky is blazing."

Su Thuar plunged out of the suite, into the corridors with the others following. "Lock and guard the door, Rosson," he called behind him. "The rest of you come on."

Simon Wright came out of his conceal-

ment like a flying shadow as the door was closed. He was startled to notice that the whole heavens northward were now flaming with an increased lurid red light. Voices were still shouting outside the ship, and men could be heard running.

The Brain delayed to examine the oblong metal cases Su Thuar had brought. He opened one, and was amazed. It contained nothing but a number of long, hollow wooden tubes. They were four-foot sections of thick, hard Jovian reeds, carefully polished.

"How in the world is Valdane planning to use these?" he muttered.

The excitement outside was increasing. The Brain hastily re-entered the ventilator tube. He refastened its grating, whose absence had fortunately escaped notice. To it, he attached a tiny instrument.

Then he made his way rapidly through the dark tubes to the property-room. As he reached that room, Simon Wright felt a shuddering vibration that shook the whole ship.

He heard a low, thunderous roar from the north, and saw that the flaming brilliance of the heavens had deepened in bloody hue. The Brain was appalled, for he had been on Jupiter enough to know what it meant.

"Tidal eruption!" a wild voice was yelling outside. "The Fire Sea has erupted right where the telepicture troupe was making scenes!"

## CHAPTER VI

### *Wrath of the Fire Sea*



BACK in the location-camp by the Fire Sea, Captain Future had felt a sharp anxiety as he saw Otho hurry away on the jungle trail after Kin Kurri and Joan. The only thing that moderated his worry about the girl was his confidence in the

resourcefulness of Otho.

Curt had not a doubt that Jon Valdane had sent the Saturnian politician after Joan Randall with a sinister purpose. Why hadn't he sent Su Thuar? Where was the Venusian criminal? He had disappeared when they first landed.

"Chan Carson!" came the angry voice of Jeff Lewis. "Will you stop dreaming and listen to me?"

Curt Newton had to turn and give his attention to the producer, as Lewis outlined the scenes they were to make in this dangerous location.

The stocky director appeared insensible to the hazardous nature of this place. The terrific spectacle of the bubbling, infernal Fire Sea that washed the base of this promontory affected him no more than if it had been a painted backdrop, in his intensity of purpose.

The others, though, were not so oblivious. Gasping and choking from the sulphurous fumes, they cast anxious glances at the molten ocean whose scorching heat partly penetrated even this zone protected by the anti-heaters. And Curt Newton, playing his part of Chan Carson, was careful to seem openly fearful.

"Now here's the plot of this episode of 'The Ace of Space,'" Jeff Lewis was saying crisply. "Lura and Ron, the two young sweethearts who are trying to give the Futuremen information about the Legion of Doom, are trapped here at the Fire Sea by some of the Legion. They're going to be killed, when Captain Future and Grag appear."

He turned to bark at the little Martian technical director. "Lo Quior, have you got that automaton ready?"

"All ready," affirmed the spectacled little Martian. "Just what will you want it to do?"

"It'll come on the scene with Captain Future — Carson, that is," Lewis explained. "It's Grag, helping Future to save Ron and Lura. It should run forward, pick up Legion men, and toss them aside."

"I can set its controls so it'll run forward and make the tossing motions," Lo Quior nodded. "The men can fake the rest."

Big Grag was standing, as immobile as the lifeless automaton he impersonated. Curt Newton grinned secretly. He knew how Grag must detest this sham.

Lo Quior began setting the control-buttons on the little switchboard on Grag's back. The Martian never dreamed that this was any other than the dummy automaton the property department had prepared.

"All right—get those cameras ready to roll," barked Jeff Lewis. "Ron, you and Lura take your places. You're breathless, exhausted by your flight from the Legion. You can't go any farther, for you're at the very shore of the Fire Sea. They've got you trapped—"

Lura Lind and Ron King began the scene. They crouched in the sunlight, silhouetted against the angry red immensity of the Fire Sea, gazing behind them in terror and despair.

Into the scene rushed the half-dozen actors who represented members of the malign Legion of Doom. They wore gray uniforms with a black disk on the shoulder. They rushed the man and girl, overpowered them and dragged them toward the edge of the cliff above the Fire Sea.

The producer made a sharp signal. In obedience, Curt Newton plunged forward, an atom-pistol clutched in his hand.

At the same moment, Lo Quior pressed the "starting button" on Grag's switchboard.

Grag came to life. The big robot stalked forward in a clanking rush, at Curt's side. Grag moved stiffly and jerkily, as though he were really the mechanical automaton which the others thought him.

"Captain Future!" yelled one of the Legion of Doom actors in simulated amazement and dismay.

"Get them, Grag!" shouted Curt Newton, repeating his line. His atom-pistol was spitting harmless low-powered charges as he charged.

Grag went into action when he reached the gray-uniformed actors. He swung his mighty metal limbs and knocked the

'Legion of Doom' about like tenpins. The actors yelled in real dismay, as Grag snatched Lura Lind out of their grasp so roughly it looked as if he were about to throw her into the Fire Sea.

**I**n fact, Grag was thoroughly enjoying a taste of action. He had been forced to stand so long in stiff immobility and silence that he now took pleasure in showing what he could do.

"Turn this automaton off before he throws me over the cliff," shrieked Lura Lind.

"Cut!" shouted Jeff Lewis. "Lo Quior, switch off that thing."

The little Martian ran forward and touched the dummy switches upon Grag's broad metal back.

Grag stiffened as though he really were an automaton whose power had just been cut off, thus allowing the thoroughly scared blonde actress to slip from his arms to the ground.

"That automaton is too dangerous to work with," Ron King declared indignantly. "It might have thrown Lura right over the cliff."

"It'll be all right next time—cut its power down, Lo Quior," Jeff Lewis ordered. "We'll have to do the scene over again."

Curt Newton had taken the opportunity to edge close to the immobile figure of Grag, and whisper angrily to him.

"Quit clowning, you big mutt. I want to get this over with and get out of here after Joan and Otho."

Jeff Lewis seemed indefatigable as he prepared to re-make the scene. Curt Newton was beginning to understand why this stocky Earthman was tops in the telepicture profession.

Was Lewis in on Jon Valdane's plot? They had been undecided about that. But Newton began to doubt that any man so earnestly wrapped up in his job as the producer, could have an ulterior purpose.

They made the scene over again, and then made it over again, as the Sun rapidly westered. The brief Jovian day was approaching its end, yet still Lewis

was not satisfied.

"You're too stiff, too unconvincing, Carson," he lectured Newton. "Why in blazes can't you act like Captain Future would?"

"It's because this place scares me," Newton said nervously. "Can't we get out of here?"

He pretended that increased fearfulness because he really did badly want to return to the ship, and find out what had happened to Joan and Otho. Otho had not returned, and Newton was increasingly worried.

"Why can't you show a little courage?" stormed Jeff Lewis. "How can I make a picture with a Captain Future who's afraid of his own shadow?"

The Jovian guide who had brought them here, plucked at Lewis' sleeve. "It would be wise to leave here," he declared nervously. "Night is at hand, and soon comes the Meeting of the Moons. That means danger."

"Will you go back to Jungletown and let me make a picture?" Lewis barked at him. "We've got night scenes to make here, too."

Captain Future understood the cause of the Jovian's nervousness. For Curt Newton knew Jupiter, as the producer and others did not.

When the four biggest moons of this planet clustered together in conjunction in the heavens, their combined gravitational pull always caused tidal disturbances of the Fire Sea. Sometimes, those disturbances were so powerful as to bring about the so-called tidal eruptions.

"Now we'll repeat that scene once more, and then we'll do the night-shots that show Future fighting off the rest of the Legion," Lewis ordered. "Snap into it, for there isn't much daylight left."

They barely completed the re-make before the Sun dropped behind the horizon. Darkness came down upon the face of the giant planet. In that darkness, the Fire Sea below them cast a baleful, lurid glow.

Up into the crimson glow climbed two of Jupiter's great moons, Ganymede

and Calypso. They were quickly followed by Io and then by Europa, the two latter moons racing to overtake their slower sisters.

The sluggish little waves of the Fire Sea increased in magnitude as the four moons drew toward conjunction. Big maelstroms bubbled in the flaming ocean. But Jeff Lewis ignored the uneasiness of the molten flood as he directed the filming of the night scenes.

"You're down on the ground, firing your atom-pistol at the other Legion men who have attacked," he outlined forcefully. "Ron is wounded, and he and Lura are crouching behind you. Camera!"

**C**APTAIN Future stretched prone, firing his atom-gun, his head silhouetted against the blazing glow of the Fire Sea.

Suddenly Curt Newton stiffened. He had felt a low, rhythmic reverberation of the ground upon which he lay. Its rhythm increased swiftly.

He knew what it meant, and the knowledge appalled him. It was the prelude to a tidal eruption. The Fire Sea, surging up into the cavernous spaces beneath these cliffs, was threatening to erupt in a geyser of flaming destruction at this very spot.

He jumped to his feet, having finished the scene. But Jeff Lewis shook his head dissatisfiedly.

"No, it won't do," declared the director. "We'll have to film that scene again."

Captain Future knew that he had to get them all out of this dangerous place at once. Destruction might burst forth at any moment, for the ominous rhythm of vibration was rapidly accelerating.

But none of them knew what it meant. The Jovian guide had returned to Jungletown. And if he told them what it meant, he would prove by so doing that he could not really be 'Chan Carson,' since no timid, Earthbound clerk such as he impersonated could know such a thing.

"Will you get back there and do that scene over again, Carson?" Lewis was

barking impatiently.

Curt Newton made up his mind swiftly. There was only one way to get them out of here without betraying his real identity. And that way, distasteful as it was to him, he must take.

He cried out in a voice he made shrill with fear. "I won't do the scene again," he shrieked. "I won't stay here any longer." He pointed trembling at the heaving Five Sea. "This place is too dangerous."

"Get hold of yourself, Carson," said Jim Willard disgustedly. "Do you want everybody to think you're a coward?"

"I don't care what they think—I'm not making any more scenes here."

Jeff Lewis threw up his hands. "I give up. That's what I get for hiring a scary clerk to play my main role."

His voice was bitter with disgust. "All right, folks—that's all here. Since Carson's got hysteria, we might as well make out with the scenes as we've filmed them. Load up the trucks, Jim."

The others, though themselves a little nervous, cast contemptuous glances at Curt Newton as they prepared to return to the ship. Captain Future knew that all of them now thought of him as a shivering craven.

But he was not thinking of that. He was holding his breath until they should be away from this increasingly dangerous spot. His keen ears told him that every moment the ominous underground rhythm of surging lava was growing stronger.

He drew a long breath of relief when the rocket-trucks finally rolled away from the seething Fire Sea and entered the jungle trail. And at that moment, it happened.

With a thunderous roar, the promontory they had just quitted exploded upward. The cliff had been cracked by the upward-surging lava, and the tidal eruption flung a terrific geyser of molten rock for hundreds of feet into the moons-light.

"Good grief, it's an eruption," yelled Jeff Lewis, his eyes protruding in the lurid light.

"Hurry up, before that lava falls back

on us," Curt Newton cried.

The drivers of the rocket-trucks jammed their cyc-pedals to the floor, and the vehicles lurched wildly forward along the jungle trail.

Cries of panic came from actors and technicians as they saw their peril. The roaring geyser of fiery lava, shooting high into the light of the four moons, was about to rain down on them.

Hot ashes and burning bits of rock hailed down around the racing trucks. A deluge of fire seemed breaking from the heavens. But the sudden spurt of the rocket-trucks saved them from being beneath the masses of molten lava that crashed down on the trail behind them.

**L**URA LIND was screaming in panic, others were chattering with terror, as the ground heaved sickeningly beneath the speeding vehicles. Curt Newton, seeing that they were out of danger, counterfeited a terror even more extreme than that of the others.

"Gods of space," exclaimed Lo Quior, his spectacled face pallid as he looked back at the lurid, fire-shot sky. "If we hadn't left just when we did, that eruption would have killed us all."

Jeff Lewis mopped his brow shakily. "You're right. It's a lucky thing that Chan Carson got so scared, after all."

Jon Valdane gave Captain Future a long, queer look.

"Yes, it is lucky," the financier murmured. "It's almost unbelievably lucky."

Curt Newton felt a chill of apprehension. Had he betrayed himself to Valdane's sharp eyes? Hastily, Curt Newton exaggerated his apparent panic.

"This world is a devil's planet," he shrilled. "We nearly got killed. I want to get away from here at once."

"Quiet down, Carson," snapped the producer. "There's no more danger now. And we're leaving Jupiter before morning. We've made all the scenes we'll need for this episode of the picture."

"I wish I were back at my dry-goods counter on Earth," Captain Future complained. "You didn't tell me how risky

that role was going to be."

Inwardly, as he kept up his pretense of dread, Curt Newton was tensely anxious to reach the ship and find out from Otho whether Joan was safe.

The tidal eruption behind them was still painting the northern heavens with a bloody light that mingled weirdly with the silver radiance of the four clustered moons. When they rattled into Jungletown, they found the interplanetary frontier-town full of excitement over the thing.

The trucks bumped across the rough spaceport to the big, looming bulk of the *Perseus*. And Captain Future felt a throb of thankfulness, as he saw that Joan Randall was there to meet them.

Joan Randall greeted Jeff Lewis indignantly. "That was a clever trick of yours to get rid of me—sending me a fake call from Earth!"

Jeff Lewis looked bewildered. "What in the world are you talking about?"

"Someone sent me a fake message to return to Earth headquarters," Joan said wrathfully. "I'd have gone, too, if I hadn't suspected it was a trick and called headquarters myself."

"I don't know anything about it," the producer said emphatically. "I've got troubles enough of my own right now. Sam! Lo Quior! Get ready for take-off. We're all through here on Jupiter."

Though disappointed by the failure of his stratagem to get Joan out of this dangerous expedition, Captain Future nevertheless felt relief that she had come to no harm from Kin Kurri.

He looked around and saw Kin Kurri himself. The tall, cadaverous Saturnian had apparently been waiting at the ship.

Curt Newton didn't see Otho, in the throng around the ship. Neither was Otho in the cabin they shared. Captain Future slipped down to the property-room, which by now had been re-loaded by Sam Martin's men.

"Simon!" he whispered in the dark room. "Grag! Has Otho been here?"

Grag came stalking from the dark corner in which he had been stiffly standing, and the Brain also glided to Curt Newton from the shadows.

"Otho has not been here," Simon Wright declared.

"I haven't seen the pest, since he left us at the Fire Sea," growled Grag.

"I sent him after Kin Kurri, whom I believed was trailing Joan," Newton explained. "Kin Kurri is here, and so is Joan, but where is Otho?"

"Lad, I found out something when I searched Valdane's suite today," reported the Brain. He went on to tell about Su Thuar's bringing the cases of hollow wooden tubes.

"So that's why Valdane left Su Thuar here—to get those aboard when no one was here to see," muttered Captain Future thoughtfully. "Now what possible use has he got in mind for hollow wooden tubes?"

"We may be able to find that out," the Brain said. "I took an Ear with me, and hung it inside the grating of the ventilator in Valdane's suite."

Captain Future uttered an approving exclamation. An Ear was a tiny super-sensitive microphone and audio-transmitter which could pick up any nearby sound or speech and transmit it to a tuned receiver.

Simon Wright had the little receiver of the Ear ready, and it was turned on. "I've been listening but haven't heard anything yet. They've not returned to their quarters."

"Listen—they're coming in now," said Grag.

They hung over the little receiver. From it came the sound of footsteps, then the slam of a door. And then Jon Valdane's voice, cold and wrathful.

"You bungled it, you fool," Valdane was accusing. "I sent you to make sure of the Randall girl, and here she is, still on the ship. Why didn't you catch up to her on the trail and do away with her so that it would look as though she'd been attacked by jungle beasts, as I ordered?"

There came the answering, whining voice of Kin Kurri, the Saturnian politician. "I couldn't do it. Someone trailed me. It was Rizo Thon, that Mercurian actor. He must have been a spy working with the Patrol."

"What happened?" Valdane demanded in alarm. "Where's Rizo Thon now?"

"Don't worry—Rizo Thon is dead," Kin Kurri answered. "I found he was trailing me, so I waited and took him by surprise and killed him. I tossed his body into the jungle. It'll never be found."

Curt Newton looked up at his two comrades, his face suddenly gray with pallor.

"If that's true, Otho is dead," he choked.

## CHAPTER VII

### *Danger in Space*



HORRIFIED Curt Newton and the two Futuremen looked at each other, stunned by the incredible news they had just heard.

Otho dead? Their minds simply could not digest the possibility of it. And as they stood petrified with consternation, there came the echoing clang of the ship's bells in sharp signal.

"Take-off time!" warned the loud-speakers throughout the *Perseus*. "Take-off time!"

"Otho can't be dead," cried Grag wildly. He started for the door. "We'll go back there and find him."

"Wait, Grag—it's too late now!" Captain Future ordered. "We're starting."

The roar of the keel rockets punctuated his words. The whole bulk of the *Perseus* lifted sharply into the air, and then the liner was roaring up through the lurid red glow of the Jovian night. "Listen!" whispered the Brain.

Voices again were coming from the tiny receiver. Valdane and his companions had stopped talking during the shock of take-off, but now their voices came again.

"If you really killed Rizo Thon, there may be trouble when he's missed," Jon

Valdane was saying. "You've botched the whole thing, Kin Kurri."

The voice of the Saturnian answered sullenly. "Why didn't you have Su Thuar handle it, then?"

"If I had, I would have made sure that the Randall girl did not get away," put in the silky voice of the Venusian criminal.

"Su Thuar was busy here at the ship, getting those cases of blow-guns aboard when no one was here to see," declared Valdane harshly.

"What good are those blow-guns going to be to us?" Kin Kurri demanded. "How are they going to help us accomplish anything on Styx?"

Jon Valdane's voice rose angrily. "You're still trying to learn what I'm planning, are you? I told you before and I tell you now, that you and Su Thuar will not be told the details of my scheme until we've reached Styx. I'm no fool. So long as I am the only one who knows the details of the scheme, there's no danger of them leaking out."

"If you're worrying about the Randall girl—" Kin Kurri began.

"Su Thuar will take care of the girl, before we reach Styx," Valdane interrupted. "But if Rizo Thon was a Patrol spy, there may be others aboard. What about this Chan Carson, whose cabin Rizo Thon shared?"

"Carson?" repeated the Saturnian incredulously. "That timid, stuttering fool? You surely don't have any suspicions of him?"

"Oh, well, I can make certain that Carson is no spy, if it'll make you feel any easier," growled Kin Kurri. "I know a way."

At that moment, Curt Newton and Grag and Simon heard from the receiver the sound of a door opening. Then came Valdane's angry command.

"Shut that door, Su Thuar. Do you want everyone on the ship to hear us?"

"It's getting stuffy in here," grumbled the Venusian. "You can hardly breathe."

"The ventilator must be out of order," Valdane retorted. "Take a look at it."

The Brain glanced sharply at Captain Future. "Lad, if he opens that venti-

lator—"

Even as Simon Wright spoke, there came from the receiver a loud sound of jarring metal. Then a cry in Su Thuar's voice.

"There's an Ear hung inside this grating," exclaimed the Venusian criminal. "Someone has been listening to everything we said."

"I told you there were other spies on this ship," cried Jon Valdane. "Smash that Ear, you fool."

Curt Newton and the two Futuremen heard a brief, shattering sound from the receiver. Then silence.

"They found the Ear," Newton exclaimed. "Now they'll be doubly on their guard."

"It's my fault, lad," murmured the Brain. "I didn't have time to replace the fans in the ventilating-tubes there, and they noticed it."

**G**RAG interjected an anxious question. "Chief, what are we going to do about Otho?"

Curt Newton's face softened. "I know how you feel, Grag. I'm worried too. But there's nothing we can do yet. I can't believe Otho is really dead. And if he's alive, he'll take care of himself and get word to us."

He went on frowning. "All we learned this way about Valdane's plans is that the hollow wooden tubes they brought aboard are native Jovian blow-guns. Why would Valdane want primitive weapons like blow-guns? There's only one possible way of getting at the secret in his mind."

Simon Wright spoke in his cold metallic way. "I think I understand, lad. You mean, to use a brain-scanner?"

"That's my idea," Curt Newton admitted. "What do you think, Simon? Could you build one here?"

Simon looked around the crowded equipment, instruments, costumes and sets that filled the property-room. "I could construct a fairly efficient brain-scanner from parts of the telepicture apparatus here, I think. But would it enable us to get Valdane's secret? You remember that when we invented the thing,



we found it only worked on the sub-conscious mind."

"There's a chance we can pry what we want out of Valdane's mind with it, if we're able to get him into unconscious condition," Curt Newton said. "In a few days, we'll reach Neptune. While we're there filming scenes in the submarine cities, we should have a chance to try our scheme. We've got to, for it's our last stop before reaching Styx! So you'd better get to work on the scanner at once, Simon."

"I'll do my best," promised the Brain. "But you must get back to your cabin. When they miss 'Rizo Thon', they'll come there looking for him and you must be there."

Captain Future hastened back through the dimly-lit corridors toward his own cabin. The *Perseus* was throbbing through the void, its rockets blasting with monotonous regularity as they hurled it on toward their next goal, the ocean-covered world of Neptune in whose strange submarine cities the next scenes of the telepicture were to be filmed. Curt Newton stopped suddenly as he entered the passage upon which lay his own cabin. A man was crouching at his cabin door, fumbling with the catch. The catch gave way and the crouching figure stealthily stepped into Curt Newton's dark cabin. He clutched in his hand a small, gleaming object.

Captain Future had already drawn his atom-pistol from inside his jacket. He tip-toed silently but swiftly down the corridor. He reached his open door and vaguely glimpsed the dark figure of the stealthy visitant, just inside it.

Curt Newton leaped in, his weapon raised. His pistol-barrel rang down on the head of the shadowy prowler. The man slumped back down in the doorway. By the dim light from the corridor, Curt Newton now saw the senseless figure's face.

"Kin Kurri," he exclaimed, as he recognized the pale blue countenance of the Saturnian politician. Now what the blazes—"

Then he noticed that the Saturnian held in his hand a small bottle. Captain

Future inspected it. It contained a colorless oil which he recognized as the oil used to remove artificial make-up.

"So that's why he sneaked in here when he thought I would be sleeping," Curt Newton muttered.

"What have you done to Kin Kurri?" a clear voice suddenly demanded.

Captain Future turned, dismayed. It was Joan Randall. She had been coming along the corridor but had stopped at his open door. He realized instantly how incriminating it must look to her, to find him stooping thus over Kin Kurri's senseless body.

"You've stunned him," she explained as she perceived the bruise on the Saturnian's forehead. Her brown eyes flashed. "I'm going to call the captain to investigate this."

Joan Randall turned to carry out her intention, but Captain Future hastily grasped her arm. "No, you mustn't do that."

"Why shouldn't I, Chan Carson?" she flared. "I knew you were a timid little coward but I didn't think you were vicious enough to make an attack like this on an unoffending man."

CURT Newton desperately realized that as things stood he could not dissuade her from giving the alarm. To her, this looked like an utterly unprovoked attack by him upon Kin Kurri.

But if she gave the alarm, if the ship's officers and company were aroused, it would ruin his own plans. He realized that there was only one way in which he could insure Joan's silence.

"Joan, listen," he begged earnestly. "You must be silent. This is Curt speaking. I'm not really Chan Carson—I'm Curt Newton."

Joan Randall's brown eyes grew hot with scorn. "You're trying to deceive me with a clumsy trick. And it won't work."

"It's true," Captain Future insisted. "I've been playing the part of Chan Carson, from the first. I'm on board on a dangerous mission—"

He saw that she did not believe a word of it, that she was about to shout an

alarm. Racking his brain for a means of convincing her, Curt suddenly thought of something.

"Listen, Joan. You were with the Futuremen on Aar, the world of Deneb, a world no one else in the System has ever visited. If I tell you the name of the leader of the Clan of the Winged Ones on Aar, won't that convince you that I'm Captain Future?"

Joan Randall looked startled. "How can you know anything about our trip to Aar?"

"I know, because I was with you," Curt Newton retorted. "The name of the leader of the Clan of Winged Ones there is Skeen. Isn't it?"

It convinced the girl. And a wonderful change came over her face. Her brown eyes misted suddenly as she clutched his arm. "Curt, it's really you? But I didn't dream that you'd got back to the System yet."

"I didn't tell you, because I didn't want to drag you into this danger," he said, and added with a groan. "And now

you're in the thick of it in spite of my efforts."

"But what's it all about?" she asked wonderingly. "Why is Kin Kurri here?"

"It's a plot of Jon Valdane's against Styx, and Su Thuar and Kin Kurri are his right-hand men," Captain Future answered rapidly. "And now it looks as though Kin Kurri has begun to suspect my imposture. For he sneaked in here with a bottle of make-up remover. He must have intended to drug or overpower me, and then see if I am really Chan Carson."

At that moment came a sound of anxious voices and footsteps hurrying along the corridor toward them. Curt Newton stiffened.

"Your first outcry must have been heard," he exclaimed in dismay.

It was Jim Willard who came down the corridor, and behind the young assistant director were Lo Quior and Su Thuar.

"What happened, Joan?" Willard

asked her anxiously. "We were just coming down to turn in, when we thought we heard you cry out."

Then he stopped as he and the other two men caught sight of Kin Kurri lying unconscious, half inside Curt's cabin.

Su Thuar's drowsy eyes instantly flared with suspicion, and his hand went to his hidden weapon. "What's going on here?" he snapped.

Captain Future answered with all the tremulous shakiness that befitted Chan Carson. "It's my fault. I heard someone coming into my cabin in the dark. I was scared to death, so I hit him with a chair and knocked him out, before I found out it was Kin Kurri."

"You would get hysterical over nothing, and do that," Jim Willard said disgustedly. "Of all the scary people, you're the worst I've ever met."

Su Thuar was still glaring suspiciously, but Lo Quior bent and gave the Saturnian first-aid. Kin Kurri revived and looked about in a bewildered fashion.

"Something hit me," he said hoarsely. "Oh, my head!"

"It was Chan Carson," said Willard. "He lost his nerve and got panicky when he heard you come into his cabin in the dark."

Kin Kurri darted a sharp glance at Curt Newton. As he did so, the Saturnian was hastily stuffing the bottle into his pocket.

"I remember now," Kin Kurri said lamely. "I came to Carson's cabin to see Rizo Thon, who shares it. I wanted to ask him something about his home-world, Mercury. Then as I stepped in, everything exploded."

"I'm terribly sorry," Curt Newton said earnestly. "I guess I did lose my nerve. But I'd been lying worrying about the submarine scenes we have to make when we get to Neptune, and when you came in in the dark I got scared."

**J**IM Willard interrupted. "Where is Rizo Thon?"

Curt Newton looked blank. "I don't know. I haven't seen him since we left Jupiter."

"Nor have I," said Willard, frowning. "There's something queer about this."

Captain Future realized the danger of his situation. If he made a wrong move now, he would betray himself and wreck any chance he had of penetrating Valdane's secret schemes.

Jon Valdane did not yet really suspect him, he felt sure. The financier had suggested such a thing merely as a possibility. Kin Kurri had apparently come on his own initiative to investigate that possibility. For Su Thuar had been unmistakably astonished to find the Saturnian here.

"I'm going to look for Rizo Thon," Jim Willard was exclaiming.

He and Lo Quior hurried away. Su Thuar helped Kin Kurri aft to their own quarters, the Saturnian holding his bruised head and looking malevolently back at Curt Newton.

Joan Randall and Curt Newton were left alone together in his cabin for the moment. She came swiftly into his arms.

"Joan," he murmured, holding her, "it's been torture not being able to tell you who I was."

He explained rapidly what little he had learned of Jon Valdane's nefarious scheme to get control of the rich diamond-deposits of Styx.

"In a couple of days we reach Neptune," Curt Newton concluded, "and Simon and I are going to make a final try there with a brain-scanner to expose this plot. It'll be difficult, but it's the only chance we have."

They were interrupted by the return of Jim Willard. With him now were Jeff Lewis, and Jon Valdane himself.

"Rizo Thon is not anywhere on the ship," Jim Willard told Joan. "He must have missed boarding it when we left Jupiter."

"Perhaps he was caught by that terrible Fire Sea eruption that we escaped," Curt Newton suggested nervously. "He didn't leave the location-camp at the same time we did, you remember."

"That's what must have happened," Jon Valdane agreed quickly. His chubby pink face assumed a look of sorrow. "Poor chap."

Jeff Lewis swore. "This would have to happen to me. Well, there's only one thing we can do. Somebody else will have to double in the role of Otho. Cesar Crail, our heavy, would be the best bet."

"Crail doesn't look the part, and he isn't good at make-up," Willard pointed out.

"I know, but the Neptune submarine scenes will all be in sea-suits so he can get away with it there," Lewis replied. "By the time we get to Styx, we'll work out effective make-up for him."

"Will I have to go out undersea when we make the Neptune scenes?" Curt Newton asked in trembling tones.

"Yes, Carson, you will," barked the producer. "And I'll have no complaints from you about it. I'm getting fed up with your scariness."

Joan gave Curt a look of contempt, simulated to perfection.

"It's a libel on Captain Future to have him played by such a man as that," she said scathingly. Then they all departed, leaving Curt Newton alone.

Captain Future's assumed fearfulness faded into an expression of real worry as he looked after them. He realized that every hour of their flight, every mile that they came nearer to Magic Moon, increased Joan Randall's danger. For her sake, he must not fail at Neptune!

## CHAPTER VIII

### *In Neptunian Depths*



LOUD sharp words of an announcement from the loudspeaker system of the ship awoke Curt Newton, a few mornings later.

"Approaching Neptune!"

When he went up to the promenade deck, he found the whole company gathering there to gaze with wondering amazement at the world ahead. Few of them had ever been so far as this remote

planet before.

As the *Perseus* had hurtled toward it in the last days, Jeff Lewis had kept his actors working steadily on interior scenes for "The Ace of Space." Captain Future had been unable except at 'night' to steal down to the property-room to help Simon Wright construct a brain-scanner.

Grag had been of little help in such delicate work. And Grag was obsessed with a desire for vengeance for Otho. The wrathful robot flamed with a consuming hatred of Jon Valdane and his associates. Curt Newton could only restrain Grag by assuring him that Otho could not be dead.

Curt Newton had had no further visitations like that of Kin Kurri to his cabin. But it seemed to him that the Saturnian constantly watched and trailed him through the ship, and he had been on his guard.

"We'll try our scheme tomorrow at Neptune," he had told Simon Wright the 'night' before. "You'll be left in the ship when the rest of us go out to make the submarine scenes. And Jon Valdane will stay here too—he won't risk his precious skin by going out. So I'll pretend to get lost, and will slip back secretly to the ship."

"I'll keep the aft emergency airlock open for you," the Brain had agreed. "But be careful, lad — you know the dangers of Neptune's sea."

Captain Future was grimly remembering that warning as he stared in pretended wonder with the others at the enlarging world ahead.

"But there isn't anything on it but water," exclaimed Ron King, astonished. "The whole planet is ocean."

The *Perseus*, its bow rockets thundering to brake its fall, dropped in past the big moon, Triton, and hovered above the heaving, shoreless sea. In the pale light of sunrise, the watery wastes stretched featureless to the distant horizons. They could glampse great fish leaping high out of the waves to escape black, reptilian pursuers.

"There isn't a speck of land on this whole world," marveled Lura Lind.

"There are some islands in the northern hemisphere," corrected Jim Willard. "That's where the human Neptunians live. But we're not going there."

"Where are we going to land then?" asked Ron King anxiously.

Lo Quior grinned at them. "We're not going to land at all. We're going right down to the bottom of this sea."

A little outcry of alarm went up from the group at this disconcerting information. Curt Newton made his own voice the most fearful.

"Now quiet down, folks," ordered Jeff Lewis bluntly. "There's no danger whatever in the *Perseus* going down to the bottom. A space-ship is built to keep air in, and it will keep water out just as well. And our rocket-tubes are fitted with baffles so we can navigate underwater."

The *Perseus* struck the waves and sank beneath their surface. Instantly the space-ship was encompassed by an eerie green gloom. The waters were all about them, pressing against the glassite walls through which they stared.

The ship continued to sink. The green hue of the water, seen through the ports, darkened. But they could make out a multitude of strange fish and sea-creatures outside the walls, which had been attracted by their lights.

Then the *Perseus* began to navigate cautiously above the weird forests of the ocean floor, moving in widening circles. The muffled throbbing of the baffled rockets was loud in their ears.

"We're looking for a city of the sea-folk," Jim Willard explained. "There's supposed to be one in this region."

"What if they don't like the idea of our visiting them to make scenes?" asked Jon Valdane doubtfully.

"They'll be all right," said Davis. "They're not exactly human, but they're semi-civilized and friendly now."

**T**HE lights caught two monstrous *Tursals* engaged in a ferocious underwater struggle. Then as the two creatures separated and fled from the bril-

liance, a sharp cry came from the bridge-room.

"Submarine city two miles ahead."

A moment later, the bow-rockets blasted and then the *Perseus* sank downward toward an open glade in the weird polyp-forest.

They all strained their gaze ahead in an endeavor to make out the outlines of the submarine city. But only a dim glimpse came to their watching eyes through the dusky water of a distant mass of black, cubical buildings surrounding a central pyramid.

Then they lost all sight of the distant city as the space-ship sank down into the glade in the forest, and landed in the ooze.

Jeff Lewis now went into action.

"Get the suits ready, Jim," he barked. "Lo Quior, you've got the cameras fixed for underwater work, haven't you? Get them ready to take out. And remember, every technician is to carry an atom-gun."

The indefatigable "producer" herded his troupe down to the main airlock of the lower deck. There Jim Willard issued the sea-suits they were to wear.

The suits were simply space-suits with glassite helmets, but they had been especially strengthened and made more rigid to withstand the crushing weight of waters. Curt Newton, as he started donning his, saw Joan Randall climbing into hers. She had previously signified her intention of accompanying the undersea party.

It had been Captain Future's idea that she should, as he had explained to her in the only chance he had had to speak with her secretly.

But Curt Newton was disconcerted to see that Su Thuar was also donning one of the sea-suits. The Venusian was going to accompany them!

"I'd like to see what this Neptunian ocean is like," he said.

Curt Newton edged to Joan's side.

"I don't like Su Thuar's going along," he whispered. "He may try to get rid of you out there. Be sure to stay close to Lewis and the others after I slip away."

The cameras and other properties, including Grag, had already been taken outside by Lo Quior and the technicians. Now Lewis gathered his actors into the big main air-lock, and its inner door was closed.

The outer door was slowly opened. Sea-water rushed in upon them and filled the lock. They stepped out of it, one by one, onto the oozy bottom of the Neptunian ocean.

Jeff Lewis' voice came to them through the short-range telaudio built into their suits.

"This way. Keep together, and follow our lights. Remember, it'll be dangerous to straggle here."

The producer and Lo Quior led the way through the submarine polyp forest, lighting their way by krypton spotlights attached to their belts. Behind them, technicians hauled flat metal sledges on which were loaded the big cameras and other equipment that would be needed.

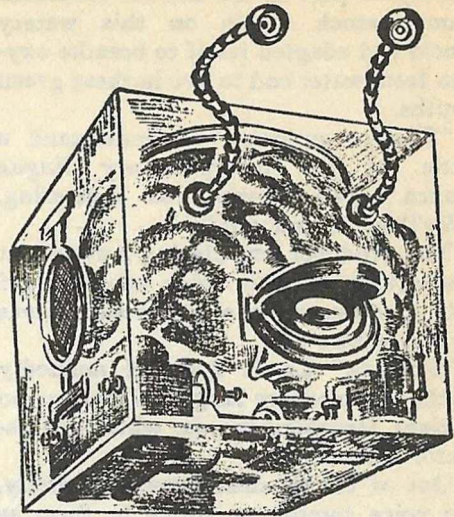
Curt Newton noticed Grag lying prone one of those sledges, and grinned to himself. Water could not hurt Grag, for the robot did not breathe. He imagined that Greg was chuckling at getting a free ride.

"Look out for 'swallowers,' boys," Jeff Lewis warned the armed men around their party. "I'm told they're the most dangerous beast in this ocean."

Weird little caravan marching through the eternal dusk of the Neptunian sea-floor. In their stiff suits and gleaming helmets, they looked themselves like grotesque denizens of the deep.

Their feet sank into the ooze for inches with each step. All about them loomed the strange polyp forest, a labyrinth of branching white and green growths whose interlaced limbs stirred in the currents with repellent semi-animal life. Shoals of "solar-fish" rocketed away startledly in front of them. A big, harmless "breather" lumbered clumsily off through the submarine forest.

"Look out! There come a couple of *ursals!*" came Jim Willard's voice in a yell of sudden warning.



THE BRAIN

**H**ASTILY the armed men leveled the heavy atom-guns which could operate as well under water as in air or space. Two of the big, black dinosaur-like reptiles were swimming toward them from straight ahead.

"There's something on the backs of those creatures," craid Newton hastily. "Wait."

The two sea-men rode their reptilian steeds right up to the telepicture party, apparently having been attracted by the lights. The two riders dismounted and approached.

"My stars those things are half-fish and half-human," came Ron King's awed exclamation.

"They're simply an extreme evolutionary adaptation of the ancient human stock to the Neptunian habitat," Joan Randall declared.

The sea-men had hairless heads, and their faces were quite human in features. But at the base of their throats were open gills that pulsed regularly as they breathed the water.

Their short, powerful arms were finished at the elbows and wrists. The two legs were almost grown together to form a powerful, tail-like limb that ended in fins instead of feet. They wore garments made of twisted sea-weed fibers woven upon metal strands.

Here was a strange offshoot of hu-

manity—a part of the ancient Denebian human stock which on this watery world had adapted itself to breathe oxygen from water and to live in these green depths.

"They're supposed to understand a little of the interplanetary *lingua franca*," Jeff Lewis was muttering. "We'll soon find out."

The producer was closing a switch at his belt, so that his voice was diverted into a resonator to set up sound-waves in the water.

"Friends," Lewis declared muffledly in the rudimentary language based upon ancient Denebian words, which all galactic races know.

One of the sea-men answered hastily, his voice coming muffledly to them as sound-waves through the water.

"What's he talking about?" Jeff Lewis asked.

Captain Future understood. The seaman was excitedly warning them that some of his people had recently sighted a "swallow" in this polyp forest. "Swallows" were the most dreaded monsters of this world.

The two sea-men rode ahead on their *ursals*, and when the company of humans emerged from the polyp forest at the edge of the submarine city, they were greeted by hundreds of the sea-folk.

Fantastic undersea metropolis it seemed even to Captain Future, who had seen these submarine cities before. And to the eyes of the others, the scene was incredible.

The massed cubical buildings of the city had been constructed of heavy black stone quarried from the ocean floor. The windows and roofs of the structures were closed by metal bars, to prevent the incursion of the more dangerous sea-creatures.

Rocketing through the grotesque streets in swimming swarms came the sea-folk—men, women, little children. They whirled and dived excitedly all around the humans, who in their heavy sea-suits seemed stiff and clumsy by comparison. And many of the sea-folk rode tame *ursals*.

"Set up the cameras here, Lo," ordered

Jeff Lewis. "Get those krypton spotlights going. We'll make our first scenes here."

The swarming, friendly sea-folk recoiled a little when the powerful krypton lights, powered by compact batteries, were switched on. Their beams streamed through the dusky waters to illuminate the weird city.

"Carson—Chan Carson!" called the producer. "Take your place over here. Turn on the automaton, Jim. Carson, you walk beside it."

At that order, Jim Willard touched one of the dummy switches on Grag's back, and immediately Grag started walking stiffly forward through the waters like the automaton he was supposed to be. Curt Newton kept beside him, tramping unsteadily toward the black city.

The sea-folk, not comprehending that the scene was make-believe, swarmed eagerly toward Curt Newton and Grag. It made a striking scene.

"That's swell," Jeff Lewis exclaimed eagerly. "Pretend to be greeting them, Carson."

**CURT NEWTON** obeyed. But Grag, stalking stiffly on through the swarming sea-people, walked straight into one of the big, tame *ursals*.

The dinosaur-like creature reared alarmedly at sight of the approaching robot. Its snaky head darted forth and grasped Grag's metal arm. Grag swung a stiff blow with the other arm that knocked the *ursal* back from him. The creature darted away through the water.

"Fine," exulted Lewis. "That little scene was accidental but it'll be a knockout. Turn the automaton off, Jim."

"Now, Carson, the next scene shows you going out of the city into the forest," the director continued. "You've rested and the friendly sea-folk have told you about a sunken space-ship in the polyp-forest. You think maybe you can use it to get away in, so you're going to hunt for it."

Captain Future, listening, perceived the chance he had been waiting for—the chance to get away and slip back

secretly to the *Perseus*.

He obeyed Lewis' directions, and as the cameras ground he tramped back out from the city toward the polyp-forest. He moved now without the dragging heaviness. Curious sea-folk swam with him as he went.

In a moment, Newton was inside the dense polyp-forest and out of sight of the city and telepicture company. At once, Captain Future plunged through the submarine forest in the direction of the distant ship!

Lewis' order rang from the telaudio receiver inside his helmet.

"Carson, come on back out of there."

Curt Newton answered with a wail of terror. "I'm lost," he said. "I got turned around in here and I don't know which way you are."

"The helpless fool," he heard Jeff Lewis exclaim angrily. "Jim, take a couple of men and go in and find him."

Captain Future plunged on through the dusky polyp-forest, startling shoals of fish, tramping around huge empty shells deserted by "tenant-clams." The sea-folk with him turned back now, as though afraid.

But Curt Newton hardly noticed these things, for his mind was on the dangerous task ahead. He must get back into the *Perseus* unobserved so that he and Simon Newton could overpower Jon Valdane and try the brain-scanner on him. And he didn't have much time!

Curt Newton suddenly recoiled as a giant, disk-shaped white mass rose unexpectedly out of the polyp-groves ahead of him. It was incredibly huge, with staring, saucer-like eyes that glared as it rushed toward him.

With a throb of horror, he recognized it as that most awful of Neptunian terrors, a "swallower." There was no chance to flee. And he had only his puny stage-property atomic pistol with which to fight it!



## CHAPTER IX

### *Undersea Trap*



WITH quick comprehension, Joan Randall immediately understood when "Chan Carson" terrifiedly reported himself lost in the submarine forest.

Captain Future had told her that he would use some such pretext to slip back

to the *Perseus*, where he and Simon Wright would subject Jon Valdane to the inquisition of their brain-scanner.

"You stay with Lewis and the rest, Joan," he had earnestly warned her. "Grag will be there, too, and you'll be safe from Su Thuar."

But the girl was rebellious. If there was one thing she hated, it was being left out of things because Newton felt anxious about her safety. And she had secretly resolved to follow him back to the ship and share in his precarious attempt there, whether he liked it or not.

Standing in her sea-suit with the others at the edge of the dense submarine forest, she heard the voice of Jeff Lewis angrily calling to "Chan Carson."

"Carson, don't wander around in there," the producer was yelling. "Jim and a couple of the men are coming in to find you."

No answer came back on the short-range telaudio, although Jeff Lewis repeated the order.

The producer swore. "He's wandered out of range of our telaudios. That Carson would lose his head and give way to panic the moment he found himself alone."

Jim Willard and Lo Quior were beating through the polyp forest, into which Curt Newton had disappeared. They tramped back out of the submarine groves a few minutes later, trudging through the ooze.



"Can't find him, Jeff," Willard reported. "He's probably wandering around in circles."

"And these sea-people seem so scared of that part of the forest that they won't search him out for us," muttered Lewis. "Well, he's in no immediate danger, for his suit has enough oxygen for many hours. You and your men can keep hunting for him, Jim. The rest of us will go on with the other scenes until you bring him back here."

And the producer gave directions for the filming of scenes inside the grotesque black submarine city of the swarming sea-folk.

"Take the cameras right inside the city, Lo. I want a scene showing Ron and Lura arriving. They've picked up a signal Captain Future sent out from the sunken space-ship he found, and have come to help."

The krypton spotlights and big cameras were moved into the edge of the city. The friendly sea-folk, highly intrigued and mystified by all that was going on, darted in swarms around and through the brilliant beams of the spotlights.

Grag was placed in the center of the scene, and Lo Quior touched his "control-buttons." Grag immediately responded in automaton-like fashion by waving his arms stiffly in greeting as Ron King and Lura Lind came tramping into the scene.

While this was going on, Joan Randall had followed Jim Willard and his two men back to the edge of the submarine forest.

"I'll help you hunt for Carson," she offered. "I know a little about these submarine forests."

"And I'll help too," said a smooth voice on the telaudio.

Joan Randall turned, sharply. It was Su Thuar's voice. The Venusian had unobtrusively stayed near her all during their undersea march and during the scenes at the sea-folk city. And he was still sticking to her.

She remembered Curt Newton's warning against the Venusian. Valdane

wanted to get rid of her before they went on to Styx. Su Thuar had probably accompanied them with that purpose in mind.

The girl felt more vexation than apprehension. She was not afraid of the Venusian. But if he stuck too closely to her it would make it difficult for her to steal away secretly from this search, and follow Newton back to the ship. And that was what Joan intended to do.

"All right, we'll separate and beat through this whole sector of the forest," Jim Willard said. "Keep within telaudio range of each other and keep calling Carson. Sooner or later, we'll get an answer."

The young assistant director added an anxious warning.

"Don't go too far in, Joan. It could be dangerous. And Carson isn't worth it."

**J**OAN RANDALL smiled to herself as she started into the polyp forest. How astounded all these people would be if they knew the real identity of the timid, fearful Chan Carson for whom they showed such open contempt.

She kept up a pretense of searching as she tramped through the dusky glades of grotesque polyp-growths. The small krypton-light she wore at the belt of her sea-suit like the others furnished a limited illumination, and she could see the lights of the others close by.

She heard, on her suit-receiver, the telaudio calls of Jim Willard and the others to the missing "Chan Carson." She called herself, to keep up the pretence. But actually, she was looking for a chance to get away from them and start back to the ship after Curt Newton.

Joan Randall was soon out of sight of Willard, in the dense submarine forest. But on her other side, Su Thuar persistently kept within sight of her lamp's beams. Undoubtedly, the Venusian was trailing her.

He had made no attempt to attack her. She did not fear such an attack, for she was on the alert and had her own

efficient atom-pistol at her belt. But she was becoming angry at her inability to slip away while the Venusian was watching her.

Joan decided to lose no more time. She entered a thicket of giant, waving sea-grasses which she knew concealed her completely. At once, she turned off her belt-light. And then she moved as rapidly as possible through the dusky undersea forest in the direction of the ship.

She was now out of sight of Su Thuar's light, and knew that she had given the Venusian the slip. Jim Willard's voice called her anxiously, but she did not answer. Presently the calls faded away, indicating that she was now out of range of the short-radius telaudio.

Joan Randall hurried on through the dusky undersea forest. The *Perseus* was still at least a mile and a half away, and she had wasted nearly an hour in the pretended search and in getting away from the Venusian. She must hurry if she was to have any chance of joining Curt Newton and Simon Wright in the ship before they attempted their daring expedient.

Shoals of brilliant solar-fish rushed away from her through the waving polyps. The groping tenacle-like arm of a hydra-polyp wrapped around her arm once, but she tore it loose without difficulty and stumbled on through the ooze.

She shrank back suddenly as a huge, black turtle-like creature rose in the shadowy waters ahead of her. Then she laughed shakily to herself. It was only one of the big, harmless "breathers," rising from its burrow on one of its endless trips to the surface to refill its lung-sacs with air.

"I suppose Curt will be angry when I show up to help him," she thought a little apprehensively. "But he might as well learn right now that I'm in on this case with him."

She wondered if Captain Future's brain-scanner would work. She had unlimited faith in the wizard mastery of science of Newton and the Brain. Yet, to snatch a man's secret thoughts from

his mind—

Joan Randall suddenly stopped in alarm. The air inside her helmet was suddenly becoming thick and foul.

"The oxygen-tube must be clogged," she thought quickly, and rapped sharply on the aluminoy tank of compressed oxygen at her belt.

There was no resulting flow of purified air. But her rapping did have an effect that dismayed her.

The oxygen-gauge on the side of the tank had shown twenty hours' supply of the gas remaining to her. But when she rapped the tank, the needle of the gauge suddenly swung jerkily to "Empty."

"But it can't be empty," she thought bewilderedly. "I've only been out here in this suit a couple of hours."

She hammered anxiously at the tank. There was no response. The needle remained at "Empty." And every moment now, the air inside her helmet was becoming more hot and unbreathable.

Joan came to an appalling realization. The tank had been tampered with! It had been emptied of all but a couple of hours' supply of oxygen, and the gauge had been set to show "Full."

"Su Thuar," she exclaimed. "He did that before we left the ship. That's the way Valdane worked out to get rid of me."

**S**HE understood with terrible clarity now, why the Venusian had made no attempt to harm her. Su Thuar hadn't needed to. All he had had to do was to wait till her oxygen ran out and she died from asphyxiation. He had trailed her merely to make certain that happened.

Joan's head was already reeling from the lack of pure air. Since the processes of oxygenation and purification had stopped, she was breathing the air in her suit over and over. In a very few minutes, she must lose consciousness and perish from asphyxiation.

She called desperately to Curt Newton. There was no answer. He was out of telaudio-range of her, ahead.

"I can't make it to the ship," she

thought wildly. "And that's the only possible chance—"

The *Perseus* was still more than a mile away in the submarine forest. There alone, was hope of life. And she could never reach it.

Death stared Joan Randall in the face. She would perish in the next few moments, unless she found air.

Find air here at the bottom of the sea? It seemed a bitter mockery to ask the question. Then into her reeling mind came sudden remembrance.

There was a tiny bit of air at the bottom of the Neptunian sea, in certain places. She had passed one of those places only a few minutes before.

Joan Randall turned and staggered back through the polyp-forest the way she had come. Her brain was spinning from lack of oxygen, and her blood pounded in her temples.

She flashed on her belt-light, desperately searching. Then she saw what she was seeking. It was the "breather's" burrow which she had passed shortly before, from which the creature had risen.

It was no more than a wide, round tunnel down into the floor of the sea. That dark, gaping passage seemed a fearsome place to enter. But Joan Randall knew it was her only chance of living a little longer. She dropped down into the black opening.

The tunnel which the big, turtle-like "breather" had burrowed went down through ooze and then through soft coral. It sank into the coral for twenty feet, then turned and ran horizontally, then rose again.

Joan Randall, gasping and only half-conscious from the roaring in her ears, scrambled up the last section of the queer tunnel. She emerged into the big, hollow pocket in the coral that was the "breather's" home.

This pocket was filled, not with water, but with air! A bubble of air trapped here at the bottom of the sea.

The "breathers" were air-breathing sea-creatures, like the whales of Earth. Survivals of former Neptunian land-life, Curt Newton had told her, who had adapted themselves to the sea when it

covered all eroded Neptune. A grotesque wonder of planetary biology.

The creatures, on each of their trips to the surface, could store their lung-sacs with enough air for many hours of life underwater. And they could bring air down in their lung-sacs to the cunningly excavated burrows in which it remained trapped, to furnish oxygen to the young of the species who could not yet ascend to the surface.

Joan was nearly unconscious as she clambered up from the water into this dark, airfilled pocket. Her arms seemed leaden and useless as she tried to unfasten her helmet. Her lungs were on fire.

Then she got the helmet off. And air—hot, thick, fishy-smelling but still blessed air—rushed into her nostrils.

Her head cleared a little as she gulped in the air. It was highly compressed by the pressure of the waters that trapped it here. It made her lungs labor to breathe it, but her gasping ceased.

Joan flashed her light around. The burrow was like a big wet cavern of dark coral. Half its floor was water, and the other half was a slightly raised ledge upon which she had pulled herself.

She discovered that she shared the ledge with a brood of five young "breathers." Looking much like big black turtles with soft skin backs instead of shells, they blinked at her light solemnly.

"What a place," she thought, with a little shudder. "I've got to get out of here somehow."

She tried the telaudio in her helmet, calling again. But there was still no answer.

The girl began to feel desperate. The air in this pocket would not last her for many hours. And there was no possible way of using it to replenish her oxygen-tank so that she could escape from here.

Her senses swam from the thick, fishy odor. She had a chill realization of the hopelessness of her situation. Even if Curt Newton searched for her, how would he ever find her in this place?

She had faced numberless perils before this, but here alone, helpless, in a strange world—her senses began to reel.

## CHAPTER X

### *Scientific Miracle*



FLIGHT could not save him, Captain Future instantly had realized an hour before, as the "swallower" rushed at him. These enormous, disk-shaped white monsters of the depths could flap through the water at a speed

very much faster than any man could run.

Neither could he kill the creature. His only weapon was the futile stage-pistol at his belt, a mock-weapon which could fire nothing but low-powered energy flashes that would look like atomic bolts in a telepicture.

Curt Newton acted more by instinct rather than by design. The "swallower" was already poised above him like a dreadful white cloud. The creature would drop down, wrap its vast, flexible body around him, and then crush him into a pulp to be ingested at its leisure.

Newton flung himself backward, against the slimy trunk of one of the big polyp-trees. It would at least make it more difficult for the beast to seize him, he thought.

"If I just had a real atom-gun for one minute!" he thought desperately.

Next moment, the enormous flat mass of the "swallower" whipped around the whole polyp-tree. Captain Future was crushed against the slimy trunk of the semi-animal growth by the pressure.

He fought to free himself from that dreadful grip. It had not yet compressed upon him with full power, for the "swallower" was impeded in its contraction by the stiff polypous branches.

Newton found it impossible to work his way downward out of the remorseless grasp. It was only a matter of minutes until the full pressure would crack his sea-suit and helmet like an egg-shell.

With a wild idea in mind, he squirmed upward. He got his head and one arm

up out of the grip of the contracting white body, but could get no further.

Next moment, Curt Newton was hurled head over heels through the water by a mad, convulsive spasm of action on the part of the "swallower." The blinded monster was thrashing the waters in crazy fury.

Hastily picking himself up from the ooze into which he had fallen, Newton scrambled away through the polyp forest. He breathed in shaky relief when he had left all sight of the raging monster behind.

"That would be one for Jeff Lewis' picture," he thought. "Fighting a 'swallower' with a stage-pistol. But he'd say it was too crazy."

He plunged on through the shadowy submarine forest. Soon he had come within sight of the brightly shining lights of the *Perseus*.

Newton carefully detoured to approach the resting ship from the tail, so that he would not be seen from inside it. He clambered through the ooze beneath the projecting tail of the craft, until he reached the little aft emergency air-lock.

It was open, and he slipped inside and then rapped softly on the inner door in an agreed signal. There was a low humming of power, and the outer door slid shut and pumps rapidly expelled the water.

The inner door opened. And beyond it, inside the deserted keel passageway of the ship, poised the waiting shape of the Brain.

Curt Newton hastily shed his wet sea-suit, and strode to the side of his waiting comrade. Simon Wright was holding a small, cube-shaped apparatus from which extended two insulated cables that ended in flat coils.

"You prepared a gas-tube as we planned?" Curt Newton asked in a rapid whisper, without further greeting.

Simon Wright handed him a silver tube, with a trigger at one end.

"Yes, it wasn't hard. I synthesized the sleep-gas from rocket-fuel elements. Valdane is in his suite now with Kin Kurri. But the man Rosson is on

guard outside it."

"You bring the brain-scanner," Captain Future said quickly. "Remember, I mustn't be seen or the whole game is up."

**T**AKING infinite care to avoid being sighted by anyone in the ship, the gliding Brain and he made their way up through the little-used aft passages to the middle deck.

He peered around the corner into the main mid-deck corridor. Rosson, Valdane's tough-looking Earthman satellite, was again lounging alertly outside his employer's door.

Captain Future raised and aimed the gas-tube silently. He depressed its trigger briefly. A tiny cloud of almost colorless gas shot from it and hit Rosson's face. The tough Earthman sank to the floor.

Curt Newton now raced down the corridor, the Brain close behind. He listened for a moment at the door. A vague murmur of voices came from inside.

Curt Newton applied the end of his gas-tube to the keyhole of the door. He depressed the trigger, holding it down so that the full charge of compressed sleep-gas would enter the rooms beyond.

He heard the beginning of an alarmed exclamation—then the thump and thud of two falling bodies. Instantly Captain Future was deftly working with the lock of the door.

The door clicked open. He dragged the senseless form of Rosson swiftly inside with them as he and the Brain entered.

Jon Valdane and Kin Kurri lay unconscious. The sleep-gas had already been carried away by the repaired ventilation system, but it had done its work.

"Close the door, Simon," Captain Future directed as he bent over the prostrate figure of Jon Valdane with the brain-scanner.

Carefully, Curt Newton strapped the two flat little induction-coils of the apparatus to Valdane's head, so that one of the coils lay flat against each of the financier's temples.

He checked the cables leading from the coils to the machine. Then he

snapped a switch and carefully turned a rheostat on the front panel of the apparatus.

"There won't be anything selective about this," Curt Newton muttered as he waited. "But if we're lucky, we'll pick up enough from Valdane's mind to enlighten us about his plans."

"We haven't unlimited time," warned Simon Wright. "If some of Valdane's men come here—"

He left the idea unfinished. For now, out of the little loud-speaker attached to the apparatus, a monotonous voice was speaking.

It was an artificially articulated "voder" voice. And what it was speaking were thoughts!

The thoughts and memories of the unconscious Jon Valdane were being detected by the delicate induction coils of this incredible instrument, and translated artificially into intelligible speech.

"—must be powerful," the machine was saying monotonously. "To be powerful, I must be rich. It is my only way of excelling. I—"

"Just subconscious stuff," muttered Captain Future. He turned the rheostat a trifle. "We've got to pick up his recent memories."

Two wizards of dark, unfathomable science he and Simon Wright seemed, as they crouched tensely listening to their machine drag the inmost mental secrets from the senseless man. Yet this thing which he and Simon Wright had years ago invented was based upon simple scientific principles.

Their brain-scanner was simply an advanced development of experiments that were very old. Long ago, the Harvard scientists of Earth had developed the electro-encephalograph which picked up the almost imperceptible electric currents of the brain which are the concomitant of thought. Those old scientists had been able only to record the thought-currents by the bobbing of a needle. Captain Future and the Brain had succeeded in translating them into speech.

"—with the Stygians," the flat voice was saying. "They wouldn't grant us

the diamond concession. Only one way to get it from them—”

“This is what we want, Simon,” Curt Newton exclaimed eagerly. “Valdane’s thought a lot recently about his Stygian plan. If we can piece together enough of his thoughts and memories—”

“Listen, lad,” admonished the Brain, who was tensely alert.

**B**UT the flat voice that was reporting Valdane’s mind was on a different subject now, relating figures connected with some financial deal in which they had not the slightest interest.

Captain Future felt frustration. Their brain-scanner could not possibly operate selectively. It could only “scan” the complex synaptic pattern of the brain a little bit at a time, impartially reporting what it found there.

The mechanical voice spoke on, calmly reporting Jon Valdane’s most secret thoughts, desires, aspirations. But not until some minutes had passed, did it come again to that which interested them.

“—will be risky on Styx,” it said. “But those diamond-deposits are worth taking risks for. And that’s the only way that I can ever get my hands on them. The way nobody else ever figured, the loophole in the Stygian treaty—”

Curt Newton listened with intense expectation. But again, the report of Jon Valdane’s mind shifted to other matters.

“Once I have control of the wealth of Styx, I’ll be by far the most powerful man in the System. Then—”

Captain Future uttered an exclamation of disappointment. “We almost had the secret of what he’s planning.”

“We’ll get the rest, with patience,” said the Brain calmly. The brain-scanner was talking again. “Must take care that Chan Carson gets safely to Styx. The whole scheme will be easier to put through if we can use him—”

Newton was astounded. What did that mean? How was Valdane planning to use him, whom he thought a timid, commonplace actor?

But the rest of Valdane’s translated

thought-memory on that subject, uttered by the scanner, swept that and all else from Newton’s mind.

“—but for that very reason, the Randall girl must not reach Styx. Should have taken care of her at Jupiter. Kin Kurri is a stupid blunderer. But Su Thuar will see to her at Neptune. His idea of fixing her oxygen-tank is good. When she smothers, it’ll look like an accident to her sea-suit. We don’t want any Patrol investigation—”

Captain Future sprang to his feet. His face was deathly white as terrible understanding burst upon him.

“Good gosh,” he exclaimed hoarsely. “Joan may be dying out there now. The devils have tampered with the oxygen-tank of her suit.”

He lunged to the door. “Come on, Simon. I’ve got to get to her. You have to let me back out through the escape-hatch.”

“The Brain hesitated a moment. “There’ll be no further chance to use the scanner on Valdane, for he’ll soon come to. And we haven’t anything more than a few dim clues.”

“To blazes with Valdane and everything else,” cried Curt Newton. “Joan may be dying.”

He plunged down the corridor with Simon Wright gliding close after him. Possessed by an overpowering fear, he was reckless of discovery but fortune was kind and they met no one in the aft corridors.

At the escape-hatch, Curt Newton delayed a moment to rip open the space-suit locker beside it and snatch up one of the spare oxygen-tanks of the suits. He inspected its gauge swiftly, then clambered into his own sea-suit, tucked the spare tank under his arm, and entered the hatch.

The inner door of the little airlock slid shut as Simon Wright operated the emergency hatch from within. The outer door opened, and the sea smashed in on Captain Future.

He flung himself out into the dusky waters. And with a cold dread clutching his heart and spurring his muscles, he started in a desperate, dragging run

through the weird groves of the polyp forest.

"If she's dead!" his brain throbbed. "If she's dead, I'll kill Su Thuar and Valdane and all the rest of them right here."

He was heading back toward the undersea city of the sea-folk where he had left Joan with the telepicture troupe. Reckless now of the dangers of the depths, he took the straightest course toward it.

Before Curt Newton had covered half the distance, he was suddenly galvanized by a faint call from the little tel-audio inside his helmet.

"Joan, is that you?" he cried frantically. "Are you all right?"

**F**AINTLY the trapped girl's voice came to him.

"Yes," she exclaimed, her tones quivering with gladness as she recognized his voice. "My oxygen ran out. I'm down here in a 'breather's' burrow. It was the only chance I had."

"Joan, stay there—I'm coming," Captain Future promised, his heart pounding with relief. "Keep speaking each few moments so I can know the way to you."

He steered his way through the labyrinthine polyp forest by listening to her frequent calls. Their short-range tel-audios, good for a radius of only a few thousand feet, made her voice quickly louder when he went toward her and as rapidly weaker when he was going away from her.

Thus Captain Future groped his way through the dusky undersea groves until he found the entrance of the "breather's" burrow. He dived unhesitatingly down into the dark mouth of the tunnel, and clambered through it until he emerged up into the burrow itself.

By the light of Joan's krypton belt-lamp, he perceived the interior of this air-filled pocket under the ocean floor. Joan was crouched upon a rock ledge above the water, and at the other end of the ledge a huge, turtle-like "breather" was protectively guarding its young. The beady eyes of the big, harmless

creature watched Curt Newton with apprehension.

Curt Newton ripped off his helmet, and took the shuddering girl into his arms. Joan Randall was nearer to hysteria than he had ever seen her.

"It's been like a nightmare," she sobbed. "And yet it was almost funny when that 'breather' came back and found me in here. It was as scared of me as I was scared of it. I laughed." He fitted the full oxygen tank he had brought to her suit, and they scrambled out of the burrow of the "breather." Then they started hastily through the polyp forest toward the city of the sea-folk.

When they finally emerged from the submarine forest into full view of the telepicture troupe at the city's edge, Jeff Lewis sighted them.

"So you found Carson, Miss Randall. It's about time."

"He was wandering in circles only a quarter-mile inside the forest," Joan Randall said in an exasperated voice.

"I've had a terrible experience," Curt Newton shrilled in accents of horror. "I couldn't find my way in that ghastly place."

"Stop whimpering, Carson," Lewis said brutally. "You've wasted enough of our time already. We've got to finish these scenes. Get over there with the automaton."

They again enacted the scenes the producer wanted, Grag striding in stiff automaton-fashion beside Curt Newton as he excitedly met Ron King and Lura Lind at the edge of the grotesque city.

The cameras whirred, the krypton spotlights eerily illuminated the scene. Through the dusky waters into the spotlights rushed schools of frightened fish, while the humanoid sea-folk swam around the beams in undiminished curiosity.

"Swell, all this is stuff no telepicture ever had before," exulted Jeff Lewis as they finished the last scene. "With these and the Jupiter scenes, and the big climactic shots, we'll make on Styx, 'The Ace of Space' will be a smash hit."

Jim Willard and Su Thuar came out of the polyp forest.

"We couldn't find Carson anywhere," the Venusian reported.

He stopped suddenly. His sea-suited figure grew stiff with amazement as he glimpsed Joan Randall.

"Where did she come from?" he gulped.

"Miss Randall found Carson," growled Jeff Lewis. "All right, folks, that's all. We're going back to the ship."

Captain Future realized the reason for Su Thuar's stupefaction. The Venusian could not understand how Joan Randall had managed to survive without air.

Curt Newton trembled with bitter anger toward the murderous scoundrel. It was not Su Thuar's fault that Joan Randall was not dead in the polyp forest. The Futureman swore to himself that he would repay the Venusian for that.

They tramped back through the submarine forest to the *Perseus* without incident, accompanied part way by the swarming, swimming sea-folk. But when they entered the ship, they found excitement in it. Jon Valdane, with Kin Kurri, was talking angrily to Captain Petersen.

"There's been a mysterious attack on Mr. Valdane while you were gone," the captain told Jeff Lewis. "We can't understand who committed it."

Valdane's eyes fell upon Joan Randall's face as she removed her helmet. And he and Kin Kurri showed blank surprise for a moment.

Su Thuar spoke swiftly, meaningly, to his employer.

"We had trouble ourselves. Carson got lost, and Miss Randall was gone for a couple of hours searching for him."

Valdane's small eyes flashed suspiciously.

"She got lost, you say?" he snarled. "Hah! That is interesting!"

The financier did not say anything more, but Newton could readily surmise what he was thinking. Valdane believed that Joan had returned to the ship and gassed them.

Then Valdane and the Saturnian and Venusian departed to their own quarters. Jeff Lewis was speaking to the captain of the *Perseus*.

"We can take off any time you're

ready, captain. We're all through here on Neptune. Now head for Styx."

Captain Future's heart sank. He had failed in his desperate attempt to prevent Valdane from reaching Styx.

And his failure meant terrible danger, not only to the girl he loved but to the future of a whole world!

## CHAPTER XI

### *On Mysterious Styx*



MAGIC MOON was to the System peoples much as ancient Egypt had been to the people of Earth. It lived in popular legend as a place of brooding mystery, a faraway world whose aloof, unsocial inhabitants were primitive in their lack of

mechanical progress but were reputed magicians in their uncanny powers of creating illusion.

Until a few years before, the Stygians had used their powers of illusion to isolate their world completely by making it appear uninhabitable. Then their age-old isolation had been broken forever by the great struggle between the Futuremen and the Legion of Doom which had resulted in the opening up of this world.

Curt Newton was darkly remembering that previous adventure as he stood at the promenade-deck wall and watched Styx grow larger ahead. Had fate led him back here, this time to taste defeat?

The *Perseus* had already drawn past the big, gleaming sphere of Pluto and now was swinging by Charon and Cerberus, the two nearer moons.

Styx loomed ahead, a growing, grayish ball. It appeared unthinkable remote and lonely as it followed its orbit around the parent planet out here in the eternal twilight. This was the edge of infinity. Beyond stretched the abysses of deep space that separated this last outpost of the Sun from the nearest fixed stars.



The members of the troupe were all gathering in excited groups to watch the landing upon the mysterious moon. A sense of adventure was evident in the bearing of almost all of them. Everyone had heard stories of Styx, but few persons had ever visited it.

The *Perseus* was now dropping rapidly toward the gray moon. As they neared it, the grayish surface paled to a dull white. There lay beneath them a strange and ghostly landscape of rolling plains of white grass, dotted with clumps of towering white club-mosses. It was half-veiled by drifting banks of dense gray mists.

Solemn chords of mystery and awe struck into the hearts of the beholders as they gazed across the shrouded face of the System's most mysterious world. They stared silently as the ship slanted down toward the northern hemisphere. Low, rocky hills and gorges lay in the misty distance, but nearer than these was a shallow valley in which was situated a small, sprawling town of light metalloy buildings.

"That's Planet Town, where we're going to make our base," informed Jeff Lewis. "It's the only 'foreign' colony on Styx."

"But this town has ordinary metalloy buildings," Lura Lind was saying in surprise. "I thought Styx didn't have any metal?"

"It doesn't," Jim Willard retorted. "Not a bit of metal exists on Styx except a few traces of cobalt, titanium and other rare elements. Scientists have never been able to explain the lack of metal. As to this town, the interplanetary traders who built it brought the metalloy with them."

They were circling toward the cloud shrouded landing-field. It lay more than a mile east of the town, a flat part of the grassy white valley whose sod was blackened and torn by rocket-blasts. A dozen space-ships lay on the field, freighters and small cruisers.

Captain Future glimpsed the *Comet*. Yet he hardly recognized it. His sleek little ship had been transformed by paint and other means into a battered,

worn-looking, little old cruiser such as could be picked up cheaply on any planet by anyone willing to risk his life in such a vessel.

The *Perseus* landed with a thunder of keel-tubes. There was an eager scramble to the space-doors by the actors and technicians. Newton pretended equal excitement as he crowded after the others, but he was careful to keep close to Joan Randall, for he saw Su Thuar following her.

"You'll all have to be careful here," Jeff Lewis warned the cast. "This place has a reputation as the toughest frontier-town in the System."

In the chill, foggy twilight that was mid-day here, they stood looking wonderingly around when they emerged. More than a mile westward through the mist loomed the metalloy structures of Planet Town.

**A** MOTLEY throng of the frontier town's inhabitants was pouring toward the field to greet them. Curt Newton's experienced eyes read these as the usual riff-raff that followed the interplanetary frontier — adventurers, fugitive criminals, gamblers, traders, curious tourists. They included yellow Uranians and pallid Venusians, somber-eyed Martians and tough-looking Earthmen. Nearly every man wore a belted atom-pistol.

A squat, brawny Jovian ruffian with a massive, vicious green face strode forward toward them.

"Welcome to Planet Town, folks," he said in hoarse tones. "I'm Jos Vakos, owner of the biggest gambling hall here. We've been expecting you telepicture people."

Jim Willard, beside Newton, commented dryly under his breath. "Looks as if our publicity campaign for 'The Ace of Space' has centered the eyes of the whole System on us."

Captain Future frowned. That was a facet of the mystery he had never been able to understand. Why had Jon Valdane ordered such a big publicity campaign for the expedition? Why did he want the System to be watching when

he carried out a secret plot to loot Styx?  
"You'll like it here in Planet Town,"  
Jos Vakos rumbled. "There isn't any  
law because the Patrol can't come here.  
You can do anything you want, as long  
as you're able to back it up with your  
gun."

Jeff Lewis was diplomatically polite.  
"We're here to film some scenes in one  
of the Stygian communities. I under-  
stand one of their cities is not far north  
from this place."

A burst of cackling, derisive laughter  
came from a whiskered, disreputable old  
space-rat of an Earthman in the front  
of the throng.

"You ain't got a chance," he shrilled.  
"The Furrries won't give anybody per-  
mission to come near their danged cities.  
They even try to stop us from workin'  
the diamond-beds north of here."

"Old Lennie is right," said Jos Vakos,  
the brutal-faced Jovian. "After we came  
all the way out here when we heard of  
the diamond-strike, the cursed Furrries  
have done all they could to scare us  
away."

Captain Future had started impercept-  
ibly when he heard the voice of the whis-  
kered space-rat they called Old Lennie.  
He looked hard at the disreputable old  
prospector, and recognized Ezra Gur-  
ney.

Gurney saw Curt Newton, in the back  
of the telepicture group, and winked  
slightly. Then the old man's jaw  
dropped as he noticed Joan Randall.

Jos Vakos was saying, "The Furrries  
keep threatening what they're going to  
do to us if we don't all leave Styx," com-  
plained Jos Vakos. "They tell us regu-  
larly that unless we go, they'll unloose  
some mysterious Destroyer on us. It's  
all just a bluff of theirs."

"Here are a couple of the Furrries  
now," called one of the motley crowd.

"Stygians?" exclaimed Jeff Lewis. "I  
want to talk to them."

Through the crowd around the *Per-  
seus* came riding two figures who were  
almost as strange as the grotesque  
mounts they bestrode.

The two Stygians were men, but not  
men like those of any other planetary

race. Their bodies were covered with a  
short white fur. Their heads were oddly  
flattened, with big, pupilless black eyes  
of hypnotic depth. They wore cloaks of  
woven gray fiber, and had no weapons.

The mounts they rode were big, white  
kangaroo-like beasts that hopped rapidly  
forward upon powerful hind legs, and  
were guided by bit and reins.

"The Furrries have come to look you  
over," growled Jos Vakos.

Captain Future perceived that the at-  
titude of the motley crowd toward the  
two Stygians was one of mingled hos-  
tility and contempt.

But the Stygians seemed impervious  
to that. They sat their strange steeds,  
solemnly inspecting the *Perseus* and  
those it had brought. Then one of them  
spoke to the other in a low tone, in his  
own language.

Captain Future, who remained unob-  
served behind the others of his party,  
understood that language. He was, he  
knew, the only one present who did so  
—almost the only outsider who ever had  
been close enough to the Stygians to  
learn their baffling tongue.

"More come each week," the Stygian  
was saying to his companion. "More of  
the forbidden machines and metals."

"It must not go on," muttered the  
other. "Even if we have to awaken the  
ancient power, it must stop."

**J**EFF LEWIS spoke to the Stygians  
in the interplanetary *lingua franca*  
which all races understood. "We are  
friends," he said earnestly. "And we  
wish to visit one of your cities to make  
telepicture scenes."

The first Stygian answered instantly,  
in the same basic language. "You can-  
not come."

"But we'd do you no harm," protested  
Lewis. "It would only take us a few  
days."

"It is forbidden," the Stygian replied  
flatly. "No strangers may bring metals  
or machines to our cities. We ask you  
to leave our world."

"Aw, tell that Furry to chase him-  
self," interjected Jos Vakos. "They're  
always coming around here demanding

that we leave."

The Stygian turned his enormous, pupilless black eyes toward the Jovian.

"It is true that we do not shed blood," answered the Stygian slowly. "But we can loose upon you a Destroyer that will bring doom to you without bloodshed. Be warned in time, and go."

And the two Stygians turned their queer steeds and rode back out through the derisive, hooting crowd, to disappear into the mists.

Jeff Lewis' square face was heavy with disappointment. "So that ends our chance of making real Stygian scenes for 'The Ace of Space.'"

"We can still fake the scenes here, chief," reminded Jim Willard. "We can rig up sets to look like a Stygian city, and we've got the Stygian costumes we brought along in case the natives wouldn't cooperate."

"Don't be discouraged, Lewis," Jon Valdane said quickly. "I told you I had a scheme we could use to win the Stygians' cooperation. Well, it looks like we'll have to use my idea. Come inside and I'll explain."

Most of the actors, technicians and ship-officers started with Jos Vakos and his friends to see the sights of Planet Town.

Curt Newton was edging away after Joan Randall, intending to get a few words in secret with Ezra Gurney. But Valdane called his name.

"Chan Carson, you come in with Lewis and me."

Instantly on the alert, Captain Future followed the producer and financier back into the ship. Kin Kurri also had joined them.

"Now here's how we can win over the Stygians," said Valdane brightly. "There's one outsider they do anything for, one man who is a hero to their race. And that's Captain Future."

He pointed, as he spoke, at Curt Newton, who was startled. But Jeff Lewis instantly comprehended Valdane's idea.

"I get it," said the producer, his face lighting up. "We send Chan Carson ahead of us, made up as Captain Future. They'll think he is Captain Future, and

will let our troupe into their city when we arrive."

"That's the idea," Valdane nodded. "They'll have the assurance of their great friend Captain Future that our party is all right."

Curt Newton's mind worked swiftly. He understood now what use Valdane had planned all along to make of Chan Carson when they got here. He understood too, at last, just why the financier had caused this telepicture to choose the Futuremen as its subject.

Valdane had achieved two purposes by that means. He had given the expedition a plausible reason for visiting Styx, scene of one of the greatest exploits of the Futuremen. And thus he had also provided himself with a pseudo-Captain Future with whom he could deceive the Stygians.

"I won't do that," Curt Newton exclaimed in pretended alarm. "It would be too dangerous. Those ghastly Stygians would find out I'm a fake."

Although he based his objection on the fearful timidity of Chan Carson, Newton had a much more impelling motive for his refusal.

Valdane's secret plot, it was now evident, hinged somehow upon getting near the Stygian city. If he made that possible, he would be helping Valdane carry out his mysterious scheme.

"You've got to do it, Carson," insisted Jeff Lewis. "There won't be any danger. These Stygians are harmless. They're absolutely opposed to any form of conflict or violence."

"And unless you do it, 'The Ace of Space' will be a flop and then you won't be a big telepicture star," pointed out Jon Valdane.

**CAPTAIN FUTURE** realized that if he persisted in his refusal, he might arouse suspicion. He would have to accede, and then arrange it so that his mission failed. He thought he saw how he could do that.

"Well, if you're sure there's no danger, I'll do it," he finally said. "But I don't like the idea."

"I'll go with you, Carson, Kin Kurri

said quickly. "Then you'll be quite safe. Nobody would harm me, a System Council member."

Curt Newton understood. Kin Kurri still harbored suspicions of him. That was why the Saturnian wanted to accompany him.

"Your going along is a good idea, Kurri," said Jon Valdane. "To make it even safer, we'll have Rob Rosson go with you too."

Newton was dismayed. With two of Valdane's associates along, he would have a harder time making his mission fail. But fail it must, just the same.

"Get your Captain Future make-up on at once, Carson," Lewis said briskly. "I'll call the troupe back so that we can follow you in the rocket-trucks, within a few hours."

Newton went down to his cabin and soon had transformed himself from Chan Carson to Captain Future, even to the gray zipper-suit and stage pistol. Before returning to the others, he slipped down to the dark property-room.

"Grag—Simon!" he whispered. They came to his side at once, and he told them rapidly of the mission on which he was being sent ahead. "I'll fix it so the Stygians won't cooperate, and the telepicture party that's to follow me won't reach their city. But I want you to get Joan to stay here with Ezra, if you can."

"I will try to make her do so, if I have the chance, but you know better than I how stubborn she is," said the Brain dryly.

"She's got to," Newton exclaimed. "Su Thuar will be with the telepicture party when it leaves here, and she'd be in danger out there."

He hurried up to the others. Kin Kurri and the hard-faced Earthman, Rosson, were waiting. Both had belted on heavy atom-pistols.

The Saturnian led the way out of the ship. Rosson and Curt Newton followed him, Newton moving with obvious reluctance.

They went toward the flimsy metalloy buildings of Planet Town, more than a mile away. Though it was mid-day, the drinking and gambling establishments

along the sordid streets were in full swing. The click of "quantum roulette" wheels, the brawling voices, the shrill clamor of music-machines, were loud all along the main street they passed through.

Curt Newton felt disgusted. He did not blame the peaceful Stygians for resenting the incursion of those rough diamond-seekers and the horde of traders, gamblers, harpies and criminals who followed them. And what was worse to the machinery-hating Stygians, the coming of these outsiders had brought mechanical devices and metals and ships to this world which they had always deliberately kept half-primitive.

Kin Kurri, Curt Newton, and Rosson tramped through the brawling town and headed northward through the mists of the shallow valley. They soon passed rocky gorges in which they could descry dozens of prospectors of all planetary races, working with picks, hammers and power-drills.

These, Curt Newton knew, were the diamond-diggings whose discovery had drawn the toughest adventurers of the System to Styx. Prospectors had staked their claims in disregard of the Stygians' protests. But each of them had to maintain his ownership with his atom-gun, since the Patrol was forbidden by treaty to come here. Thus there was no law except that of force and violence.

The party passed out of the misty, shallow valley and tramped northward across a rolling plain of blank white grass which was veiled by thicker banks of fog. They moved through a silent white obscurity, seeing nothing except an occasional clump of the huge white club-mosses which towered up like vague, spectral giants.

The Saturnian took his direction from a pocket gyro-compass he had brought. For more than an hour, they moved northward.

"We ought to be near that Stygian city," Kin Kurri said, in worried tones. "We've come at least a half dozen miles, and—"

"Good grief, look there," yelled Rob

Rosson suddenly, his brutal face blanching as he pointed wildly ahead.

Captain Future, as he gazed sharply ahead, felt his own blood chill at the incredible horror that had loomed suddenly from the mists.

A half-score huge, scaled gray monsters were approaching them through the fog. The creatures were of elephantine bulk, with humped, six-legged bodies and massive, hideous snouted heads.

Their small red eyes were blazing and their opened jaws displayed cruel, menacing fangs as they charged toward the three men who were no more than pigmies before them.

## CHAPTER XII

### *Masters of Magic*



RIVETED with horror, Captain Future for a moment could not believe his eyes. He had been on Styx before, and he knew that there were no animals upon this moon of such monstrous dimensions as those

now charging down upon them.

Suddenly Curt Newton understood. He had seen something on his past visit here of the wonderful powers of illusion of the Stygians. Despite their primitiveness in some ways, these Stygians were masters of magical and hypnotic arts. Their legendary fame in this regard was the reason why all the nine worlds called their world Magic Moon.

These charging monsters were illusions. His reason told him that it was so, even though his eyes assured him the creatures were hideously real. Curt Newton swiftly realized that their approach to the Stygian city that lay somewhere in the mists ahead had caused the furred natives to project these fearful phantasms, to scare them back.

Kin Kurri and Rosson had whipped

out their atom-pistols and fired crackling bolts at the charging monsters. But it did not stop them.

"They don't even feel our atom-blasts," Kin Kurri exclaimed. He seemed stupefied.

"Run for it," Curt Newton cried, in simulated panic. "Back, before they kill us."

Thus Curt Newton tried to take advantage of the situation to bring about the failure of his mission.

But unfortunately for his design, Rosson suddenly stopped on the point of flight. The tough-faced Earthman uttered an oath.

"Those creatures ain't real. If they were, wouldn't we hear them?"

It was true that the solid-looking monsters made not the slightest sound as they rushed forward. The fact had given Rosson the clue to their nature.

"They're only fakes—magic of the cursed Stygians," the Earthman exclaimed. "I've heard about these Stygian tricks."

As he spoke, the onrushing monsters suddenly vanished. Nothing remained except shrouding white mists.

"The Stygians are using these tricks to keep us from getting near their city, blast them!" swore Rosson. "But they won't stop us."

He started forward again, and Curt Newton and the Saturnian were forced to follow.

A hideous reptilian head suddenly appeared through the mist. A serpent of incredible size was writhing toward them.

"Just more illusions," said Rosson hoarsely. "Come on."

The great snake also vanished. Now they entered a grove of leafless, black trees such as Curt Newton had never before seen on Styx.

The trees suddenly reached tentacular branches to seize them. Captain Future recoiled with a cry of pretended terror.

"You fool, it's only more tricks," exclaimed Rosson. "See, they're not real."

And he passed his arm through one of the solid-looking trees. The whole grove disappeared. They were alone

again in the mist.

"I won't go any further on this devil's world," Newton exclaimed.

"Maybe we had better go back," muttered Kin Kurri doubtfully.

"The boss said to go to their city and we're going," growled Rosson. "These illusions can't hurt us. And the Stygians are harmless."

Curt Newton's endeavor to balk the mission had failed. The tough Earthman insisted on going forward. Now the mists ahead were thinning.

They came suddenly out of the thicker mist, into view of a far-stretching landscape of rolling, white plain.

They all three stopped short. A half-mile ahead, there rose a cluster of octagonal towers of pale stone. The Stygian city!

But it was not that that had stopped them so short. Just in front of them stood a half-dozen Stygians, facing them. The white-furred, hollow-eyed men wore curious objects like glittering diamond lenses strapped upon their foreheads.

"These are the Furries who've been playing those cursed illusion-tricks on us to stop us," swore Rosson.

Captain Future knew it was so. On his previous visit to Styx, he had learned the use of those curious forehead lenses.

**T**HE Stygians, who lacked almost all mechanical science, were masters of a mental science older than history. They had a power of projecting telepathic suggestions, somehow amplified and focused through the strange lens-devices, to set up perfect illusions in others' minds.

The foremost of the Stygians now spoke to the three men, in the interplanetary *lingua franca*. His voice rang with a warning note.

"You will go no further. No aliens may approach our capital city Dzong."

Rosson nudged Curt Newton.

"Do your stuff, Carson. Tell them you're their friend Captain Future."

Newton stepped forward, his mind grappling with the problem. He must try to impersonate Captain Future—him-

self—for Rosson and Kin Kurri were watching him. Yet his impersonation must fail.

He spoke haltingly in the *lingua franca* to the Stygians. "Do you not remember me? I am Captain Future. You told us Futuremen that we would always be welcome on your world."

The leader of the Stygians started. He peered closer at Curt Newton. Then excitement flashed in his eyes.

"It is Captain Future," he exclaimed to his companions.

Then he broke into the native Stygian language, addressing Curt Newton with eager rush of words.

"We did not know that you had returned to our world. You and your friends will be welcome in our city Dzong."

Curt Newton perfectly understood the Stygian language. But he looked bewildered and turned helplessly to Rosson and Kin Kurri.

"I can't understand that language," he said in assumed panic.

"The devil—that may give us away," swore Rosson. "Tell him you've forgotten his language."

Curt Newton obeyed, speaking in the *lingua franca* to the Stygians.

"It has been so long since I was here, that I have forgotten your tongue."

The Stygians instantly showed suspicion.

"That is strange for you spoke it perfectly when you were here before," said the leader.

"It may be that this man is not really Captain Future at all, Th' Thaan," one of the Stygians warned the leader. "It may be a trick."

"We can soon find out beyond all doubt," snapped the leader, Th' Thaan. He turned suddenly to Curt Newton.

"Look!"

He pointed as he uttered that sharp order, to the glittering lens upon his forehead. Startled, Captain Future glanced at it.

Instantly Curt Newton realized his mistake. He had forgotten the hypnotic powers of which the Stygians were masters.

The glittering lens seemed to revolve in a spinning blaze of light. It and the hollow, probing eyes of Th' Thaan seemed to whirl and coalesce, as the hypnotic power seized Curt Newton's brain.

As though from a remote distance, he heard the deep voice of Th' Thaan speaking to him.

"Declare your true identity. Are you Captain Future?"

Dimly, Curt Newton heard like a faint echo the raging cry of Rosson. "Don't answer him. He's hypnotized you."

Curt Newton did not want to answer that question but he could not refrain from doing so. The hypnotic grip of the Stygian had short-circuited his own will in his brain, so that he was forced to speak the truth.

"I am Captain Future," he heard himself dully saying. "I took the identity of Chan Carson, an actor hired to impersonate myself, so that I could thwart the plots of an evil man against this world."

The hypnotic spell abruptly snapped and Curt Newton found himself standing stiffly facing the Stygians. And the Stygian leader now was stepping forward with gladness in his eyes.

"You are really he, our friend. For a moment, we doubted—"

Curt Newton spun around with desperate swiftness. He knew in a flash the disastrous implications of the admission he had made under hypnotism.

He was too late. Rob Rosson had his atom-pistol already in his hand, and Kin Kurri had flashed out his gun, too.

Rosson's eyes were bulging as his deadly weapon held level with Curt Newton's chest. The hard-faced Earthman spoke in a strangled whisper.

"You're really Future. You, Chan Carson. By Jupiter, you've fooled us the whole way."

**D**EADLY hatred flashed in his eyes. "But I found out in time!"

He was going to fire, Curt Newton knew. He gathered himself for a hopeless lunge.

For it was hopeless. The crackling blast of Rosson's gun would rip through

him before he got halfway to the Earthman. Nor could the Stygians help him, for they had no physical weapons whatever.

An incredible thing happened. Kin Kurri, behind Rosson, had raised his gun. The Saturnian suddenly brought it down on Rosson's head. And the Earthman criminal sank to the ground unconscious.

Captain Future looked at Kin Kurri, unable to believe his eyes. Kin Kurri, with a queer grin on his solemn blue face, lowered his weapon.

"That was a little too close for comfort, chief," he said.

And the voice of Kin Kurri was the familiar voice of Otho!

Curt Newton found his voice.

"Otho! It's you?" he cried, thunderstruck.

"None other, chief," was the flippant reply. "You never guessed it, did you? If I do say it myself, this disguise of mine as Kin Kurri is the greatest feat of make-up I ever pulled off."

Newton was still amazed.

"But how long have you been masquerading as Kin Kurri?" he asked. He gazed at the Stygians who had taken to their heels when the fight began, and were now pausing uncertainly, some distance off.

"Ever since we left Jupiter," was the calm reply.

"Since Jupiter? But we thought Kin Kurri had killed you on Jupiter."

Otho's disguised face grew grim. "Kin Kurri tried to kill me there. He suspected I was following him along that jungle trail, and ambushed me. He had his gun against me, and was going to use it. But I'm quicker than any ordinary man, as you ought to know. I twisted the gun around the moment before he fired. His gun-blast killed himself."

Captain Future began to see light. "I get it now. You buried Kin Kurri there."

"And took his place," Otho said. "I figured that as Kin Kurri, one of Valdane's associates, I could get to the bottom of the plot. So I took Kin Kurri's clothes, and used the make-up kit I

always carry at my belt, to make myself exactly like him. Neither Valdane nor anyone else suspected that I was anyone but Kin Kurri."

"But why in blazes didn't you tell me?" Curt Newton demanded.

"Chief, I tried to," Otho said earnestly. "The night we left Jupiter, I slipped into your cabin to tell you. I had a bottle of make-up remover with me so that I could prove to you I was Otho, if you doubted."

He grimaced. "But you conked me before I had time to explain. When I came to, the others were around and I couldn't speak. I told Valdane I'd had suspicions that made me go to your cabin. Valdane told me I was a fool, and ordered me to stay away from you. So I didn't dare get you apart to tell you, from then on, without running the risk of arousing his suspicions by disobeying his order."

Captain Future mopped his brow. "You certainly pulled me out of a nasty hole right now, even though you gave me the shock of my life doing it."

The Stygians had recovered from their fright. After some hesitation, they slowly returned and began to stare at Newton and Otho curiously.

"Otho, what's Valdane planning?" he asked. "As his associate, you must have learned something of his scheme."

"Chief, I've learned almost nothing," Otho answered ruefully. He swore. "That cursed Valdane was too cunning to betray himself." The Stygians had been standing, wondering witnesses of their rapid colloquy. But now Th' Thaan, their leader, grasped Newton by the arm.

"We do not understand, Captain Future," he said. "Why did your companion stun this other man? And what is the plot against our world of which you spoke? Will you come into Dzung with us and tell our council?"

Captain Future nodded in quick decision. "Yes, we'll do that. Your people ought to know what confronts them."

Otho was deftly binding the senseless Rosson with strips torn from his jacket.

"Bring him along, Otho," Curt New-

ton directed.

They moved across the misty plain with the group of Stygians toward the pale stone city that lay a mile away.

Though not large, the city Dzung was immeasurably ancient. Its close-clustered octagonal towers were surrounded by a stone wall, and this in turn was bordered by a wide belt of carefully cultivated land.

**T**HEY passed with Th' Thaan and the others through the open gates of the metropolis and made their way along paved streets toward the largest, central tower. Stygians in the streets stared in wonder at the spectacle of two aliens carrying another unconscious alien through their city. A small crowd formed, and followed them.

Captain Future had been in this city before. It was as he remembered it, an ancient but not unbeautiful place of narrow streets and tall towers half-veiled by the drifting mist. All the architecture here was of massive stone—there was not a scrap of metal in evidence. And there were no machines, no mechanical devices, no vehicles except the low carts drawn by the kangaroo-like beasts of burden of the Stygians.

Th' Thaan led them into a big, eight-sided stone hall that formed the ground floor of the central tower.

The council of the Stygians was sitting, earnestly deliberating. Its ranking member, an old Stygian, peered at Curt Newton with wide eyes.

"The Futuremen have returned," he exclaimed. "Let this be a day of gladness in our city. For you alone of all alien peoples are welcome here, my friend."

"Thanks, Qu Lur," Curt Newton said earnestly. He remembered the aged head of the Stygians' council well, from his former visit. "I wish I had come with more cheerful news than I bring."

"He says that the space-ship which came today to our world has brought men who plot to take our whole world away from us," Th' Thaan informed the old council head.

Captain Future rapidly explained the



existence of a mysterious plot by Jon Valdane and his henchmen to secure control of Styx' wealth.

"I thought you ought to know so that you can defend yourselves against these plotters in case I fail," he concluded earnestly.

"We cannot take life or inflict physical injury on any men, no matter what their evil purposes may be," old Qu Lur reminded him.

"Then how could you defend yourselves?" Otho protested. "Your powers of hypnotism and illusion are all right to scare people with, but they wouldn't stand up against a real attack by armed men."

"I know your pacifistic traditions, but

Always we saved it so that we could use it again if necessary."

Otho stared skeptically. "This Destroyer looks like nothing but some sealed vials of gray powder.

"Otho, these hieroglyphs are ancient Denebian writing," Captain Future exclaimed.

He had recognized the hieroglyphs. They were in the ancient language of Deneb, that distant star whose pioneering humans had eons ago colonized the whole starry galaxy, including this System's worlds.

Captain Future mentally spelled out the first part of the inscription, from the knowledge of the hieroglyphs which he had attained on remote Deneb's world.

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you'll have to forget them and fight if necessary to protect your world," Curt Newton told the Stygians.

"Do not fear, we will protect our world if it becomes necessary," replied old Qu Lur. "But we will not do so by taking life. We will do so by unchaining the Ancient Destroyer."

"The Destroyer? The thing you've been threatening the intruders with?" repeated Curt Newton. "What is it, Qu Lur?"

"It is that which our ancestors devised many ages ago to repel invaders who came to our world," was the reply. "Come, I will show you."

He led the way into a small, guarded chamber off the council hall. Curt Newton and Otho followed wonderingly.

There was a massive stone pedestal in the little room, whose face was inscribed with crumbling, ancient hieroglyphs. On the pedestal was a glass case whose contents were a mass of tiny, sealed glass vials, each of which contained a pinch of gray dust.

Qu Lur motioned solemnly toward the glass vials. "That is the Destroyer. With it, our ancestors of long ago crushed the invaders in a single hour.

"Otho," he exclaimed, startled and horrified by what he read. "This is one of the secrets of the lost, ancient science—and one of the most terrible of all those secrets."

**H**E TURNED to Qu Lur. "You would not unloose this. It would be disastrous beyond imagination."

"We shall be forced to unloose the Destroyer, unless all the greedy intruders cease to mock our laws and desecrate our peaceful world," replied Qu Lur solemnly.

"Chief, how can they cause any big disaster without taking life or doing injury?" Otho asked skeptically. "I don't get it."

"That gray dust can do it," Curt Newton said shakenly. He appealed to Qu Lur. "You must not unchain this thing, no matter what happens. Think of the awful consequences."

At that moment they were interrupted by a sound of excited voices out in the big council hall. Th' Thaan came running into the little chamber.

"Another of the Futuremen has come!" he exclaimed excitedly. "The one who does not look like a man, and

who glides through the air."

"That's Simon!" Curt Newton cried. "But what's he doing here? Something must have happened."

He raced out into the big hall, with Otho and the others following. At the center of the hall was poised the Brain, calmly hanging in mid-air while his lens-like eyes searched for Curt Newton.

He saw Captain Future, but also saw the disguised Otho behind him. "Kin Kurri," exclaimed the Brain. "What's he doing here with you?"

"It's not Kin Kurri, but Otho," Curt Newton answered swiftly. "I'll explain later. Simon, why did you come? What's happened?"

"I came to warn you," the Brain replied rapidly. "Su Thuar and all the rest of Valdane's strong-arm men are coming this way, ahead of the telepicture party. We saw them secretly depart. They had those blow-guns with them."

"The blow-guns?" Curt Newton repeated mystifiedly. "Is that all they took with them?"

"They took a case of some kind from the property-room of the *Perseus*," the Brain added. "We couldn't tell what was in it. There's nothing in that room anyway but the cameras, sets and costumes."

"The cameras, sets and costumes?" Captain Future echoed. Sudden dazzling enlightenment came to him. His tanned face blanched.

"Of course, I see it now. Valdane's plan—I've been a blind fool!"

"Chief, you mean you know now what Valdane's plan is?" cried Otho.

"Of course. There's only one way in which Valdane's corporations can get absolute control of the Stygian diamond-deposits." Curt Newton uttered a groan. "The blow-guns, the costumes, the loophole in the Stygian treaty that Valdane had in mind—it all fits together."

He plunged toward the doorway. "And it means death for Joan and maybe all the rest of the telepicture troupe. Simon—Otho—come on! We may be too late but we've got to try to stop it!"

## CHAPTER XIII

### *Ambush in the Mist*



GRAG and Simon Wright, in the dark property room of the *Perseus* back at Planet Town, had conferred worriedly after Captain Future had left them with his final admonition to see that Joan Randall remained in safety.

"I don't see how we're going to get to Joan without giving ourselves away," Grag said anxiously. "Have you any ideas, Simon?"

"No, I haven't," said the Brain. "I wish Otho were here." He suddenly whispered a warning. "Someone's coming."

They subsided instantly into immobility and silence. It was Su Thuar and two other of Valdane's "bodyguards" who entered.

"That's the case there," exclaimed the Venusian criminal, pointing to a metal chest. "Quick, before the property-men come down here."

The men picked up the chest, and in a moment they were gone with it. Grag and Simon were mystified, but before they could speculate upon it they heard other footsteps approaching.

Joan and Ezra Gurney slipped into the property-room. At first, neither Grag nor the Brain recognized Ezra Gurney in his shabby prospector's clothing and evil-looking white whiskers. Then his familiar drawl sounded.

"Danged queer-lookin' automaton over there in the corner, Joan," he chuckled. "Looks almost lifelike, doesn't it?"

"Ezra," cried Grag. He strode forward. "Where's the *Comet*?"

"Right here on this landin' field," was the reply. "Only she don't look like the *Comet* now, but like a battered old space-cruiser."

"Are Eek and Oog all right?" Grag asked anxiously referring to the Future-

men's two pets on the *Comet*.

"Sure, they're fat an' sassy," Ezra reassured. Then his face lengthened. "Joan was just tellin' me about Otho."

"Otho's not dead," Grag declared stubbornly. "He can't be."

Joan interrupted anxiously. "Ezra and I just saw Su Thuar and all the rest of Valdane's 'bodyguards' slip out of the ship into the mist. They had a metal chest with them, and two smaller oblong metal cases."

"Those are the cases that contain the native blow-guns they picked up secretly on Jupiter," the Brain said quickly. "The chest they took from the telepicture properties here, but we couldn't see what was in it. Joan, which way did they go?"

"Northward, the same way Curt and the other two went."

"I don't like that," muttered Simon. "We should warn Curtis."

"Simon, you could overtake Curt and warn him if we got you out of the ship without anyone seeing," Joan exclaimed.

"I can get Simon out," Ezra said promptly. "I got the run of the ship, for I told this Jeff Lewis I knew a lot about Styx and he asked me to go with their telepicture party as a guide. I can wrap up Simon like a bundle, and smuggle him out that way."

"We'll do that," the Brain decided immediately. "It's imperative that I tell Curtis of Su Thuar's party following him."

Ezra soon made an innocent-looking bundle of the Brain by wrapping him up in his jacket. Then he sauntered casually out of the property-room, to leave the *Perseus* and release Simon in the mists.

Grag had detained Joan Randall with an anxious plea. "You must stay here when the telepicture truck-caravan goes to the Stygian city," said the robot. "The chief told me to tell you so."

"Stay here?" cried Joan. "I won't do it. I'm going north with the others after Curt."

She departed before Grag could think up more objections. The big robot made a disgusted snorting sound and reluc-

tantly resumed his former immobility. For a stir of preparation was resounding through the *Perseus* as the telepicture troupe prepared for the trek northward to the Stygian city.

Sam Martin, the chief property-man, came down into the dark prop-room with his helpers and made the air ring with sharp orders.

"Get the stuff I listed up through the unloading hatches at once! The automaton and the dummy Brain, the Stygian costumes, the cameras and the krypton-spots. Snap into it!"

Grag resigned himself to being carted around again like the automaton they thought him to be. He heard a worried prop-man report.

"The dummy Brain isn't here. And neither is the chest that had the Stygian costumes in it!"

"So that's what was in that chest—fake Stygian costumes," thought Grag.

"They must be here somewhere. Look for them." Martin ordered.

**B**UT the search was unavailing. Swearing, Sam Martin superintended the unloading of Grag and the other needed properties from the *Perseus*. They were loaded into the rocket-trucks ready outside the ship.

Jeff Lewis stormed when the property-man reported the loss.

"This picture is hoodooed. First Rizo Thon disappears. Now it's the dummy Brain and our Stygian costumes."

Jim Willard tried to reassure his boss. "We can leave the Brain out of our scenes till the boys make up a new dummy. As for the Stygian outfits, we won't need them if Chan Carson wins the Stygians' cooperation."

"All right, but let's get started before something else happens," snorted the producer. "Where's the old prospector who was going to guide us?"

"Right here," drawled Ezra Gurney, stepping forward.

Grag had meanwhile been loaded onto one of the rocket-trucks. The actors and technicians were climbing aboard the vehicles.

"I know Styx as well as any outsider,

which ain't sayin' much," he heard Ezra telling the producer. "It's easy for a man to get lost in these mists, but I can take you to the Furrries' city Dzong, all right."

Jon Valdane had been standing beside the *Perseus*, watching the bustle of preparation. "We're ready to start, Valdane," Lewis told him.

The chubby financier answered quickly. "I'm not going with you on this trip. To tell the truth, I'm too tired. All this long voyage has worn me out."

"It's wearing me out too, the way things are happening," Lewis said gloomily. "All right, Jim—start rolling."

The rocket-trucks that contained the telepicture troupe and their equipment, moved ponderously across the misty landing-field. As they passed the bat-

Captain Future had impressed on Grag that if he once showed signs of life and intelligence, the whole precarious imposture of the Futuremen would be shattered.

The truck-caravan throbbed northward through the drifting mists for an hour, first up the shallow valley and then over a rolling plain of blank white grass and towering club-mosses. There was little talk. The telepicture people were subdued by the oppressive, awesome mystery.

Grag heard Ezra Gurney's drawling voice drift back.

"Gettin' pretty near the Furrries' city now," Gurney was telling the producer.

"I hope Chan Carson was able to make friends with the Stygians by his Captain Future make-up," Lewis said in a worried voice. "It'll help a lot."

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tered little cruiser that was the disguised ship of the Futuremen, Grag looked longingly at it. He wished he could see Eek.

The caravan of trucks throbbed toward Planet Town, more than a mile away, and then rolled through the sordid, noisy streets of metalloy structures and headed northward into the shrouding white fog.

Grag sat stiffly propped in a corner of the last truck, just as the property-men had carelessly left him. His mind was not so much on the indignity of being so treated, as it was upon the surprising fact that Jon Valdane had remained behind.

Was Valdane, Grag wondered uneasily, up to something back there in Planet Town? Maybe he should have stayed to find out?

"But the chief told me to watch over Joan," the robot told himself. "And I couldn't stay, without them finding out I'm no automaton."

Lo Quior suddenly cried a warning. "There are some Stygians just ahead."

Startled, Grag managed to twist his head imperceptibly so that he could see. Nervous exclamations were coming from the whole party.

A half-score of the weird, white-furred natives stood, only half-visible in the shrouding mists. They formed a semi-circle across the path of the caravan's advance.

The Stygians suddenly raised long, slim tubes in an odd motion. Next moment, a vicious shower of deadly, tufted wooden darts whizzed through the mist and struck the rocket-trucks.

"They're attacking us," yelled Jim Willard. One of the darts had ripped through his lower arm.

Sam Martin had taken a dart through his throat and was sprawled dead, half-out of his truck. A technician was clawing at a missile that had stuck in his chest, and another prop-man was yelling in agony.

"Turn the trucks around," Jeff Lewis cried hoarsely. "Start back to Planet Town."

"It seems incredible," exclaimed Joan Randall. "I've never heard of Stygians killing anyone before."

**E**ZRA GURNEY, whipping out an atom-pistol from inside his jacket, fired a crackling bolt. One of the Stygians crumpled.

But the other Stygians instantly melted back into the mist, out of sight. And from these invisible attackers there continued to whiz the deadly darts that now were striking down more of the party.

The telepicture troupe was giving way to panic. The rocket-trucks had jammed together when their drivers had run into the one which Sam Martin had been driving, and which had stalled when he was killed. As they jammed, Ron King yelled in pain and terror as a dart grazed his cheek. And Lura Lind's shrieking rose shrilly above the whole babel.

"Those aren't Stygians," Grag exclaimed to himself, thunderstruck. "The costumes that were stolen from the property-room—"

There was no time for Grag to complete the thought. The panic that had seized the telepicture troupe was costing lives.

Ezra Gurney had the only weapon in this unarmed party. He could not use it now, for there were no targets. The attackers had retired into the concealing mist, from which their darts continued to rain on the party.

"This is where an automaton comes to life," thought Grag. Then he exploded into action.

He leaped off the truck and began to advance in great, clanking strides toward the unseen foes in the mist.

"Stop that automaton," yelled Jeff Lewis through the din. "It must have rolled off. Something set its switches going. It's running wild."

But Grag was already plunging into the mist. Darts rattled off his metal body without harming him in the least.

He began to seek for the attackers. Then his sensitive microphone ears located the source of the whizzing darts, and he charged in that direction.

Two of the weird, white-furred men who were crouching in the mist and loosing their missiles toward the telepicture party, suddenly looked up to see the giant metal robot looming over them with his photoelectric eyes blazing down like stars in the mist.

The men uttered yells and recoiled. Grag's mighty metal arms caught them and hurled them senseless to the ground. He stalked on, found another of the attackers. But this one was already fleeing. The attackers retreated from the enraged robot as he searched the fog.

Grag heard Jeff Lewis shouting over the din. "Get Martin's truck started. Turn back to Planet Town."

Grag would dearly have loved to remain and hunt down the ambushers, but Captain Future had told him to guard Joan.

Mindful of that order, the big robot turned and tramped hastily back to the troupe. The trucks had been turned around and the telepicture troupe was panically streaming southward with its dead and wounded.

Deadly darts still whizzed out of the mist at them, taking toll of more actors as they retreated. Grag found Joan Randall and Ezra at the rear of the panic-stricken retreat, Ezra firing furiously in the mist.

"Can't see them to shoot at, dang them!" swore the old veteran.

Grag picked up Joan bodily and carried her as though she were a feather, his great metal body shielding her from the whizzing darts.

"Put me down," cried the furious girl. "I'm going on after Curt."

"You're going back to the ship," the inflexible robot replied. "The chief ordered me to keep you out of harm."

With Ezra Gurney beside him, he strode rapidly through the mist after the fleeing telepicture caravan as they retreated to Planet Town with their unseen attackers still following and showering darts upon them.

## CHAPTER XIV

### Warning of Doom



UPON hearing the news the Brain had brought, Captain Future, in the Stygian city, had had a disastrous divination.

"We've got to head off the telepicture party and turn them back to Planet Town," he cried as he raced for the door.

"They're coming into danger and death."

Qu Lur and Th' Thaan and the other Stygians were with them as they burst out of the big stone tower into the misty daylight.

"We go with you," exclaimed Qu Lur. "You can go faster upon our *kurus*."

The *kurus* were the big, kangaroo-like animals which the Stygians used as steeds. A row of them, already saddled, was tethered outside the council tower. Both Curt Newton and Otho had ridden them before. They sprang into the saddles as the Stygians also hastily mounted.

In a moment, their mounts were galloping in long, hopping leaps through the stone streets of Dzung. As they rode, the Brain glided swiftly beside them.

Otho called out to Captain Future. "Chief, what is it?" he asked. "What's the danger to the telepicture caravan?"

"It's Valdane's plot," exclaimed Curt. "I was blind not to see it before, when every clue pointed to it. I know now what he meant by 'the loophole in the Stygian treaty.' That treaty provides that the Stygians retain complete authority over their own world, but only so long as they maintain order on it!" Curt Newton reminded fiercely. "That's the loophole in it. If Valdane can bring about an attack by the Stygians on this much-publicized telepicture party, the System will ring with resentment against the Stygians. The treaty will be broken, and the System Government will

take over Styx."

Qu Lur, riding beside them, had heard and now uttered a cry of unbelief. "But we Stygians have no intention of attacking anyone. We never use violence."

"If I'm not wrong, Valdane has taken care of that problem too," growled Captain Future.

There was no chance for further talk, for now they were outside the Stygian city and the *kurus* were galloping in a dead run.

The big, leaping white steeds raced southward through the mist, back in the direction of Planet Town. Though their speed was great, they seemed slow to Curt Newton as he thought of Joan Randall's peril.

The misty, subdued daylight was darkening to a deeper dusk as night approached. The shrouding fog through which they rode seemed to press more closely upon them.

They had galloped a half hour when one of the *kurus* snorted and shied. There came a call from Th' Thaan, its rider.

"There is a dead man here upon the ground."

Curt Newton's heart chilled. He rode swiftly with the others to Th' Thaan's side and dismounted.

Upon the white turf lay the limp, dead figure of what appeared to be a Stygian. The white fur of his chest was scorched and blackened by the atom-blast that had killed him.

"One of our people—slain," exclaimed Qu Lur.

"No, not one of yours," Curt Newton said. "Look here."

He had bent over the dead figure and was tugging at it. The white-furred skin seemed to come suddenly away from the body, and with it came the mask that had covered the face.

It was an Earthman who lay here dead. He had worn a close-fitted zipper-suit and mask which had made him an exact replica of a Stygian.

"It is a costume to make him look like us," cried old Qu Lur in anger.

"Valdane's planning," rapped Captain Future, his face dark with passion. "He

had to have Stygians attack the telepicture party, to set his machinations working. He knew real Stygians never would attack, no matter what the provocation. So he sent Su Thuar and his 'bodyguards' ahead, wearing these Stygian costumes from the telepicture properties, to ambush the caravan. That's why they brought the Jovian blow-guns."

**H**E and Otho and the Brain made a quick search of the surrounding plain. They found no other bodies.

But they did find clear signs of what had taken place. The telepicture caravan had fled back to Planet Town with the disguised attackers pursuing.

Qu Lur and Th' Thaan and the other Stygians came riding up through the foggy dusk to where Curt Newton and the two Futuřemen were searching.

The old Stygian's face was solemn with purpose. "We have seen enough," he told Captain Future. "We know now that our world is in danger from these ruthless men. So we must act now to protect it."

His voice deepened. "This night, every alien visitor on Styx must leave our world. For if they do not go before Pluto rises tonight, we unloose the Destroyer on them."

Curt Newton uttered an exclamation. "You must not do that, no matter what the danger. It would cause a planetary disaster."

"Too long have we been patient," Qu Lur declared firmly. "Because we will never use violence or take life, the alien men in Planet Town have believed that they could safely mock our laws. Now this final outrage forces us to use our great weapon of defense.

"For ages, we have guarded that weapon for such a need as this. It is why we have deliberately shunned mechanical progress and metals and machines, why we have kept our cities and our people primitive in many ways. So that, if the time came that we needed to protect ourselves, we could use the mighty Destroyer to do so."

Captain Future pleaded desperately.

"Qu Lur, don't unchain that catastrophe! Wait."

"We wait only until the parent-planet rises," answered the Stygian. "If the aliens have not gone by then, we act."

He added an anxious admonition. "You Futuremen should leave at once, with your friends. For if we release the Destroyer, then you will never leave."

Curt Newton recognized that no pleas would change the terrible resolution of the Stygians, whose wrongs had reached a climax.

"We'll ride to Planet Town and warn them there," he said. "If I can make them believe, they'll all leave Styx."

"Remember, at planet-rise the Destroyer will be freed if every alien is not gone," warned Qu Lur, as he and the other Stygians mounted.

They turned rein and rode rapidly back toward their city, disappearing into the misty darkness.

Curt Newton called to Otho and the Brain. "We've got to get to Planet Town as quickly as possible. It's only a couple of hours till Pluto rises."

He leaped back into the saddle of his *kuru*, and Otho followed his example, for the Stygians had left the two steeds for them.

"Ride hard!" he cried as they spurred their mounts into the darkness. "Everything depends on our getting all the inhabitants of Planet Town to leave this moon at once!"

The Brain, rushing effortlessly through the mist beside him, called a question. "Shall I go ahead to warn them?"

"It would be no good," Curt Newton groaned. "They wouldn't believe you for they all think you only an ingenious mechanism, Simon. I may be able to convince them. I've got to—or doom falls on this world."

"Doom, from those vials of gray dust?" cried Otho skeptically. "Doom that won't take life or inflict injury? It can't be so terrible a catastrophe if it wouldn't harm anyone physically."

"It would be the most awful disaster

that ever struck any planet in the System," Captain Future answered, the wind tearing the words from his lips. "Valdane's greedy plot has brought on this danger."

His mind was seething with mingled fears and doubts. He knew that the one hope of averting that catastrophe was to induce the brawling lawless population of Planet Town to leave Styx at once.

They would leave, if they believed. But would they believe the warning of doom that he was bringing?

## CHAPTER XV

### *The Destroyer*



PLANET TOWN was ablaze with lights, and its main street was jammed by an excited crowd of its motley interplanetary inhabitants. From the town, a dull, ominous roar of voices was wafted through the mist to Curt Newton and the

two Futuremen as they approached.

Newton suddenly reined up his *kuru*. In the foggy darkness, he had suddenly descried a little group waiting out here on the northern edge of the town.

"It's Grag and Ezra—and Joan," he exclaimed, with a great leap of thankfulness in his heart.

Ezra Gurney and the girl, with the mighty robot towering beside them, had been peering into the misty night. They ran forward with eager exclamations as Curt Newton and Otho dismounted.

"Joan, you're all right," he cried anxiously, taking her into his arms. "We saw that the telepicture party had been ambushed—"

"I'm all right, thanks to Grag," she interrupted. Her lovely face was pale in the darkness. "But Curt, all Planet Town is raging against the Stygians because of that ambush. Three of the party were killed, and a half-dozen wounded."

"And Jon Valdane has sent out a tel-

audio call to the Planet Patrol, demandin' that they come here to restore order," Gurney cried.

Captain Future's eyes flashed. "I knew he'd do that. It was his game from the first, to get the System Government to move in here."

Grag had sighted Otho, who still wore his Saturnian disguise. The giant robot wrathfully strode forward and gripped Otho's neck.

"Shall I finish this rascal Kin Kurri, chief?" the robot called angrily to Curt Newton. "He tried to kill my pal Otho. Maybe he did!"

Otho uttered a choking yell. "Let go of my neck, you big cast-iron baboon! I'm your pal Otho."

"Otho, it's really you?" cried Grag joyfully. Then the robot hastily dissimulated his gladness. "You blasted rubber dummy, why didn't you let us know you were safe?"

Joan Randall was speaking urgently to Captain Future. "Curt, we've been waiting for you out here on the edge of town. We're sure that the Stygians who ambushed us were not really Stygians but were—"

"Su Thuar and his men, in costumes," Curt Newton finished rapidly. "Yes, I know all about that."

"But you don't know that Jon Valdane is incitin' the toughs of Planet Town to take revenge on the Stygians," Gurney exclaimed. "He's talkin' to 'em right now, stirrin' them up."

"The more disorder he creates, the more reason there'll be for the Patrol to come here," Captain Future declared. "And the Patrol must not come. Everyone here has got to leave, at once."

He told them swiftly of the overshadowing doom which the Stygians would unchain if all aliens had not left Styx by planet-rise.

"We've got to make them go, and prevent the Patrol or anyone else from coming here," he concluded swiftly. "Grag, I want you to hurry to the *Comet* and get a telaudio call through to Planet Patrol headquarters. Tell them not to come to Styx. And keep warning all ships."



Grag nodded his understanding. "Okay, chief!"

The big robot clanked away through the misty dark, skirting the edge of Planet Town to reach the landing-field that lay more than a mile eastward.

"The rest of you come with me," Captain Future exclaimed. "I must convince that mob of the danger."

As he and Otho, with Gurney and Joan Randall, hurried into Planet Town, the Brain glided above them in the misty night.

Curt Newton glanced up at the dark sky as they ran. Mists hid the stars. But soon there would be a vague glow in the heavens, when Pluto rose above the horizon. It was not long until planet-rise, now.

"Curt, what is it that the Stygians are threatening to do?" Joan was asking breathlessly, as they hastened. "What can they do when they refuse to fight or take life?"

"Joan, they can do a terrible thing," answered Newton. "They can cut off this moon from the rest of the System forever."

There was no time for him to continue. They had entered the brightly-lighted main street of Planet Town.

**A**N angry, seething mob jammed the street from one row of metalloy buildings to the other. The crowd was thickest in front of the pretentious metalloy structure that was the big gambling hall of Jos Vakos, the Jovian.

Jos Vakos himself was standing on the raised porch outside the entrance, bellowing something to the listening crowd. Beside the green Jovian was Jon Valdane, and also Jeff Lewis and others of his troupe.

Curt Newton fought through the crowd toward them, Otho, Joan Randall, and Ezra Gurney following him, while the Brain glided above them in the mist.

"Mr. Valdane's right," Jos Vakos was roaring. "We ought to clean out the whole devil's nest of Furrries. They killed some of the picture people today, and next thing, they'll be killing us."

A roar of assent came from the crowd.

Martians, Earthmen, Venusians and every other planetary race—their hard, brutal and sly faces were illuminated alike by furious mob-emotion.

Captain Future sprang up beside the green Jovian and the others. Valdane looked startled as he recognized Curt Newton and the disguised Otho.

"Chan Carson and Kin Kurri," Valdane exclaimed. "We thought you'd been killed by the Stygians."

Curt Newton ignored him. He turned around and faced the crowd, holding up his hand to gain their attention.

"People of Planet Town, you've got to leave Styx at once," he shouted. "Unless you go before planet-rise, doom will fall on this world. There are enough ships out at the landing-field to take you all. Get into them and go."

A bursting chorus of amazement and incredulity swelled up from the astonished throng.

"What's he talking about?"

"Carson, are you crazy?" Valdane was demanding furiously. "What's got into you?"

Captain Future paid no attention, as he desperately repeated his warning to the incredulous throng.

"You must go," he shouted. "The Stygians are coming here, and unless every one of you is gone, they will release catastrophe."

A roar of laughter went up from the brutal throng, an outburst of contemptuous mirth.

"This poor nincompoop is trying to scare us with the Furrries," bellowed Jos Vakos in homeric laughter. "Why, those ignorant monkey-men don't have a weapon to their names, and wouldn't use one if they had it. We could wipe 'em all out with our atom-guns in an hour."

"Listen, you're wrong," cried Curt Newton desperately. "The Stygians possess the most terrible of all weapons—"

He was interrupted by a hand that yanked him around. It was Jon Valdane, his chubby pink face distorted with rage.

"Have you lost your mind, Carson?" he demanded.

"Who is he, anyway?" yelled a voice

from the crowd.

"He's just a scared telepicture actor, who was hired to play the part of Captain Future," Valdane shouted back.

"You are wrong," Curt Newton answered. "I am Captain Future."

"He's been playing the part so long he believes it himself," exclaimed Jeff Lewis in amazement.

"No, he is really Captain Future," Joan Randall exclaimed. "I would know, wouldn't I? And I can prove it."

She raised her head. "Simon!" she called.

Down from the misty darkness came flashing the weird cubical shape of the Brain. He poised beside Curt Newton, his strange lens-eyes calmly surveying the astounded onlookers.

"The dummy Brain," gasped Jim Willard. "But it's living!"

"It is the real Brain," Joan Randall retorted. "All the way out from Earth, the Futuremen have been aboard the *Perseus*, impersonating themselves."

"Good heavens," gasped Lewis, overwhelmed by realization. "Captain Future, playing his own part in 'The Ace of Space'—"

**J**ON VALDANE'S plump face seemed to sag and pale to a sickly gray as he stared, as if hypnotized, at Curt Newton's face.

"Captain Future!" snarled a voice.

Blazing, bitter hatred was in that hissing cry. It came from Su Thuar. The Venusian stood at the edge of the throng below, his atom-pistol leveled at Curt Newton, his eyes burning.

"If I'd known, you'd have been dead before we left Earth," the Venusian choked. "But there's still time. There's still time to pay you for what you did to my brother four years ago."

Curt Newton had no gun. But with a movement faster than any ordinary human could have executed, Otho drew his gun and fired.

The blast grazed Su Thuar as the Venusian swerved wildly. His scorched hand dropped his weapon. Before Otho could blaze away again, he had flung himself back into the throng and was

lost to view.

"Kin Kurri, what are you doing?" yelled Valdane hoarsely.

Otho grinned at him impudently. "Not Kin Kurri—Otho, the Futureman, to you."

Valdane shrank back. "You can't prove anything—none of you can prove anything against me."

Curt Newton pointed to the eastern heavens, where a faint glow of light was beginning to burgeon in the misty darkness.

"Look, Pluto is about to rise," he shouted desperately to the seething crowd. "It's your last chance to leave Styx."

"To blazes with you and your warnings," roared Jos Vakos, the Jovian. "You may be the real Captain Future but we've no more love for you Futuremen than we have for the Patrol. We take no orders from you."

"You blind fools, Valdane has stirred you up against the Stygians for his own purposes," cried Curt Newton. "Can't you see—"

He was cut off by a loud yell that came from northward, a cry that raced along the crowded street like flame.

"The Furrries are coming."

Curt Newton looked northward and saw that a hundred Stygians, mounted on their *kurus*, were riding into Planet Town. He recognized the solemn faces of Qu Lur and Th' Thaan in the lead.

"Good, now's our chance to show 'em what it means to ambush other-planet people," roared Jos Vakos. "Let 'em come on."

The Stygians reined in their steeds, a block away. With unfathomable eyes they met the raging gaze of the motley mob that now had drawn its atom-weapons and was standing in sinister, waiting silence.

Qu Lur held up his hand, and spoke loudly in the *lingua franca*.

"Aliens, we give you one more chance," he said. "Go to your ships and leave now. If you do not, we set the Destroyer free."

Roaring laughter answered him, mirth that broke from the lips of every man in

the crowd.

"Listen to the Furrries. They're still trying to scare us with their old bluff."

Captain Future yelled hoarsely across their heads. "Qu Lur, don't do it."

His plea went unheard. For as the crowd rocked with laughter, Qu Lur had raised his hand in a signal.

"Let the Destroyer free," shouted the old Stygian.

And instantly, the scores of Stygians behind him drew the tiny sealed vials of gray dust from inside their cloaks.

They hurled those vials in every direction, against the metalloy structures on either side, and out into the seething mob.

The crowd, for a moment, startled, uttered an even louder roar of contemptuous mirth.

"The Furrries' terrible weapon is nothing but gray dust—nothing but pinches of dust!"

But even as they shouted with laughter, Curt Newton's heart seemed to turn to ice. Catastrophe had been unchained.

"Simon," he cried to the Brain instantly. "Fly to the *Comet*! Get away in it with Grag at once, outside of Styx' atmosphere."

**T**HE BRAIN hesitated, poised in mid-air. "But you others—"

"We can't make it," Curt Newton exclaimed hoarsely. "Before we covered the distance to the landing-field, the Destroyer would be ahead of us and you and Grag and the *Comet* would be annihilated. We four will suffer no harm but you must go. Wait outside Styx' atmosphere, and warn away all ships. Go!"

The frantic urgency in his voice drove Simon Wright like a physical thrust. In a flash, the Brain rushed off through the darkness toward the landing-field two miles to the east.

"Curt, look," cried Joan Randall, wildly, clutching his arm. "Look!"

The shouting mirth of the crowd had suddenly given way to a confused, rising babel of stupefied alarm.

Curt Newton saw what he had expected to see. Wherever the Stygians'

vials of gray dust had fallen, that gray dust had magically spread.

It spread like gray flame, proliferating itself with incredible swiftness over the surface of every bit of metal it touched. And it ate the metal it touched, feeding upon it as fire would feed on wood.

With a crash, a metalloy building collapsed as its whole front was consumed by the gray blight. Another structure crumpled, and another. Like lightning the blight leaped along the street.

The air was full of floating gray dust now, that drifted out in all directions. And wherever it touched metal, it proliferated with that unbelievable rapidity to consume the metal.

Captain Future heard a thunderous roar from the east, and saw a trail of rocket-fire arc toward the heavens from the distant landing-field.

"Simon and Grag got the *Comet* away before the Destroyer reached it," he cried hoarsely. "Thank Neptune, for that, at least."

"Curt, what is it?" Joan Randall cried, stunned. "That gray dust—"

"It is a blight—a blight that eats almost every kind of metal," he answered. "A strange secret of the ancient science that the Stygians have kept, a semi-organic, fungoid thing that is spreading now on every wind, and will consume every bit of metal on Styx."

She gasped in horror. And from the dazed crowd in the street, horrified cries were rising in wild clamor as they witnessed the awful progress of the Destroyer.

The metalloy structures of Planet Town were crashing into ruin everywhere! The gray flame of the blight was leaping through the air in floating spores, eating up every thing of metal it encountered.

Already half the structures of the town were melted into shapeless heaps of seething gray dust. The brilliant lights went out, as the blight reached the power-station. And beneath the dim, eery planet-glow from the heavens, the terrible destruction went on.

"This building is going," Curt New-

ton cried to the others over the uproar. "Quick, get away from it."

He dragged Joan Randall out into the street. As the others followed as if in a stupor, the gray blight was already eating into the building front.

"Chief, my atom-pistol's crumbling in my hand," Otho yelled wildly. "Everything's going."

Planet Town had become an inferno of panic and horror as destruction fed upon it and turned it to melting mounds of gray dust.

And Qu Lur and his Stygians, at the end of the street, sat their steeds and looked solemnly at the catastrophe they had unloosed.

"The ships are crumbling, too," screamed a wild-eyed man who came racing into the mob from eastward. "Every space-ship on the landing-field has got the gray dust spreading on it."

Joan Randall clutched Curt Newton's arm convulsively. "Curt, that means—"

Captain Future's voice was thick. "Yes, Joan. It means we can't get away from Styx now. And no ship can now visit this moon, without itself being consumed by the blight."

"We're lost!" screamed Jon Valdane in hysterical panic. "We're trapped here without hope of escape, marooned here forever!"

## CHAPTER XVI

### *Marooned*



QUICKLY the awful prospect that awaited them dawned upon the dazed mob as they heard Jon Valdane's scream.

"Gods of Mars, we can't ever get away," yelled a bulging-eyed Martian.

"It's the Stygians' work," raged Jos Va-

kos, foaming. "Kill the Furrries."

The maddened mob reached for their atom-guns—and found them gone. There was only crumbling gray dust where

their weapons had been.

Captain Future felt his pockets lighten as every metal object he carried was consumed likewise. To the tiniest bit of metal on their persons. The same thing was happening to them all.

Su Thuar's hissing voice rang out through the raging of the crowd.

"Future helped do this," shouted the murderous Venusian. "He's been in league with the Stygians from the first!" accused the Venusian. "Get him."

"Kill Future and his friends," roared the crazed mob.

Curt Newton saw the danger. He shouted to his companions, and to Jeff Lewis and the other horror-stricken members of the telepicture troupe.

"We've got to fight our way out of Planet Town or this mob will murder us all," he cried.

From the dim, misty obscurity northward, the shrill voice of Qu Lur called to him in the Stygian language.

"Captain Future! This way, and we will help you to get away. But we cannot fight, even to aid you."

Curt Newton shouted to his companions. Jon Valdane had deserted them, but Lewis, Jim Willard, Lo Quior and the other men of the telepicture organization ranged themselves beside Newton and Otho and Ezra.

"Put the women at the center," cried Captain Future. "We'll have to charge right through this mob. Now!"

They rushed forward in a compact mass, straight into the howling crowd that was coming toward them.

There were no weapons, no atom-pistols, not even so much as a knife. Bare fists were the only weapons on this world which the sudden destruction of metal had plunged back into the primitive.

Curt Newton lashed out with hard, smashing blows at the whirl of brutal, raging faces he saw in front of him. He was the apex of the compact formation seeking to cleave a way through the crowd.

Otho, on his right, was using the super-ju-jitsu of which he was master to break arms and wrists with expert skill. And on his left, old Ezra Gurney was

calmly cracking heads with a heavy stone he had picked up. Behind him, Jim Willard and the other telepicture men fought furiously.

It was a nightmare struggle down that dark, misty street of the dying city. Only the fact that many of the motley mob were still too stunned to follow the leadership of Su Thuar made it possible for Curt Newton and his companions to win their way through to the Stygians.

Qu Lur and the other Stygians were tensely waiting for them. Governed by their creed of non-violence, the Stygians had refused to strike one blow in the battle, but they had waited at dire risk to themselves.

"Mount and ride with us," cried Qu Lur to Newton. "We have *gurus* ready for you."

Some of the Stygian riders had doubled up on their straggling steeds so as to leave mounts free for Captain Future and a few companions.

Other Stygian riders reached down and lifted the telepicture people behind their saddles, while Curt Newton, Otho and Joan Randall were mounting.

"Future's getting away with them," raged Su Thuar's voice from the darkness. "Stop them."

"Ride!" cried Qu Lur.

Vicious faces flashed into Curt Newton's vision as hate-maddened men rushed forward to pull them off their steeds.

But the nervous *kurus*, frightened by the uproar, were now bolting forward in prodigious leaps. They tore away from Su Thuar and his followers, galloping down the crumbling street.

And then they were out in the dim, mist-shrouded night outside darkened Planet Town, racing northward. The padded hoofs of the *gurus* drummed loudly on the grassy plain as the chill wind rushed past them.

"Captain Future, why did not you and your friends leave Styx as we warned you to do?" cried Qu Lur as they rode. "Now you can never depart."

**C**APTAIN FUTURE grimly pointed behind them.

"I was trying until the last to induce the people back there to depart," Newton answered. "Now they must remain forever. You should not have released the blight, Qu Lur."

"They mocked our laws too long, bringing ever more violence to our peaceful world," replied the old Stygian firmly. "So we have destroyed their weapons and machines. No more aliens will ever be able to come here."

He added earnestly, "You Futuremen are our friends. Would that you had heeded our warning and left. But since you did not, you must spend the rest of your lives on Styx. And you and your companions are welcome in our city Dzung, whither we ride now."

"You've been blind, Qu Lur," said Curt Newton bitterly. "Don't you see that you've only penned up hundreds of brutal, ruthless men on this world with you? Even without metal weapons and machines, they'll find a way to attack you."

Joan Randall, riding beside him, called to him. He saw through the foggy darkness that her face had become deathly pale.

"Curt, are we doomed to spend the rest of our lives here?" she cried. "Isn't there any hope of our ever getting away?"

"Joan, there may be a faint hope—but nothing more. The Destroyer blight won't leave a scrap of metal on the surface of Styx. No ship can land here. And we can never build a ship, without metal."

Suddenly the girl smiled. "Curt, at least we're together here," she said. "If we never get away, I won't mind so much."

"Nor would I, Joan. But the danger here is bigger than you realize. This whole moon, cut off from the rest of the System, and nursing a blight that sooner or later might spread to all the other planets of the Solar System."

The terrible vision of that possibility that unrolled in his mind struck him to a chill silence.

Finally, the Stygian city loomed out of the cold mists. Its octagonal towers

of stone were vaguely outlined against the dim planet-glow in the sky. Torches were burning along the streets of Dzung, but although the gray dust of the blight was in the air here as everywhere else, nothing in this stone city seemed to have suffered.

"The wisdom of our forefathers," muttered old Qu Lur to Curt Newton as they rode in through the gate in the wall. "They warned us never to depend on machines and things of metal, so that if we ever had to loose the Destroyer for defense, we would be unaffected."

It was true. The totally non-mechanical, non-metallic civilization of the Stygians had experienced no harm from the world-wide blight.

In the torchlight, hundreds of wide-eyed Stygians watched the refugees dismount. The Earth people looked around them at the city.

"And we're going to spend the rest of our lives here," murmured Jim Willard.

"I want to go back to Earth," wailed Lura Lind. "Jeff, you've got to get me back, do you hear? The *Perseus* will take us."

Jeff Lewis shook his head heavily. "All that's left of the *Perseus* now is a heap of gray dust. The ship, and all our telepicture equipment, and all the film we worked so hard to make—"

"The films we made ought to be all right, boss," Lo Quior put in hopefully. "They're non-metallic themselves, and were packed in those plastic insulite cases to protect them from heat and cold."

The producer smiled bitterly. "What difference does it make now whether they're safe or not? We can never show 'The Ace of Space' to anyone."

Qu Lur was designating buildings in which the stricken outer-planet people were to be quartered. "Qu Lur, what will you do if that mob in Planet Town comes here to attack you?" asked Captain Future.

"We shall use all our powers of illusion and hypnotic defense to repel them," the old Stygian answered.

"A mob like that won't be scared back by illusions," said Ezra Gurney.

Qu Lur answered solemnly. "We have always lived by the creed of non-violence. It is our law."

WHEN he had gone, Ezra Gurney looked skeptically at Curt Newton and Otho. "Not an encouraging prospect," he drawled.

"Chief, were you just cheering up Joan or did you mean it when you said there might be a hope of getting away from Styx?" Otho asked.

Captain Future frowned. "It's a pretty slim hope, I'm afraid. But I base it on the fact that the ancestors of these Stygians once before released the blight here, ages ago."

"So what?" Otho countered.

"We know they released the blight, long ago," said Curt Newton slowly. "But the blight hasn't been present on Styx, in more recent times. That means that the ancient Stygians must have known how to clean up the blight after it did its work of defense. They must have known of a way to destroy the Destroyer."

"You're overlooking the possibility that the blight slowly withered and vanished in those long ages," pointed out Otho.

"I don't think the spores of the stuff would ever completely disappear unless they were destroyed by artificial means," Captain Future declared. "But I can't be sure till we've examined the stuff."

Otho gestured ironically to the flecks of gray dust that floated here in the torchlit chamber, as everywhere else.

"There's plenty of it to examine. All you need is an electron-microscope. And we can't have one, or anything else made of metal."

"Turn out your pockets," Curt Newton ordered. "Let's see just what we can salvage."

They made a little heap of their belongings. It was a discouraging inventory that they took. Everything metallic had vanished. Of some things, only the plastic parts remained while metal parts were gone.

"We've got a plastic knife-handle, the stock of an atom-pistol, a gyro-compass

without needle or rotors, a pocket chronometer whose works are all gone, and some other junk," Otho said in a discouraged voice.

"Let's have the lenses of the compass and chronometer," said Curt Newton.

He examined them. They were magnifying lenses, so that the two instruments could be made tiny and yet read with ease.

"By fixing these two lenses apart at the correct focal distance, we'd have a microscope of sorts," Captain Future declared. His brow knitted. "We'll have to use these plastic cases as a tube for it."

He began work, with the crudest of means. The light plastic cases of the ruined chronometer and compass, he softened into malleable state by skillful application of heat from one of the torches.

While Otho and Ezra watched skeptically, Newton's deft fingers shaped the softened plastic into a new form. He drew it out into a short, thick tube, affixing the two lenses at its ends before it hardened.

Then he tested the crude little microscope. "It amounts to little more than a fairly strong magnifying-glass, but it may help."

Newton now captured a fleck of the floating gray dust, and affixed it to a tiny mirror Otho had carried in his make-up kit. They placed the torches around this for the strongest illumination possible.

Captain Future then intently studied the fleck of dust with his improvised magnifier. He looked long through the tube, and his face wore a frown of doubt when he finally raised his head.

"I've never seen anything quite like this blight before," he said. "It resembles certain fungoid microscopic forms of life, able to drift as dormant spores which proliferate swiftly by fission when it reaches a favorable environment.

"The amazing thing is that these gray spores seem capable of feeding upon metals by producing from themselves certain combinations of chemical elements which cause an unbelievable

electronic alteration of the metallic atoms, into atoms of organic substances the spores assimilate."

"Wait a minute, Cap'n Future," Ezra Gurney reminded him. "Remember I'm no scientist."

"You can think of it this way, Ezra," Newton simplified. "The gray blight is rust—living rust, that spreads like a swift contagion and feeds upon all metal it touches."

"So how are you goin' to kill off a blight like that?" Gurney wanted to know.

CURT NEWTON shook his head in despair. "I wish Simon were here. But I do have an idea. Past experiments have shown that hard electric radiation destroys microscopic fungoid forms somewhat similar to this strange new one. I think hard radiation would destroy this blight, too."

Otho said bitterly, "That's fine. All we need to do to kill off the blight is to set up a powerful generator of hard radiation. Only, we can't ever do that because you can't have a generator or anything else electrical without metal to build it of."

"Cap'n Future, isn't there any metal at all on this world?" Gurney asked.

Newton shook his head. "The surface metals of Styx were all destroyed ages ago, when the ancient Stygians released the blight. A few traces of cobalt and titanium survived because their peculiar crystalline compounds insulated them from the spores, but they'd be no help to us.

"We might dig down and find metals deep beneath the surface, but what good would it do us? As soon as we dug them up and refined them, the blight would destroy them too."

"So our problem is this—to build a powerful electric generator and radiation-projector, without using a scrap of metal," Otho said.

Ezra Gurney shook his head. "I can see it's impossible. You got to have metal to conduct electricity."

"Not necessarily," Curt Newton corrected him thoughtfully. "Carbon is a

fair conductor. Remember, back in the dim dawn of Earth electrical science, they used it for the filaments and electrodes of their lighting devices."

He went on. "We could rig a Sander-son single-fluid chemical battery without using metal. And we might be able to build the coils of our generator from carbon."

"But we haven't even got the tools and substances to try that," Otho burst out. "And we can't get them from any place."

"There are enough non-metallic tools in the *Comet* to give us a fighting chance," Captain Future reminded. "Grag and Simon will be hovering over Styx' atmosphere, for I told them to stay

Jim Willard, with other of the telepicture technicians to help them. A number of Stygians watched their labors curiously.

Captain Future's improvised heliograph consisted of a wooden frame twenty feet square, to which were attached a number of parallel wooden axles that each bore an oblong section of glittering glass. These shutters would reflect the sunlight brilliantly when they were closed.

"We need to rig a single control for all the shutters, so that we can send sharp code-flashes," Curt Newton explained.

A *kuru* came galloping through the dawn-misty streets of Dzung and was

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there and warn off all approaching ships. If we could get into communication with them and have them drop the things we need without entering the atmosphere."

"Sure, all we have to do is to build a teldudio transmitter," Otho retorted. "It's easy, without metal. I'll dream one up right way."

"Not a teldudio, a heliograph," Curt Newton said. "It's not always misty in the day. A big enough heliograph would flash reflected sunlight brightly enough to be seen by Grag and Simon."

Hope dawned on Otho's face for the first time. "Chief, I didn't think of that."

"We'll start to work on it at once," Curt Newton said. "The Stygians will give us the glass and other materials for it, when they understand we want to communicate with our friends. We've got to have the thing ready to use tomorrow. We may have little enough time in which to work!"

Dawn found the work of constructing the heliograph going forward by torchlight in the open plaza of the city. Curt Newton and Otho had got Lo Quior and

pulled up beside them. Th' Thaan hastily dismounted.

"Someone is coming from Planet Town," the Stygian reported. "Our sentries on the wall have just told me."

Captain Future stiffened. "Is that devil Su Thuar starting already?"

They hastened to the wall. Out on the foggy plain, a single man was approaching the city in an uncertain, staggering run.

"Why, it's Jon Valdane, alone," Joan Randall exclaimed in amazement.

CURT NEWTON'S face hardened. "Then it must be a trick of some kind. Keep your eyes open."

Valdane staggered up to the gate and beat upon it.

"Let me in!" he wailed.

"I can't see anybody else coming," Newton declared. "Keep watch while I open the gate."

Jon Valdane tottered inside and collapsed in a limp heap when the gates were opened.

The chubby financier was a pitiful sight. His sagging face bore the livid red weal of a recent blow, and he was



## CHAPTER XVII

### *Attacked*

gasping wildly for breath. His clothes were stained and torn.

"Why did you come here?" Curt snapped. "Did Su Thuar send you here as a spy?"

Valdane looked up with wild eyes.

"Su Thuar is a devil from the pit!" he croaked. "He told me that since we're all prisoners for life on Styx, my wealth and my pay meant nothing more to him. He treated me like a servant. He struck me when I objected."

Captain Future looked down at him grimly. "Your greedy plot ruined this world, Valdane. Now it's recoiled on yourself. That's only justice. You can't stay here. Go back to your friends."

"No, don't send me back to those devils," Valdane pleaded. He clutched Newton's arm. "Let me stay, and I'll tell you what they're planning."

Joan Randall's fine eyes showed pity. "Let him stay, Curt."

"We ought to wring his neck," Otho declared disgustedly.

"You can remain here but it'll be to face trial on Earth if we ever get back there," Captain Future told the shattered man. "Now, what is Su Thuar planning?"

"He's going to lead those brutes in Planet Town here and take the city away from the Stygians," Valdane babbled. "Now that Planet Town is in ruins, they say they'll live in this unharmed city and use the Stygians as their slaves. Su Thuar is their undisputed leader now."

"When are they going to attack us?" Curt Newton asked quickly.

"As soon as they can prepare weapons," Valdane said in husky tones. "Su Thuar has already got them to work making more blow-guns and stone clubs."

Curt Newton's heart sank. When that attack by the brutal mob of the interplanetary town came, he would have to meet it with only a handful of men. The Stygians' creed would prevent them from resisting by physical violence. And if the attack succeeded, Su Thuar would be master of this moon and everyone upon it.



SILENTLY Captain Future fought down the despairing foreboding that had gripped him. His red head raised indomitably, and his voice rang.

"That means Su Thuar and his band will be here tomorrow or the next day.

Very well, we'll get ready for them."

"What can we do?" Ezra Gurney muttered hopelessly. "We ain't got time now for you to rig this blight-destroyer you were planning."

"I'm going ahead with that," Newton declared. "It's our one best chance of escape, if we can contrive to build it. Meanwhile, Ezra, you and Jim Willard start preparing weapons. Make swords of tough glass."

He looked at Th' Thaan, the Stygian. "Can't the Stygians forget your pacifistic creed and fight? It's that, or slavery for you."

For a moment th' Thaan seemed tortured by deep doubts. "It is forbidden for us kill," he said at last. "We can resist only with our powers of illusion."

Ezra Gurney and the young assistant director began feverishly to superintend preparation of long, keen glass swords and knives with which to arm their party. The Stygians made no objection to their work.

Meanwhile, as full daylight came, Captain Future and Otho waited for the mists to clear so that they could use their heliograph.

As the morning advanced, the mists did not clear. The fog might not clear for days, Curt Newton knew. He waited with agonizing uncertainty.

A slight wind was blowing. The great bank of fog was moving, but had not thinned out. Then, before noon, it began to clear.

"It's lifting," Otho exclaimed. "Now's

our chance."

Captain Future stood ready at the lever of the big, rude heliograph. Finally, the mists were gone. The small, distant Sun shone from the dusky sky.

Somewhere up in that shadowy sky, the *Comet* was hovering outside Styx' atmosphere. Curt Newton was banking on his knowledge of Simon Wright and Grag that they would be keeping anxious telescopic watch on this part of Styx.

He closed the mirror-covered shutters of the heliograph. The glittering glass surface brilliantly reflected the pale sunlight into the sky. Newton rapidly opened and closed the shutters, in long and short flashes that spelled out a message in the standard interplanetary code.

"Calling the *Comet!*" he signaled swiftly. "Stand by and do not enter atmosphere. But drop the following materials and tools to us, here in Dzung—"

He listed their requirements, from his knowledge of what the *Comet's* equipment could provide.

"Hurry up," Otho warned. "The mist's thickening again."

Curt Newton hastily finished the message, as another bank of fog came drifting across the heavens.

"They'll soon drop the stuff, if they saw our flashes," he said tautly. "Now all we can do is to wait, hoping the message was seen."

Twenty minutes later, he and the other anxious watchers saw a white parachute floating down from the misty heavens nearby.

"Good old Simon and Grag—they saw!" exulted Otho.

When they got to where the improvised parachute lay, they found it attached to a bundle that contained the non-metallic instruments, materials and chemicals for which Captain Future had asked.

There was also a brief note from Simon Wright.

"The whole System is stunned by the disaster to Styx," it read. "A full squadron of Planet Patrol cruisers has arrived, but I have prevented them from entering the Stygian atmosphere by my warning. We are waiting, and will be

watching."

"This stuff gives us a fighting chance, at any rate," Captain Future declared, eagerly.

"A chance that's cursed slim, when it depends on building a completely non-metallic electric machine in a day or two," Otho muttered.

Yet Otho plunged into the labor with the same unremitting zeal as Curt Newton himself. Joan Randall joined them in the work, as did Lo Quior, the little Martian telepicture technician. Their workshop was in the big council-hall itself.

Madly impossible task it seemed, indeed, to build a complicated electric generator and projector without the use of metal. Yet Captain Future's energy and genius drove the work forward despite all difficulties.

**T**HE source of electric power did not present so many obstacles. A series of powerful Sanderson chemical batteries were soon constructed, using glass tanks and the chemicals which had been dropped from the *Comet*.

The coils and tubes of the hard-radiation generator were the great problem, since they had no wire. Curt Newton planned to use carbon for the filaments of his coils and valves, though its mediocre conductivity would make the generator one of comparatively low efficiency.

"The point is, to destroy the blight in a small area at least," Captain Future declared. "Then ships can land safely in that area, bringing equipment with which to construct a bigger, efficient generator."

He and Otho made their coil-forms of glass. Upon these forms they toilsomely wound their coils, using cord of twisted moss-fibers instead of wire.

"How in space can that moss-cord replace metal wire?" Ezra Gurney demanded skeptically.

"It will work, though the efficiency will be poor," Newton insisted. "I made preliminary tests of the fiber, and it's the best material available for our purpose."

When the coils were completely wound, they were subjected to carefully-controlled heat in an improvised oven. The high degree of heat slowly carbonized the fibers, burning away impurities.

Curt Newton inspected the coils after the baking. They were now of brittle, delicate carbon wiring, whose large diameter partly made up for its indifferent conductivity.

"Now the tubes," he exclaimed. "Otho, while I'm working on that you bake out the carbon rods we'll need for our connections."

Night had come. They were working now by torchlight. The Stygians watched their labors wonderingly, thinking that it was part of their effort to communicate with their ship. Curt Newton did not deceive them.

Ezra Gurney and Jim Willard returned from a reconnoitering expedition out in the darkness. They reported no sign yet of attackers.

"But they'll come soon, I'm thinkin'," muttered the old veteran. "What I'd give for a couple of atom-guns when they do come."

Dawn found Captain Future reeling with fatigue. He had not slept for two nights, and even his iron frame felt leaden from weariness.

But he insisted on driving the work ahead. Their motor-generator was completely finished, though the radiation projector was not. He tested the generator, closing the circuit of rigid carbon rods that connected it with the series of Sanderson batteries.

The rotor of the big, crude motor turned with shrieking noisiness upon its axles of toughened glass. But it delivered current from the attached generator—high voltage current to operate the projector.

"Turn it off," Newton ordered. "That's enough for a test-run. Those vibrations might shatter the carbon cells if it runs too long."

He had improvised tubes with non-metallic grids and filaments. These were a failure. He had to go to work on them again.

Then, in later afternoon, two Stygian

scouts rode their *kurus* hastily through the mists into the city.

"The aliens of Planet Town are coming," the scouts reported excitedly. "They are only a couple of miles away."

"Ezra—Willard—Lewis—get our men on the walls and at the gate," Curt Newton ordered. "I'm going on with this. Perhaps it will be possible to finish it before they get here. And if it works, and kills the blight in this area, the *Comet* and other ships can land."

"What about Valdane?" asked Ezra grimly, jerking a thumb toward the chubby, terrified financier whom they had kept under guard with the other prisoner, Rosson.

"Leave him there," said Newton. "He'd be no good as a hostage, for Su Thuar doesn't care whether we kill him or not."

Old Qu Lur and Th' Thaan had gathered their Stygians. The moon-men all



wore the strange telepathic lenses upon their foreheads.

"We will use our powers to the utmost to halt the attackers," Qu Lur declared earnestly.

Curt Newton kept Otho with him, toiling with desperate haste in the fabrication of new tubes for the projector. Time was running out, now.

**H**IS hands trembled as they finally finished the task and inserted the new tubes in the apparatus. Again, he closed the circuit that sent the batteries' current flowing into the makeshift mechanism.

The shrieking of the generator's glass axles did not quite drown the slow, rising hum that came from the projector. Its radiating-sphere of carbon showed

## CHAPTER XVIII

### *Last Stand*

no change, and they felt nothing.

But Curt Newton knew that the mechanism was emitting hard radiation that was drenching the area for at least a dozen miles in every direction.

"Is it working?" Joan Randall whispered. "Is it killing the blight?"

"I don't know yet," he answered in taut tones. "It should work quickly, if at all."

The shrieking, spinning rotors of the generator threatened to shatter their carbon coils at any moment. Curt Newton imprisoned a speck of the gray dust that still floated everywhere, and inspected it through his make-shift magnifier.

He uttered a hoarse cry of triumph. The gray spores were turning black. They were dying—killed by the radiation.

"It's working," he cried. "The blight in this area is destroyed, clear up to the limits of the atmosphere. The projector will keep any living spores from entering this area, so long as it continues to run."

At that moment, there broke upon their ears a fierce, distant chorus of raging yells that came from the southern side of Dzong.

"Su Thuar's band," cried Joan Randall. "They're here."

"There's still time enough," Curt Newton answered feverishly, racing toward the door. "I can call the *Comet* to come, by the heliograph."

Then, as he and Joan emerged from the tower in which he had built his projector, Curt Newton stopped, appalled.

He had forgotten one thing. He had forgotten the mist! The big, drifting bank that had shrouded Dzong all day still lay over it.

And while that mist veiled the city, he could not use the heliograph, could not flash his message to Simon Wright and Grag.

The bitter irony of it struck to Captain Future's soul. He and the others had achieved the impossible, only to have their work made futile by mere mist.



DEEP fog still hid the skies but, sooner or later Curt Newton knew the mist would pass. It would pass, in time — but time was what they would not have if Su Thuar's forces won the city. That would end all hope, indeed.

"We've got to hold them off, till the mist clears and we can get a heliograph message through to the *Comet*," Newton exclaimed.

He started forward with Otho, on a run, toward the south wall of the city. Joan Randall started to accompany him, but he motioned her back.

"No, Joan! Somebody's got to stay here by the heliograph, to send the message the moment the mist clears. And you're the only one of these people who knows the message-code."

She protested, but he was deaf to her objections as he and the android ran to join the other defenders.

"Just let me get my hands on that devil Su Thuar," Otho was swearing. "I wish to blazes we'd killed him that night on Saturn four year ago, when you shot it out with his brother."

They climbed up to the south wall, upon whose parapet were Ezra Gurney and Jeff Lewis and young Jim Willard.

The Stygians were there too, ranged all along the wall, their faces turned toward the misty plain southward, each man wearing the telepathic lens upon his forehead.

"They're comin'," Ezra Gurney grimly told Captain Future. "Hear them?"

Out of the mist came again that chorus of ferocious yells. Then from the fog appeared the mass of hundreds of men, advancing rapidly.

Curt Newton recognized Su Thuar at their head. Behind the Venusian criminal followed the motley throng of interplanetary adventurers who, deeming

themselves trapped forever on Styx, were willing to follow their leader to conquer and enslave the Stygians.

"They've got plenty of those blow-guns, as well as war-clubs," Jim Willard explained. "Su Thuar hasn't been idle."

Old Qu Lur spoke from his station on the wall, to his rows of waiting Stygians. "Now!"

Captain Future and the other watchers perceived then a sight that stunned them with wonder.

Out from the city Dzung there suddenly rushed a magically-materialized band of stalwart men in the gray uniform of the Planet Patrol. They charged the attackers, levelling their heavy atom-guns as they did so.

"The Patrol," yelled a terrified Saturnian behind Su Thuar. "They've landed somehow. There they come."

The whole mob halted in its tracks, wavered on the verge of flight. Curt Newton was breathless with hope.

But Su Thuar's cunning and courage reversed the situation. The Venusian shouted to his followers. "Don't be fools. It's only one of the Furries' illusion-tricks."

But the mob still held back. For now the advancing Patrol band was triggering its atom-guns, loosing brilliant bolts of energy toward them.

Su Thuar's yell came clearly. "See that? Those atom-guns haven't killed a one of us. They're just illusion."

His motley followers, taking courage from the fact that none of them had fallen, again rushed forward howling.

And the Patrol band vanished. They were gone like a snapped-out picture-film.

Qu Lur turned to Curt Newton, registering defeat. "We placed our hope in that illusion, and it's failed. But maybe others will succeed."

He and the Stygians proceeded in their desperate extremity to give a magnificent demonstration of their hypnotic powers of illusion.

Ravaging monsters of hideous aspect appeared to hurl themselves toward the attackers. Tidal waves of water rolled

menacingly upon them. A wall of flaming fire sprang up in their faces. And it was all illusion, mass hypnotism practised on everyone here by the Stygians' concentration.

But Su Thuar's rallying voice kept his men advancing. They had plucked up confidence and now were defying the fearsome-looking obstacles in their path. And now they were but a few hundred feet from the wall.

**T**HE Venusian yelled an order and they brought their blow-guns into play. A shower of keen darts swept the parapet of the wall. Poorly aimed as many of them were, still a half-dozen found their mark and four Stygians and two of the telepicture technicians fell back wounded.

"Get down under cover," Curt Newton yelled. "You're not doing any good exposing yourselves. Wait till they try to climb the wall and then use your swords."

He and Otho had provided themselves with two of the tough glass swords with which the telepicture men and Ezra Gurney were armed.

But they soon learned that Su Thuar had no intention of trying to scale the wall. They heard the Venusian's ringing command.

"Bring that battering-ram ahead. Quick!"

"They're goin' to bust in the gate, Cap'n Future," cried Gurney.

"Down behind it, then," Curt Newton cried. "Get more stones to brace it!" Curt ordered.

He saw a score of the motley mob running forward through the others, bearing a massive club-moss trunk that had been shorn of branches.

As Curt Newton leaped down with the others to take a station behind the gate, the battering-ram crashed into it from the outside.

He looked up wildly at the sky. The bank of mist was still drifting slowly across Dzung. Not yet had the sky cleared.

"They'll be through in a minute," Otho yelled with wolfish excitement, his green

eyes blazing. "I wish old Grag were here with us now."

*Crash!* The right leaf of the massive stone gate shattered off its crude, ancient hinge and was driven in against the stones that braced it. Through the opening, Su Thuar and his brutal horde came pouring.

"The city's ours," yelled the Venusian. "Kill all the Futuramen and the telepICTURE fools—but not the women."

It was that command and its hideous implications that exploded cold fury in Curt Newton's brain. He sprang forward with his little group of comrades to stem the entrance of the invaders.

Blow-gun darts whistled past his face. He was seeking Su Thuar, but in the cramped, choked confusion of that staggering fight, he came face to face not with the Venusian but with Jos Vakos, the Jovian.

The Jovian's green face was a brutal, distorted mask of ferocity as he raised his stone-studded war-club for a shattering blow.

Curt Newton ducked and stabbed upward under his opponent's descending arm. The slim glass blade of the sword ripped into the Jovian's heart, and he staggered and fell.

"There ain't enough of us," Ezra Gurney was panting as he fought beside Curt in the narrow combat. "They're pushing us back."

As he shouted, there was a great roar of voices and a horde of figures suddenly flung themselves into the battle from behind Curt and his little handful of men.

"The Stygians," cried Ezra Gurney, in unbelieving surprise. "The Stygians are *fightin'!*"

Qu Lur, his eyes raging, was in the forefront of the moon-men and exhorting them in a shrill voice.

"Strike to kill," the old Stygian was shouting. "They seek to murder and enslave us. It is better to take life than to become slaves."

Captain Future understood. The Stygians' age-old creed of nonviolence had failed them, as it always would fail when opposed to predatory and ruthless

men. At this last, fateful hour, the moon-men had seen the fatal mistake of their peace-loving tradition.

And the Stygians, who had never fought in their lives before, were fighting now like demons. They had no weapons, but they seized stones and used them, or hurled themselves into the melee with their bare hands reaching for the throats of their attackers.

"Kill the Furrries," came the ferocious howl of the invaders.

The battling Stygians went down by dozens as they threw themselves with bare hands against the blow-guns and clubs of the attackers.

"Push them in," yelled Su Thuar's exultant voice through the melee. "We're winning!"

Captain Future wielded his glass sword like a madman, fighting to get through the crazy combat to the Venusian.

**B**UT the irresistible weight and weapons of the attacking horde was rolling his own few men and the raging, weaponless Stygians back away from the shattered gate. The invaders were pouring into the city.

They were now all around Curt Newton and his comrades, who formed a little knot of resistance vainly striving to stem the tide.

Curt Newton, stabbing furiously at the motley horde, glimpsed Jim Willard go down from a dart in his leg. Ezra Gurney was stunned by a war-club's grazing blow, and sagged to the pavement.

"Help him, Otho," Curt Newton yelled, himself trying to fight to Gurney's side as he shouted.

But Otho, at this moment, was being overwhelmed by a dozen attackers who were pulling down the deadly android by sheer numbers.

Captain Future lunged forward, and his glass blade slashed into two of the ring around Otho. His sword met a swinging war-club, and shattered.

"Look out, Future!" yelled the wounded Jim Willard from behind.

Curt Newton spun around with his

shattered sword in his hand—just in time to glimpse the big Uranian behind him who had his war-club raised.

He flung his sword-hilt and glimpsed it crunching in the Uranian's yellow face. But in that same instant, the heavy club completed its blow and struck Curt Newton's head. Blackness enveloped his mind.

Curt Newton came back to his senses to find himself lying prone, the sunlight in his eyes. Sunlight? Yes, the drifting mists were finally clearing.

But too late. The city had fallen to Su Thuar's horde, and the surviving Stygians were fleeing from the brutal, triumph-flushed invaders who pursued them through the stone streets.

Captain Future tried to leap to his feet. Then he discovered that his hands were bound. He was in the central plaza of Dzong, with Otho similarly bound beside him and Joan Randall standing under guard nearby. And Su Thuar was contemplating Captain Future with burning eyes.

"Pull them up!" snapped the Venusian criminal, and Curt Newton and Otho were roughly hauled to their feet by the guards behind them.

Su Thuar laughed softly.

"I wanted you Futuremen to be awake and conscious when I killed you," he told Curt Newton. "I wanted you to pay to the full for what you did to my brother and to me."

Captain Future did not answer. His hopeless eyes were fixed upon the big heliograph in this plaza, its open shutters gleaming mockingly in the pale sunlight.

He could hear the creaking drone of his radiation-generator from inside the council tower, still neutralizing the blight in this area. He had struggled so hard to build those things, only to be defeated finally by the unpredictable vagaries of shifting mists.

Su Thuar seemed to gather rage from Curt Newton's calmness.

"Yet I ought to thank you, Future," he snarled. "I've got you to thank for the fact that I'm now master of this moon. Nobody can ever take it away

from me. No ship of the System can ever land here to dispute my rule.

"And before you die," the Venusian hissed, "I want you to know something else. I want you to know what will happen to her."

He gestured toward the pale face of Joan Randall. As he made that gesture, Su Thuar suddenly stiffened and glared past the girl.

A man was stealing out of the council tower—a chubby, dishevelled man who was frantically trying to escape without being seen.

"Valdane," yelled Su Thuar. "So this is what happened to you. You came here to warn them."

"No, no, I didn't," shrieked Jon Valdane in accents of terror. "No!"

Wildly the financier started to flee, for he had read death in the Venusian's eyes. But Su Thuar was after him with tigerish swiftness, raising his long stone dagger in his hand.

The crude knife plunged into the stumbling Valdane's back. The financier choked, staggered and then fell forward, with his face crushed in death against the stones of the world whose wealth he had coveted.

**A**ND in that moment, Captain Future acted. He had felt his two guards' grip upon him relax a little as they turned to look. His body suddenly contorted and then broke free from their grip like an uncoiling spring.

Curt Newton plunged toward the lever that controlled the big heliograph, a score of feet away. His bound hands gripped the lever. He frantically jerked it back and forth. The glass shutters of the thing closed and unclosed swiftly as he began to spell code-letters in flashes.

"C-o-m-e."

"Curt, look out," screamed Joan Randall.

Captain Future leaped aside, and the reddened dagger which Su Thuar was bringing down on his back, dug into his shoulder instead.

The Futureman's bound hands seized the Venusian's dagger hand. He strug-

gled for that instant, Su Thuar's raging eyes glaring into his.

"Kill him, you fools," Su Thuar was yelling to his hastening men. "He was trying to signal to his friends."

Fighting with mad ferocity, Otho was trying to get to Newton's side.

There was a sudden thunderous roar, growing to deafening pitch as a dark bulk dropped down upon them through the pale sunlight.

"It's the *Comet!*" came Joan Randall's frantic cry. "And the Patrol!"

Su Thuar's horde was scattering in all direction as the little ship of the Futuremen and the half-dozen grim, big Planet Patrol cruisers that followed it, landed swiftly upon the central plaza.

Atom-guns of the descending ships sent bursting shells over the fleeing horde. And out of the *Comet*, the huge figure of Grag came plunging, his metal fists smashing heads like eggshells as he strode in the direction of Curt Newton and Su Thuar.

Su Thuar, his face livid, suddenly relaxed his hold on the dagger and turned to flee. His sudden relaxation of pressure turned the weapon in Newton's hands, and it drove into the Venusian's throat.

Su Thuar tore away, choked with blood, foam on his lips, as he staggered a few steps and fell. Then he lay still beside the dead body of the financier whom he had murdered a minute before.

"Curt!" cried Joan. She was free, running to him. After she had cut the bonds from his wrists, she wound her arms around his neck.

Grag's booming, excited voice interrupted them. "Chief, we were watching and when you said 'Come', we came. You've got the metal-blight licked here, haven't you?"

"The blight is conquered in this small area," Captain Future answered. "The first thing we've got to do is to build a big enough generator and projector here to destroy the blight all over Styx."

The Patrol was rounding up the men of Su Thuar's horde. With no weapons except blow-guns and clubs and knives, facing the atom-guns of the grim Patrol

officers, there was no resistance.

Curt Newton, Joan Randall and the Futuremen found Ezra Gurney in the heap of bodies by the shattered gate. Gurney was stunned, but no worse. Jim Willard and Lo Quior had suffered wounds, but would recover. But old Qu Lur, chief of the Stygians, had died fighting.

Curt Newton spoke earnestly to Th' Thaan, who now would be leader of the Stygian people.

"Th' Thaan, you've had a lesson in the perils of pacifism and isolation when they're carried too far. I want your people to forget your old traditions, and join the rest of the Solar System, yielding authority to maintain order here to the Patrol."

"We shall do so," the Stygian declared fervently. "All we ask is that our world shall not be overrun by aliens."

"The System Government will take care it isn't," Newton assured him. "The diamond-deposits here, which might draw more unprincipled seekers, are going to become the property and trust of the Government itself, if my recommendation has any weight."

**J**EFF LEWIS approached Newton. There was an embarrassed timidity in the producer's manner that contrasted oddly with his former bluntness.

"Carson—I mean, Captain Future," he corrected hastily, "what about our picture, 'The Ace of Space?' Jim says we'll find our films unharmed, but we still haven't made any scenes here on Styx, and can't make them without you."

Curt Newton's lips twitched. "I see your difficulty. All right, I'll make a bargain with you."

"What is it? Just name your conditions," Lewis said eagerly.

"I'll help you make the last scenes here you need, as soon as you get new equipment, on condition that you and the troupe keep it secret that the Captain Future in the film is the real Captain Future."

Jeff Lewis' face dropped. "But think of the worlds of publicity it will mean if I'm able to advertise that the picture



has Future himself in it," he wailed.

"You'll have publicity enough, without that," Curt Newton answered firmly. "Is it agreed?"

The producer nodded heavily. "All right, it's agreed. But when I think of it, I could weep. The Futuremen themselves in my picture—and nobody will ever know it."

**I**N a night three months later, there occurred in a New York telepicture theater the System-wide premiere of "The Ace of Space."

A packed audience cheered for minutes when the film ended. And when they issued from the theater they found a tremendous crowd outside, who nearly crushed Jeff Lewis, Ron King and Lura Lind.

The most important telepicture critic in the System, on the next day, published what became an epitome of the general reaction to the film.

"'The Ace of Space' is the greatest adventure picture ever made," he wrote. "The terrifying scenes by the Fire Sea of Jupiter, the incredible undersea episode filmed in an actual Neptunian sub-

marine city, the wonderful special effects, and especially the scenes on remote Styx, have never been presented on a telepicture screen before.

"The hero-worship of our peoples toward the Futuremen who have performed such great exploits in our behalf, will make this film the biggest attraction in entertainment history. Its appeal is heightened by the fact that it was partly made on Styx at the very time of the mysterious, sensational catastrophe that recently struck that world.

"The story is a masterpiece of swift-paced writing that still keeps closely to the facts of the Futuremen's past exploits. The direction and technical effects are superb. The performances of Lura Lind, Ron King and Rizo Thon have never been bettered.

"There is only one flaw in the picture to which exception can be taken. That is the new actor who performs in the title role, Chan Carson. We hate to say it, but Carson is a misfit in this role. Let's hope that the next time Jeff Lewis makes a film like this, he gets somebody for it who can really look and act like Captain Future."

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