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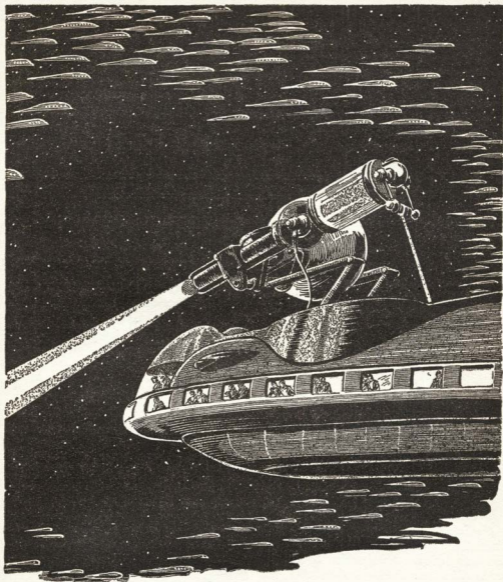
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VASSALS OF THE MASTER WORLD

By EANDO BINDER

Mighty Tharkya—for untold aeons the tyrant ruler of a million conquered galaxies. Then from fettered Earth came the clarion call to arms—"Revolt!"—and ten billion slaves blasted to certain self-annihilation against the energon-supplied armadas of the Master World.

IT was a peculiar singing whine, followed by a ground-shaking thump, that woke James Kaine from a sound, dreamless sleep.

He half rose in bed, straining his ears. Whines and thumps were not the common thing in this quiet, open section of New Jersey, but Kaine didn't investigate

at first. He was annoyed and tried to resume sleep, settling back. In the following minutes he became wide awake as he heard clinking sounds, like the use of tools. Also a glow of light reflected from outside.

Muttering under his breath, Kaine slipped noiselessly from bed, envying his wife who had not awakened. He looked out of the second-story window of their bungalow. The nearest neighbor was a block away.

It was the dark hour before dawn. The sky was peppered with star sparks, and over the northwestern horizon pulsed the glow of New York City. But the light that had come from somewhere near was out now.

Kaine strained his eyes toward the far end of his property and barely made out a long, smooth bulk. It was metallic, glinting with starshine. What the devil was it—an airplane? They had a nerve, landing on his lawn and probably ruining it.

But it must be an emergency landing.

He stared. Dimly, then, he saw the figure crouching before a long tube that seemed set on a tripod, outside the ship. The tube probed skyward, like a telescope, and changed angle every few seconds with a rustle of pinions. Kaine couldn't make out the figure.

"Damn!" he breathed. "I suppose I'll have to go see."

He left the window and fumbled for his clothes in the dark, all thought of further sleep gone. As he dressed the first grays of dawn stole through the air. Quietly, he left his sleeping wife, went down the creaky stairs and out into the crisp air.

Curiously, as he had occasion to reflect later, his uppermost thought was that if any part of his lawn had been plowed up, they'd pay for it. But back of that, he had a vague sense of the extraordinary in this event.

"Hallo there!" he called softly as he rounded the corner of the house. "What's the trouble?"

He strode forward, peering through the morning mists.

Three things came to Kaine's attention with stunning rapidity. Half his lawn was a seared, blackened mess. Secondly, the ship had no wings. And third, the

figure that straightened from the tube and turned wasn't—

His mind almost refused to accept it.

—*Wasn't human!*

Kaine gasped and blinked.

The figure was manlike, but not human. It was short and willowy, gnome-like with a blue skin and large head. It was built in the same plan as man except for having four arms, a pair on each side. The face was intelligent, the large owl-eyes keen. These features were clearly visible behind a wonderfully transparent globe that encircled the head and fitted snugly at the neck. It must be breathing its own, artificial atmosphere.

FRIGHT came like a blow to James Kaine. He hoped it was an illusion. But the strengthening blaze of dawn did not vanish it. His mind whirled at the verge of panic. For a moment he was just a child confronted by a bogey-man, ready to bolt with a scared whimper.

Then mental relays clicked and replaced blind fear with curiosity. He swallowed, forcing himself to adopt the scientific outlook on this. As a writer of scientific articles, some of which had speculated on otherworldly life, he must accept the alien being for what it was—a creature from some other world. He felt color drain back into his face.

The blue being, in turn, showed little surprise at his appearance. Rather, he seemed puzzled. He looked at Kaine, then around at the scenery and up into the sky, as though asking himself a mental question. Finally he spoke.

The flowing words were unintelligible to Kaine. He shook his head. The syllables changed to clacking consonants, apparently of a different language. After several other variations of speech, the blue man, non-plussed, motioned for Kaine to speak.

"You want me to talk?" Kaine queried. "But you can't know my language, either—"

"Talk!" returned the alien commandingly.

Kaine now noticed that the blue man's voice issued from a small machine on his chest, with a metallic overtone.

"I can't think of much to say," Kaine stammered.

"Talk—much!" ordered the alien, or his voice machine. Kaine had sudden respect for the device. It obviously learned words instantly, crazy as that seemed, through some telepathic channel.

Incredible? This was all incredible. But it was happening, right here and now in 1940.

What should he say? Kaine's mind became an annoying blank, as if from stage fright.

"For Pete's sake!" he mumbled. "With the whole dictionary full of words, I'm stuck."

"Dictionary! Words!" repeated the uncanny voice, mimicking his inflection perfectly. Then, a little hesitantly: "For Pete's sake—dictionary!"

It was, Kaine sensed, a command.

He hurried to the house and returned with his Collegiate Dictionary. The elf-like being still stood beside his telescopic instrument with an impatient air. Kaine started at "AA" in the dictionary, waded through half a column, and then began skipping. After all, *abacus*, *abaft*, *abase*, and words of that type were unnecessary to average speech. Besides, it would take all day to include them. Selecting, and going as rapidly as he could, Kaine raced through the alphabet.

He stopped in the "I's" suddenly and glanced at the attentively listening blue man.

"Do you understand everything so far?" he asked practically.

"Certainly!" the alien retorted.

Kaine finished an hour later, his throat dry and hoarse.

"Thank you!" said the blue man. "Now I am able to use your language quite readily. This instrument on my chest catches the telepathic impulse that you automatically send out with each spoken word. It records them indelibly as thought-tracks along a spool of wire. When I speak, in my own language, the instrument mechanically substitutes your words. There are hundreds of other languages recorded on separate spools."

The blue man paused, and Kaine opened his mouth to ask some of the buzzing questions in his mind. But the alien being seemed to have questions of his own, and beat Kaine to it.

"What sector of space is this?" he

queried. "Frankly, I'm lost! I made observations with the telescope, but can't seem to place your primary's position. Is your sun in Sector M-45, or perhaps N-23?"

"Search me," Kaine returned, bewildered. "I don't know anything about space sectors."

"You must!" snapped the blue man, frowning impatiently. "Everyone knows the space sector his sun is in. Is it L-62? I thought I recognized an L-62 star before."

"I tell you I don't know," Kaine declared firmly. "You're talking gibberish, as far as I'm concerned. Or anyone else on Earth. You say you're lost. What planet or world are you from?"

"Are you joking?" accused the blue man, his eyes wide and angry. "Surely you must know I'm one of the Tharkyans?"

"I didn't know till you told me."

"You've never seen my kind before?"

"Never!" Kaine was sure of that.

"Your system hasn't been *censused*, by our census-takers?"

"Of course not, whatever you mean."

"And you've never paid the Tax?"

"See here," Kaine grunted. "You're talking riddles."

The Tharkyan leaned against his telescope, shaking his head inside his helmet in a curiously human mannerism. He waved his four arms as if overwhelmed.

"Then this sun has been overlooked—for Pete's sake!" he marveled. "Completely passed over by our scouts, explorers, governing commission, census-takers and tax-collectors! How strange!"

JAMES Kaine felt ready to burst with unanswered enigmas. What the blue man had revealed sounded ridiculous—and yet chillingly ominous.

"You mean then," he asked, "that you're from some other star with planets, and that your race has colonized other planet systems?"

"Let me explain."

The little blue being stood erect and went on. "We Tharkyans are the oldest, most civilized, and most powerful race in this galaxy. A million of your years ago—I computed your orbit—we arose to our heights. Our sun lies about 50,000 light-

years from here, near the hub of the galaxy. Achieving the faster-than-light drive for our space ships, we gradually spread out among the stars. As you may know, there are more than 100 billion stars in this galaxy. Only one out of 100,000 has planets, but that means a total of a million colony systems. One million and twelve, according to the last census. They comprise our empire!"

Kaine gasped. The British Empire in spatial terms!

"You've colonized them all—over a million planetary systems?"

"All except this one it seems." The blue man smiled whimsically. "And perhaps a few others we've somehow missed. Distances are so vast, and recording methods so intricate, that it has been quite a project. We have gone from one end of the galaxy to the other, which is 200,000 light years in its greatest extent. We scouted, explored, set up a governing body and collected tax from the last new system ten thousand years ago. But now, of course, this solar system will be the last, or latest, to join the empire."

"What if we don't wish to join?" Kaine objected, slightly repulsed at the Tharkyan's lordly manner of saying it. "What does joining involve?"

"Rule by us," the blue man returned blandly. "You have no choice in the matter, in the first place. Almost all the planet systems have native civilizations. All are under our jurisdiction."

He waved two of his four arms, dismissing the matter.

"My name is Thork," he introduced himself. "Of the Inspection Service. I was on my way to sector L-28, to inspect our station there, when I ran into a small cosmic cloud. That is, a dark area caused by fine dust in space. I must have passed a star that threw me off course. Anyway, I found myself lost, and landed here to get my bearings. Little did I know I had found a new, undiscovered system of planets!"

He went on thoughtfully.

"Incidentally, I can see why your system has escaped detection so long. The dark cloud, or nebula, covers you on three sides. You don't see it yourself because of your proximity to it, and its diffuseness. It's likely that no one else would

have blundered into your star for another thousand years, if I hadn't found it. But come, I must see more of your world and your civilization. You will be my guide."

"But my wife—" Kaine objected automatically.

"Wife—um—mate," Thork murmured, as if comparing the dictionary terms. "I will give you five minutes," he conceded magnanimously. "Tell her as little or as much as you want, in that time. You will not be harmed."

Kaine walked to the house, confused, still half stunned.

He looked once over his shoulder. Maybe he had dreamed the whole thing. But the wingless ship was solid, real. Thork was dragging his telescope inside the ship.

Kaine knew what he had to do. Not for another thousand years, the blue being had said. Not for another thousand years would Earth be discovered and exposed to some hideous, appalling rule by inhuman creatures.

His wife came out of her undisturbed slumber as he shook her shoulder. She opened sleepy eyes. Kaine spoke swiftly, explaining.

"No hysterics now!" he snapped fiercely, as she seemed ready to scream. He slapped her face twice, stingingly. "Sorry, dear. But you must keep calm. I'll have to go with him, I can see that. Can't tell what powers he has. While I'm gone, call the police. Get as many here as you can. Have them wreck the ship, and then wait for our return. Tell them it's a dangerous maniac. Got it straight?"

He shook her and repeated the instructions, till she nodded dumbly, with without hysteria. Then he pressed her hand and went down again.

OUTSIDE, Thork met him before the door.

"I can't use my space ship to observe your world closely. Do you have some sort of vehicle for traveling? Take me to a large city."

Thork was wearing, in addition to his sealed helmet and voice-machine, a harness around his waist, outfitted with small boxes. He glanced doubtfully at Kaine's coupe, but climbed in. Kaine shifted gears

and toiled the car toward the highway. A mile down the road, shaking his head, Thork made him stop.

"What a frightfully noisy, vibrating contraption!" the blue alien snorted. "I'll not ride another inch in it. Leave it here. We will—"

"Leave it here!" Kaine exploded. His jaw set. "Look here, Thork, you're upsetting my life. I don't know why I should guide you around in the first place. In fact, I won't. I refuse!"

"You can't refuse a Tharkyan," Thork said mildly. "We are your rulers."

"Damn you, I'll break every bone in your ornery little body!" Kaine roared, his nerves snapping. A man could stand only so much of this maddening business. He clutched at the blue man—and grabbed nothing.

Thork had whisked away with incredible swiftness.

His voice came from behind Kaine.

"Watch your car!"

Kaine saw a shimmering violet beam jab from one of Thork's belt-boxes. His car began to crumple, fantastically, and fall together like limp rags hanging on a frame. A moment later it had settled down to a heap of dusty smoke that swept away with the next puff of wind.

"You see?" prodded Thork's voice warningly.

Kaine saw. He was in the hands of a being controlling forces of disintegration, space travel, and God knew what else. A million years of science! A million years of power and rule, among a million worlds. That was what the scrawny little blue-skinned imp of a man represented!

"Let's go on," Kaine said hurriedly. "I'll show you around New York City."

He must gain time. He must think some way out of this appalling situation. Not just for himself. For the world! The police were no help. He sensed that now.

And then Kaine's heart sank sickeningly.

"I heard you talking to your wife," Thork announced blandly. "Police, eh? Come, we'll go back immediately to welcome them."

Thork grasped Kaine's hand.

"Stay close to me and have no fear." He touched studs on the little belt-boxes.

They rose lightly in the air. Gravity control! Kaine choked, but Thork held his arm firmly. Borne by some unfelt, unseen force, they drifted over the road, back to the house.

A police squad had just arrived. They were large, powerful men, armed to the teeth for tackling a maniac. Thork chuckled, landing directly in front of the police.

Their reaction, as it might have been to any wild animal confronting them, was to shoot. Kaine dived away just before the first rattle of sub-machine guns. When he turned to look, Thork stood unharmed, surrounded by a faint green haze. It turned bullets aside.

Still chuckling, Thork pressed one of his studs. Soundlessly, the police fell, and turned to wisps of dust. They and their guns. It had all happened in swift, unbelievable seconds.

Thork turned to Kaine, holding his wife in his arms.

"I'll look your world over myself. Then I'll return to my headquarters and report your total armament. If there is resistance, we will quash it quickly. Within a year, your world will be under our dominance!"

He stiffened. "Stand back!" he warned. Kaine was advancing, slowly, grimly toward the grotesque being. Like a robot he came forward.

"You'll probably kill me, Thork," he grated. "But I've got to try to kill you. I've got to try it—"

The rest was a gurgling rattle as the ray of disintegration sprang over Kaine. Thork looked down at the wisps of dispersing matter, shaking his head. To Kaine's wife he said:

"Tell your world it is no use to oppose us—as you have seen!"

He turned and entered his ship.

Emotionlessly, he rose in the air and soared away.

Kaine's wife, beyond tears at the horrible sight she had witnessed, knelt down over the last wisps of her husband. The whole universe had suddenly dropped out from under her feet. From under Earth, in fact.

"What kind of dreadful world," she whispered tonelessly, "will our child be born into?"

II

TERRY KAINE stood stiffly with Lon MacLean before Thork, the Tharkyan governor of Earth.

Two rugged sons of Earth. Terry Kaine was tall, lean-faced, with the strength of active youth. Lon MacLean was short, wiry, with sandy thin hair, spryer than his fifty years of age betokened. Space pilots, they had been together on many a run to Mars and Jupiter.

"Terry Kaine, Lon MacLean?" said the mechanical tones of the governor's voice-machine. "What outlandish names! Well, you have been chosen to be this year's Bearer of the Tax. The year—what is it in your calendar?—oh yes, 1965."

Kaine let the older man acknowledge the mission. MacLean merely nodded stiffly.

The blue being eyed him. "Well, have you nothing to say?" he asked sharply. "It's an honor, you know."

"Yes," MacLean said tersely.

"Yes *master!*" prompted the alien overlord, his owl eyes angered.

"Yes—master," MacLean muttered reluctantly. He drew a defiant breath. "But it isn't an honor. 'Tis no honor to bear the Tax—the mark of our subjugation to Tharkya!"

Terry Kaine swallowed a little. He had tried to kick MacLean, to stop him. The old fool! It was all right to talk rebelliously in private. But to fling those things right in the face of the Tharkyan governor—dynamite!

The Tharkyan's large eyes blazed now. Two of his four talon-like hands darted to a belt-stud. A ruthless, burning disray would leap forth. MacLean didn't cringe. Neither did Kaine. Earthmen were not the cringing sort.

The gnome-like alien moved his hands away, anger gone suddenly. Kaine could hardly believe it. Could you insult these overlords and get away with it? MacLean winked at him as though to say—"Outbluffed the lion in his den, didn't we!"

Thork waved his four hands.

"Why must you Earthmen be so difficult?" he complained. "We are not cruel rulers. We have interfered little with

your chosen way of life. Damn little!" The governor spoke English like a native, after twenty-five years, save for a slight hissing accent. "Why do you hate us so?"

"What do you expect?" MacLean snapped back. "No, you aren't cruel rulers. But my people don't like imposed rule of any sort. Ever study our history? No dictator lasted for long. You'll never drive away our spirit of freedom. No, Thork, never in a million years!"

Thork glowered a little at the familiarity of using his name, but passed it by. Kaine released his breath. He had never suspected the old, loquacious Scot of this much downright foolhardiness.

"In what way have we imposed our rule?" Thork argued. "Outside of the Tax, which all colony-systems pay, and the regulation of interstellar trade, we do nothing to rub your fur the wrong way. Damn it, man, we've done you more good than harm. We've opened space to you, and given you ten times the science you puttered along with. Can you deny that?"

MacLean shook his head honestly.

"Ay, but we would have reached that point ourselves, in time. And further. Now you hold us back. We're fitted in the mold you Tharkyans think best for the galaxy. But who are you to tell us what to do? Us and a million more intelligent races?"

"We are the oldest race," Thork reminded.

"So what?" MacLean snarled. "You're on the decline, whether you know it or not!"

"Careful!" the alien warned frigidly. Kaine shivered at the ice in his tone. "I'm not interested in your personal opinions. You're an old, hard-headed malcontent, Lon MacLean. Your kind will die out in another generation."

MACLEAN clenched his fists, but Kaine tugged him back.

"Hold your temper, Lon," he whispered. "This isn't getting us anything."

Thork turned to Kaine.

"I'm rather interested in you, Terrance Kaine," he said. "Twenty-five years ago your father and I met, the first Tharkyan and first Earthman. I was forced to kill him, as you know. You were born soon

after. In atonement, I've given you the best of Tharkyan training, in space-nautics and all its science. I believe you will some day be important, in leading your people to cooperation with Tharkya. I've appointed you Bearer of the Tax, so that you may see our home-world and its great civilization. We shall have a talk when you return. Don't listen to MacLean too much. But I think you'll see through his petty mouthings."

MacLean growled, but craftily said nothing. Kaine knew he wanted nothing more than to see Tharkya for himself, home of their overlords.

Kaine diplomatically said: "I'll form my own conclusions."

Thork nodded, pleased. "You don't hold your father's death against me?"

Kaine shook his head, despite MacLean's slight curl of the lips.

"Sensible man," Thork commanded. "I think you realize my problems, on a larger scale. I was appointed the governorship of this solar system, as reward for discovering it. It hasn't been easy. Earth resisted for months, at first. It wasn't till we finally stamped out that stubborn rebel—what was his name?"

"Hitler," MacLean supplied.

"Hitler!" Kaine echoed softly, for the name was honored. Whatever he had been before the advent of Tharkya, he died a hero in Earth's history. His great military machine had fought to the last against Tharkya's super-weapons. His legions of planes had broken themselves against Tharkya's adamant phalanxes. Men still talked of that final moment, when the British Navy and German Air Force together had made a final desperate raid against the Tharkyan base in Africa. Every ship and plane went down—and Tharkya had won. The Red Army and the Italian and Japanese units were destroyed in a week. The American Navy had gone down with the British.

"Yes, Hitler," Thork nodded. "Few worlds gave us the battle he did. But that is all in the past. Since then, my aim has been to treat Earth fairly. Earth is better off in the great economic union of the Milky Way Galaxy. Can't you people ever see that?"

"We see only one thing," MacLean grunted. "Eventual liberty."

Thork laughed, harshly now.

"Tharkya has ruled in the Galaxy for a million years. In that time, no revolt has ever seriously threatened us. We'll rule for another million years. A billion! We have *energon*."

Terry Kaine felt suddenly hollow inside.

Yes, they had *energon*. Tons and tons of it, stored on their home-world. Enough to blast every world to dust, if they wished. And each year, from each colony-system, they gained another gram of it. It was the Tax. The universal tribute paid by all the subjugated worlds to mighty Tharkya.

"Here it is," Thork said, handing over a small box. "I know you'll deliver it without fail, for you know the penalty."

Kaine felt more hollow inside.

He had seen movies of what happened on a world, over in space sector B-44, that failed to deliver its Tax. A frightful hundred-mile wide dis-ray criss-crossing over cities and fields, leaving them smoking ruins. It had been like a whip applied to the whole planet, till half of it lay torn and smoldering. The surviving half of the four-legged citizens of that world had been allowed to take up where they left off—as obedient servants of all-powerful Tharkya.

MacLean took the box.

"We'll deliver it," he promised. "But nevertheless, it is *not* an honor!"

"Stubborn to the last," Thork sighed. "You know the instructions. The automatic pilot will take over beyond Pluto. If you tamper with it, you'll never reach Tharkya, the Tax will not be delivered, and your world will be scourged. Understand?"

MacLean nodded grimly and wheeled, with Kaine. They left the presence of Thork, Governor of Earth.

III

AN hour later, without fanfare, their space ship glided from Earth. MacLean took the ship into space, piling on velocity past the asteroids, and out toward Pluto. A born engineer, he sat at the controls with a begrudging smile.

"Well, me lad," he chirped, "we're on a blessed long run. Fifty thousand light-years. Ah, but this is a sweet engine!"

He cocked his ear, listening to its throaty purr.

"It's one of the Tharkyan's best ships of the small-tonnage class," Kaine agreed. "Engine capacity of 1,000 *spacions* per cubic inch. And 5,000 *chronons* per second."

"Spacions! Chronons!" MacLean grumbled. "Damned new-fangled nonsense. When I used to drive trucks in the old days, it was horsepower—something a man could ken."

"It's simple enough," Kaine grinned. "Spacions are the discrete particles of space. Chronons of time. The engine develops enough horsepower to handle bunched quantities of both. Since spacions and chronons are the essence of space and time, the engine literally eats up distance in negligible time. Light-years become mile posts."

MacLean was not that casual about it. He watched the speed-dial with fresh wonder. Light-years were beginning to click by at an increasing pace. The automatic pilot had taken over. Already behind them the sun and its planets had faded into a lightless background. They were going far faster than light.

"I still liked the old days better," MacLean muttered. "When a man could *see* where he was going."

"The old days!" Kaine looked at the Scot with a sudden new interest. "You actually lived, for twenty-five years, in the world prior to the coming of the Tharkyans!"

"Ay, lad, and it was a different world. A freer, better life, without any blue-skinned devils lording it over us."

"But you had no space travel," Kaine said thoughtfully. "No atomic-power machines in the factories. And you had quite a bit of war, which the Tharkyans have banned."

"But dang it," MacLean returned, "at least the human race was making its own bed. Now we're told what to do, what crops to raise, what gadgets to manufacture, how many children to have. It makes my blood boil!"

"Scientific control," Kaine said. "Everything is figured out for the best benefit of all. We've got to admit it, Lon."

"Must we go through all that again?" MacLean groaned. "Terry, lad, have you

forgotten you're an Earthman, not Tharkyan?" His voice turned a little unfriendly. "You even care nothing that your father was murdered, in cold blood, by this Thork!"

Kaine was silent. No, not exactly. But he had never known his father. Only one thing at times stirred a deep, resentful anger. His mother had died, a year later, heart-broken. And insane.

Kaine shrugged. "Of course, they've had to be rather ruthless and autocratic at times. But it's for the best."

"For *whose* best?" MacLean exploded. "Tharkya's! They control all interstellar trade. The best of everything goes to them, so that they can live an easy, rich life. Worst of all, the energon Tax. Millions of our people laboring year after year at that same task. A gram each year, for the coffers of Tharkya. Is that right, that they gain all that energon which rightly belongs to the separate worlds?"

"Energon!" Kaine murmured. He picked up the box, opening it. He wanted to see this miraculous substance. A small sealed vial lay in cotton. He picked it up and held it to the light. Only a few grayish crystals rattled within.

"Saints, don't!" MacLean gasped, backing away. "If you drop it, we'll be blown to atoms!"

Kaine laughed.

"Rubbish! That's a popular misconception. I've read all about the stuff. It's as stable as sand, in this form, and just as harmless." But his tone was half awed. "Energon!" he breathed. "Crystallized energy."

MacLean came close, doubtfully, and looked at it curiously.

"Another one of those Tharkyan brain-twisters. What is it exactly, lad?"

"Energons are particles of pure energy. In your day, up to 1940, Earth scientists knew of protons and neutrons, the building blocks of matter. Also electrons, the units of electricity. And photons, the particles of light. Tharkyan science has gone much further. Everything in the universe reduces to ultimate particles. Space to spacions, time to chronons, and energy to energons."

"And food to foodions, I suppose," MacLean growled. "They're too almighty

smart to suit me. But where does this energon come from?"

"From matter," Kaine supplied. "Einstein proved that matter held energy, fifty years ago. Matter is the 'ore' of energy, as pitchblende is the ore of radium. And like radium, energon is scarce, only infinitely more so. Millions of tons of matter have to be worked and reworked for a year to get out a gram of crystallized energy."

"And millions of people have to do the dirty work on those millions of tons," MacLean observed. "All for the benefit of Tharkya! Terry, *that gram of energon belongs to Earth*. Why should Tharkya get it?"

Yes, why? Kaine's mind turned it over. Why should a million colony worlds be forced to pay that expensive tribute? Why should Tharkya bleed the Galaxy of its crystallized energy, the rarest thing known? Why should all this rest in their strongholds, making them the most powerful race in the Milky Way?

MacLean, his face twisted, grabbed for the vial.

"Don't be a fool!" Kaine hissed. "We have to deliver it. Otherwise Earth will suffer."

But MacLean came on, with deadly intent. "I'll throw it out into space," he ground out. "To hell with Tharkya—"

They struggled. Suddenly the ship lurched. It began to swing. Just a little—a very little. But at their prodigious velocity, now thousands of times that of light, it threw them against the wall and flattened them there.

"The automatic pilot is changing course," Kaine panted. "For the next three days it'll do that, zig-zagging us through the Galaxy. When we arrive at Tharkya, we won't know how we came."

"Pretty clever, aren't they?" MacLean puffed out. "Making sure we'll never know where Tharkya lies."

No one in the Galaxy knew where Tharkya lay—except the Tharkyans.

A HUNDRED billion stars, big and small, dim and fierce, alone and binary, composed the Milky Way Galaxy. Shaped like a flattened disk, it wheeled through the cosmos, separated from other galaxies, or island universes, by unthink-

able stretches of barren empty space.

Most of the stars were without planets. Collisions producing planets were rare. But dotted here and there throughout the host, one out of 100,000 was circled by a family of worlds. Half-way between the hub and rim lay Sol and Earth. Somewhere near the hub itself lay Tharkya, like a spider at the center of a web.

Hovering clouds of dust, or Dark Nebulae, existed here and there, sometimes hiding the stars behind. Tharkya lay in the heart of a Dark Nebula, camouflaged completely from the eye.

Driving through the cloud, it gradually thinned. Suddenly a tiny light gleamed, growing. It became huge, but never bright. Thark, one of the oldest suns in the Galaxy, had burned to an ember. It was, in Earth's astronomical terms, a red giant.

Around it lumbered a single gigantic planet—Tharkya, home of the master race of the Milky Way.

"What a monster planet!" MacLean said with a low whistle. "If a thousand Jupiters fell on it, they'd be like mere hail!"

His voice was rather weak. For three days the ship had lurched, side-slipped, and arced through space, keeping their stomachs upset and their minds sleepless. It had been a trying experience, this zig-zagging through space under the inexorable hand of the automatic pilot. Sometimes for hours they had been flattened against a wall, senses swimming.

"We're here—but where?" Kaine murmured. "Wish I could take star observations, but this damned Dark Nebula—"

He shuddered, looking around through the port windows. Not another star was visible. They seemed sealed off from the entire universe, in a bubble of darkness. Only Thark and its one huge planet met the eye.

The automatic pilot clicked loudly, presently, and then a bell rang. Its mechanical duties were over. MacLean leaped to the hand controls.

"We'll head for outer space and take star observations now," he muttered. "We'll expose Tharkya's hidden position. They're probably afraid of attack."

He wrenched at the drive lever, but Kaine wrenched it back.

"Don't be a fool, Lon," he snapped. "It would take us a week to feel our way out. We're on schedule. Delayed, they would send out their Space Patrol, to track us down. We can't do a thing except deliver the energon Tax."

"Which belongs to Earth," MacLean said bitterly. "All right, lad, but it isn't right."

"Perhaps it isn't," Kaine said. "But you can't change a thing like that overnight."

"Perhaps it isn't right!" echoed MacLean with infinite scorn. He glared at the younger man. There was bad feeling between them that hurt them both.

"Look, Lon," Kaine said firmly, "I'm not a revolutionary—not in the face of absolute power. You have to make the best of things."

"Faugh!"

Nothing more was said between them as the ship neared Tharkya. MacLean broke the strained silence in impersonal tones.

"Where do we land?"

"There's a line of ships spiraling down," Kaine pointed. "Follow them. Probably other tax-bearers, from other worlds."

IV

MACLEAN fell in line. The caravan of ships were of all different sizes, shapes and structure. Tharkyan engines were standard, but ship hulls were all laid down on the various worlds, according to their individual specifications. The ship ahead was a long cylinder with wide fins for handling in a thin atmosphere. Further ahead was a tiny five-foot disk ship, perhaps piloted by some race of small, intelligent insects. Another was so huge that its pilots must be large as dinosaurs.

"The crossroads of space!" Kaine mused. "A million and thirteen different beings of intellect paying tribute here, year after year."

"And not a one like us," MacLean grunted. "I saw a picture once of the Intergalactic Camera Club, meeting on some world in Sector C-14. Anything from five-eyed lobsters to double-headed elephants. The one Earthman representative looked like a man surrounded by jungle beasts. But everyone had a cam-

era in his hands, or talons, or claws, or tentacles. Guess the mind counts, not the body it's in."

The line of ships spiraled down toward a huge drome, on the surface of Tharkya. MacLean landed. They looked out. Beyond the space port stretched the planet's surface, seemingly forever. The curvature of horizon was so slight that vision went on for hundreds of miles—and still there was more surface!

Kaine stared till he noticed the sweat pouring from their foreheads. They were standing in a bone-crushing gravity five times that of Earth, every muscle strained to the limit. He quickly spun the grav-dial. The ship's grav-system relieved the terrible pressure.

Each ship rolled forward on its landing carriage, and was stopped at the portal of the drome's entrance. Tharkyan inspectors were busily checking them in. The line moved slowly.

"You'd think, after a million years of this," growled MacLean, "they'd have some efficiency. Instead, it's as slow and pokey as a bread-line on Earth during war time."

At last, weary hours later, their ship rolled to the portal. They slipped into their seal-suits, adjusted air and gravity to Earth-normal, and stepped out. Save for the protective suits, they would die instantly, either from intense cold, poisonous atmosphere, or crushing gravity.

The Tharkyan inspector, at home in those extreme conditions, began his routine questioning. Mutual voice-machines translated automatically.

"Sun?"

"Sol," MacLean replied.

"Never heard of it," snapped the Tharkyan.

"Sol, and the planet Earth," MacLean elaborated stiffly.

"Wert?" echoed the blue alien. "Listen, out of a million worlds, do you think I know yours by name? What space-sector are you from, you fool?"

"Keep a civil tongue in your head," MacLean spluttered. "Well, maybe you never heard of Earth at that. But by God, you needn't act as if it's an insignificant world. It's as good as yours, by heaven, and—"

"Easy, Lon!" Kaine had to grin, as he

put a restraining hand on the Scot's arm. MacLean's face was red with indignation.

"What space sector?" demanded the Tharkyan impatiently. "I haven't all day." "Sector N-99," Kaine supplied.

The Tharkyan turned and consulted a chart. It was a three-dimensional schematic design of the Milky Way Galaxy, hung within a frame fifty feet high. Every star was indicated, with lines and squares marking off the sectors.

"Way out in the sticks somewhere," the Tharkyan murmured in idiom that translated through telepathy. He ran his eyes over the gigantic model. "What star is it near?"

"Sol," MacLean grunted. "I told you once."

"Some *important* star," the Tharkyan snorted.

Kaine answered, while MacLean mouthed outraged curses.

"Alpha Centauri, Tau Ceti, Barnard's Star, Sirius—"

"Sirius!" interrupted the Tharkyan. "I've heard of that. Now let's see—"

He turned back suddenly. "Oh, for Heaven's sake," he said irritably. "You're at the wrong gate!"

"Wrong gate?" MacLean gasped.

"Certainly. There are a hundred gates, each handling a certain portion of the Galaxy. Why didn't you stop at Information first, instead of wasting my time? These hicks—"

The Tharkyan shook his head annoyedly and waved them away.

BACK in the ship, MacLean lowered his visor and cursed fluently. "Damned arrogant little blue-skinned monkeys! For two cents I'd have cracked him right on the button."

Still grinning, Kaine rolled the ship back along the line till he saw a tremendous sign emblazoned with one word—INFORMATION—in the patois of space trade. Stopping there, he asked for his gate. Two other puzzled Bearers were there, just leaving. One, through its visor, had the face of a fox. The other face was indescribable—ten eyes on stalks, petal-like ears and lips, corn-silk hair. Perhaps a plant-being.

"Sol—Earth—sector N-99—near Sirius—50,000 light-years—um—oh, yes, here it

is. Gate 29. Two gates down, five to the right."

"Thanks," Kaine said, turning away. "Come on, Lon."

But the engineer was standing like a frozen statue, staring at a figure approaching. Kaine followed his eye, and gasped.

The figure's suit was of utterly transparent material—apparently flexible glass. Within it was a being more startling than any they had seen yet.

"Do you see what I see?" MacLean whispered.

"I can't believe it!" Kaine muttered.

"What's an *Earth* girl doing here?" MacLean demanded. "We're the official Bearers of the Tax for Earth. She can't be here on that mission."

Earth girl it was, with blue eyes, flaxen hair, and an ivory complexion. Her form, plainly revealed in the transparent suit, was slender, lithe, clothed in shimmering silk. Oddly, one arm and one leg were bare, the others swathed, in some style Kaine could not place geographically on Earth.

She had spied them now. Her eyes went impersonally over their opaque sealsuits, then widened with surprise, reaching their faces through the glassine visors. But her surprise seemed only momentary. She brushed past.

"Pardon me, miss," MacLean said, grabbing her arm. "You're from Earth, aren't you? What in the wide universe are you doing on Tharkya?"

Her face stiffened at the brusque questions. She seemed about to snub them indignantly.

"Forgive us," Kaine said quickly. "But it isn't often that Earth people meet on Tharkya, is it?"

She turned frozen-faced to him, but suddenly thawed. Even in the dim light of smoldering Thark, she was incredibly lovely.

"You're Earth people?" her voice came melodiously. The voice-machines faithfully reproduced tone, if not actual syllables. "But of course! I've seen pictures of you."

She stared with interest now.

"Pictures of us!" MacLean spluttered. "Don't tell me you've never been on Earth?"

"Naturally not," she returned, smiling.

"You mean you were born and raised here on Tharkya?" Kaine guessed, bewildered.

She shook her head, laughing.

"I'm not an Earth woman at all. I'm Vela, of the planet Dymoor, sector D-5. Haven't you ever heard of us? By chance, evolution on our two separate worlds produced identical beings. It is well known on Dymoor that 200,000 light-years away lies a world inhabited by beings like us."

"We're rather new in the Galaxy," Kaine explained. "It's a surprise to us. But a pleasant one. You look almost exactly like an Earth girl."

Almost, but not quite. There were shades of difference. Vela's flaxen hair had a faint greenish texture. Her forehead was slightly broader than normal. Her fingers were exceptionally long, her feet incredibly slender. Her features were indefinably sensitive, as though all the heritage of a brute past were far behind. The Dymoorans were probably an age further advanced from anthropoid ancestors than Earth people.

"An extremely lovely Earth girl," MacLean added.

The Dymooran girl blushed, quite in an Earthlike manner. "I—I must go now. I'm the Bearer of the Tax for my world."

Information sent her to Gate 76. With a last flashing smile at them, she skipped to her ship.

MacLEAN barreled into the air, maneuvered skilfully past the traffic of other ships, and arrowed down the line of gates. They proved to be widely spaced—hundreds of miles in fact. It took them an hour, at a safe speed, to go down two and five to the right. Everything on Tharkya seemed built on a huge scale.

And all the space between was city. One vast, humming, planet-wide city, covering the ground completely. Buildings, structures, houses, bridges, and more enigmatic items sprawled over every visible inch.

"I'd heard this, but didn't realize it could be true," Kaine breathed. "The surface of Tharkya, through their million years of civilization, is one giant city!"

They saw more of it, after checking in at the right gate and officially delivering the energon Tax.

"You are invited to tour Tharkya for one day," the inspector said routinely. "Before you must return to your home world. Park your ship in the drome. A guide will conduct you around, in parties. See Tharkya, the magnificent center of the universe!"

It was more a command than a request.

Kaine looked around eagerly, as they joined a group of other seal-suited figures of assorted shapes and sizes. Was it just possible?

"There she is," MacLean grunted, pointing. "And I still insist she isn't human. Oranges and tangerines look alike, too."

"Genes and chromosomes are the important things," Kaine repeated for the tenth time. "If they match the human pattern, she's as good a *homo* as you are."

They approached the alien girl. She was in animated conversation with a spider-being four feet tall. She turned.

"Ah, the Earthmen! This is ZlkZee of Klak. We've been discussing the relative merits of life under a bright or dim sun."

The spider-man acknowledged the introduction in a clacking speech, then left. Somehow, he had an air of delicate tact that seemed at odds with his hairy, ugly body.

Vela saw MacLean's slight shudder.

"You Earthmen are new, I see, to intercourse with other-world beings. We, of Dymoor have long since come to ignore outward form. All the races of the Galaxy have the common ground of intelligence." She smiled a little mischievously. "You look as ugly to him as he does to you, you know!"

"Ouch!" MacLean grinned. "Yes, there's the common ground of mind. And one more common denominator—we're all under the thumb of Tharkya!"

"Hsst!" the girl whispered fiercely. "Watch your tongue, in the enemy's stronghold. Such talk is only for private councils, behind sealed guarded doors far from here—"

She broke off, as if having said too much.

"The Legion of Freedom?" MacLean whispered back eagerly. "You belong to it?"

The girl paled, drawing back a little. Kaine stared. Was she part of that mysterious underground movement, only a

whisper of which had reached Earth?

"I don't know what you mean," she said carelessly. "Look, we're moving."

The tour started. Moving platforms carried the tour party along, first high, then low, through selected portions of the endless city. An amplified voice from the front of the train of platforms pointed out sights and landmarks.

"Citizens of the empire! On the right you see the statue of Kazzi. He first conquered space, for Tharkya. It was then, an age ago, that our race swept out into the Galaxy, colonizing, bettering, uplifting!

"On the left, the preserved hulks of a dozen space ships, all that remained of a foolhardy rebellion of 500,000 years ago, universal scale. There have been a thousand misguided rebellions since then. Not one succeeded. Tharkya is supreme!

"Ahead now, you see the ramparts of our energon vault. Buried there, miles deep, are vast stores of energon. We have enough to equip millions of fighting ships, against which no force in the universe can stand!"

That was the main text of the tour. Tharkya's history and might. Tharkya's upliftment of civilization. Tharkya's supreme right to rule.

"Trying to impress us," Velloa murmured, as if to herself. "Browbeating us with propaganda."

Later, the moving seats passed through centers of the amorphous Tharkyan city. Sheer magnificence dazzled the eye. Gleaming golden towers, richly adorned homes and patios, floating palaces of entertainment and recreation.

The Babylon of the universe.

The Tharkyans were all opulently clothed, leisurely sauntering through artificial parks of stunning beauty. Children played with toys of gold, platinum and all the precious metals, studded with flaming jewels. Restaurant menus advertised the epicurean delicacies of the million different worlds.

"Ours—all ours!" the Dymooran girl was breathing half-audibly. "All the wealth of the Galaxy, its best foods—here. Tharkyans enjoying age-long prosperity and luxury. Parasites! Consuming but not producing. And they have our energon, with which to crush us if we revolt."

For the first time, Kaine felt doubt. Sweeping tides of it. Had Tharkya done enough good in the Galaxy to overbalance this self-gain? Or had Tharkya bled the Galaxy white, throwing back a sop of small benefits?

MacLean had caught the girl's murmur, too, leaning close to her.

"You're a girl after my own heart!" he whispered. "The Legion of Freedom! Tell me—"

INTERRUPTION came.

The moving platforms came to a jerking stop. The announcer's voice clipped short. The figure nearest them turned, throwing off its hood. It was a Tharkyan!

"You are under arrest," he said harshly to Velloa. "You are a member of the Legion of Freedom. We've been trailing your activities for a long time. Come with me."

He pulled the girl to her feet roughly. She gave a half-sob of terror. A human sob. Kaine leaped to his feet. Anger fired his veins.

"Let her alone," he raged. "Get your dirty hands off her!"

"Who are you?" barked the Tharkyan agent. "Are you one of the Legion—no, you're an Earthman. Recent colony, untainted. Be on your way."

He shoved Kaine back and pulled the girl away. Kaine leaped to follow, but MacLean held him back. "Easy, lad! Don't dig for trouble. She's not human, in the first place."

The excitement over, the tour went on. But Kaine was no longer interested. He shifted a stud on his voice-machine, so that only Earth language issued, unintelligible to anyone around.

"Not human?" he blazed. "She's as human as you are, you baboon!"

"Naw," MacLean drawled back, his eyes on Kaine narrowly. "I doubt she even feels pain, like we do. Different nervous system and everything. She probably won't feel the torture."

"Torture!"

"Sure, the Tharkyan Inquisition. They'll put her through that. Make her talk. Or else mess her till her own mother wouldn't know her. Drive her insane, too."

Kaine groaned. He had heard whis-

pers, too, of the dread Tharkyan Inquisition. They were ruthless in pursuance of their one goal—remaining masters of the Galaxy.

"Good God," Kaine moaned. "A young, delicate girl being made to suffer!"

"But she isn't human," MacLean reiterated indifferently. "No business of ours, anyway."

"No?" Kaine's voice was deadly calm. In one upheaval, all the picture changed. He went on, the words coming from his tongue almost by themselves. "Maybe not. But we're going to try to rescue her!"

MacLean stared—estimatingly.

"But that would make us culprits against Tharkya!" he protested. "Helpers of the Legion of Freedom!"

"Exactly," Kaine spat out. "I've had enough of Tharkyan methods. From now on, Tharkya and I part!"

MacLean heaved a sigh and rolled his eyes.

"Stars be praised! At last your eyes are opened, lad. It took a woman to do it—a woman of another race!" He lowered his voice, though there was no danger of their Earth words being understood. "Welcome, Terry! Welcome to the Legion of Freedom!"

Kaine stared, breathing hard. "You mean—"

"A year ago," MacLean nodded. "Agent S-14. I couldn't tell you before. You were too Tharkyan-minded. Might even expose us. But I've been working to get you. The Legion has wanted you for a long time. Good men are scarce."

"I'll be damned," Kaine grunted. He was suddenly aware of the invisible rumblings of revolution. A volcano seethed, out among the stars. When it burst, it might shatter a universe.

His thoughts narrowed to the present. "Rescue Veloe! I suggested it myself—but how?"

MacLean smiled strangely. "ZlkZee will help."

Kaine looked up, and started to see the spider-man in the seat ahead. The beady eyes were on him silently, warningly, not to say a word.

ZlkZee, then, was a Legionnaire, too!

Terry Kaine felt bewildered. He had suddenly been caught up in events that

might be far-reaching. For ten years he had been sheltered, and trained by the Tharkyans in their space-nautic school. Thork, governor of Earth, undoubtedly had a high place in mind for him. Perhaps Rear Commander of the Space Patrol in Earth's sector.

Now, suddenly, he was a Legionnaire. A rebel against the ruthless machine of Tharkyan rule. Why?

Why! His own mind thundered the question at him, and answered it. Because his father had died under a Tharkyan dis-ray! Because his mother had gone broken to an early grave! Because Earth was robbed of its riches and produce! Because a million and thirteen other races were robbed of those, and of energon, rightfully theirs!

And one more reason lanced through his grinding thoughts.

Because a soft, lovely girl was even now being churned under the wheels of Tharkyan overlordship! Anger burned at white-heat in Kaine. That alone would be reason enough to challenge the masters of the Galaxy.

THE tour was over in another hour. The tired tour party was allowed to disperse to its ships. Twelve hours were allowed for rest and preparation. Then they must be off to their home worlds.

ZlkZee scabbled within their ship. Kaine met him with hurried words.

"We have twelve hours left. How can we rescue Veloe?"

"One moment," the spider-man clacked. "Do you pledge yourself to the Legion of Freedom?"

"Ay, he does," MacLean put in. "I'll vouch for him. Terry was a revolutionary all the time, without knowing it. It just took something like this to wake him up."

Kaine raised his hand, soberly. "I pledge myself to the downfall of Tharkya!"

"Good enough," ZlkZee said. "Shake!"

Kaine gripped the extended spider-paw. He didn't feel the chitonous knobs, or see the hirsute, nightmarish form before him. He saw ZlkZee now as only another mind like his, angered by the same outrages, devoted to the same ideals. But he was

surprised at the human-like gesture of hand-shaking.

"We adopted it from Dymoor," the spider-man explained. "It has come to be our Legionnaire salute. Dymoor is one of the key worlds in our movement. Many of our secret Legion leaders are Dymoorans. Velloa's father is the president of the future Galactic Congress, if we win. Velloa knows many secrets of our activities. They must not be tortured out of her by the Inquisition."

"Then let's get going!" Kaine demanded.

"Easy, lad, easy," MacLean said. "This is Tharkya, the enemy stronghold. It is not simple."

"No," agreed ZikZee gravely. "Fortunately, I've been on Tharkya before. I know much about it. The Inquisition chambers are in a tall tower, easily entered with the proper agent—energon."

"Energon!" Kaine's heart sank. "The one thing we don't have."

"Ah, but we have," ZikZee contradicted. He fumbled in his spider-silk garments and withdrew a small vial. Within rattled a single crystal of energon. "The Legion has secretly extracted energon, a bit here and there on various worlds. All agents carry a crystal, for emergency. It will melt any lock, as a dis-ray. I have the hand-projector, too. It will kill guards, and cover our retreat—"

Kaine stared. "That makes it ridiculously simple!"

"—cover our retreat as far as space," the spider-man finished. "There's where the danger lies. The Tharkyan Space Patrol will immediately hound us. Being born in a strong gravity, they have iron-like bones. They can stand accelerations that knock out any other race."

He waved a hand uncertainly. "I can rescue Velloa. But the escape through space—it seems a hopeless obstacle."

There was silence for a moment. No ship, in the history of the Galaxy, had outrun the Tharkyan Patrol.

MacLean growled finally. "Bunch of old women, we are. It has to be tried. Let's go!"

ZikZee looked somber, but determined. "We'll almost certainly lose our lives. But let's go!"

"Yes, let's go," Kaine nodded grimly.

THE Tharkyan night was abysmally dark. No star shone in its skies, through the Dark Nebula that veiled it from the Galaxy at large. It had no moon. The street level, however, was a blaze of artificial light, from energon-lamps. Only the tallest spires and towers reared into the shadows of night.

No one opposed them as their ship rose silently, on low power, into the air and soared for the Tower of Inquisition. Tharkya feared no attack. There were just a few suspended traffic stations here and there, attended by lax operators who watched for speeders. MacLean drove slowly, like any Tharkyan out for a night spin, or visiting relatives.

The Tower of Inquisition was a mile high, shrouded in gloom. A landing platform circled the topmost section. MacLean set the ship down with barely a creak of the hull-plates. They stepped out. No guard was in sight.

"Follow me," ZikZee whispered.

Half-way around the landing, he stopped. A doorway was visible, indented from the smooth metal wall. The door was locked rigidly. The chambers within were impregnable to any means short of violence. Or energon.

Silently, the spider-man trained his hand-gun. A low hiss sounded and a violet beam sprang against the lock. Metal sagged, thinned, and whiffed to atom-dust. Kaine gasped. It was the first time he had seen the dis-ray in action.

ZikZee ate around the lock. Finally it clinked loose. Kaine shoved, and the ponderous metal door swung inward on well-oiled hinges. A dim hall stretched ahead. A Tharkyan guard leaned against the wall, with his back to them, idly smoking a chlorine-gas cheroot.

"Sorry," the spider-man breathed, sending a pencil-beam straight into the back of the brain. The Tharkyan folded to the floor, dead, without a cry. They stepped over the corpse. It was a grim game they were playing, with death at any turn.

Beyond, another door barred the way. ZikZee put his helmet against the metal, for sound contact. His keen spider ears

would detect sounds inaudible to human ears.

He turned fierce, angered eyes. "I hear moans—Velo's! They've begun torturing her. I think, from their breathing, that there are five Tharkyans within."

Kaine snatched the dis-gun from the spider-man's paw. It had a trigger. It was no different, in principle, than a pistol. Kaine was a crack-shot with a pistol. The door wasn't locked. He flung it open.

The scene burned itself into his brain.

Velo's nude form lay spread-eagled on a flat table. Five Tharkyans hovered over her. One of them held a glowing, radioactive needle. Suddenly he jabbed it down, into soft flesh, where the burning rays would touch every sensitive nerve with excruciating agony.

"Talk!" he thundered. "Tell us where the Legion headquarters are!"

"No!" Velo screamed, through the voice-box of the breathing helmet she wore. "Never! Oh, stars above, how can I endure this!"

VI

SMOKING rage brought an animal roar to Kaine's lips. At the same time, he shot twice. Two of the Tharkyans slumped to the floor, riddled through the head. The other three leaped back. Kaine picked off two with snap accuracy, but the third jerked out a dis-gun.

His shot came before Kaine's, dissolving half the gun in his hand.

"Away from the door!" barked the Tharkyan, waving his gun. "So! Two Legionnaires come to rescue this girl! I'll kill one of you and torture the other for information."

Two Legionnaires! The Tharkyan hadn't seen the spider-man scuttling low along the wall, in shadow. The gun aimed for MacLean. "Hurry, ZlkZee!" Kaine shrieked silently.

The spider-man reared and knocked the gun down just as it spat. With a curse, the Tharkyan kicked ZlkZee in the thorax, sending him thudding against the wall. Deceptively small and gnome-like in appearance, the Tharkyans were solid muscle

and bone, evolved by nature to withstand tremendous gravity.

The gun now lay between Kaine and the blue-skinned alien. They both dived for it, met with a crash. Kaine kicked it aside just as the Tharkyan clutched for it. The Tharkyan cracked his four fists against Kaine's chest, in rapid order.

Kaine felt as though solid cannon-balls had bounced off, caving in his ribs. He wobbled dazedly on his feet while the alien turned for the gun. Kaine tripped him. The Tharkyan was up in a second and whirled with a snarl. Kaine was waiting. He lashed out with his fist. Behind it was all the power of his young, strong body.

The crack of gauntleted fist against chin was followed by the thud of the Tharkyan's falling body. He was knocked cold. Kaine stood over him, breathing hard, still half reeling from the blows he had received. Blows that might have killed most men.

ZlkZee limped close. "Impossible!" he murmured. "How could you do it? You weren't born in the heavy gravity he was."

"Jupiter-trained muscles," Kaine said shortly. "Two-and-a-half times normal Earth gravity. The Tharkyans trained me to run at top-speed there, for years." He laughed. "Trained me for this, without knowing it."

The laugh died on his lips, as his eyes went to Velo's moaning form. A cry of sheer horror tore from his throat.

"Easy, lad," MacLean said pityingly. "They got in their dirty work before we came, after all."

Seen close, Velo's body was unrecognizable. Great radium-burns criss-crossed the white, tender flesh. The strained angles of the arms and legs showed that every bone had been broken—in dozens of places. Only the face behind the visor was unharmed—a lovely, oval face over a body that would be horribly deformed, if it miraculously lived.

"Good God!" Kaine moaned over and over.

"We have to get out of here," ZlkZee snapped.

MacLean picked up the Tharkyan's dis-gun, held it over the girl's heart. "Put her out of her misery," he grated, with

a glance at Kaine. Kaine nodded haggardly.

"No!" The spider-man knocked the gun aside. "Take her along with us. If we escape, she'll heal."

"But how?" Kaine hissed. "In what shape? She'll go mad, seeing herself. Better for her to die."

"I tell you no!" ZlkZee shrieked. "I can't explain. Guards are coming—I hear them. Hurry, grab her up!"

Kaine knew what the spider-man meant. Perhaps her life could be saved. It didn't matter if her body was horribly deformed, no more than ZlkZee's, deformed by nature. Mind alone counted—in ZlkZee's estimation.

Kaine unloosed the straps and picked up the limp form. Vela had slipped into unconsciousness. He clamped his teeth together at the feel of broken bones. How could she even live for more than a few tormented, delirious hours? Half her skin was burned away.

They raced out of the chamber of Inquisition and gained the ship just as guards burst in from below. Kaine savagely picked off three before he banged the hatch shut.

MacLean sent the ship up at a leaping pace. Up and up it bored, Tharkya's thick atmosphere whistling past the hull. The whistling died, as they plunged into free space. Then another whistling arose—that of the tenuous cosmic-dust as the ship rapidly piled on trans-light speeds.

"So far so good," ZlkZee said matter-of-factly. "But now we have the Space Patrol to contend with. They'll be around soon, like vultures."

THEY were, within an hour. Out of the nebular dark they gleamed, one first, then dozens, converging from back and sides. MacLean desperately flung the ship into higher acceleration, till back-pressure strained every muscle to a dull ache.

The Patrol inexorably loped nearer, with ease. The foremost ship fired its dis-cannon. The livid bolt crackled past the nose with only inches to spare. The second shot missed the stern. The third and fourth skimmed above and below. They were narrowing down the range quickly.

"I guess it's curtains for us," MacLean muttered.

"But the Legion of Freedom goes on," ZlkZee said.

Kaine left Vela's side, shoving MacLean from the controls.

"Let me try some zig-zagging," he said rapidly.

"You're daft, lad," MacLean declared. "The slightest swing at this pace will throw us all unconscious. The ship would keep swinging, then, till our senseless bodies would starve to death—"

His voice choked off as Kaine swung the ship slightly. It was no more than a tiny angle from their course, but the pressure-impact was like a giant's blow. ZlkZee went out instantly, born in a light gravity. MacLean gradually faded, sending Kaine a mute farewell with his eyes.

Kaine shook himself like a dog, fighting off the haze in his brain. A dis-bolt sizzled by, but missed completely. The swing maneuver had thrown off their aim. The Patrol ships swung with him now, and three shots successively burst nearer.

Kaine swung again, on a slightly sharper off-arc. Bombs seemed to burst in his brain, but he grimly refused to let go his senses. Again and again he arced, gradually increasing the sharpness of the swing. Could he never shake those relentless pursuers?

After the tenth swing, his brain was on fire. His muscles quivered as though mountains had dropped, one by one. Mountains of pressure. Every cell in his body screamed in agony.

Again he swung. And again. Zig-zagging through space. If the enemy made one little slip, failing to follow each swing, they would shoot off and lose him forever.

But how could he stand it? How much longer would his wracked body and dimming brain hold up? The Tharkyans, damn them, were born to these frightful pressures. He sat at the controls grimly, eyes bloodshot, nose bleeding, eardrums bursting.

He was still sitting there an hour later, when MacLean came to. MacLean's amazed eyes looked back into space, forward, at all sides.

"Terry!" he cried. "They're gone—gone! We escaped!"

"I know," Kaine mumbled, through blood-dried lips. "The last swing did it. They shot off at the side, so fast that it would take them a week to retrace. We're safe."

"How did you do it?" ZlkZee's clacking voice came, as he stirred and came to his legs. "It's an incredible feat!"

"My Jupiter-training," Kaine said. "They trained me to race over Jupiter's surface at ten-normal acceleration. Didn't know I'd some day use it against them, instead of for them!"

He staggered to his feet, pointing at Velloa's recumbent form.

"But what good is it all?" he croaked. "She's dead! You see, I love her. I don't know why, but I love her. And she's dead!"

The spider-man shook his head. "No, merely in a deep trance. As we left Tharkya, I put her in a hypnotic state. We of Klak have that power. She will not die before we arrive at Dymoor. Doctors will save her, then."

Kaine gulped in relief. Then his eyes pained. She would live, but never again to look in a mirror without shuddering at her crooked limbs and malformed body.

"And look—stars around us!" MacLean yelled. "We're out of the Dark Nebula. One good octant reading and we know the secret Tharkya has kept for ages—its exact position in space!"

Eagerly, he fumbled with the octant, then steadied to take the readings. Rapidly, triumphantly, he put down the figures.

"And now we can attack," ZlkZee said fiercely. "Now that we know where Tharkya lies. Millions of ships will rend aside the veil before Tharkya and bomb that wicked world to oblivion!"

Terry Kaine forgot his numb body. He thought pleasantly of bombs dropping on Tharkya—everyone a hit in that planet-wide city. Bombs, bombs, millions of them, for the cruel beings who had destroyed Velloa's body!

VII

FAR across the rim of the Galaxy, where the appalling emptiness began to

the next island universe, rested a small yellow sun, type G0, like Sol. Like Sol, it had a family of planets, one of which revolved at a distance of 98 million Earth miles.

This planet was 8,100 miles in diameter. Its surface was three-quarters blue water, one-quarter land. Its north and south poles were regions of eternal ice and snow, its equator jungle hot. Its rotation period was 22 Earth hours, its year 398 of those days.

Summer, fall, winter and spring alternately laved its face. Forests and grains grew luxuriantly, and furred, feathered and scaled animal life romped over the fossils of their ancestry. A two-legged upright animal with intelligence ruled the planet.

It was a second Earth.

"Dymoor," announced ZlkZee. "The headquarters of the Legion of Freedom."

"Blast me if it isn't Earth all over again!" MacLean sighed. "Eh, Terry?"

Kaine nodded heavily.

"Buck up, lad," MacLean said sharply. "Dymoor must be full of lovely girls. Earth, too, only you didn't notice them there. Now why in the name of Aldebaran must you lose your heart to this one girl, an alien at that—"

"Hush, fool," the spider-man interposed. "Love is of the mind, not body."

"Indeed!" the engineer retorted. "Well, I don't picture any female mind—not even one of your own spider-women—falling for you!"

ZlkZee gave a clacking chuckle. "In turn, one of our women, seeing you, would turn away in horror. You might call that biological relativity. Look to your landing, monster!"

Under the spider-man's directions, MacLean lowered into the atmosphere over a triangular continent with two huge oceans on both sides. On one coast, within an indented harbor, gleamed a city. A city beside which New York might have seemed a backward village.

"Dymoor's greatest metropolis—Myr," ZlkZee informed. "Descend."

"Wait a minute," MacLean objected. "I see a Tharkyan local Patrol ship loafing around down there, over the port. Maybe they're on the watch for us."

"Hardly," the spider-man denied. "Re-

member that no Tharkyan back there saw us—alive. They'll have to check all the Tax-Bearers before they find which are missing. It will take them days. By the time they do pin our identity down, and send the alarm to Earth, Klak and Dymoor, we'll have the attack plans launched. Descend!"

With misgivings, MacLean sidled the ship past the Patrol. It made no move to intercept. No news had come yet from distant Tharkya that four members of the outlawed Legion of Freedom were at large.

The space port of Myr was reminiscent of New York's, bustling with activity. Checking in, Kaine and MacLean, under Zlk-Zee's instructions, posed as Dymooran traders, returning with an empty ship after delivery of cargo. ZlkZee and Velloa lay hidden in the locked hold. If the Tharkyan port official saw the spider-man, and especially Velloa's broken body, his suspicions would flame.

The Tharkyan glanced at the two Earthmen casually. Only to a wary eye would they stand as bogus Dymoorans, with slightly varied racial characteristics. Kaine held his breath.

"Busy day," complained the Tharkyan, waving a lax hand. "Move on rapidly. Don't clutter up the ways!"

Rolling the ship to a dock berth, MacLean let ZlkZee out of the hold. "Ornery blue devils!" MacLean growled. "Never met one yet with manners."

"Be glad we checked in so easily," Zlk-Zee murmured. "On a slower day, they might have nosed around. However, we're safely in. Now, we must rush to headquarters."

A commercial aero-cab took them over the tall-spired city toward its outskirts. Velloa's hypnotized form lay swathed in silken blankets. The cab-driver, like any on Earth, questioned nothing. Business was business.

THEY were landed before a ramshackle country home, so like plantations of America's south that Kaine blinked. Dymoor had certainly followed a development closely paralleling Earth, in all things. More startling yet, a sleepy old negro answered the door.

"Yes suh?" he queried. The Earth-

men's voice-machine translated an inflection of drawl.

"Is the master in?" ZlkZee said.

"Massa?" the black Dymooran echoed vaguely. He mumbled on, as though saying something always lurking in his slow mind. "Only Tharkya is Massa of the universe."

"Yes," ZlkZee returned. "Tharkya is master of all—except souls!"

An electrifying change came over the blackman. He peered up and down. No one was in sight. The cab had gone. His eyes flashed.

"Enter, ZlkZee!" he said, all trace of drawl gone. "I thought it was you, but had to make sure. You gave the password. President Kylar waits below."

The blackman led them through dim, dusty halls and down steps into a dank basement. He pressed a concealed button. With a low hiss, a rock door pivoted aside. Beyond were light and sound, in a huge sunken chamber.

A dozen Dymoorans stood facing the doorway, all armed with dis-guns. The foremost, white-haired and aristocratic, holstered his gun and strode forward with outstretched hand.

"ZlkZee!" he greeted. "What are you doing here? These other two are"—his old eyes widened a little—"Earthmen!"

"Lon MacLean," ZlkZee introduced them. "Agent S-14 of Earth. And the other is Terrance Kaine. I think you will be glad to greet him as a Legionnaire, President Kylar!"

"Terrance Kaine!" Kylar said eagerly. "Splendid! A Tharkyan-trained man, worth his weight in gold. I greet you, Kaine, and—"

Kaine woke from a sort of daze. He had only been dimly aware of events since the escape from Tharkya. He had carried Velloa's swathed, limp form, since arriving at Dymoor. Tenderly he had carried her, lest the poor tortured body suffer more.

"Never mind all that," he snapped haggardly. "Take care of this girl. I think she's your daughter."

"Velloa!" Kylar gasped. "What—"

"Inquisition!" ZlkZee said bluntly.

For a moment there was utter silence in the room. The Dymoorans clenched their fists, like Earthmen. Kylar took

several deep breaths, while they all watched. The younger men stood ready to support him, if need be.

The venerable president stiffened finally. "All right," he said quietly. "Let me see her. Dr. Voro, your medicines!"

K A I N E laid the girl down on the indicated couch. The place was outfitted completely as living headquarters and sick bay, for long periods of hiding. The doctor, Voro, pulled back the blankets. The watching eyes sickened at the sight—and then burned savagely.

"Death to Tharkya!" Kylar spoke for them all, in a deadly calm voice. "Death to the cruel tyrants!"

Thunderously, fists upraised, the cry was repeated by all. Then Kylar's shoulders sagged.

"We've said that before, again and again, at each fresh outrage. But how can we fulfill our vengeance? How can we attack? We know not where Tharkya is hidden—"

"We do that!" MacLean contradicted, expanding his chest under their startled eyes. He tolled the figures out eagerly. "Five galactic units from the hub, in the direction of Sector Z-18. Nearest major star, Beta Sagittarius. That's where Tharkya lies, my hearties!"

"There?" Kylar gasped. "How do you know this thing that no one has been able to ferret out for a million years?"

ZlkZee told the story, from beginning to end.

"At last we know!" Kylar murmured fiercely. "At last we can attack. Council of war is in session, men! Follow me." He turned. "You too, Kaine of Earth. You are skilled in space-nautics, being Tharkyan trained."

But Kaine was standing over Voloa, as the doctor injected hypodermics.

"Will she live?" he whispered.

"Of course," the Dymooran medico nodded. "ZlkZee's hypnosis carried her through to here—acting as a soothing anesthetic. Medical care will do the rest." He smiled a little. "I think I can safely say our Dymooran medical art is superior to yours of Earth."

"Will you operate?" Kaine insisted. "Use plastic-surgery? Can anything be done?"

"Operate? Plastic-surgery?" The doctor looked puzzled. "We use bionic methods."

"What will she"—Kaine gulped—"be like?"

Dr. Voro shook his head. "I make no predictions. I cannot say."

Kaine stood dumbly, thinking of a wheel-chair in which would repose a shapeless, deformed body surmounted by a maddeningly lovely face.

"Kaine! Are you coming?" Kylar's hand was tugging at his arm. "We cannot waste time now—"

Kaine turned on him bitterly. "How can you be so indifferent to your own daughter's well-being?"

Kylar seemed surprised. "She's in good hands. What's done is done."

MacLean was at Kaine's side. "Besides," he whispered, "she isn't human. Don't make a fool of yourself, lad."

Dr. Voro looked up sharply. He had caught the whisper.

"If you imply," he said coldly, "that we aren't human in the sense that you are, you're the fool. Dymooran and Earthian genes and chromosomes follow the same pattern. One of our biologists went to Earth recently on research and determined that. Inter-marriage is possible, for instance, between our races!"

Kaine jerked as though a lash had struck. It was the one thing he had dreaded to hear. Surely in all the universe no man or being had ever been the victim of a more monstrous joke!

"What of it?" Kylar snapped impatiently. "This talk is meaningless."

"Is it?" ZlkZee said softly. "Look at the Earthman's face, while he gazes down at Voloa!"

Kylar started, meeting Kaine's eye. They stared at one another. An Earthman, and the father of a girl who could have walked the streets of Earth all her life and never been challenged as a denizen of another world.

"Come," the Dymooran leader said simply, "we will plan how to destroy the race that did this to her—whom we love!"

Kaine followed, stony-faced, hard-lipped. MacLean shivered a little. "I'm glad I'm not a Tharkyan right now," he muttered to ZlkZee. "I saw that lad wade into ten men once, rowdies molesting a

girl on Earth. He made them cry for mercy. When he's mad, he's mad down to the last electron!"

VIII

COUNCIL of war!

Not a war of nations or continents, or even worlds. A war of galactic proportions, involving the destinies of more than a million races of peoples. It was a significant moment, Kaine realized, in the history of the Milky Way Galaxy. The last attempt at revolution had been a thousand Earth years before. Like all preceding, it had failed miserably, swamped by Tharkyan might. What chance did this one have?

Curiously, Kaine reflected, the last revolt had taken place while Earth was yet undiscovered to the Tharkyans. Way back during the Middle Ages a mighty battle had raged far out in space, unknown to Earth. Mankind on Earth had been throwing off the yoke of Islamic rule at the time, pursuing its own petty little destiny. Now all such civil wars of the human race were meaningless, against the background of Tharkyan domination. All Earth history was meaningless. The shadow of Tharkyan overlordship had been there all the time. The Tharkyan masters had been roaming space even when man first emerged from the ape, an age before.

Now Earth too lay under the heel of Tharkya, along with a million other worlds. Earth's sympathy must lie with any rebellion.

But what chance did this one have?

Kylar stood before a lighted, three-dimensional chart of the Galaxy. It was smaller than those on Tharkya, but no less complete. With a long pointer, he jabbed at the unmarked Dark Nebula in which Tharkya nestled invisibly.

"At last we know!" Kylar said eagerly. "We'll swoop down on Tharkya and bomb it out of existence!"

Kaine groaned a little. Typical revolutionary talk—restless, fierce, but childishly optimistic.

"Just like that!" he spoke up, breaking into their cheers. "Just charge there with a few ships and drop bombs. What about the Space Patrol, armed with energon dis-

rays? They have ten million Patrol ships in operation! I happen to know. How many ships can you muster?"

Kylar smiled peculiarly.

"A hundred million. Will that help?"

Kaine gasped.

"A hundred million! How—what—"

Kylar spoke slowly. "You don't realize our organization. We mean business. The Legion started a thousand of your years ago, just after the last abortive revolt. Slowly, carefully, grimly, it built up—adding members, agents, spies, important men. We have active, though secret, members on every one of the million and thirteen worlds. Each world is contributing, on the average, a hundred fighting ships. That makes our hundred million."

Kaine felt a surge of wild hope. With that kind of an armada, they *did* mean business! Then he felt a drop of elation. Numbers alone meant little.

"How are they armed?" he queried.

"The best we could do—rapid-fire guns using explosive shells. It's the most effective weapon in space warfare, with the one exception of the dis-ray. However, we do have a unit of ships with dis-guns too, powered by energon we've secretly extracted ourselves. About ten thousand. We can use them as a spearhead."

"Ten thousand dis-guns against ten million!" Kaine muttered dubiously. "Still a long, long chance."

Kylar nodded.

"We have no illusions. With the luck of the gods, we have a chance."

"Why not organize more?" Kaine suggested. "Gather more and more ships. Why strike prematurely?"

"We must strike now, or never," Kylar responded solemnly. "The Tharkyan secret service has gradually wormed out information about the Legion. Lately, they've been snatching our agents right and left. Any moment, through Inquisition, our headquarters may be exposed. The whole system would collapse, then." He paused. "Velo was the last agent to be apprehended."

Kaine's nerves quivered.

"I see," he grated. "You're right. Attack now. But where are the ships? What's your battle plan?"

"The ships are on their respective

worlds, at hidden docks—fueled, stocked, primed, ready to go at a moment's notice. The signal is ready to go out, calling them to arms. We plan on meeting at some strategic spot, near Tharkya, now that we know where Tharkya lies."

He moved his pointer to a dead star ten galactic units above Tharkya. "Our armada will meet here, for the drive on Tharkya!"

Kaine pondered. "No, I don't think—"

HE stopped, his scalp prickling. He was suddenly aware of eyes on him—hundreds of pairs of cold, silent eyes. There were only a dozen Dymoorans present, but he felt all those other eyes.

MacLean was clutching his arm.

"Look, Terry—beyond the chart. Those rows of television screens!"

Kaine was barely able to make them out. Each reflected a dim image. And each image was of a different being—a dog-face, turtle-face, bird-face, insect-face, and dozens that were unnameable except to an experienced galactic biologist.

Kylar noticed their shock.

"I forget you are new members," he apologized. "These are our Legion sub-commanders, in the various sectors. Low-power, scramble-wave television is used. Tharkyan detectors might trace one down, after several hours hard figuring. We never connect more than a few minutes at a time. Now, Kaine, go on. Your opinion, I might add, is respected by all of us. You are Tharkyan-trained, in space-nautics. And the Tharkyans, in spite of what they are, are supreme in that field."

Kaine gripped himself. He was addressing perhaps a thousand other beings. He must weigh every word.

"Meeting within the Galaxy seems to me dangerous," he resumed. "The Tharkyan Space Patrol is bound to meet some of the contingents by sheer accident. The alarm will go out. Tharkya will instantly man its defenses, taking away all the element of surprise."

Heads nodded, in the screens.

"Keep it up, Terry lad," MacLean said a little proudly. "You have their ear."

Kylar nodded too. "We realize that. But no matter where we meet, the same will happen—"

"Not if you meet *outside* the galaxy!"

Kaine said quickly. "Say a few units beyond the rim, at its narrowest point. That is, up from the hub, perpendicular to the disk-shape of the galaxy. The Tharkyans don't bother to patrol beyond the rim. We could meet there safely!"

A murmur came from the television delegates to the war council. A murmur of approval.

"Fine!" Kylar commended. "Then the massed armada can slowly creep within range of Tharkya for the surprise blow—"

"Slowly?" Kaine broke in again. "And take a chance of being spotted with each added hour? Why not take a running start, out there in the emptiness, build up velocity, and plunge straight for Tharkya at top-speed? If the Patrol spots us, they still wouldn't have time to really man all defenses on Tharkya."

Kaine paced before the screens, raising his voice.

"Don't you see? Our one and only chance is surprise. A quick, staggering thrust. Bombing Tharkya before the Patrol gathers in force. Because I'll guarantee you one thing—not one of our ships will come back!"

"What?" demanded Kylar. "We have them outnumbered ten to one—"

"And they have dis-guns," Kaine grunted. "We can't stand against them forever. Every ship will go, I tell you!"

Kylar's shoulders sagged. "You must know, Kaine of Earth. What can we do, then? What chance have we of victory?"

"One chance!" Kaine whispered. "Our fleet must deliver a knock-out blow, before it is decimated. Then, with Tharkya reeling, the rest of the galaxy must rise and deliver the final stroke. With any and all ships, commercial and private, they must down the Patrol—by ramming!"

There was silence in the chamber. The awful price left the delegates stunned. But heads began nodding.

"You're right, Kaine," Kylar said finally. "We can't shrink from it. Win all or lose all. Eons of future freedom are worth any price."

"Have I made it clear? Kaine resumed. "The armada to deal with Tharkya, the planet, itself. The rest of the galaxy to clean up the Patrol. If the armada fails, all is lost. The armada's only chance is this—"

He talked on and on, with every ear bent forward in the screens. Heads nodded. The battle plan was completed.

Kaine stepped back, flushed, half astonished at his own clear-sightedness. He had in one stroke whipped the former vague battle plan into a powerful, aimed thrust.

"Thank the stars for your Tharkyan training," MacLean said soberly. "They've taught you to think in galactic terms, as they have for ages."

Kylar called for attention.

"Legionnaires! We are ready for attack. But we need a commander-in-chief of the armada, one who—"

A rustle interrupted. A rustle of voices from the thousand television screens. A thousand accents, a thousand minds. But the rustle was of only one repeated name.

Kylar turned.

"Terrance Kaine of Earth! I appoint you, by common consent, the commander-in-chief of our forces. Do you accept?"

Kaine was suddenly voiceless, choked. He couldn't say it. That he would like nothing more in the universe. But his eyes went to the other room, where Velloa lay broken-bodied. Kylar grasped his hand in understanding.

A low, fervent cheer came from the thousand alien delegates.

Kaine was deadily tired. He needed sleep. He was dimly aware, now, of hands leading him to a bunk. Before his eyes closed, he saw the Dymooran staff leap to microphones. Their low voices hissed into the voice-cups.

"Attention, all worlds! Prepare for attack on Tharkya! Send your ships to the following point, beyond the rim of the galaxy. You are under command of Terrance Kaine of Earth!"

On and on the voices droned. They reached to every corner of the galaxy instantly. Not by mere radio. Radio waves would have taken thousands of years to bridge the stupendous distances. Super-radio it was, crackling aeriels that hurled forth spacion-chronon waves, annihilating time and distance.

The battle-cry of a galaxy!

But Kaine's last thoughts were not of the coming engagement that would rock the universe. He pictured a sweet, lovely Dymooran girl, as human as any on far

Earth, doomed to a life of physical deformity.

"Velo!" he murmured. He slept.

IX

"VELO!" he murmured, under the open stars of space.

It was three days later. The giant flag-ship was manned by fifty Dymoorans. Its powerful engine flung it smoothly through the empty void. Behind followed three hundred other battleships—the total Dymooran contingent.

A bell rang.

MacLean punched the "on" stud of the desk. "Captain's office. Yes?"

"Pilot room, sir. Our long-range detectors just spotted a Space Patrol unit, on our course ahead."

"Shift course," MacLean instantly barked. "We don't want any mix-up with the Tharkyans yet. Two galactic points east. Five units of swing. Then shut down the engines and lights. Hep!"

"Ay, sir!"

The flag-ship swung in an arc. The ships followed. A minute later they blinked out of existence, as all lights and engine exhausts vanished. Silently, three hundred dark bulks swung around the Tharkyan Space Patrol.

An hour later, MacLean gave the all-clear signal. Engines resumed. Lights went on.

ZlkZee released his breath. "The third one we skipped by. Don't suspect a thing. And now there's no more danger. Look—open space!"

By "open space," the spider-man meant the void beyond the galaxy. The fleet arrowed out past the last fringes of stars. Before them now stretched only an appalling, starless nothingness. The nearest other galaxy was a million light-years away. No Tharkyan ships patrolled this Siberia of space.

Ten hours later they decelerated for the trysting place of the Legion of Freedom. Faintly, up ahead, could be seen the lights of other ships.

"Many are here, already, from closer sectors," ZlkZee said. "Ah—the contingent from Klak, my world! Those two hundred web-work ships—see?"

For once, the phlegmatic spider-man

was excited. It was the first time Kaine had seen him so.

"Do you want to join them—fight with your own people?" MacLean asked. "I can shift you across. You're no good anyway."

ZlkZee calmed. "No. One ship is as good as another. I'll stay with you, monster!"

"Monster, hmff!" MacLean snorted. "We'd use you on my world to scare little children and haunt haunted houses! All right, you can stay. Spin yourself a web in some corner and hang on when the fighting starts."

"When it comes to fighting," ZlkZee retorted indignantly, "I have eight arms. I hang on with four, and fire with four. Put that in your pipe and smoke it, my dear captain!"

Even Kaine had to smile at the bantering the two kept up, hour after hour. ZlkZee usually had the best of it, having been around the galaxy much more than MacLean.

MacLean glared, without a suitable repartee, but then punched the communication board.

"Attention, all contingents! Flagship of the Dymooran unit arriving. Commander Terrace Kaine of Earth aboard. From now on, your orders will come from him."

Kaine leaned to the microphone.

"Commander Kaine speaking. Each unit report as follows—sector, world, number of ships, number of men, number and calibre of guns."

For the next twelve hours, the Dymooran staff of recorders were kept busy.

MacLean jerked his head up suddenly, as a deep clear voice reported in familiar accents:

"Sector N-99. Earth. Eleven ships. One thousand men. 315 one-pounders. 22 three-inch guns. Eleven six-inchers. Five space torpedo tubes. One dis-gun. Ready for action, sir!"

"You hear that—it's Earth!" MacLean yelped. "We're represented after all!" His voice fell a little. "I wish it was more than eleven ships."

He looked a little sheepishly at ZlkZee, whose world had sent two hundred.

"Earth has been in galactic affairs only 25 years," ZlkZee said. "Most of us have known ages of oppression. Eleven ships

from Earth, on that scale, represents a bigger proportion than any other world!"

"Thanks, pal," MacLean muttered, gripping the spider-man's chthonous arm. He bent to the microphone. "Hello, Earth contingent! Only eleven ships we have, men. But give the Tharkyans hell!"

"Ay, sir, that we will. Eleven kinds of hell, sir!"

IN the following hours, units began arriving in mounting numbers. From every corner of the Milky Way they came, in fifties, hundreds, and sometimes thousands. The ant-people of a world near Betelgeuse came in a cloud of five thousand ships. But they were small, with small guns. The dinosaur-people of sector J-8 sent only twenty-five ships. But their giant cannon could hurl out shells big as houses.

Kaine found himself busier than ever in his life before. How to whip this disjointed horde into an effective fighting force? No ordinary mind could have met the challenge. But a Tharkyan-trained mind could. A mind taught to think and reason in terms of galactic proportions.

"Attention, all ships!" he barked, when the last units had straggled in three days later and been recorded. "Line up in formations of a hundred. The following heavy-gun contingents in Battalion One—"

He read off the list. Then Battalion Two, with lesser guns. And down the line. Obediently, the contingents moved to their allotted positions. All except one.

"Contingent 18 from sector D-82!" MacLean barked. "Get going. You're holding us up."

"One moment," came back in a throaty rumble, from a being Kaine vaguely knew to be a ten-foot gorilla-like race. "We question your authority, Kaine of Earth! Your puny world has been the last to be colonized by the Tharkyans. Why should a man of that world lead us, we others who have an ancient, sacred score to settle with Tharkya? It's ridiculous. Furthermore, we question your ability. Our contingent should be closer to the front, since we are superior fighters. You have the ant-people in front of us, like flies. They'll get in our way!"

And then, like a dam bursting, a babble

of dissent came from many other contingents. Petty jealousies, resentments, injured pride erupted. Contingents began to move out of line.

"It's breaking up!" MacLean gasped. "Terry, all our work will go for nothing!"

"I was afraid this might happen," ZlkZee half groaned. He looked at Kaine. "There is only one thing to do, *commander!*"

Kaine hesitated, then set his jaw.

"Contingent 18!" he barked. "Move to position, or take the consequences!"

"We refuse!"

And contingent 18 did not move.

Kaine was already whispering orders below deck, to the gunners. A long cannon snout gyrated and froze into position.

"Fire!" Kaine said grimly.

A dis-ray crackled from his ship. Striking the rebel flagship squarely, it rammed through to the other side, reducing all within to smoking atom-dust. The craft broke in half. Gorilla-men spilled out, shrieking, clawing. They died almost instantly in the vacuum of space. In a minute the two silent, dark halves of the shattered ship drifted away, lifeless.

"Any more?" Kaine asked in deadly warning.

Not a sound came back. The contingents that had begun to slip out of place silently went back. This commander was no weakling. He meant business.

"That's better," Kaine said tersely. "We're out to battle our common enemy, Tharkya. Not bicker among ourselves. I'm sorry for what I had to do, contingent 18. Now elect a new flagship and captain, and move to position."

Contingent 18 obeyed.

"Good work, lad!" MacLean patted his back.

"You did the only one thing that saved us from disaster," ZlkZee commended.

Kaine wiped sweat from his forehead. "For a minute," he said weakly, "I thought it was all over."

He straightened up.

"Attention! The contingents armed with dis-guns line up back of my ship. We are the spearhead of attack—"

Interruption came. Lights twinkled in the distance and rapidly approached. A belated contingent arriving. They reported, while coming up.

"Lakan, of sector P-33 reporting, sir! Original number of ships, 120. Now 97. Lost 23 ships battling a Space Patrol unit that blundered into us. Destroyed all but two of them. They raced away, toward Tharkya!"

"The alarm is out!" ZlkZee cried. "We haven't a minute to lose!"

"Ready for action!" Kaine yelled into the microphone. "Constant top-acceleration for Tharkya. Advance!"

X

ENGINES whined to life. Pilots manipulated their various strange controls, fitting claws, paws, talons, tentacles, hands, tendrils, and a thousand other varieties of appendages.

The ships leaped toward the galaxy while gun-crews set their weapons for prime action. The great armada thundered through space, at a rate that swiftly surpassed that of laggard light. Into the galaxy it swarmed, arrowing between the mighty suns that lumbered in their eternal orbits.

One hundred million ships. Manning them was a total of ten billion souls, of a million and thirteen different races. The most gigantic army ever assembled, in the history of the galaxy.

Ten billion warriors, fighting for the destiny of countless trillions of subjugated peoples.

Kaine's Earth-mind almost swam under those stupendous figures. As a caveman's mind might swim if transported to the 20th century with its inconceivable empires of millions, where he had known only tribes of a dozen or hundred.

But Kaine's Tharkyan-trained mind was not overwhelmed. Clearly, he saw the whole picture, as on a great stage.

Armageddon!

There was no attempt at secrecy now. Before they were half-way, Tharkyan Patrols spied them, and fled to report. Soon after massed units of the Space Patrol winged out, engaging them. But the element of surprise was still there. The enemy had only caught the last final phase of the gigantic attack, and too late to stop it.

"Attention, all ships!" Kaine barked, in a coldly calculating voice. "Do not

break formation. Do not cut speed, or veer. Continue for Tharkya. Fire back at enemy ships within range, but do not maneuver from our formation!"

The formation was like a huge, bristling gimlet, boring through space. The Patrol units crunched at it from the side, trying to break it up. Their dis-rays began to stab relentlessly, eating inward. They were far out of range of return fire from the Legion.

Dozens of Legion ships whiffed to nothingness, then hundreds, then thousands. The loss was insignificant, when counted against the total.

"They've got a long way to go—millions and millions!" McLean crowed. "We'll easily last to Tharkya, where the fun begins!"

Enraged, the Tharkyan units now began ranging closer, to sweep their powerful dis-rays over lines of ships. Legionnaires aimed cannon now. Shells peppered back. Tharkyan hulls began to show holes. Here and there a ship darkened, out of action. The Legion was retaliating.

Kaine reduced it all to cold mathematics. The Tharkyans could take them ten-to-one, with their energon-powered super-rays. But the Legion, in turn, outnumbered the Patrol ten-to-one. It came out even, therefore. Thus, a drag-out fight with the Patrol meant little. Tharkya would remain unharmed, with factories that could turn out Patrol ships overnight.

The blow must be struck at Tharkya itself.

The Patrol ships had to be armed with dis-guns—and energon. Tharkya had vast, endless stores of energon, systematically culled from the galaxy for an age.

Energon! It reduced finally to that. If once Tharkya were cut off from its energon! . . .

PATROL ships were at all sides now. The alarm had gone through the whole galaxy. From every last outpost they swarmed to the battle, at super-speeds. They began to mass at the front of the armada, to stop its mighty plunge for Tharkya.

"Dis-guns ready for action!" Kaine yelled. "Fire!"

And now the strategy of the dis-ray

spearhead fulfilled itself. The front ten thousand ships, with a weapon equal to the enemy's, blasted the way clear. As fast as the Tharkyan formations came, they were whiffed to dust.

And before the surprised enemy could mass itself in effective numbers, the Legion had heached Tharkya.

It plunged into the Dark Nebula that hid Tharkya. The Patrol still harried at the sides and back, but hopelessly. The toll had not been negligible—the armada had been cut to half. But still fifty million ships hurtled through the thinning haze and speared for giant, red Tharkya.

A cheer thundered from the remaining five billion warrior throats. Tharkya lay under them, the home of their overlords of a million years. Every eye gleamed, and every pseudo-hand itched to swing the guns on this hated dictator race.

"Decelerate! Spread formation!" Kaine called out, at the precise moment. "All rear contingents carry out bombing, as prearranged. Good luck!"

The great armada spread fanwise. The outer contingents sped away from the common center. They raced over the surface of Tharkya, in all directions.

Down they swooped, when within the atmosphere. Down, down, screaming and whistling through the air. Then bomb-racks clicked. Black dots hurtled down. Puffs of white smoke tufted the surface of Tharkya.

For the first time in the history of the Milky Way, Tharkya was being bombed!

"Ah, this is a blessed moment!" ZlkZee breathed. "I wish all my people could see it. Almost a million of your years ago, the Tharkyans came to our world. Subjugated us. Destroyed half our population in the struggle we put up. Then half of the remaining in some program of 'population stabilizing,' saying there were too many of our people for our own good. The murdered souls of billions of my people must be looking down on this glorious moment!"

MacLean was hardly less calm.

"Give it to the blue devils, you bombers!" he shrieked. "Bomb the whole wicked planet to ruins!"

"Don't be a child," Kaine remonstrated. "Do you realize how big Tharkya is? It would take ten years to bomb down the

entire planet-wide city. We must carry through our original plan."

The plan Kaine had meticulously worked out before the delegates at the council of war.

MacLean nodded, sobering. "It goes back to Hitler, when he was trying to conquer Earth. Paralyze a city by bombing its main centers, its life currents. The rest becomes dead, useless. We have to strike at the heart of Tharkyan power—"

"Which is its energon vault!" ZlkZee said.

"That's our one chance of real victory," Kaine murmured. He turned to the microphone. Twenty-five million ships, his first line, were hovering with him, waiting for the bombers to range far and wide. In essence, the bombers were a decoy, to draw the Patrol after them.

"Look at the fools!" MacLean crowed. "Chasing after our bombers just to protect a few buildings and gardens from being blasted. While here, we'll strike the real blow."

"Descend!" Kaine cried into the microphone. "Straight down for the energon-vault. It's a small target, compared to the rest of the city. Dive-bomb, as per previous instructions." He paused, then resumed in more somber tones. "Good luck, all! If we succeed, we'll be blown to bits. If we don't succeed, the Patrol will get us. Descend, Legion. Down with Tharkya!"

THE suicide fleet dipped, into the atmosphere. Down and down it dived, straight for the ramparts of the underground energon-vault. They pulled out of their dives, skimming towers and spires, and dropped their eggs of destruction. Wave after wave they dove, zoomed up, circled, and dove again.

The radium-bombs exploded in a continuous roar. The mighty concrete ramparts began slowly to crumble. It was succeeding!

So it seemed in the first few minutes. Then hell broke loose. Units of the Patrol madly dashed close, sweeping their rays over the massed ranks of diving ships. Legion craft rained below by the thousands, as broken debris. Lives snuffed out at an appalling rate.

A new sound suddenly pierced the din.

The rattle of pom-poms and anti-aircraft guns. Tharkya had not bothered to set up defenses over its surface, secure in their Dark Nebula hideaway. But they had protected the vital energon-vault, against a remote possibility of attack.

A ring of ground guns burst forth into rapid-fire action, filling the sky with dis-bolts. Legion ships fell like leaves. Great gaps were torn in their ranks. Into these the Patrol swarmed, spreading out to break the formation.

Disintegration came rapidly. In appalling minutes, the dive-armada broke up into aimless units, fighting dogfights with the Patrol. Individual ships desperately tried bombing, only to have a hounding dis-ray touch off their bomb-cargo in mid air. Flying pieces from the explosions often pierced the hulls of all nearby ships, further decimating the Legion.

"All is lost!" ZlkZee groaned. "Those ground guns stopped our dive-attack. It's just a matter of hours now, with the Patrol systematically butchering us!"

MacLean's grey eyes were dull. "And the energon-vault is still untouched, except for surface destruction. We've lost!"

"Not yet!" Kaine cried wildly. "We still have a few thousand dis-ray ships." He was screaming into the microphone. "All ships armed with dis-rays rally behind me. Hurry!"

Here and there a ship darted through the battle melee, behind Kaine's flagship. Five thousand at the most.

"I see a dozen of my Klakian ships," ZlkZee said proudly, and sadly.

"And one from Earth," MacLean muttered. "The only one left. The other ten were on the bombing mission."

None of those would return. Theirs had been a mission of lone-eagle bombing, with the relentless Patrol after them.

"Dive formation!" Kaine commanded to the dis-ray unit. "Keep diving in formation, come heaven or hell! One lucky bomb, breaking through into the energon-vault, will win for us. Descend!"

In the face of withering ground fire, the five thousand dove. The Tharkyan ships were unable to break this formation. Legionnaire dis-rays stabbed back, for every dis-ray the enemy rammed in. They could only pick off the divers from the sides one by one.

It was a race against time, and fate.

Again and again the formation dove, dropping rack after rack of radium-bombs on that narrow target below. Again the vault's ramparts shook and cracked under the furious pounding.

One lucky bomb! One lucky bomb might do it!

But how long before the last Legion ship fell?

KAINE woke from a daze. It seemed the ship had dove and spun under his feet for half of eternity. Again and again dis-bolts from below had hissed inches past the hull. On all sides, ship after ship had gone to oblivion.

MacLean was shaking him.

"It's all over, lad. We failed!"

Kaine focused bleary eyes. He hadn't slept for three days, organizing the attack. He saw Tharkya spinning away, as a globe, from one of the ports.

"We're leaving!" he thundered. "Turn around—go back. Can't leave. Fight to the last ship—last man!"

"We did," ZlkZee said croakingly. "We're the last ship—or at least we're among the last few dozen that may have slipped away. Our bombs are gone. The energon-vault is intact. No need for us to uselessly sacrifice ourselves. We live, perhaps to try again at some future time."

"After another thousand years?" Kaine said bitterly. "I failed. Failed miserably! Great God—"

A hundred million ships wasted. Ten billion lives! The hopes and plans of a thousand years! The appalling count might have driven Kaine mad, at that moment. . . .

"Patrol ships!" MacLean shouted. "They'll hound us through space. They're determined to cut down the rebel fleet to the last one."

"But they won't!" Kaine hissed. All his blind anger at the mocking universe transferred to the Tharkyans. If they escaped, they'd have won some small victory over the enemy.

Kaine leaped to the controls. Grinning like a devil, he decelerated, ramming straight for them. In utter surprise they scattered, forgetting even to use their guns. Kaine cut in an arc, back into the Dark Nebula, losing them. He skirted

the cloud's edge, emerged into clear space, and scuttled for the next dark nebula.

When another Patrol ship spotted them, he slipped back of a dark sun. Its gravity-field threw the enemy's detectors off. From dead sun to dark nebula he skipped, laughing maniacally at the outwitted pursuers.

"You trained me at this," he chuckled mirthlessly at them. "Now see if the master can catch the pupil."

When they reached the rim of the galaxy, near Dymoor, the last Patrol ship was still searching around a dark sun futilely. The ringleaders of the rebellion had escaped!

"But the galaxy won't be safe for us for a long, long time," ZlkZee said. "We'll have to lay low. Dymoor is as good a place as any."

XI

PRESIDENT KYLAR met them with a pained face. He listened to the full account with hollow eyes.

Once again the full tide of the frightful catastrophe to their cause hit Kaine. A thousand years of preparation, hope, devotion, shattered. A million worlds doomed to continued servitude. And he, Kaine, had led the Legion to its Waterloo!

Madness crouched close to him, in the following days. He was hardly aware of those about him—of the hushed whispers, guarded suspense, the horrible waiting. He was fed forcibly. He heard snatches of conversation.

"Scouring the galaxy," in Kylar's grave voice. "Searching for us, the ringleaders."

ZlkZee's clacking syllables: "A thousand Tharkyan agents arrived today, combing the planet."

And often, MacLean's gruff, concerned tones: "Terry's going mad. I can see it. Poor lad, he takes the fault upon himself. If we could only do something—" His tone suddenly sharp: "Veloal!"

Stars overhead. A cool breeze soughing through tall, leafy trees. Kaine's tormented mind struggled. Was he back on Earth somehow? But no, the stars were strange. No Big Dipper, no Pole Star, no red Mars. Besides, there were two moons. Earth only had one.

It was still Dymoor, second Earth, but

a garden spot that soothed and rested the mind. Had MacLean done this? And then a vision floated near. A lovely face of ivory, framed by flaxen hair. Two heavenly blue eyes looked into his wild ones.

Velo!

Her voice chimed out.

"Terry! You must not blame yourself, Terry. You mustn't. And there is still hope. There is always hope. Even I have that!"

The sweet face was before his. The blue eyes glowed with fire, and hope—and something more. A something that filled his whole being and touched the stars. This frail girl, with her terribly broken body, was teaching him courage. Sublime, undying courage!

Abruptly, the curtain lifted. Kaine's mind swam up from dark depths. The scene cleared before his eyes.

Velo was in a wheel-chair, her body covered in swathed silks.

"I'm ashamed, Velo—" Kaine began, but she stopped him with a shake of her silvery head.

"No one blames you for despair," she murmured. "Thank the stars you have come out of it. Your eyes are clear now, rational. They told me I must save you. Other plans must be laid."

Kaine jumped up. "Where are the others? I—"

"Hush! There is still grave danger. They are back in the house. The Tharkyans seek us. We are in an isolated garden of our planet, far from any city. We are reasonably safe, but must stay here."

Kaine sank back. They talked of blessedly trivial things. And more and more the girl's gentle voice soothed Kaine, driving away the nightmare of recent events. Moonlight shafted down from the twin orbs. It was a lovely spot such as Earth could hardly have matched.

"Velo," Kaine breathed suddenly, drinking in the crisp air. The universe had faded away, leaving only their two souls touching. "Velo, dearest!"

He clutched for her hand. She drew it back but he felt momentarily the gnarled monstrosity it was. He had almost forgotten. She had healed, in a fashion, but below the lovely face was lit-

tle more than patched together skin and bone, twisted and deformed. Still, what difference did it make?

"Velo," he went on firmly, "mind alone counts. I've learned that lesson, recently. Velo, I—"

"Hush!" she said again. "It cannot be, unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Nothing. Oh, it cannot be. Please, Terry, don't go on!"

There were tears in her eyes. But they seemed tears of pride and joy.

"You've made me wonderfully happy," she added. "But don't go on. Don't spoil the moment. Let us sit and dream of what might have been."

The universe seemed to smile down on them, pityingly, these two of separate worlds who had come to know life's greatest glory—and fate's most grinding twist. It was a beautiful, sad dream they dreamed. . . .

LIKE a thunderclap, the bubble burst. Voices first, strident. The struggle of bodies. The hiss of dis-rays. Cries of alarm from the shadowy building beyond the garden.

"The Tharkyans!" Velo shrieked. "They've come! Run, Terry. Escape—anywhere—"

"And leave you and the others to them?" Kaine shook his head, standing before her wheel-chair. A moment later a dozen armed Tharkyans swarmed into the garden, from all directions. Roughly they grabbed at Kaine.

He struck out savagely. He had the satisfaction of bowling three over before the rest grabbed his arms and pinioned them to his sides.

The Tharkyan leader eyed him triumphantly.

"Terrance Kaine, the commander of the Legion armada!" he crowed. "We caught one of the last few ships of the Legion and extracted information from them."

A moment later Kylar, MacLean and ZlkZee were dragged from the house.

"Now we have all you ringleaders," the Tharkyan hissed. "You will be taken to Tharkya, for trial." He looked at the girl in the wheel-chair. "Kylar's daughter? We won't take her along. She, I believe, has already had her punishment!"

He leered from one to the other of the four captured rebel leaders.

"Your punishment, I can promise, will make hers seem like ecstasy!"

They tried not to shudder. The Inquisition of course, at its most devilish. MacLean shrugged.

"It was worth it," he jeered in their faces. "We gave your high and mighty Tharkya a good, stiff jolt, one you won't soon forget!"

THE trial was attended by the elite of Tharkyan society. A million resplendently clothed and jeweled blue-beings, in a giant hall. The affair was televised through the all-wave network, so that all the million worlds could see and hear the fate of their degraded rebel leaders.

The judge of the High Court spoke.

"The rebellion is over. The Legion of Freedom is no more. All worlds stand equally guilty, for participating in the crime against Tharkya. As punishment, the energon-tax is hereby doubled for the next hundred payments. Failure to meet the new quota by any world will result in that world's decimation of its population to half!"

The tyrannical pronouncement winged to all the worlds. A silent groan seemed to fill the galaxy. Tharkya was punishing with a heavy hand, for a revolt that had come within an ace of success.

"On the various worlds," the judge resumed, "agents of the Legion are being ferreted out. These will be summarily executed."

He turned to the four prisoners from Dymoor.

"These four, ringleaders of the attack, merit a greater punishment. Even the Inquisition could not comply. We sentence you to—*exile from the galaxy!*"

Kaine's blood froze? What horrible thing could it mean?

The Tharkyan resumed. "You will be towed in a ship beyond the galaxy, and flung into outer space. The food and air supplies will be limited to give you a few days of life. You will have time to repent your sins against Tharkya, before the end. Or perhaps you will go mad!"

THE small ship hurtled through the void.

There were no stars near. This was the deep between galaxies. Back of them, the Milky Way gradually shrank. This they were able to see by virtue of a device that caught and focused light-rays they caught up with, at their prodigious velocity.

The Milky Way shrank, in the following days, till the individual star-dots merged into a general whiteness. It assumed a whirling disk-shape, like the images of distant nebulae caught on a photographic plate. Eventually, it dwindled to almost star-small proportions, unthinkably remote.

Around them now, all the other island universes were visible, like fuzzy stars. They were in the middle, in truly empty space, with almost inconceivable stretches of nothingness before them. It was, Kaine reflected, like being in a rowboat on a vast ocean that stretched from Earth to Mars.

"Maybe we'll last till we coast to the next galaxy," MacLean said hopefully.

"It would take ten years to get there!" ZlkZee informed, "even at our uninterrupted velocity. We have food and air, at the most, for another week."

There was no fuel for the engine, of course. No way to go back, or speed ahead. They could only drift, on and on, in the stupendous gap between galaxies.

Kylar raised a haggard, hollow-eyed face. "We'll go mad—mad!"

"Not if I can help it," Kaine grunted. "We can't give them the satisfaction. We'll stick it out to the end, and go out quietly."

"Give me more food!" Kylar yelled suddenly. "Why are you rationing it? We have no place to arrive at. More food—"

He was screeching. Kaine bit his lip, then clipped him on the jaw. When the old Dymooran came to, he smiled weakly. "I'm all right now, Kaine of Earth," he sighted. "No, we can't give them the satisfaction."

His eyes went around the cabin again. They all searched the odd corners often. But they could never find it. Somewhere, the Tharkyans had installed an iconoscope pick-up, cleverly concealed. They had heard the faint buzz from the first. Hidden batteries between the double hull sup-

plied power, and sent the images back to Tharkya, so that they could watch these four go mad.

And for that reason, Kaine was determined that they must remain calm to the end. The watching Tharkyan sadists would like nothing less. It would spoil their show.

MacLean sang songs gaily, sometimes for hours on end. He acted out bits of plays for their diversion. He cracked jokes endlessly.

"Ever hear the one about the Tharkyan overlord, newly appointed to the worm-people's world? Well, to show his august authority, he picked out the first group of worm-people he met and told them to eat dirt. He never could figure out why they seemed to enjoy it!"

Then he would turn around in all directions, to make sure the hidden tele-eye would transmit his jeering face to the Tharkyans.

ZlkZee told stories of his days as a smuggler, in his youth.

"Once we were smuggling a shipload of our spider-silk to a neighboring world. The Tharkyan Interstellar Trade Council had banned that, wanting our fine product only for themselves. A Patrol caught us. When they clumped in, we set fire to the cargo. It was raw silk, uncured, and the fumes are powerful. The Tharkyans went out like lights. We robbed them blind and left their naked bodies, suitably kicked, in our ship while we took theirs. Then, with the Patrol ship, we smuggled silk for another hundred loads, right under their stupid noses!"

MacLean threw up his hands in mock horror.

"How criminal!" he whispered, looking around furtively. "Don't you know that if the Tharkyans hear this, they'll sentence you to five years hard labor?"

MacLean and ZlkZee burst out in laughter together.

"Shake!" MacLean said. "You're a great rascal."

"Which one?" ZlkZee asked blandly, extending four of his eight arms or legs.

"Glad you're not a centipede," MacLean grunted.

On and on it went—ridiculous, foolish, pathetic, but sublimely magnificent. Earth-

man and spider-man, creatures monstrous to each other but closer than brothers, defying doom.

Yet Kaine knew it couldn't last. When their last crumb of food went, an ominous gloom came over even the two funsters. A day later, the last hiss of oxygen came from the reserve tank. The oppression of stifled lungs joined the pangs of hunger.

The real battle for sanity began.

"Chew leather," Kaine demanded, handing out strips cut from his boots. "It'll keep our minds off hunger. When the air gets really bad, we'll go unconscious. It won't be hard."

ZlkZee eyed a little fly buzzing about the cabin. He tentatively reached out for this natural food of his, then drew back his arm. The others could not eat flies.

MacLean jumped up suddenly. "I found it! I knew that spot on the wall didn't look right. I've been staring at it. Look—it's the inconoscope, flush with the wall!"

He unfastened a hand-rail and savagely prepared to bash in the mechanical eye.

Kaine caught his arm.

"No, Lon, let it be. Let them see us go out—like men!"

Five hours later, Kaine groaned. The other three were sprawled on the floor, unconscious, their lungs gasping for fresh air. They would pass quietly into eternity. Their troubles were over.

Why couldn't he go out like that? Kaine cursed his strong body, his special powers that kept him awake beyond normal. He was alone now. Alone in the awful void. His mind shrank, gibbered. He couldn't stand it. He'd be shrieking in a moment. And that sleepless eye would see him go raving mad.

He jumped up, smashing it, laughing horribly. He knew that he was slipping, down into an abyss of insanity. . . .

XII

A FLASH of light. A tiny flash of light, out here in the bottomless void. How could that be? His mind snapped alert. He pressed his face against the port plate, looking out.

Again it flashed, and a ship gleamed in

the void. It rapidly neared, then slowed and hovered. It seemed to be watching, waiting, perhaps for a sign of hostility. Finally a space-suited figure emerged from a lock and drifted across. Kaine heard it clumping with magnetic shoes all around the ship's hull.

Kaine screamed, but knew he couldn't be heard. He couldn't open the welded lock. But he had to signal the figure somehow, before it left, thinking the ship a derelict.

He grabbed up the rail and pounded against the metal walls. The vibrations should be felt on the hull. The footsteps paused, then resumed. A helmeted, indistinct face peered in through the port. Kaine gestured wildly.

The figure saw. Kaine knew that, with a surging joy, just before he slumped to the floor, gasping for oxygen.

Kaine opened his eyes and saw faces through a visor. It was part of a sealed helmet that pumped invigorating oxygen past his nostrils. He breathed deeply, feeling strength stealing back through his limp body.

The faces cleared to his eyes. They were strange beings, of a dozen varieties. Beings of the Milky Way Galaxy, who had somehow come to rescue them? No. Kaine was aware that the beings, though a mixed group, were subtly different from any mixed group of the Milky Way. It was an indefinable something, as vague but definite as the slight distinctions between Earthmen and Dymoorans.

Then they must be from another galaxy!

"You are awake?" asked one of the beings. They had voice-machines, too, operating through telepathy.

"Yes. We are from the Milky Way Galaxy. You saved our lives." Kaine went on to tell the story, in brief.

The spokesman nodded, and introduced himself.

"I am Ji Tu. We are citizens of the galaxy nearest to yours. Cruising through outer space, our long-range detectors told us of your ship, drifting along. We came to it and found you."

ZlkZee awakened. They had fitted a breathing helmet around him. He heard the last words.

"How did you happen to be so far from

your galaxy?" he queried. "Far more than half-way to ours! Were you visiting ours?"

"No. We patrol space, however, that far out."

MacLean came to now, stretching luxuriously. "Blessed oxygen!" he cried. "We're saved. What a joke on the Tharkyans!" But then he eyed Ji Tu, having heard his last statement. "Why do you patrol so far out? It's lucky for us, but it seems pointless."

"Our galaxy was attacked once!"

Now Kylar sat bolt upright. "By the Tharkyans!" he said. "It is not widely known, but thousands of years ago the Tharkyans outfitted an expedition and attempted to invade the next galaxy, in their thirst for power. They were beaten back, and hushed it up."

The galactic alien nodded. "We beat them back, the Tharkyans you mention. Since then, we've patrolled space around our galaxy. We want nothing of their method of rule. Our system is a commonwealth of worlds, for the good of all."

The four from the Milky Way looked at each other. It was a significant statement.

"That is the system we wish to achieve in our galaxy," Kylar said wistfully. "A democracy of worlds, with a president. We've groaned under Tharkyan dictatorship for a million years."

Kaine's thoughts crackled.

"You beat off the Tharkyans?" he said. "That means you are more powerful than they! With your help, we could—"

Instantly, Ji Tu shook his head.

"I thought you would say that. I am sorry, but we cannot help. We have determined to follow a policy of strict neutrality, with other galaxies."

Kaine looked at the others helplessly. It didn't seem right, but he could see their viewpoint. Meddling in other people's affairs never brought good. It applied to galaxies, as well as to worlds, nations, or families.

"You must have large stores of energy," MacLean said. He seemed casual, but Kaine saw the cunning in his eyes. "Perhaps we could make a deal. What are you in need of, Ji Tu—rare metals, priceless jewels, delectable foods? Name your price!"

Ji Tu smiled. "I'm storry. I'm really

sorry. We cannot sell you energon either."

"Damn!" MacLean growled. "In our galaxy, everyone has a price."

"I appeal to your sympathy," Kylar tried hopelessly. "Surely you can't refuse to lift a finger, when a whole galaxy's fate is at stake—"

"Enough!" Ji Tu cut in sharply. "I will listen to no more arguments. We cannot interfere. Fight your own battle. We are outfitting your ship with food and air supplies and fuel, to enable you to return safely to your galaxy. Beyond that, we can do nothing more."

The note of finality in his tones struck the four dumb.

Ji Tu turned. "I must report this incident to our headquarters." He placed a queer helmet over his skull. No words issued from his lips. After a moment he turned away.

ZLKZEE had said nothing so far. His beady, canny eyes had been going around the cabin. He had watched Ji Tu with narrowed eyes. "You can actually communicate all that distance to your galaxy, from here? It is a thousand times the range of our best spacion-chronon radios!"

"Simple enough," Ji Tu returned, apparently willing to satisfy their scientific curiosity. "Psychon transmission. Projection of psychons, the units of thought. Their range is intergalactic. Our best scientists also use psychon-baths to stimulate their minds into advanced scientific research."

"Psychons!" ZlkZee breathed, looking at the others. It was a manifestation of the super-science of this other galaxy.

Kaine started. The word was new, its implication strange. His thoughts clicked rapidly. Earth had known of neutrons, electrons and photons. The galaxy knew further of spacions, chronons and energons. The next obvious step was this. All the things of the universe reduced to primal particles.

Thought too!

Psychons—it seemed to open up a tremendous new scope of science. If only they knew more of this—

Ji Tu interrupted his clashing, eager thoughts.

"Your ship is ready. We will transfer

you back immediately. Please—" He shook his head at Kaine as he seemed about to speak. "Not another word. Good-bye and good luck!"

A few minutes later, after the transfer, the alien ship dipped in farewell and then plunged away, vanishing from sight.

MacLean started their engine. It purred smoothly. "Tanks chock full of radium-oil," he announced. "Back we go! I'd like to see a Tharkyan's face, if he knew of this!"

"Back we go—to what?" Kylar said tcnlessly. "Back to hunted, outlawed lives. Hiding for the rest of our days. No revolt can be organized for at least another thousand years."

Kaine's voice was bitter. "Psychons! We were at the verge of learning about them. And they might have meant something to us. Even the Tharkyans don't suspect psychons. But it would take centuries of research to isolate them, use them—"

"Would it?" ZlkZee interrupted. "With this to go by?"

Kaine stared at the object he held up, blankly. Then he let out a yelp of amazed joy.

"The psychon-helmet! How did you get it?"

"I have eight arms," ZlkZee said simply. "As I passed by Ji Tu on the way out, I waved five of them, distracting his attention. With another, I snatched the helmet from its hook and tucked it under my thorax. Or as MacLean would say, hid it in the long, coarse hair of my ugly misshapen body. Anyway, to be candid, I stole it."

"You don't think you'll get away with it?" MacLean said sourly. "When they notice it gone, they'll chase us down before we can say Betelgeuse."

ZlkZee smiled strangely.

"They did notice it! Not Ji Tu, but three of his under-officers. One winked at me, the other two turned away. Our story, I suppose, struck sympathy after all. Those three will probably contrive to keep Ji Tu from noticing."

The helmet glowed suddenly, with a cold light. ZlkZee promptly slipped the flexible headgear over his squat head.

"Ji Tu speaking. A psychon-helmet is reported missing. It undoubtedly slipped

down a ventilator and was burned in the engine exhaust. Good luck!"

"I'll be double damned!" MacLean muttered, when ZikZee repeated the message. "Those fellows are *human!*"

When the Milky Way Galaxy had enlarged and expanded to fill all the firmament before them, Kaine had wormed out no tiniest clue to the instrument's operation.

"This helmet represents advanced science," he announced. "Head and shoulders above anything even the Tharkyans know. It produces psychons—but *how?* I must know. This is only a communicator-helmet. I want to make a mind-stimulator, much more powerful. With that, the wearer would become a superscientist, as Ji Tu hinted. But it looks like first, to solve this fundamental secret, I'd need the best scientific minds of our galaxy to help!"

"We'll contact those scientists," Kylar promised.

BUT the promise seemed an empty one. Reaching the fringes of the galaxy, Tharkyan Patrol ships seemed everywhere. Kaine dodged from dark nebula to dead sun, keeping from being detected by the skin of his teeth.

"Naturally, after the revolt," Kylar said tensely, "the Tharkyans are doubly watchful for any further uprisings. All space is being patrolled rigidly. Every ship is being watched and accounted for."

When they neared Dymoor, after narrow escapes, sentinel Patrols blocked every avenue of approach.

"If we check in anywhere, we're sunk," Kylar warned.

Kaine set his lips. "Hang on! We're going to run the blockade, on the night side."

It was ticklish work. He lowered cautiously. Suddenly a Tharkyan watchdog, spotting them on its long-range detectors, faced close.

"Halt and report!" was the message spoken by the red signal rocket that arced across the bow.

Kaine dropped his ship like a stone. Down and down it plummeted, whistling through the atmosphere. Reactions keyed to hair-line pitch, he brought the ship to a stop fifty feet above an ocean surface,

dark and stormy in the night. Then, gently, he slid the craft under water, nose first, using his gravity-drive to plow a hundred miles along, like a submarine.

When he was forced to come up, before the engine short-circuited and burned out, the ship rose dripping into the air. No Tharkyan ship was in sight.

"He's got an ocean to search, for where I came up," Kaine grinned. "Their detectors don't work on water. Learned that trick from them too!"

"Good work!" Kylar commended thankfully. "Now head for my garden hide-away." He gave directions, and Kaine glided the ship low over the planet.

XIII

AT dawn, Kaine slid the ship into a leafy grove of orchard trees, and they stepped out. "This is the one place they would never suspect we'd return to, where we were captured," Kylar reasoned.

The house was dark. Kaine's heart beat, ringing the bell. Vela was within.

A sleepy-eyed blackman answered the door, Kylar's faithful servant, Korio. The white eyeballs sprang open. He stood frozen at the apparition of the four, returned from the dead.

"Ghosts!" he wailed, like any superstitious negro of Earth.

"Nonsense, Korio," Kylar said. "Snap out of it. Hide us, quickly, in the secret basement. Then bring down food."

Before the panel-door slit shut behind them, down below, Kaine grasped the black Dymooran's arm. "Vela! Where is she?"

"She's not here," Korio informed. "Doctor Voro took her last week to a big medical institute in Myr."

"She's in danger?" Kaine gulped. "Dying?"

"I don't know anything about it," Korio returned, shortly. "I have other things on my mind. I handle this estate for Master Kylar. Taxes have gone up, to meet the new production schedule for twice as much energon-tax this year."

And over the radio, they heard news items of conditions throughout the galaxy. Worlds of people laboring to meet the new tax burden. Interstellar trading running

at a loss, with the Tharkians confiscating whatever they pleased. Millions of beings rounded up, on suspicion of being former Legionnaires, and executed without trial.

Tharkya was mercilessly making the galaxy pay, over and over, for the bombing of its sacred soil.

"Life won't be worth living for generations," Kylar said dismally. "Tharkya must be downed!"

"I need those scientists, before we can do anything," Kaine said. "How can you get them to me?"

"I don't know—I don't know!" Kylar groaned. "We don't dare show ourselves, or radio them. The Tharkians must have every communication line tapped. We might try to wait for the worst of this to blow over."

They waited a month, their nerves grinding to shreds. It was worse, almost, than the waiting for death out in space.

"I can't stand it," MacLean growled one day. "I'm not built to be a worm, hiding in holes. Let's *do* something!"

"Too bad you cannot spin a web, like I," ZikZee sympathized. He indicated the shimmering webwork that occupied one corner of the cave. Strand by strand he had meticulously spun the gossamer structure. "Isn't it beautiful? It's our race's expression of art. It keeps my mind off other things."

"Damn your web!" MacLean raged, tearing into it with his arms and legs, ripping it to pieces. "You nearly drove me mad, watching you stick it together, humming to yourself."

The spider-man stared in shock, at his destroyed handiwork. His tiny eyes gleamed balefully. With sudden silent ferocity, he leaped at MacLean, fangs outstretched.

"Stop!" Kaine commanded.

The spider-man came on, bowled MacLean over like a doll with four club-like legs, and then leaped at his throat. Kaine leaped faster. ZikZee turned on him. Kaine took blows without effect. He grasped the spider-man's foremost pair of arms and bent them back till ZikZee grunted in pain.

"Stop, you fools!" Kylar shouted, running up. "Tharkians are outside!"

Kaine released ZikZee and ran to the detector. It connected with the upper

ground, transmitting sound and sight from above. The scene showed a Tharkyan and Dymoran stepping from an aerocar. Korio answered the door.

"Census bureau," the Tharkyan announced, taking out a pad and electro-pencil.

Kylar gasped in relief. "Just the census-takers. This is census-year. I had forgotten."

"Census-year!" Kaine whispered. "The census-takers, going from planet to planet, throughout the galaxy! Kylar, there's our answer. If we could join the census-bureau, somehow, Tharkya would be officially taking us from world to world. It would be comparatively easy, then, to leave a message on each planet, to the scientists we need!"

"But they know us," Kylar said doubtfully.

"A disguise," Kaine said quickly. "Any simple disguise. They wouldn't *dream* we'd walk right in their hands. But if we tried circulating through the galaxy in a ship, we'd be caught and exposed in no time. It'll work, I tell you. It's just crazy enough to work!"

"It is sheer daring," Kylar mused. He nodded. "We'll try it! I can still pull strings, secretly. The Tharkians need assistants, for the gigantic task of censusing a galaxy. They welcome recruits. I'll get you into the branch that picks up reports from the various worlds. They'll start in a month's time. Just you alone, Kaine? Would that be best?"

Kaine pondered.

"MacLean and ZikZee with me," he stated. "There might be problems. Three heads are better than one." He turned. "That is, if they want to—together."

MacLean looked sheepishly at the spider-man, then stuck out his hand. "It was just nerves. Shake?"

"Which one?" asked ZikZee, extending four paws.

Kaine grinned, then turned back. "It's up to you, Kylar, to do the rest. Where can we set up a secret laboratory?"

"We already have it," Kylar said. "It's on a planet called—Earth!"

"Earth!" Kaine and MacLean gasped in chorus.

Kylar nodded. "The Legion established it, in your South America, ten years ago.

Many of our guns were manufactured there. Earth is the latest Tharkyan colony, the one least suspected by them to harbor a Legion outpost. That was our reason. All the scientists you contact must be sent there. I'll have things prepared."

A MONTH later, three figures embarked for Tharkya in a census bureau ship.

With greenish-dyed hair, a practiced accent, and swathed silken clothing, the two Earthmen easily passed for native Dymoorans—to Tharkyans at least. Terrence Kaine and Lon MacLean, arch-conspirators, were of Earth, not Dymoor, in the Tharkyan records. ZlkZee was bleached to an albino-shade, posing as a member of the "white race" of his planet. Simple disguise, but therefore cleverly deceptive. More elaborate preparations would have been hard to live up to.

"You look like a pale nightmare," MacLean vouched to the spider-man.

"You look," ZlkZee retorted, "like what was eaten to produce that nightmare!"

Kaine silenced them. "Keep in character," he warned. "Simple-minded clerks who joined the census-bureau to see the universe."

The ship, one of similar hundreds, worked its way through allotted sectors, picking up reports. It stopped at each world's main city or center, where the previous population census had been completed. It was a statistical job gigantic in scope. A million worlds to file away in the records of Tharkya.

Routine labors occupied the three men while the ship cruised from planet to planet. A staff of a hundred, of which they were part, compiled figures, cross-indexes, references. They were allowed an hour of leisure at each stop-over on a world.

During this hour, the message was delivered, to that world's greatest scientist known to be sympathetic to the Legion's cause. The method was simple, infallible. ZlkZee's hypnotic powers were used.

Standing on a street corner, he would fasten his glittering eyes on the nearest being of that particular world. Silently, he would command that mind to go to the nearest public communication station and send a message.

The message was uniform, on all worlds: "Psychon lecture taking place on Earth, sector N-99, through the auspices of the InterGalactic Science Society. You are cordially invited to attend. (signed) President Wyrwyn, D.G., Ph.D., S.Sn., L.F."

Nothing in the message would arouse the suspicions of the spy-agents of Tharkya, laymen to science. But two things in it would make a scientist sit bolt upright.

Psychons, first. An unknown science term, but instantly suggestive of a great new discovery. Second, the "L.F." in the title. Doctor of Galactics, Doctor Philosophy, and Savant of Space-Nautics were bonafide. But "L.F." meant nothing! Nothing more than a misprint—or, by laughable coincidence, the initials of the Legion of Freedom!

Kaine wondered how many scientists would laugh at this, snort at the "psychons," and tear up the message. How many others would leap to their feet, heart beating, and take the next liner for Earth?

Kaine didn't know. He could only go on, from world to world, leaving the cryptic message. Kylar had supplied him with a list of the top-notch scientists on each world.

At times Kaine lost himself in wonder over the strangeness of worlds he had never seen or even heard of.

THE triple-sunned world of sector F-14, for instance. Three giant blazing suns constantly swinging over a nightless planet, causing three sets of shadows. Another world in the heart of a star-cluster, with a hundred thousand flaming stars in its nightly firmament, shedding light strong enough to tan the skin. The world with fifty-three moons, darting overhead like fireflies. One with magnificent rings that stretched as far as the eye could see, like Saturn.

Saturn, of Earth's system, wasn't habitable, as were none of the nine planets except Earth. In most planet families, only one, at the most two, favored planets could support life. Those just the right distance from their sun not to be too scorched, or too frigid.

But the varieties of life-forms, within those limits, were endless.

Intelligent minds reposed in animal forms resembling anything conceivable on

Earth—dogs, cats, elephants, deer, dinosaurs, insects. Dozens of varieties of each. Dozens of varieties of two-legged upright beings too, similar to man. Gorillas, apes, toothpick limbed scarecrows, manlike beings with four arms, or tentacles, or six eyes.

Some worlds were unique. One was completely covered with water. Its intelligent fish-life lived in floating cities drifting over the planet-wide ocean. Another had atmosphere so dense that its people swam through the air, with finlike hands and feet. Silicic beings, crackling like moving glass statues, moved over one hot world where their scientists considered it an achievement to freeze a thimble of water.

Some life-forms were almost unbelievable. The liquid-life of one world that was little more than thin skins holding liquid that rolled over the planet. Gaseous intelligence, too, encased in egg-shells with cilia-hands. The invisible life of a world where the sharpest eyes could only make out vague forms.

Rock-people, planet-beings metal-boned creatures, amoeba-minds. . . .

There seemed no limit to evolution's experimentation.

All had civilizations, great or small. All had forms of art, science, culture. And all were dominated by Tharkya. All labored to produce the energon-tax, lest the ruthless overlords purge them.

Kaine felt that kinship with them. All were fellow-minds, despite outward form. All had sent their quota of ships to the great, ill-fated armada.

All had great scientists, who might or might not answer the silent call to arms. If only a fair portion of them responded!

XIV

BY chance, their pick-up ship went through sector N-99. From Sirius, it crossed to Sol. The stars suddenly seemed to fall into place, to Kaine and MacLean. There was the Big Dipper now, and Orion, and all the other constellations that they hadn't seen for months.

It was "home," in the galactic sense. The enlarging sun was like the Statue of Liberty, greeting their return from foreign

shores. Pluto winged by, like an old landmark, and ringed Saturn, belted Jupiter with its dozen moons, the twinkling asteroids, and red Mars.

And then Earth swam out of the void, a beautiful blue orb.

"There's no world quite like Earth," MacLean murmured, loyally. "Not even Dymoor. Good old Earth! Stirs the blood to see it, eh Terry?"

But sight of Earth brought visions of Dymoor, to Kaine. And visions of a girl, on that other Earth. A girl of the might-have-been, if it weren't for what the Tharkyans had done to her.

Velo! Her face seemed to shine at him from the Lunar orb, instead of the Man in the Moon. They stood at the corner of Times Square; after landing, little different from the Times Square prior to the Tharkyan advent. Strolling crowds still passed this busiest corner of Earth.

MacLean promptly called a shoe-shine boy over and had his boots polished, while munching a hot-dog. Tharkya had not penetrated deeply enough to change these little but endearing things typical of Earth and Earth alone.

"Like the old days," MacLean said, breathing deeply. "Used to stand here when a lad like you, Terry, and watch the people pass. Free people, in those blessed days. Different now, infernally different!" He shook himself, then brightened. "Not so different at that! Look at those girls, Terry lad, coming along. Aren't they stunners? You can take all your Dymooran girls and—"

"Hush, monster!" ZlkZee stopped him. "His heart is not here."

Kaine did not deny it. In each passing girl he saw Velo, maid of another world. Certainly the lightning that had struck him took no account of time or space.

MacLean grunted, as he spied a Tharkyan elbowing through the press. "He *would* spoil the picture! Ah, if but the day comes when I can step up to a Tharkyan and tell him to get the hell off Earth—"

He was interrupted. An Earthman had passed, then turned, staring in puzzled surprise. Suddenly he gasped in amazement.

"Is it possible—my old buddy at school?"

You're Lon MacLean! Did they revoke your sentence? Read all about you. What are you rigged out like this for—silks, green hair?"

The words had bubbled out of the man, half in awe, half in eager wonder.

Kaine was instantly aware of danger. The Tharkyan, within earshot, swung and approached. The name of Lon MacLean, archtraitor last known to be exiled from the galaxy, must grate on any Tharkyan ear.

Kaine kicked MacLean, who was about to greet the man effusively. "You're a Dymooran!" he hissed warningly.

MacLean choked. Stiffening, he shook his head. "You are sadly mistaken, sir," he said in Dymooran accents. "I am from another world, Dymoor—"

"No you aren't!" blurted the man. "I'd know you anywhere. You're—"

The Tharkyan was close now. If he heard the name again, anything might happen. Kaine saw the Tharkyan fingering his dis-gun. In another second they'd be exposed, arrested, back in the hands of the enemy. Inquisition, then, and perhaps ruin of the whole new plan.

Kaine's lightning thoughts were followed up by his lightning fist. He clipped the blundering Earthman on the chin first, lightly. Then the Tharkyan, with all his power. Both went down.

"Come on!" he yelled to his companions. "We can't go back to the ship. If we're going to escape, it's now!"

With the annoying habit of crowds, a group had already congregated. Kaine pushed his way through roughly and led the way down a subway kiosk. Leaping over turnstiles, they pushed into a crowded car just before the doors closed. It cut off pursuit, perhaps by Earth police for disturbing the peace.

THE subway train rumbled away. The passengers moved slightly away from the two seeming Dymoorans, and rather shudderingly from ZlkZee's spider form. Yet there was no voiced objection. Lately there had been increasing numbers of other-world beings visiting Earth. New York was the cosmopolitan center to which most came.

One undaunted man even struck up a conversation.

"You fellows from Dymoor? My brother-in-law went there for a business trip last month. Says it's just like Earth. Seeing the sights? Don't miss the Everest Building, two hundred stories high."

"We have one on Dymoor," MacLean answered gravely, "that is five hundred stories high."

The other turned red and lapsed into stony silence. Most of the other New Yorkers were nose-deep in their newspapers, reading of the latest murder. Affairs of the galaxy to the side, Earth minds still turned to their own peculiar doings.

Shuttling back and forth in the subways thoroughly, to lose all possible pursuers, Kaine breathed easier.

"Danger's over," he announced. "But we have to get out of New York before our employers on the census-ship start an organized search. We'll follow Kylar's instructions."

At a public phone booth, he dialed a number.

"Aero-cab service."

"Can you furnish us a cab to Buenos Aires?" Kaine inquired. "We're attending the InterWorld Convention there."

"We'll have a long-range flyer ready for you when you arrive, sir!"

Emerging to street level, they walked to the cab service's office. In a few minutes they were climbing into a long, slender winged cigar, equipped with gravity-drive. As the cab-driver shifted gears, shouts arose from outside. Three Tharkyans came running.

"Checking all stations for us," MacLean cried. "Get going, cabby!"

But the man shook his head. "They want you, for some reason. I can't go and defy Tharkyans."

Kaine wasted no time. He shoved the man out bodily and jumped in the driving seat himself. He took-off from the roof station with dis-bolts hissing past. In seconds he was out of range, climbing into the sky at reckless velocity.

"Just in time," MacLean breathed. "But they'll be after us with fast police ships. There's one now! And another—"

They came from all sides, leaping from roof stations.

"I'll lose them somehow," Kaine promised grimly.

Daringly, he zoomed into the thickest of air traffic, crossing lanes and piling on speed against all regulations. Deliberately, he circled over New York, darting in and out of traffic, utilizing its craft-filled skies for escape.

One police ship dropped out of the race, bogged behind an impenetrable press of speeding ships. Kaine blessed the uprise of air traffic, that today in 1965 filled a city's skies with innumerable local fliers.

Dodging, skimming, swooping in and out, up and down, back and forth at breakneck speed, he left the police craft stalled behind masses of fliers. When no police ship was in sight, he shot straight up into clear air and left New York.

MacLean picked himself off the cabin floor. "You're a demon at any ship's controls, lad! I'm one mass of bruises."

"Why didn't you hang onto something?" ZlkZee said, unwinding his eight limbs from the seat he had clung to like a leech.

TEN hours later, the speedy flier descended over Buenos Aires. Following Kylar's instructions, they applied at the secluded offices of the InterGalactic Science Society. In minutes, they were leaving again, with an automatic pilot attached.

It took them winging into the interior of South America, over jungle-land not much more explored in 1965 than in 1940. It dropped them beside a mountain lake, ringed by cliffs.

They stepped out. There was no sign of manmade things, only primeval wilderness.

"Auto-pilot must have gone haywire," MacLean growled. "Dumped us God knows where. Now we *are* stuck—"

He stopped, gasping. Half the cliff before them seemed to open up. A giant block of stone lowered rumblingly. Two figures stepped out. One ran to the ship and rolled it on. The other was Kylar.

"Welcome!" he greeted. "I saw it was you on a detector plate from inside. If Tharkyans arrived, they would find only the unopened cliff. But aren't you here early? The census isn't officially over for three days yet."

Kaine told their story, as they entered. The great stone rose into place. But almost instantly it lowered again. Kylar

stepped out to greet an anthropoid-like being.

"Dr. Zoll of sector M-77," Kylar said. "One of the galaxy's most brilliant minds."

"Psychons, eh?" the scientist boomed. "And 'L.F.'! I caught on right away. But what are these psychons?"

"It will be explained," Kylar said. "Enter."

"How many scientists came?" Kaine asked tensely. "Did our plan work?"

For answer, Kylar led the way through rock corridors to an underground amphitheatre. It was a tremendous chamber. The entire floor space was taken up with scientific equipment. And among the tables moved hundreds of beings.

"A thousand of them altogether," Kylar stated in satisfaction. "The plan worked splendidly. A thousand of the best galactic minds. They'll solve the secret of psychons in short order. Already, passing around results, they've established that the psychon-helmet produces psychons by drawing them from the wearer's mind."

Dr. Zoll stood a moment, drinking in the scene. Then, with a sort of eager snort, he ran forward. He joined the melee of scientific bloodhounds on the trail of something stupendously new and great.

"Don't let them lose themselves in pure research," Kaine warned. "What we want is practical results. Some sort of psychon-bath such as Ji Tu mentioned. And we want it quick! They'll question that man who recognized MacLean. Then, forced to believe he returned from exile and death—and we others—they'll organize a planet-wide hunt. Give them a month's time and they'll nose out even this hide-away."

"Speak to the scientists," Kylar urged. "There's an amplifying microphone."

Kaine stepped to it, announcing himself. His voice rolled through the giant cavern. Heads came up, reluctantly, from their engrossing work. But then a cheer arose from the scientists. No less to them than to laymen, Kaine was a champion of the Legion of Freedom.

"You are scientists," Kaine resumed. "I know that science cannot be hurried. There must be check and counter-check and many blind allies to retrace. But you

must solve the secret of psychons—in a month!"

The Earth term translated to their various time-systems. Heads shook dubiously.

"A month!" Kaine repeated. "After that, this place may be exposed to the Tharkyans. And our last chance to defeat Tharkya will be gone. I believe psychons will win for us. It's above Tharkyan knowledge. But we must hurry—hurry!"

XV

A MONTH later, a strange machine grew at the center of the laboratory. A circular globe of lead was surrounded by huge beryllium magnets. Beyond that, Kaine could make nothing of it.

"We've succeeded to this extent," Dr. Zoll said. "This is a cyclotron producing psychons. Any mind within the magnet will furnish the psychons. These can be focused, then, into another mind, making it doubly powerful in all thinking processes. A supermind will result, with enough other minds contributing."

"Good," Kaine said. "The super-mind must then work out some super-weapon. Anything that will beat the Tharkyans."

The scientist hesitated. "There is only one trouble. The apparatus is crude. The psychon-yielding minds will be damaged. In fact, they will—die!"

Kaine spoke after a long moment.

"Shall we go on with it?"

Without exception, the scientists murmured assent. They took pride in what they had fashioned, and did not shirk from its demands. It was a weird experiment. Dr. Zoll was elected the recipient mind. He was the Einstein of the galaxy. He sat in the lead globe, his head under the focus of the cyclotron.

By lot, scientists stepped within the magnet field. A flip of a switch. A surge of humming power. The head shrinking visibly, pouring out its psychons. A body slumping to the floor, carried reverently away. A hundred minds went to the block, first. Formulae showed that many psychons were required to make an effective super-mind.

Dr. Zoll emerged, his pseudo-ape face glowing. His eyes shone, and almost seemed to sparkle as though the mind

were crackling and buzzing with energy.

"Let me work now," he said. "My mind is leaping with new scientific conceptions. There must be eternitrons, too, the basic particles of that thing we call eternity. Projected, they would be a mighty weapon—"

His voice trailed away. He was already among the apparatus, swiftly setting up experimental items. For a day he worked, pausing at times to think with a mind that was probably inventing a whole new system of mathematics as it went along.

Kaine watched nervously. Would it work out as he hoped? Was there time? Would it take even this super-mind weeks and months to devise a weapon to beat the Tharkyans?

Kylar clutched his arm. He had just come from the set contacting them with the outside world.

"Kaine! The Tharkyans have just raided the InterGalactic Science Society's offices in Buenos Aires. They'll track down information leading to us!"

"How much time do you think we have?" Kaine demanded.

"Twenty-four hours, at the most!"

"One day!" Kaine groaned. "What can we do in one day?"

The centaur-being stood before him. "There are 900 scientific minds left. If need be, they must all be poured into Dr. Zoll's brain."

Other scientists had already started up the cyclotron. Dr. Zoll stepped under the focus. The centaur-man was the first to step under the magnet. The first body to be carried away lifeless. One by one, silently, they lined up and passed under the scythe of mind-draining death.

When nine hundred scientists had gone, Dr. Zoll became excited. "I'm near now! The great weapon is shaping in my mind. Give me more psychons. When the secret clarifies, I'll let you know."

Fifty more went, but still no signal.

"What if it isn't enough?" Kaine groaned. "What if it would take a thousand more minds? What if this is all sheer, senseless slaughter!"

"Take it easy, lad," MacLean soothed. "It has to be tried, just as the attack of Tharkya had to be tried."

"All we need is the basic formula for

the weapon," Kylar nodded. "As soon as Dr. Zoll has it, I'll transmit it via radio to Dymoor. None of us will escape alive from here. But if the formula goes out—we've won! Think of it that way—"

MacLean interrupted, with a hoarse cry. "ZlkZee!" he screamed, running forward.

The spider-man was among the last 25 who marched to the magnet. He stepped under it just before MacLean arrived. A surge of power, as the great magnet drew psychons from his mind. Then only a body lay on the floor, the limbs stiffening in almost instant death.

ZlkZee had given his pitiful few psychons.

MacLean stared down with queerly bright eyes.

"Shake, pal!" he whispered.

Kaine could almost hear the spider-man's ever-ready reply: "Which one, monster?"

Kaine turned away. "Come on, Lon—Lon!"

A hum of invisible forces. A body. Stiffening lips that would never again say: "Eh, Terry lad?"

KAINE stumbled away. It was all a blur now, a terrible ache. Kylar was shaking his shoulder.

"Dr. Zoll just stepped out again. He's working. He must give us that formula. He must!"

Kaine looked around. There were only the three of them left. All the personnel of the place had joined the parade of death unflinchingly.

There were only the three of them, one a super-mind. Dr. Zoll was busy with his hands, swiftly setting up a strange apparatus. Faster and faster he worked, till his movements were almost a blurr to the two watchers. His fingers worked with the rapidity of a super-mind that needed only seconds for what might ordinarily have taken hours and days of concentrated thought and study.

"They're here!" Kylar screeched suddenly. "The Tharkyans!"

Outside, beyond the rock wall that hid them, they heard low, whining thumps. Dis-bolts were being hurled against the cliff, to batter down this last remaining partition.

Kaine grasped Dr. Zoll's arm.

"The formula," he demanded. "Can you give us that formula in the next five minutes?"

The ape-scientist made no answer. His movements doubled their speed.

The ground under them trembled, as great masses of rock outside broke loose and thundered down under the hammering of the Tharkyan dis-cannon.

Suddenly, a hollow boom sounded. One dis-bolt had worked through. A second rammed in, screeching over their heads and cracking into the wall beyond.

"A few more shots and the roof will collapse!" Kylar moaned. "Bury us under tons of rock. If Dr. Zoll doesn't give me that formula to transmit within a minute—"

The ape-man abruptly stopped working. His hairy face was infinitely tired—but triumphant.

"You have it?" Kylar cried eagerly. "Give me the formula."

Dr. Zoll shook his head. "No time to set it down. It would take an hour. And no other scientist in the galaxy would understand it!"

Kaine's shoulders sagged. Dr. Zoll had succeeded, but too late. His triumph was purely the triumph of scientific discovery. He would probably die happy, under the Tharkyan guns, knowing he had done a great piece of research.

Research that would be buried forever and uselessly under a crumbling mountain! Supreme jest of the gods!

Tharkyans appeared now, in the gap they had blasted through the rock wall. Dozens of them ran up, with hand-guns ready. Spying the three men, they spread in a semi-circle, converging slowly. Guns raised, aimed. In another second, their blasting bolts would wipe out the last of the Legion of Freedom.

Kylar straightened his old body, waiting calmly for death.

Kaine visioned Vela's lovely face. He would go out with that comforting picture in his mind.

VII

DR. ZOLL, however, seemed unperturbed. Carelessly, one hairy paw flipped over a stud. From the mouth of his apparatus flowed a queer silvery light.

It seemed to lazily drift toward the Tharkyans, like vagrant smoke.

Kaine started violently. What was happening?

The Tharkyans were shrinking visibly.

Kaine's scalp prickled. He felt weirdly as though he had seen an eternity sweep by, and an infinity loom before his reeling mind.

The Tharkyans vanished into specks that were lost in an appalling abyss. The silvery light crawled further. It laved through the rock aperture, out over the other Tharkyans. They all dwindled and vanished. Their ships shrank to toys and then into microscopic invisibility. Surrounding trees and rocks within range suffered the same strange fate.

Kaine shook his head, clearing his eyes. Nothing remained of the enemy, or the space they had landed in. Only a flat lifeless stretch of bed-rock, down to which the silver ray had eaten.

"Saved!" Kylar breathed. "How was it done, Dr. Zoll?"

"This apparatus—or gun—shoots out infinitrons and eternitrons," the ape-scientist murmured dreamily. "It shoved them into infinity and eternity. I can explain it no more clearly."

"The weapon!" Kaine whispered. "The weapon we need to defeat Tharkya! How soon can more be made?"

"More?" Dr. Zoll seemed astonished. "You need only one. Mount it on your ship. Go to Tharkya. Keep it radiating about you. No enemy can come within range of their weapons, without first slipping into an infinite pit, for the rest of eternity!"

"Just one?" Kaine cried. "But Dr. Zoll—"

He stopped with a gasp.

The ape-scientist's face twisted loosely. A foolish, vapid grin came over it.

"Two plus two makes five. Ha, that is the great secret of the universe. Let's dance!"

Dr. Zoll began cavorting madly. Kaine and Kylar watched in horror. Suddenly the ape-man stopped in mid-stride. His hairy paws tore at his head in agony. Something seemed to snap inside, like a bursting bomb. Soundlessly, the ape-scientist sank to the floor.

"Dead!" Kylar shuddered. "He gave

his life too. He died mad. His brain burned out under the burden of a thousand others. He was a super-mind only for a day!"

"But he left a super-weapon," Kaine murmured. "Come, we'll mount it, and go to Tharkya."

THE stars watched in astonishment. A lone ship arrowed through the void. Openly, it aimed for Tharkya. Patrol ships hounded toward it, to blast the defiant attacker. But they never reached within gun-range. At some moment long before, they vanished from the known universe, as a queer silvery light bathed them.

Majestically, the little ship went on. Within, Kaine and Kylar felt almost like gods. At their fingertips reposed more frightful power than any being in the galaxy had ever before known to exist.

Kaine did it with almost sadistic finesse. He circled the ship around Tharkya first, ripping aside the Dark Nebula veil behind which it hid. Tharkya lay exposed to the glaring eyes of the billions of suns of the galaxy, like some evil flower.

Then he lowered the ship, skimming over the giant planet's surface. Where his super-ray touched, the things of Tharkya puffed away. Hours he circled over the planet, cutting wide swaths in their magnificent city, as they so often had cut paths of ruin over other worlds.

Patrol ships swarmed around by the thousands—only to vanish under the silvery scythe. Nothing could stop the vengeance of the lone ship.

"Half of Tharkya is gone," Kylar said at last, in awe. "Their power is already broken. Shall we be merciful and let the rest live—"

"No!" Kaine burst in savagely. "No mercy for the Tharkyans, who took untold billions of lives, in their million years of rule. The penalty is complete extermination. No mercy, for the monsters who took Velloa's poor, frail body and . . . but enough of this playing!"

Lips set in a dead, grim smile, Kaine sent the ship over the energon-vault, then down. The super-ray ate away the bastions as if they were paper. A great hole yawned. Down below lay crystallized energy, gathered for an age.

Infinitrons and eternitrons met energons.

Two of the mightiest forces in the universe.

The explosion that followed seemed to rock the stars!

One moment Tharkya lay underneath them, huge and solid. The next moment it was debris. Pieces of it were to land as meteorites on other worlds, for the next thousand years. One great chunk, a century later, was to inadvertently fall upon a busy world and destroy it.

Tharkya was no more. The colossus had fallen.

Kaine gazed at Thark, the sun robbed of its planet. The explosion had not harmed their ship. Flying matter that would have crushed any other ship was warded off by the super-ray.

"It's over!" Kyler whispered. "A million years of overlordship is ended. And we did it!"

"Yes, we did it," Kaine said quietly. He half turned, as though including two others who were not there to share this final triumph in the flesh.

He broke from a trance, then, to stride purposefully to the super-ray projector. Carefully shutting it off, he pulled wires loose, then smashed it with a wrench. He eyed Kylar meaningly. It was too appalling a powerful force to be left in existence. Whoever possessed it was king of the universe. There would be no more king of the universe.

Kylar turned his white-haired, noble head up to the stars.

"There will never again be rule by force!" he said solemnly. "I will form the InterGalactic Democracy of Worlds immediately. Take me to Dymoor!"

THREE days later, the ship descended over the other-Earth. The great news was still ringing through a stunned, wildly joyous galaxy. A flock of Dymooran craft, waiting, rose to greet them. A week of holiday had been proclaimed from one end of the Milky Way to the other. Air-sirens screamed and a vast procession escorted them to the port. Stepping out, they faced a cheering sea of faces.

"Terry, smile!" Kylar was shaking his

arm. "This is for you as well as for me. How can you be so sober in this moment of glory?"

"Velo!" Terry groaned. "I destroyed Tharkya. But before that, Tharkya destroyed her!"

Kylar stared in surprise.

"Didn't you know?" he gasped, shaking his head with a strange, soft smile. "I thought you knew of our Dymooran medical arts. I thought you knew that all this while Velo was under treatment."

"Treatment?" Kaine echoed vaguely.

"Certainly. Bion treatment. It—" Kylar broke off, pointing. "But look, here comes Velo!"

She was pressing through the crowd, escorted by Dr. Voro and Korio. With an eager gasp, she reached him.

Kaine stared. She was dressed in a light summer costume, revealing much of her body. It was the body he had first seen—lithe, slender, graceful. There was not a mark of other things!

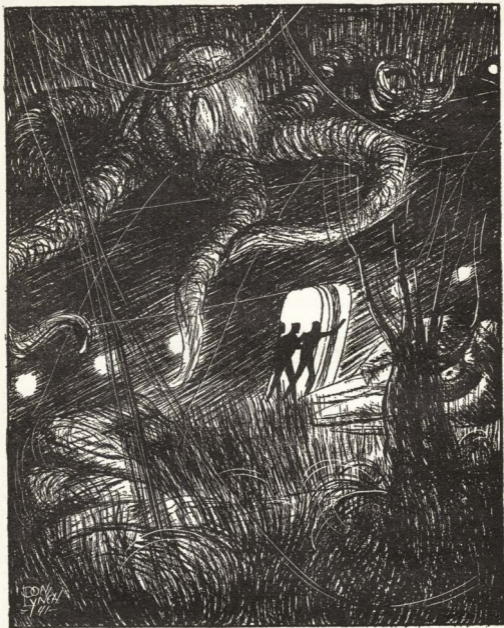
Kaine closed his eyes, groaning a little. It must be an illusion. His tortured mind had gone under, visioning things that couldn't be. Certainly this was a miracle beyond all telling. And miracles weren't scientific.

"Miracle?" Dr. Voro scoffed, and Kaine realized he had been mumbling aloud. "What's miraculous about it? Neutrons are the units of matter. Electrons of electricity. Photons of light, spacions of space, chronons of time, energons of energy. Psychons of thought, as you've recently discovered. It's been known for a long time that there are also units of life—bions! Not a miracle, but a good job, if I say so myself. It was simply a matter of rebuilding tissue with those building blocks of bions and—"

Kaine didn't hear any more. The roars of the crowd faded to another realm, too. He heard only Velo's softly chiming voice.

"Terry! I've come to you at last, the way I wanted. I didn't want you to know till it was done." She screamed a little. "Terry—not in front of all these people. . . ."

But Terry chose not to hear that either.



THE VICTORY OF KLON

By WILBUR S. PEACOCK

"Behold, I bring my people light!" But it was a deadly triumph for Klon, wriggling, slimy lord of eternally-veiled Venus.

KLON fled from fern to fern like a drifting shadow, circling the new clearing that had been torn in the steamy jungle by the gleaming monster that had come from the eternal fog that clothed his world. He halted now and then, slipped into the stagnant water that covered nine tenths of the planet, and

listened for the slightest sound that would warn him of a hidden watcher spying on his movements.

Satisfied that he was alone in the jungle swamp, he edged closer to the clearing whose edge was a charred and ragged circle. His lidless eye gleamed phosphorescently in the darkness that never changed, bringing into sharp detail the shadows that were two shades of blackness for there were no colors on his earth.

He slipped over the burned ground, wincing at the bruises given him by the unaccustomed hardness beneath his body. He hissed a bit in anger that he should suffer so, then went rigid as the thing happened again.

An amazingly light shadow had suddenly come into being on the roundness of the gleaming visitor from somewhere above.

Klon wanted that shadow, wanted that thing that was brighter than anything he had ever seen—and his purpose was to gain it in any way possible. For possession of that light shadow would make him greater than anyone else on the planet. Mightier even than Valok.

Klon knew that his time was growing short; the nation would declare their new leader within a very short while, and he knew that possession of that light shadow was the one thing that would assure him of victory over his rival for leadership.

His gills opened and closed automatically, involuntary muscles working even when his lungs worked on the damp air. He winced a bit from the lightness of the shadow, for never had his eye seen one that was so without blackness.

And then Klon was at the roundness of the thing, the touch of its coolness sending a thrill of dread through his heart. He moved slowly until he was just below the circle of lightness, then climbed upwards with his sucker-discs.

Slowly, carefully, instantly ready for flight to safety, he lifted his head until his eye was pressed against the light shadow. He felt tiny pains running through his eye, back into his head, and down into his body, but he gave it no heed.

For he was seeing something that none other of his race had had the courage to

face. He saw things but dimly, and the hideousness of the scene almost made him lose his hold.

For nightmarish creatures moved within the gleaming thing, moving on stiff tentacles, gesturing with others, while above, on a thin neck, fanged mouths opened and closed in sickening motions. And the shadows of their skins were of shades of lightness and darkness that were terrifying to Klon's senses that had never met the like before.

He gasped audibly, swung back from the circle of lightness, shaking with horror at what he had seen.

INSIDE the gleaming space ship, three men were seated on the collapsible bunks. Kurt Overland, his muscular body unclad except for shorts, was speaking in his even tone.

"Well," he said cheerfully, even his steady voice failing to conceal the burning eagerness within him, "we're finally ready. I've just made the last repair on the things broken by landing."

Frank Barker grinned at him from across the cell-like room, stretched his six feet of blond-topped, lanky strength happily.

"Suits me," he said, "I'm tired of being cooped in this animated bullet that's been home for so long."

"We had to wait," Gray-haired Professor Kent said mildly, "After all, if we are met by hostile beings, we want to be able to escape."

Kurt Overland grinned. "Maybe you're right, Professor," he said, "But I'd hate to return to Earth and say that we'd been run off before we had a chance to bring back proof of our expedition's success."

"That would be a calamity," Barker broke in. "Remember what a devil of a time we had getting permission to make this flight through space. The President told me, just before we took off, that because of the many deaths in faulty rockets a law was being passed to forbid any more flights. He said that it was only his influence that made it possible for us to leave Earth on a trip to Venus, and that if we failed to make good there would probably be no more flights for, possibly, hundreds of years."

"So! Professor Kent nodded his head.

"Then I am glad that we did not fail; for it is apparent that we are the vanguard of a new phase of our civilization."

Kurt Overland stood, flexed his arms. "Well, come on, let's go," he said, "It's time we took a look around."

The three of them slipped into their space suits, each of them tight-breathed with eagerness to explore the second of the planets. They were strangely silent as they dressed.

"Better slip the cover over that radi-light," Professor Kent tried to keep his tone even. "There may be poisonous insects outside that would be attracted by it. We will go outside without lights, then switch them on when the port is closed."

Frank Barker moved toward the radi-light, slipped the cover over its eternal brightness with a gloved hand. Then he joined the other two at the port. For a long second the three of them stood shoulder to shoulder.

"Professor Kent," Kurt Overland said softly, "please go first. It is your right that you should be the first to step onto a world made accessible only by your genius."

Professor Albert Kent's shoulders shook silently for a moment in great emotion, then straightened with pride. He nodded, swung shut his visor plate, dogged it securely.

Barker and Overland followed suit, clicked on their radio receivers. They waited patiently for their leader, knowing the feelings that must have been his at the moment. *

And then, unsealing the port, clutching the American flag gently in his left hand ready for its planting on Venus, Professor Kent stepped through the port, the first human to land on the veiled planet. Behind him, following with a clumsy speed, came Frank Barker and Kurt Overland.

"We three—" Professor Albert Kent began.

KLON dropped from the side of the ship.

He paused for a moment over the lifeless bodies of the three intrepid explorers, then moved away, disgusted by his closeness to the horrible creatures he had slain so swiftly and casually.

His every sense was alert for the slightest movement on the long gleaming thing

beside him to retaliate in quick vengeance for the slaying of the things that lived within its belly.

Klon crouched there for moments, then moved toward the ship. He climbed into the port entrance, leaving a thick trail of slime in his wake. He moved eagerly toward the small hole in the opposite wall, his heart thudding with bursting eagerness.

He had seen Frank Barker slip the shield over the shadow that was so unlike anything on his earth. And now he moved through the darkness of the space ship, slipping surely through a darkness that was natural to him and his fellow creatures.

He lifted the small box from its recess, turned and sped from the ship, vague terror and superstition overcoming the courage that had taken so long to build to a white heat. He rushed past the men who slept the eternal sleep before the port of their ship, slipped into the warm water at the edge of the clearing, began his long journey to the meeting place at which a leader would be chosen.

He clasped the box close to him as he raced through the swampy jungle, afraid that it might disappear before he could reach his destination. He did not pause to examine his prize, knowing that the time was growing short, feeling certain a longer wait would only make the globe of lightness more thrilling.

THE people of Klon's nation were gathered in the Council Clearing, silent as each of the candidates for leader extolled his own virtues and explained his qualification for the position as their leader.

Hisses of approval and sounds of disapproval greeted each candidate as he placed himself on the stone at the clearing's center.

And then Klon slipped into the clearing. He hissed greetings as he made his way to the central stone. Still clutching the box tightly to his body, he climbed to the top of the stone, faced his nation.

A respectful silence fell as his powerful body loomed high in the air over the heads of his people.

Klon stood for a moment, silently considering the short speech he intended to make. He caught the glance of Valok's

eye, looked away. His gaze travelled over the clearing, making out familiar features of his people.

The crowd was not large, for Klon's nation was a small one. It was large in the sense that no other group on the planet was as large. And it was the only race with useful intelligence.

Klon looked at his people, and pride made his heart beat even faster.

"I am here to prove to you that I am the mightiest among you," he hissed. "I have here the thing that will prove what I say." He lifted the small box so that everyone could see.

A wave of interested hissing grew in sudden applause, then a respectful silence fell again. Klon hesitated for a moment longer, then continued:

"I got this thing from the belly of the thing that came from the clouds, killing three horrible creatures single-handedly. Thus I have proved that I am clever, brave and strong."

"What is this thing you have brought us, Brave Klon?" Valok's sneering hiss broke in upon Klon's words.

"A thing that is like nothing any of you have ever seen; it is a shadow lighter than anything on this world," Klon said proudly, and placed the small box on the rock beside himself.

He paused again, knowing the effect his wait would have on his audience. And then he whisked the cover from the radi-light, slid from the central stone.

The radi-light flared with a dazzling, gleaming whiteness on the stone, bringing with it a light such as had never pene-

trated the always-present clouds that veiled Venus. Klon stood proudly to one side, drinking in the hissing applause and hisses of surprise and awe that greeted his showing of the globe of light shadow. He knew then that he had won the coveted leadership of his nation.

"This," he hissed over the uproar of his people, "is the—"

Klon gasped in sudden intolerable agony, fiery fingers of pain tearing at every bit of his body, cutting off his speech almost at its very inception. He crumpled slowly to the ground, dimly conscious that other cries were echoing his own.

He died then, hearing the agonized hisses of his friends, his last sight of life being that of the globe that burned with a white-hot light on the top of the central stone.

And slowly, but with increasing speed, his people died too. They fell like tiny trees before a huge storm, falling even as they tried to find a reason for the death around them. Like a wave eddying out from the central stone, death cut its merciless sweep.

And within seconds there was no life in the clearing. Within seconds an entire nation, every intelligent being on Venus, was dead of the unleashed light rays, the like of which had never penetrated the miles of fog that lay between earth and the sun.

The radi-light gleamed brightly on the central stone, shedding radiance over the last beings of intelligence ever to be on Venus—perhaps forever!



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THE STAR OF SATAN

By HENRY HASSE

More than the wreck of the *Martian Princess* lay on the lazily spinning asteroid. That uncharted star of Satan harbored madness in awful, human form.

HYPER GARTH was suddenly awake. He lay there on his cot in the dark, listening intently for the sound he knew would shortly come through the receptor. It almost frightened him, this subconscious awareness of his. He often wondered about it and wished he could

explain it. Always, during their sleep period, just a minute before a message came through he was wide awake and waiting, knowing. He supposed nerves had something to do with it. Or the time he'd spent out here? Nerves were bound to go raw and perhaps play strange tricks

when two men were thrown together in this black isolated hell of outer space. And Garth had been out here for twenty-three full years and seen his partners come and go.

From the other side of the room came Prokle's slow, sonorous breathing. Garth suddenly hated his partner for his ability to sleep at this moment. Garth reached out and touched the huge, nine-foot recepture by his bed; a faintly glowing violet permeated the darkness. His whole attention centered in a strained, concentrated listening.

Then the sound came, as he knew it would: first the crisp, crackling static; then the familiar and hated voice of the sender at Martian headquarters, stabbing the darkness almost viciously:

"Salvage Station M3! Attention M3! Passenger liner *Callisto*, enroute Jupiter to Mars, radios they have just encountered uncharted asteroid swarm on the Martian side of the belt. They have passed through unscathed. But attention to this, M3: Captain Lambert of the *Callisto* reports that he detected a light on the surface of one of the larger masses! This may have been a distress signal-flare, and if so, can mean but one thing: that the sole remaining life-boat unaccounted for from the wreck of the *Martian Princess* twenty days ago landed on this asteroid; and the party, or some of them, have managed to survive. This seems hardly possible, but we must investigate.

"Proceed at once in search of this uncharted swarm. Approximate position when encountered by the *Callisto*, exact center of the belt, two hours behind the Lanisar group, orbital plane about twenty degrees from regular passenger route. Mass in question cannot be mistaken, largest of the group, about twenty miles diameter. Proceed at once, M3! End of message."

Garth knew it was not the end of the message. That Martian sender always reserved some little sardonic touch to send to Garth. Garth's jaw tightened, he waited about five seconds, and then, raspingly, it came:

"Oh, just a moment, M3—Garth listening I hope—here's a tip for you. As you probably know, J. P. Chiswell is among

those still missing in that life-boat. If you two can locate that party, who knows—it may mean unconditional pardon for both of you! End of message."

There came the hint of an amused chuckle before the tube went dead. Garth's face was grim. J. P. Chiswell, President of EMV Lines! Unconditional pardon. Yes, for Prokle, perhaps, if they were lucky, but never for him, and that rat of a Martian sender knew it. Garth, in the early days, had been a source of considerable annoyance in the spaceways, and he was now serving forty years. The longest sentence in the entire history of the Salvage Stations.

GARTH arose and clicked on the light in the little cubicle. He crossed over and shook Prokle, grinning in anticipation of the grumbling protest he knew his partner would make.

"Message just came through," Garth said. "Sounds urgent."

"Go to sleep you damn idiot, and let me," Prokle mumbled. "I was just dreaming I was back in Chicago."

Prokle only lived for the time when he'd get back to Chicago, and Garth knew he never would. So did Prokle.

Garth grinned broader and shook his partner harder. "Come on, snap out of it. This is important, I tell you."

Prokle rolled over, half opened one eye and muttered, "Nothing's more important than sleep, out here. Hell, can't it wait 'til tomorrow—"

"I'll let you be the judge of that," Garth said with calm emphasis. "It's an uncharted swarm."

The effect was electric. Instantly Prokle was awake and on his feet, fumbling with his space equipment, no more questions asked. Garth smiled to himself, and moved over to his own equipment. He had been out here a long time and had often seen the effect of those magical words, "uncharted swarm." But never had he known them to work in quite the way they did on Prokle.

Uncharted swarm! To men such as they, that meant much—or it meant nothing. But above all things it meant a chance, and eternal hope. It had all begun twenty years ago when the group of four

men over on Station J5 had found gold on one of the uncharted asteroid swarms. They had pledged secrecy and worked it the smart way, leaving the swarm unreported. They had mined the gold until the rocks sped too far away in their orbit for them to venture out in safety; but they had obtained enough to buy off the duration of their penal terms, and had gone back to Earth very rich men.

Some years later Malcolm and Schroeder, on M1, had made a similar strike, but platinum. They worked it the same secret way. Malcolm had died, and there were rumors his partner had murdered him. Schroeder, through the obvious channels, had bought off his remaining sentence. Through the years there were other such rumors, and "uncharted swarm" had become magic words to all Salvage Station men. Secrecy, jealousy, hope continued to prevail.

Except with Garth. Garth knew that all the precious metals in all the asteroids would not suffice to buy his freedom.

THE two men stepped from their sleeping quarters out onto the metal platform which had been Garth's world for twenty-three years, Prokle's for two. It was a tiny world, extending in each direction for a mere quarter of a mile to end abruptly at the edge of the eternal darkness. Man-made, glass-domed, it was the tiniest of all the Salvage Stations. Garth had been stationed there at his own request, defiantly, alone at first. He had worked alone pirating the spaceways, not liking the company of many men. He still didn't.

But he did like the single men they sent out to him now when necessary. And it was frequently necessary. The trouble was, either their sentences expired too quickly, or they did! Garth's last two partners had done that—one stumbling clumsily over a precipice while exploring, shattering his oxygen helmet; the other being crushed in his solo cruiser between two asteroid masses from which Garth himself only narrowly escaped.

And Prokle he liked perhaps best of all. Prokle was the reckless type and it was those who always, somehow, managed to survive. It was Prokle, too, who had hung the name "Hype" on Garth and made him like it. He had first called him "hyper"

because of that amazing, premonitory sensitivity of his; then shortened it to "Hype." Garth had at first resented it, then bore it laughingly, then liked it.

And it was not only at the receptacle that his strange "awareness" was in evidence. He used to tell Prokle an hour or two in advance when a supply ship was arriving at their Station—and they were supposed to arrive in secret! He could uncannily sense the proximity of dangerous chasms on the asteroids they explored. And once, just before boarding a derelict freighter, Garth had told Prokle to wait; they waited, and five minutes later the freighter was torn asunder by a terrific explosion, caused by seeping fumes.

Now, as they crossed over to the safety lock where their cruiser waited, Garth told Prokle the content of the message. But all the latter heard was "uncharted swarm." There was a gleam in his eyes Garth had seen before, which caused him to say abruptly:

"Look here, Prokle, that gold lust is going to be your finish some day. I can see it coming."

"What else is there to live for out here?" Prokle flared up.

"Work. First of all we're going to follow instructions implicitly. Later we'll have plenty of time to explore and prospect; this swarm is our exclusive property. But just remember old man Chiswell's with that missing party, and that might mean plenty, to you anyway, if we can find 'em."

Prokle's mind came back from its flight. "Yeah, that's right. That *is* an angle." He seemed to consider it for the first time. "That is an angle," he repeated. "Say, how many are supposed to be in that missing party, anyway?"

"The entire passenger list of the *Martian Princess* is accounted for," replied Garth, "except six persons. And the missing life-boat is one of the very small ones, accommodating but six. Draw your own conclusions."

"Sure, that's what I'm trying to do. But it just don't add up. Look here, Hype, those life-boats are all provisioned about the same, ain't they? Oxygen for three or four days, and food for a day or two at the most?"

"That's about right. Close enough."

"Then you add it up. The *Martian Princess* was wrecked twenty-one days ago. Three weeks to the very day. How do you figure a party of six could have survived that long?"

Garth shook his head sadly. "You jump to conclusions like a Venusian Polywog. Nobody's said that the six, or that any of them, have survived. A light was seen, that's all; maybe it was a meteor. Anyway it's not for us to believe it or doubt it, our job is to find out."

"Still, it's damn funny where that life-boat could have got to," Prokle growled. "The way this whole section's been scoured. Our own detector would have picked it out anywhere in a thousand-mile radius."

"Yes, I've been thinking of that. And I sort of lean to the belief they landed somewhere; Captain Lambert was probably right about that light he saw."

"But after three weeks," Prokle protested, "and only a few days' oxygen and provisions? For six that'd be impossible, and even for one man—well, that's a long stretch on oxygen and food."

Garth turned to his partner and said, "You know, Prokle, that's one thing I like about you. You're unimaginative. You're always yourself. You never can put yourself in the other fellow's place. You and me, we don't put a high value on our lives anymore, but other people still value life highly, they cling to it tenaciously. Isn't that quaint?"

"Skip the sarcasm," Prokle said. "I know what you mean. The oldest story in the world, the survival of the fittest."

"Exactly. They can't all have survived. But I'm sure someone did."

THEY reached the edge of their half-mile world and stepped into the lock where the two-man cruiser waited, Garth having decided against the solo cruisers. Something told him they ought to stick together on this venture.

They sped away into the blackness, Prokle at the controls. Garth looked back at their tiny glass-enclosed world and the wreck of the *Martian Princess* anchored there, bordering almost one entire edge. She was a rather helpless looking "Princess" now, but her lines were still regal. Garth smiled as he remembered the wreck,

three weeks ago. Station M6, with its larger crew, had done most of the rescue work; but the hull of the huge liner had drifted toward M3 and so Garth and Prokle got the salvage job, to the envy of every other Station this side of the belt. But that was the inviolable law of the Stations. The two men were now leisurely engaged in putting the liner back into condition for the inspection crew who would be due out here at the end of the month.

Garth grimaced, remembering the earliest days of these Stations. The few prisoners out here then had at first been sullen, stubborn, unresponding to the occasional messages of salvage work flashed out to them. But there had been no attempt to force the men to do the work. No pretense of discipline. Supply ships had stopped every three months, briefly as possible, then went on their way. Less than a year of this, and the sheer stark *ennui* of the black outer hell had proved to be the real disciplinary master. There were only three Stations then, a handful of men on each, who soon vied with each other for the too infrequent salvage jobs. Garth had to hand it to the psychological genius who devised the plan!

Prokle brought him abruptly out of his reminiscences.

"What do you say, Hype? Sight for the Lanisar group?"

Garth examined the chart which showed the position and orbit of every known asteroid swarm. He consulted their present position and made swift calculation.

"Sure. Lanisar's coming on fast, but we won't cross it for an hour yet. The baby we want is about two hours behind it, according to headquarters, but on the *inside*. Remember, that's plenty dangerous territory in the middle of the belt for a flea-cruiser like this, without a repulsor. How does that suit you?"

Prokle revealed how it suited him when he said: "It's an uncharted swarm, ain't it?"

THEY skirted the edge of the belt, easily avoiding the occasional smaller swarms. The charted Lanisar group, easily recognizable and already thoroughly explored, intersected them in less than an hour.

Prokle turned their tiny craft deeper

into the belt. Here there were long stretches of comparative emptiness, but these became ever more infrequent. Dark masses began looming out of nowhere, but luckily they were tinged faintly from the light of the distant sun. Many of these veered crazily, or hurtled across their bow, seeming much closer than they actually were. Some of the larger pieces eventually formed miniature solar systems in themselves.

After more than an hour of this both men were nerve-wracked and exhausted. But they dared not relax for a moment. This was deeper, presumably, into the belt than any men had ever gone with a cruiser as tiny as theirs. They now seemed to be in a veritable sea of leprous light reflecting from the pock-marked masses speeding around them.

Prokle had just turned a worried face to Garth, and the latter moved forward to take the controls . . . when the swarm abruptly thinned. They were in the comparative emptiness of space again, with only tiny pebbles peppering their hull harmlessly. Prokle slumped in relief.

But the relief was brief.

"Look," Garth said, pointing.

Far ahead, directly in their trajectory, a pinpoint of light was discernible. It did not remain a pinpoint long. They watched it grow nearer and larger and slowly take shape. Another swarm, seemingly a large one. But gradually they saw that it was, rather, one very large mass with lesser ones speeding along behind it. The large mass turned lazily on a verticle axis, the sunlight striking it sharply.

Then, without the slightest warning, Prokle gave a short gurgling cry. He lurched up from the seat and backward against Garth, clutching at him. Garth could only stare at Prokle in amazement as the latter pointed, in a kind of horror, through the glassite prow.

Garth pressed forward and looked. Now he saw clearly. An involuntary sharp gasp hissed through his clenched teeth.

The large rock ahead, turning on its axis, had suddenly presented a new contour. Due to its formation and the way the sun struck it, it now seemed almost a perfect, though rough-hewn, death's-head!

In fascination rather than horror, Garth

watched the rock turning slowly. A minute later, considerably larger, the semblance was directly facing them—undeniably the rough shape of a human skull, all leprously sun-illuminated, seeming to grin a sardonic welcome as it came nearer. Deep shadowy gorges were in the places where the eyes would have been. Then it slowly revolved away, and the semblance was lost.

"Very cute, huh?" Garth said, quickly taking over the controls. "Nature's a grand comedian sometimes. I've seen some queer sights out here, but never anything like that!" And he added with grim humor: "Well, that's undoubtedly the baby we're looking for, the one we've got to contact. About twenty miles diameter. Glad you came along?"

Prokle hadn't quite gotten over the initial shock. He started to snap a reply, then clamped his teeth as he remembered something. He smiled wryly and said:

"If it's got gold teeth, I won't mind landing on that thing at all!"

REGULATING their speed to that of the asteroid, Garth swung their cruiser behind it and came closer in a gradually contracting spiral. Meanwhile they kept a sharp lookout for the distress flare the Captain of the *Callisto* had presumably seen.

They detected no light, however. They only saw below them a terrain that might have been lifted from an ink-sketch of grotesquerie by Goya or Sidney Sime. This was a cold and unutterable outer hell running rampant. This was a new canto for Dante. The rock was like a broken-off black tip of a mountain surging suddenly toward them, with jagged pinnacles reaching out to grasp and deep black gulches agape.

Garth allowed the cruiser to drift just beyond gravity, away from the sunward side. Peering at the scene below, he shook his head.

"I wouldn't want to attempt a landing there. Safer to use the magnibullet—there's usually enough metallic content at the core of these rocks to make it feasible, and we're only a few hundred yards away."

They donned space-suits and moved into the air-lock. There the magnibullet, a

heavy magnetized projectile, rested in a powerful compressed air tube. From it led a thin cable, wound upon a pivoted spool. Garth opened the outer door and swung the compression tube around. He released the power and the magnibullet shot "down," or "out," straight for the asteroid. The cable unreeled behind it until it struck.

The cruiser was now a tiny satellite, revolving slowly as the rock revolved, but connected to it by the taut strand of wire. The two men moved along the wire hand over hand until the gravity of the rock gripped them, to pull them slowly downward. They alighted on a precipitous plateau bordering on the sunward side. All was an amorphous mass of guttered rock, of serrate pinnacles and precipices and sudden chasms. Bizarre and ever-changing shadows played slowly over the naked, revolving surface.

As they stood there staring around, Prokle clicked on the radiophone in his helmet and said:

"Hype, I thought of something. How could there be a signal flare here anyway? No oxygen."

"How do you know?" Garth replied. "Surprising thing, but there often is air, a thin sort, on asteroids this large—deep down in the crevices. I've even seen various kinds of moss, lichen, and other sparse growth on some of these rocks. Come to think of it, that might conceivably serve as food. You know—to men who cling tenaciously to life?"

Prokle shuddered at the thought. He said, "Well, shall I take the light side and you the dark? That way we could circle this rock in a couple of hours."

"Wait a minute!" Garth said severely as Prokle started off. "You haven't worked a rock this size before. First we're looking for that missing life-boat and not for a gold or platinum vein—remember that. Second, we work only on the dark side, because it's safer. Yes, I mean it. On a rock this size there's always a certain bombardment of fragments—some no larger than your fist. Over here we can see 'em coming, on the light side we can't. I'm cautious on this point because the first partner I ever had out here went that way with a hole smashed clear through him. Now, you take the left, I'll take the right,

keep always on the side away from the sun by working away from the direction of rotation."

As Prokle moved away Garth called a final instruction: "Contact me every once in a while, and watch the chasms especially for that light."

PROKLE was just a little resentful as he moved away. Much as he liked Garth, he sometimes didn't like his dictatorial manner. As for any of that missing party being left alive here—it was sheerly fantastic. They were wasting time which they might be putting to better and more personal advantage.

Prokle looked into the blackness and saw two tiny points of light moving swiftly toward him. He ducked involuntarily. But the meteoric fragments passed high above his head, and he turned in time to see one and then the other hit on a pinnacle far behind him. He decided suddenly that Garth was right on that point, at least.

He came to a chasm and peered down into stygian blackness. No light there. He muttered disgruntledly and leaped far across to the opposite edge, limned by the faint tinge of starlight. He stopped and looked back and Garth was already out of sight below the rock's ragged horizon. He forged cautiously ahead, leaping chasms and skirting pinnacles and stumbling over dangerously sharp rocks.

Prokle stopped at his eighth or ninth chasm and scanned the utter blackness. Still no light. Why should there be? Fantastic to think a human being could subsist on this place for three weeks. Prokle muttered to himself in ever-increasing sullenness. He hated this derelict rock and this blackness and Garth and—

Then without faintest warning the white flash of a ray spurted up from the depths, past Prokle's left ear, and hung for a moment against the darkness of space. It vanished. And just as Prokle, in his surprise, stumbled backward and fell prone, it spurted up again to burn the lip of the cliff at his feet. Then all below was dark again.

Prokle lay there a moment in silence, blessing the protecting darkness which he had cursed only a moment before. Then,

hardly moving, he chuckled grimly and clicked on his phone.

"Hype! For the love of— Hey, Hype, can you hear me?"

Garth's voice came faintly in reply.

Prokle continued: "Hype, listen. I hate to admit it, but I guess you were right. There's someone here all right, and I've got him spotted. I've got him spotted so damn good that I don't dare move! He's got a ray-pistol and he just took two pot shots at me."

Garth's voice came again, thinly: "If this is your idea of a joke, it's out of place and very unfunny."

"It's unfunny all right! You get over here damn quick! And Hype, be careful. I'll keep talking to guide you."

Ten minutes later Garth crept cautiously to his partner's side and whispered: "You're sure it wasn't a meteor you saw?"

"Do meteors singe your ears? It was a ray, I tell you! It came from down there."

Garth crept to the edge of the chasm and rolled a fragment of rock over the rim. It bounded steeply down in the dark, but they could hear no sound due to the helmets they wore. No answering ray flashed up. For a minute Garth lay there, peering down cautiously. Then he crept back.

"You're right," he told Prokle, "someone's down there."

"See something?"

Garth shook his head.

"Oh, I see, it's one of those—those things of yours again. Well, you've never been wrong yet on those premonitions, but this time you don't need it. Can you tell if there's more than one?"

"Not sure," Garth said, "but I don't think so. Just *someone*. Lord knows where he got the ray-pistol, those lifeboats aren't equipped with 'em. He was probably carrying one."

"But good Lord, why take pot shots at us? He must know who we are! He must know we're here to get him off this blasted rock!"

Garth looked straight at Prokle and spoke calmly: "Maybe he knows it and maybe not. Twenty-one days, Prokle, remember? Imagine three weeks on this place, knowing there's only a chance in a million of you being located. Maybe

watching the others die off one by one. You'd hate to be the last, Prokle, wouldn't you? But remember what I said about some men loving life more than others, clinging to it longer, even when it means. . . ."

Garth didn't finish, but Prokle nodded and said the last word for him. "Madness. You're right, Hype, that's all it can mean. We've got a madman on our hands. Let's go home."

GARTH shook his head and pointed across the chasm. Fifty yards away the opposite precipice, a bit higher, was lined raggedly against the stars.

"Our best bet is to get over there unobserved. It may not be easy dealing with him."

Prokle patted his own ray-pistol at his side.

"No," Garth cautioned. "We don't want to use those and I don't think we'll have to."

Slowly, circuitously and with much effort they gained the opposite rim. It took them nearly ten minutes but the negotiation was masterful and noiseless. Finally, from behind a protecting rock formation they peered again into the depths, their eyes becoming slowly accustomed to that darker darkness. Then Garth silently pointed.

"What is it?" Prokle whispered. "I don't see a thing."

"Keep looking. A little to the right."

Then Prokle saw it. The missing lifeboat, lying quite still there below, like a tiny silver bug with its nose smashed. And that disseminated whatever slight doubt they may have had.

"What now?" Prokle whispered.

"We've got to go down!" Garth said hoarsely. "Nothing else. This side doesn't seem so steep; if we get to a point where we can see him, we'll talk to him."

"Can't do that, unless he's got a phone, too!"

"We'll see about that when we have to. Keep looking down there a while, let your eyes get used to it."

Presently, Garth first, they began the descent. It was slow and ticklish work, but now they could dimly see their way enough to proceed in safety. Garth followed a little gully which at times was

only arm's width. For perhaps two hundred feet they descended; then Garth stopped so suddenly that Prokle bumped into him and nearly lost balance.

"What is it?" Prokle forged carefully forward.

Garth merely pointed.

They had come nearer to the bottom than they supposed. They now stood upon a narrow ledge scarcely forty feet above the sharp little valley. And below the edge of their protecting ledge they saw a light.

That was not surprising. It was half expected. But the light wasn't a signal-flare, it was a crude, open bonfire.

"Well, Hype, you were right about that, too!" Prokle murmured. "That means there's air of some kind down here."

Hype nodded, and pointed to another ledge perhaps twenty feet below them, and to the right. Carefully they negotiated to it. Again they peered below.

THEN, for the first time, they saw the man, but only a silhouette. Really a smallish figure, but looming up large beside the flickering fire. He stood quite still, one hand at his hip grasping a ray-pistol, peering up at the opposite precipice edge; the edge where he had fired at Prokle.

Very still he stood and very still the two men above him watched. Then the figure turned, still very cautious, toward the fire. He bent and threw several handfuls of something on the blaze. It immediately leaped high, illumining the rocky terrain for a hundred feet around. The two men crouched back, but the light did not quite touch the ledge where they stood. His hand still by his hip, the tiny figure turned in a complete circle and surveyed the line of cliffs above him. Then, still peering around, he huddled miserably by the fire, seeking warmth.

But that brief glimpse was enough. Both men had recognized the grotesque figure below. And it was Prokle who pronounced the name first, in a hoarse whisper:

"Chiswell! J. P. Chiswell, president of EMV Lines! Of all men to survive in this hellish place, it had to be him."

"Why not?" Garth snapped venomously. His lips were tight and his face was pale

beneath his helmet. He was remembering again, with all the old bitterness, the exceedingly unethical ruse by which he'd been captured in the spaceways many years ago—the ruse engineered by Chiswell himself. "Why shouldn't it be him?" he went on. "The survival of the fittest, remember? Look at that ray-gun!"

For a moment Prokle was uncomprehending; then he said in a rush of fierce words:

"Hype, I'll bet you're right! Of course, you're right! The survival of the fittest, and with that gun old Chiswell *was* the fittest. I'll bet you he murdered the others and kept all the provisions of that lifeboat for himself! There's no other way he could have subsisted here so long."

Garth nodded grimly. "Maybe. Some of 'em may have been lost in space somewhere, though. We've no proof of murder yet; but I know he's capable of it if it means his own hide."

"Sure, I know that, too. Look at the two pot shots he took at me! We've got a maniac on our hands, Hype, what'll we do now?"

"For one thing, he hasn't a helmet. I'm gonna get out of this damned uncomfortable head-gear."

Cautiously Garth unscrewed the helmet at his neck; lifted it slightly, and sniffed the air. Then he threw it back, where it dangled from his shoulders. "Don't breathe too deeply," he warned Prokle who followed his example.

Garth reached into a rocky cleft near by and brought out a handful of greenish, lichen-like growth. "See there? That's the stuff I told you sometimes grows on these big rocks. Maybe it's what he's burning down there. He could dry it out if the sun hits down this far. All right, I'm going to call to him now, so watch out for that ray-gun."

With that, Garth peered down and called loudly:

"Chiswell! J. P. Chiswell!"

THROUGH that thin air his voice rang clear as a bell of doom; echoed eerily between rocky walls and went shivering away into the black distance.

The man below at the fire was on his feet and facing them with a fierce snarl. His hand darted up and a ray flashed to-

ward the voice, to splutter harmlessly on the rock—some distance from where the men stood in darkness. That act alone proved to them he was mad; from where they stood they could have rayed him with ease. But they didn't need that mad act as proof of the man's madness.

For in the full glare of the fire his face was a fierce caricature. Even from their distance they could see the wild gleam of his eyes as he leaned tautly forward trying to pierce the dark; could see the gaunt face, beak-like nose, shaggy brows and tangled growth of beard; they could see the flick of his tongue over lips drawn tight, and could hear the animal snarl that rumbled warningly out of that throat. There in the red glare of firelight he was a demon out of Hell.

For only a moment he stood there tautly facing them, fiercely peering; then, with an agile bound he leaped away from the fire and scuttled like a huge beetle toward the opposite cliff. They could only see him dimly now, but they saw him turn in a posture of defiance, arms spread out as though protecting the cliff behind him.

"Whew!" Prokle breathed.

"That goes double for me," said Garth. "Come on." He leaped the remaining distance to the base of their cliff, and Prokle alighted easily beside him. They peered across at Chiswell.

"There's a sort of cave over there," Prokle exclaimed, "and he's standing in front of it! Say, he's gone mad all right, but there's something else behind his madness."

Garth nodded. He grasped his partner's arm and moved forward slowly, saying: "Careful now; we'll try to reason with him."

They had almost reached the fire when they saw Chiswell's hand come up again with unexpected swiftness. They fell flat upon the rock, and just in time, as the ray flashed close above them. Garth realized they must have been easily visible in the fire-glow, and could have kicked himself for a fool.

But now Prokle was chuckling. "Didn't you notice?" he whispered. "That last ray was dim, it didn't much more than reach us. His charge must be getting low. A couple more like that and it'll be finished."

A few minutes they lay there, watching, as Chiswell made no further move. They could see the cave plainer now, a cave as high as Chiswell's head, but narrow, extending darkly back into the towering rock.

Without warning Prokle leaped up, ran a few feet forward and flopped down again, just as Chiswell's ray stabbed over him.

"Prokle! You damn fool!" Garth crept forward beside him.

"It's all right. I doubt if he has another full charge in that gun now."

"Chiswell!" Garth called, but softly. "We're your friends, don't you understand that? Put down the gun. We've come to take you away from here!"

For the first time, then, they heard the madman's voice. It was just as soft as Garth's had been, but cunning. The voice spoke five words:

"I know what you want!"

"We want to get you off that rock, that's what we want." Then Garth added: "The *Martian Princess*, don't you remember? The space-weck? All the others were saved—don't you want to be saved?"

"You sound like some street-corner missionary," Prokle said, chuckling.

And again the madman's words came—cunning, but with a certain cool menace:

"I know what you want!"

"See?" Prokle said. "You can't reason with him. Hell, I wonder what he does think we want?" Prokle leaped up, stood exposed in the dying fire-light. Again the ray spurted. Gravity was light, and before Prokle could fall away from it, the ray caught him in the chest. Prokle fell and Garth cursed.

"It's all right, all right!" Prokle assured him quickly. "Just scorched my suit a little. Well, that finishes his ray."

"You're still a fool!" Garth snapped.

NOW, from where Chiswell crouched they heard an animal-scream of rage as he realized how he'd been tricked: "Damn you!" And they heard the clatter of the gun as he flung it toward them. And their blood ran cold as Chiswell burst forth in a profane and garbled rush of mad words. The speech was so inarticulate, that it wasn't until he was nearly out

of breath that they began to gather the purport:

" . . . damn tricky are you? But I know you. I know why you're here, too . . . want to get me away do you—but you won't! . . . it's all mine, do you hear, all mine! . . . mine! . . . you'll never get it. . . . I was here first . . . keep away from me, keep away! . . . you just try it . . . ha ha! . . . all mine!"

The rush of words ended in a high pitched scream. They couldn't see him clearly now at all, but they could imagine froth on his lips. They heard his gurgling breath for a moment, then it died away and he was abruptly, cunningly silent.

Prokle grabbed his partner's arm so tightly it hurt. His whispered voice was hoarse with emotion. "Hype! Did you hear? Did you? It means—it must mean—tell me I'm right, Hype! Tell me!"

Garth jerked his arm away. He frowned, but there was a light in his eyes nearly as bright as Prokle's.

"Sure," he said, trying to keep his voice calm. "I guess maybe I'm thinking the same thing you are."

"Gold! It's happened, Hype, it's happened at last! And Chiswell found it for us; no wonder he's protecting that entrance over there, it's a vein!" Prokle laughed almost shrilly. "I never thought we'd make a strike, Hype. Never really. This means back to Earth, back to Chicago. We can buy off the rest of our time! There are ways, if you work it right!"

But Hype Garth, long ago pirate of the spaceways, was looking at his partner silently and calmly. Prokle saw that look and stopped suddenly, abashed. He remembered.

"Oh, I'm—damn, Hype, that's right. I didn't think—"

"Sure, Prokle. I'm serving forty years on the Station. Might as well be life, for it was Chiswell and his crowd who put me there and were tickled to get me there. Sure, you can buy *your* time, through the obvious channels, but not me. For me there's only one slight chance, a chance in a million. Know what that is?" Garth laughed softly. "One chance in a million, and here it is in my lap! If I can get Chiswell away from here and back to the Station, his sanity might return. I think

it would! This sort of madness is only temporary. And then—*then*—he might be very appreciative."

"*You* of all persons oughta know better'n that, Hype!"

But Garth went on musingly: "Yes, he might be appreciative to the extent of fixing pardons for both of us. And if he isn't . . . why, then I'd just have to persuade him, wouldn't I? And I know some very good methods." His eyes glittered.

"Damn it, Hype, listen! You know what'd happen then as well as I do. Suppose he did fix the pardons, even willingly. D'you think we'd ever get out here to this gold again? Never! We could never beat out the Chiswell interests."

Garth, smiling thinly, looked straight at Prokle. "Sure, I realize that perfectly. You want the gold, sure. But to get it, and get away with it, you're going to have to dispose of Chiswell over there. And if you do that, there goes *my* one chance of a pardon. Nice little stalemate, huh?"

And Garth, as he watched his partner's indecision, was suddenly enjoying the grim stalemate. But Prokle wasn't. He stared sullenly at Garth for a moment, rubbed his chin and grumbled baffledly in his throat.

Garth grinned back at him.

Suddenly across to them came Chiswell's jumbled words again, this time tinged with fear:

"Whispering, are you? I hear you over there, plotting. You just try it! . . . rob me—no! . . . ah-h-h! . . . two of 'em! . . . two . . . no, you can't! . . . it isn't fair, I'm all alone!" This time his voice ended in a little sob of terror, perhaps because he realized for the first time the odds against him; perhaps because he remembered that he'd thrown his gun away.

Garth, from where he lay, reached out and threw a handful of dry matted lichen upon the fire. For only a few seconds it blazed up, to reveal Chiswell crouched before his cave, a wild sight, trembling and waiting.

And it revealed something else.

"LOOK!" Again Prokle grabbed Garth's arm in his excitement.

But Garth had seen it, too, within the cave behind Chiswell. Along the sides,

only dimly discernible in outline, were masses of something that was not rock. Seemingly sacks of something.

That was enough for Prokle; and Garth, too, was sure his own eyes were blazing as he tried not to let Prokle's fanaticism get him.

"Can you beat that for luck?" Prokle was whispering. "He's started getting the gold out already! Or it's platinum maybe! Anyway it's going to save us a lot of time and work. Lord knows how *he* ever expected to get it away from here, but—well, I guess I'd have started mining, too, if I was in his shoes. Come on, Hype, let's get over there!"

Prokle had quite lost sight of the issue. Garth kept his own voice calm as he said: "Not yet; it'll wait. Well, which is it going to be?"

Prokle was still staring over at the cave. Now he looked back at Garth. "Which—what did you say?"

"I said: what happened to our little stalemate? You know, the one we were at a moment ago?"

The light in Prokle's eyes died. "But—but Hype—you can't be serious—to pass up this?"

"I've got to pass it up, pal. You know that all the wealth on this rock couldn't buy my freedom! There's my passport to freedom, crouching over there in front of that cave. And he's got to stay alive."

Prokle was becoming angry. "You're—you're just exaggerating!"

Garth merely shook his head, smiling wryly.

"All right, Hype, I've got an idea. We'll finish off Chiswell—we've got to do that. Then we'll mine the gold. We'll get every ounce that's here, and that ought to be plenty! Then I could get back to Earth myself—and with all that wealth I could help *you*! I'd make the proper contacts, bribe the right people—you know how it's done. And I'd really try, Hype. And you know you can trust me!"

"Yes, I know I can. And I know you'd try, Prokle. But you simply haven't any idea what you'd be up against, trying to buy a pardon for *me*. Any other man, yes. But you see, Prokle, the Earth Corporations would never let it go through. They know I'd soon be back pirating the Space Lanes again, and I would, too! I

hear that pirating has been pretty tame since I've been away, if you know what I mean." Garth smiled reminiscently.

Across to them came Chiswell's whimpering, his half-sobs of fright as he heard them whispering. He was like a trapped wild animal, not quite daring to flee for fear they would pounce upon him.

Prokle's sullenness was slowly mounting to anger again. There was sweat upon his brow. His face twisted with indecision. Neither man had moved from where they lay, prone beside the dying fire.

Garth looked at his partner and said: "I'm going to leave it squarely to you, Prokle. The decision's all yours."

"Damn you, Hype!"

Hype simply watched. He wasn't smiling any more, for already he knew what the decision would be. He saw the fanatic light return to his partner's eyes. He saw his jaw set determinedly. Prokle wiped the sweat from his brow, and his body tensed. The lure of the gold. . . .

Prokle twisted around to face Garth squarely then, but he couldn't look at him squarely as he said in a voice that was hardly audible:

"I—I can't give it up, Hype! It's too much to ask!"

And with a sudden little push he was on his feet and bounding low across the space toward the cave and Chiswell.

THE action was too sudden for Garth to do anything. He couldn't even get to his feet, much less intervene. He saw two leaps carry Prokle halfway across the space. He heard a frightened little cry from Chiswell, and suddenly he felt very sorry for him. The last twenty feet Prokle literally soared, almost horizontally. He leaped too wide, but managed to reach out and grasp the startled Chiswell by the throat. They fell lazily to the ground in a tangled heap, Chiswell bleating in thin terror like a lamb with a wolf at its throat.

Trapped animals can be very dangerous in their terror. Prokle's hold loosened and he rolled over lightly. From his distance, Garth saw Chiswell's hand come up. He glimpsed something massive in it. He cried out a warning, and Prokle twisted around.

But not in time. Garth saw the mass of rock descend, and he heard an awful crunch-

ing sound as it smashed Prokle's skull.

Chiswell bleated no longer. The bleat was a snarl as he leaped astride Prokle and without waiting to see if he were dead, gripped his neck with unbelievable strength. Garth heard the vertebrae snap sickeningly, and still the madman clung. He clung until he was quite sure Prokle wasn't going to move any more, and then his hands slowly loosened. He leaped aside, and with the mien of a sculptor surveying his masterpiece he gazed on the thing at his feet. Then, uttering horrible little throat noises he grasped Prokle's hands and dragged him to the cave and into the darkness beyond.

Garth staggered blindly to his feet and stood there swaying. Prokle was dead, but there was something else. A semblance of thought and reason was trying to flow back to his brain, but it came too slowly.

Garth moved toward the cave just as Chiswell emerged. If there had been any doubt before that the man was mad there could not be now. As Garth approached him he stood there half erect, gibbering, ghastly in the pale ghost-light of the sun that was just beginning to reach down into the chasm.

Garth stood before the disgusting thing that was no longer a man. His fist moved only a foot and caught the thing in the throat. On Chiswell's face as he sailed backward there was a look of mild surprise, as if he could not quite understand how it happened or why; but when he hit the rocky wall he crumpled and lay still.

Garth looked at his fist wonderingly. He passed a hand across his brow. That's what he had needed. Clear, concise thought was coming back. He entered the cave and stood a full minute there in the darkness, before he remembered the torch at his side. He lifted it, and was about to flood the cave with light.

Then that familiar premonitory "awareness" was with him again; abruptly, startlingly, vividly it came, engulfing him. It told him not to click on that light.

Garth stood stock still for a moment, hand half lifted, indecision creeping on him.

Prokle's body was in here, he knew that. But—yes, that's what had brought the numb fear a minute ago! That's why this

was different! *Why had that madman dragged Prokle in here?*

For the first time in his life Garth disregarded his warning premonition.

He clicked on the torch.

OUT on the Station, in the long dreary days to come, Garth was to remember that scene.

His torch remained on for only about ten seconds. But in those seconds he remembered telling Prokle, "Some of the party may have been lost in space somewhere"—but now he knew none of them had been.

He recalled telling about the lichen and moss here, which desperate men might conceivably use as food—but now he knew Chiswell had not.

His ears rang again with the madman's words, "All mine!"—and now he knew their horrible purport.

He remembered when the fire had flared up and they had glimpsed dim masses of something along the sides of the cave, something that was not rock, something that was seemingly sacks of gold—but now he knew those dim shapes were not sacks of gold.

It was not gold that Chiswell guarded so viciously, for there was no gold here.

In those few seconds before he clicked off the torch Garth felt his mind slowly slipping away into a chaos of vertiginous horror, but he caught it on the brink. He retained enough of sanity to realize why he must not leave his dead friend here.

He emerged with the body of Prokle into the palely creeping sunlight. He saw the thing that was Chiswell stir and breathe and try to sit up. Garth reached for his ray-pistol, aimed it and tried to press the button. Then he let his hand drop. That was strange—he had thought he felt sorry for the thing there before him, but now he didn't feel sorry. He simply didn't feel anything.

But *he* had Prokle! With the body lightly across his shoulders Garth began the ascent of the cliff to where the cruiser waited. He did not once look back. An idiotic desire to laugh seized him, but he did not laugh; he knew that if once he laughed it would be wildly, and he could never stop, and he'd become as mad as the thing down there. . . .



DEAD MAN'S PLANET

By R. R. WINTERBOTHAM

For unmarked ages a dead man kept his ghostly vigil on that barren, frozen asteroid.

“A LIFE-SAVER!” Mick said, bringing the space freighter down with a gentle bump on the huge, shapeless mass of rock and iron that

floated between Mars and Jupiter. The term huge was purely relative, for the asteroid was scarcely ten miles in diameter at its thickest point, and its axis

could not have been more than twelve miles long.

Mick switched off the rockets, opened a locker and pulled forth a suit of heavy, furlined, airtight garments which he slipped over his uniform.

The communication speaker buzzed.

"Hey, Mick! Are you still on the bridge?"

Alf Rankin was calling from the charting room.

"Yes, Alf. What's the trouble." Mick Conner was sealing his space suit.

"This isn't an ordinary asteroid, Mick. It isn't barren. There's stuff growing on it."

"That's nothing to get goggle-eyed about, Alf. There's moss on Eros which is smaller than this. And there are 142 different kinds of plants and one intermediate—animal-vegetable—organism on Juno."

"Hm-m!"

Of course this was a surprise to Alf, who had never made a landing on the asteroids before. Science had rather neglected the asteroids during the rapid development of interplanetary flight, yet there were many interesting sights to be seen on the 4,000 minor planets that floated between Jupiter and Mars.

"Get on your space togs and oxygen helmet and we'll fix that broken jet," Mick said. "We'll be ready to go in three hours."

Mick sealed his helmet and stepped into the automatic lock leading from the control bridge to the roof of the streamlined rocket.

He held tightly to the rail of the observation platform, knowing that the gravity of this nameless planet was next to zero. A man might jump one thousand feet into the sky without exertion and, if he wasn't careful, he might fling himself so high that he would be unable to land—he might become a satellite of this grain of cosmic dust.

Mick hooked the lifeline from his belt to the rail of the platform and stepped over the side. Instead of falling, he floated a few inches a second downward to the ground. In gravity like this a man might jump off Mt. Everest—if there were an Everest—and land without injury.

Alf, the square-jawed giant who manned

the engines of the rocket ship, emerged from the lower locks and fastened his lifeline to the iron ladder extending to the ground.

"Look at that stuff, Mick," Alf spoke into his radio telephone. He pointed to a dense growth, barely visible in Jupiter's light, just north of the ship. "It looks like corn. Good old American maize!"

Mick who had been examining the damaged portion of the starboard rockets, glanced in the direction Alf was pointing. In even, nicely cultivated rows, stood tasseled stalks.

"You don't suppose this place is inhabited by men!" Alf's voice was awed.

"It can't be. There's no air," Mick replied. "Anyhow, it isn't corn. It must be something else. You know there are doubles all over the system. The Martian pumpkins aren't even vegetables, but they're a species of mollusk. Even if this is corn, it's different, because corn depends on carbon dioxide in the atmosphere."

"Maybe there's carbon dioxide in the rocks."

"Then this wouldn't be like terrestrial maize. Its leaves would serve some other purpose."

"Mick! Look!"

AS Alf spoke the rows of corn seemed to move. Bright phosphorescent beads seemed to pop from the tassels and float toward the two human beings.

Like a rain of meteors, the brilliant specks came floating through the sky. But the brilliant shower fell with tantalizing slowness. Then one of the sparks dropped short, twenty feet from the feet of the spacemen. As it touched the ground, there was a bluish spark, and the rock beneath it glowed with heat.

"Look out!" Mick cried. His hand snapped the lifeline. His legs doubled beneath his body and he shot upward into the air. Suddenly he plunged into daylight. The corona-crowned sun was sticking its head over the horizon.

As Alf shot into the sky beside him, Mick noted that the ground was still dark, and that the terminator line that delineated night and day, still was a mile or so to the eastward, floating rapidly toward them.

There were other things about this weird planet that also struck Mick's

eyes. It was filled with growing things. Most of these were single stalks, crowned with a bluish bud. But there was a terrestrial note to some of the plants that cling to the rocks and sand of the asteroid.

To the south was a huge tree, with gnarled branches and leaves. Tucked away in a small gully were reddish flowers that looked like roses in the distance. There were vines clinging to the rocks. The corn that had first attracted attention of the spacemen, occupied a small, rectangular patch and the stalks were so evenly spaced that the field suggested artificial cultivation.

Slowly they came back toward the ground. Below was one of the budded stalks which slowly nodded its tip toward the terrestrials as their feet came in contact with the soil.

Mick was ready this time. His gun was in his hand as the little white bead emerged from the tip of the bud. The gun sent a streak of flame into the middle of the stalk, and the plant was sliced as neatly as a knife could have cut through a stem.

"It's not nearly as pleasant here as I expected," Alf panted into the phone of his space suit. "Who ever thought we'd have to fight plants on an asteroid?"

Mick did not answer. Still clutching his gun, he was walking toward a little path that led into a gully in the rocks. He moved cautiously, halting at each turn in the little path, searching the gully ahead of him. The path indicated animals, for plants do not walk.

Alf trailed behind, keeping his eyes peeled for fire-shooting plants, and carefully gauging his steps to keep himself from sailing high into the sky.

In the steep places along the path, there were steps carved into the rock.

"It looks—almost human," came from Mick, "but why would a human being need steps in this gravity?"

At the end of the gully was a cliff, fully one hundred feet high flanked by a mound of sand. The path led toward this mound and in the center was an iron door, looking all the world like the outer locks of a space ship.

Toward this door the two men walked. Whatever doubts they had of a human

touch on this asteroid vanished at the sight of the door. It was possible for nature to duplicate her works on two different planets. The physiology of Martians, Venusians and terrestrials had much in common. The processes of biochemistry are limited and living types are always similar to some degree. Even on earth many species of animals and plants which have no direct relationship may possess resemblances—the fish and the whale, or certain reptiles and amphibians.

But the airlocks of space ships were human inventions. There was small likelihood that another race in the universe would mark its doors with the Roman letters:

UNIVERSAL LOCK COMPANY ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

The two spacemen stared speechlessly at the evidence of human habitation. Then slowly the door swung open.

They waited for someone to emerge, but the silence of space remained unbroken. The locks were empty, yet they had opened. Was someone watching them from inside? If so, why didn't he hail them?

"Hello there!" Mick spoke on the universal wavelength into his microphone.

No answer came.

"Maybe his radio's out of whack," Alf said. "Shall we go in?"

Alf started forward, but Mick seized his arm.

"Look!" he whispered. "Up there, above the door!"

Just above the door was a ledge, which neither man had noticed at first. On this ledge stood a human figure. He wore no space suit, no oxygen helmet and his head was bare.

An empty pistol holster dangled at his side and his hands were on his hips. He was standing motionless in the cold of space watching the two terrestrials below him.

"Great guns!"

The figure didn't move. He didn't even blink his eyes. He only stared. Not a flicker of movement crossed his face.

"He's dead," Mick said. He bent his legs and shot up to the ledge beside the man. "Dead and turned to stone!"

"Stone?"

"Ice, rather. He's frozen hard as a rock. Probably he's been here for years. Not enough heat to thaw him out."

"But why hasn't he fallen down?" Alf asked.

"Why should he? There's hardly enough gravity to pull him down; there's no wind to blow him down. There are no earthquakes on a planet as small as this."

"How did he get there?"

Mick shrugged his shoulders. It was a puzzle, certainly; but there were possible solutions. The first and most logical was that this fellow had exposed himself, rather than to die a lingering death from starvation or lack of oxygen.

"Let's take a look at his quarters," Mick suggested.

He dropped lightly to the ground and entered the lock. He quickly inspected the lock control apparatus, making sure that the outer doors would function properly. Then he closed the locks and opened the inner doors.

The glass of Mick's space helmet frosted as warm air from the interior struck its surface.

Wiping away the mist he stepped aside.

STANDING in the center of the room, smiling at them, was an exact replica of the man they had seen on the ledge. But this one was alive!

"Welcome to Dead Man's planet!" the faint human voice drifted to the ears of the men. "You may remove your helmets. The air here is pure and there is plenty of it." The man's greenish eyes drifted down over the figures of the human beings facing him. "But you needn't point your guns at me."

The welcome was not as warm as the two spacemen might have expected from an exile on the asteroid. There was a note in the pale-faced man's voice that sounded false. It was not distrust that Mick felt, nor a sense of danger, for there was nothing to indicate that this lonely man intended to harm his visitors; but some subconscious reasoning in the spaceman's brain seemed to detect an uncanny sort of insincerity. Mick could not forget the grisly object on the ledge above the doorway. Why hadn't the dead man been buried?

The pallid host watched the spacemen skin themselves of their airtight suits and sniff the warm, sweet air of the buried spaceship.

"You're men," he said. "Men!"

"My name's Michael Conner, a space pilot; this is Alf Rankin, co-pilot and engineer. We fused and blew a rocket on the earth-Jupiter orbit and we landed here to make repairs."

The pallid man smiled. There was the cunning of the fox and the savage craft of a spider in his expression.

"Call me Ghor," he said.

Mick's eyes cruised over the pointed face. Ghor was a strange name. It wasn't terrestrial and it didn't sound like any of the Martian dialects. Ghor might be a criminal, preferring exile to a life in prison.

"You're a strange man, Ghor," Mick said. "You present a mystery. Are you from Mars? How does it happen you live on this Godforsaken bit of rock?"

"I was born here," Ghor said.

"Oh!" There was an awkward pause after this unexpected answer. Mick's eyes unconsciously lifted toward the roof, above which stood the frozen human figure.

"He was my father." Ghor spoke simply. His words were carefully and slowly enunciated. Mick supposed that Ghor was unused to talking and his brain worked slowly in the matter of words. But that brain was keen. It seemed to read Mick's thoughts, answering an unspoken question about the Dead Man.

"You must have an interesting history," Alf suggested.

"I have," Ghor replied. "But so have you. Tell me how you happened to find my home. You might have repaired your ship and gone on, without discovering me."

"There was a field of queer acting plants—they looked like maize, except that they tried to kill us."

"Oh! My cornfield! I forgot the nasty habit the cornstalks have."

"You mean that stuff was corn?" Alf asked. "Real roasting ears?"

"Well, almost." Ghor's lips cracked into another of his nerve-racking smiles. "You see the plants are really native of Dead Man's planet, but I modified them into

something quite close to terrestrial maize."

"By grafting and cross fertilization?"

"Oh no. There is a much different process of propagation of the species here, much simpler. My corn was regenerated."

Ghor hobbled across the room toward an ultra-violet lamp beneath which were two pots of flowers, both looking much like American beauty roses. Ghor returned, with the same mincing steps, walking as if a leg injury had limited the use of his knees.

"These flowers are beautiful," Ghor said, like a doctor of philosophy announcing the first premise of a step in mathematics.

"Yes," Mick replied. "We noticed numbers of them growing in the rocks."

"I know. I placed them there, to make Dead Man's planet beautiful. But they are quite useless."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that."

"I know what I am talking about. On earth, roses serve many purposes aside from beauty. They help maintain the atmosphere by exchanging carbon dioxide for oxygen; they fertilize the soil; they supply insects, such as bees, with food. These roses extract carbon from the rocks and give nothing in return, except their beauty. The soil is not fertilized. There are no insects to feed. This flower has no pollen, for it is purely ornamental, developed by myself for beauty's sake."

He took his fingers and pinched off the rose. As it dropped to the floor, a whitish, gleaming pellet half emerged from the flower, but Ghor quickly ground it underfoot.

"You see? That little projectile might have killed me. The flower is vicious. Like other plants on this planet it utilizes organic radioactivity to destroy other living plants."

"So that was what it was," Mick said. "Organic radioactivity!"

Ghor did not reply. His eyes were on the stem of the plant. It was swaying gently, as if it possessed muscles. A little green bubble formed on the end of the stem.

"Watch!" Ghor whispered.

The bubble enlarged and suddenly burst. There, in full bloom, was another rose, just like the first that Ghor had broken from the stem.

"You see, gentlemen, your planet is not the only one that might have the legend of the Hydra! You cut off the head of any plant and another grows in its place. Sometimes two heads grow and by the process of division—analogueous with cell division—a new plant individual is formed. The botanical life of Dead Man's planet carries regeneration forward to such a degree that even the loss of a leaf, or of a thorn is replaced in a few minutes, often in a few seconds. The plant life is so hardy that when my father, whose name I never knew, attempted to clear this space with fire, he found he had twice the growth of plants after the fire."

"It's clear now," Alf said. "How did he do it?"

"By transplanting and controlled regeneration," Ghor said, smiling. "He carried his experiments far. Most of the trees here were developed by him. He found that certain injections transformed cell structures so that he could cause the regenerated parts to assume almost any shape he desired. My father's trees are nothing but Ngye stalks—mere weeds—so transformed that they resemble the oaks, the elms, and the chestnuts of the earth."

"And the corn, I suppose is merely a synthetic product?" Mick asked.

"It is a triumph of my own. The product is quite edible and tastes, I assume, much like terrestrial maize, which I have never eaten. The cells possess the same number of genes and chromosomes as Indian maize and it is, therefore, biologically related, although the two types have never been in contact."

"But there must be some difference. Maize doesn't throw radioactive particles at cornhuskers!"

"That," smiled Ghor, "is probably an environmental factor. And it is possible some of the genes are not exactly like maize genes."

GHOR and the two earthmen talked for hours. He showed off his little establishment, buried to conserve heat, under the sand of the asteroid. It was equipped with air purifying apparatus, electrical devices and heaters, all supplied with plant generated power. Ghor cooked a meal, entirely vegetarian, that tasted little different from its terrestrial counter-

part. The bread was indistinguishable from that made from wheat flour, the potatoes had exactly the same taste as terrestrial tubers—in fact every item had its counterpart on earth, yet it was supplied from carefully developed plants of the asteroid.

Ghor told other facts about his home.

Dead Man's planet turned on its axis once every nine and one-half hours. Its average temperature was about forty degrees below zero and this temperature remained fairly constant because of the small diameter and surface of the asteroid.

Mick's perplexity over the degree of trust to be placed in Ghor wavered as the conversation continued through the day. Ghor's actions did not appear suspicious. Ghor himself, pale and weak and a product of zero gravity, was hardly to be feared, except through trickery. But there were words, sentences and phrases dropped by the exile from time to time that indicated deep mystery and hidden horror. There were certain unanswered questions that were clues to questions that were not asked.

Behind this mystery, Mick noted a beseeching look that appeared from time to time on Ghor's pinched face. It was the air of a man asking pardon for a crime. Yet, what crime had been committed? Ghor's experiments were contribution to universal knowledge. On earth they would be hailed as discoveries and Ghor would be honored and rewarded for his work. Surely Ghor had committed no crime in his development of alien plants into terrestrial forms.

Ghor's work had been done in the same manner that an experienced airplane pilot flies blind in a fog. He had never seen corn and potatoes, yet he had created them. His sole guides were books in the library and sound motion pictures bearing on botany that had been left behind by Ghor's nameless father. Ghor was more than a Robinson Crusoe; he was a Tarzan in the jungle of space.

The only unseemly exhibit in this island of the sky was the frozen body of Ghor's father on the ledge above the buried space ship. This, however, could be considered in the light of environment. On an airless bit of rock, where nothing decayed, burial in the ground was like offering the human

body as food for the roots of millions of obscene plants. Burial seemed more of a sacrilege than the placing of the body on a rock as a flash and blood monument.

After a rest during the short, five-hour night, Ghor offered to take the spacemen back to their ship to make repairs.

"It isn't that I wish to hurry your departure," he said, "but I realize that my life here is very dull. Except to tell you of my work, I have nothing to offer in the way of entertainment."

"Wouldn't you want to go back to Terra with us?" Mick asked.

Again that cunning, deceptive expression crossed Ghor's face.

"No," he said. He did not elaborate.

GHOR'S method of avbiding the radioactive pellets cast from the buds of the weird plants of the asteroid, was akin to the degaussing process used by ships in mine-infested waters. The plants sensed their enemies through the minute electrical currents that are present in all living organisms, Ghor explained. They cast their pellets at all alien organisms that came near.

"You mean grow near?"

"There are a few mobile plants on Dead Man's planet." Ghor explained.

They had emerged from the locks of the ship and they were moving down the gully. Ghor walked in his usual stiff-legged stride and clad as he was in a spacesuit, he appeared to be some sort of mechanical monster.

As they emerged from the gully and came to the place where Mick had slashed down the budded stalk with his ray gun, Ghor halted. The shriveled burned bud lay on the ground, but the stalk had disappeared.

The earphones in Mick's spacesuit caught Ghor's startled gasp:

"Ngye!"

"It attacked us yesterday after we jumped out of the corn patch," Alf was explaining. "Mick knocked it over with his ray gun."

"It is the first one that has ventured on this side of the planet in several years," Ghor explained. "It's one of the mobile plants I was speaking of. You see, the stem has regenerated a new bud and has moved on."

"We saw several of them—"

"Several!" Ghor seemed to stiffen. "Gentlemen. It is not safe here. We must go back to my cabin. The Ngye is one plant that is deadly."

"I thought your father made trees out of them," Mick said.

"At first they were docile. My father developed many kinds of plants from them and I myself created the corn from hybrid Ngye plants, but the process of survival played a curious prank by developing in the untouched plants a sense of hatred for these new variations, as well as an everlasting enmity for my father and myself. It was as if these plants resented being made over into alien forms. My father developed a poisonous substance which he spread on the soil which drove the Ngye plants to the other side of the planet. Apparently they have come back. It means, my friends, that mankind must go to war to save himself and his products."

Ghor already was walking rapidly back toward the gully.

"Couldn't you make some other poison to get rid of them again?" Alf asked.

"I might, but it would take time. And—" Ghor seemed to choke, "—it was the poison that killed my father."

As Ghor reached the first turn in the gully, he halted and then sprang back. A gleaming spark landed at his feet and heated the rock to incandescence.

"Trapped!" he groaned. "There's a forest of Ngyes in the path ahead of us."

Mick pushed forward, his ray gun in hand. He caught a glimpse of a forest of leafless stems, surmounted by ugly, bulging bulbs. Ghor tugged Mick back, just as a shower of sparks shot from the stalks.

"How do they know where we are?" Mick asked. "Doesn't our degaussing equipment work?"

"The Ngye has more sensitive perception than most plants. You forget the radio waves from our phones. The plants are able to find us by those."

"Maybe we can rush them," Mick suggested. "Alf and I can use our ray guns to burn a path through to the cabin—"

Ghor shook his head.

"No. Before we seared half of them, the rest would have melted us into grease.

Besides, fire won't work with them. It will only multiply our enemies."

A warning cry came from Alf.

"They're behind us, too!"

Mick glanced down the gully. A moving forest was circling the bend. The Ngyes seemed to progress with an amoebic motion, as if their roots tugged them along over the loosely packed soil.

"Quick, Alf! Take Ghor's arm. We can jump for it!"

As Mick shouted, he seized Ghor's right arm. Alf took the left arm of the asteroid man. The three shot upward into the air, propelled by the earth-born strength of the spacemen. The ground where they stood a moment before turned red beneath a shower of tiny radioactive pellets.

As they shot into the sunlit sky, their eyes saw Ngyes on all sides. They lined the valley. The cornfield was ablaze with light as the budded plants and hybrid maize battled for existence. Even the rocks above the gully sprouted hundreds of the swaying stems.

"We're in for it," Mick said. "Wherever we land, we'll be in a patch of them. We'd better shut off our telephones and try to slip through—"

"No! Our steps on the soil will be sensed by the roots. We'd never walk a dozen yards. But you might make it by jumping—"

Ghor broke off suddenly. His head turned toward a grove of the enemy stalks directly below. Two of the stalks had bent close to the ground, placing their bulbs beneath the roots of a third. Suddenly the bent stalks straightened, catapulting the third stalk into the air, like an arrow toward the three floating men.

Mick's gun blasted the stalk and it withered in flame in mid-air.

But other stalks were shooting toward them now.

Ghor was struggling desperately.

"Let me go!" he whispered. "Turn loose of my arm. Remember, the gravity here will not let me fall faster than you."

Ghor suddenly wrenched loose. From a pocket of his spacesuit flashed a knife.

"Stop!" It was Alf who first sensed Ghor's intention, but his action was too slow to stop what followed.

The knife slashed through the fabroid spacesuit, deep into the neck of the asteroid man. A spray of red blood shot into the airless sky.

A curious sort of tremor seemed to shake the stalks below. The reddish spray seemed to strike fear into the waving buds. The living forest pushed back away from the spray of human blood.

When the men dropped to the ground the Ngyes were retreating.

But Ghor lay lifeless beside them.

"That was the poison that killed the Ngyes—and that killed his father," Mick said. "Human blood! It's ghastly."

"We'll put him on the ledge," Alf said. "I think he'd like that. Lord! To think that we didn't trust him at first. He's a hero, Mick! A hero as great as any in the history of mankind!"

A day later the two terrestrials, protected by the degaussers, completed the repairs on their space ship.

"I think we ought to go back to the cabin, Alf," Mick suggested.

"Yeah. We ought to pay our respects to Ghor. We owe him more than he'll ever know."

Once more they stumbled up the gully. They kicked aside a few dead Ngye stalks that had been killed by the lifeblood of Ghor as they followed the turns of the pathway. At last they reached the locks. "Mick!"

Alf was pointing to the ledge above the locks. Only one human figure, its arms akimbo, eyes staring down the gully, stood on the ledge. Ghor was gone.

Slowly the locks opened. Through the door, unhelmeted, unprotected by a spacesuit, came Ghor.

"He's alive!"

Ghor smiled—that same crooked, half mysterious smile. He lifted his hand and held a microphone close to his lips.

"I hoped you wouldn't come back. I didn't want you to know I was a failure."

"A failure! Man, you're a hero!" Mick said.

"I'm not a man. If I had been a man, I would have died. But, you see, I am not a man. I am a product of my father's botany. You see, I, like all of the things that look like terrestrial things on this planet, was developed from the lowly Ngye. It had been my hope that I was no longer a plant, but a man. I had read men's books; studied his pictures; learned his arts. But I am not a man. I am a failure."

From the door came another being—an identical image of Ghor.

"This," Ghor said, "is my son. The result of my wound yesterday."

Mick walked forward and took the hands of the two asteroid men.

"If you're not men," he said, "you're something greater."

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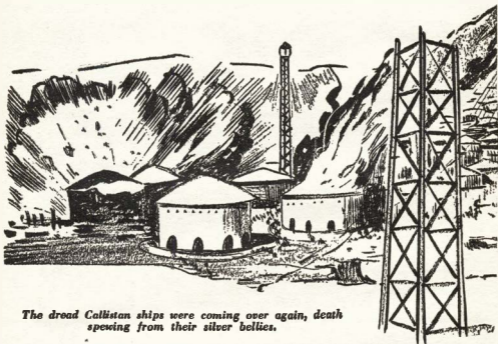
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The thin, clear air trailed streamers of blue smoke, that blurred the ringed globe of monster Saturn, visible at the horizon, above the craggy surrounding hills.

The Earth-Colony here on Titan, largest of Saturn's satellites, seemed doomed. The invaders were firing everything they could reach.

Angry farmers were gathered in front of the Community Bank in Leiccsendale. Old Arne Reynaud, who kept a great orchard and flower-garden beyond the village outskirts, stood on the concrete steps of the bank building, and shouted to the assembled group of bitter faces.

"Twenty-three Earth-years, Terrestrials have been here in Leiccsenland!" he shrilled grimly. "Ain't nobody gonna drive us out now! Not even these damned Callistans from their moon back Jupiter-way! Titan, so far from the sun, was a frozen world when we came. Its water was ice. Even its air lay in frozen snowdrifts in the awful cold! We slaved



and starved and spent almost every cent we had, getting started here! Setting up Bart Mallory's atomic sun-ray towers, to make the climate warm! Cultivating the soil, that hadn't had any life in it for a billion years, since Saturn cooled too much to radiate any heat to Titan! Bringing in seeds and cattle and hogs! Even bumble-bees to pollinate the flowers! Ain't no dirty, fuzzy Callistan devils gonna take Titan away from us now! We made us a little heaven, here, with the sweat of our brows! And we're gonna keep it! Ain't no—"

Arne Reynaud got this far in his speech, his shrill, scratchy old voice vibrant with mingled grief and wild determination. But just then a second voice, from the rear of the little crowd, cut in like a whetted knife-blade, keen and caustic and condemning:

"Shut up, Reynaud! That Iron-Made language of yours is completely out of place, now! It only makes things worse! So, for God's sake, shut up! Stop talking like a damned fool!"

The words fairly snapped and snarled with bitterness. No Callistan heat-bomb, dropped into the center of the little gathering itself, could have produced more emotional startlement. Two hundred pairs of haggard eyes turned as one toward the man who had broken a spell. Surprise was too great to allow anger to awaken, yet. There was only wonder as to who this rude traitor could be.

He stood there at the edge of the side-walk, with half his gaunt weight leaned against a maple sapling. But his eyes glowed tensely, under a broad-brimmed colonial hat, denying the indolence of his posture. A crooked smile showed white teeth, and traced a line of derision in one narrow, bronzed cheek. Youth and strength and sadness and broken dreams, were in the curve of his brow and lips. But above all, there was realism—the will to do the best, most reasonable thing, in the face of heart-breaking defeat.

A girl, as forceful as himself—in her own pert way—was the one who answered him. "You!" she stormed. "You—Ron Leiccsen—nephew of the man who explored this world, and died from the effects of hardships here, soon after his

return to Earth! The man who made our Titanian Colony possible! And you tell Arne Reynaud to shut up, when he talks patriotism! You're not fit to bear the same name as Jan Leiccsen!"

The girl was Anna Charles, a teacher in the school at the village. There was a moment of strained silence, after her furious, accusing words tumbled out. Her tiny fists were clutched so firmly that the knuckles showed white. Her heart-shaped face had gone pale with fury, defiance, contempt! Her dark eyes blazed narrowly, and her whole, small, reckless body trembled with emotion. Anna Charles, daughter of a champion space pilot, killed several years before, was a tornado from her golden head to the tips of her tiny boots!

BUT she was only part of the situation, now. Everyone, among those hard, bristly-cheeked colonists, waited for Ron Leiccsen to answer the girl's withering challenge. Ron had been a respected machinist bearing an honored name—before. But his caustic attitude, now, made a difference. Most of those grim men scowled at him. Many of them fingered their smooth, trim-barreled atom-rifles in a silent threat to a dis-senter. Even old Arne Reynaud, on his impromptu orator's rostrum before the Community Bank, said nothing. His withered features only looked startled. His thin shoulders sagged in his shapeless overcoat.

The nearest great sun-ray globe, rising on its tall, steel-girdered tower above Leiccsendale, purred softly, shedding its warmth and brilliant light, and its special, invisible radiations, which acted as a stimulus to all vegetable growth, over the scene. Smoke from rich, ripe corn-fields nearby, tanged in the cool air, like a questioning ghost. Even the far-off sun itself, scarcely more than a great star in the vast distance, seemed to wait, to see what would happen during the next tense moment.

Ron Leiccsen's grin became a trifle more crooked. Otherwise he scarcely moved, though his eyes admired Anna Charles' vigorous spirit.

"I apologize, if I've hurt anyone's feelings—without good reason," he said

at last. "I look up to anyone with plenty of nerve, like Arne Reynaud, or Miss Charles, here. But we can't successfully fight Callistan heat-bombs, and their horde of heavily armed ships. We can't expect any aid from Earth, since the Callistan space navy is supreme in this part of the void. To continue to resist alone, is just plain stupid. We'd all be killed or enslaved—Titan taken away from us anyway, in the end. And we have women and kids, remember! Miss Charles, who is a school teacher, should know that we have kids, here, as well as anybody else! Tots. Who wants to see them enslaved, abused, massacred? So, though it will hurt plenty to do it, let's face facts! Let's leave Titan before these laughing devils from Callisto can fly so many war-craft out from their world that even escape will be cut off!"

Ron Leiccsen paused for just a moment, to let his arguments sink home, and to let the grim truth register in the minds of his hard, embattled listeners. Then he went on.

"Of course, if Arne Reynaud has any information," he said, "any new trick, or any means at all that might give us hope of defeating these furry giants from Jupiter's outermost large moon, let him speak up! Otherwise his talk of fighting is exactly what I implied before—just senseless, foolish courage!"

When Ron Leiccsen finished speaking, farmers looked at each other, their faces puzzled. It was easy to see that common-sense was tempering their defiance against the Callistan hordes, now. Their wives. Their children. Even Anna Charles' features showed a sheepish, apologetic petulance for a moment, as though maybe she realized that the man whom she had as good as accused of traitorous cowardice, might have told the truth.

From the distance, over the blazing fields and farm buildings, a slim, silvery shape flew silently, coming closer. And the atom-guns which had so far kept the hamlet of Leiccsendale itself, safe from the bombs and heat-rays of the Callistan raiders, began to spit their whining darts up from the village outskirts.

But now old Arne Reynaud lifted a

shaky hand. "Ron Leiccsen," he shouted sincerely, "you got real, honest-to-gosh, good judgment! Talk without backing don't get anybody anywhere! But I haven't been just shooting off my mouth! There is a way to lick them damned Callistans, as I was gonna tell you all before! Everything's fixed, except for the last tough part of the job!"

It was Ron Leiccsen's turn to be surprised, now. His brows creased in mingled doubt and hope. He stood erect now, taut and ready.

"All right, Arne," he urged eagerly. "I'll eat those words of mine, down to the last sour syllable, if I've said anything out of place! Tell us what you've got up your sleeve."

"Just this, friends," Arne returned seriously. "Mighty few Callistans ever visit Earth. Even though they're immune to our germ diseases, they don't thrive so well there, at certain seasons. Me and a brother of mine, back home, are probably the only men, either Earthian or Callistan, who realize why Callistans get very sick at certain times on Earth, though it's so simple. I saw one die once, in New York State, in summer. It ain't just the density of the air. They can stand that. It's something else—and I've got the password. I found out.

"Quite a while ago, I wrote a letter to my brother. But everybody knew, already, that the trouble with the Callistans was coming. My brother has quite a lot of money, and I asked him to do me a favor. Just a few hours ago I got his space-radiogram, probably one of the last that got through the Callistan interference barrages."

Arne had taken a slip of yellow paper from his pocket. He cleared his throat, and read the message aloud:

"Dear Arne: Shipload of stuff you asked for is at Vananis, on Mars. Have just learned that crew deserted, refusing to go farther into zone patrolled by hostile Callistan craft. Delivery up to you colonists. Luck. Tony."

ARNE REYNAUD ran his fingers through his ragged gray hair, as he finished the radiogram. "You see, folks?" he continued. "That space freighter is waiting on Mars right now,

for somebody to go and get it. All we have to do is sprinkle its cargo all over Leiccsenland, and as much more of Titan as we can. . . ."

The old horticulturist's words were cut short here, as the silvery Callistan ship that had been approaching, swept close, overhead. It had won through the outer defenses of the village. The ominous shadow of the craft, which was small but deadly, slid swiftly over the ground. Sparks of molten metal shot from the tower of the sun-ray globe, as an unseen sword-beam of intense heat lashed at its girders. Steel crumpled and snapped. There was an ugly, creaking, groaning sound, like that which a great tree makes when it begins to fall, after the lumber-jacks have severed its trunk. The tower leaned, like a man shot, and crashed with a thunderous noise onto a row of stores and houses along the street.

Fire spurted, as the great sun-ray globe of heat-resistant carbon-glass shattered, spilling its seething, white-hot contents on the wreckage. Flames lashed up, blazing furiously.

Everyone had crouched down, seeking whatever cover was available, as the enemy ship, glinting in the pale sunshine, and reflecting the glare of the conflagration, circled above. The hiss of its propelling mechanism was almost a whisper. So low that the wild, challenging laughter of the gray-furred Callistan pilot, leaning over its side, could be plainly heard. *

The beam of heat that had wrecked the tower, swung downward. It hit the front of the Community Bank, and the latter's windows, with the gold lettering on them, cracked and wilted. Old Arne Reynaud, hunched now behind the stone blocks that flanked the steps, was hit. His whole back was raked by that invisible sword of concentrated heat waves. Flesh and clothing alike was burned away from his spine.

But even as this was happening, slender atom-rifles and pistols were brought into play—sobbing and whirring. Ron Leiccsen was among the other marksmen, firing with his pistol from beneath the foliage of the maple sapling, where he had drawn Anna Charles.

The swift missiles struck the invader craft. Incandescent spots, bluer and more eye-hurting than the glare of an electric arc, blotched its burnished hull. It sagged in its flight like a mass of wet paper, and plummeted to the street. From the wreck was hurled a big-chested, furry, half-human form, bloodied, and spattered with its own brains, its broken, slender limbs tangled in the wires of a house-yard fence.

Ron Leiccsen leaped to where Arne Reynaud lay on the heat-racked bank steps. There was still a flicker of life in his faded blue eyes, glazed with agony. But he was past all help.

"Ron," he muttered, as the youth bent over him. "You didn't believe me—anyhow at first. . . . But I ain't a liar. . . . I told the truth. . . . Mars. . . . That ship there. . . . Do what I said—please. . . . It'll lick the Callistans. . . . You got nerve—cleverness—plenty. A swell space-pilot, too—the others aren't so good. . . . Bring the freighter to Titan. . . . Sprinkle the stuff in the hold all over Leiccsenland. . . . The cargo is—is. . . ."

And there old Arne's heart stopped beating. His charred body relaxed in its last sleep. His brain ceased to think. And a vast question-mark seemed to hang over him. While in Leiccsenland, chaos thundered. Fire crackled and roared.

Anna Charles was bending close to the old man's body, too, her face a mask of dumb horror. But she had become challenging again, now. "You heard what he said, didn't you, Ron Leiccsen?" she flung at him with a taut, cold softness. "Your idea that we should all leave Titan may be wrong! There's that ship on Mars, which might save our colony! And he—Arne—appointed you to go and bring it here!"

NO one could ever have traced the course of the tumultuous hatred and doubt that seethed in Ron Leiccsen's mind just then. Red hate of the laughing fiends of Callisto! Little, withered Arne Reynaud—murdered! He was a hero—an inspiration! And yet, maybe he was just an old fool with an empty, hair-brained scheme that wouldn't work! Another crackpot—a kind of fanatical

inventor, perhaps, who deluded himself into believing in a worthless idea! A ship on Mars, loaded with something. What?

Ron struggled to be reasonable, fighting the mad fury that prompted him to be rash, to believe what the old horticulturist had said and fly to Mars. Such action might give the colonists here on Titan false hope. Hope that would encourage them to stay, when maybe they should be leaving with their wives and children.

"It's stupid!" Ron growled at last. "A shipload of some kind of mysterious elixer! Scatter the stuff around on Titan! It'll defeat the Callistans! Bunk! What kind of a magic charm is this, anyway? Arne was a swell old guy, all right; but he fussed too much with his flower garden, and dreamed and wished too much!" All of Ron's cynical, bitter, doubting viewpoint, seemed to boil from his lips. "I've got to see that the colonists leave Titan!"

"I won't leave for one!" Edward Clay, a hard-bitten young farmer with a craggy jaw, stated definitely. "Me and Pa and my wife have been here five years. Not a chance of me going, now! I'll stick, if only to even the odds for Arne Reynaud! Maybe he was an idiot, but he had courage!"

Bart Mallory, who had invented the atomic sun-ray towers, and held their patent rights for the exclusive use of the Titan Colony, was present, too. All of his small, nervous body, even his neatly kept Van Dyke beard, trembled with rage and grief.

"Arne was a good, practical man, when it came to taking care of fruit trees," he said. "But he was certainly no highly trained scientist. I haven't much faith in whatever his idea can be, either. Still, he was my friend. If I ran away from Titan, now that he's been killed, I'd feel like a dirty, yellow coward!"

Most of the other farmers had left the front of the bank building, to fight the fire across the street. But several of those who remained, nodded agreement with Bart Mallory. After all, everything they owned was on Titan. It was their home.

"If you don't go to Mars for that ship, Ron Leiccsen," Anna Charles said quietly, "I will! I know how to fly spacecrafts as well as you do, anyway. My father was a racing pilot, and he taught me a few tricks of the trade! What Arne Reynaud said may be bunk; but there's a chance!"

Ron Leiccsen only growled inarticulately, and hurried off toward the blazing buildings. He had to fight something to expend some of his physical energies so that he could think, and clear his brain. Fighting the fire might do this. The release of atomic heat in the incandescent substance from the shattered sun-ray globe had ceased when the tower had collapsed; for the catalytic forces which induced the breakdown of the atoms had been cut off with the disruption of the apparatus. But the spilled contents of the globe were still terrifically hot. Only sand, poured on that dazzling fury, could cool and insulate it. And water was needed to quench the blazing debris of the buildings. So Ron Leiccsen worked like a demon with the other men.

And from the village jailhouse, opposite the row of fire-wracked ruins, hollow, booming laughter mocked him. There a Callistan combat pilot, captured some time ago when his ship had been shot down, clutched the bars of his prison's window with slender, furry, three-fingered hands, and made derisive, gloating remarks in his sketchy English.

"Eart'men! Vaah!" he taunted, his words rumbling in his vast chest. "Very little while—all done—you—here—Titan! Titan be—Mado-Achar—New Achar—New Callisto! Very little while we build shiny metal house here! You find out! You know already! Eart'men! Vaah! Huah!"

And then he would laugh, the breath sizzling in his wide nostrils, his little, close-set eyes, that peeped, like a poodle-dog's through the thick fur that covered his face, reflecting the flames and seeming to glow in appreciation of the situation, and of the choice Acharian insults, he had hurled.

As he helped fight down the fire, Ron Leiccsen glanced often toward the defiant captive, wondering intently about all his

kind. Tough and hardy, and immune to all terrestrial germ diseases, the Callistans came from a strange world of spore-plants and burnished, bizarre cities, over which a steady, cool climate brooded. Achar—Callisto—being a satellite of Jupiter, was far from the sun, too. But because Achar had a radioactive core, generating heat constantly, its surface was far warmer than would otherwise have been possible. And so there was life, there. It was a different kind of life, in many minor respects, than that of Earth. In that thin, cool atmosphere, nature had omitted certain biological phenomena.

Others of the fire-fighters hurled insults back at the captive Callistan—furious, defiant curses which showed that no sane argument could ever win a good half of them to retreat.

ANNA CHARLES was climbing into the cabin of her sleek, black space flier, which rested on the landing platform on the flat roof of the house where she lived.

She was prepared to seal the door, when a booted foot was thrust against it, preventing her action. A slow, admiring grin was turned upon her. The sullen, half-humorous line in the intruder's bronzed cheek, was like a steel wall, against which her fury and her surprise and contempt lashed in vain.

"Ron Leiccsen!" she choked. "I was ready to start for Mars! What do you want? You and your negative talk!"

Ron entered the ship's cabin. "To Mars, then," he drawled. "But not all by yourself. You see, I've changed my mind, Miss Charles. About half the colonists will stay on Titan, no matter what advice is given, though I hope they'll have sense enough to get most of the kids out. Result of this stubbornness, as far as they're concerned—well—Arne Reynaud's shipload of I-don't-know-what is the one barely possible salvation. So, not being able to rescue my friends with argument, I have no choice. If I deserted them now, I'd only prove myself to be the yellow rat you seem to think I am. Anyway, this trick of bringing that ship back from Mars, is a real, man-size job."

Deliberately, Ron closed the flier's door. He worked the controls. The ship shot up over the blackened, smoke-wreathed plains of Leiccsenland, where splendid corn and grain had grown, under the stimulus of special vitalizing radiations, mixed with the ordinary light and heat that Bart Mallory's sun-ray globes emitted.

In a twinkling, Leiccsenland and Titan were dwindling away, below. In brief minutes, even the bulk of giant Saturn and his Rings and ten glowing moons were shrinking away astern. Ahead was the tiny sun, Mars and Earth and Venus completely lost in its rays.

"Pray for speed, Miss Charles," Ron grated grimly. "Pray that we make this trip in time! And that Arne Reynaud's idea is something better than the froth of an addled brain!"

Their velocity was demoniac. But the distance they had to go was tremendous. They plotted a course across the orbit of Jupiter, and through the dangerous Belt of Asteroids. Luckily, Mars and Saturn, in their respective orbital positions, were near their closest possible approach to each other. So the journey was about as short as it could ever be.

The spacial stars leered sardonically, and Ron and Anna stuck to their posts like fiends, charting, piloting, keeping watch for meteors in that dangerous region of cosmic debris, the Asteroid Belt. There was no time for quarreling, there was little enough time to eat, and only moments for sleep.

Thus they reached Vananis, the gigantic spaceport set amidst the rusty red deserts of Mars. But even then it was only the beginning. Two Earth-weeks it had taken to come. And it would take longer to return; for on their trip back their ship would not be a slim scout, but a heavy freighter instead.

They were directed to it there at the quays. *The Barbarian* was the name painted on its beetling black prow. It was a black ship, as were all the space craft of Earth—slender, quite speedy, judging from its lines and the power rating of its engines and gravity repulsion plates. It was an old grain-carrying ship. Its cargo hatches were bat-

tened down firmly, and could not easily have been removed.

"What does its cargo consist of?" Ron Leiccsen asked, after Anna and he had presented their credentials, identifying themselves as Titanian colonists and licensed space pilots—the only necessary formalities in their taking control of the freighter; for special orders had been radioed to Mars by Arne Reynaud's brother, weeks before.

"I don't know what the cargo is," the brown-skinned Martian official returned indifferently. "You realize the crew deserted, not caring to go any nearer to Titan, with the Callistan trouble brewing. And we don't care especially what the *Barbarian's* hold contains, so long as it's not going to be unloaded here in Vananis."

There was no time for further investigations of what the tightly closed hatches might conceal. It would have been useless to attempt to radio Earth, and try to find out from Arne Reynaud's brother; for that would take an hour at least, and besides, there was a barrage of static even in this region, thrown out from a great station on Callisto as a wartime blockade measure. No message could have gotten through.

Ron Leiccsen and Anna Charles cast longing, wondering glances at the huge grain discharge-spout, under the flaring stern of the craft. But there were no precious minutes to spare, to investigate what lay beyond that spout, within the bowels of the ship, itself. They begrudged even the moments it took to climb the narrow ladders to the control turret of the *Barbarian*.

At Ron's manipulation of switches and levers, the engines that fed power to the gravity plates began to whine. Like a black cloud, the old freighter arose from the quays.

THE first part of the trip back toward Titan was quite uneventful, though the work and vigilance involved in bringing a huge, clumsy, and far under-manned ship along a perilous, short-cut route through the region of the asteroids, was even more gruelling than the journey in the scout flier had been. Luckily, most of the machinery was

automatic, needing almost no attention to keep it functioning.

But Ron Leiccsen knew what kind of trouble lay ahead. So did Anna Charles. By now many more silvery ships must have gone out from Callisto toward Saturn and Titan to reinforce the conquering hordes already there.

"We'll make it, all right, Ron," Anna declared vehemently, showing almost her first signs of friendship toward her companion. "We'll make it because we've got to!"

Her small, red lips jutted out petulantly. She was coaxing herself into a mood of optimism with defiance alone. She was being optimistic only by wanting to be.

"*Maybe* we'll make it!" Ron Leiccsen answered doubtfully. "If our luck is right, and if we work out a good enough plan!"

"Why, what do you mean?" she snapped back at him, angry again because of his usual dark thinking, which seemed to laugh at hope.

"Just what I say," he returned brutally, feeling that he might have tried to keep the grim facts from her, if she'd been less reckless by nature. But she was no fragile clinging vine. Bleak, skeletal truth might help to balance her judgment of what was wise and what was not.

"I guess you're right," Anna Charles murmured at last, her sagging shoulders showing suddenly how very tired she was, and how little. "Those Callistan ships are almost certain to spot us, as we approach Titan. They can recognize a black Earth-craft from millions of miles off, through their telescopes. They'll try to get us, of course, and unless we find some way to trick them, we'll never win through the blockade alive!"

Ron patted Anna's arm, and grinned reassuringly. She was not reckless now, though she betrayed no hint of real fear.

Suddenly Ron wanted very much to kiss Anna Charles; but he didn't do it. "We'll think hard, pal," he said quietly, almost apologetically, "and maybe we'll find a way to reach Titan, yet!"

Thinking—with the sharp, steady stars gleaming ahead. Thinking—with Saturn and his beady moors growing, getting closer, out of the distance of space.

Danger, coming nearer and nearer. Ron Leiccsen's head ached with fatigue, with mental strain, with somber doubts. There was no way to hide this huge, black Earth-freighter from keen Callistan eyes. No way at all! And yet he had to keep trying. Struggling to build a scheme to run the blockade and elude the mathematical accuracy of the long-range atom guns which the Callistans used in space fighting. The *Barbarian* was unarmed, and against such guns, within any range less than two hundred miles, it wouldn't have a chance.

There was still no time to investigate the freighter's unknown cargo. To do so would have involved the unbolting of massive doors, hasped and sealed for the voyage, so that there would be no danger that the load would shift, throwing the ship off balance, and disturbing its flight. A couple of hours' work would be required to unscrew those bolts, and replace them again, for safety. And there might be other unknown dangers, too.

Ron decided to put the question of the cargo's value as a weapon out of his mind. Arne Reynaud's mysterious idea, in which he still felt scant confidence, would either fail or succeed—that is, if they got through to Titan. And there was no use seeking an easily possible unhappy disillusionment, now. Not when the cargo was the only hope of Titan Colony! He and Anna were pledged to deliver it, and to scatter it over and around Leiccsenland. That was their part of the job. If they accomplished the job, without any hoped-for result against the men of Achar—well—he couldn't help that.

They were only a million miles from Saturn, when danger finally became visible. Anna, at the lookout telescope, gave the warning, her lips atremble.

"I see them," she said. "Bright silvery dots against space. Callistan ships, maybe fifty of them, ahead and to port about a million and a quarter miles. They're coming this way, rapidly."

"They must have spotted us already, then." Ron stated with a slow, surly nod. "Even a black ship reflects enough sunlight to be seen easily from a long way off, through a telescope."

He moved the guide-levers, heading the ship to the right of Saturn's colossal, whirling bulk. Titan was to the left of the planet now, and far out.

After all his thinking, Ron had only one pathetic shadow of an idea to use against the enemy. By going to the right of Saturn, instead of to the left, he was avoiding the direct route to Titan, cherishing the forlorn hope that such action might confuse the Acharians a little, and perhaps enable the *Barbarian* to circle the gigantic gaseous world, and somehow reach Titan from the other side.

The engines of the freighter were throbbing and vibrating hideously, feeding every ounce of power they could produce, to the gravity plates, that hurled their propelling beams of reversed force, astern. Speed! Speed! Ron's fingernails bit savagely into his palms, as he guided the old freighter on, as fast as he could make her go.

"The Callistan ships are trying to close in ahead of us," Anna announced from the telescope.

"I guess they see, then, what I'm trying to do," Ron commented bitterly. "And they're twenty-percent more speedy than we are."

He didn't change his course. To do so would have been useless. He just kept driving the old merchantman on, determined to make it as good a race as possible.

SATURN bulked more and more huge in the ship's observation bay. Ron's course took him straight to the edge of those vast, arcing circular paths of cosmic dust and pebbles, known as the Rings. Seen from the *Barbarian's* angle of approach, the planet's northern hemisphere was upward.

There, just beyond the stupendous natural miracle of the Rings, thousands of miles across, Ron piloted his craft along, in a parallel curve around Saturn. Anna and he had gotten this far, at least, ahead of their enemies; but what good did that do?

Scarcely half a mile in front of the freighter, a terrific explosion blazed soundlessly in the voidal vacuum. Then another and another. A little nearer

each time. The Acharian fleet was firing explosive atomic shells at its prey. In greater and greater numbers, as each second passed, and with better and better accuracy, as sighting instruments and ballistics calculating machines improved the aim.

There was no way for Ron and Anna to return the fire. In spite of her warlike name, the old merchantman carried no weapons. She had been sent out from Earth on her strange errand too hastily to be fitted with guns. But even had she been a battleship, her position would have been hopeless against the odds of fifty to one!

Once the *Barbarian's* hull rung and shivered like a vast, deep-throated bell, as an exploding projectile barely grazed her flanks. It was a matter of moments, now, before a direct and final hit would be made. The atomic missiles the Callistans were using, were different in their action from the silent, metal-melting darts employed in the rifles of the terrestrial colonists of Titan. But they were no less effective, in their more sudden release of atomic power, because of that!

Young Leiccsen found himself looking into Anna Charles' brave, misty eyes. The pale, flooding glow of Saturn, and its sinister Rings, reflecting the sunlight, streamed through the broad observation bay of the control turret, and touched her hair, making it give back soft, golden glints.

"Ron," she said quietly. "I guess this is the end of the trail. But I wouldn't like to let it be those devils from Callisto who kill us. I'd rather choose the way to die. Maybe you would, too. There's another road out of this life, Ronnie. A grander one. You're so bitter, sometimes. But I think you're like me, in a few things. Shall we go—that other way? It's so close, so easy, so swift. Look. . . ."

She was pointing through the observation bay, straight into that awesome flood of reflected sunshine. Not at Saturn itself, whirling like a giant, streaked orb that filled almost half the spacial sky. But at the Rings.

No words could ever have described that incredible spectacle—perhaps the greatest natural wonder in all explored

space! A tremendous, sweeping path, circling in a perfect plane, like a highway of the gods. Misty at the edges, with scattered, cosmic dust. So near, now, belting monster Saturn. So calm, so grand, so unutterably beautiful. But deadly.

"A trillion-trillion little moons," Anna said softly, all traces of any resentment she may have felt for Ron Leiccsen gone now. "Or many more, even, than a trillion-trillion. Hurling around Saturn in a sort of stream at a velocity of many miles per second. Most of them dust, as fine as powder. Steer the *Barbarian* into the Rings, Ronnie. Instantly those countless, tiny meteors will riddle our ship—and us."

For just a second Ron Leiccsen stared at that awful, dazing spectacle. It made his throat ache with awe. There was a fascination about the Rings, something unholy that beckoned suicide. But then Ron laughed, as though he was part of that miracle—a man about to use the tools of the dietics for his own purposes. Two things he remembered, especially. That the *Barbarian* was moving very fast. And that it was to the right of Saturn, considering the northern hemisphere as upward.

"Thanks, Anna," he said cryptically, as more projectiles from the rapidly nearing Callistan ships blazed close to them. "Hold tight to your stanchion, because here goes! And don't blame me if you're surprised at what happens!"

For a moment he adjusted velocity dials carefully. The *Barbarian* slowed a little, then swerved, nosing at a gradual slant toward the glory of Saturn's Rings. No inferno could have held a magnificence like this! A stupendous, murky, curving ribbon, like an inconceivable circle-saw, rotating at meteoric speed! So, certain death seemed to hurtle closer. A matter of mere instants, now. . . .

In a second, the plunge was completed. Within the *Barbarian's* hull, a dazing din roared suddenly. Partly like a magnified hailstorm, beating on a sheet-metal roof. Myriads of dust-grains, and tiny pebbles of meteoric iron and rock, were colliding with the freighter's hull. It seemed impossible that any ordinary meteor-armor could turn aside such an

avalanche. Even Ron Leiccsen wondered that they were still alive, and that their bodies, and the steel shell of their ship were still unriddled, before he remembered why.

The murk of cosmic powder swallowed them, until the Callistan battlecraft, and the stars themselves, were lost to view. Ahead, through the observation bay, only a yellowish, foggy light showed—sunshine penetrating deep into the hurtling substance of the Rings. Uncountable billions of minute particles, whirling in eternal moon-paths around the gigantic if tenuous mass of Saturn.

"They can't shoot at us now," Anna shouted, straining her voice so that it might be heard above the hail-like clamor, and the gigantic hissing, souging sound—like blowing sand—that dinned within the vessel. "They can't even see to shoot at us, through all this dust! And even if they dared follow us, they couldn't find us! But how can it be, Ron? All these meteors are traveling at planetary velocities—maybe twenty or thirty miles a second! Small as most of them are, they should still tear through the steel armor of the *Barbarian*, as though it was butter! How is it that we're still alive?"

Ron was conscious of the bigness of the question, and yet the simplicity of the answer now.

"Nothing to it!" he shouted back. "We approached Saturn from the right. It rotates in the same direction as does the Earth—to the right, if you consider that down lies toward the southern hemisphere, and that up, of course, lies toward the northern. So do the Rings. With but one exception, the direction of rotation is the same everywhere, for all the bodies in the solar system. And now space ships equal and exceed the velocities of planets and meteors. The *Barbarian* was moving at many miles per second, too, paralleling the Rings, and going the same way. I adjusted our velocity a little, so that the difference between it, and that of the Rings, is very small. Relativity, Anna. And now that we've plunged into Saturn's cosmic belts, the difference in speed gives the meteors only enough relative momentum to make a lot of noise, when they strike our ship. They can't puncture us."

ANNA CHARLES gasped as she realized the easy truth. "Then we can go all around Saturn hidden in the Rings!" she burst out enthusiastically. "Even though we can't see much, we can fly blind with our instruments. But —" and her hopeful expression became faintly worried again—"we've got to emerge into free, clear space sometime! To cross out to Titan! And there the Callistan ships will spot us. They'll have plenty of time to blow us up!"

Ron Leiccsen chuckled under his breath. It was funny to hear reckless, daring Anna Charles talk like this now, while he, the cautious, careful planner, felt a wave of contrasting optimism. Maybe they'd both learned something from each other.

"Wait and see, Anna!" he yelled back. "You might be surprised again! Remember, I'm a machinest!" On his lips was a taunting smile of confidence.

Hours later, having circled Saturn, they dipped out of the Rings. But as the murk that had concealed them cleared, and the voidal stars showed bright again, they found a group of Callistan battlecraft not much more than a hundred miles away, their burnished hulls gleaming silvery in the faint sunshine.

"Ron!" Anna quavered, with a nervous catch in her voice. "We'll never make it, now! They'll surely destroy us!"

Young Leiccsen gripped the controls, and put on full speed. His face was grim, but that crooked smile was there again, tracing a line in his left cheek.

"That, Anna," he said, "remains to be seen."

Through her telescope, the girl continued to watch the enemy vessels, gleaming like silver arrows against the hard blackness of space. It was impossible that the keen-eyed lookouts aboard those warships did not see the black Earthcraft. And yet they approached no nearer. Their atom guns did not fire. The *Barbarian* was continuing on out toward Titan, quite unmolested.

Anna Charles' beautiful face was alight with puzzled wonder again. "Maybe I'm dumb, Ron," she murmured. "Just like I was last time. But I still don't understand why the Acharians neglect

such a splendid chance to finish us."

Ron pointed toward a heavily glazed side-port in the control-turret. "Look out there," he suggested. "Back at our own hull."

Half rising from the pilot-seat, he was looking, too. They couldn't see much of their ship's flanks from the little window, but what they could see of its great, spreading guide-fins was plenty.

Those guide-fins had been deeply black, once. Now they were almost as bright and shiny as a polished mirror.

"When we were in the Rings," Ron explained, "all those fine meteors pounding against the *Barbarian* rubbed off every last speck of her black lacquer, and gave the metal underneath a swell polish, besides! I knew that it had to happen, of course. It was just a very ancient machinist's trick, with a new, cosmic wrinkle. In effect, this old tub of ours was just sand-blasted, Anna."

"Why, certainly!" the girl exclaimed in pleased startlement. "I should have guessed it, too! The *Barbarian* is bright silver now, instead of black! From a distance the Callistans think it's one of their own silvery ships! And so, naturally, they don't bother us!"

"Uhuh," Ron chuckled. "So far, so good! Now maybe we can concentrate on delivering our mysterious cargo, as per Arne Reynaud's instructions. It's all up to him, now! We're going to find out whether he was crazy, or, to put it mildly, truly clever!"

DISGUISED as it was, the *Barbarian* reached Titan's far upper atmosphere without trouble. Evidence of fighting could be seen, many miles beneath. Puffs of explosions in the weak sunshine. Silver ships flying, spreading final destruction over the richest farm country in the solar system—richest because of those scattered sun-ray towers and their secondary, plant-stimulating radiations, and the fact that Bart Mallory, the inventor, permitted the patent rights to be used only for the Leicesenland Colony.

A few of those towers were shattered, now; but most of them still shed their sunlike brilliance. The Callistans needed them, if conquest was completed, to

maintain the warm climate and the fertility of the farms. So, in general, they had avoided their destruction. And when, as now, the sun itself shone during the day, it was useless for the Earthians to shut off the globes for blackout protection.

"Our people are still battling!" Anna said happily. "For weeks, with all radio-communication blocked off by the Callistan static-barrage, we didn't even know that, for sure! But it's a good sign!"

"Maybe," Ron commented with a shrug. "Anyhow we're here high up in the atmosphere. Arne Reynaud said 'Scatter the cargo.' That should be easy to do from this position. So, here's how!"

He pulled a lever which had been an enigma to Anna and to himself through all their return voyage from Mars. It was the lever which opened the discharge-vent of the *Barbarian's* hold.

Peering wonderingly from the side-ports of the control-room, the man and the girl saw what was coming out of that discharge-vent, and settling gradually toward Leicesenland, and the surrounding hills, far beneath.

A brownish cloud—like chaff—that was all. It swirled astern like a steamer, in that high, frigid altitude. It scattered, so that it dissolved from view. Spreading, sinking downward.

"Not very impressive, is it?" Anna asked anxiously. It was plain that she was doubting Arne Reynaud's mysterious weapon more and more. Just chaff. What could it ever do against the Acharians, armed to the teeth, hardy, and prepared for all violence?

"Not very impressive," Ron agreed with a cynical shrug.

But he kept guiding the freighter around and around at that vast altitude until the discharge-spout had ceased to trail brown, chaffy dust. The hold was empty. The job, at least, was accomplished, now, according to exact specifications.

Not two minutes after it was completed, a shell exploded before the prow of the old freighter—a signal to halt. Many burnished Callistan warcraft were approaching.

As Ron cut the power in the propell-

ing gravity plates astern, he looked at Anna. "Well," he drawled. "I guess this is where we stop being free Earthians."

The girl nodded, biting her lip.

Ron switched on the short-wave radio, which, over a limited distance, could function, in spite of the static barrage. Over it came harsh Callistan tones:

"You are blockade runner, perhaps. It is old trick—making ship shiny, like ours. But from very close, we recognize Earthly shape of your hull. Terrestrial resistance on Titan almost finished. Please land outside Leiccsendale."

With so many weapons trained on the unarmed *Barbarian*, there was little to do but obey orders. Ron guided the ship groundward. But as it came to rest on the charred soil of what had once been an orchard, he turned a control dial on which there were red marks—danger graduations, indicating the limiting point of safety. He turned the dial well past those points. The engines of the ship howled and groaned with a fearful overload for a moment. Then there was a dull, grinding, ripping noise astern, and the crackle and hiss of fire.

When the two Earthians emerged, red flames and black smoke were rising from the crumpled aft-portion of the vessel. The engines had been immersed in vats of oil to insulate their power. And now that oil was blazing. The *Barbarian* at least would be useless to the enemy, and the secret of its cargo, whether a dangerous secret or not, would be hidden in the ashes and the ruins.

BUT for Anna Charles and Ron Leiccsen, this was the beginning of slavery. Within a hundred hours of their capture, Callistan heat-rays and shells and heat-bombs had put down the last resistance of the terrestrial colonists. They were all either chattels or dead—those who had not left Titan in time. The colony had possessed enough ships to remove everyone to Earth; but those that had not been used had fallen into Acharian hands.

The captives were herded into their barracks—the few half-ruined farm-buildings which still stood, after the conflict was over. They were put to

work repairing damaged sun-towers, recultivating desolated fields, and helping the Callistan engineers erect the burnished metal structures which duplicated in architecture the buildings of that distant moon of Jupiter. Rapidly, Mado Achar—New Callisto—was being born. Bizarre cactiform vegetation, from the flowerless mother-world, began to sprout from spores, under the stimulus of the radiations from Bart Mallory's sun-ray towers.

And among the chattels, the whip was not spared. Frequently a slave, driven to vengeful mania by maltreatment and overwork, was blasted down with a heat pistol, by some furry, laughing overseer.

Ron Leiccsen saw Anna Charles only rarely, at assembly roll-call periods. Always she looked tired from endless hours in the fields. Still sweet and beautiful, though, even through the grime that covered her face and tattered clothing. Luckily Callistans were not attracted to Earth-women.

Once Ron got a chance to talk with her for a few minutes, in the shadow of a fire-charred warehouse.

"I can't stand it much longer, Ron," she whispered raggedly, her face strained with horror. "At the end of the last work-period, I saw Joe Kerrin killed, his head and shoulders burned off with a heat pistol, simply because he was too weak to carry a heavy box of tools. Kerrin was an old man, Ron, and a neighbor of mine. And that isn't all! Not long ago, Ollie Marvick, only eleven years old, was kicked to death by one of the overseers, because he was too ill to work. Ollie was a student of mine at school, and one of the few kids that wasn't gotten out of Titan in time. I tell you I can't endure it, Ron! I'll go crazy! So—well—some of us have been thinking of making a break for the hills."

The hills! Ron Leiccsen had seen horror, too; horror that there was no way to fight, downtrodden and disarmed as the Earthians here now were. The hills that rimmed Leiccsenland—the borderline region between the reclaimed territory, warmed by the sun-ray towers, and the still bleakly frigid portion of Titan, as yet uncolonized. Ron's mind ached with a fierce,

sharp eagerness at the thought of the hills, and all the wild, self-reliant pioneer blood in him throbbed violently. It was natural for beautiful, reckless Anna Charles to be forced toward the idea of escape.

But then Ron looked toward those hills, and at the intervening rows of silvery Acharin ships resting on the ground. A barrier that stood in the way! And there were many furry guards pacing, too, their accoutrements and gaunt, deadly weapons glinting in the glare of the sun-ray globes.

Ron saw how hopeless it all was. It was all but impossible to get past those guards, and those heavily armed vessels. And even if you did get to the hills, what then? Doubtless even now they were the refuge of many colonists who had fled Leiccsenland before the final surrender. But sooner or later they would all be tracked down by burnished, vulture-like ships, flying overhead.

Ron's common-sense conquered. "Don't try to break away, Anna darling," he urged seriously. "At least not yet. You see, it's almost sure death. Remember we're still relying a little on Arne Reynaud's plan, which we carried out. Maybe it's one of those schemes that takes time to develop."

Even as he spoke, the usually cynical young machinist was aware that he was not talking much like himself. Once he'd denounced Arne Reynaud. But then things had been different. Retreat to Earth, in favor of which he had argued, had still been possible for everybody, then. Now all those who had remained behind were prisoners, and you had to make the best of a bad situation. You had to find hope where you could, even if its basis was only the word of a dreamy old horticulturist.

He was relieved to see Anna nod agreement before she left him. "Okay, Ron," she whispered. "I'll try to endure it." Her dark eyes were misty and strange, as she continued: "And I'll say 'darling,' too, because I think you meant it as I do. Maybe you're right. I guess we should wait, before we try to escape to the hills. But I've sort of lost faith in Arne Reynaud."

Ron kissed Anna then, and let her walk away toward one of the women's barracks. But all the time he was thinking

of her words—lost faith. And what a tragic let-down it would be, if Arne Reynaud's scheme proved fruitless. That daring race across the void to Mars, to bring in the *Barbarian* and its unknown cargo. The eluding of the Callistan ships by facing death in a dive into the incredible grandeur of Saturn's Rings. The sand-blasting by those tiny meteors, changing the freighter's black-painted hull, the obvious mark of a terrestrial ship, to a polished, gleaming, Acharian disguise! These things were all triumphs in themselves. But if Arne Reynaud's brown, chaffy dust, sprinkled over Titan's surface, failed to turn Callistan conquest into defeat, then all this luck and effort was for nothing!

Then the Titan Colony might just as well not have been established! The frozen atmosphere and water of the far-flung world might just as well never have been thawed! The building of the sun-ray towers had been futile, then. Anna Charles and he, Ron Leiccsen, might just as well never have met and quarreled and fallen in love! For Acharians, with their gray fur and beady eyes, and harsh, mocking, inhuman laughter, would rule forever here then, and their human slaves would be worked until the last of them had dropped, or had been destroyed.

So, in increasing bitterness, time passed for Ron Leiccsen, in spite of his will to be patient. It was daylight, always, of course, with the sun-globes glowing eternally, just as they had in the old days, before the conquest. The tiny sun itself would creep slowly across the sky, and set, as Titan revolved around Saturn. A great, long day, like the day of Earth's moon; for, like the latter, Titan rotated only once on its axis, every time it completed a journey around its parent planet. But all this made no difference. There was no night—only the brief sleep-periods in the ever lasting light of the Mallory towers.

RON was transferred from the construction of Callistan apartment houses, to a job in a newly completed factory. There, under a cruel, petty old tyrant in dirty fur, Ron toiled in a little cell, polishing metal plates. Acharians loved burnished surfaces.

Young Leiccsen could talk with no one

now, except his boss, Arruj. For he was forced to sleep at the foot of his polishing machine. And he ate the food brought to him while the abrasive discs whirled. He had only this little metal cubicle to live in now, with its heavy door locked, its single window barred.

"Be faster, Eart'man!" Arruj would growl. "Or shall I beat you more. Maybe I kill you, this moment, eh." And then Arruj would laugh uproariously, and seem to wait for an outburst or an attempted assault that would give him an excuse. Ron could hear the breath wheezing and whistling in the Acharian's great chest.

It took all the courage, and all the will that Ron Leiccsen could muster, to check that maddening impulse of murder. But always, so far, he had controlled himself, because he still clung savagely to hope. But it was still there, maybe only because he willed its presence.

Arruj wasn't in the room most of the time, for there were other slaves to supervise in other cubicles in this great factory building. When Arruj was gone, there was always a chance to climb up on a bench for a moment, and look out of the barred window.

The building of the Callistan city was continuing, strange, square, shiny structures rearing bizarrely among the half-ruined houses of Leiccsendale. The construction work took first place, of course, ahead of the replanting of the desolated land. But strange, flat-leaved, flowerless growths from Callisto, were already sprouting before those gleaming new factories and dwellings.

The distant hills, which seemed forever unreachable now to Ron in his prison, showed a faint, unfathomable green now, even at their pinnacles. Young Leiccsen often wondered about this, for the higher slopes of the hills had been barren before of vegetation. The twenty-three years since Leiccsenland had been thawed, and Earthians had come to Titan, had been insufficient time for much of the imported plant-life to spread to the rocky crests.

During his stolen moments of observation, Ron watched other human slaves, toiling in some of the fields, clearing away fire-charred corn and other Earthly crops, to plant Acharian spores. But most of the cultivated land was still neglected by

the conquerors. It showed that same rough green as the far-off hillsides. Weeds, it looked like. And yet no weeds had ever been brought to Leiccsenland, as far as Ron knew. The colonists had always been careful to see that the imported seed was pure.

Vaguely, Ron wondered if these growths were something from Titan's tremendously ancient past, when Saturn had been a hot, youthful world, acting as a warming sun to its satellites. Some vestige of plant-life preserved here through the frozen eons. But why should such vegetation appear suddenly, now? Why hadn't its seeds sprouted as soon as Leiccsenland had been thawed, years ago, if they had existed?

And then, with a sudden inspiration, Ron saw part of the truth. The brown, dusty stuff that had filled the hold of the *Barbarian!* Seed of some kind! Arne Reynaud's plan! But what in the name of sense could it all be about? Those growths out there weren't poison, evidently! Ron saw both Callistans and Earthians handle them with impunity! What harm could they ever be to the invaders?

None! With a cold wave of despair, Ron reached this inevitable conclusion. So this, then, was the final disillusionment! Reynaud had been a crackpot after all! Like many a hare-brained inventor, he had dreamed only nonsense! And the struggle to carry out his wild scheme had been utterly wasted!

Ron Leiccsen sank into black dejection. Once, beyond the wall of the great factory, he heard a flurry of hisses. Heat-guns and pistols being discharged. And then human screams of agony—and silence.

Stealing another moment to peer from the window, he saw furry guards reloading their weapons, after the brief, murderous action. On the ground, too far off for their personal identity to be revealed, were burnt and crumpled human corpses. A group of colonists, maddened by their heartless overlords, must have tried to escape to the hills. And this was their end.

Had Anna Charles been among them? Quite possibly. Reckless and brave and impatient as she was, it was almost prob-

able. And Ron Leiccsen couldn't have found it in his heart to blame her. He would have been among that bunch of rebels, too, if he hadn't been imprisoned here. Grief struck home, until his eyes misted and his throat ached.

Arruj came into his cubicle not long afterward. "Very little more time for you to live, Eart'man," he announced gleefully. "When our city built, we kill all Eart'folk. No good! Much trouble! Always try revolt! All things from Eart' no good! Except sun-ray towers. Plants from Eart' no good! Don't like Eart' plants. Corn, grain, trees, everyt'ing! Look ugly. No use. We root up—destroy!"

Arruj emphasized his hatred of all that was terrestrial by striking Ron across the back with his metal staff. Blood oozed, dying the filthy tatters of Ron's shirt.

But the young machinist remained quite cool. He wouldn't have to curb that lust for murder much longer! There was a certain guide-bar that was part of his polishing machine. It could be unscrewed without much trouble. Next time Arruj came into his cell, he would strike him down, before the Callistan could reach the pistol in his belt. He would kill Arruj at least—smash his hideous, fur-draped head, and have the satisfaction of seeing the petty tyrant's bloody brains dribble, before the other Acharians killed him, too. Partial revenge! Ron knew now that there was no need to conserve his own life. For hope was gone.

This time Arruj stayed for quite a while in Ron's cubicle, as he inspected the machine, and the quality of the work his chattel was turning out.

"Very, very bad!" he grumbled, commenting on the latter without sound reason except plain cussedness. "Vaah! It will be great pleasure to see you die, Eart'man! You are even more useless than the others."

Ron scarcely listened. He was too used to this treatment by now. He turned his face upward toward the window, toward blue sky and brilliant artificial daylight. It was like an afternoon in late summer, on Earth.

Suddenly a swift gust of breeze began to blow from across the fields and from the distant hills. It was refreshing and cool to Ron, as it filled his stuffy cell.

"Your work is very, very bad, Eart'man," Arruj repeated. "I beat you more now!"

He raised his staff to strike. But then, half-way up, the end of the metal rod wavered. Arruj drew in a great, spasmodic breath. An instant later the wind in his vast lungs was expelled in a mighty sneeze!

Once more he inhaled deeply and spasmodically, and again an explosive sneeze tore through his wide-flaring nostrils. But this was only the beginning. Rapidly the sudden fit that had gripped him grew worse, as sneeze was heaped on sneeze in agonizing, choking succession.

WONDERINGLY Ron turned to watch. Arruj's pink skin, showing here and there through his fur, had turned livid. He was strangling. His little eyes were streaming tears so profusely that he could not open them. His strange, three-fingered hands clutched at his chest as though he had inhaled a whiff of lethal gas! He tried to speak, but he could not. His strangled, bellowing, tortured lungs would not give him time, as one coughing, sneezing explosion came after another, in a swift, inexorable sequence.

He tried to grope for his keys, to unfasten the locked door of the cell and reach the open air. But the effort was lost in a confused, quaking gesture. He could not keep his hands steady for a second, as the violent spasm that heaved and tore at his breathing organs, fairly threw his whole body off balance! The keys jingled to the floor, and he tried to find them, feeling with his fingers. His streaming eyes were blinded, so that he could not see. Weakened and choked, he crumpled to his knees, and sprawled helplessly on his belly. But that smothering, drowning fit that wracked him, went on.

From this point, the transition from humor to horror was swift. Bloody froth came to Arruj's lips. He writhed. His sneezes and coughs and raking gasps became less forceful with exhaustion, but more hideous, with the bubbling, scratching sound of an unmistakable death-rattle.

All this, Ron Leiccsen watched, almost without moving. He was too fascinated, too puzzled, too unbelieving to move. But then, as if remembering a

duty, he picked up Arruj's staff. It was quite massive. He lifted it, and aimed a blow at Arruj's skull. But the blow that would have pulped the Callistan overseer's gray matter, never was delivered. Ron felt suddenly sheepish—almost guilty. It was against best human principle to murder a helpless enemy. And Ron did not need the word of a physician to know that Arruj was dying.

But how? Why? That was the question! Ron listened. Dimly, within the great, roaring factory, and beyond its walls he could hear more coughs and sneezes, like the rattle of great drums. No human chests of Earth could have produced such noises. Only the great barrel-like thoraxes of Callistans could ever reverberate like that!

It was a plague, then. Something that must have stricken them all, suddenly. But how was it possible? They were tough, these beings from that moon of Jupiter. Earth-germs, for instance, did them no harm. And there were few native Acharian diseases that their rugged flesh could not throw off. Still, now, there was a pestilence among them—a killing horror, swift and strangling! Ron Leicsson thought of Arne Reynoud, and wondered.

Then he saw the keys there on the floor, beside Arruj's writhing, tortured form. He picked them up, chose the one he knew fitted the lock of his cubicle, and opened the door.

Cautiously he stepped over the quivering, doomed Arruj. In the corridor outside, along the row of cells, other Callistans sprawled, helpless and strangled, their efforts to breathe consisting only of horrible, gurgling gasps. Something must be swiftly inflaming their lungs, until death by strangulation was inevitable. Like pneumonia or diphtheria, but far more rapid.

In a daze of wonder, in which hope and optimism scarcely dared to rise, Ron rushed from one cubicle door to another. It was easy to release the human slaves who had worked the machines within each cell. All the doors could be unlocked with the same key as his own.

Startled, unbelieving men collected in the corridor, as he freed them. Men with great welts from many beatings on their backs, and dull gleams of confusion in

their eyes. Larsen, Schneider, Novak, Loyde, and a host of others.

Bart Mallory, the inventor and patent-holder of the sun-ray towers, was there, too, his once neat beard, which had been clipped in a Van Dyke fashion, an unkempt tangle, now.

"What's happened, Leicssen?" he croaked. "We're free! I don't understand! How can all the Callistans be suddenly ill like this—dying?"

"I don't know," Ron stammered. "We'll have to try to find out."

Like a bewildered pack the liberated slaves rushed to the factory exit. There, on the metal steps, a half dozen Acharian guards lay helpless. One already had ceased to sneeze and strangle. The dark red froth on his lips had ceased to drip to his bosom, smearing his fur. He was already dead.

Before the factory exit, the released prisoners halted, staring across the plain, brilliant in the glow of the sun-towers. Leicssenland still looked beautiful, though weird with the addition of strange, gleaming Acharian buildings, and with a puzzling greenness that had sprouted from the charred ground, masking the effects of Callistan vandalism, not so long ago. The conqueror-fleet of silvery ships stood in serried rows of silent power at the edge of a fire-blackened woods, that was beginning to show new leaves, once more.

But not one of the invaders, among the hundreds that could be seen, stood on his feet. All writhed on the ground, in the streets, on the lawns, and beside the ships, helpless. The stamp of doom was upon them—sudden, subtle, nameless destruction!

Then one of the Earthmen sneezed. Smith, it was. He was a big, husky fellow; but now his red cheeks blanched with fear. His unpleasant thought was easy to understand. That sneeze looked like a symptom. Were the Earthians, the colonists, to be wiped out by this hellish plague, too?

Ron looked at Bart Mallory, and Bart Mallory stared back in concerned doubt. A group of other slaves who had been clearing the unkempt fields, were coming forward, shouting questions. Ron saw Anna Charles among them, haggard and tattered, but still alive, still herself. Im-

pulsively he ran swiftly toward her.

"Anna—honey!" he blurted, as he gathered her briefly into his arms. "You didn't try to break away to the hills. They didn't kill you! But now—I don't know what to think. This is Arne Reynaud's scheme come to fruition, isn't it? But maybe it'll get us, too—this pestilence."

He looked at her carefully. With increasing worry, he saw that her nose was red. Her long eyelashes were blinking back telltale moisture. And yet it didn't seem as though she'd been crying or anything. Were these, then, more forerunners of the plague? Several other men sneezed violently. And Ron looked, with a touch of real fear, at the motionless body of a Callistan, lying on the grass nearby, its fur blowing in the wind. Maybe the Acharian doom was also going to be an Earthian doom.

"Anna—" Ron gasped. That single name, as he uttered it now, was like some strange plea and prayer to the unknown.

But the girl smiled back at him. "I think that I'm the one who understands what this is all about this time, instead of you, Ron," she declared almost tauntingly.

"Then tell us, Miss!" Bart Mallory urged in a half-frantic tone.

Anna glanced briefly and mysteriously at the bulk of Saturn—a pale, pearly, enshrouded bubble at the horizon—above the now green-tinted hills.

"Yes, it's Arne's scheme come true," she said musingly. "The Acharians lived unknowingly with death here, for almost two terrestrial months. Too few of them had ever visited Earth, even to recognize the enemies that lurked there for them. And when that nemesis was brought here, it was far too harmless and unobtrusive in its aspect, for them to notice or be warned."

"Remember what Arne Reynaud told us, long ago, just before he was killed by one of those Callistan heat-guns, in front of the Leiccsendale Community Bank? The time he made his speech, Ron? You heard him, too, Mr. Mallory. I think I can quote almost his exact words:

"'Me and a brother of mine are probably the only men, Earthian or Callistan, who realize why Callistans get very sick on Earth at certain times—though it's simple. . . . I saw one die once, there, in summer. It ain't just the density of the

air. They can stand that. Something else. I found out. . . ."

"Well, what is it, then?" Mallory demanded, not meaning to sound impatient.

THE girl glanced at him, then back at Ron, then all around at the waiting faces. "We all know, don't we," she said, "that we are used to certain conditions, we Terrestrials from Earth. We get tough and acclimated. People from other worlds, not used to similiar conditions, wouldn't have the same resistance. Space travel bears this out—Martian plagues spreading on Earth—Venusians dying of the common cold. Even an interchange of germs between the terrestrial continents was dangerous, according to history. Tuberculosis ravaging the American Indians. Eskimoes killed by the measles. Terrestrial germ diseases don't bother the Callistans, it is true, because their blood is at too high a temperature for Earthly bacteria to survive. But there's another thing—a weak point. The cargo Ron and I brought from Mars in the *Barbarian*, was the answer."

"Then you guessed, too, what that cargo was, Anna," Ron burst out. "Seeds of some kind—plants. They're growing elsewhere now. Out there in the fields, and on the hillsides. But that's all so crazy! Where can there be any danger in simple, everyday Earth-weeds? Poison ivy is bad, of course; but even it couldn't kill off thousands of Callistans—certainly not in a few minutes!"

"Yes, I guessed what the *Barbarian's* cargo consisted of, Ron," Anna returned. "I was working in the fields all the time, seeing those plants, which had never been on Titan before. Not even many of the slaves remembered them, though, since we've all been a long time away from home, and from some of the familiar things, there. But I'm a school teacher, and I know a little about biology, and the common afflictions of humankind. But I kept still, because secrecy might be important. Well, those plants grew like wild-fire, under the stimulating rays of the sun-towers. And I was praying that they'd hurry up and blossom. Callisto's a flowerless world, Ron. Probably that's the big point. With an equal start in their growing, the plants blossomed all at once.

And the winds blew, and the plague came. And now we colonists are masters of Titan once more. The Acharians can never threaten us again. Not even if they find a way to face the pestilence with filter-masks and so forth. For we've got the major part of their space fleet to protect us. Do you know what I'm talking about now, Ron? Everybody?"

There was an awed quiet in the listening crowd. Then Bart Mallory whooped suddenly. "I get it!" he shouted in triumph. "Of course! Callistan lungs are huge and delicate and entirely unacclimated to one Earthly condition! Naturally they'd react to it far more violently even than we do! And now Terra is mistress of this section of space! My sun-towers must have helped some, by increasing the normal virulence of the plants. But most of the thanks go to Arne Reynaud, and to you, Anna, and to you, Ron."

Mallory, the scientist, swept his arms out toward the fields. Waving there in the bright artificial sunshine, was a tattered green host of plants, that men of Earth had known and lived with, with considerable discomfort but scant real harm for countless ages.

Was it just the wind that blew that host, making it sway and undulate with a simple grandeur, while huge Saturn looked on? Or was the unseen spirit of Arne Reynaud, the old horticulturist, the old fool, the dreamer and the wizard, stirring them, too?

Ron Leiccsen scowled, still lost and bogged down with the enigma, as were most of the other listeners. "I guess you've got to draw me a diagram, Anna," he grumbled, shaking his head ruefully. "I know a lot about machinery and space ships and Saturn's Rings, but it looks as though this biological problem goes beyond my depth."

Anna Charles smiled a faint, twisted little smile. "We've been through a lot together, Ronnie," she said wistfully, not caring if the others heard. "We've quarreled a lot, learned an awful lot together, and I think at last found that life could be beautiful for us both. So I can afford to be patient. Now look—"

She bent down. Her little fists clutched a tall, tattered plant, that grew nearby in the grass. Tugging vigorously, she pulled it out. From its top, where there was a cluster of homely golden nodules, there dusted a fine, yellowish powder. Pollen.

Anna's nose wrinkled. Suddenly she sneezed very hard.

"Somebody ought to write some music about this plant, now," she said at last. "It is commonly known as—Ragweed. Some Terrestrials are terribly allergic to it, though nothing like the poor Acharians from flowerless Achar, of course. Its dry pollen, drifting with the summer breeze, causes more—and more violent—*hay-fever*, than anything else known on Earth!"

The next issue of PLANET STORIES will be on

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South to Propontis

By HENRY ANDREW ACKERMANN

To the South lay Propontis, capital of Mars. But between it and the homesick Earth-youth stretched a burning desert—lair of the deadly *Avis Gladiator*!

IT wasn't the grim thought that he would be dead in a few moments that filled the mind of Don Moffat so much as the bitter realization that a six-

teen-year-old suspicion had been confirmed too late.

Across the small room a mad light burned in the blood-shot eyes of his uncle.

In spite of the raw liquor he had drunk the grimy paw that held the old electronic gun was steady.

Beyond the battered hut's open door heat-blasted desert pulsed as a tiny sun beat savagely down on the arid, sterile wastes from the inferno's distant rim.

It was that southern rim, a mere uneven thread of rust, to which Don had raised his eyes so many times that day, his heart light with the thought that he was going to Proponitis. And from Proponitis to a greener world beyond—a world he had dreamed of one day seeing; a world where water wasn't priceless. Earth!

Just entering his twenties, he had spent his life on the Martian wastelands, a motherless kid who had trailed a diamond-mad father over the wilderness of sand and rock.

Don had been seven when they struck the Suzie lode. There were plenty of the rough stones, and his father sent for the boy's uncle and his own brother. Together they were to mine and share alike.

Shortly after his uncle had arrived Don found his father with a charred hole in his heart, bleaching on the sand. Uncle Fred had cursed at him when he wept. Later, though, the man explained that it must have been one of the native Martians. Don believed him then, but as he grew and came to know his uncle, he began to doubt.

That morning Uncle Fred had abruptly announced that they were through, that the last gem had been mined from the Suzie lode. But there were many diamonds in the plastic boxes, enough to satisfy any man. They would pack their Iguana, Gecko, and make ready for the long trek.

So Don had stowed the saddle-bags and water-tanks. Gecko was ready and waiting outside. Don's last act was to gather his own scanty belongings. He was in the hut alone when Uncle Fred came in. Don raised his eyes to find himself staring into the belled muzzle of the electronic gun.

"Desert brat," said Uncle Fred thickly. "I'll blow you so wide open that there won't be a square meal left for a *Wirler!*"

And now Don knew that he was to die by the same hand that had killed his father. And Fred was through with him. The

boy had helped to mine the gems, but his uncle had never intended that he should live to share them. That was why Uncle Fred had been drinking all day—to bolster up his courage to do deliberate murder. He raised the gun an inch. Don saw his finger tighten on the trigger. He closed his eyes, knowing that it would be all over in a moment.

The paper-thin walls of the hut vibrated with the thunderous crash of an electronic pistol. Donald's jaw went slack. For a paralyzing second he could only gape at his uncle. The man had uttered a choking cry, his fingers loosening the gun. Then he pitched to the floor in a limp heap.

In the open doorway stood a bullet-headed, brown-eyed man, holding a still-glowing electronic pistol. Over his shoulder peered a bearded, thick-lipped companion.

BULLET-HEAD shifted his gaze to the boy.

"Glad we showed up?" he asked, grinning.

"Sure am. Thanks," said Don, eying the two men closely. They weren't settlers nor native-born sons of settlers. For the strangers walked with difficulty. They had yet to learn the gliding stride that was second nature to Don. And their complexions had never been won on Mars.

"You must be Don," said Bullet-Head. "Right," said Don shortly. "What's your tag?"

"Call me Pete. I heard about you from your uncle last time he was in Strada." Strada was the diamond center of Mars, Don knew. His uncle had been there a month ago with some specimens. There were only three kinds of people in Strada, the boy thought; business men, police and thieves. Hastily he ruled out the first two. His uncle must have told too much about his pay-load. These men had decided to cash in before it had reached a civilized city.

Pete's brown eyes wrinkled. "Right, son," he said amiably. "We're here for the diamonds. Consider yourself lucky to be alive. Now just keep your mouth shut and pack that lizard of yours. We're going to Proponitis."

Don didn't ask any more questions. While he was filling the water tanks

from their stores he thought with desperate clarity and speed. They were city men—earthmen, and could have hoofed it all the way. He knew how an Iguana could go sullen and completely intractable if it were mishandled; that, he guessed, was what had happened to the outlaw's pack-lizards. From the thin crust of sand on their boots the boy guessed that they hadn't had to walk more than a few miles.

Don turned, and caught a glance that the two outlaws exchanged. In that look the boy read an answer to any other question in his mind. Don knew then that he had escaped death at his uncle's hands only to face it eventually from these two.

Pete eyed him quizzically. "Let's get going," said the outlaw. "We'll put some distance between us and this shack before we camp for the night."

The boy gave Gecko a friendly whack on the tail. The lizard cocked a lazy eye and ambled off, the rest following.

Behind him Don could hear the two men talking in low undertones. Only one snatch of conversation was clear. "Dumb Martian!" Pete had grunted, and his friend had snickered agreement.

The boy smiled to himself. Yes, he thought, he was a dumb Martian. What chance had he had to learn in a land where everything withered under the scorching sun, and where only ugly venomous creatures survived? True, he had read his father's old books, but he had only half understood them. They were mostly treatises on practical mining and engineering, the rest unreal blood-and-thunder tales of life in the space lanes.

Two hours later Pete called a halt. He never took his eyes off Don as preparations were made for the night camp. His companion cooked a meal out of tins; the outlaws ate most of it and flung the scraps to the boy.

"Brought plenty of water?" asked Pete, titling a canteen.

Don nodded.

"That's good. Because if we run short you'll be the first to do without. When's the soonest we can expect to get to Propontis?"

"Four days," said Don shortly.

Pete raised his brows. "That long?" he asked. "We'd better bunk for the night." He pulled out his sleeping bag

and dropped it on the bare sand. Don smiled grimly. That was no way to live on the desert, he knew. The boy burrowed down until he struck the red layer of sand that retained the day's heat. There he spread his sleeping-bag and crawled carefully in after taking off his heavy sand-shoes. With his free arms he banked the red sand over his legs before unfolding the top flap.

"Kid!" called out Pete.

"Yes?" said Don, stopping short in his preparations.

"I thought I'd tell you—I have my blaster under my pillow. And I'm a light sleeper. Get that?"

"Yes," said Don coolly. He went on with his bedding. The boy had no intention at all of running away. The desert was his friend, but the most implacable enemy that these city men could hope to find.

WHETHER or not Pete slept lightly Don didn't know. He awoke snug and warm when dawn was striping the wastelands with rosy hues. As he looked into the horizon he knew that the day would be a blistering one.

The outlaws awoke stiff and lame, barely able to crawl out of their sleeping-bags and not even knowing that they had made the mistake of sleeping on the hard-packing top layer of sand.

By the time they had started and eaten a meager breakfast the outlaws had swilled down a full quart of water apiece. Don wisely contented himself with the moisture to be found in the green food he had packed.

As the full glare of the sun began to strike the scorching sands the two Earthmen began to lag. Don slowed his gait for them. They called for water often; so often that at last he was forced to remind them that they were drinking too much.

Pete glared at him out of his red-rimmed eyes, false geniality gone. "Brat!" he snarled. "You'd like to see us die of thirst, wouldn't you?"

Don didn't answer, and silently gave them water whenever they called for it. By noon both men were suffering from the choking heat. In the early afternoon Pete called a halt, coughing dryly.

"We're stopping here," he said hoarsely, raising a limp arm at an outcropping of rock that shelved over a stretch of sand, casting a jet-black shadow. The boy did not speak, but he knew that these rock formations were little less than refractory furnaces, concentrating in one innocuous spot the terrible radiations of the desert sun. Pete coughed again, his smooth skin paling. Suddenly a sort of sympathy came over the boy.

"Look," he said, tossing a bit of vegetation under the rock. It crisped and blackened. The outlaws stared, first at the cinder and then at Don. Pete's face twitched with strain as he spoke: "Smart kid? Maybe you're too smart for us!" His hand fell to his belt, where he wore his bell-mouthed electronic pistol.

The other of the two laid a hand on his arm. "Cut that out," he said slowly. Then, turning to Don, "Thanks, kid." Stolidly he spread out his sleeping-bag and squatted down on it to await the night. Pete sprawled face-down, breathing heavily till the darkness fell. Then Don, who had bedded down Gecko the Iguana, and the other slid him into the sleeping-bag.

Before he put up the flap of his own bag Don turned to the silent outlaw and said: "Half a tank of water left. Ought to hold out if we're easy on it. There's a water-hole ahead—there was once, I mean. Maybe it isn't dried up. But it's the wrong season."

"Right," said the outlaw.

Nothing more was said that night.

In the morning, after packing, Don measured out the remaining water into three canteens. He gave one to each of the outlaws and put his own on Gecko's back.

The heat was worse than the day before. By noon Gecko was voluntarily picking up speed, the spines on his horny back moving first one way and then the other. Don knew the signs. The lizard sensed water ahead.

"We can't be sure," Don shortly told the Earthmen. "It might not be drinking water—for us."

Thirty minutes later they came upon it, a small patch of rust-red mud and slime. One of the outlaws groaned.

"Dried up," whispered Pete dully.

Don said nothing. There was some coarse growth that the pack-lizard began to eat. The boy was glad of that. He had begun to worry about Gecko, but now the Iguana would be good for a longer trek than the one before them.

Pete was on his knees, clawing at the mud. The other watched him for a moment, then looked at Don inquiringly, who shook his head. "He'll only poison himself," said the boy.

The outlaw took his companion by the collar, hoisted him to his feet. "Take this," he said slowly, offering his canteen. "That mud's deadly."

Pete took the canteen and tilted it, swallowing convulsively. His companion pulled away the precious container. "That's enough," he said. "It has to last."

A wild curse ripped from Pete's lips. He snatched back the canteen and drew his gun. In a voice that was hard to recognize as human, he rasped: "Stand back—you an' the brat!"

His finger whitened on the trigger of the blaster.

And then there sounded about them a curiously soft, derisive hooting, seemingly from every point of the horizon. Pete stared wildly about him. There had risen from the sand, it seemed; ghostly shapes—tall, spindly creatures holding recognizable blowguns against their lips. The outlaw's gun lowered, and he looked at Don.

"Native Martians," said the boy. "Don't shoot—they know how to use those blowguns. They might not harm us." There was no time to say more, for the weird creatures had noiselessly advanced on them, holding spread before them what seemed to be heavy draperies.

Don hadn't even to wonder before one of the things was clapped over his head. He felt himself being picked up and carried.

PART of the time consumed by the enforced journey he dozed fitfully, but while he was awake he thought with strange clarity and precision, dreaming of the other greener world he had hoped to see. The boy was almost stifled under the heavy folds of the blanket when, after hours of travel, the Martians removed it.

Free of the torment, he drew a deep breath, blinking his eyes as he looked

about him. The first thing he saw were the two Earthmen peering dazedly about them, their eyes not yet accustomed to the sudden change of light.

And when Don looked beyond the outlaws he gasped in stunned astonishment. Fronting them were the ruins of an old city!

That, he thought, must have been why they had been covered with the blankets. The Martians wanted to keep the location of the place a secret.

It seemed to the wondering boy that giants had played here a while. He saw great statues, perhaps of forgotten gods, misshapen things with cruel faces, tumbled over on one side. He saw vast paving-stones, hewn from solid rock, thrust up from their bed of sand, standing at all angles, cracked and split. He saw great buildings, strong as fortresses, fallen into ruins. In one place that must have been a public square a tide of sand broke in still waves about the base of a truncated pyramid.

"Where are we?" choked Pete, the first of the three to recover from the shock. He stared about blankly. "It's like a city of the dead," he whispered hoarsely.

"You're right," Don told him. "It is a city of the dead. An ancient, long deserted city of the Martians, the ancestors of the degenerates who hold us captive. This band uses it as their base from which they launch raiding parties."

Don had no time to say more. The Martians goaded their captives ahead of them down streets that had once echoed to the tread of a thousand feet. The humans picking through squares where multitudes had shouted saw no other living thing but a shimmering green lizard that basked on a fallen god. There was no sound but that of the ever-creeping sands. The old people were gone leaving only ghosts, and the hand of Time in its unhurried way had long since set about the task of wiping out all trace of their existence.

The party turned suddenly around the jutting corner of an immense white stone edifice. Then Don saw something that took his breath away.

Before him was a great towering structure, a temple judging by the cryptic signs that adorned its face. Before the temple

was a sunken triangular amphitheater of shining yellow stuff. A glance told Don that the great pit was made of shining bars and heavy slabs of hand-hammered and hand-polished metal.

Don wondered why the outlaws were eying the sunken pit so intently. Since he had been raised on Mars, Don had never heard of gold.

But it was the birds perched on the top ledge of the amphitheater that caught Donald's attention as he neared the temple.

There were hundreds of them—*Wirlers* with plump bodies and pinkish eyes, iridescent *Zloths* poking busily with their long, sharp beaks, spotted *Cotasi* standing in somber dignity, and everywhere huge black *Sominas*. Don paused. These birds made him cold in his stomach.

"What are those?" asked Pete, his smooth face uneasy.

"Birds native to Mars," said the boy. "But I've never seen them in such numbers." The Martians and their prisoners halted before a small, square stone building.

Pete was singled out by one of the gangling creatures, and yanked inside the little structure. The other outlaw was forced in after him. Don watched with a strange feeling of detachment as the two vanished into the building. It was the heat, the withering heat, that caused that. It sapped all the strength from one's body and left him feeling slow and dim-witted.

As he stood there he noticed belatedly something he had been looking at all the while but had not really noticed. It was a small clump of stunted trees, growing a few paces back from the edge of the amphitheater. Their crooked branches were overladen with the globes of some bright red fruit.

A sudden impulse came on him. He could just touch one of the limbs. A moment later one of the red fruit was in his pocket. He forgot about the thing as soon as he saw Pete and his guards emerge from the building. "What happened?" the boy asked.

The outlaw coughed dryly. "They showed me some kind of machine—motor—something. I don't know what they wanted." He grinned feebly. A moment later the man backed away in alarm as one of their captors approached him. De-

liberately the Martians flung the contents of a clay gourd into the outlaw's face. The Martian laughed, a hollow, croaking boom that sounded like sacrilege in that city of the dead. He gave some order in his gobbling tongue, and two Martians unceremoniously shoved the weakly struggling Earthman into the deep pit of the amphitheater.

The Martians looked on stolidly as the outlaw raved and cursed, berating them. Then, suddenly, the air above the pit seemed to blast wide open. A shrieking, unhuman sound beat at the ears of the boy; he jerked his arms up to shield his face. For the hundreds of birds clustered grimly about the city were in flight—necks outstretched, eyes glittering, feathered bullets.

Pete screamed faintly and fell to the ground shielding himself. Then he was overwhelmed by the dark, whirring mass.

THE birds had gone berserk. They drove straight for the man's face, hundreds of them. His flailing arms smashed against their soft bodies, batting them out of the air, crushing them to the ground, but hundreds more took their places, pecking at him with frenzied beaks, uttering harsh, discordant cries.

It had all happened so quickly that it caught Don off guard. It was incredible—birds attacking a human being! He jerked forward. Immediately Martians rushed to the aid of his guards. His young muscles strained to break their grip, but in their hands he was powerless. Agonized, he watched Pete die, a swaying, staggering figure seen dimly through a heaving whir of wings and stabbing beaks.

Finally it was over and the birds, flying heavily, reeled through the air to their old posts, leaving behind them a hundred dead and dying of their kind, the result of the outlaw's frantic blows.

The boy turned his eyes away from the gory mess on the floor of the amphitheater. In spite of his horror his mind was working with desperate clarity. Birds do not attack human beings. It was against nature. What had maddened them to their deed?

His eyes widened as he saw the second of the outlaws dragged from the little building, his face dripping with the fluid.

And then a forgotten memory linked itself with what he saw. The liquid that had been poured on the Earthmen was *Xtholla*—Martian language for "bird-lure." It could be distilled from certain wasteland plants which the birds ate as a natural tonic and medicine. But the concentrate of these plants had no mild effect of stimulation. Birds went mad when they smelled its faint pungent odor. It had a tropic effect on their ganglia; they had to go to it, gobble it down and wallow in the stuff. They pecked savagely at anything that had on it the slightest trace of the distillate.

"The pit!" called the boy frantically. "Don't let them—" but one of his guards struck his mouth and he fell silent, knowing that there was nothing more he could do to avert the fate that was before the outlaw.

The man was wholly paralyzed with fear. The Martians laughed as they hurled him into the pit. Again the birds swooped, converging on the terror-stricken man from all points of the compass. They flung their soft bodies against him at murderous speed, sharp beaks stabbing till he bled from a myriad wounds.

When Don looked up again the birds were reeling back through the air. The boy could not bring himself to look at the thing in the arena. A sudden chill gripped him as his guards grimly took his arms. They were leading him to the little building from which had come the Earthmen, he thought swiftly, and he was to undergo a life-or-death test. He held himself tense as they passed through the ancient doors of the structure.

The walls, he saw, were studded with tubes that had not lit for untold millennia; machinery of bizarre design covered the floor. The boy jumped as a Martian touched his arm. The gangling travesty on humanity pointed grimly at a device that alone of the machinery seemed to have been dusted off and wiped with oil.

It was a small motor. The motionless belts and brushes seemed oddly familiar to the boy. Then he had it! He had seen pictures of just such motors in one of the old books of his father. But what did the Martians expect him to do? Obviously the natives wanted him to start their machine but how could he? He had

none of the sources from which electricity was derived—no steam, no water-power, as they called it on his father's planet.

As Don glanced at the open door and saw the crowd of demoniac faces framed in its portals, he knew what fate awaited him if he failed. The same ruthless sentence that had been executed on the outlaw Earthmen would fall on him.

The eyes of his guard became dull and deadly as he saw Don did nothing to the motor.

Then the idea came. Feverishly the boy went to work, racking his brains for all the details in that old book, "Electricity for the Practical Miner." He remembered the title clearly, and ground his knuckles into his eyes to bring before them the simple diagrams that he once had learned.

Hesitantly he salvaged from a pile of scrap in one corner of the room two metal plates and lengths of wire. One, he fervently prayed, was copper and the other zinc. But he could not be sure. The boy clumsily connected the two terminal wires of the motor, one to each of the plates.

Then he did what seemed a foolish thing. He took the globe of red fruit from his pocket and sliced it neatly into thin layers. Don laid the dripping slices atop the copper plate, and then, his heart cold as ice, laid the zinc plate atop the fruit.

The Martians watched coldly, grunting to themselves. Their eyes were on the world-old motor. Slowly, incredibly, the thing turned over. The straps sped over the drums; the brushes fizzed and emitted inch-long blue sparks.

And from overhead came a sudden, terrifying wail like nothing that had been heard on Mars for countless ages. It was not the cry of an animal nor of a man—

that was all the boy knew as he backed against a wall of the building. The noise rose sickeningly in a demoniac shriek. The Martians seemed paralyzed by the awful sound. Then, with choking cries, they broke ground and ran, their eyes popping and the shout, "*Kursah-ekh!*" bursting from their lips. Don knew little of the language, but he did know that their cry was "Demons!"

The natives fled with the speed of wild things, and the boy found himself alone. No, not quite alone, for into the door of the little building poked the familiar old head of Gecko, Don's pack-lizard. He nearly embraced the ugly creature. It would have been hell to go without water for another minute. From the canteen on the Iguana's back Don took a long, refreshing swig. Then he turned again to the motor.

It was still turning over, but more slowly. He was about to separate the plates when it stopped of its own accord and the fiendish wail from above died away. The boy nimbly scaled the web-work construction and pried about the tangle of machinery until he found the obvious answer. It had been a blower operated by the motor, to which had been attached a simple siren. Burglar-alarm, perhaps, or danger signal, he thought. At any rate it had saved him.

He laughed as he descended slowly. The old book had been right. Fruit acid between zinc and copper made the simplest sort of generating battery cell. What knowledge he had possessed he had used to the full. He drank again from the canteen.

And a few moments later with Gecko at his side, he left the city of the dead behind. Don was going to a greener world.



A Fiction House Magazine



SPAWN OF THE VENUS SEA

By HARRY WALTON

**What was this ghastly inhabitant of Venus?
Dead Sea — this multiple-life monstrosity**

WITH a tremendous snap, the taut steel cable humming in over the stern sheaves suddenly leaped high. The winch screamed briefly as the cable skipped its guides. Before power could be shut off it had snarled badly, and the frayed end of it had thrashed a splintery dent into the *Mermaid's* deck.

By this time, Second Mate Stanley Kort reflected grimly, the net itself had probably bottomed on the floor of Venus's largest ocean—the *Molo Ivrum*, or Deadly Sea, thus named for the paradoxical reason that it teemed with life, most of it decidedly unpleasant.

Hands clenched, Kort stared from the plaskon windows of the wheelhouse. Through the thin haze blanketing the deck he could see net tenders and seamen stolidly staring forward. The cable lay in a vicious tangle between winch house and stern. Nobody looked at it.

They were waiting for orders, as they always waited when Kort held deck command. Were Hodge up here, or even Pratt, the third mate, the net tenders would have laid hold of the snarled steel by now. With Kort it was different.

Or was it he who was different, he who hadn't been trained in the hard school of this sort of seamanship? A man who'd won his papers in passenger service wasn't wanted aboard a floating cannery. Kort wished he had known a month ago how it would be. He should have left Venus after being discharged from the *Corinthia*, instead of trying to start anew in the cannery service.

His clenched fist opened.

"Break out a magnetic!" The deck speakers amplified his voice to stentorian volume, galvanized the crew into sullen action. Men untangled the steel, spliced a new length to it, and swung the magnetic grapple over the side.

With the grapple magnets drawing two hundred amps, the ship swung in a clumsy circle. Half an hour passed, marked only by the screech of cannery boilers popping off every five minutes. From forward came the stench of cleaning platforms, the "clop-plop" of trimming machinery.

Then the rain, pelting down in drops big as grapes. They splashed roaringly upon the deck, drummed upon the wheelhouse windows like furious fingers. The *Mermaid* seemed to squat lower in the water under the weight of the storm.

Abruptly a red lamp flashed. Kort was out of the pilot house almost before the engine room, answering his signal, had reversed the turbines. In helmet and plaskon overalls he fought his way aft.

At the stern rail Kort watched the cable come in, dripping steel curl itself over the drums. Finally the grapple broke the frothy surface of the sea. To it clung the lost net, and Kort felt a moment of amazed gratitude for that bit of luck. For once the *Mermaid* had been fortunate. Ships sometimes spent hours in futile grappling.

Tenders seized the net, spread it as the winch hauled in. It was nine tenths up when Kort, watching for anything that might jam the rollers, signaled the winchman to stop.

THE thing might have been a giant slug. Thick as a man's arm, it was so entangled in the net that any estimate of its length was sheer guesswork. One end tapered to a featureless snout, the other flattened to a broad, finned tail. Its color was a dingy, bloodless white. Kort had never seen anything like it before.

"Get a trident, Simms!" he bawled over the fury of the storm, and the man obediently lifted one of the implements from its rack. Simultaneously a net tender



climbed over the rail and, clinging to the mesh, lowered himself hand over hand. The man with the trident looked gravely on. Kort felt himself flush, yet hesitated to order the other man back. Possibly the thing in the net was familiar to the others, its disposal a simple matter which his interference might make difficult.

The tender leaned down, chopped at the white monstrosity with a heavy knife. There was a solid *thunk* of metal as the edge bit chain mesh. Kort would almost have sworn that the thing moved. It was incredible that the man could have missed it otherwise.

Suddenly uneasy, Kort drew his electro-gun. With a grimace the tender leaned farther over, raised his knife again.

Before it fell, before anyone could move or shout warning, the white trunk flashed out, magically freed itself from the net, coiled about the man, and in one convulsive movement vanished with him beneath the sea. There was a single sharp splash, muted by the drumming rain.

Kort had not dared to fire. Incredulously he stared at the spot where the thing had been enmeshed an instant before. The undamaged net, slimy with the detritus of the sea, hung empty under the ship's stern.

IT was still raining, but, as though some oceanic deity had accepted a living sacrifice, the *Mermaid's* luck had changed. Nets came up laden with the *Molo Irvun's* rampant life. Sorters tossed the edible, bulbous *gwai* upon conveyor belts for the cannery machines to clean and pack. The remainder of the catch was thrown back into the sea. The finless, two-mouthed *gwai* alone was wanted for its incredible nutritive value, twice that of the finest synthetic foodstuffs, which had made this tiny denizen of Venusian seas a staple article of diet wherever supplies had to be taken in concentrated form.

Kort watched the work somberly, feeling himself responsible for the tender's death. Even Pratt would have ordered the man back. The men were right; he was a gold brick, not worth his salt aboard the *Mermaid*. He'd have to get off. Not that there could be any going back to the passenger runs for him, after the tragedy of the *Corinthia*. They allowed a man

only one mistake there. He had made his by failing to report a brother officer unfit for duty.

A steward brought his lunch—fried *gwai*, native tapioca, and strong synthetic coffee. While he was eating Hodge entered. The first mate poured himself a cup of the brew and dismissed the idle helmsman with a nod. The *Mermaid* lay becalmed in the downpour.

Kort felt the Mate's eyes upon him. Hodge was a grizzled giant of a man, at least thirty years older than he.

"Taking it a bit hard, aren't you, son?"

"I should have ordered him back," said Kort tightly.

"Maybe," retorted Hodge, stuffing a biscuit between his teeth. "And maybe he shouldn't have played the fool. Never give the sea bigger odds than you can help. They do say the critter was all tangled up with the net to the last second—and then it wasn't."

"That's true."

"Reminds me of them native magicians you can see in Dana T'resa. But the sea's full of surprises. We'll never outguess her—well, D'loo?"

The pilot house door had been flung open as by a tempest. One of the stokers, a squat green-skinned Venusian, stood breathless and wild eyed before the two officers.

"Steady, boy," rumbled Hodge. "What's up?"

The native's broad ears twitched. "*Twahna ekeh-il!* Twahna is dead!" He lapsed into chattering dialect, his eyes almost idiotic with fright.

"He says Twahna was killed by the ghost-snake," muttered Hodge. "Sounds like a lie to cover up some liquor stealing, but we'd better go see. Have Pratt take over; it's almost his watch anyway."

The third officer, flushed of face and glaring resentfully, answered Kort's telephoned summons by appearing on the bridge. He slouched on the leather bench behind the wheel, pulled a bottle from his hip even before the others left.

The chattering Venusian led them to the second forecabin reserved for native seamen. Half a dozen other natives, all off duty for the present, were huddled in the passageway outside. The low room was deserted. A single fluorescent bulb glowed

blushly between the tiers of bunks. Almost directly beneath sprawled Twahna.

His face was cupped in both hands as though to shut out the sight of death. Kort rolled him over and got the shock of his life. The Venusian was dead white, his flesh drained of color. His hands stayed up before his face and Kort tried to put them down.

"He's frozen!" Kort marveled. "Frozen stiff. Feel him."

Hodge touched the man. "It wasn't liquor," he rumbled. "Alcohol will kill a native quick enough, but it won't do that. D'loo says a snake came through the bulkhead while they were getting dressed for their watch, and wrapped itself around Twahna. It was between D'loo and the door, so he had to stay until the thing went back through the bulkhead. And he's too scared to be lying."

There was a clatter of footsteps on the ladder. Kort looked up into the flushed face of Pratt, and knew there was more trouble. Nothing less could have induced him to leave the comfort of the wheelhouse.

"Well, mister?" asked Hodge.

"A—a net tender's been killed," the third mate stuttered. "They say—they say he's the second."

"The third, mister," said Hodge harshly. "Anything queer about the net tender?"

"Yes—yes, he was frozen. Frozen blue. I thought I'd better call you."

THEY went up together, leaving behind them a sorely frightened group of Venusians. The moment they reached the deck Kort knew that something else had happened since Pratt had left. It had stopped raining, although the last of the water was still sluicing from the scuppers. But not a man was in sight. Winch house, stern deck, and sorting platforms were deserted.

Yet not utterly, for just forward of the main net locker swayed the creature from the depths, a sinuous tapering trunk, its snout uplifted like a hound's nose scenting game.

"Two of them!" gasped Pratt, pointing to a second one atop the pilot house.

"And one makes three!" muttered Hodge, for still another had appeared magically beside the first. Pratt pulled

his electro-gun from its holster. Its heavy bullet splintered a hatch cover just behind the thing, but the creature showed no harm. Kort drew his own weapon and joined Pratt in pumping bullets. Wood splintered and metal clanged where the projectiles struck, but the sea slugs remained unharmed.

It seemed to Kort that the things flickered, faded from view, at the very instant he fired, only to reappear so quickly as to make him doubt his senses. Pratt was reloading furiously. He went down on all fours, crawled along one of the conveyor belts until he was no more than twelve feet from one of the things. Prone on the deck, he fired at point blank range. The soft nosed bullet smashed into planking directly behind the swaying trunk. Kort saw splinters fly at the impact, but again the sea slug had seemed to vanish for an instant, like a candle flame almost blown out by a sudden draft.

In drunken anger, Pratt seized a trident from the rail, sprang to his feet, leaped at the thing. Kort shouted warning to which the man paid no heed. Spear-like he hurled the trident; the prongs sank a full inch into the wooden deck. The swaying trunk reared, became ominously still. Kort cried out again as Pratt, howling drunken defiance, emptied his gun at it.

Like the pounce of lightning the creature struck. One instant it was upreared before Pratt, the next its fatal helix enclosed the man. He staggered, screamed once, a howl of sheer animal pain that struck Kort like a whip across the face. It was Hodge who restrained him from tackling the thing with fists and knife.

"Too late!" the older man said grimly. "No use throwing yourself after him."

There was no sound from Pratt now. In ghastly silence the sea creature had settled down with him, his body rigid in its coiled grip, protruding eyes mirroring agony, yet already glazed with approaching death, his face slowly turning the purple of asphyxiation. Once more the gun blasted before it fell from twitching fingers. To the watchers it seemed an age before the tortured body at last went limp.

"Time the captain heard about this!" growled Hodge, "Although it ain't likely to do any good." His iron grip aroused Kort from the stupefaction of horror into

which the sight of Pratt's death had plunged him. Together they went forward, giving the monsters a wide berth, past the cannery deck where most of the deck crew were gathered, to the captain's cabin.

One glimpse of the master told Kort no help might be expected from him. Spale's huge body overflowed the bunk; he was more stupefied than asleep. The cabin reeked of liquor. Hodge slammed the door on it.

"Might've known it," he grumbled. "He won't be good for thirty hours, like that. We're putting back to port, catch or no catch."

They reached the forward wheelhouse from below deck, leaving the one aft in possession of the sea monsters. Hodge pushed over the engine room telegraph. At the wheel, Kort awaited the first throbs of propellers to drive the ship ahead.

For a moment there was no movement but the slow roll of the *Mermaid* in the trough of the waves. Then the interphone cracked.

"Wellson, engine room. We have no pressure on the boilers down here. Chief Starr has gone aft to see about it. I can give you quarter speed for a few minutes."

"Quarter speed!" barked Hodge. The vessel trembled to the surge of the screws, forged slowly ahead. That moment too came the first of the wind. Kort found his hands full keeping the ship on course in the face of it.

Once he looked aft, just in time to see the last trunk vanish from atop the aft pilot house. It did not plunge overboard, but faded from sight as abruptly as a projected image when the light is snapped off.

Briefly grateful that the things had gone, he bent all efforts to keeping the *Mermaid* on course in the face of freshening wind. Through the deck he could feel the whine of turbines inexorably slowing down.

"No steerageway, sir," he said finally, as the ship yawed.

Hodge rang the interphone savagely, without result.

"Better see what's wrong," he told Kort. "Wait—take this."

He thrust an electro-gun renewal clip into Kort's hand. With the weapon in

hand Kort descended ladder after ladder to the engine deck. Amid disquieting silence something within him grew coldly alert.

The engine room was empty. Giant mercury turbines spun lazily under a pressure head far too low to drive them at normal speed. A chill swept him at sight of the pressure gauges. In the dim glow of failing fluorescents he headed for the stokehole.

A nameless sense of menace cautioned him. He passed the great bunkers full of kwahna wood, the rich, oily fuel that drove the *Mermaid* and her kind across the planet's five oceans. In the last bulkhead the stokehole door stood wide, somehow sounding a chill note of warning.

Without entering he called Wellson and Starr. The names echoed hollowly from the dim reaches of the ship, but in response came only the faint roar of a blower left at half speed.

The thought that Wellson and Starr must have gone through that same door determined him against doing so. Instead he climbed to the deck above, coming out on a catwalk above the boilers, from which he could see into the stokehole.

Five men sprawled on the deck plates in the contorted postures of those dead by violence, knees drawn high, arms outflung, fingers bent into claws. By the light of his pocket flash Kort recognized the distorted features of Starr. A reddish glow from an open firebox illumined those of Wellson. The other men were native stokers. When Kort moved the flash beam horror tightened its clutch upon him. The stokehole pit seemed full of sea slugs.

By actual count he found there were five of them, alert, weaving, posturing as though to sense new victims, Oddly enough the light brought no response from them, even when flashed directly upon their dingy white bodies.

Suddenly the electro gun seemed to burn in Kort's hand. He lifted away a section of the catwalk grid to fire through the opening thus left. Bullets howled, ricocheting from deck plates and bulkheads below. Occasionally one of the creatures seemed to flicker before a shot.

When the gun was empty Kort got to

his feet. His fire had been without effect. He felt a sick sense of futility as he climbed back to the wheelhouse, where Hodge soberly listened to the tale of death he had to tell.

"We've got to get them, son," said the first mate grimly. "It's them or us. Look apart."

The sky was aflame over the horizon. Twisted ribbons of light swirled between sea and heavens, shot through now and again with flashes of crimson. Across the waters came, faintly, the rumble of thunder.

"*Kilwanni!*" grunted Hodge. "From the looks of that borealis, it's headed this way. If we lie here much longer we'll be blown out of the water."

"With the anti-grids?" Kort protested.

"Without them," Hodge answered dryly. "What're you going to use for juice? The lightning generators have almost stopped, and you can't turn the anti-grid generators on flat boilers, nor use battery juice either."

He jerked his head significantly at the wheelhouse lamps, hardly more than aglow.

"Looks like we have to lick the things or else! No good wasting more bullets, either. The things dodge 'em. See how they flicker when you put a bullet close? No wonder D'loo calls them the ghost snakes."

Kort nodded, and yet it seemed to him that Hodge's appraisal was wrong, in some vague way he couldn't himself put a finger on.

"If they dodge the bullets," the first mate went on, "then they must see 'em coming. Maybe we need something faster than bullets—a bolt blaster, maybe."

"And Spale's got one!" finished Kort.

"Only one aboard," finished Hodge. "He had a mutiny once, and a blaster saved his fat neck for him. Since then he won't let anybody else keep one aboard, curse him. I reckon we'll have to find his."

FIVE minutes later the two men trod softly away from Spale's cabin, the precious blaster, clumsy with its huge capacitor drum, ridged barrel, and pointed electrode, in Hodge's hands. Yet Kort was haunted by an unreasonable premonition of failure. Perhaps, he told himself,

repeated failure had sold him on the belief that the sea slugs were invulnerable. Certainly the blaster was no common weapon. It shot a bolt of non-oscillating high amperage current, a single shattering projectile of pure energy, with the speed of light itself. What living thing could sense the approach of that flashing death?

They entered upon the catwalk after Kort's light had shown it clear of the creatures. The stokehole fluorescents were mere luminous streaks against encroaching darkness. Only dying embers glowed behind the open fire door. But the flash beam revealed four white trunks grouped before the boilers, as though attracted by the warmth. Purple faces of the dead glared up in the pallid light of the torch.

Hodge swore feelingly, leveled the blaster. The weapon spat a lurid, creamy-white bolt that pierced the nearest trunk. Kort held his breath. The flash seared his sight, seeming of longer duration than it really was, and limned the sea thing starkly against the blackness of the stokehole. The light of his torch seemed feeble after it.

But in that light the creature swayed, unhurt, untouched. Hodge cursed it furiously, fired again and again. The crash of bolts was thunderous in that confined space. Fringes of electrical fire leaped from metal at their touch. Ozone stung Kort's nostrils.

But when the blaster clicked empty not four, but five trunks swayed languidly before the boilers, curving their supple bodies in undulating motion that at times gave them the shape of huge, animated question marks.

"Drum's empty," said Hodge quietly. "Let's go topside."

Kort felt his calmness in strange contrast to the fury raging within himself—fury that mindless things from the sea should set at nought the intelligence and courage of some fifty men. What price intelligence? An amoeba, incapable of sensing the approach of death, was better off than they who could foresee, and fear, and do nothing at all to escape, extinction. What was the *kilwanni*—the coming storm—but a conglomeration of ions, dead and unintelligent, possessed of no will either benevolent or malevolent, yet destined for all that to shatter the *Mermaid* and com-

mit them to death in the freezing sea—those who escaped a fiery but swifter death from the storm itself.

He followed Hodge silently back to the pilot house. Two seamen waited there, grim faced.

"Three of them by the cannery boilers," one man said. "They got Sanderson before he could clear out."

That was all. They stared at Hodge, waiting for him to speak. The grizzled first mate shook his head.

"I know," said Kort suddenly, and all eyes turned to him. "The bullets were too slow—but the blaster was too fast. A bolt lasts only a few micro-seconds."

"How d'you mean?"

"You remember when D'loo first talked about a ghost snake? He hadn't seen the one on the net, but only the one that killed Twahna, and *nobody had fired a shot at it.*"

"But he saw it come through the bulk-head," Hodge pointed out.

"That's what threw us off the track, but that wasn't the only reason D'loo called it the 'ghost snake.' Nor was it because they flicker before bullets. Have you ever known a native who cared to see ordinary cinema films?"

"Nope," grunted Hodge, plainly mystified. "Nor one who'd let a newsreel man photograph him. They call 'em the ghost pictures. Say—!"

"There you are. They fight shy of the films because they don't get the illusion of motion, as we do. All they see is a quick-fading succession-of stills, because the natives don't have persistence of vision, as we have. The films don't fool them as they do us. Nor do those things out there. To us they look solid. To D'loo they flicker constantly—ninety-nine percent of the time they literally aren't there. They have a vibratory existence, like the image we seem to see on the cinema screen. Back in the twentieth century it was shown that the probability wave representing an electron extended, theoretically, to infinity. In these things free will—the life force—enters to control that mathematical probability. They can literally be two places at once—on the bottom, three miles down, and on our deck—at the same time.

"They're *here* only at intervals, and

persistence of vision bridges the time gap between those intervals. The blaster bolts last only a few micro-seconds, a far shorter time than their natural period. A bolt comes and goes while the thing you fire at actually *isn't there*. It would be sheer luck if the bolt should coincide to hit it at the instant it's actually materialized—sheer luck, because our eyes can't help us. Even a Venusian wouldn't be able to synchronize a bolt—there isn't that quick co-ordination between brain and muscle. The odds would always be against us."

THE seamen looked blank. Hodge drummed the chart table with a huge fist. "If you're right, we need a faster bullet or a slower bolt."

"Or *timing!*" finished Kort. "Have Sparks rig a stroboscope out of spare parts. You know how moving parts can be made to look as if they're standing still, in an intermittent light that flashes only when they are at one point in their movement. With all other lights off, a stroboscope wouldn't show us the things at all, except when we have it exactly synchronized with their vibratory period. Rig the blaster in series with the light circuit, and it would have to fire at exactly the right time. That'll get them."

One of the seamen cleared his throat. "Maybe it would—or maybe not. This is no time for theories. We're speaking for all the men now. We don't mean to stay aboard to be blasted by the *Kiwuani* or strangled by these damned snakes. We want to take the launches."

"Supposin' you did," Hodge countered. "You'd last just till the *Mermoid's* hit. Then the potential would flatten out, with the launches stickin' up in it like sore thumbs. There ain't no anti-grids on them, and you couldn't get away quick enough."

"We'd rather take our chances than go down with this tub," snarled the other man. "You ain't going to stop us!"

Hodge shrugged, then stared in amazement at Kort, who stood by the door with a leveled electro-gun.

"I'm stopping you. Listen—you won't last five minutes out there in the launches, without anti-grids. Give Sparks an hour to rig a stroboscope and we can get back into the stokehole. With pressure on the

boilers we can charge the anti-grids and the storm won't touch us."

The men looked black rage at him, but made no move. Hodge's right hand hovered over his own gun.

"Don't draw!" snapped Kort. "I don't want to hurt you, Hodge, but this means the life of all of us, not just one or two."

"Forgettin' something, ain't you?" asked Hodge dryly. "I'd be all for you, if we had an hour to spare. Take a look at the grids."

Kort risked a glance aloft, through the wheelhouse windows. Against a dark, sultry sky the spiral network of the anti-grids already glowed with faint pricklings of St. Elmo's light—harmless prologue to the storm to come. Any weather-wise sailor could read the menace in those flaming curtains to port, swirling in fiery splendor, very tapestries of hell.

"Won't take them but forty minutes, maybe, to get here," continued Hodge inexorably. "And after you've got your stroboscope, and killed the critters, it'll take thirty minutes to get pressure on the boilers. Not a chance your way. Better stow the gun and go along in the launches."

It was like a pit opening before Kort's feet. Bitterly he realized his mistake—he had forgotten those all-important thirty minutes needed to get enough pressure for the anti-grid generators. Actually there remained perhaps ten minutes to defeat the sea monsters and regain the stokehole. He'd been making a fool of himself, delaying the men's last forlorn dash for life.

Sheepishly he holstered his gun while the seamen stalked out. Seconds later came the groan of pulleys as the first launch swung out from the davits.

Hodge slouched over the chart table, stared out at the activity on deck. The third launch splashed noisily into the sea. Men scrambled down the davit lines. Far in the bow swayed, unheeded, one of the blind, deadly creatures from the depths.

"Few hours ago," Hodge rumbled, "all we worried about was getting a catch aboard. But the sea changes things before you know it. Take this ship—ought to be fit to ride out any *kilwanni*. Now she ain't, all on account of the sea. *Kilwanni's* part of the sea too—never get 'em

over the land. Bolts fat as the mainmast and red hot, lastin' ten seconds, some of 'em. Melt the chocks right off the deck—"

"Damn!" exclaimed Kort. "Why didn't I—"

"Steady, son. Too late now. The last launch's gone."

"Why didn't I think of it before?" asked Kort wildly. "How many drums has the captain got for that blaster?"

Hodge chuckled. "If I know Spale, he's got twenty or thirty. Spale! Holy cheroot, we forgot all about *him!*"

WITHOUT a word they rushed together to the captain's cabin. Hodge flung the door wide. Spale lay as they had left him, motionless in his bunk. But at sight of his face Kort turned cold within. The normally flushed features were a dull purple.

"Critters got him too," Hodge said calmly. "Probably never felt a thing, the shape he was in." He stooped over the desk in the far corner, tossed a jumble of bottles, pipes, pencils and other miscellany out of one drawer after another, at last uttered a triumphant grunt.

"Here!" Kort snatched the squat black cylinder Hodge tossed to him. The first mate delved further. "Plenty more in here—sure you want 'em, son?"

"All of them," said Kort breathlessly, tearing the discharged drum from the blaster and fitting the new one in its place. While the mate's back was turned he ripped away a small black box affixed beneath the weapon's chunky barrel, and twisted together the raw ends of the wires thus exposed. Furtively he looked up to see whether Hodge had noticed, but the later was still bent over the desk.

Suddenly the blaster seemed to turn ice cold in Kort's hand. For a moment, he doubted his ability to press the trigger. His nerves seemed frozen, incapable of action in the dread need of the moment.

As though a hand other than his own had loosed it, he saw the bolt stab white-hot across the cabin, its crash far louder than in the stokehole, the tang of ozone sharp instantly after.

Hodge leaped wildly, spun around in open mouthed astonishment. Silently Kort pointed to the bunk, behind which the

painted bulkhead showed a sear of flame.

Sprawled across Spale's body lay the dingy white carcass of a sea slug, streaked and blackened by the bolt.

"It came through the bulkhead," said Kort tensely. "Maybe it was the one that got Spale. There wasn't time to warn you."

"Thanks, son. Dying by the *kilwanni* would be a pleasure compared to making a meal for *that*. But how come?"

"I took a chance," Kort said slowly. "I took the choke condenser off. That's what limits each bolt to a twentieth of the drum's capacity and damps out all oscillation. Without it the whole drum fired at once, and because the charge oscillated it lasted about a hundred times as long as before—long enough to bridge the thing's vibratory period. The bolt hit while it was there, and killed it."

Hodge snatched up the drums and stuffed them into his pockets. "Come on! We'll roast out the rest of 'em—what's wrong, son?"

Kort laid the blaster wearily upon the desk. "Look at it. The full drum charge burnt out the electrode tube." His voice was bitter. "I forgot that, too. We'd need a new blaster for each one!"

Hodge's ruddy, wind-roughened face paled to grayness. He threw the drums alongside the ruined weapon, cursing steadily.

Idly Kort prodded the dingy white carcass with the barrel of his electro gun. It was quite solid, indubitably dead. He pushed it off Spale, and it landed with a *thunk* on the floor.

"Hodge!" he said suddenly. "Come with me."

He ran from the cabin. His flashlight, lighting the pitch dark passages of the deserted ship, found the catwalk above the stokehole.

"Well, I'm blessed!" murmured Hodge a moment later.

Five bodies lay in the black pit below. There was still a faint glow of embers in the firebox. But although Kort flashed the light everywhere, there was no sign of the sea slugs.

"What are we waitin' for?" demanded Hodge fiercely.

It was he who led now. Seconds later, log after log of the furiously inflammable

kwahna was disappearing into the fireboxes. Blowers, powered by auxiliary batteries, shrieked at full speed. Mercury surged and simmered within the tubes. Behind the fire doors infernos raged.

Once Hodge vanished briefly to close the anti-grid switches and open the throttles of the high potential shield generators. Kort steadily kept on feeding the voracious boilers. There was as yet no pressure to turn the lighting dynamos. He worked by the gleam of flames alone.

"Run topside, son," gasped the older man at last. "See if you can signal the launches—we'll never make it by ourselves."

In two minutes Kort gained the deck. The first thing his eyes sought was the mainmast grid. It had struck an aurora, no longer the pale blue of ten minutes ago, by a hot, bright yellow signifying that the arresters were bypassing current to the sea. How long before they would break down under the rising potential?

He ran to the starboard rail at the sound of voices, the bump of a boat touching the ship's side, and almost collided with a grinning, brawny stoker. The launches were back!

Men slapped him jubilantly on the back, dignity, discipline and all else forgotten. Smoke from the *Mermaid's* funnel had announced to them the conquest of the creatures from the sea.

Ten minutes later the thin blue thread was a belching cloud. Below decks turbo-generators whined at speed, and aloft the anti-potential grids gleamed with the soft green halos of the protective repulsion fields.

HER sodium fog lights boring yellow tunnels through the night mist, the *Mermaid* scudded over the *Molo Ivrus* at her maximum of twenty knots. In the wheelhouse Hodge noisily sucked his pipe, staring the while at Kort, who had the wheel.

"Wouldn't figure on staying on this tub with me, would you?" Hodge asked suddenly. "I'm in line for the captain's berth, but damned if I can think of anybody to recommend for my first mate. Exceptin' you."

"I—I hadn't said I was leaving," Kort replied.

"You hadn't said—but you were thinkin' plain out," murmured Hodge. "Noticed in the last few hours how the men are acting?"

A grin touched his grizzled face as Kort made no answer. "Haven't noticed how they jump when you give an order now, son? You're a blinkin' hero, by Jerusalem. Weren't for you they'd be scrapin' ribs with the sharks by now, and they know it."

Kort flushed in silence but said nothing. "Only thing I couldn't tell 'em," complained Hodge, "was how you knew the things would have left the ship after you killed just that one."

"That was a wild guess," admitted Kort, spinning the wheel briefly. "That one was no more solid than the others—until it was dead. I wondered where it was when it wasn't there. And suddenly the answer came—all over the ship, of course. During that part of its period when it wasn't in the cabin it was in the stoke-hole and on deck and maybe on the bottom, three miles down, besides. Because it wasn't several, but all one. Just one thing, with the power of being several places at once." He paused, then continued.

"You thought it fed on heat energy and oxygen. Well, there's precious little of both three miles down. It could absorb more of what there was by splitting itself up—probably had to, to survive. By projecting ten images of itself, all capable of feeding for the common benefit—it had ten chances for food instead of one. When I killed it in the cabin it materialized there and disappeared elsewhere, because its vibratory form depended on life, that is, on will or instinct."

Hodge rapped the pipe on the palm of his hand. "Wouldn't surprise me if you doped it right all the way through, son. And I can't say I don't believe it. Sea's so full of surprises she never quite does surprise me."

He moved to the door, paused. "You think over that first mate's berth. I think this is one crew that would be proud to have a gold brick mate. Because you don't want to forget, son, that a gold brick is a pretty fine thing to have—if it's genuine clean through."

PS's Feature Flash

FLASHING you the highlights on one of the men you've met in the preceding pages—those cosmic-minded writers who help to nourish Planet Stories.

"WHO is Bond; what is he; that all his fans adore him?" We really feel a bit ashamed that only now are we getting around to an expose of the genes and chromosomes of this consistently popular SF author. We would have put him in earlier, but quite frankly we've been blasting along under the comfortable—but altogether erroneous—impression that he already *had* been represented. So, hastening to make amends, we asked him to dash off a short column about himself, telling us all. The versatile Mr. Bond replied with the following interesting letter.

If there is, as one or two readers have been kind enough to say, a certain amount of verisimilitude and conviction in my science-fiction stories, it is undoubtedly because I am not only a fantasy writer, but a fantasy fan as well. I became one "way back when," and before there were such things as science-fiction magazines avidly devoured all I could unearth in the way of "conjectural fiction."

Naturally, when some three or four years ago I became a full-time writer, I elected to inject into my favorite field my own pet theories of the World-to-Be. Such men and women as Lancelot Biggs, Hank Cleaver, Meg the Priestess and Blaster Bill are the results of this day-dreaming.

I am completely confident that in the days that lie before us—always, of course, harring the possibility of a "bloodthirsty guttersnipe" hurling mankind backward into a new Dark Age—those things of which we now read and write: space-travel, atomic power, interplanetary communication, etc., will be attained. I deeply wish I might be one of those who live to witness their attainment. But if I cannot, I must be content to be one who keeps the dream alive, in the hope that some bright-eyed youngster of today or tomorrow may, inspired, turn science-fiction into science-fact.

The Vital Statistics concerning Nelson S. Bond are unimportant. I am thirty-two, married, and mail my manuscripts from *Sans Souf*, just outside of Roanoke, Va. I talk approximately a half million words a year into my Dictaphone. I've sold, to date, three novels, numerous articles, and more than 150 short stories—a number of which I am now preparing into "omnibus" form for possible book publication. And I am *still* to be ranked among the most ardent of science-fiction fans.



“SHADRACH”

By NELSON S. BOND

Once, in Bible times, three men were cast into a fiery furnace—and lived! Now, on far-off, frozen Titania, three space-bitten Shadrachs faced the same awful test of godship.

THE man at the end of the bar was very drunk. That was not, in itself, unusual. Xuerl's Cosmobar, dangling like a leech on the drab outskirts of Mars Central, did not cater to a select clientele. It was not noted for its culture or gentility; it was famed from one end of the System to another as a place where a hard-fisted, full-pursed spaceman, newly in from the mines or out from Earth, could get a weapon or a wench, a bottle or a battle, any or all with equal clerety. And at an instant's notice.

But the man at the end of the bar was very drunk. So drunk, indeed, that he seemed neither to notice nor to be concerned about the actions of his comrades. And they, Chip Warren thought as he watched the bleary man pour yet another jigger of green from a malevolently gleaming bottle of *lisk*, were a particularly evil-looking and ill-assorted lot. Even for a dive like this.

“A Venusian,” he mused, “a greenie, a runt—and an Earthman. Like bugs in a rug. . . .”

“Trink?” piped a thin, reedy voice at Chip's elbow. “Trink, ssor?”

Chip shook his head in reply to the Martian barman's query. Damned chrysanthemum! he thought. Damned squeaking, upright chrysanthemum! He would never, so long as he lived, get used to hearing English speech emanating from the curled petals that served as a Redlander's head. Martians tried to look like Earthlings. They braced their soft, pallid bodies in steel uprights, they underwent serious and probably painful operations to give themselves a humanoid appearance, but they still looked—and always would to Chip—like ungainly flowers of madness.

“No,” he said. “Not just now, thanks. Later.” He returned his gaze to the group at the end of the bar. A new member had joined the quartet. Another Earthman. Warren's eyes became more speculative as the newcomer drew the Jovian aside, queried him briefly, then moved to the drunken man's shoulder.

“Trink?” piped the persistent voice of the barman.

“Blast jets!” said Chip curtly. “I'll order when I get damn good and—*hey!*”

THE gasp broke unbidden from his lips. In the din and confusion of Xuerl's Cosmobar it went unnoticed, even as had gone unnoticed by everyone else the momentary byplay he had glimpsed.

As the newcomer slipped his arm about the drunken man's shoulder, the first Earthman, turning suddenly, dropped from his hand to the floor a previously concealed *something*. A silvery, glistening, round *something* that hit the floor—and bounced!

Four figures reacted immediately, violently, eagerly. The Venusian, the Uranian, the Jovian—like four minds with but a single thought they formed a wall of flesh around the drunken one. The other Earthman's hand leaped out greedily to catch the bouncing blob on the rebound. But in vain. The drunk had retrieved the object, shoved it into a pocket.

But Chip Warren knew what the object was. It was a ball of ekalastron!

Ekalastron! Most recently discovered, rarest, and most precious of all metals known to man! A metal so unique that up to the time of its discovery there had been no place for it in man's supposedly “complete” periodic table.

A metal that, defying man's previous de-

liberations on the habits of metals, supplied man with the most valuable servant he had ever known. A metal so light that a child could carry enough in one hand to coat the entire hull of a space-cruiser—yet so adamant that a gossamer film of it would deflect the impact of a meteorite or the battering crush of a rotor-gun shell! A metal strong enough to grind diamonds to powder—but so resilient that, when molded and properly treated, it would bounce like a rubber ball!

In all the wide universe, hungry mankind had found less than two tons of this vitally precious new metal. An ounce was worth a prince's ransom; so jealously was each gram weighed, guarded and distributed that the U.S.C.—Universal Science Council—could account for every known ounce of it. Yet here, in the noisy bar of Mars' most infamous refuge for scoundrels, a drunken miner tugged with a chunk the size of a billiard ball!

If Chip Warren's attention had previously been attracted by the oddly-assorted quintet, it was riveted now. Fierce curiosity hunched him forward. Abandoning all shame at eavesdropping, he strained eyes and ears upon the group.

It was well that he did so. Otherwise he would not have seen the sober Earthman's gesture to the bartender, the bartender's furtive acquiescence, the tentacular hand opening a colorless phial, pouring its contents into the miner's bottle of *lisk*. There would have been no one to protect the drunken man from the drug that would swiftly have left him at the mercy of his companions.

But Chip was watching. And moving on raw instinct, without a thought for the consequences, he surged forward. His arm brushed the surprised Uranian aside, his hand thrust just in time to sweep the doped drink from the miner's lips. Glass shattered on the floor, singing a shrill song. Chip's challenging voice echoed its brittle crispness.

"Hold course a minute, buckoes!" he ordered. "What in space goes on around here?"

CHIP thought afterward that never in his life had he ever looked upon such stark, forbidding coldness as that which, in the next moment, flamed upon him

from the eyes of the newly arrived Earthman.

Everything about the man was cold, bitter and bleak as the hostile depths of space. His eyes were glacier-gray, his lips thin and bloodless as hoarfrost; the hand he shoved forward to grip Chip's wrist in steely grasp was like ice.

The coldness of death was in his voice, although he spoke with infinite quietude.

"I might ask the same of you, sailor." The man had raven-black hair save where, from a widow's peak, one single swatch of pure white sprang startlingly to lie like a stream of ice between dark banks. "By what right do you intrude on a private party?"

Chip shook the man's hand from his wrist. His eyes parried with hot defiance the stranger's frigid calm.

"By the right of any man," he growled, "to see fair play! I saw—"

"A moment, sailor!" The man's voice was like a low note struck in warning. "Before you tell what you saw, you might like to know who I am. My name is Blaze Amborg."

"I don't give a portside blast," snarled Chip, "if your name is Lucifer himself. I saw—"

"You haven't been out here long, have you, sailor? Well—that's your misfortune, I fear. Torth!"

He inclined his head gently toward the giant Venusian. The big man rolled forward. His hamlike paws reached for Chip. But fast as he moved, Chip moved faster still; in the split of a second his hand had found his belt. The dull lights of the Cosmobar glinted sallowly on metal that prodded Amborg's middle.

"So that's the way it is, eh?" gritted Chip. "Your bullies do your fighting for you? Well, maybe you're right. I haven't been out here long. But where I come from, men do their own scrapping. Now—tell these scum of yours to keep their distance, or by the Seven Sacred Stars, I'll let ether through you!"

A man could not tell by studying Amborg's features if his lips were white with fear or what. But the ice in his eyes was deeper, more shadowy. And he said, "Back, Torth!"

"That's better!" approved Chip. "And now—come out of it, you!" The drunken

man had finally slipped out of the picture. Blissfully unaware of what was going on about him, his head had slumped to the bar. He was asleep, lips loosely agape, breath coming in sodden grunts. Chip grasped the nape of his neck, shook him roughly. “Pull yourself together!” he commanded. “We’re getting out of here!”

The man came to with a start, stared at Chip Warren blearily. “W-whuzzup? Whuzzmatter? Don’ shake me like that, ole boy. All pals t’gether. All good ole pals. . . .”

His head dropped forward again, and Chip sighed. It was like kicking a pup, he thought, but it had to be done. His rousing slap jarred the drunk to grieved awareness.

“Hey! *Don’* do that! We’re pals, ain’t we? All—”

“I wouldn’t know about that,” snorted Chip. “But I *do* know these other ‘pals’ of yours are getting ready to dig you for that—that stuff in your pocket.”

THAT did it. The warning drove its way through the miner’s stupor. His head jerked up, his eyes widened, and a hand clawed at his pocket.

“*What?* My ekalastron? The filthy thieves—!”

His loud voice carried throughout the room clearly. Too clearly. For with a sudden fear, Chip could feel a tension tighten through the hard habits of the bar. Nervous scrapings of feet, the *frou-frou* of suddenly intense voices. “Ekalastron! Eka—”

For a moment, Chip’s guard relaxed. He twisted his head to survey a new and potent danger. And as he did so, a sharp cry burst from Amborg’s lips. “Raat ‘Aran! Torth!”

Chip whirled back to face immediate trouble. Shapes were plunging down upon him. He wheeled, slipped, tumbled to one side even as the scorching burst of a needle gun seared a hissing path past his shoulder. Someone behind screamed a high, thin scream that died in a choked gurgle. . . .

Then all was madness! The magic word “ekalastron” had wakened the riches-lust of the mob; now the presence of death had roused its blood-lust. In the space of a moment’s time, a score of guns were

drawn and wildly flaming as the throng charged the bar.

Chip only lived in that moment because he lay helplessly asprawl upon the floor. The hobnailed boots of miners kicked and trampled him, thick bodies struggled, cursed and groaned above him. Once as he tried to scramble to his feet his hand slipped nauseatingly in a pool of freshly spilled and steaming blood.

He was aware that somewhere in the howling mob that fought, not knowing why, and fighting died, the glacier-eyed Amborg strained for sight of him. But the tide of conflict, sweeping over and about them, separated them.

There came a reedy cry in the voice of the Martian barman; the lights went out suddenly, and the room was alive and spiteful with the flames of criss-crossing fire-needles. A questing hand found Chip’s throat in the darkness, fingers tightened. But in a flash of fire, Chip saw the figure atop him suddenly crumple, steel clattered aimlessly beside him as his assailant choked and died. Thus close to him walked mad, unreasoning Death.

But he was on his feet again, now, and armed! Chip forced his way toward that spot at the bar where last he had glimpsed the drunken miner. No figure stood there, but his feet stumbled against a yielding body. He stooped—then he blinked as the lights suddenly flared on again.

He looked upon a frightful scene of carnage. Where men had fought, a dozen bodies lay upon the floor like broken things; elsewhere about the room a dozen struggling piles of life, human and humanoid, white, coral and green, Earth-born and spawn of a dozen globes, still fought their purposeless battle. And at the far side of the room—

Amborg!

But Amborg had seen him first. Even as he raised his needle-gun, Chip realized the dousing of the lights, the sudden return of them, had been a trick of Amborg’s to gain advantage. The other man had the drop on him . . . even now his hand was tightening on the press.

And then, miraculously—

“Hold!” cried a thunderous voice. “Stay now thine hand from the sword, yea, loose not thine arrow from the bow—else by My might shall I crush thee to

the dust, truly My lightnings shall wither thee with fire!" Thus saith my Lord God which is Jehovah!"

A vast, awed silence fell suddenly upon the room, a paralysis seized all forms and held them motionless. Amborg stayed his finger. All eyes sought the doorway. And there, covering the whole of the Cosmobar with the ugliest but most efficient looking piece of private ordnance Chip had seen in his life, stood a man. A tall, gangling scarecrow garbed in rusty black; a lean-jawed, hawk-eyed man with tumbling locks of silver and blazing eyes.

A whisper arose from men's lips. A whisper at once respectful and—fearful.

"It's Salvation! Salvation Smith!"

FOR a long, dramatic moment the old man stood there in the doorway; then, satisfied that all motion had stopped, he stepped forward into the room. Chip knew, now, who—and what—he was. "Salvation" Smith, sin-driving missionary of the Wastelands, was a legendary, almost fabulous, figure of the Martian scene.

A devoutly religious man with the heart and soul of a pioneer, he had taken upon himself the mission of carrying to the savage outland tribes the story of the God he worshipped. That this God was Him of the Old Testament, a God of wrath and vengeance, fire and flame, was evidenced by those methods Salvation sometimes employed to make his message acceptable to uncivilized breasts. In addition to being the most pious man on Mars, Salvation was also reputed to be the best shot!

Earth's softhanded ecclesiastics did not altogether approve of their wayward missionary's reputation, but had to concede that he, working unaided and alone, had done more to bring the light to Mars than the rest of their emissaries as a group.

Thus Salvation Smith, who stared now at the corpses on the floor and muttered beneath his breath a prayer so hot and violent as to be almost blasphemous.

There came a shrill bleat, and Xuerl, proprietor of the infamous Cosmobar, minced across the floor, grotesque in the rigid habiliments that lent him a humanoid shape.

"Sssalvation," he pleaded, "Thiss wasss

none of my doing, sssir! I have kept the peace, as I promissed—"

"Silence!" roared the old man, and frowned. "Your foul den is a stench in the nostrils of Heaven. I am tiring swiftly of your iniquitous ways, Xuerl! One day I—shall—who started this, anyway?" he demanded.

"Thiss man!" Xuerl pointed a quavering tentacle at Chip. Salvation gazed at the young man sternly.

"You are new around here. What is your name?"

"Chip Warren. I'm just out from Earth a week or so ago. Free-lance prospector. But—but I didn't start this, sir. I merely interfered when that man and his thugs tried to steal a ball of ekaalstron from this dead miner—"

Chip paused suddenly, staring at the drunken miner.

"But he's still alive! I thought—"

SALVATION was at his side in an instant. They both knelt beside the miner, whose eyes had flickered open. He was no longer influenced by drink. His eyes were clear with prevision of a longer flight than he had ever known. For a moment he struggled for breath. There was recognition in his feeble tones.

"S-salvation—"

"Peace, my son. We will take you to a hospital."

"N-never mind that, Padre. It's too late. But the ekaalstron—"

"You stole it, my son? You wish to confess?"

"N-no, Padre! Not stolen. I found it. A mine—" His breath was coming in tiny, tortured gasps; he spoke more swiftly as if aware that he must tell his secret ere silence claim him. "Danger . . . on Titania! The caves . . . natives . . . and the furnace of flame . . . beware!"

"But he survived!" Chip burst in. "He got some and returned. Ask him how, Padre!"

The miner's head moved slightly as if to signify he understood the query, but even as his lips moved to frame an answer, a swift, cold shadow frosted his eyes with glaze. A moment his breath stopped. Then it shuddered back as with a violent effort the dying man dragged

himself back from death itself. A convulsion shook him. He cried weakly the single word:

"*Shadrach!*"

Then a blood-specked spume gushed from his lips and he lay still. "May the Lord have mercy on his soul!" begged Salvation Smith. He pushed Chip gently away, fumbled at the dead man's clothing, arranging it more neatly, then rose.

"He is gone," he told the spellbound assembly. "He is gone, bearing with him to the world beyond the secret for which you jackals strove. Thus be it, O Lord God of Hosts!"

But one man did not accept this as final. That man was Blaze Amborg who, bolstered now by his hard-bitten group of outlaws, strode forward belligerently.

"Not so fast, psalm-singer! He and I were partners. Anything he had belongs to *me* now!" He bent over and with a jerk disarranged the clothing Salvation had smoothed. "And by the Comet, I'm going to have it—" His hands moved with deft assurance, then with tense, hardening suspicion. "It's gone!" He wheeled to face Chip. "You stole it! You—"

But the old missionary barred his rush with a steel forearm. "Slowly, my friend! What is gone?"

"The ball of ekastron! It's worth a fortune, and it's mine! This snoopy young thief—"

Salvation turned to Chip sternly. "Well, young man—is this true? Did you steal it? If so—"

"I didn't. I swear I didn't!"

"He was bending over Jenkins," Amborg raged, "when the lights went on. He's got it! Let me at him!"

"There has been sufficient violence!" snapped Salvation Smith. He turned to Chip. "Young man, I order you to let your accuser search you. If you are truly innocent, you will not demur. If you refuse—" He shifted his rifle from one horny palm to another significantly. "Justice shall prevail!"

"Very well!" said Chip. He submitted himself to Amborg's triumphant search. His flesh ran cold at the feel of the man's icy fingers, and a dull resentment suffused him—but he got his reward in the look of bafflement that grew on Amborg's face as it became clear that the missing sphere

was not on his person. "Are you satisfied now?" he demanded.

Amborg's normally pale face was whiter still with impotent fury; his eyes flamed with hatred. "It's not *on* you," he admitted. "But I know you took it. You've hidden it somewhere. I'm not through with you yet, sailor! I'll have that metal or—"

"There will be no 'or'!" proclaimed Salvation Smith stridently. "The lad has passed the test and proven himself guiltless; the case is closed. He will walk from this place unharmed—in my company! 'The true man shall suffer no hurt, neither shall the righteous fail.' Come, my son!"

And he lifted his gun. Blaze Amborg's lips thinned to a hard, white line. But he made no reckless move as the two men stalked silently from the room. . . .

II

THE Martian night was clear and cold. Its thin air was sweetly welcome to Chip's nostrils. When they gained the street outside, Salvation spoke to him suddenly. "Where is your ship, my son?"

"Ship, sir?" queried Warren. "But why—?"

"Don't waste time!" snapped the old man. "We're in grave danger. Blaze Amborg is a man of violence. In a few minutes he'll figure out what happened to the ekastron and be out looking for us."

Chip stared at him. "The ekastron? But what *did* happen to it? It disappeared—"

"Into," grunted Salvation, "my pocket! While I was arranging Jenkins' clothing. 'He who taketh in the cause of righteousness hath done the will of the Lord!' Amborg is an evil, wilful man. He would have used the ekastron for his own wicked purposes. In our hands, all mankind shall profit of its beneficence. But, come! Where?"

"C-churchill Field," stammered Chip. "Dock 31, Bin A. T-this way, Padre."

They moved at quickened stride through the darkened streets. As they neared the cradles wherein lay the vessels of a thousand diverse ports, Salvation questioned Chip still further.

"What type of ship is it, lad?"

"Not a very new one, sir. A Challenger 7-jet, four berth explorer. But in good shape. My friend and I managed to get it cheap, reconditioned it—"

"Then you have a companion?"

"Yes, Padre. Syd Palmer. He's waiting aboard. We had planned to lift graves tomorrow for a prospecting tour of the planetoids. I visited the Cosmobar because I thought I might run into some old space-dodger who would give me a tip on a lode-rock—"

"And you ran into," said the missionary, "something which may turn out to be the greatest discovery ever made by man. Murder . . . thievery . . . wealth . . . is this the ship?"

They had stopped before one of the smaller cradles. Chip pressed a signal button, a buzzer responded, there came from within the familiar wheeze of an air-lock generator.

"This is it, sir. Please step in. 'Lo, Syd. This is Doctor—Mister—"

"Call me 'Salvation,'" said the old man. "I'm used to it. Palmer, I take it you're the chief engineer of this jalopy?"

Syd Palmer was short and chubby; his hair was a tow colored bristle that stood up like a cock's-comb when he was excited or annoyed. It stood up now, and his pale blue eyes danced with tiny, indignant sparks.

"I'm the engineer of this *ship!*"

"Call it what you will," grunted Salvation. "Is it fast?"

Palmer grinned. "Puh-lenty! I've hepped the hypos to super-max. The *Chickadee* can outrun anything its size in space, and a lot of bigger ones, besides!"

"Good! And have you got clearance papers?"

"Why, yes, but—"

"Excellent: 'Verily, He taketh care of His own nor faileth them in time of need.'" Salvation nodded to Warren. "We'll lift graves," he said, "immediately!"

Palmer stared at him, then at his companion.

"What is this, Chip? Old boy off his jets?"

"Far from it," said Chip seriously. "Can't explain everything now, Syd; time's too short. But you like a good, old-fashioned fight, don't you?"

"Fight? Sa-a-ay, now—"

"Then warm the hypos," ordered Chip, "while I plot a course. We're lifting graves immediately—for Titania."

DURING the long days that followed, there was time and to spare in which to clarify the situation to Syd. When he heard of Chip's adventure at the Cosmobar, his pale eyes gleamed and fists less chubby than they appeared tightened at his sides. "Wish I'd been there—" he muttered. Salvation glared at him and snorted, "'Verily they are fools who do not rejoice that they have escaped woe!'"

And when Chip showed him the ball of ekaalstron—

"Glory be!" exclaimed Syd. "There's enough to dip a whole battle unit in that one ball! What are we going to Titania for? Why not fly this to Earth immediately and let the Council know—"

"Because Amborg knows," replied Chip grimly, "that this came from Titania. He was nearby when Jenkins said so in his dying breath. That was probably the secret Amborg's thugs had been trying to probe from the miner all night. I have a hunch that Amborg is out there somewhere right now!"

He nodded toward the quartzite view-pane. Outside lay space—the long, dreary reaches of space between Mars and Uranus. But it didn't look like space. Not like space as navigators a short ten years ago had known it, an eternal pall of blackness spangled with the livid dots of a myriad stars.

This was a blotched, striped, crazy-quilt of color. Crimson, ochre, emerald—all the hues of the rainbow merged into a faery, magic loveliness. This was space as seen when Man traveled at the terrific speed attainable only through the use of the recently developed V-I unit, velocity intensifier, invented by that mad genius of the spaceways, Lancelot Biggs of the lugger, *Saturn*.

Five years ago, in the year 2210, the fastest craft in the ether had had a top speed of approximately 200,000 miles per hour. Now almost every ship was equipped with the V-I adapter that gave it a flight-potential limited only by the critical velocity of light. Where once it would have required almost ten months to reach Titania, second satellite of far Uranus,

the trio could now expect to gain their destination, traveling at a speed of more than 650,000,000 mph., in something less than half that many *days!*

“I have a hunch,” repeated Chip, “that Amborg and his crew are somewhere out there right now, speeding, as we are, to Titania. Of course we can’t tell. We’re not equipped with a magno-tector, and we couldn’t see them unless by sheer chance they should approach within our visibility parallax.

“But when we get to Titania and slow down, we must go on the alert. Salvation has told me about Amborg. He’s a hard, brilliant man with a dangerously criminal mind. Let him find Jenkins’ ore-deposit and the Federation of Planets would pay through the nose for his discovery. Jenkins said there was a whole mine of ekalastron. With that at his disposal, Amborg could make himself a robber baron. An Emperor of the outlaw world.”

“Which is why,” Salvation offered gravely, “we must get there before he does. Lay claim to the deposit, somehow secure its safety against the arrival of I.P.S. troops. Can we but find the mine, soldiers will come in jigtime from New Oslo on Uranus. But—”

Syd nodded.

“I see. But we couldn’t walk into the garrison and hand them a line about a “mine” of ekalastron. They’d shove us into the nearest looney-bin. And I wouldn’t blame them a bit. If I didn’t know Chip Warren like I know my own lovely pan—but suppose we meet Amborg?”

“The Lord,” said Salvation, “is my strength and my salvation. In His hands do I place my guidance.” His lean hands flexed powerfully. “We destroy them,” he said gently, “like the rats they are . . .”

Thus four days sped by in plan and conjecture. And on the fifth day Syd Palmer cut the velocity-intensifiers to normal, and a scant thousand miles beneath them, so accurate had been Chip’s astrology, gleamed the silvery mote which was Titania, second child of the mother planet, Uranus.

“Well done, my son!” approved Salvation. “The best landcast I’ve ever seen!”

Palmer was less exuberant. He stared

at Titania, scratched his yellow crest morbidly.

“A damn snowball!” he mourned. “A damned snowball, eight hundred miles in diameter! Sweet crimes of Beelzebub, Chip, how do you ever expect to find a pinpoint of a mine on that huge hunk of ice? It will take us ages!”

“We’ll cruise at low elevation,” said Chip, “until we see something. There must be a dark spot showing against that sheen of white somewhere. Jenkins spoke of caverns and natives and flame. We have plenty of supplies—*look out!*”

He leaped even as he shouted. Leaped to the panels and jammed the full strength of his six foot plus frame to a deflecting lever. The control room of the *Chickadee* whirled giddily as the little ship spun into a crazy spiral; Palmer yelped, skidding helplessly across the floor. Salvation let loose a roar and clung ardently to a stanchion, his silvery locks whipping straight out from his head with the force of the drive.

Chip threw himself into the bucket-shaped pilot’s-chair, gained possession of the controls. An instant later, the *Chickadee* was tossing through the maddest gyrations Chip could devise. Fore, loft and jet, with hypos throbbing, the little craft was blasting, shaking, quivering like a leaf in a cyclone.

And above the tumult of racing hypos came the sound of Syd’s voice: “What is it, Chip? Amborg?”

Chip nodded tightly, his hands gripping the control levers, his eyes glued to the perilens through which he saw the enemy craft. A larger ship, with a red fang darting from its prow, slashing viciously at the bobbing *Chickadee*. “It’s Blaze Amborg, all right! And he means business! He’s got an Ingermann ray-rotor on that crate of his; he’s trying to burn us clean out of the ether!”

CHIP WARREN and Syd Palmer were the co-owners of the *Chickadee*; it was Chip whose alertness had saved them in that first, terrifying moment, Chip it was who still held the controls. But it was Salvation Smith who usurped the mastership during the crisis.

“Hell’s flaming damnation!” he cried, and there rang in his voice a rage above

weak need of profanity. "Lend now Thy servant strength, O Lord, to smite these sons of Hurkan!" He whirled on Palmer, snarling. "Break out bulgers for us in case they should pierce the hull! Chip, son, do the controls answer well? Good! Keep dodging. Swing aft; the beam can't nip you there! You've armament aboard this heap?"

Syd, tugging three spacesuits from the store-closet, puffed over his shoulder, "Only a low-cycle heat-gun. There! Under that tarp. Press the green stud to clear the nose from the hull-plates. It's retractable—"

"You're telling me," bellowed Salvation, "how to rig a cannon? I was teething on a lanyard, praise be to Jehovah!" He had the tarpaulin off in a jiffy, the fore-irons open, and shot an experimental burst from the small weapon. He smiled. "Good! But you've got to get closer to him, Chip; this thing is only effective at short range."

Chip said dubiously, "I don't know, Padre. Perhaps we should cut and run for it. If that beam hits us—"

"Are we mice," bellowed Salvation, "or men? You've got to get closer! The Lord is our right hand. 'Surely the evil shall fail, yea, the way of the transgressor shall perish!'" He loosed another blast from the small gun, breathed a sigh of satisfaction. "Aaah! that's better! Closer!"

"You're the skipper!" decided Chip suddenly. A jab of the finger, the stern-jets crackled and the *Chickadee* cut suddenly to starboard, swinging straight toward the craft of Blaze Amborg.

So unexpected was the move that it caught the enemy gunner napping. For an instant he had a clear target before him. But he had not been expecting such luck, and before he could center his sights on the *Chickadee*, the smaller vessel was streaking down upon and over his own.

And Salvation Smith's voice shouted triumph through the room. "'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord!' he intoned, "'I shall repay!'" His hand jerked the release-stud.

And as though the metal skin of the enemy boat were tinfoil held above a flame, there appeared suddenly upon its hull a leprous spot of black, from the curling edges of which silvery alloy

sloughed off in rolling, sluggish waves. From within the ship small motes poured forth, sucked out by the frigid vacuum of space to explode and die frightfully; sore, raw, pressured clots of matter that had been men. The other ship reeled for a moment like a stricken hart, then crumpled upon itself, a wildly spinning boom-erang of death.

"You got 'em!" squealed Syd Palmer from his vantage spot at the perilens. "Got 'em all, Padre! No—there goes a life-skiff from the wreck!" His voice rose in sharp fear. "Omigod! Swing out, Chip! Swing—"

But Chip had seen the new danger as quickly as his comrade. Here was peril beyond Amborg's fondest devising. As the stricken ship, folding upon itself, spun aimlessly in space, its forejet wheeled like a flaming spiral—and from the prow still flamed the withering, crimson ray now untended by living hands!

Like a gigantic scythe it flailed the ether, swinging a huge curve directly toward the *Chickadee*. Vainly Chip jammed the studs before him, striving to escape above, below or beyond that sword of doom.

There came the ear-splitting crash of impact, metal screamed thin agony, rending itself to shreds somewhere aft; the *Chickadee* shuddered like a pole-felled steer under its mortal wound.

Instinct shot Chip's hands to the lock-stud which sealed the control chamber airtight from the rest of the ship; that action alone spared them for a few minutes. But each of them knew the ship was doomed to crash. Syd croaked, "Here! The bulgers! Get in them—*quick!*"

Split seconds later, they were three grotesque figures huddled before the control board, staring through quartzite globular headpanes at Chip's last, frenzied efforts to break the fall of the *Chickadee*. The studs beneath his fingers were unresponsive as the inarticulate phalanges of a broken limb. In vain and desperately he struggled to gain a modicum of control over the falling craft, now firmly gripped by Titania's gravitational field. They had fallen into the high atmosphere of the little globe, now; thin winds howled and bansheed about their sharded hull, and the

walls of the room began to heat.

The aft jets were dead, the anti-gravs broken, helpless. There remained but one possible way in which to keep them from being crushed to bits. A prow landing, braked by the fore jets. It was dangerous, but—

“There!” cried Syd. “Look there, Chip! Below us!”

Chip risked a brief glance, saw that the smooth and icy surface of Titania was broken by a long, ragged swath of black. Ironic laughter curled the corners of his tight-set lips. What a quirk of fate that here, with death but a hair’s-breadth removed, they should unwittingly find that for which under happier circumstances they might have sought endlessly and in vain. The promised spot of habitation on the bleak little moon of Uranus.

“I’m fore-jetting!” he crisped. “Stand by for—a fadeout!”

Salvation’s hand was on his shoulder, reassuringly, somehow warm despite its casement of rubberoid fabric. “Be of strong heart, my son,” he said simply, “He who watcheth the fall of the smallest sparrow, He shall not fail His own in their hour of need.”

Then Chip pressed the necessary, the only remaining responsive keys. And the control room trembled like a hurt thing, seemed to stop stock-still in space, shake itself for a moment—then plunge on. Forejets flamed blast upon roaring blast. Chip felt the gravitational force seem to lessen as the flares beat stubbornly against the adamant breast of the globe below. Drop . . . stagger . . . drop again . . . the shocking concussion of brakes . . . then a swift, dizzy, headlong fall . . .

Wild winds howled, and the din of metals tortured beyond endurance slashed at Chip’s eardrums. He was aware of the last cry of Syd Palmer, his life-long friend. “Luck, Chip, old pal—!” And the remembered ghost of Salvation’s promise. “He shall not fail His own—”

Then a horrendous crash jarred his head back on the seat. A smashing veil of crimson settled before his eyes . . . then there was darkness. And silence.

HE felt some mad conceit that this was death . . . that the restless fingers of the gray unalive plucked at his arm,

bidding him rise and stir forward toward he knew not what.

Then suddenly he was awake, alive, and conscious—and it was not death, but life; fingers *did* tug at him, but they were the figures of—

“*Ranies!*” cried Chip. “Hands off, you! Or—”

The green complexioned native growled some guttural comment, moved closer rather than away, and pinioned Chip’s arms to his sides. Chip saw, now, that the *Chickadee*, though battered and broken beyond hope of repair, had miraculously grounded without destroying them all. For Syd was stirring, and Salvation, too, but each of them was surrounded by green natives, as was Chip. These creatures, the nearest approach to Man’s physiology that had ever been found in the System, were tall and rugged, masterfully built. They were equipped with native lariats or bolas; these they whipped cuttingly about their captives.

Chip strained lashed fingers toward the heat-pistol in his belt. But Salvation, seeing his motion, stopped him.

“No, lad! Relax! Don’t make a hostile move!”

Chip growled, “No damned greenie is going to make a trussed duck out of me. If I can reach this gun—”

“If you value your life,” said Salvation, “and your welfare, keep your hands quiet and your wits active! These creatures aren’t Uranians. They’re Titanians. An offspring of the parent race, but as savage and untamed as beasts.

“I don’t know what they plan to do with us. I have heard they are a strange, mystical race; their tribal rites and taboos are many and—dangerous! Our only chance is to be quiet, try to reason with them, convince them we are not foes but friends—”

All three were securely tied, now, save for their legs. The tallest Titanian, evidently the group chieftain, grunted a word of command. Strong arms prodded Chip and his fellows forward, out of the broken *Chickadee*, into the bleak landscape of Titania.

They had crashed in the dark spot Chip had viewed from above. They discovered, now, that this spot was dark because—*incredibly*—here the thick, icy blanket had

been stripped away to discover the raw and rocky core of the Uranian moon.

Black rocks thrust jagged spires skyward, mountains of stone girdled this one clear space on the whole of Titania; greater wonder still, gnarled and stunted trees, lichens of hardiest verdure, eked a precarious existence from the grudging soil.

And here the natives had—a village. One coarser, cruder, than the village of the meanest of Earth's savages, but a village nonetheless. Slab dwellings dabbled with thick black clay, a central structure, larger than the rest, something that looked like a market—or community gathering-spot.

Chip's wonderment had made him impervious at first to such trivia as personal comfort and discomfort. He found now, though, that he was cold. By dint of much effort, he managed to squirm a hand to his belt-studs, operate the tiny needle that increased the warmth of his spacesuit.

Almost immediately there came a howl from the green native maintaining a vigilant grip on Chip's arm; the fellow leaped away, bellowing angry, guttural speech at his leader.

And Salvation spun to Chip swiftly.

"Chip—turn down that heat, boy!"

"B—but—" stammered Chip.

"Quickly!"

Chip obeyed. It was well he did so, for the leader was moving toward him menacingly. With a cautious finger he touched Chip's suit. Then, apparently mollified to discover it satisfactorily cold, he snarled a word or two and the little party moved on.

Chip stared at the old missionary.

"But, why?" he demanded. "What did I do wrong? I don't get it. I was freezing, then—and—"

"Then you've got to freeze," said Salvation Smith, "and like it. Until we can escape from these creatures. Do you have any idea how cold it is here on Titania, my boy?"

Chip said, "Why, plenty cold, I suppose—"

"About minus 380°Fahrenheit!" said Smith. "That's all. Uranians and Titanians may *look* like Earthmen, lad, but they're built entirely different. They are not children of the Sun, as we are. Their

bodies are so constituted as to be able to stand extremes of frigidity that would quick-freeze us like salmon. Sluggish basal metabolism, dermal, rather than pneumonic respiration—these enable them to endure what to us appear the impossible living conditions of a world on which mercury and gallium are adamant solids, liquid hydrogen forms seas, and the snow is carbon dioxide.

"When you turned on the heating unit of your bulger you subjected that native's hand to what was to him a burning, unendurable heat!"

Chip nodded.

"I see. That makes sense. But—but there must be some warmth around here? A cleared patch—"

"I haven't yet decided whether this patch was cleared by heat or labor," said Salvation. "If we can make them believe we are friends, I may learn. I can sling their talk a little. It's not unlike the Uranian language. But—"

He stopped, and his voice rose to a shout. "Behold! Thou hast delivered mine enemy into mine hands, O Lord; Thou hast brought the wicked even unto judgment!"

And Chip, following his gaze, saw a second party of Titanians approaching the central gathering place from the opposite direction. These natives held captive, even as he and Salvation and Syd were held, an ill-assorted foursome in spacemen's bulgers. A giant Venusian, a greenie, a dwarfed Jovian and an Earthman!

"Amborg!" yelled Chip. "Blaze Amborg and his crew! They got away on that life-skiff, but they were caught when they landed! Padre—"

It had not occurred to him that the arms of Amborg and his men would not be, like their own, lashed securely. Thus it came as a heart-stopping shock to hear Amborg's cry ring in their ears, a sharp cry of command—then suddenly there flamed from the sidearms of the other captive group the withering blasts of heat-guns!

III

CHIP WARREN had bitterly resented the close guard with which the Titanians had surrounded him and his comrades; he had reason, now, to be grate-

ful for that very protection. Otherwise his dreams of space adventure would have ended suddenly and terribly in that moment.

As it was, the foremost wall of Titanians took the brunt of Amborg's vicious attack. They screamed as pencils of crimson scorched the life from their unprotected bodies, screamed and died horribly, falling in blackened piles that whimpered futilely for an instant and were still.

Chip had never known a moment of such dreadful impotence as this. Arms lashed to his sides, his own weapon as securely removed from his grasp as if it no longer existed, there was nothing he could do but attempt to evade the flame of the lethal guns.

With a choking cry to his mates, he threw himself forward; his knees struck rocky ground, grit slashed his unprotected headpane as he fell, and for an instant he feared the impact might shatter the quartzite, exposing him to the deadly, ammoniac atmosphere of Uranus' second moon.

Then he was entrenched behind the still-smouldering bodies of the slain Titanians, watching the speed of their fellows' reprisal.

And it was speedy. Salvation had spoke truly when he said these creatures were savage and untamed as beasts. Reckless of their own lives, green-casted features snarling, they swooped down on the treacherous quartet. In the split of a second they had seized them, bound them, removed their weapons.

But Chip and his companions suffered the same fate as their adversaries. The Titanians stripped them of their sidearms, as they had taken those of Amborg's men. Ungentle hands herded them into one of the nearby hovels, and there, as two guards held the single doorway, they were deserted.

Salvation groaned his rage and discomfiture.

“A judgment on that beast in man's flesh!” he proclaimed. “He has destroyed us all! Had I been given an opportunity to talk with their chief, quietly, peaceably, this matter might have been settled with no harm done to anyone. But as it is—” He shook his head.

Syd said, “What do you think they'll do next?”

“Whatever it is,” said Chip tightly, “I've got an idea it isn't going to be pleasant. They're gathering; hear their footsteps and voices? And there's something like the beat of a tom-tom—” He stared at Salvation speculatively. “Padre—torture?”

Salvation stroked his long, lean jaw. “I hope not, my son. But—I don't know. They are savages. And I have heard they place much faith in rites and ceremonies. But we will learn soon. Meanwhile, keep faith with Him who watches us all.”

They learned sooner than they dared expect. Whatever else might lay in store for them, they were at least spared the agony of waiting. The Titanian preparations took but little time. Within scant hours after their incarceration, the three Earthmen were once again dragged from their prison to meet their judgment and their fate.

THAT some form of ritual was in progress was immediately apparent. From hillside, rock, cranny and hovel had come the Titanians; there were more of them than Chip would have believed could subsist in this hostile environment. A solid phalanx of them walled the avenue up which they were led. As they walked, the Titanians chanted a slow and ominous threnody. There was a dirgelike quality to the chant; despite the surface courage with which Chip bolstered himself he felt the chill of nervous apprehension upon him. Palmer must have felt the same way. He edged closer to Chip, spoke from the corner of his mouth in a tone that belied the forced gaiety of his words.

“Swell end to our trip, pal. *Piece de resistance* for a gang of green choristers!”

Salvation overheard him. “We have not yet come to the end of our journey,” he said. “The line stretches up the side of yonder hill. To those caves.” He lifted his voice sonorously, drawing curious stares from the green-skinned Titanian guards. “I shall lift up mine eyes unto the hills,” he cried, “whence cometh my strength and my salvation—”

“Caves!” Sudden memory flashed back upon Chip Warren. “Jenkins said something about caves, Padre, remember? Caves and flame—”

“There's Amborg,” interrupted Syd.

His plump face was tightly pale behind his globular mask. "I don't care so much about checking out," he said, "but I wish I could get my hands on that rat just for a minute before—"

His words dwindled into silence. It was, Chip believed, an impressed silence. For they had reached the foot of the hill, now, and were climbing between two chanting rows of natives toward a huge, ornate, altarlike structure placed before the largest of the cave-mouths.

The dirge rose and soared, filling their ears with numbing fear; they moved upward inexorably, monotonously, almost mechanically. And finally they stood before the high altar.

Chip saw, then, what he would never have credited if it had been told him by another; what he could not have believed had he not seen it with his own eyes. He saw into the cave-mouth—and what he viewed there was so incredible that it brought a gasp unbidden to his lips.

This cave, deepset in the mouths of icy Titania—this cave, which by all laws of nature, of logic and reason, should be a dank, forbidding gateway to frightful cold—was bright-gleaming with orange, crimson, ochre tongues of flame! Within it, high-rising to the very lofted vaults, roared a staggering, tremendous holocaust of fire!

And beyond the altar was a precipice overlooking a sunken vale. This vale, like the interior of the cave, was shimmering like the plains of Abaddon with coruscating fingers, sheets, spires of red.

He was aware that he had gasped, for he detected a similar gasp from Syd, and he heard Salvation Smith say a single, incredulous word. "Sheol!" Then the chieftain, or high priest—Chip did not know which—spoke from the altar. Shortly he spoke, but with strident emphasis, jabbing his fingers at the two groups of captives in turn.

"What is he saying?" demanded Chip.

Salvation interpreted hastily. "We have violated their land. We have been brought to the Place of Destruction to meet judgment for our crime. The test of fire will prove our guilt—" Then he raised his voice, spoke to the Titanian ruler.

The outland ruler heard him through, then answered. Salvation turned to Chip and Syd. "I told him," he explained,

"that we were friends, come in amity. That we intended them no harm or offense—"

"And what did he say?"

"He said," relayed Salvation grudgingly, "that they were forced to distrust us because our 'companions' were men of sin and violence—"

"Companions!" interjected Syd angrily.

"—and he said, also, that he realized we might be gods. He says there are two types of white creatures, those who are mortals and evil, and those who are Masters of Fire. We must be tested to see which we are."

"Two types?" cried Chip. "Masters of Fire? Padre, what does he mean?"

Salvation shrugged helplessly. "I don't know. But wait—he is talking again."

THIS time the green chieftain's speech was longer, more dramatic. He postured, gestured; once he strode to the edge of his raised platform and pointed majestically down into the chasm below. Then, concluding his words with a tone of finality, he folded his arms across his chest.

Chip noticed that a few rods away Amborg's Uranian companion was interpreting his decision to Blaze. Salvation performed the same function.

"He says," explained Salvation, "we must walk into this cave of fearful flame. It leads through burning corridors to the valley below. In that valley is the life-skiff which brought Amborg and his men here.

"If we are good men, gods, and guiltless, the flame will not destroy us. There was one not long ago who walked unscathed through the fires, he says. That man was surely a god."

"Jenkins!" broke in Chip. "It must have been—"

Salvation nodded. "That is what I thought, too, my son. But—but how? How could Jenkins survive the flames?" And he stared sombrely, questioningly, at the sheet of ruddy fire filling the cave from base to arch. He shook himself. "Well—that is a problem we must solve, and soon. For the ceremony has begun. *Amborg!*" he cried.

The dark man turned. Chip saw that his face was set in granite lines. Nearest to the cavern mouth, his men were being

prodded toward the awful test they must endure.

Even in this critical moment, Salvation was the man of god. “Amborg,” he said, “you have been ever an evil man, living and thinking the thoughts of Satan. But there is yet time for you to repent and confess your sins. As a fellow man, I loathe and despise you. But as His emissary, I offer you even in this hour of trial the peace that surpasseth all human understanding—”

Amborg laughed at him. His voice crackled harshly, metallically, in the audio-phones of Chip’s space-helmet.

“Save that stuff for the suckers, old man. You and your pals are just worried because we get first chance to go down into the valley. Well—you’d better worry! There’s a rotor-gun mounted in that life-skiff. If we hadn’t all been jarred cold when we landed, we’d have given these greenies a sweet greeting. We’re going to lift the ship out of that ditch and bring it back over here. Save your prayers; you’ll need them when we come over!”

Salvation reminded him stonily, “The flames—”

“Flames be damned! Superstitious poppycock! Spacesuits will protect us from heat or cold alike. Well—come on!”

He gestured his mates to him. The wailing chant of the Titanian natives increased in tone and volume as the four outlaws left their guards and boldly strode the last few rods up the hill, past the dais—and into the roaring hell-mouth of the cave!

And as they entered, Chip Warren knew a swift sinking of heart. His apprehensions had been unfounded, Amborg’s claim that the lethal power of the flame was “superstitious poppycock” was true. The spacesuits *were* adequate protection, and in short moments, Amborg would be soaring back across the plateau, the jets of his rotor-gun spewing death and destruction upon them all. . . .

Then, “My God!” gasped Syd Palmer, his voice awed.

Chip looked, and shuddered to see, the last judgment of Blaze Amborg and his men. A scant dozen yards they strode into the cavern. Vast spirals of fire played about them, but they did not falter. Their suits, ingeniously woven of metal, rubber,

asbesto-quartz, defied the combusive powers of fire. But despite this—one of the figures staggered. The stunted Jovian was first to succumb. He had just pitched forward to his face when the second figure reeled. Raat ’Aran, the Uranian. He reeled and clutched at the tall Venusian, Torth—but the Venusian, too, had dropped to his knees; his hands clawed frenziedly at his breast.

Then the mysterious death struck Amborg. His voice rang out in a piercing scream; Chip saw him stare wildly at the three now-motionless bodies of his comrades, whirl, race back toward the safety of the hillside.

But he never reached it. He had taken no more than a dozen strides when he fell. A moment his incoherent cries babbled sickening delirium into his watchers’ ear-phones. . . .

Then all was still, save for the inexorable chanting of the natives. And the grave, judicial voice of the Titanian on the altar.

“They have been tested in the flame,” interpreted Salvation Smith soberly, “and found guilty. Now it is our turn. . . .”

CHIP WARREN was not a religious man. He lived by a simple code: do good and keep your sidearms primed. But now there faced him the inevitable finality of death; he felt an urge to meet that last, great mystery in comfort. He turned to his friends gravely.

“Now,” he said, “it is our turn. So I guess this is goodbye, Syd. And Padre—it might help if you could say a few words for us . . . just something. . . .”

“So be it, my son!” said Salvation, understandingly. He lifted his head; his fine old eyes sought the murky gray skies of Titania, so different from the sweet blue Earthly skies for which all space-farers’ hearts yearned when their journey’s end was reached.

“If this be the way,” he said quietly, “thy servants must depart, then so be it, O Lord. Yet even now in extremis we do not forget Thee and Thy might. We remember even yet—” He looked at the flaming cave-mouth toward which they must in a moment walk. “Even yet we remember a fellowship like ours who met and defied the dread embrace of fire.

"'And in those days,' he said, "'there were three children of Israel which the king Nebuchadnezzar ordered to be cast without raiment into the fiery furnace. And their names were Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—'"

"*Shadrach!*" cried Chip. There was no intentional irreverence in his interruption. Understanding had burst upon him so suddenly that the words hurtled from his lips.

"Peace, my son!" counseled the old man. "Let not your heart be troubled—"

"It's not! We're all right, Padre! If my hunch is right—and it must be! Look, they are bidding us walk into the caves. We haven't a moment to spare. Hurry, *get off your spacesuits!*"

There was biting cold upon Chip Warren's limbs and body as he cast the limp shell of his bulger behind him. But as he neared the cavern's mouth, the cold grew less intense. Less intense! That in itself was final, convincing proof he had been right! He was barely two yards from the writhing gouts of flame now. Were that the true fire it *appeared* to be, its searing blasts would already be parching his skin to black flakes—

But it was not! It was merely—pleasantly warm!

"I was right!" he cried exultantly. "Syd . . . Padre! Come on in!" His voice was almost hysterical with relief as he stepped gingerly over the prostrate bodies of those who had gone into the fiery furnace garbed in suits of metallic substance. "Come on in—the fire's fine!"

And together the three new Children of Israel walked unharmed into the fiery furnace of Titania. . . .

THE corridors led, as the Titanian chieftain said, downward, winding, through the hill to the vale below, where rested Amborg's navigable life-skiff. The small cruiser in which they were to fly to neighboring Uranus, there find aid and eager ears into which to pour their story.

And it did not surprise Chip Warren in the least to discover, about halfway down the flickering tunnel, a ledge of brightly gleaming ore that was resilient to the touch but broke the keen edge of the knife with which Chip attempted to scratch it.

"Ekalastron!" he cried. "See—a whole

mountain of it! Not just a mine; a mountain! Enough to fill Man's needs for centuries!"

Syd's eyes, behind the quartzite globe, were big as saucers. He gulped, "C-chip—are you sure we're alive? Do you think maybe we died back there in the first cave, maybe? And this is all some wild illusion—?"

"It is not illusion," proclaimed Salvation serenely. "I understand, now, what Chip divined in time to save us from a dreadful fate." And he looked at the young man affectionately. "Radiation was what killed the others, my boy?"

Chip nodded. "Must have been, Padre. The 'flames' were not true flames at all. Not as we Earthlings, children of a warm Sun, masters of combustive fire, understand flame.

"Different elements have different combustive temperatures. On bitter-cold Uranus and Titania, the kindling point of certain rare gases is necessarily in ratio to the outer cold. The kindling point of the gases in this tunnel is a temperature which—though fiery-hot and deadly to the Titanians—is only pleasantly *warm* to us!"

"So Amborg," continued Syd, "walked into the flaming tunnel wearing a space-suit—"

"A *metallic* space-suit," reminded Chip, "which was a transmitter for certain lethal radiations inherent to this 'cold heat.' Blaze Amborg did not die of flame. He died of—electrocution."

Then a strange thought struck him and he turned suddenly to Salvation Smith. "Padre—?"

"Yes, my son?"

"The story you started to tell. The one that gave me my inspiration. About Shadrach. I wonder if some time long ago in the past, that legend may not have sprung from an adventure such as ours?"

Salvation smiled and shook his head.

"That is not mine to say, my boy, not yet thine to question. Perhaps some day the truth shall be known to you and me. But meanwhile—"

But meanwhile, the life-skiff was theirs for the taking. This was no question to long plague Chip Warren or any other space-adventurer, before whom stretched a whole, wide universe of wonder.



THE VIZIGRAPH

YOUR'E invited, all of you, to vizigraph in your messages. Kicks, kudos, bombs and bouquets—our expert operator can take it. All PS asks is that you make your vizigrams helpful and interesting.

Winners of the Summer issue letter-contest are No. 1 Guy Gifford, No. 2 Leonard Marlow, No. 3 Margaret Wells, with Milton Lesser runner-up. As you will notice, another page has been added to an already enlarged letter section, and still the Vizigraph is turning away guests.

IF ALL I HAD WAS 20¢, WHAT I WOULD DO . . .

118 West Madison St.
Opelousas, Louisiana

DEAR EDITOR:

My apologies if this letter seems a bit on the sugary side. I realize that criticism is what you want and criticism is what wins pictures, but I found the Summer ish of PS V. G.

That cover! And I've been the dope who booed fans that asked for Finlay on the top! Watch the acclaim you get on this one. It was the best of all the mags for this month—as well as being the best PS has ever had. Such a contrast to the Spring issue!

The Stories: I liked all of them except one. 1st, quite naturally, is *Intruders of the Forbidden Moon*. The only real science yarn in the issue. I liked this one better than any I have read this month.

2nd is *Fak's* very interesting saga. The basic theme is not original, but I liked the way Fred did it up. A damn (damn if you must) good story—all around. Next is the consistently good Miss Brackett. I still can't see the use of the Dragon Queen. All she did was to sail around a couple of times and fly away. And what were the mentions of "making Venus safe for colonists" and "Venusian fogs"? I got the idea the story took place on Jupiter? Did ye ed slip?

4th: *Mutiny Aboard the "Terra"* which I found absorbing. 5th: *Proktofs of Neptune*—Nice reading. 6th: *World of Mockery*—Nice idea, poorly put up. It's easy to see, however, that Moskowitz will soon be "up there." 7th: *Genesis*—I liked this one. 8th: *Space-Wolf*—(Please Mr. Cummings! Most sfans are through the fifth grade!) Here is a fine example of what a name can do. Mr. Squidgebottom could not have sold this yarn to any mag. There was absolutely nothing to this one. No more of this tripe—I mean—type, please.

The Ballad of Blaster Bill deserves a special rating. If I were to count plain "liking" this poetic saga would rank ahead of Gallun's classic. Get Bond to work on another one immediately.

On an average, you have a better collection of yarns than the other mags. Although, frankly, you are not my favorite, I be-

lieve I would buy PS before any other if 20¢ was all I had. To add to this you have the best reader's department. I mean the most enjoyable, the most constructive and unbiased; and about the largest. Fans who merit pictures are, in order, Mrs. Wells, Leonard Marlow, and Miss Baum. Women taking three out of four? What is s-f coming to?

Illustrations this month were good. As usual, Paul's pic was the best in the ish and one of the best he's turned out. (What's the use of pleading again for a Paul cover?) Lynch is improving, but I still don't put him ahead of Wesso, Finlay, and others. Bok would be good if he could get a life-like appearance to his pictures. Smalle will never make the grade as an s-f ink slinger. Eron is poor and Morey is alternately good and bad. If this missive merits a picture, give me "the Paul-one" first; Bok's second; and Lynch's for Miss Brackett's yarn third.

In closing, I'd like to say that really, I sure sympathize with those poor brutalized heroes. If I am not mistaken, in *every* story the hero, by some means, "fell into the bottomless abyss of unconsciousness. . . ."

Let's have:

A lot of: M. W. Wellman, Binder, pages in the vizigraph, Paul covers and interior work, the real Cummings' "stuff."

More of: Gallun, *Science-fiction*, Bond's poems, Miss Brackett.

Less of: Eron, Lynch, actionized plots, interplanetary yarns.

No more of: Smalle, flying fists and gushing blood, screwy dames and screwier love, Cummings' hack stuff.

Very sincerely yours,
ALFRED EDWARD MAXWELL.

FIRST THE 'HAVE NOTS' NOW THE 'LET'S HAVES'

MR. ALFRED EDWARD MAXWELL,
118 West Madison St.,
Opelousas, Louisiana.

Dear Mr. Maxwell:

Don't apologize for the sugar—even horses like it. As far as criticism winning pictures, I'm not sure about that, nor am I sure that the secret is praise. After all, the editor doesn't pick the winners. The editor is nothing but a second-hand tabulating machine. He merely adds the combined opinions of all the letter-writers. If they say "give the Paul to Al Maxwell," he makes a note to have someone wrap it up. If they say "Maxwell is lousy, shoot him, please," the editor dictates a telegram to some well-known cannon in Maxwell's locality.

As far as it is possible to judge, ideas and personality are what reap the results in the Vizigraph. Fortunately there's no dearth of ideas among s.f. fans.

I'm glad you liked the Finlay cover though, as you will read, it's not only acclaim that we got.

In regard to the slip-up in *The Dragon-Queen of Jupiter*, the plea is guilty. You see, having given Venus a big play on the cover of the Spring issue it seemed only fair to hand Jupiter a break—you know these planetary jealousies! Unfortunately the story was shot to press with more than customary speed, and less than customary care, leaving the geography somewhat tangled. It will not happen again.

Since you have started a new party, the "Let's Haves," we'll try to fill your requests: "a lot of M. W. Wellman, Binder, pages in the Vizigraph, Paul covers, the real Cummings' stuff; more of

Gallun, *Science-Fiction*, Bond's poems, Miss Brackett." Good ideas.

And thank you for saying that if all you had was 20¢ you would buy PLANET. From a s.f. fan there could be no finer compliment.

The Ed.

THE DRAGON LOOKED LIKE A DEAD TURKEY

Waiting for Thanksgiving to Roll Around

DEAR EDITOR:

Here comes another "first" and if the thoughts I have in mind ever get down on paper you'll have to add another room to your Vizigraph quarters. As I said, here comes a "first," meaning my first letter to an editor, but also my first acquaintance with your magazine. Way back in the *good old days*, unquote I used to wait with growing impatience for the next issue of Thrilling Wonder Stories and others. Then as I matured (?) and launched into a more practical field, the study of law, my reading of s.f. dropped a little below nil. However, during my spare time I worked at writing, and now, having finished those dreary tomes, I return to my first love. As you say, your "expert operator can take it," so I shall try to dish a bit of it out. Shall we start with the cover? One usually does, in fact that's what a lot of them say induces them to buy PLANET STORIES. I'm rather inclined to think the beautiful assortment of colors lean a bit toward the garish, if they haven't already fallen. But then that is defended by the fact that it draws attention to the cover. All right, we'll cross that off. Then *why* must we have a couple of green Saturns cavorting all over the page carting the title words around? Couldn't we have some nice plain letters? After looking at the title for a few minutes my eyes just about meet themselves coming back on the return trip. I see no reason why fantasy or science fiction magazines cannot have dignity (not necessarily sedateness or her sister) as well as "oomph."

Next, a brief squawk on advertising. Of course I saw only the one incident on page sixty-two of the Summer issue, but at any rate I found it disconcerting to have a blurb suddenly appear in the middle of a page, and the last page at that! telling me I'm sure to like a detective story magazine. I mention this as a policy not to be followed up.

Oh! One thing more about the cover. Like most everyone I am greatly enamored with Finlay's work and I liked his cover, but I think "Sargasso of the Stars" would have made a better subject than the one he used. While I'm on the subject of illustrations I may as well continue. The one by Paul brought back cozy, warm memories of the "good old days," but somehow Finlay seems to have us spoiled.

This fellow Lynch seems very versatile but he seems also to be in search of a style or medium of expression. His drawing for "The Dragon Queen" story was mmm . . . shall we say not so good? The dragon-lizard looked like a dead turkey waiting for Thanksgiving to roll around. The illustration for the *Ballad* had a good idea but the execution reminded me of the work I used to do in art class, when I made wood cuts for a high school publication. However, his drawing for "Sargasso" I thought was very nice, and the one for "World of Mockery" had a very good atmosphere even if the monster did look as though it had a broken neck. Lynch's figures of men and women are good. Let him try working in color and do a cover.

The illustration for Genesis was all right, but it didn't thrill me. The one for Rocklynne's story was simple yet nice, and I think it would have been even better on two pages. The drawing for "Space-Wolf" was hardly worth mentioning, it's lines were entirely too confusing, however, the little blonde in it was good (or was it a blonde?). Then way at the end, which incidentally was a h— of a place for your best story and illustration, comes Bok. Next to Finlay, Bok is my first love. These two are leaders of the minority of illustrators who seem to realize that composition is a good thing to have in drawings.

How about a credit line or something on the contents page for the illustrators? For the benefit of the old newcomers and the new newcomers, on account of because some of these guys are either so modest or realize in advance that the darn things are not any good, they put their names in itsy bitsy scribbles that you couldn't read with the aid of an electron microscope.

Now for raves and ratings on stories. You really have something new under the sun as far as I'm concerned in Bond's Ballad. I liked it and am keeping an eye out for some more. I don't rate it with the stories, for I consider it in a class by itself. Incidentally, your article "Feature Flash" is good. Do you do that every issue? And speaking of issue, add my vote to those asking for a monthly.

"Proktols of Neptune" takes first place on my list. Next, almost a tie between "Mutiny Aboard the Terra" and "The Dragon Queen of Jupiter." If Brackett (I understand it's Miss?) had left a few of the d.t.'s out it would have taken second place. "World of Mockery" takes third place, and fourth goes to "Sargasso of the Stars." "Genesis" and "Space-Wolf" tie in at the end for fifth. As for "Invaders of the Forbidden Moon"—Phoooyee!! Verboten is the word for it! Some might call this a pot-boiler, but I think Gallun should have used it to light the fire under the pot. Stilted, artificial . . . oh well . . . what's the use. Just wait till Gallun sees one of my stories!

Well, one thing more and I'll shut up. How about a bit of explanation somewhere in the Vizigraph about the sweepstakes business? Being a newcomer I'm a bit confused, but that doesn't stop me from hoping that my letter might get printed in the Vizigraph and that I might get a slice of the cake you seem to be handing out to lucky squawkers.

Despite my criticisms I enjoyed my first contact with your magazine and intend to keep up with it. Gosing with the best of wishes for continued success with a good magazine. Gosh! Did I write all this just to tell someone I liked their magazine?

Sincerely,
W. A. CONOVER.

STRAIGHT FROM THE MOUTH OF THE HORSE

DEAR MR. CONOVER:

"Shall we start with the cover?" seems to be the usual introduction to manslaughter around here, though you phrased it much more politely than most. Doesn't anyone like our gaily-colored plumes? How is the Bird of Paradise to attract his mate?

Your stand on the middle-of-the-page advertisement is well taken. Many magazines use such a blurb but this is the first time for PLANET, and probably the last. I have often wondered how

many s.f. fans read detective stories anyway?

Glad to hear that you liked the "Ballad of Blaster Bill" by Nelson S. I thought it a honey, too, but poetry is always a long shot. The only reason this wasn't vetoed was that it was just too darned good. Bond says that when the spark sparks he will write another ballad.

Regarding the sweepstakes mentioned in the Summer Vizigraph, this was nothing but a high-falutin' way of describing the winners of the previous PLANET's letter-contest. You know how it is, no one can help but get tired of always writing: Joe Ginch gets first. So with a touch of the magic Underwood the winners were transformed into high-spirited racing-stock and from now on they have the privilege of writing: "This is straight from the mouth of the horse."

Many thanks for the "first" Mr. Conover. I hope there'll be more.

The Ed.

"LIKE SOMETHING USED FOR SCARING DRACULA TO BED"

69-62 43rd Ave.,
Woodside, L. I.

DEAR EDITOR:

Your cover still looks like something they used for scaring Dracula to bed, but at least there's a marked improvement over last month.

Keep it up and in a few more issues you'll have the best s.f. mag. out. And please, I am begging you on bended knees, make PLANET STORIES a monthly mag.

As for the thing you call stories, I might as well put *Dragon Queen of Venus*, in first place. After which comes *Invaders of the Forbidden Moon*. For a close third comes *Ballad of Blaster Bill*. (Probably because I'm also named Bill.) *Proktols of Neptune* and *Sargasso Sea of Space* tie for fourth place. If I have to go on, *Space-Wolf* rates fifth. (You can do better than that, Ray.) As for *World of Mockery*, Ha, say I. Please put Mr. Moskowitz back in his cage. As for your departments, they're nifties—both of them. I repeat, keep picking and you'll soon have a first-class mag.

More pictures by Finlay and Paul, and please, a cover by Bok. As for Lynch, give him to the "Dragon Queen" for lizard food. Let's have more stuff of the "Blaster Bill" type. If I get a picture (please Jupiter I do) make it a Bok.

Yours for bigger and better,

BILL HOWELL.

Ed's NOTE: For you, Mr. Howell, a cover surprise next issue.

HER OWN SEX SHOULD STICK TO READING S. F.?

1243 Juniata Street,
North Side,
Pittsburgh, Pa.

DEAR EDITOR:

Yippee! And another yippee! Finlay on the cover, and long letter column, and finally the most revolutionary piece of science-fiction in years, by Nelson Bond. A stan couldn't ask for more.

Say Mr. Editor how did you do it? Why not devote the entire magazine to illustrations, letters and all the stuff that a fan goes for? It would be something new and it would be appreciated by every fan. The reason I am asking this favor of you is because the stories in Summer issue weren't worth a damn. As a matter of fact neither were the pics, possibly with the ex-

ceptions of Paul and Bok, who can always be relied on to do their best. Take Mr. Gifford's suggestion and cut down on Lynch and those other guys who laughingly call themselves artists and give us more of the two I mentioned, plus small doses of Sherman, who has yet to do an interior. And since you have finally obtained Finlay let him do some full-framed pics on the inside, too.

Getting back to those "stories," as I said before, Bond's BBB was different and unique. Let's have more of this type of stuff. Frankly I think members of my own sex should stick to reading s.f., and let fellows like Bond, Binder, Wellman write it. Not that Leigh and Helen Wienbaum's fiction isn't well written, but the plots they use have no originality. Am I right, fellows?

The letter columns as usual were the best thing this month, and some were so interesting that it is hard to choose the contenders for those (CENSORED) illustrations. But in my 'umble opinion pics should go to: 1, Gifford; 2, Mrs. Wells; 3, Thompson. This letter I am writing now is so good I think, that it is deserving Bok's pic and Paul's pic, too. However, if worst comes to worst, I'll accept Sherman's illustration in the department.

Sincerely yours,

KATHERINE BUM.

ED'S NOTE: Your suggestion for cutting out everything but letters and illustrations is fine, but some old-fashioned people insist on stories, even bad stories.

THE WORLD OF MOCKERY KEPT BORING FROM WITHIN

R. F. D. No. 2,
Mt. Pleasant, Michigan

DEAR SIR:

Favoritism raises its ugly head in the Vizi-graph! The "Stink-Bug" was good. I'll not quarrel with that. But why the editor should go to bat for that rapid-chatter spacehog of the odorous appellation is beyond me. Especially since he admits he's too damn good to read your fiction.

Now you take me . . . I read all your fiction, including Cummings. I'll have to admit to cheating a little there. I read Cummings not for pleasure but to see if he cops last place. (Ed's note: Does he?) (Author's note: He does.)

If I had written this letter immediately after reading the issue, I would have given *Mutiny Aboard the Terra* first place. But *World of Mockery* kept boring from within and now rates first in the issue. "Mutiny" was better written, masterfully handled. Moskowitz's had that elusive something that made you forget its cumbersome passages. Cut loose, Sam, with all rockets next time. . . . And try a little streamlining. (No fee.)

So we come to *Invasions of the Forbidden Moon* and *Sargasso of the Stars*. "Invaders" noses out "Sargasso" because I kept wondering what happened after the "Lodestar" was cooled off. Maybe that blaze of glory they took off in kept the ship warm 'til they got out of the clutches of the magnetism. . . . It was a nice trick though. Both yarns were excellent.

Genesis! takes fifth, not far ahead of *The Balad of Blaster Bill*. So Bond is also a troubador! My! If he could only cook. . . .

Brackett and Hasse were both good . . . in that order. *The Dragon Queen* would have rated better if *The Stellar Legion* had not appeared in the Winter ish.

All in all, I rate your Summer ish the best to date. Lynch has shown something I hadn't suspected him of. His pic for the *World of Mockery* was the best in the mag. Throwing away that ringed planet rubber stamp was a step in the right direction. How he must have struggled with his baser instincts in the drawing for *Sargasso*. Three months ago he would have slapped on a half-dozen Saturns.

Paul was perfection . . . but I'm handing Lynch first place on the basis of improvement.

Congrats on the cover! It is the best you've ever used.

As for the letters, naturally I think mine was best. Give Stink-Bug an old Lynch and let's not hear from him until he lowers himself to reading your fic. I would like to give out a half-dozen thirds, but a friend leans slightly toward Lesser, so Lesser it is.

Sincerely,

JOHN LAPIN.

P. S.: "HORSE OPRY IN A VACUUM."

336 East 6th St.,
New York City.

DEAR EDITOR:

I am a mild peaceful citizen. I mind my own business I don't usually mix into controversies, BUT . . . this cover business has gone on long enough! People are raving back and forth . . . bug eyes, yes and no, heroines, yes and no. Well I have read s-f magazines for quite a while. I am not an author, nor an artist, nor a member of a s-f society . . . but I will be heard. (If this letter were a telephone call, I would be yelling by now.) *I'm tired of bug-eyed monsters and even bugger-eyed females on the covers of science magazines!!!* Frinstance, the Summer issue of the *PLANET* . . . the color was striking (the b-e-m 's wings) but I could've drawn those lizard-with-wings and the handsome (?) warriors and the beeyootiful dame with my eyes closed. I've seen the same thing, with veddy veddy minor differences for the last few years. It's gotten to the point where I only look at the cover to make sure I'm getting a science-fiction mag. It's a good thing you print the name of the mag on the cover. If I went by the illustrations, I would be likely to think it was the "Stirring, Soulful, Scintillating, Sinful Stories of Love, Inc."

After all, the readers of s-f magazines are not infants, as a matter of fact, they usually have more than average intelligence, and more than a little imagination, and perhaps some idealism, too. The average story attempts to depict some phase of life in the future. Usually, it portrays a far better, and more advanced civilization. They are stories of the future. Why not have illustrations of the future to match? Bok's illustrations have a definitely new quality, and so does Hunt. Why not have more of the experimental type? Larger use of shadows and light, more symbolic and symmetrical drawings? All mags have curvy girls on the covers. Why don't you have a dark background, and use of one or two colors in an eye-catching symmetrical drawing? You might get a few people to try you just out of curiosity, and of course once they do, you've got them for good. Science-fiction has a way of catching on to you and never letting go. You may have to read through four months of every magazine on the market, and get one good one, or you may find four top stories in one issue. It goes that way. But always remember, the average fan does not read only one publication. If they are as voracious (is that spelled correctly?) readers as I am

they read them all. They have the materials at hand to make comparisons, they have the experience and judgment. And if they find that one certain pub can be relied on for trash . . . they ditch it. Now your stories are well above the average. Your mag is well planned, your edges are fairly neat, the Vizigraph is intelligently conducted. Why don't you bring the illustrations up to the intellectual standard of the mag?

Now about Bok. Where did he come from? How about a feature on him? How is that style of his managed? Does he draw over sandpaper or what? (It looks very like the screen work done on a stencil.) His work is best in black and white. It is art work, and the best I have ever seen, but it does not go on covers, perhaps it's the difference in texture of the paper, but it is classic on the inside, and weak on covers. Hunt, with something of the same impressionistic style, would do better on covers than interior.

How about a few more stories, that give a normal picture of future every-day life, and a little less of the Wyuld West disguised as a space pirate? Horse opry in a vacume. Thank the good one that you haven't had all of these *Invasors Strike Earth* things anyway. Remember, we not only imagine the future—we make it. So we might as well do a good job. Start with the illustrations.

Yours,

R. STERN.

P. S.: Just saw the *Ballad of Blaster Bill*. That puts Bond into the immortal class. It's a masterpiece, and Lynch did it justice. Wow!

RS

ED'S NOTE: Good idea about Bok's biog. He looks like a man with a past. Will attempt to wring his life-story from him for next ish.

ORCHIDS, ROSES, PANSIES AND LOTS OF SKUNKWEED

229 Washington St.,
Dorchester, Mass.

DEAR EDITOR:

I can't understand most of the fantasy poetry that is being printed, but science-fictional poetry seems easier for me to digest. To me, some of the fantasy poetry that I have read sounds as if the author had a screw or two loose.

But not Bond. I understand and enjoyed his poem. His poem sounded a lot like Kipling. (Or should I have said, "reads"?)

Let me be one of the many fans who will congratulate you on getting Virgil Finlay to do a cover for you. I would like to see more of his work in PLANET STORIES.

Now for some ratings. But first let me explain the system I am going to use. An excellent story will get an orchid, a good story will get a rose, a fair story will get a pansy and a poor story will get—skunkweed.

Invasors of the Forbidden Moon will get a bright, red rose. No further comment.

Sargasso of the Stars—a pansy. I didn't like it but I didn't dislike it, either.

Mutiny Aboard the Terra—skunkweed. It stinks. Ditto for *Proktoles of Neptune, Genesis and Space-Wolf*.

The Ballad of Blaster Bill—an orchid. No. Two orchids. It was swell. More please.

Dragon Queen of Jupiter—one rose. Hell and heat on Jupiter. I always thought it would be cold on Jupiter.

World of Mockery—one pansy. To Bok's picture for *Proktoles of Neptune* I give an orchid.

Give the originals to Gifford, Marlow and Mrs. Wells.

Stfanaticallyyours,

A. L. SCHWARTZ.

ED'S NOTE: Will pass bouquets, intact, on to authors.

"ANNIE'D BE AWFUL COLD ON MARS"

New York, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

Dammit!

I repeat and elaborate: dammit to Haydes!

I had to go and shoot off my great big, wide-open, four-dimensional trap and talk myself out of the possible but not probable chance of winning either that grand Paul or that swell Bok—the former the best since Salient. And just because I was in a sticky mood of grandiloquent generosity and false modesty! And the Ed. had to go ahead and take advantage of a weak moment and agree with me! But then the winners don't receive the pix anyway—so I should care. (Sour grapes.) Beware of Tucker. Lil ole Le Zombie is a disguised but potent sword in his crusade and might decapitate the editorial Gordian knot(head); for the benefit of the uninformed—that last is a pun. Haw. And I worked so hard on that note—as you must have guessed. According to the consensus it seems most of my predictions were a trifle—to be kind—screwy, and perhaps it's just as well the Epic didn't appear.

I did think, though, that my protest against letter-writers that don't vote was worthy. And even in adverse waters I will sink before I deny the worth of *Vampire of the Void*—the best Durna Ranguer yarn I've read; a beautiful and adult love story—and *Cosmic Derelict*. The acclaim for Bond's putrid *Revolt on Io* is beyond understanding; just compare it with *Ultimate Salient*. The same goes for *Exiles of Desert Star*, a good yarn in its own right but merely a retelling of a superior story. Kummer's *Satellite of Fear* was unjustly panned, I thought.

I think too much so-called funny stuff is being printed ridiculing the Good Old Days—the worst of 1932-1936 would be rated classics in the majority of "stf" publications today. A pre-Golden Age was the first three years of Gernsback. I did not have the good fortune to read those mags upon issuance but am now collecting them second hand and reading them along with the modern stuff. I'd advise Mr. Marlow to distrust an obviously faulty memory and do the same thing—he may find a surprising shock in store. He will also find most of PLANET's stuff is good.

. . . but not if the yarns are like those of the Summer 1941 issue. Only four were passable and two were fair; a definite low after last issues swell line-up. Dragon-queens, Proktoles, mutiny, ray guns, diaphonous garments, mush . . . Ugh!

I enjoyed Gallun's *Invasors of the Forbidden Moon* so much that despite some corny items throughout I made it first. The pic was superb and reminded me of Heiner's criticism of Paul's women—clothed. Well Vaughan, Ann Corio is touring in White Cargo and wears a bathing suit that served for five years as the picnic ground of a convention of virile and mass-producing moths; it's a cute outfit, but Annie'd be awful cold on Mars and terribly scorched on Mercury and positively bruised on a crowded spaceship. Which all leads to my denunciation of the over-worked trend to laugh at Paul's clothes. For the

rigors of travel in the atmospheres that authors has conjured up, I can visualize no better outfit than the standard Paul breeches, boots and sport blouses. Say girls, can you imagine climbing in and out of a spacesuit with your "darling" Swiss organdy with the frills and ruffles getting caught in space? Whoops boys, don't look now.

Genesis is second and very good with a fine Morey pic. *Mutiny Aboard the "Terra"* is third and regally written—a so-overworked plot revived charmingly. So good to see the Rosenthal "silhouette" art once again. *Sargasso of the Stars* gives way, after a struggle, to Bond's *Ballad*. Some of the rhyming was poor, but the novelty of the thing made it fourth. Kummer's piece had a bit too much of the slambang-boom to suit my tastes. It's pic—like most of Lynch's recent work—is space-wasting. So is the drawing for Miss Brackett's *Dragon-Queen* (6). When the artist is confined to one page his work is invariably good; witness Blaster Bill and the No. 7 short by SaM., *World of Mockery*. The latter was at ease in the company of Paul's *Invaders* and Bok's *Proktols*. (Whatever induced Hasse, a really fine author, to scribble off such tripe as that?) The clever *Space-Wolf* is eighth—it shouldn't be so far down—and the *Proktols* last. The *Smalle* pic was good but there wasn't enough delineation between light, near shadow and shadow.

The contest was so hard this time with so many notes, but here goes: Lesser, Marlow and Heiner—he begins to sound as pathetic as he described my notes. I, too, DB, am enthralled by his process of rating. Naturally the cover was a thrill. But of the little cover work Finlay has done, the majority were poor. Why don't you use Finlay inside and Paul, Morey and Bok on covers? Give Paul another pic an issue and get away from the two-page spreads—they're awful.

C. HIDELEY.

Ed's NOTE: The winners got their pix—due to your letter, which spurred our shipping dept. into action. It seems to me that several, we included, owe you a vote of thanks.

BLITZ!

117 Hamilton St.,
Live Oak, Florida.

DEAR EDITOR:

Your cover revealed to me: Blitzkrieg! Blue-green dive bombers with long machine guns! Swarms of white-haired invaders, assailing the last stronghold of Democracy! It seems the blue-clad soldiers aren't doing so good. Let's take a closer look. Ah! The bombers are birds, and the machine guns are spears.

And the magazine is PLANET—the cover is Finlay! Drool, drool. Take home. Turn to contents page. *The Ballad of Blaster Bill* looks pretty good. "When you're hurtling 'round the Sun . . ." Aha! Where have I heard that before? Give you one guess.

My gosh! The Ed. wrote a letter to a fan, not to mention getting us the Finlay cover. A horrible, impossible suspicion enters my mind. Are Editors human?

I made a mistake in talking about the poem by Bond. I meant, where have I heard the rhythm before?

The Dragon-Queen of Jupiter and *World of Mockery* stand out in the issue, altho I noticed errors in the former yarn. At first it was about colonists on Jupiter, and then on page 40—"And then hordes of white-haired warriors would swarm

out . . . and sweep outland Peoples from the face of Venus."

One more blurb: In the *Vizigraph* you answer the first letter printed, and write a long message back. You usually do *not* answer the other letters in a similar manner. This prejudices the reader. You should abandon this policy . . . unless you print my letter first.

Any drawing would do for me.

Sincerely yours,

RAYMOND WASHINGTON, JR.

P. S.: I am enclosing one of my poems you might like to print.

P. P. S.: I would tell you I am 14 years old, but then you wouldn't print this.

R.W.W.

SOLAROIDS

By RAYMOND WASHINGTON, JR.

From Mercury's sun-baked surface to Pluto's icy plains—
From Venus' streamy jungles to Neptune's methane rains,
We'll be blasting, blasting, blasting—against the star-specked void
And none will know how far we go, for we are Solaroids.

Past island universes, beyond the speed of light,
Surrounded by the Nebulae, an awe-inspiring sight!
A million miles a second! and we have just begun . . .

Behind us we can dimly see a star that is the Sun.

The island universes are fading far behind,
And we are chilled and strangely thrilled, and proud of all our kind

For Man, the puny creature—who, fighting fearsome odds—
Has struggled ever upwards to challenge all the Gods.

A-blasting, blasting, blasting! thru icy space and time,
As ageless and eternal as an all-embracing mind—
No secret place is sacred from the cold and glaring light
Of Science, and the search for truth thru black forbidden night.

Then head the ship around again, back to our native world!

The blazing stars in cosmic space are each a flaming pearl
We are blasting, blasting homeward—against the star-specked void,
And none will know how far we go for we are Solaroids.

Ed's NOTE: Would like answering all letters but you'll be bound to admit, even if your name is Washington, that the odds of one man to this mailsack are pretty colossal. Your poem is a mighty nice job. Keep on.

DEGRADED FINLAY

140-92 Burden Crescent,
Jamaica, New York

DEAR EDITOR:

Only an illustrator of Finlay's high quality could have taken the hero-heroine theme and drawn a cover like the one on the Summer PS.

But it *was* Finlay—incidentally, how did you get VF to degrade himself enough to draw for Planet—and therefore, the over *was* the best yet. Several improvements could still be made—such as a different cover theme and less lettering.

The quality of the stories is again, after a two-issue slump, approaching the grade of the memorable Alf ish. So-o, here are the best four:

1. "World of Mockery"—ah! Fresh blood! After all, big names aren't everything.
2. "Ballad of Blaster Bill"—so Bond is a good poet too!
3. "Proktoles of Neptune"—hang on to Hassel!
4. "Sargossa of the Stars"—an old plot, but well-written.

There's something fishy about "Dragon Queen of Jupiter." The locale is obviously Venus (on page 40, column 1, 3 lines from the bottom, it even says so). But Jupiter, with greater gravity and different atmosphere!

Glad to see an enlarged Vizigraph. This letter department is your ace in the hole, being the best in the entire s-f field—and that ain't hay! What puzzles me, though, is how people can hope to win illustrations against such competition as Heiner, Mrs. Wells, and Marlow which happens to be my choice for the Summer no.

This is your favorite cover heckler signing off.

BILL STOV.

THERE WUZ 3 IN THE BEGINNING—OLD MONTY SELLO, TEX AKO, AND ME!

174 Windsor Pla e,
Brooklyn, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

Unless my well-known naiveté misleads me, it would seem from your answer to this guy Gifford (look who talks about names) that the phrase "I think you are as good as Asi mov!" is to be taken as a compliment. Well, well how times do change.

Let me tell you a little story—a true one (so there's no charge). It happened a few years ago, when I was widely known throughout the west as the rootiest-tootiest badman that ever took his buttermilk straight.

There wuz three of us in them days, pard. There was good old Monty Sello (darned fine feller—came from Montana) and Tex Ako (a tall gringo, pard, as came from Texas); and me, Brook Asimov (I come from Brooklyn, you understand, the garden spot of the universe).

Babblin' Brook Asimov I was knowed in them days. Babblin' Brook Asimov, as brave, bold and beautiful a bimbo as ever broke a bronc, busted a bank, or bummed a bite; beknown to billions as the Big Bad Boy from Brooklyn, beloved because of my brilliant bombast and boring banalities—

Yet get the idea, Pard?

We wuz tough men in them days and our favorite hangout was Ed's Saloon over in Crooked Gulch. Day after day I would sit there sluggin' my buttermilk till the poisonous fumes filled my head and laid me unconscious on the table, a bleary wreck of a good man. (It wuz a gal, pard, that did it, but that's another story.) And while I sat there, alone, broodingly misanthropic, the rest of the pla e rang to the coarse shouts of the badmen. The air was blue with tobacco smoke, and filled with the reek of buttermilk, lemonade and sarsaparilla. More than one hombre, vice stamped over his evil face, chewed gum openly, and one sin-drenched soul called loudly for a cherry-coke.

Into this vile den of iniquity (to coin a phrase)

walked Bandy-legs Gooch, Terror of the West. Up he strode to my pal, Tex.

"Pard," he said, with that deceiving quiet that is the true mark of the leopard about to spring, "I been hearing things about you—things I don't like."

Tex's eyelids flickered. "Yeah?" he said, laying down his cards. His hand hovered about the butt of his famous pearl-handled 22.

"Yeah!" came the lightning retort, for Bandy-legs was widely known for the sharpness of his wit. "I heard as you done cast doubts upon me as a good shot."

"I think," answered Tex coolly, "that you are a no-good hoss-thief, a liar to boot, the doggoned-est yellowest-livered coward in the West, and a son of a (censored) besides."

"Never mind all that," grunted Bandy-legs, "I don't mind picayune palaver like that. I fights only for *real* insults. What did you say about nfy shootin' eye?"

"I said, you wuz as good as Asimov."

A purple flush passed over the villain's face as he heard those dread words and a pause of utter horrified silence fell over every one of the hardened criminals present.

It lasted a bare instant, and then there was a pistol shot and Tex went down; a bullet hole right between his eyes. Bandy-legs said thickly, "No one insults me like that without gittin' shot."

The sheriff lifted himself out from under the table and said, "Let 'im go, boys. We all done heard what Tex said. It was a clear case of provocation. No jury would convict."

Two-hours later, I crawled out of the rain barrel and buried Tex. He was a great guy. After that, I went back to Brooklyn and started writing science-fiction.

And now the phrase for which fifty-two men have died (I counted them) has become a compliment, or something. At that, though, maybe I'm speaking too soon. This guy Gifford might still kill Ye Editor. It's still a fact that no jury will convict.

Incidentally, Dearly Beloved Editor, whatever else you have or haven't got, you've got one of the best letter columns in current science-fiction. I like it. And that reminds me that I wish people would quit wasting valuable votes on my letters. After all, I should be disqualified as a professional, and if no one else will do it, I hereby do it myself.

Score on the Asenion business: (a) people who called me Asenion since last time—6,349,203; (b) people who called me that while within reach—7; (c) people killed dead—6.

The reason I killed only six was because the seventh was lame, so—being kind-hearted and not dead to the finer things—I merely smiled gently and broke his crutches over his head.

If Mrs. Margaret Wells will come within reach, I will kiss her (provided her husband is not too much bigger than I am) for her kind thoughts, but please don't blame Dearly Beloved Editor for not printing an Asimov story every issue. I haven't been submitting anything—on account of because I've hardly been writing anything on account of because—I'm trying to get through with school on account of because—Aw, nuts.

Anyway, as soon as May is over and I get my M.A. (a chorus of Columbia professors say—Oh, yeah?????) I'll really start writing—at least until the army grabs me. (We need *someone* to stop Hitler.) As a matter of fact, it has just occurred to me that tomorrow morning at nine I take my

second series of tests for that damn degree. What the devil am I doing writing letters anyway? (I'm a nut—Tsk, tsk, must everyone agree that enthusiastically?)

Incidentally, Dearly Beloved Editor, this letter seems to have nothing to do with Planet. I'll fix that and then you can print the letter. I love Planet. I love Planet. I love Planet. There!

ISAAC ASIMOV.

ED'S NOTE: Thanks for the "love."

A HERMIT COMES OUT OF HIDING

1301 State Street,
Schenectady, New York

DEAR EDITOR:

Clear the Viziwaves for Shaw. I just finished the Summer issue of PLANET STORIES. The main reason for rousing myself from my usual lethargy is the faint chance of winking an original.

I'd like to skip over the first 121 pages, but I'd never forgive myself for depriving you of my valuable opinion of your stories. First of all; the cover. Improvement. BIG improvement. But nowhere near perfect. Virgil handled the colors beautifully, but was inaccurate. I like accuracy.

Gallun was good, but definitely. He has his ups and vice versa all right, but this was very up.

Bond's Ballad was beautiful. It was just what I've been looking for. I got the idea that a ballad of this type would go over good a few months ago. ESP, maybe? Anyway, Nelson handled it perfectly.

I couldn't go for Brackett's bit, somehow. I can't give a good reason, but I don't care for tales about the jungles—what am I saying? Let's start all over. On second thought, let's forget it.

"Sargasso of the Stars" was something like Winterbotham's "Genesis" was good, too.

Thanks for Moskowitz. Excellent, and get more by him. Ross Rocklynne was another "upper" this time. I enjoyed this one the best of the issue.

What has Ray Cummings got on you?" "Space-Wolf," ghaaa! Hack, hack, hack! Or words to that effect. Cummings, by the way, has had a story in every issue since the second. I don't think anyone would quit buying the mag if you left him out once.

Now, "Proktoles of Neptune." It started out beautifully. Why must Hasse go in for stuff like the horrible torture; he's swell otherwise. The ending had very good points; Hasse should have spent more time building up to it, and less on slop. I don't care much for "great brains," either.

Once over lightly on the art, now. Paul's was his best yet. (They all are.) Don Lynch's only good pic was for "World of Mockery." Hold him down to less work, and he'll get somewhere, maybe. Morey is pretty bad, but he is worse in rival mags. Rosenthal and Small both slipped. Especially Ed. Somebody should know better. Hannes Bok. Well, why say more? He's always wonderful.

Three cheers, everybody! Here's the Vizigraph. Best part of the mag, but Still Not Big Enough. (Hint.) The best letter was Leonard Marlow's. Right now I'll say that I agree with him 100%. This because he'll probably come in for a lot of abuse for daring to criticize the "good old days." Again, I agree. Wonder how many other readers do? I know D. B. Thompson does. Let's rally round the flag, boys.

Guy Gifford came in second. I like him as well

as "Asenion," too. I like Me better than either of them, though I wish somebody agreed with me on this.

Third, I guess, goes to Milton Lesser. Just a good letter, that's all.

Now a little general advice to letter writers. I have the perfect solution to one big problem. If you're ashamed to be seen carrying a mag with a gruesome cover on it, do as I did. It's simple. Move upstairs over a newsstand. Then you can buy your mags when no one is around and you won't have to walk up the street with them. Second, if you don't want your moniker twisted up, get one like mine. Short and sweet, see?

Just noticed D. B. Thompson, my favorite letter writer, didn't even get third place. Just shows how good the Vizigraph is. But following his example, would any fans in the Schenectady area get in touch with me at 1301 State Street.

In closing; it seems to be the custom now to say "This is not my first letter to a S.-F. mag," instead of "This is my first—" etc. Well, this isn't my first letter either. It is my best, tho.

Till Fall, then.

Yours sincerely,

LARRY SHAW,
(The Hermit of Schenectady.)

UNTIL ASTEROIDS TURN TO PEANUTS

Los Angeles, Calif.

DEAR EDITOR:

A few weeks ago one might have seen a very sorrowful looking gentleman wading through piles and piles of science-fiction magazines at our corner drug store. Yes, it was I, picking out my usual favorites, when all of a sudden, out of the blue, a thunderbolt of an idea struck me, why not try some new magazine? Thusly I became acquainted with PLANET STORIES. After reading your Vizigraph section, which I always read first, I decided to write to you also, and give you the opinions of a new reader. When a reader starts to look through a number of magazines, what strikes his mind first? Of course, the front cover. It was not up to the standards of Virgil Finlay, or the kind of work P.S. could turn out. With two fine artists like Paul and Morey, who I am well acquainted with, you should be able to do better than that last one. As for inside illustration, you are much better. Paul, Morey and Bok are excellent. Don Lynch has fine responsibilities but don't overwork him. Please tell me who was responsible for that ghastly attempt that was supposed to be a drawing for "Mutiny Aboard the Terra." I couldn't read the name of the artist but please send him via etherwave to Pluto and forget to bring him back. Your features are very good, both of them, and that idea about giving away free original illustrations is a lulu. Before I forget, I'd like to cast my votes for Milton Lesser, Leonard Marlow, and Margaret Wells. Their letters were very interesting and deserve an illustration. You know the drawings I like in case I was lucky enough to win one; Paul's first, followed by Morey's and then Lynch's for World of Mockery.

As for the yarns in your Summer issue, they were superfine except for Space-Wolf, Cummings. After all my brickbats, this will probably wind up in the wastebasket, for who can compete with guys like Heilman, Lesser, and that amusing Guy Gifford. Gladly informing you that you have made a new P.S. fan out of me, I remain until the asteroids turn to peanuts,

ALDEN VERITY.



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by S. J. E.
(NAME AND ADDRESS SENT UPON REQUEST)



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