

PLANET STORIES 20c

STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS—THE UNIVERSE OF FUTURE CENTURIES

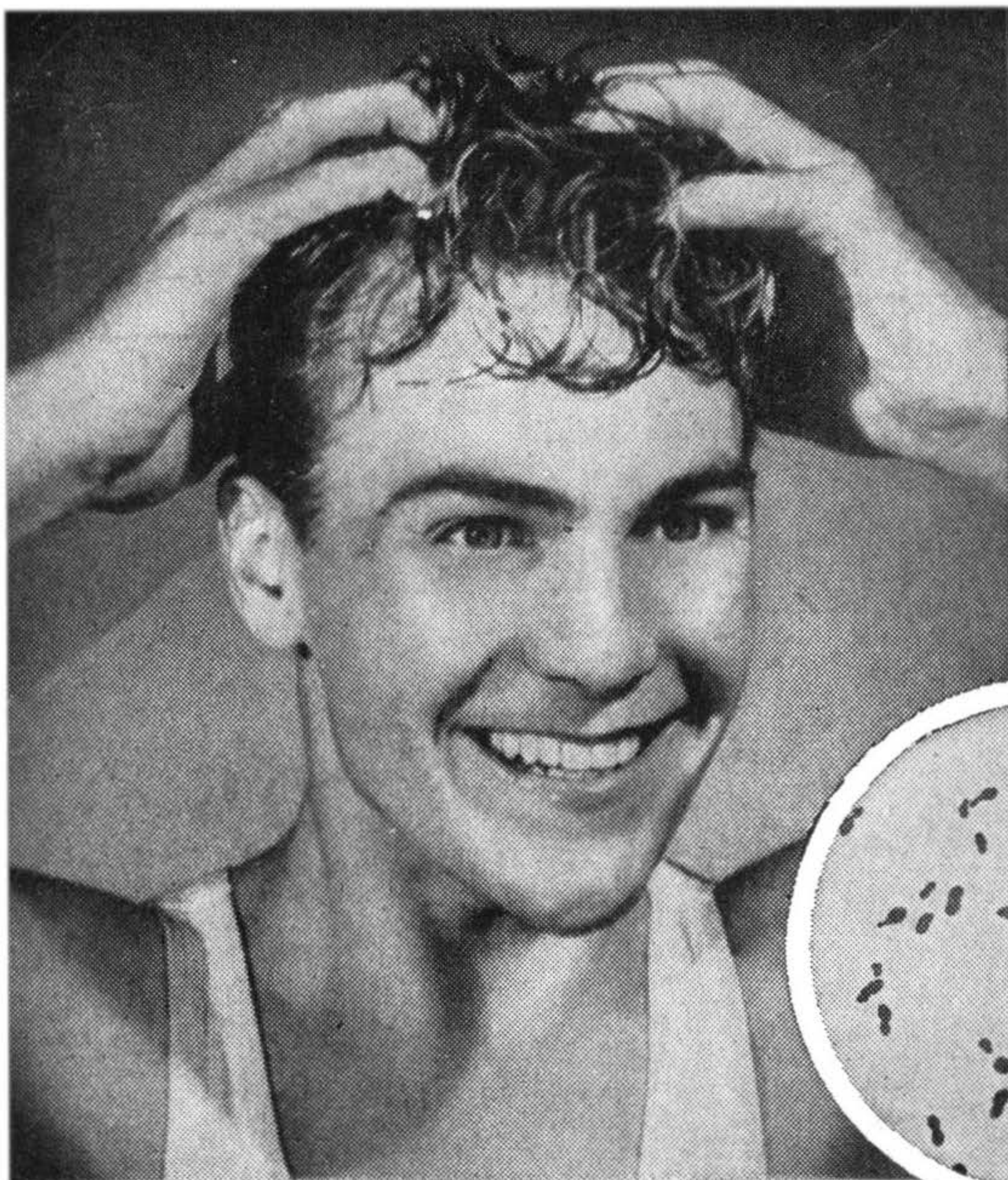
CITADEL OF LOST SHIPS
A *Novelet of Space Rovers*
by **LEIGH BRACKETT**



SLAVES OF THE NINTH MOON

by
ROSS ROCKLYNNE
NELSON S. BOND
R. R. WINTERBOTHAM
HASSE & DE PINA





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Cosmic Castaway

By CARL JACOBI

Within a year Earth would be a vassal world, with the Sirian invaders triumphant. Only Standish, Earth's Defense Engineer, could halt that last victorious onslaught—and he was helpless, the lone survivor of a prison ship wrecked in uncharted space.

STANDISH came back to consciousness, a dull pain surging in his head and a feeling of nausea in his mid-section. The room about him was strange:

grey *arelium* walls, a single light burning above the iron cot, and a low vibration that trembled the floor beneath his feet.

For a time he lay there, fighting off a

cloud of dizziness. Then he groped unsteadily to his feet. As he did, the vibration ceased, and far off he fancied he heard voices pitched in alarm. A bell clanged hollowly several times.

He recognized those sounds now, as his thoughts struggled to bridge the gap in his brain and the memory of past events came rushing to him.

He was on a Sirian prison ship!

The silence grew upon him, and he stood there uncertainly, listening. Some-

thing was wrong. There was no familiar drone of atomic motors, and there should be . . .

When the shock came, he was hurled completely across the room to the far bulkhead. Yet it wasn't a severe shock. It was as if the ship faltered suddenly and heeled over on her side.

Above him, Standish saw induction and exhaust pipes, coated with sulphur dioxide frost, writhe and twist like so many serpents. The explosion that followed was

Illustration by Paul



deafening. The floor buckled upward under the pressure. The door to the cabin was torn from its hinges, and a sheet of flame and a column of smoke gushed inward.

In an instant, Standish understood. The prison ship, well on its voyage from Earth, had entered the danger zone, that part of space swarming with planetoids and miniature planets. A sleepy pilot had failed to make the proper gravitational allowances. They had struck!

The ship was almost over on her beam ends now. It righted slowly, and Standish fought his way into the outer passageway, every muscle tensed for instant action.

The corridor was empty. Gas and smoke searing his nostrils, the Earthman made his way to the companion. Up he climbed. Emerging on the second level, he stood rigid, stark horror gripping him.

The cages were there. Tier after tier of them stretching into the bowels of the space ship as far as the grey light permitted him to see. In those cages, he knew, were men of his own race: Earth soldiers, prisoners of war.

But over each cage the heavy ceiling plates had been ripped free by the force of the explosion, and where the imprisoned men had been, only twisted bars and sheets of *arclium* steel were visible. The entire level was a tomb of silence.

Standish choked back a sob. His men all dead! Crushed like rats in a trap.

He crossed to the ladder leading to the third and main level, climbing slowly.

Reaching the crew deck, he rocked backward again with a cry of dismay. Here, too, the fearful destruction was evident on all sides. Uniformed Sirians lay dead in the scuppers. The entire bridge house was a mass of fallen girders and broken metal.

The officers' quarters had been crushed like an eggshell. Only the steering cuddy and control room had been spared. But here, too, Standish found death had not spared the occupants. A pintax bar, ripped free from its rocker arms, had jammed itself like an exploded cartridge into the pilot's skull. All in the control room had died of fumes forced into the chamber when the motors backcharged through the instrument pipes.

FROM cabin to cabin Standish went from the living quarters of the crew in the forecastle, to the ammunition chamber in the stern. Everywhere he found destruction and death.

And slowly the fact dawned upon him that he alone aboard was alive. He had been spared because he had been imprisoned in the lower hull, and that section of the ship had escaped damage. Slowly he sank onto a settee and tried to reconstruct his thoughts.

A few hours ago as defense engineer for Earth, he had generated a daring undercover attack against the Sirian's main base at San Francisco. For ten years—since 3010—the war between Earth and Sirius had been going on, with Earth the stage for all battles of the conflict. The cause of the war was long forgotten. Earth people only knew that the Sirians, greedy for more land, had successfully vanquished Mars and Venus and were steadily closing in on terrestrial territory.

Already Australia and Asia had fallen. With every known device of interplanetary warfare, the Sirians had captured district after district, until the American continent alone remained untrampled by the invaders.

But Standish's story had begun a week before. Through an operative in his vast espionage system, he had learned that the Sirians under command of the ruthless Drum Faggard, were preparing for the "big push."

With a dozen chosen companions disguised as Sirians, the Earth engineer had successfully passed through the enemy lines. He had hoped to capture Drum Faggard and a number of his officers-of-staff and race with them back to the Earth's front line breastworks at Omaha. It was a wild scheme; but Standish knew if Faggard were captured, the war would collapse.

The plan had failed. Counter-spies had warned the Sirians. The little band of twelve had been permitted to penetrate deep into Sirian territory, then had been overwhelmed. And after that—Standish's fists clenched—he had been brought face to face with Drum Faggard.

He was a renegade, this Sirian master of conquest. He had been born on Earth of low parentage, but at the beginning of

hostilities he had wormed his way into the graces of the Sirians and by cunning and force of will had risen to Chief of Command.

The Sirians were a wafter-headed race with featureless faces and short barrel-like bodies. Their legs were the same as those of the men of Earth, but their arms possessed tumor-like swellings above the wrists, secondary nerve centers. Faggard, a huge man with a gross face, pig-like eyes and thin lips, had smiled sardonically when Standish was brought before him.

"So your little plan failed, eh?" he said, swallowing a glass of Sirian whiskey and wiping his mouth with the flat of his hand. "Well, Standish, you may as well realize it, you're quite in our power now, and you'll be treated with no more consideration than the rest of the prisoners, unless you answer a few questions."

"What sort of questions?" Standish had demanded.

Faggard smiled again. "Now that your connections with Earth have been forever severed, it can be of little concern to you what happens to that planet. What I want to know is this: How many anti-rocket guns has Earth located at its Omaha base? What is the number of strato-cruisers stationed at Powerville? How heavy are the reserves in the Electra City sector?"

"Answer those question, Standish, and you will be virtually a free man. You will be released on our colony planet of Pluto, with five hundred *planetoles* in your pocket. That money will enable you to live a life of ease for the rest of your days."

For a moment Standish had stood there, face emotionless. Then like an uncapped bottle spewing forth, he had given in to blind rage. He lunged across the room, seized Faggard's thick throat and pounded his right fist into the smirking lips. Twice he had struck before a guard had rushed forward and pulled him off. Then something hard and heavy had crashed down upon his skull, and he knew no more.

He had awakened on this prison ship. But had not this accident occurred he knew well enough the fate that would have been in store for him. All prisoners captured by the Sirian army were transported back to Sirius where they were put

to work as slaves in the marsh fields, extracting hydro-carbon gas for use in the food-distillation plants. It was said a terrestrial man could live only one year there.

Only one thing puzzled the Earthman. Why had he been given special quarters on the prison ship instead of being placed in one of the cages with the other prisoners? To that he could give no answer, and as the ringing silence of space closed in on him, he got to his feet and made his way slowly back to the control room.

II

GLASS 5 showed that the forepeak and secondary chamber had been ripped open. Glass 5 also showed that bulkhead doors there had automatically closed. For the rest, excluding the motors, everything seemed in order.

The oxygen suppliers were functioning smoothly on auxiliary batteries. Likewise the heat units, one for each level, showed normal operation. All lights were lit.

Standish glanced out the port. Whatever the ship had struck, it was out of his vision range now. Propelled by the forward surge of the dying motors, the ship must have advanced a great distance since the fatal crash.

Now the ship was drifting. Drifting without steerageway.

"Derelict," Standish said slowly. "It looks like I've got a one-way ticket to eternity."

He took the elevator down to the lower level again and made his way along the grating to the engine room. Carefully he examined the six ato-turbines with an experienced eye.

Standish had grown up with atomic motors. He had served an apprenticeship at his father's solar plant at Sun City, and he had graduated from the New York School of Technology. As a boy of sixteen, he had built his first miniature atom smasher during vacation days.

Now he moved along the narrow catwalk between the motors, touching a wire here, an armature there. The two port engines, he found, were wrecked completely. Likewise the two starboard. Two forward machines remained, and of these he saw one had an inch-wide crack in its

combustion chamber. But the other . . .

Standish drew in a breath of satisfaction. The last motor was disabled but not beyond repair. Without further ado, he peeled off his coat, seized a Stillson wrench and fell to work.

It took him a long time, and the task drew his mind away from the horror about him. With the patience of long experience, Standish made his repairs. At length it was completed, and he paused with bated breath while he pressed the starting button.

The motor began, sluggishly at first, then faster and faster. Presently it was droning evenly as if nothing had almost wrecked it earlier.

"One motor isn't much," he told himself. "But it may be enough."

For the third time he returned to the control room. There, triumph met his gaze. The master indicator showed a definite forward movement through space. The crippled ship was moving, though slowly.

Standish turned his attention next to the visiscreens and emergency radio with which the liner had kept in contact with Earth and Sirius. Neither the transmitting nor the receiving sets showed any response when he turned on the control switch. A glance back of the panels showed shattered tubes and broken apparatus.

He went out on the deck and climbed to the pilot cuddy. One look through the three-directional glassite shield told a grim story. But it was a full minute before the significance of it all probed into him.

The view ahead was utterly unfamiliar. Strange stars and constellations glowed in the void. Far off to his left was the white radiance of a spiral nebula. To the right, the galaxies seemed to blend in a bewildering array of light and matter, stretching on into infinitude.

Standish's knowledge of cosmography was limited. He knew that straight lines connecting Sirius with Procyon and Betelgeuse would constitute a nearly equilateral triangle. He knew, too, that Betelgeuse, Sirius and Regal—all of the first magnitude—formed a lozenge-shaped figure, with Orion's belt in the center.

But try as he would, he could locate none of these stellar landmarks.

TURNING, he looked for the liner's log. With information as to the ship's time of departure from Earth and an average calculation of her speed, he might hope to chart his position.

The log, however, had not been filled out. The Sirians apparently had grown careless in their repeated trips through space.

Standish's teeth came down hard on his pipe stem. He was lost! Hopelessly lost! A solitary spark of life in a man-made projectile, wandering the immensities of the Universe.

Mechanically, the Earthman set the automatic directionscope for a larger spot of light far ahead and threw in the massmeter which would effectually warn him of any body within collision range in his path. Had the liner pilot paid attention to that dial, he reflected, the crash might have been avoided.

Stars paraded, swung past. The Big Dipper flamed away, curiously changed in outlines. Or was it the Big Dipper? Standish didn't know.

Material thoughts supplanted cosmic ones then. There was work to be done, ghoulish work which common decency demanded he perform. The dead must be disposed of.

It was a hard task, and he accomplished it by carry the bodies of the Sirian officers and crew to the baggage chamber in the stern and casting them free through the airlock. On the second level which had held the Earth prisoners the work was even more difficult. Heavy bars and plates had to be lifted free. But at length Standish stood alone on the ship.

He recognized the gnawing sensation in his midsection then as hunger. Finding the galley supplied with both fresh meats and vegetables as well as food concentrates, he ate well. The food served to restore some of his confidence.

When he returned to the pilot cuddy, he saw that the bright spot for which he had set the directionscope had enlarged to a great orange globe that covered the entire glassite shield. Even as he watched, the outlines of land and seas took form.

The needle of the massmeter began to

quiver spasmodically, but Standish held to his course. It had occurred to him that this world might possibly be inhabited and that he might obtain aid for his return to Earth, or at least the proper directions.

But as he drew closer, the land resolved itself into thick jungle and smooth eroded mountain tops, barren of any building or structure. The planet, on this hemisphere at least, was devoid of life.

A bell clanged above the massmeter, warning him the ship was in the danger zone. He seized the wheel and turned it hard over. At the same time he moved the power switch to the last notch.

The liner swung sluggishly. And then the thing Standish had feared happened! The single motor buckled under the strain and ceased. Without resistance, the ship swept full into the gravitational field of the planet and plunged downward.

Like a man in a dream Standish saw jungle rush up to meet him. An instant later there was a terrific crash, and he felt himself hurled into oblivion.

III

AN eternity seemed to have passed before he opened his eyes. He was conscious immediately of his left arm which was pinioned under a heavy rock. He wrenched it free and staggered erect, looking about dazedly.

His eyes opened in bewilderment. He lay on a shelf, a small escarpment projecting from the side of a cliff. Far below him, smashed and broken in two, amid jagged boulders, lay the prison ship. And sweeping on and on to the horizon was a dense matted jungle.

The trees resembled giant cat-tails. Without branches, the trunks towered up a full three hundred feet to form a huge green protruberance at the top. The rock of the cliff was neither igneous nor sedimentary. Instead it was smooth and almost translucent, like glass.

In the sky above, two suns blazed, one at the zenith, one a fiery ball dipping over the horizon. The air was warm and humid, and Standish knew the oxygen content must be almost the same as on Earth.

Nature-formed rock slabs led in stair formation down the cliff. While he stood there, slowly regaining his strength, the Earthman tried to trace the path of the crashing liner. He saw where it had struck, ripping open the entire side and casting him out. Then it had rolled end over end down into the ravine.

At length, Standish began his descent. The moment he swung his body over the edge to hang by his hands, he gave an exclamation of amazement. His body seemed to weigh nothing at all. This planet must be of smaller size than Earth, and, therefore, the gravitational attraction was less.

On the ravine floor he looked about him warily. Titanic rock, smooth and polished from erosion, littered the expanse but stopped at the jungle edge. The trees were all the same, of equal height and girth. They seemed to be arranged in corridors or galleries, the way between them dark and shadow-filled. Standish knew he must exercise caution until he could explore those depths.

The significance of his plight now swept upon him. He was alone on an alien planet. Even granting the Sirians would send out scouts to locate their prison ship when it failed to arrive, the chances of his being found were remote.

Yet on the other hand, he alone had been spared death. And he had come upon a world, one perhaps in millions, which had an atmosphere capable of supporting human life.

A sudden high-pitched drone broke the silence. Rising up from behind a pile of boulders a hideous winged shape shot toward him!

Half bird, half saurian, the thing's head was enormous with an inflated cobra hood. Even as the creature closed in with incredible speed, Standish wheeled and ran for the safety of the wrecked space ship.

He reached it and wormed his way through a gaping rent in the hull. The lizard-bird stopped short a few yards from the ship to stare perplexedly. Then with its queer droning cry still sounding, it zoomed into the air and flew out of sight.

"Holy Hell!"

Standish inhaled deeply. Dangers here

were imminent. He must take steps to protect himself at once.

Although the liner lay on one side with the three entrances and emergency airlock underneath, the hole through which he had entered was the only opening. The hull bottom had been crushed by the great impact. Yet the glassite ports and vision shield of the pilot cuddy were unbroken.

Standish crawled back along the passage to the officers' quarters. On the well of one of the cabins he found two genithode pistols and a portable ray gun. He realized then that his first move toward self preservation lay in making the space ship livable and impregnable to outside attack.

He accomplished the latter by removing two bulkhead doors and jamming them across the opening in the hull. The last door he arranged on a swivel so that it could be locked from either side. Then, exhausted by the hours of activity, he fell asleep.

WHEN he awoke and went outside, he saw that the two suns had exactly altered their position. The larger was at the zenith now; the smaller, low on the horizon. The temperature was unchanged, and the air was crystal clear, with only a few fleecy clouds floating overhead.

Standish ate a hearty breakfast, then strapped one genithode pistol about his waist and headed across the ravine to begin his first trip of exploration.

The moment he entered the jungle he was conscious of an electric something that passed before him, telegraphed from tree to tree. The strange plants, neither cyads nor conifers, seemed aware of his presence, whispering among themselves.

Experimentally he touched one of the trunks. It quivered, the bark split apart, and a spongy tentacle whipped out to drive straight at his throat. Standish escaped the clawing coil by inches. The tree quivered again, and the tentacle returned to its hiding place.

He kept well away from the trees after that. But as he went on, he saw other forms of life, all manifesting an evolution in mixed stages of development. There was a low plant, brilliant purple in color

which gave off a mewling cry whenever he stepped on one of its fronds. There were small lizard-birds, and occasionally he saw bluish masses growing melon-like on the ground. These had a single eye in the center of a spongy body. They watched him as he passed.

Once a small animal darted out before him. But when he approached, the creature instead of running for safety, thrust one paw in the soft earth, and a whitish blossom leaped up on a wavering stalk from its head. Within the flick of an eye, the thing had changed from animal to plant life.

It was at high noon by his Earth-time watch that Standish emerged into the glade. He stopped short, staring, then uttered a short cry.

Before him were buildings, low mushroom-like buildings arranged in a semicircle. Fashioned of the same translucent rock he had seen on the cliff, they resembled the igloos of his own north country. Overhead a network of thick yellowish wire ran back and forth, separated at intervals by heavy white insulators.

He saw then that the structures were old. The wires hung slack, and in many places were broken in two. A heavy silk-like grass had sprung up in thick clumps between the buildings.

With steps suddenly grown heavy, Standish advanced to the nearest house. The rotting remnants of a wooden door hung from elliptical hinges.

Inside was desertion. There were no furnishings of any kind. Over everything lay a heavy coating of dust.

There were twelve buildings in the glade, and he examined them one by one. In one he found a skeleton with a skull of enormous size and three leg appendages instead of two. In the last a strange looking machine, partially dismantled, was mounted on the wall. Every detail of it, from the mildewed control panel to the eccentric wheels and cogs were unfamiliar to him. On the floor was a stone tablet covered with hieroglyphics.

But that was all!

Depression swept over Standish as he mentally supplied the missing details. Some race had been here long ago; a foreign race, for the glade was undoubt-

edly a temporary camp. The wire entanglement and the machine had been constructed as some sort of protection against the animal life of this planet.

But whoever these people were, they had come and gone!

IV

STANDISH left the glade with a heavy heart and returned to the space ship. In the ravine, he made two discoveries. There was a spring of clear water pouring from a fissure in the cliff side. Growing about it was an edible variety of moss. Although he had concentrated food in the liner's galley to keep him for a long time, these finds were reassuring.

He also found that the combination of the mineral soil and the two suns affected growth tremendously. Planting a few dried kernels of corn, he was amazed to see them take root almost instantly and reach full maturity within a few hours.

He now set upon a task which he had been mulling over in his brain for some time.

There were ray cannon mounted on the space liner's stern. Two of these had broken muzzles, but the third was intact. Standish went down into the bowels of the ship and found a dozen old message projectiles. Cigar-shaped objects of heat-resisting corodite, these projectiles were a part of all space crafts' emergency equipment. They were used for distress signals when radio or visiscreen equipment failed.

In the hollow chamber of each of the twelve projectiles he placed the same message:

Castaway. Mason Standish. Lieutenant-defense-engineer Earth. On unknown planet, somewhere near Sirius-Earth Route. December 28, 3020.

He had no means of astronomical calculation. So he aimed the gun at twelve different points of the heavens and fired haphazardly. Chances of intelligent life ever finding those projectiles were millions to one against him. But whatever the odds, he must miss no opportunity.

Next he made a thorough survey of

the wrecked liner, carrying all usable objects to the forecastle, which swiftly took on the appearance of a storage room. As these articles began to grow in number, satisfaction and pride of ownership gripped him.

It was in the midst of these labors that he was suddenly struck with an idea. Why not construct a space ship from the wrecked parts of the liner? He had six atomic motors, and surely from their wreckage he could salvage enough to build one of half the trajectory power. And with a smaller ship, he might be able to find his way back to Earth.

Standish smoked a pipe over this. When morning came, he began the herculean task of dismantling the motors. Day after day he struggled with the cumbersome machinery. When this stage of the work was finally completed, he was startled to discover that six weeks of Earth time had slipped by.

He then found in the machinists' quarters an electrolic saw. The tool was dull, but he managed to cut free a dozen girders for the framework of his craft. To his dismay he found them too heavy to move even with block and tackle. There was no alternative but to cut them into sections and weld them together, hoping they would stand the strain.

That night the first warning of trouble came. Absently Standish had noticed a chill in the air, a more oblique slant to the twin suns. Suddenly from the jungle beyond the ravine came a low rumbling.

The earthman switched on a searchlight he had fastened on top of the forecastle. The white glare fastened itself on the wall of trees, revealed five figures advancing directly into the light.

ON all fours they came, huge beasts with long tapered bodies covered with heavy white fur. Their heads resembled the saber-toothed tigers of Earth's Upper Miocene.

A dozen appeared before Standish understood. This zone of the planet was advancing into its cold season. The animals were part of a migrating herd, coming down from the warmer districts.

He drew his genithode pistol and fired into their midst. The foremost of the creatures keeled over, and the Earthman

advanced boldly, firing as he went. Here was fresh meat, and with winter coming on, he intended to obtain as much of it as possible.

Standish was twenty yards from the hull of the liner when a coughing roar sounded behind him. He wheeled and uttered a cry of horror. If the creatures revealed by the light were giants in size, these others were titans. Nostrils picking up his scent, they came forward slowly, cutting him off from the ship.

He fired twice again, even as two of the monsters hurtled toward him. It was stark struggle then. With only the reflected light of the search lamp and the vague glow of the stars, Standish fought desperately. The pistol barrel became hot; the white-haired things went down in two's and three's.

And then abruptly there came a lull in the attack. The creatures halted listening. And an instant later the sound reached the Earthman's ears like the hum of an angry hornet. From above it came, rapidly drawing nearer. Stunned, he saw the saber-toothed monsters turn and slink quietly back into the jungle.

Up in the sky a light gleamed, and a series of red flashes split the darkness. Then a black ball-shaped shadow swept downward with incredible speed. There was a roar and a series of muffled reports as the thing hurtled over the roof of the jungle and swept to a landing at the far end of the ravine.

The sounds ceased. Standish stood there, frozen to inactivity. Then a hysterical shout and a peal of laughter burst from his lips. A space ship . . . a rocket ship, landing here on this planet. It . . . it wasn't possible!

V

BUT it was possible. As Standish ran forward, he saw a hatch open in the metal sphere and a man climb out. And yet it wasn't a man. The face and body were normal, but the arms and legs were vine-like appendages with segmented fronds for hands. When this person saw Standish, it recoiled and whipped a knife out from a scabbard at its waist.

Quickly the Earthman raised one arm above his head in the common symbol of

friendliness. A smile of recognition crossed the little man's face. He nodded and raised his frond-like hand in a similar gesture. Then he pointed to himself and said:

"Ga-Marr!"

The rocket ship now came under Standish's gaze. He saw that it was of a design foreign to any craft he had ever seen before. Spherical in shape, with a series of strange-looking fins along the sides, its stern rudders were formed of crude exhaust jettisons, and the several ports were formed of a transparent material that resembled quartz.

Ga-Marr—for it was evident those syllables formed the stranger's name—opened the hatch door and motioned Standish to enter. Without hesitation, the Earthman did so. Inside was a single cabin, with a control panel occupying two of the four walls. Ga-Marr pressed a button, and a panel slid open in the floor, revealing the motor chamber.

The stranger pointed downward, then shook his head violently. Standish nodded.

"Motors went dead on you, eh? Well, my friend, it looks as though you and I were in the same fix. Come along, and I'll show you my diggings."

But when Ga-Marr looked upon the wrecked space liner, he stared incredulously. He walked its entire length as if doubting its proportions.

"Yes, she's big all right," Standish smiled, aware that he was not understood. "But she's no good, the way she is now. Now, how about a little food?"

In his fore-castle home, the Earthman set out a bottle of wine and some cakes. He noted that Ga-Marr used his front hands with great dexterity, but that he betrayed no surprise at Standish's own physical appearance.

Once the stranger had eaten, Standish began the necessary task of providing a common means of communication. He used the Corelli sound-system—a short-cut method of acquainting the ear and the eye simultaneously with objects of fundamental importance. Within two hours, he found he could converse with Ga-Marr with a minimum amount of difficulty.

Haltingly then, the stranger began to speak:

"I am from the city, Calthetra, of the planet Lyra, of the system Aritorius. My race was once a great people, but raiders from another planet destroyed our civilization. All we have left is a few rocket ships of the kind in which I came. These were built long ago by our ancestors, and only a few of us know how to operate them."

Standish nodded. "How came you here?"

"I was voyaging to visit my brother on our satellite, Zora, when those same raiders caught sight of me and gave chase. My space compass broke, and I became lost. I found my way here just as my rocket motors consumed the last of their power."

"I see." Standish lit his pipe and began to smoke slowly. "And these raiders—they come from near here?"

"From Sirius," Ga-Marr replied. "They raid us for funds to continue their war with a planet many light years away."

For a full moment Standish sat there rigid. Then the pipe fell from his hands, and he leaped to his feet.

"Sirius!" he cried. "So those butchers are not content to place in bondage all the solar system. They must plague other worlds also!"

He paced the length of the fore-castle.

"Tell me," he said, whirling abruptly, "do you know of a Sirian leader called Drum Faggard?"

Ga-Marr's eyes gleamed. "Aye. The cruelest and most bloodthirsty of them all. It was he who led the attack against my people in which my brother was killed. It was he who directed the sacking of our city of Calthetra. My one hope is that some day we may meet on common ground."

THE next day Standish revealed to the newcomer his plan to build a smaller space ship out of the wreckage of the old.

"Your own craft is useless without power for its rocket motors," he told Ga-Marr. "Yet it contains parts that will be valuable. Have I your consent to dismantle it?"

The stranger nodded.

"To work then. And remember, if

we succeed, we may yet be able to strike at Drum Faggard."

It was the desire for revenge that spurred them on. Quickly they set about dismantling Ga-Marr's ship. Rivets were cut, bolts unscrewed, plates ripped off. Using the dismantled parts of the space liner's atomic motors, Standish fashioned a smaller but powerful engine. Gradually out of the mass a crude craft began to take form.

But they were working on counted time. Days were growing shorter; the nights, longer. Icy winds began to sweep across the ravine, bringing sleet and flurries of snow.

With the change in seasons came new dangers. Strange animal life, following the perverse migrational instinct of the planet, swept out of the jungle.

First came the lizard-birds, similar to, but larger than, the one which had attacked Standish. They came over the cliff in squadron formation, a dense cloud that blotted out the sky.

For two days the men were kept prisoners, while the flock stalked back and forth about the ravine like a vast Roman encampment.

A week later the thrads came. It was Ga-Marr who called them thrads. They were a tiny species of anthropoid, no larger than a squirrel, with bright red bodies. Inquisitive and bold, they hampered the two men as they gathered close to watch the work.

The ship was nearing completion. While Standish labored at the control adjustments, Ga-Marr carried in a supply of food concentrates from the wrecked liner. Along the length of the ravine an inclined runway was built for a take-off. At the end of this, Standish constructed a rifle-like catapult, using the parts of Ga-Marr's rocket motor and a quantity of trinitrate cellulose he found in the liner. If the device worked, it would multiply their initial trajectory power and quicken their passage through the planet's gravitational field.

At length Standish fastened the last bolt of the crude new ship in its place. Nervously, he pressed the starting button. The single motor began with a smooth powerful hum. The ship strained at its moorings.

"Ready, Ga-Marr? We'll give her a trial flight and see how she handles."

The little man grinned, shouted. "Cast off!" he cried. "Cast off!"

Standish severed the mooring cable of the ship with one shot from his genithode pistol. The two men yanked shut the hatch, screwed down the air lock. With a yank, the Earthman threw over the control lever.

Up from the ground the ship shot. Through the floor panel, Standish saw the ground receding.

"Take the controls," he told Ga-Marr. "I'm going to try and chart a course for your planet."

THE planet rose up before them like a great ripened peach. It had taken Standish long hours to calculate with his elementary astrophysics the location of their destination. Ga-Marr had supplied what information he could; but he knew only that the planet, Lyra, was bordered by a spiral nebulae on one side, and that it revolved about a sun some hundred million miles distant.

As they approached now, Ga-Marr betrayed no emotion. "The city of Calthetra is on the other hemisphere," he said. "I'll direct you to the landing."

They crept slowly along the surface, and the Earthman found himself looking upon a land similar in many respects to his own. Nostalgia seized him. Here were lakes and woods and broad fields in the state of cultivation. Here were lanes, roads and hedges, a tracery of browns and greens that was good to see.

But when a moment later Ga-Marr pointed out the port and said, "Calthetra," Standish's jaw set hard. The city had been devastated. Buildings stood in ruins. Towers were crumbling masses of masonry. Only one structure seemed to have escaped the fearful onslaught, a globe-shaped building, fashioned of some kind of black metal.

The Earthman saw the landing place and guided the ship downward. Below he could see people milling about excitedly, groups of them pointing upward.

The moment the ship came to a rest, Ga-Marr threw open the hatch and climbed out. Standish followed, to find an assemblage drawn up suspiciously in battle

array, their weapons ready for any hostile move of the newcomers.

In the foreground stood a taller man of Lyra, wearing a suit of copper-colored chain mail and a helmet studded with gleaming chips of yellow metal. At his sides were two men in white flowing robes. All had high brows, penetrating eyes and frond-like appendages in lieu of arms and legs.

Ga-Marr ran forward and embraced the man in the helmet.

"My father," he said, "this man is Mason Standish, a great warrior from the planet Earth. He has rescued me from certain death, and has brought me back to your empire at the risk of his life."

The Emperor paced forward, a benevolent smile playing across his lips.

"He who befriends my son has my gratitude," he said softly.

Standish was bewildered. Ga-Marr had made no mention of the fact that he was of royal birth. It was a long time before the Earthman found his tongue.

"Your son tells me that your people and my people are at war with a common enemy. May I ask how long since the Sirians made their last attack upon you?"

"Within the risings of twelve suns," the Emperor replied. "But come. Let us go to the palace where we may speak alone."

STANDISH missed no detail of his passage through the city. Calthetra, besides being hard hit by the invaders, was quite evidently in the process of decay. Streets were racked and unrepaired. House windows were broken and open to the elements. And on all sides the Earthman saw faces devoid of intelligence staring at him.

But when he climbed the steps and followed Ga-Marr and the Emperor into the black metal globe, he entered a different world.

A vast pillared hall stretched before him. On one side a balustrated ramp led to the upper levels. Opposite were a series of high triangular doorways, each opening into separate chambers. The air was cool and exhilarating and seemed to have a different chemical content than that of the street.

"This is our palace," Ga-Marr said, "built thousands of years before when our people were a great civilization. It alone has withstood all the attacks our planet has been exposed to."

"Why?" demanded Standish. "I should think this would be the enemy's first striking place."

Ga-Marr stook his head. "I do not understand the science of it myself. It is something in the black metal. It is an electron-stripped element, I believe, tremendously heavy and impregnable to any weapon of cosmic warfare."

They reached the last doorway and entered the royal quarters. The Emperor and his son sat down before a circular table and motioned Standish to a chair opposite. The older man removed his helmet and closed his eyes as if in weariness.

"Earthman," he said at length, "you come at a time when my planet is sorely in need of help. I don't know how much my son has told you, but if you will listen I will tell you the history of Lyra. But first I have something to show you."

He touched a button on the table, and a chime sounded melodiously in the outer corridor. A servant appeared in the doorway.

"Tell Thalia I would see her at once," the Emperor said.

A moment later light steps sounded and Standish looked up curiously. What he saw brought him out of his chair with a cry of pleasure and amazement.

The figure of a girl—an Earth girl of his own race stood there on the threshold.

VI

FOR a full moment as their eyes met, man and girl stared speechless. To Standish, who a few short weeks ago had thought himself cut off forever from his people, she was a vision of loveliness. Her hair was dark, and her face was a delicate one of natural beauty.

"This is Thalia," the Emperor said, "born on your planet, but brought here as a child. Perhaps you recall a liner, the Colossus, which was lost and never reached port some twenty years ago?"

"Glory, yes!" exclaimed Standish.

"The Colossus was destroyed by the Sirians. It was their first attack on an Earth craft, and I believe the initial act which led them on. Thalia was the only survivor when we came upon the ship, drifting, a derelict."

The girl stepped forward now shyly. "My greetings," she said.

Standish took her hand, and a strange thrill shot through him. Then the Emperor leaned back in his chair, lit a short metal pipe and began his story. . . .

Thousands of years before, the Sirians had come to raid this planet, Lyra, attracted by the wealth of minerals: coronium, thanium, margon, gold and silver. They had destroyed the libraries, the laboratories, the schools. They had killed the scientists and all men suspected of higher intelligence. For generations, the people of Lyra had been held in bondage.

Then an Emperor had come into power, gifted with a scientific reasoning far in advance of his time. He had constructed a warp in space on three sides of the planet. This alteration of the space-time coordinates served as an impregnable defense.

Until Drum Faggard had come upon the scene. With but one desire—to continue his war on Earth and the solar system, Faggard had broken through the space warp and destroyed the time machine that operated it.

"And so," concluded the Emperor, "we of Lyra today are but ghosts of our past. Our heritage has been stolen from us. We are far removed in space, so have been unable to obtain allies. Even your planet, Earth, does not know of our presence. The Sirians have told us that your observers believe Lyra unfit to support life. And the few rocket ships we have left are not capable of crossing that immense distance."

Standish sat in thoughtful silence. Abruptly the girl, Thalia, moved to his side.

"Will you help us?" she said. "You have knowledge, and knowledge is power. Will you aid Lyra in its fight for freedom?"

Standish stood up slowly, face a grim line of determination. "Yes," he said. "I'll do all I can."

HE began with a survey of the city of Calthetra. With Ga-Marr answering his many questions, Standish passed from street to street, building to building, no detail missing his sharp eyes. He saw the wreckage of the space warp machine, broken ray cannon, the debris-choked lower levels where once light-hearted Lyrians had their libraries and laboratories.

Then Standish spent two days devising an intelligence test as he remembered them from his Earth studies. The test, he instructed Ga-Marr was to be given to every able-bodied man in Calthetra.

He spent a week more checking the results. But at length from the mass of papers he selected twenty-four Lyrians whose IQ rating and general scientific aptitude seemed in advance of their fellows. The Earthman then revealed his plan to Ga-Marr.

"We're going to build a space ship," he said, "a super destroyer with the most powerful atomic motors I've ever designed. We're going to take this war into our own hands—attack, rather than wait to be attacked."

A call for workmen was broadcast. The response was overwhelming. All Calthetra, all Lyra wanted to help the man from Earth in the struggle to free them from bondage.

With the twenty-four picked men as overseers, the work began. A flat space was selected beyond the outskirts of the city. Food depots were thrown up, together with temporary housing quarters. Like a colony of ants, the workmen labored in three shifts. At night, the work went on by the light of solar-condenser lamps mounted on towers at every point of vantage.

The ship began to take form. A long cigar-shaped blue-black hull was fashioned out of *feloranium*, a metal peculiar to Lyra which Standish toughened by the addition of five alloys. At intermittent spaces along that hull, disappearing ray guns were swivel-mounted, operated and loaded by remote control.

The Earthman personally supervised the installation of the atomic motors. Each he had given the most strenuous block tests. Switched on, they purred like six

gargantuan cats, alive with effortless strength.

Finally Ga-Marr climbed out of the huge cabin and smiled.

"It is completed," he said. "Only the heat units remain to be tested. What now?"

"Now," said Standish. . . . But his words were never finished. From the roof of the palace the warning siren burst into a wailing clamor. Ga-Marr's face blanched.

"The Sirians!" he cried. "They'll destroy all we've done."

With a single leap Standish was across to the microphone of the field amplifying system.

"Wait!" his voice boomed out. "If you run, all your work will be for nothing. We still have a chance, but we must hide this ship. I want each of you to bring here every movable object you can find. Do you understand? Every movable object!"

The field saw strange activity then. While the siren continued to scream out its warning, an endless procession of Lyrians raced in and out of Calthetra, carrying stone blocks, furniture, doors, articles of every description.

"Looks like moving day back on Earth," Standish said to Ga-Marr with a lightness he didn't feel. His fists clenched. "We'll beat them yet."

He ran for the palace. Even as he raced up the inclined ramp of the rear entrance, he saw five Sirian battle cruisers land with a roar in the central square. Inside, Standish moved swiftly to the quarters of the Emperor. The old man was leaning weakly against a chair, eyes smoldering.

Without preamble the Earthman explained what he had done. Then he had barely time to leap through the doorway into the adjoining room.

HEAVY steps sounded in the hall. A moment later six men entered the chamber and strode belligerently to the Emperor. Five of them were Sirians. The sixth was a man of Earth—a tall broad shouldered man with a bullet head and a cruel predatory face. This was Drum Faggard.

He wore the Sirian uniform and a

flowing scarlet cloak hung from his shoulders. At his waist were holstered two long barreled genithode pistols.

"Your mines are lying idle," Faggard snarled. "Why?"

Through the crevice between the partially closed door Standish saw the Emperor shrug eloquently. "We have had troubles."

"What troubles?"

The Emperor hesitated. "Labor," he said. "My workers refuse to toil further when the results of their work are stolen from them. They see no reason to struggle for the benefit of murdering raiders."

Blunt anger crimsoned Faggard's face. He struck the Emperor hard across the face. "Watch your tongue, fool!"

Standish made fists of his hands. He had an overpowering desire to leap into the room and seize the renegade. To do that, however, he knew, would mean failure for his plans.

Drum Faggard paced to a window.

"What is the meaning of all that material piled outside the city?"

Quietly the Emperor continued to play his part. "We are moving to new grounds," he explained, "moving higher into the hills. The weather on Lyra is changing, growing warmer due to the planet's gradual approach to our sun. Surely your observers must have noticed it."

For a long moment the renegade stood there motionless, digesting this information. Then he crossed back to the table, slammed a mailed fist down upon it.

"Old man, I give you one more chance. Either those mines are worked and a double amount of ore made ready for us, or we level Calhedra to the ground. Do you understand? We will return later."

He turned on his heel, and the five Sirians followed puppet-like into the corridor. Darting across to the window, Standish saw them march pompously across the square and enter the space cruisers. A moment later, with a roar of rocket exhaust, the six armored vessels shot upward.

Standish turned and ran out the door, heading for the landing field. Half way he met Ga-Marr.

"The ruse worked," the Emperor's son exulted. "They've gone."

"Order the ship cleared!" Standish commanded. "We take off at once."

Quickly the screen of material was torn from the new ship. A vat of necessary water and a case of food concentrate were hastily carried into the storage chamber. The twenty-four chosen Lyrians took their places. In the pilot cuddy, Standish nodded to Ga-Marr and pulled down the microphone of the ship address-system.

"Close stern hatch!" he ordered.

A dial flicked on the panel before him, and from the loudspeaker a voice answered:

"Hatch closed, sir."

"Close midships-tower."

"Midships-tower closed."

"Gunner's mate!" Standish called. "Test all gun swivels, air locks and automatic loaders."

There was a moment's pause. Then:

"All guns tested, sir."

Standish motioned Ga-Marr to shut the pilot cuddy hatch. But before Ga-Marr could swing the hermetic barrier into position, a lithe figure leaped down the ladder. It was the Earth girl—Thalia.

"I'm going with you," she said. "This is my battle as well as yours."

Standish looked into her defiant black eyes and frowned. But the refusal that rose to his lips died unsounded. He nodded and motioned her to the settee on the far side of the cuddy.

In rotation then, he snapped on the six atomic motors. A dull tremor of life and power shook the ship. Then Standish seized an electro-welder left behind by some workman, flung open the hatch and ran outside to the stern of the ship.

Roughly, while Ga-Marr watched bewildered, he seared the name, *Phantom*, on the feloranium hull. He leaped back to the cuddy, slammed shut the hatch and threw over the acceleration lever.

The huge ship lifted from the field of its birth and roared up into the stratosphere.

VII

IT was Standish's plan to permit the six departing Sirian cruisers to cover sufficient distance that they would not associate him—immediately at least—with

the plundered planet, Lyra. With unleashed power at his fingertips, he planned to pass his quarry on a higher plane, then circle and return.

The *Phantom* functioned like a dream. Up through space she bored, annihilating distance, sweeping out into the star fields in hot pursuit. Warm clear air circulated out from the oxygenizers. Each dial and gauge told its proper story. Even the heat units, which had not been properly tested, operated smoothly.

Standish pulled down the cosmoscope and surveyed the way ahead. He saw star clusters and constellations. Ahead, tail sweeping out in a blaze of glory, a comet crossed his path. But nowhere did he sight the Sirian cruisers.

"I'm afraid they've got too great a start on us," said Ga-Marr. Thalia drew in her breath sharply.

"That black speck ahead. . . ."

Standish threw over the accelerator another notch and twisted helm sharply. The *Phantom* answered her controls. The Earthman was maneuvering for position now. Far below him, he saw the six cruisers materialize in his vision.

And then, with a dull roar, the *Phantom* swung and leaped for the attack.

"They see us!" Thalia cried. "They're going into battle-formation!"

With Drum Faggard's flag ship in the lead, the six cruisers turned and headed toward them in squadron formation. It was evident that they were still unaware of the identity of the black ship. The visiscreen clicked on, and Faggard's face appeared in the panel.

"We are Section one, general Sirian Expeditionary Force, Sirius to Earth, heading for regular interplanetary lanes," he said, following the customary salutation. "Who are you?"

Standish flipped on his own microphone, but disconnected the vision panel so that no return image would be broadcast.

"Destroyer *Phantom*," he replied, muffling his voice. "Captain Ether commanding. Stand by for boarding or we open fire on you."

Faggard's gross face, crimson with rage, flashed back on the screen.

"Are you mad? We are six to your one. From what planet do you come? Show your colors."

"I'll show my colors," Standish muttered, a grim smile playing about his lips. He switched on the ship address system.

"Port gunner. Stand by for shot across enemy's bows. Elevation six. Trajectory five."

There was an excited reply. Standish twisted his helm a fraction of a turn.

"Fire!"

THE *Phantom* recoiled slightly, but there was no sound, no tell-tale streak of flame. Only on the Sirian flagship was there any evidence of what had happened. A gaping hole appeared in the vessel's hull. The ship faltered momentarily. Then, Standish knew, hermetic bulkheads automatically closed, and she swung on a wide arc.

"They're spreading out," Ga-Marr said. "They're going to attack from both sides."

The flagship shot into another plane. The remaining five cruisers surged toward the *Phantom*, firing as they came. Standish saw the strategy and realized he was pitted against no amateur fighter.

He signaled to fire both forward guns, holding his position boldly. At that moment, one of the cruisers attempted a maneuver old in space warfare. Charging head-on toward the *Phantom*, the cruiser's commander sought to frighten Standish into turning broadside.

Thalia uttered a scream. "They're going to ram us!" she cried.

The Earthman nodded. "Let them. If they do, they'll be in for a surprise."

On came the cruiser. The *Phantom* did not alter her course. And then, at the moment the Sirian realized the ruse had failed, Standish threw his helm, heading directly toward the enemy. The two vessels struck squarely.

In the pilot cuddy Standish, Ga-Marr and Thalia were hurled to the floor. The Earthman struggled erect, helped the girl to her feet.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

"No, but the ship. . . ."

"Look!" Standish pointed out the port.

A horrible sight met the girl's eyes. The *Phantom's* stout *feloranium* sides were unharmed. But the Sirian cruiser had broken into three sections. Even as she watched, figures were catapulted out into space, and the whole mass of debris be-

gan to rotate slowly around another enemy ship, forming a macabre satellite.

The remaining four cruisers circled and began to close in.

"All starboard guns," Standish ordered. "Elevation one. Double charge. Fire!"

The recoil was jarring. Two cruisers fell back, rocket motors stilled, huge rents in their forward quarters. And with that, Drum Faggard's flag ship and the other cruiser turned about and fled.

"They've had enough," Ga-Marr exulted.

"Faggard is the one I want," Standish said. "We'll come back and tow in those two disabled ships later."

But the Earthman had reckoned without the huge planetoid swarm which lay directly in their path. The two Sirian ships plunged into the midst of these miniature worlds and in an instant were lost.

Power control wide open, Standish zoomed in pursuit. But though he swung the cosmoscope to every angle he saw no sign of his quarry.

"He's slid through our fingers this time," he told Ga-Marr bitterly. "But our chance will come again."

Heavily he swung the tiller and returned to the area of combat. The two helpless cruisers and the portions of the third were drifting idly without steerageway. Standish steered the *Phantom* alongside, shot out the magnetic grappling bars and secured the two derelicts.

Then he headed the big ship back to Lyra.

A great crowd awaited them. As the *Phantom* and its twin burden settled slowly downward, hundreds of Lyrians ran to the landing field. The court guard, resplendent in shining armor, took their places in formation, and the Emperor and his ministers hastily assembled on a raised pavilion.

Then the two wrecked cruisers were opened, and the prisoners led forth.

"You will be well treated," the Emperor addressed them collectively. "We do not subjugate our captives of war after your fashion; but until the Sirians cease their raids upon this planet, you will not be permitted to leave."

Standish ordered the *Phantom* inspected and such damage as had been inflicted

by Drum Faggard's guns repaired. Then with Thalia at his side, he moved slowly toward the palace.

"Some day," he said, "all this will be over. I don't know how, but I'm going to do everything in my power to bring this bloody war to an end. Then . . ."

The girl smiled and lowered her eyes. "Then?" she prompted softly.

But Standish colored and became suddenly silent. Even during the heat of the battle, his heart had not beat as fast as it was beating now.

VIII

SIX Lyrian months had passed since Standish and Ga-Marr had escaped from the unknown planet. During those months the fame of the *Phantom* had spread fast as light. From the constellation Cygnus to the twelfth and fifteenth magnitude stars, the name of Captain Ether, behind which Standish hid his identity swept through the interplanetary lanes. Transports from powerful and peaceful Alpha Centauri moved with extra convoys, ready for instant action. No one knew when the *Phantom* would strike. No one knew from what planet it came to attack like a black meteor without warning.

Yet Standish challenged no ship but those of Sirius. Haunting the lanes between Sirius and Earth, he seized enemy prison ships and troop transports alike with daring regularity.

The city of Calthetra was filled to overflowing with Sirian prisoners. But the man Standish wanted most, Drum Faggard, was never on a captured ship.

Desire to capture Faggard became almost an obsession as the Earthman went on. Through the powerful radio which he had built on Lyra, he learned of the situation on Earth, day by day.

The news was black. Canada, Mexico and Central America were now a part of the armed camp of the invaders. The Greater United States alone had managed to remain independent. Breastworks a quarter of a mile high had been erected on the Canadian and Mexican frontiers.

The only bright spot was the fact that Faggard's "big push" had failed. Often Standish smiled as he listened in on radio

messages between the Sirian government and Drum Faggard at his Frisco base.

"The *Phantom* has been sighted, lurking near Ganymede. Dispatch five cruisers to that satellite immediately."

And again: "The *Phantom*, it is learned on definite authority, comes from some point in future time. It is able to maintain a speed in excess of light, violating the Fitzgerald contraction, riding the fourth dimensional continuum."

To which Drum Faggard always snarled the same reply. "Whoever Captain Ether is, I'll get him. Give me time."

IT was the day of his return from his most successful raid; and Standish and Thalia were walking arm in arm through the palace garden on Lyra. Flowers were in the full bloom of the planet's early summer, and the sun glowed upon them warmly.

"The *Phantom* is not enough," the Earthman said. "Powerful as she is, she can only plague the Sirians like a single hornet. With all my efforts, I have not halted the war against Earth one iota."

Thalia shook her head. "You've done all one person possibly could do."

"I need an army and a fleet," Standish said. "Yet on all Lyra there will not be sufficiently trained men to furnish either for a long time."

The girl stood there, idly plucking the petals of a flower. Abruptly she turned.

"The Sirian prisoners! Even the private soldiers are equipped with scientific knowledge. Why not use them?"

But Standish shook his head. "They would refuse. We could force them to do physical work, of course. But that's all . . . I . . ."

"Listen." Excitement suddenly entered Thalia's voice. "In the laboratories in the lower levels there is a machine built by the early Lyrians long ago. No one understands its operation now. But its some kind of an electro-hypnotic machine. Couldn't you use it on the Sirians and make them *want* to help us?"

A glitter in his eyes, Standish considered a moment, then leaped to his feet.

"Let's have a look," he said.

They left the garden, crossed the square and entered the ancient tunnel that led

to the old laboratories. In the first level the Earthman found nothing that answered the girl's description. But in a storage room far back in the second tier he came upon two of the strange machines, dust covered, in places red with rust.

Mounted on wheels, the instruments consisted of a small cart with twin panels and a confusing array of dials. Above each machine was a helix of tightly wound silver wire. At the bottom was a transparent globe still half-filled with a thick greenish liquid.

"According to Ga-Mar," Thalia said, "these machines were used by the early Sirians for medical purposes. They found in the principal of applied hypnosis a cure for a great many ills."

Standish nodded. Without further word, he took up a small wrench and removed the panel from one of the instruments, carefully examining the revealed wiring.

"They seemed to be constructed for use on ordinary electric power. But not the power supplied by Calthetra's dynamos. I'll have to step up the frequency."

He opened a wall switchboard and quickly connected two wires to the machine. On a table he found a transformer. Thalia stood by in silence while he hooked up wires, condensers, and a small loading coil. Presently he looked up with a nod.

"We'll give her a try and see what happens."

"Stand over there in front of the helix," Standish said. "I don't think there's any danger. Unless I'm wrong, the thing simply places the patient in an electro magnetic field and transmits an alternating vibration to the human brain."

He played with the dials a long time, twisted a rheostat experimentally.

"Notice anything?"

"Yes, I . . ." The Earth girl's voice died off. A vacant look entered her eyes. "What is your wish?" she asked suddenly.

Standish made a quick adjustment to the controls. "Sit down," he commanded.

Obediently, Thalia moved across to a chair and sat stiffly erect.

"You have studied some mathematics," Standish said then. "Tell me, what is the principal of the algebraic curve?"

Without hesitation Thalia replied, "A

curve, the equation of which contains no transcendental quantities; a figure the intercepted diameters of which bear always the same proportion to their respective ordinates."

Standish uttered a low cry of triumph and threw over the reverse lever of the machine. An instant later Thalia stared at him in bewilderment.

"What happened?"

"It worked," Standish replied. "With that device and a hundred more like it I will build, I can control every last Sirian prisoner. I can make them help us build an entire fleet, using all their scientific knowledge."

Thalia's eyes glowed. "We'll be fighting them with their own people," she said.

IX

THE electro-hypnosis machines finished, Standish enlisted Ga-Marr's aid and proceeded to try them on a group of Sirian prisoners.

"After all," the Earthman said, "what we're doing is for the sake of your planet and mine. These prisoners will suffer no ill effect, but by organizing their efforts, we can aid a great cause."

He turned a control knob, and a low hum sounded in the machine. The green liquid in the globe began to bubble, and a column of mist climbed upward through the connecting tube.

Improved as they were by Standish, the machines immediately placed the Sirians in a mental state where they were receptive to all commands. Yet they retained full control of their mental faculties.

The work began. Frameworks for twenty space destroyers were laid. Like automatons the Sirians toiled, worked side by side with the men of Lyra. The twenty hulls were completed, and the atomic motors were being installed when Standish called Ga-Marr aside.

"I'm going to leave you in charge," the Earthman said, "while I take the *Phantom* out again. The more prisoners, the quicker we'll have a fleet. Besides the Sirians will have grown careless again by now."

This time, however, Standish steadfastly refused to take Thalia along.

"I'm going to skirt the very stratosphere of Earth," he told her, "and it'll be too dangerous. But I'll be back soon."

Thalia pouted, but Standish was firm.

With another Lyrian, Dar-ley, as his lieutenant, Standish took off. He headed at full speed for the interplanetary lane between Sirius and Earth. As he went on, suspicion assailed him. Not a single Sirian ship did he see. Once a slow-moving freighter from far off Protorus crossed his path. The freighter clapped on all speed in a frantic attempt to escape. But Standish viewed it without interest.

He was drawing close to Earth. Alert, Standish kept the moon between him and his home planet, advancing cautiously. But there was no sign of trouble. The spaceways were empty.

Now the cold expanse of the moon opened before him. The *Phantom* soared over Tycho, Aristotle and Petavius, dipped downward and came to a rest on a barren lava plain. Standish took down a space suit, and a small magno telescope and went out through the air lock. Pacing slowly across the frigid flat, he tried to fathom the growing puzzle.

A hundred yards from the ship he trained his scope on Earth, staring long and intently. But the range was too great and the scope too weak for detailed observation.

And then abruptly he stiffened. Through the powerful retinite lens a tiny dot focused his vision. A rocket ship! He adjusted the glass and studied her lines. Unquestionably she was Sirian and heading toward the moon on an oblique angle. Standish ran for the *Phantom*. The air lock closed; he threw over the control lever, and the big ship headed with a lurch for the enemy.

In the pilot cuddy Dar-Ley watched the cosmoscope and intoned the distance measurements.

"Thirty thousand miles. Enemy still following same course."

"Twenty thousand. No change."

"Eight hundred."

A frown crossed Standish's face. The Sirian ship must have seen them by now. Alone and without convoy, it should have turned and fled.

Puzzled, the Earthman ordered a shot across the enemy's bows. The Sirian

did not change her course. And then Dar-Ley gave a frantic cry.

"Behind us. Look!"

SIX Sirian ships were racing out from the surface of the moon in battle formation. Even as Standish looked, he saw four more cruisers join the others, spread out to cut off the *Phantom*.

He realized then that he had blundered into a trap. The Sirians had been waiting for him. The single cruiser had been the bait which he had swallowed blindly.

"We'll have to run for it," Dar-Ley cried. They're too many for us."

Standish's teeth came together grimly. "We'll give them a fight for their money first."

On toward the cruiser the *Phantom* raced. The ship staggered as the Sirian opened fire, and two of the shots glanced harmlessly off the *feloranium* hull. But with five well-placed shots Standish demolished the Sirian's guns and left her floating helplessly. Then the *Phantom* turned helm and ran alongside on the opposite side of the cruiser.

In an instant Dar-Ley saw Standish's strategy. The *Phantom* was now protected with the cruiser between her and the fleet. The Earthman flipped open his microphone switch.

"Rocket bomb. Full charge. Point four."

There was a deafening report as the bomb erupted from its cylinder. Through the port Standish saw the nearest Sirian ship explode into fragments. He smiled grimly and swung his helm far over.

"Here we go, Dar-Ley. If they catch us, they'll have to move."

But fast though the *Phantom* was, the fleet hung steadily in her wake. Finally the Earthman switched on the boosters, auxiliary machines which drew power from intra-spacial emanations and built up the speed of the atomic motors. Gradually the fleet dropped behind.

"Close call!" Standish breathed. "Faggard almost got me that time."

X

STANDISH had never believed in hunches, yet the moment he entered the stratosphere of Lyra he knew some-

thing was wrong. A moment later he was free of the cloud level and over Calthetra. A wave of despair shot through him.

The city was a ruin. Not a single building remained. The great palace was a mass of debris, and the choked streets were deserted. With a great fear he headed the *Phantom* for the landing field. Here a cry of dismay escaped his lips.

The sleek space ships which had dotted the level were no more. Twisted lumps of metal and scattered pieces of broken machinery were all that remained of the fleet.

"In heaven's name," cried Dar-Ley, "what has happened?"

"Drum Faggard," said Standish heavily. "He attacked while we were gone. It must have been only his lieutenants we met off the moon."

The *Phantom* dropped to a landing, and the two men climbed out, followed by the crew. A death-like silence reigned. As he stood there staring at the grim devastation, the Earthman's fists clenched. The Lyrians, the prisoners, the Emperor . . . had they all gone?"

And then he thought of Thalia!

He lurched into a stumbling run and headed for the ruined city. In the metropolis the destruction was even more terrible. Ray guns had leveled every structure to the ground. Dead Lyrians lay on all sides. Every labor-saving device which had been constructed through Standish's efforts had been shattered.

But an instant later, in the midst of this wreckage, he saw a familiar figure stagger toward him. Ga-Marr!

The Emperor's son's face was caked with blood and his clothing was torn to shreds, but he managed to gasp a single word:

"Water. . . !"

Standish dispatched Dar-Ley back to the *Phantom* for a canteen, then tore off his coat and rolled it into a pillow, forcing Ga-Marr to rest his head upon it. But when the Lyrian struggled up on one elbow and drank thirstily from Dar-Ley's canteen, Standish choked out the question that was uppermost in his mind.

"Thalia! Where is she?"

Ga-Marr's voice was a sob. "Drum Faggard! He surprised us with an en-

tire fleet while you were gone. He kidnaped my father, and he took Thalia."

A blur rose up before Standish's eyes. "And the others?" he demanded. "The rest of your people? Can it be they all are dead?"

Ga-Marr shook his head. "They fled to the hills. I alone remained here because I knew you would return."

It was time, Standish realized, for action. But what action? His fleet was gone, all his work destroyed. Even the girl he had come to love had been taken from him. He turned and stared helplessly at the black hulled *Phantom* resting on its mooring platform. Powerful as that ship was, he knew it was not enough. He might raid more Sirian ships, destroy more transports, but what would it avail him. He had played his hand, and he had lost. He was up against a blank wall.

AND then a single object on the far side of the palace ruins focused in his vision. Stone and debris were piled high there, but the little, crudely-built space ship with which he and Ga-Marr had escaped from the unknown planet had escaped damage. For a moment Standish's brow furrowed in thought; then he uttered an exclamation.

"To the *Phantom!*" he said. "There may yet be a way. . . ."

With Ga-Marr supported by Standish, they hurried down the debris-choked streets and across to the landing field. Reaching the ship, the Earthman turned his crew of twenty-four over to Dar-Ley, ordering them to leave at once for the hills where they were to aid the Lyrians.

"But what are you going to do without a crew?" objected Dar-Ley.

Standish's face was a block of granite. "I'm going to fight trickery with trickery," he said.

Then the Earthman and Ga-Marr entered the destroyer alone. Slowly, Standish guided the big ship over the ruins of the city of Calhedra. Above the palace, he suddenly shot out the magnetic grappling bars and secured the little space ship.

"What can you do with that?" Ga-Marr frowned. "The thing has little power and. . . ."

But Standish, lips set hard, was moving the controls with silent determination. Up the *Phantom* shot, boring forward like a hound to the hunt, carrying the crude little ship with it. Standish threw over the accelerator to the farthest notch and switched on both boosters. He motioned Ga-Marr into the control seat.

"Head directly for Earth. I'm going back and see if I can get a little more speed out of those motors."

Hour after hour the big ship plunged, rocketing madly across the star-filled heavens. Time and space were dropping behind them like falling grains of sand. Standish, returning from the motor chamber, saw the planes of Pluto and Uranus rise up far ahead. Then Earth came into sight, a pin-point almost at the limit of his vision.

The Earthman glanced at the chronometer on the instrument panel. It would be approximately midnight when they reached the North American continent, judging by their present speed. Unless the Sirians at their Frisco base were watching closely, they might be able to pass unobserved.

Earth grew. Now the *Phantom* was zooming down through the stratosphere. Over New California they swept, checking trajectory by reversing motors.

Over Omaha, Standish looked through the floor plate. Were the front-line breastworks still here? Or had his people been forced to retreat farther toward the Atlantic seaboard?

"I see lights," Ga-Marr said abruptly. "There seem to be fortifications below us."

With a sigh of relief Standish guided the *Phantom* downward. He was at home again.

XI

OFFICERS and soldiers formed a cheering circle as he climbed out of the hatch, followed by Ga-Marr. Old companions rushed forward to shake the Earthman's hand and bombard him with questions. Smiling, Standish pushed his way through the throng to the building marked GHQ. An orderly ushered him inside, and a moment later he was facing Attack-Engineer McClellan whose eyes were wide with amazement.

"Listen," Standish began without preamble, "I want to see a detailed map and an aerial photograph of the Sirian's Frisco base. Have you got one?"

McClellan bit into his cigar and nodded. He opened a cabinet and laid out two large sheets.

"The pilot who made these barely got out with his life," he said. "I don't suppose you'd care to tell me where you've been or what you've got in mind, Standish."

Without answering Standish gazed at the maps and the photograph. Presently he looked up.

"Prepare for a big push," he said. "Get all your guns and men ready for immediate movement. And keep your observers watching this point, Sector Five"—he indicated the area with his forefinger—"As soon as the firing stops there, go through."

He turned then and ran back to the ship.

Straight into the stratosphere Standish guided the ship. As he continued to climb higher into the night sky, Ga-Marr watched puzzled, but made no comment. One thousand, two, three thousand miles slid behind them. At length the Earthman turned.

"Set off the emergency rocket flares," he ordered.

Ga-Marr stared. "Are you mad, Mason? The Sirians will see us and. . . ."

"Which is just what I want," Standish replied. "Hurry, man!"

Obediently Ga-Marr strode back along the passageway, began to push contact buttons at regular intervals along the bulkhead wall. As he did, long streamers of crimson fire erupted from the *Phantom's* side. In a moment the destroyer was a flaming mass. Standish set his controls and took down two space suits.

He donned one of them, motioned Ga-Marr into the other. Then he tied a rope to the lever controlling the magnetic grappling bar, trailing it across the floor to the air-lock.

"All right, Ga-Marr," he said. "Here we go."

The lock door slid open at his touch. Then and not until then did Ga-Marr understand. Directly below them, held to the *Phantom's* hull by the magnetic bars was their crude space ship. Balancing himself cautiously, Standish reached down and opened the hatch. He climbed in,

and Ga-Marr quickly followed. Then the Earthman gave the rope a jerk. The grappling bars released, and the two ships drifted apart.

Alone and unmanned, the *Phantom* swept downward, her exploding rockets a blaze of glory in the black sky.

"And there goes the fleet!" Standish said. "They've sighted the *Phantom*."

AWARE that hundreds of glasses must now be turned upward, he headed south beyond the outskirts of the city. He selected a flat open space by the ocean shore and glided quickly to a landing.

A hundred yards away the white expanse of a highway snaked through the dark countryside. No one apparently had noticed their descent. At a run, Standish headed for that highway. Twin head lights swept around a curve as he reached it, and a heavy gyro truck rumbled into sight.

The truck slowed to manipulate the curve. An instant later Standish and Ga-Marr leaped, clutched at the swaying tailboard and drew themselves aboard.

Before a large white building the two men dropped from the truck, darted across to the entrance. A Sirian guard stopped them armed with a ray gun.

"Halt!"

Standish used his pistol this time, smashing its barrel down on the Sirian's skull. Then a muffled voice sounded directly before them, and the Earthman leaped across to a door and ripped it open. On the threshold he stood rigid, staring inward.

The room was a richly furnished office. At a large desk in the center sat a familiar figure. It was Drum Faggard, cigarette between his lips, microphone in his hand.

"Put down that microphone, Faggard," Standish commanded. "If you speak so much as a single word, I fire."

"Standish!" Faggard gasped.

The Earthman dropped silently into a chair, while Ga-Marr pulled a small knife switch, disconnecting the microphone. Ga-Marr then paced to the window and drew the blinds.

A gleam of cunning crossed Faggard's face. He turned the knob of the radio and leaned forward. Then his right hand shot into the desk drawer and clawed forth a small genithode gun.

But Standish had been expecting that move. His hand clamped over the gun wrist, twisted the weapon free. Jamming his own gun hard into the Sirian leader's ribs, Standish said,

"Talk. Call your officers and tell them to stand by for important orders."

There were beads of perspiration on Faggard's brow now as he twisted a dial of the radio and began to speak slowly and haltingly. On the indicator panel on the far wall Standish saw little red lights flash on as outpost-officer after officer acknowledged the call. The entire Sirian army was listening in.

EVEN as he finished, a terrific vibrating roar sounded from a distant point of the city. The sound trembled the walls of the building, shook the floor beneath their feet.

"The *Phantom!*" said Ga-Marr. "She struck!"

Faggard's face was livid. "You fool!" he snarled. "Do you realize what you've done?"

Standish betrayed no emotion. "Perfectly. I've divided your army in half. I've cut an aisle through your defense, through which my people even now are beginning to advance."

Abruptly the Earthman's teeth clicked together. "Now what have you done with Thalia and the Emperor. Tell me or . . ."

Faggard's shoulders slumped in defeat. He groped to his feet like a blind man and stumbled across the room. "I'll show you," he said huskily.

He open a connecting door, and Standish saw two familiar figures in the adjoining room, an older man and a young girl. But in that instant Faggard acted. He lunged

across the room, reached up to a shelf filled with chemical tubes and vials. Seizing a bottle of colorless liquid, he threw it straight at Standish.

The bottle struck the door frame, and acid geysered in all directions. The Earthman felt a hot stab of agony lance across his left arm.

But Ga-Marr was not taken off guard. His genithode pistol exploded even as Faggard reached for a second bottle. The Sirian threw up his arms, staggered and pitched forward on his face.

Thalia was in Standish's arms then, sobbing. But in the outer corridor running steps sounded. A heavy fist banged on the door.

"In here," the girl cried. "This door. It leads to a tunnel that passes under the city. It's Drum Faggard's secret avenue of retreat. He has the key in his pocket."

As they sped to safety Standish felt a wave of elation sweep over him. He had won . . . !

THREE days later a small cruiser took off from Omaha, swept through the stratosphere and headed for the planet, Lyra, many light years distant. Four persons occupied her pilot cabin: Standish, Thalia, Ga-Marr and the emperor.

"It's all over," the Earthman said to the girl. "The war is ended. Sirius' power is forever broken, and even now the work of reconstruction has begun. Earth and the whole solar system can return to peace."

Ga-Marr nodded. "What now?" he asked.

"Now, we're going home." Standish drew Thalia close. "Your home and mine. Our future lies out there in the new frontier."



A Fiction House Magazine



THE SWORD OF JOHNNY DAMOKLES

By HUGH FRAZIER PARKER

The mad dreams of a crazed dictator had reached from the past and taken root in the dread Tsom Clan on Neptune, threatening the peaceful existence of a dozen worlds. There was little Timmy Gordon and Johnny Damokles could do—for they were prisoners of the Tsom, working on the monster bomb that was to signal the invasion.

Illustration by Doolin

A CLOUDLET of dust whirled across Spaceport X and rose in the thin Callistonian air to beat against the window. The sound was gritty, abrasive. It hadn't rained for weeks, and the sky, clear of clouds, hovered blacker than Holofernes' soul. Jupiter touched the horizon. And far away, Neptune's pale blue light glowed softly.

Timmy Gordon walked to the window. "I've never seen old Neptune so clear before," he said. "And say, Johnny, where'd they ever get a name like that for a planet? Neptune! What's it mean?"

Johnny Damokles laid one fat, hairy hand on the bar. He wiped a glass with his apron and smiled. "Sure, boss," he said. "All the time you talking space, eating space. What's a good if you don't know why planets get name?"

"Do you, chum?"

"Sure t'ing, boss. Greeks are all knowings about Neptune."

"Well?"

"She's this way. Neptune are a old Greek god, and he are importants for rule the ocean. So what happens?"

"I'll bite, Johnny."

"A fellows finds it this planet. She ain't got a names and deesa fellows t'ink she's all watery. So they name her for Mister Neptune. Dem times long ago . . . two t'ousand year . . . t'ree t'ousand. What them hells!"

"Aw for cripe's sake shut up! You dam' Greeks!"

Timmy and Damokles turned. Shelton Thurner, head pilot of the Jup-Cal Line was sitting alone at a side table. He was

drunk, very drunk, and a wisp of black hair hung over his forehead. "Shut up!" he screamed, "talkin' about the past! Dam' dumb Greek dishwasher! Neptune was discovered 900 years ago, aroun' 1830 . . . and who in hell cares what it's named . . . excep' a Greek." Thurner staggered to his feet. Liquor spilled.

For a little man, Johnny Damokles was both fat and fast. One hand hit the bar, he vaulted it, and faced Thurner. "What's for you cuss Greek? She are good braves people . . ."

"I told you to shut up," said Thurner. He planted a big hand in Johnny Damokles' face and shoved. Johnny fell, and Thurner kicked him brutally in the side.

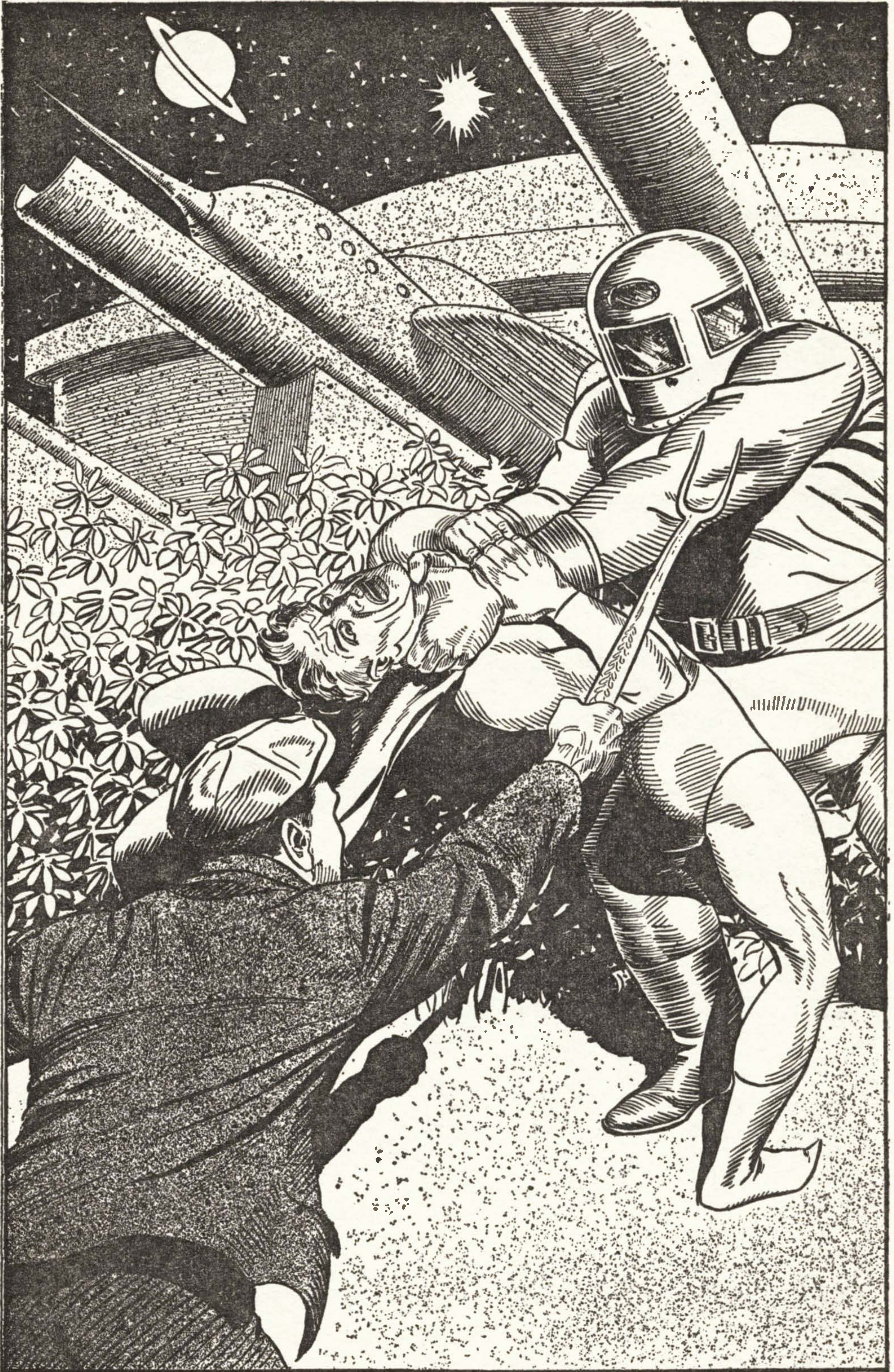
Then the room hit Thurner smack on the jaw.

"Want some more?" asked Timmy. He stared down at the hulking pilot, as Thurner rolled over and rubbed his face. "Want another?" Timmy repeated.

The door opened, and the Director of Spaceport Operations stood framed in its classic Callistonian marble columns.

"I want the two of you in my office. Special job for T-Three."

Timmy snapped to attention. T-3 was the one military department which took immediate command of any pilot under any circumstances. Obedience to T-3 was unquestioning and immediate. Even Thurner assumed a semblance of military bearing and shook his head to clear the cobwebs. He fell in beside Timmy and, scowling, followed the Director out. Johnny Damokles watched them, wiping greasy glasses on a greasier apron almost automatically.



Steel-strong hands closed about Timmy's throat.

The Office of the Director of Operations, shared by the Port Captain, had been designed in 2475 by Anton Sestrovic.

Stars and planets moved silently across the ceiling in an endless procession, while glowing dots, marking the positions of

spaceships in transit, crawled in well-defined lanes. Timmy shuffled his feet on the carpet and waited for the Director to seat himself at his plexi-glass desk. Thurner threw himself into a chair.

"Well?" grunted the big pilot, "what's T-Three after now? The feathers from an angel's backside?"

The Director looked at him coldly, "No," he said. "Something a little more dangerous to procure. Information is what they want."

"Why in hell don't they ask the Greek in the bar? He knows everything! Ask his side-kick here."

Timmy flushed and knotted his fist. "You ask me . . . later," he grunted.

"I can't. I'm on the Jupiter run in an hour."

"No," corrected the Director, "you're not on the Jupiter run. You're heading for Neptune with Mister Gordon . . . in his ship."

"Why pick on me?" interrupted Timmy. "I'm not fussy about whom I share space with . . . but I just cleaned ship . . . and I don't like this lug."

"Sorry," said the Director. "Yours is the only ship in the Four Planets fast enough to make the trip in time, but you're not licensed for flight beyond Jupiter."

"How about another pilot?" Timmy pulled no punches in letting the Director know how he, personally, felt about Mr. Shelton Thurner.

"I haven't another," the Director paused. "But you can take a third man as super-cargo, Gordon. It might quiet down the Kilkenny-cat action."

A slow smile rolled over Timmy's face. "Okay," he said. "I'll take Johnny Damokles."

Thurner leaped to his feet. "That dam' Greek dishwasher!" he exploded. "What use is he in space?"

"He can sing . . . and read Aristotle in the original Greek . . . whoever Aristotle was."

"Blast the whole job! I won't go!"

"Yes you will, Thurner," said the Director. "Report to Gordon's ship in half an hour . . . or turn in your license."

Thurner stomped out of the room. A slightly vulgar noise, issuing through Timmy's pursed lips, was the last sound the big pilot heard.

"WHAT'S next?" asked Timmy. He turned to the Director as he spoke. "What's it all about?"

"See those dots on the space map?" The Director pointed ceilingward to a spot where a cluster of red spots moved on a common center.

"Yes."

"This is a wild hunch. But I suspect them to be Neptunian ships . . . unlisted in our clearance papers."

"You think they're a menace?"

"Definitely!"

"Why?"

Instead of answering the question, the Director rose and walked across the room to a row of hermetically sealed cases. Like the display units in small and dusty museums, these held a few yellowed books, chunks of unclassified rock, and an occasional fossil. But one of them was broken.

"This case," said the Director, "once held an obscure book by a Twentieth Century warlord. Know the period?"

"I'm a mechanic," said Timmy.

"Most of us are these days. It's something of a pity. But in the middle Twentieth Century, historians tell us of a semi-civilized chieftain named Hetlir, or Schicklegrub, who managed to control the mass of Europa through an intelligent but utterly unscrupulous plan. The seeds of that plan lie in a book called *Mein Kampf* . . . and this case once held a copy."

"I see," said Timmy, but he didn't.

"Two years ago," continued the Director, "I entertained a leader of the Neptunian Tsom clan. When he left, the book went with him."

"How can a book affect us?"

"Easily. Our only defense against the powerful semi-humans of Neptune has been their own inability to organize any planetary unity. They trade with us on a basis of toleration . . . but they're not friends."

"Why haven't they attacked before?"

"Their clan system, and their wars at home."

"I see," said Tim, and this time he really did. "Then, you figure that if one clan could dominate Neptune, they'd strike?"

"Yes. And Hetlir's plan calls for precisely the sort of planetary organization

that would suit the Neptunians. A master-race dominates . . . and on Neptune . . . that master-race would probably be the Tsom clan. *They* have a copy of *Mein Kampf*."

"You believe they've done it?"

"I see no other reason why ships should hover near our Callistonian frontier for five days."

"Then, I'll go investigate in the *Solabor*."

"Not the ships, Timmy. I want you to check on Neptune from the dark side. Look for two things. Are there any Neptunian cruisers massing? Have the planetary wars ended?"

Timmy sprawled back in his chair. "The answers to those questions," he said, "will tell us our next step."

"Exactly."

"I can leave in twenty minutes."

"Then," said the Director, "hop to it son. And I hope good luck goes with you." On the ceiling, the ominous dots seemed to grow more clear as their new significance thrust itself on Timmy. He grasped the Director's hand, shook it briefly, and walked out.

DOWNSTAIRS, in the Space Bar, Johnny Damokles sweated over some unsavory concoction, and swore in six planetary languages, plus old Greek and a frenzied form of English. His apron strings hung loose, three knives and a toasting fork peeked out of his pockets.

"What's cookin'?" hailed Timmy.

The little Greek turned around. "West'in om'let," he blurted. "An' this dam' blast Callisto garlic . . . she are not fit for cooking dog meat!"

"A clear and sensible opinion," said Tim, "neatly expressed." He leaned over the counter, tilted Johnny's frying pan to the floor, grabbed the Greek's apron and whipped it loose. "Come on, chum," he said. "You've just resigned."

Johnny looked sadly at the mess on the floor. "What's a matter of you, dam' idiot? Who are resigned?"

"You did, Johnny. You're going out into space with me as cook . . . and I need somebody to prepare rat poison for my pilot." He stopped, and watched Damokles' chin drop. "Come on," he repeated, "we're going places."

"Crazies places?"

"Nope! Space."

Johnny Damokles' face lighted up with something of the glow his ancestors must have shown at Thermopylae and Salamis. "No kid? You take me? Oh, Meester Timmy Gordon . . . you is a dam sweet feller." His cap went sailing skyward. His apron followed suit, and he grabbed a twisted necktie from beneath the counter. "Hey, boy!" he shouted to an open-mouthed waiter. "I is resigned. Tell her to the boss. Goom bye!"

"Look—" the waiter began.

"You look!" Timmy said, grinning.

Johnny grabbed a handful of tattered books from under the counter, picked up his toasting fork and knives, slapped a checkered cap on his head and dashed for the door as Timmy burst out laughing.

"Whassamatter, Meester Tims. You go crazies?"

"Not me . . . but you. Come on, Spacehawk. Let's hit the hangar."

HANGAR 6, block 8, where Timmy kept the *Solabor*, was one of the smaller impervium shanties built to accommodate just such independents as himself. It lay at the end of the field, sheltered from the major launching-cradle by a thick growth of scrub hedge. Timmy whistled as he walked toward it, and Johnny Damokles picked up the tune. "Where we go, Tim?" asked the Greek, and waved his fork in circles. "Maybe go Jupiters?"

"Nope. Can't tell you till we're aboard ship." The hangar lay just ahead. The *Solabor* was ready. Timmy grinned.

And then he stopped.

No, that statement is incorrect. *Timmy was stopped*. His feet dangled stiffly in air, as steel-strong hands, powerful as an atomic lift, closed hard on his throat . . . and lifted. His shout of warning was a muttered croak. Then the world faded away in a purplish-gray haze. The only sensation as darkness fell was a refrigerant chill biting at his neck. Blackness.

"Whassamatter, Timmy . . . you no sing?" asked the little Greek. He turned around. His chin dropped with an almost audible thud on his chest. And then, Johnny Damokles moved forward, blindly, heroically, a 28th Century Leonidas armed with a toasting fork.

II

TIMMY GORDON awakened to find his immediate world in a chill of killing frost. Cold water ran down his brow. Johnny Damokles' muttered curses penetrated his consciousness. "What . . . hap . . . happened?"

"Don't speaks . . . you almost go for rides with Father Charon on one-way ferryboat. Look!" Johnny turned Tim's head tenderly to one side, and the young flyer gasped.

"Great flying dragons!"

Timmy's eyes traveled over the squat bulk of a figure clad from head to foot in heavy synthi-leather. "A Neptunian," he blurted, "but dead. How? Who did it?"

"I did it . . . with toastings fork!"

"What?" Timmy's head went round in circles, "You killed one ton of concentrated Neptunian-venom with a toasting fork?"

"Sure things, boss. I stick heavy fellers with fork. He go hiss. Then bad smells. Then fall down . . . *woosh!*" Damokles gave a graphic description in pantomime, and Timmy understood how this seeming miracle had happened. A Neptunian, accustomed to a mass of seventeen times that of Earth normal, a normal temperature at minus-180 Centigrade, and a methane plus solid oxygen atmosphere, would need some insulating, restricting suit to move about on frail Callisto. Apparently Johnny's fork had struck a weak spot in the refrigerant-suit, and a mild Callistonian climate had literally boiled the Neptunian to death.

Timmy staggered to his feet and tramped through the artificial frost to the Neptunian's side. A tiny mark, distinctive and simple, was branded on his assailant's collar. "The Tsom clan," said Timmy to himself. "The Director was right . . . but why did he attack me in particular?"

Johnny Damokles pointed, "Look!" he said.

A bulky figure broke from the bushes and darted toward Hangar 6, but in that darkness, it was unrecognizable. "Get him!" barked Timmy, and raced down the path.

The figure, whoever and whatever it was, had disappeared by the time Timmy Gordon reached his ship. A quick inspec-

tion showed nothing in the hangar, and he climbed aboard the *Solabor*.

"About time you came," grumbled Shelton Thurner. He threw an empty bottle through the door and climbed from his seat in the back of the ship. "You ready to go?"

Gordon disregarded the question. "You see anyone come down here?"

"No. Been all alone."

"A Neptunian attacked me back in the bushes. "Look," he showed Thurner the frost-bitten bruises on his throat. "Whoever set the Neptunian on me came this way . . . *fast!*" He moved forward, seized Thurner by the shoulder, and laid his hand on the pilot's heavily-muscled chest. If Thurner had been the man, speedy running would have resulted in irregular breathing and heart-action. But the pilot's breathing was calm and normal. With an angry snarl he seized Timmy's wrist and flung him backward.

"Keep your hands to yourself, Gordon!" Thurner hissed.

"Sorry." Timmy's eyes squinted into slits, "I was just proving you innocent . . . to my own satisfaction." He turned, climbed out of the ship, and hurriedly called the Director to report what had occurred. "Shall I stay on," he asked, "and help investigate?"

"No. We'll clean up the mess. Blast off as soon as possible, and get back here sooner!"

"QX, sir," said Tim, and hoisted himself aboard ship. "All set?"

"Been ready for twenty minutes."

"Yowsah, boss!" chimed Johnny Damokles.

THERE was utter silence, but in the midst of it, Callisto vanished. Seconds later Jupiter's bulk faded redly from the sky to become a dot silhouetted sunward. And all in silence.

"Lord, man!" Thurner looked at Timmy with a hint of surprise veiling his usual antagonism. "How in hell does this thing work?"

"Search me," shrugged Timmy. "I worked it out on a sensitizing principle. My impervium hull was supposed to reject light as a mirror would, and so throw

itself forward like a beam of light. The thing works, too."

"She sure do," chuckled the delighted Greek. He looked through the sunward port and watched Jupiter diminishing. "Great Scotts!" he yelled. "This ships are fast like Greek god, Mercury!"

"And just as inexplicable."

"Why, man?" asked Thurner, "You've told us how she worked."

"You mean . . . how I *thought* she would work. Unfortunately, I tried the same principle on more impervium . . . and not another ship has flown like this one. My math was wrong, but my mechanics worked. Just once."

"So I'm supposed to operate a fluke to Neptune?"

"Don't worry about it, Thurner. She's dependable and her controls are exactly like those in an ordinary planetary-liner. Watch." Timmy threw the wheel down, and the Solabar tipped into a wide curve. Jupiter vanished. Dotted pinpoints of stars prickled the black of inter-world space.

"Looks easy," grunted the pilot. He slipped over into the wheelman's chair, and fiddled experimentally with gadgets. "Okay," he said, "after four or five minutes I'll be able to handle her."

"QX," said Timmy. "There's a copy of Maconachy's book on Supra-solar Navigation behind you. Great book, Maconachy, wouldn't want to be in space without it to lean on." Thurner grunted again.

"Yeah. Good stuff for you practical astrogators. Put it over there in reach. And listen . . ." Thurner's voice lost some of its begrudging tone. "We're on this trip together. Let's make it peaceable." He stretched out a broad paw, and Timmy shook. Thurner, for all his slyness and for all the ease with which Tim had knocked him down back there in the Space Bar, was a powerful man. Tim wondered why he hadn't fought back.

"All right!" he said, "We're together . . . for the duration."

"It's a bargain. Now . . . tell me more about how she operates. This ship's *actually faster* than light?"

"Yep! Warps across a light beam just the way a sailboat can exceed the speed of wind on a certain tacks. Look back at the sun."

Thurner turned his head. "I'll be damned. A Dopler effect!"

"We're exceeding the speed of light . . . right now!"

"And you're sure this principle of yours won't work on any other ship. Was there anything mixed with the impervium?"

"Central labs checked it," Timmy replied. "It was pure impervium."

"Where'd you get it?"

"By *coincidence* . . . from Neptune."

Thurner's face went red. "Look, guy," he said, "The war's off, and I don't like being played for a fool. There's no impervium on Neptune."

"Sorry, Thurner. This metal did come from Neptune. I bought the back fin of the old XC-34 . . . it was towed in from Nep back in '67."

"I see." Thurner's brows knitted, and he muttered an apology. Then, turning away, he ran through the logarithms in Maconachy, made a few quick checks, shifted dials coolly and competently, and leaned back. "I'll take her in from here," he said.

"From the dark side," cautioned Tim.

"Okay. I'll drive part way to Pluto . . . then swing back."

"QX," said Gordon. He spun about and walked to the back of the little ship. "How do you like it, Johnny?" he asked, and Damokles' face lighted up.

"She's one dam' fine ship . . . go like go-to-hell fireball . . . but look it here, Meester Timmy."

"Yes?"

"Why you say she won't work for any other ships?"

"Just won't. That's all."

"Maybe this planets Neptune do it."

"How, Johnny? We tested the impervium from every angle, and found it nothing but pure metal."

"Maybe is so. Dam' gods, Neptune, are funny feller. Sometimes he look like friend . . . sometimes he are foe. Sometimes just do nothing . . . but plenty happen just because Neptune are there. See?"

Tim whistled. "I see what you mean. Like a catalytic agent. You can't detect it. You don't test it . . . *but it does something.*"

"Who's the difference? Call her catalytic agents . . . call her fool gods Neptune. What them hells!" The little Greek shrugged his shoulders and was silent.

UP in the *Solabor's* bow, later, Thurner spun the dials on the automatic calculator. Timmy watched him idly, then, moving away from the window, fell asleep. Johnny Damokles hummed an old tune, and lost himself in reveries on Greece. It was strange that so intense a national feeling could survive the melting pot of world assimilation. Yet the Greek national feeling had survived unchanged for more than three thousand years. The greasy old suit which Johnny Damokles wore, remained almost unchanged from the 20th Century attire which his ancestors had worn at Crete and in the long, bloody fight down through the mountains from Olympus. Alone amongst all the people of the 28th Century, the Greeks remembered their past glory, and the bloody history which had split them as a nation, yet welded the iron of heroism into their souls.

Only the Greeks, in a world of mechanics and science, were still concerned with events now dead and gone. Small nations may live . . . in tradition.

Johnny Damokles let his gaze slowly fall from that wild pattern of unvisited universes which spread before him in the *Solabor's* ports . . . and slowly turned the pages of his beloved Aristotle. An essay on the nature of the order of things caught his attention, but reading was no pleasant occupation inside the *Solabor's* stuffy little cabin. Johnny's head nodded. His eyes fluttered. He fell asleep.

TIMMY GORDON'S return from slumber was rather like the awakening of a city-dweller whose ear is annoyed by a sudden unslaught of silence. Accustomed by now to the sensation of motion, immobility woke him up.

"Stopped?" he yawned. "Why?" The cabin was dark, and in that velvety obscurity, Timmy could barely see the recumbent sleeping form of Johnny Damokles. He leaped to his feet. Strange, his body felt heavy, leaden, drugged.

A faint bluish light, barely enough to weaken the black of night, pushed its way through the window. Timmy staggered forward to the control bench. Shelton Thurner was gone!

But where? How? Where were they? Timmy reached for the starting button

to test his motors, but the panel had been stripped. Bare.

The answer came swiftly. To the accompaniment of a blast of noisome gas, the door swung open. Two figures entered. The door thumped shut.

"Thurner!" gasped Timmy. "But what? Where've you been?" His questions were interrupted, sharply. Behind Shelton Thurner, and barely visible, stood the hulking figure of a Neptunian.

Thurner's hand shot out and clamped on Tim Gordon's arm, "Bow!" he said. "You're on Neptune now . . . you swine."

Timmy's fist shot out with the speed of a striking cobra, and a solid blow bounced off the renegade pilot's jaw. Nothing happened. Thurner grinned. His evil gapped-teeth gleamed. He raised his hand and brought it down with a flat *thwack* on the young Earthman's cheek. Timmy felt as though a sharpened file had hit him. Warm blood ran down his chin, and dripped floorward.

"Things are different now," said Thurner. "I don't have to take anything from you pigs." He drew back his hand for a second blow, but the figure behind him stepped forward.

"No!" it ordered. "Not now. There'll be time . . . yet."

"What's all this?" snapped Timmy.

Thurner smirked, "You're on Neptune . . . and are . . . shall we say . . . a guest of the Tsom Clan."

"Distinctly," hissed the semi-human figure behind Thurner. "Oh most distinctly . . . a guest."

"And this . . . renegade?"

"You allude to Shelton Thurner?"

"Yes!"

The Neptunian looked from Timmy to the big pilot. "I do not believe," he said, "that you will understand this easily. But you do your late associate an injustice. He is no renegade . . . but a leader of the Tsom Clan."

"A Neptunian? Impossible!"

"Not at all my dear sir. We Neptunians have science. Given the proper materials, our surgeons can duplicate the . . . rather . . . loathesome appearance of you humans."

"You can make men out of a semi-human?"

"We are adaptable, my dear sir." The creature's nictitating membrane drew up

over his eyeballs and gave him a deceptively sleepy appearance.

"But what about the temperature? How could Thurner stand Callistonian heat and gravity, when built for that of Neptune?"

"Enough of this foolish questioning!" barked Thurner, "Take the fools outside."

The creature at his side raised a leather-clad hand in a peaceful, gentle gesture. "Patience, friend," he said, "We owe our *guest* much. For he has much to give us."

"I have!" blurted Timmy.

"Yes!" the Neptunian's manner was calm and unruffled. "You, a skilled practical mechanic, can contribute to a glorious Neptunian victory."

"And you think I will?"

"I know you will. No human-being has the nerve structure to stand up under our harsher persuasive methods. It is quite important for us to learn your method of treating impervium for these faster-than-light ships."

"But my method doesn't work."

"That's true," interjected Thurner, "We talked about it on the way out."

"Most regrettable!" Again that unpleasant, half-dead membrane flashed across the Neptunian's eyes. He seemed to sleep. Minutes passed before he looked up again. In that event," he said, "you must suffer for the good of Neptune. Follow me." He waited while Timmy climbed into a heated, anti-gravitational space suit.

Thurner cuffed Johnny Damokles to his feet and motioned for him to put on a space suit. Then completely in command of the situation, the Neptunians led Tim and Johnny out into the blue cold of a monster and horrible world. They paused long enough for Thurner and his companion to remove the space suits they'd worn in the heated cabin of the Solabor, and when Thurner seemed to peel his very skin from his body, Timmy understood the miracle by which the pilot had posed as a Callistonian.

III

THE pilot was actually a Neptunian. But a beautifully made synthetic skin served him as an undetectable protection against both heat and gravity . . . made him, to all appearances, an Inner-Worldian. Timmy was amazed. These Neptunians

were *surgeons* . . . and thermal engineers.

"This way," motioned the Neptunian, and drew in a vast breath of Neptune's methane atmosphere. His chest swelled until its minute scales seemed on the verge of separating. Man-like in height and size, his adaptation to a terrible gravity had made him a creature of steel-hard sinew and muscle. Thurner, or whatever his proper name might be, was almost as solid and several inches taller. No wonder he could consume Callistonian whisky by the quart and still navigate a ship successfully.

They walked across the plain, dropped downward into a slit-like canyon. Ahead of them lay a fortress whose only decoration was the simple symbol of the Tsom clan. Its walls bristled with blast guns, but closer examination showed Timmy that they were all of an obsolete pattern. Methane had clogged their rifling, and made them utterly useless.

"These aren't used," said their guide. "Just there to frighten away lower forms of life. Watch!" He flicked a switch, and the wall's outer surface raised to reveal a vast network of grids. "Heat grids," he explained. "Perfect defense against the other clans."

"But we don't need defence," added Thurner. "Neptune is a united planet now."

The gates swung wide, and Timmy, with an empty feeling walked in. Johnny Damokles followed. His antiquarian interests still shielding him from the horror of their situation.

The council chamber, holy-of-holies, audience room, or whatever the Neptunians called it, was perhaps the most impressive place either Timmy Gordon or Johnny Damokles had ever entered.

Black rock lined the walls and seemed one with the primeval essence of absolute cold. Atmosphere, at 17 G's, pressed hard against them, barely repelled by their space suits. The Neptunian turned. "If this," he said, "were a nightmare, I'd order you to kneel and worship at the feet of the Clan Tsom's god."

"Why not?" Timmy's belligerent Irish chin thrust out.

"Because, my dear guests, we have advanced considerably beyond such idle superstitions. Neptune, and the Tsoms, are the perfection of true civilization. We

know there are no gods. We are neither concerned with ritual nor rank. Here, all are equal, under my *leadership*."

"Interesting," commented Timmy. "I seem to have heard it before."

Johnny Damokles nodded. "She are wonderfuls idea . . . but gods is dam' important fellers. So is old time's history."

The Neptunian looked at him. "What," he asked Thurner, "is this? Some primitive?"

"A Greek," the pilot explained. "Sticks to the old beliefs and the old ways of Terra."

Those nictitating lids flicked up. "Then . . . he's of no use to us."

"He'll do for raw material." Thurner shoved the little Greek to the floor, "Use him for Extract 47-a. Humanizing fluid."

The Neptunian shuddered, "The thought," he said, "of treating another of our people with that semi-humanizing element is repulsive. But sacrifice in the interest of conquest is needed. We must have more Neptunians capable of resisting higher temperatures and lower gravities."

Thurner grinned. "Precisely," he said. He turned to Timmy, and judged him as a man might judge a Percheron stallion. "This one is too lean."

The Leader nodded. "Our dear guest will be of use in research and mechanics. We might even grant him certain liberties."

Timmy glared at the monster, hating that assumed tolerance, then spat with deliberation on the floor. "Try to use me," he grunted.

"A CHALLENGE?" The Leader pressed a button. A bell rang, and two squat Neptunians glided into the chamber. There was a burble and a hissed command. The Neptunians retreated, then returned dragging a small box behind them. Its wires were a tangle maze of tentacles. Icy cold exuded from it, to chill the two Callistonians even through their heavily-heated space suits. The Leader barked an order. Timmy found himself flat on his back with a Neptunian servant pressing the face-plate of his suit down hard. There was a little whirl of power. Agonies unimaginable shot through every nerve of his skull. He screamed. Restraint was impossible. The pain eased.

"You see!" said the Neptunian, "that

treatment does no harm to nerves or tissues, and actually prolongs life."

Timmy looked past the grinning faces of his tormenters and fixed his glare on the reptilian Leader. "Try again," he said. "I'm still tough."

The pain came back. It spun through skull and brain like a biting buzz-saw. Timmy gritted his teeth, then again came the inevitable scream. He wanted to faint. He prayed for death. But that buzzing pain was an elixir . . . a stimulating and eternal torment. Timmy's hands thumped hard against the floor. His feet jerked, his spine arched, and he screamed again and again in a great crescendo. The pain eased.

"Could you stand that," said the grinning Neptunian, "for a lifetime?"

"No!"

"Then I warn you, the next time we apply it, you'll be alone in a dark room . . . with a time clock on the door set for a one-week period. No one will enter. No one can stop the *treatment*. Will you cooperate?"

"Within limits."

"That's for me to judge. Give me the figures on how you managed to create that ship of yours."

"That's agreeable. You could take them anyhow." Timmy reached into a pocket of his space suit. He pulled out a bundle of papers and handed them to the Leader. "I warn you," he added, "they won't work." Then he swore at himself for saying that. If, by ingenuity, he could manage to convince the Neptunians that his ship would work, he might waste a lot of their time in research and give the Inner Worlds time to find out what was happening. "I might manage to make one work at that," he added swiftly.

The Neptunian scanned the papers. "No," he said, "this report of your scientific laboratories is definitely conclusive. I can see that you've done everything possible. The ship you have, or *had*, is a freak. But you're an expert in mechanics and photography. We'll put you in the research labs. Your friend can go with you until we need him."

The Neptunian cast one final look at the two captives, smiled, and walked away. Thurner jerked his head at an inner door. "Come on," he ordered. "Your quarters

will be near the labs." He led them down a succession of corridors to a room where temperature and gravity stood at Earth-norm, and Callisto constant. "You can do without those suits," he said, and shut the door.

Timmy and Damokles looked around. The room was lighted quite brightly. A window gave onto the plain. Above them, Triton whirled its endless mad dance, speeding across the sky in the opposite direction of the planet's rotation. Timmy watched it. Here and there in the dark sky, synthetic power-moons hovered to steal energy from the cosmos.

"They gonna feed us, anyhow," said Johnny Damokles, and turned on the faucet of a food conveyor. Hot, spicy-scented edibles poured forth, but Timmy wasn't interested. Not far from them, half-lost in the gray light, two giant semi-globes towered heavenwards. Tim stared at them. Apparently the Neptunians were building another power-moon to add to that whirling band above. He watched as squat figures moved up and down its side, then walked from the window in a fog. Damokles tried to engage him in conversation, but Timmy was too defeated. He fell asleep.

MORNING dawned swiftly because of the giant planet's rapid rotation. Seven hours of total blackness were then followed by a *day* . . . but a day in name only. The sun out here had only one one-thousandth of its Earthian strength. For human purposes, it was useless. Timmy was standing by the window when the door swung open. Thurner stood on the threshold.

"Come on," he ordered, "your job is ready." He looked at Johnny Damokles. "Might as well use you, too. Get into your space suit." The little Greek obeyed.

The next seven hours passed as a nightmare for Timmy. For Johnny, working outside as a slave on the power-moon, they must have been pure hell.

Timmy returned to their room that evening to find a tired little Greek sprawled on the couch. "Work you hard, chum?"

Damokles groaned. A livid weal ran down the side of his face, where a blow had slammed his head about in his helmet.

"We get these Neptune bums . . . Timmy," he said.

"Sure thing, pal. But how?"

The Greek shrugged his shoulders. "They guards you close?"

"No . . . but we couldn't get away without the ship."

"Yeah." Damokles' chin dropped on his chest. "I guess we gives up." But despite the Greek's apparent despair, he had an idea of some sort. Timmy Gordon knew it, but he also knew that Johnny was afraid to talk about it in a room where sound detectors might pick up any hint of escape. "Let's go to sleep, Johnny," he said.

"Yeah . . . you stay your side of bed, too. Last night you kick me blacks and blue in rib."

Which was distinctly untrue.

But if that was the way Johnny wanted things . . . it was distinctly QX with Timmy Gordon. He stretched himself on the narrow couch beside Johnny. For twenty minutes he seemed to doze, then began kicking about fretfully, and muttering as though in the clutch of a nightmare.

"That's right, Timmy," the little Greek whispered. "Keep her going. You kicks hard . . . yells . . . them spies are too busy watching you. I can talks."

Timmy's reply was another boot to Johnny's shin. "Go on," he whispered, then kicked again.

"Remember what I say to you in ships?"

"About what?"

"About fool gods Neptune . . . cataltickic agents . . . Aristotle."

"Yes."

"Maybe I are right"

"So what?"

"Maybe if impervium get soaked on Neptune long enough . . . then maybes it behave like metal in your ship?"

"Go on." Timmy groaned, thrashed about. Threw a fist that thudded into Johnny's ribs. The Greek grunted, and resumed his whispering.

"They puts me working on power-moons outside."

"Yes?"

"She are mades from metal of wrecked space-liner. I see one plate who say XC-34 on her."

"Great Jupiter, Johnny! That's the liner I got the metal for my ship from . . .

just one fin was all I had to work with."

"Shut up! Dam' fools. Want him Neptune stinkers hear you?"

Instead of answering, Timmy grunted in his supposed sleep. Damokles whispered on: "They don't guards me! They make me be dam' fool clowns for Neptuners to laugh at. 'Get sky hook! Get bucket steam-ice!' That's what them lizards-men holler at me."

"Yes?"

"Then . . . *cracks!* Hit Greek with fist. Don't like."

"Skip it, Johnny. What's your idea?"

"I hear them say . . . artificial power moon ain't gonna be that at all. Gonna be giant bomb. Gonna load with tons an' tons an' tons of *dynotron*. Shoot him to Jupiter . . . blow all air off everythings!"

"Good lord! Dynotron would do just that . . . and then they'll repeat the procedure."

"Is right! I hear lizard-pig say just that!"

"How do you figure on stopping 'em, Johnny?"

Damokles wriggled, poked Timmy hard with his elbow. "Lay still!" he shouted. "I can no sleeps!" He butted up against Timmy, and began to whisper in fast chaotic broken murmurs. "I got a long story to tells you, Timmy. All about powerful old Greeks' king."

For half an hour they trashed about, while Damokles unfolded his plan. At last, Timmy grunted. "OX," he said. "Can do!" He rolled over and fell into an extremely troubled sleep.

IV

THE next day, at Neptune's dawn, Johnny Damokles was led back to his work on the *dynotron* bomb. Timmy, sleepy-eyed and wavering, followed his captors to a place in the mech lab. He worked quietly for half an hour, then beckoned to his overseer.

"Yes?" hissed the Neptunian.

"I want to see your leader."

"Why?"

"None of your blasted business. Just do what you're told, or be mighty blasted sorry."

The Neptunian scratched an itching neck flange. "All right," he said, "but you'd

better have something to make this worth while." He shoved Timmy forward, released a door catch, and led him down the hall. Three staccato raps opened another door, and Timmy again stood in the presence of Neptune's Leader.

"Yes?" the Leader's voice was suave, but flat. "Oh, it's you . . . you've something important?"

"I want to work in the photo-lab."

"Something to do with your way of sensitizing impervium?"

"That's right."

"Utterly useless. We've checked the figures of your own labs and find that they are completely accurate. That ship of yours is a freak . . . and we can see no reason as to *why* it works."

"I still have an idea."

The Neptunian glared at him, and again that dead-alive membrane concealed all key to his thoughts. "You're not trying to convince me you're willing to join us, are you?"

"Nope," Timmy's Irish jaw shot out belligerently, "I just figure it'll be easy to escape from there."

A hiss was apparently the Outer-worldian's manner of laughing, for the hiss he emitted was as jovial a sound as Timmy had heard since landing on the planet. "I mean it!" Timmy finished, "and I warn you to watch me."

"Your spirit," the Neptune said, "is admirable." He scrawled a few notes, handed them to Timmy. "Here," he said, "is an order to work in the photo-labs. I shall watch your struggles with great pleasure." His hand closed on Timmy's shoulder and Timmy gritted his teeth, shook his way loose, and walked to the door.

Mockingly, the Leader laughed.

THAT night, when Timmy returned to their room, he found the little Greek seated, eyes blazing, on the bed. "Smatter, chum?"

"Dam-blasted Shelton Thurner . . . chase me all over hell for skyhook. Don't like it!"

"Forget it. You're tired and so am I. Grab off a mouthful of that synthi-food and let's hit the hay." He turned on the faucet, drew a cup of steaming brew and handed it to the Greek.

"I got the mixture," he whispered be-

tween gulps. "Did you get the metal?" The Greek nodded. "Yep," he replied, then in a louder tone. "Let's get to bed, Timmy."

Lights were quickly extinguished, and the two, with much moaning and groaning, crawled under the covers. But tonight there was need for action, not talk. Timmy pushed the blankets up to make a low tent, and handed Johnny a torch he'd stolen. Improvised though it was, their bed made a flawless, light-tight darkroom. Timmy climbed out to make sure no ray escaped, then plunged into bed again.

"The metal!" he grunted. Johnny Damokles handed him a tiny piece of impervium. It was, approximately, three inches square.

"Swell," said Tim. "Now hold this light." He dug deep into his pockets and pulled forth a bottle of stolen liquid. "As nearly as I can tell, this is the same mixture I used in making my other ship." He dipped the square of impervium in it, then waited. Dry at last, he wiped the metal square until it shone, and grinned as the first reactions started. "It works!" he nearly shouted. But that was neither the time nor the place for shouting. "Watch!" he whispered. Taking the torch from Johnny Damokles, he held it close against his treated impervium. The little square darted away so swiftly that it nearly tore loose from his hand. It did pull him a foot or so toward the edge of the bed before he switched off his light. There was no doubt about it. Impervium, when exposed to some unknown Neptunian radiation, underwent an untestable change and behaved precisely as had the metal of his ship.

"Hallelujahs!" burbled Damokles beneath his breath. "Now we fix up dam' fool Shelton Thurners."

"Maybe?" said Tim with unexpected pessimism. "I've stolen enough fluid for you sure the whole thing's impervium?" feet on that dam' bomb." He paused, "Are you sure the whole thing's impervium?"

"Yep! But how I gonna rub this stuff on ship?"

"Don't rub it. Pour this bottle on a high perpendicular point and let it run down the sides. We'll take a chance that the dim light here on Nep will prevent our process from knocking your bomb over ahead of time."

"Yeah. Then you get more solutions. We pour her on . . . an' dam' bomb go sail away fast as hell!"

Timmy grinned. "Not quite, pal," he said, "I'm figuring on something just a little more effective." He took a piece of paper and made a few hasty sketches. Johnny Damokles watched with interest. Then he broke into a smile.

"I see," nodded the Greek. "She are just like story I tell you about old Greek king."

"Exactly. . . . And now, let me have time enough to get rid of our scrap of test metal and we'll turn in."

"No," protested Damokles. "Give me this piece impervium. I got good idea. Secret."

Timmy, without further question, handed Johnny the bit of treated impervium and added to it his bottle of stolen liquid. "Good night, chum," he mumbled, and rolled over to sleep.

TEN days and ten nights passed in that way. Each night Timmy had another flask of his sensitizer to give Johnny. And each night Damokles reported another successful application of the fluid. Miraculous that the two of them could so successfully hoodwink their captors? Yes. But then the Neptunians thought of the two as members of a lesser race, and gave them almost complete freedom of movement . . . within limits. Timmy blessed the arrogance from which this stemmed. From the photo-labs he stole his sensitizer. In the mech labs he succeeded in removing and assembling certain vital cogs and rheostats. Put together they would give him control of Neptune's gigantic *dynotron* bomb. And Timmy Gordon was the man to put any machinery together. He did it on the tenth day. That same day, he stole a length of steel chain and a sharpened metal hook. Why he stole them, Timmy Gordon didn't know. But Damokles had asked him to, and he'd given his promise.

"Here you are," he said when he reached their room that night. He slipped the hook and chain to Johnny beneath the covers of their bed. "Goin' fishin' with it, chum?"

"You bet your dam' boots. I catch fat fish, too."

Timmy smiled. Then, quietly, he showed Johnny Damokles the piece of apparatus he'd constructed. It looked somewhat like the primitive 20th Century radio sets one saw in museums, but its purpose, as Tim explained, was more important. Compact, weighing no more than fifty or sixty grams, it gave him complete radio control of anything treated with his sensitizing fluid. What was more important, it took its power from almost any faint source of light, and should be effective up to two or three thousand miles.

"She work?" asked Damokles.

"She will if static doesn't cut me out too much."

"Dam' good," grunted the Greek. "Now we show them dam-blast Neptuners what good Old Greek History are."

"Correct, chum. When will the bomb be ready?"

"She are ready now."

"Swell! I might as well blast her off."

"No!" Johnny Damokles' tone was urgent, pleading. "You wait . . . do him tomorrow when Neptune fellers can see."

Morning dawned with its usual dim lessening of the Neptunian murk. A methane breeze rolled down from some distant mountain range and swirled in noxious vapors across the plain. Two Neptunian guardsmen saw a flicker of movement in a nearby sandheap and cut loose with the fullest fury of their heat-grids. There was a crackle. An unassimilated tribesman rolled over, kicked a spurred foot in the air, arched his haunches and died.

The little tragedy, repeated time and again on that ruthless planet, was no more than window-dressing for more significant events. The crackling, burning grids were crackling arcs of doom. Like Gabriel's trumpet, they served to awaken Tim and Johnny Damokles.

"What's dam' noise?" grunted the Greek.

"Target practice." Timmy was about to deliver further comments, but a rap at the door cut him loose. "Come in!" he barked. The door opened. The Leader entered.

"Ahhhh. Good morning, my dear guests." He rubbed his hands in a gesture that grated scales together. "We've a special *treat* for you this morning. And perhaps, since you've displayed certain interests in *history*, you'd enjoy sharing in the history of the future."

"Would we?" queried Timmy.

"Belligerence is an ill-fitting trait of yours, Mister Gordon," said the Neptunian. "An inadequate one, I'll add."

"We're wasting time," interrupted Tim. "Get on with it!"

"Impetuous? You've a right to be. Get into your space suits and come outside. We're launching a special present for the Jovian System . . . and feel that you gentlemen would enjoy it."

"I know," muttered Timmy.

"Of course, you do." The Leader was grinning as he spoke. "We've given your companion full opportunity to tell you about it. But come along . . . unless you prefer a few rather . . . delicate . . . adjustments of the nervous system."

Johnny Damokles laughed. But beyond that, neither he nor Tim had anything further to say. They climbed into their space clothes and followed the Leader out into the Neptunian twilight.

V

IN a natural amphitheater, walled in at one side by the cliff of the ravine and sheltered from the methane wind by the parapets of the Tsom fortress, stood the gigantic Neptunian bomb. Its impervium walls glowed with a faint, cold light. Regularly, down its sides from ten points, uneven streaks marked the course of Timmy's sensitizing fluid. Their exact placement was coincidentally fortunate. Each served to counteract the other, though the inward pressure they exerted must have been tremendous indeed.

The Leader was laughing in a repulsively reptilian way as he ascended his rostrum. Timmy and Damokles followed. "Observe," said the Leader, "the ingenious controls by which I guide the rocket-blasts from this remote station." He pointed to his control board, motioned Timmy and Johnny to stay away from it, and chuckled as they obeyed. Then, for a full hour, he delivered an impassioned and almost insane address to his followers.

As near as Timmy could judge, the Leader's address was a skilful bit of vituperation against the injustices done Neptune. But it was effective. A frenzied circle of lizard-men howled as he finished speaking. "And now," said the Leader,

"we send our little present on his way."

He reached for the control board. The bomb shot heavenward.

Yes, it shot heavenward.

But the Leader *hadn't touched* the controls.

Timmy's fingers anticipated him. A flick on his own secret control board had shot the bomb silently out toward the void. The Leader's finger froze in mid-air. His jaw dropped. He followed the bomb in its flight, and every muscle tightened, when it stopped dead at a point half a mile above Neptune. There the bomb hovered, unmoving. Its orbit, if an orbit you could call it, held it exactly above the center of the Tsom fortress. The Leader's finger jammed down on his control button.

Flames blasted from the bomb's jets. It whirled crazily on its own axis . . . but was otherwise immovable.

"Interesting, isn't it?" said Timmy mockingly.

The Leader looked at him. "You've done this?" His tone was most incredulous. He darted toward Timmy.

"Don't move," ordered the Earthman. He flicked a button and the great bomb dropped silently. The Leader stopped. There was utter silence as every creature in the amphitheater realized what was happening.

"Well," said the Leader at last, "it's an impasse, isn't it?"

"No . . . it's check . . . and check-mate."

"Yes," chuckled Johnny Damokles, "she are old Greeks' gambit."

THE Leader darted back to his control board. Again and again he shot every ounce of power into the bomb's blasts. Nothing happened. It spun about at that same tantalizing half-mile above their heads.

"Most ingenious," said the Leader. "You falsified those papers on how your principle worked?"

"Believe that if you want," said Timmy with a shrug. "And now . . . I'm taking over."

The Leader bowed.

But Johnny Damokles stepped into the picture.

"I take over first," he said. "I gots present for dam' blast Shelton Thurner."

He leaned over the front of the rostrum and caught the big Neptunian spy by the coat collar. Timmy, guarding against any treacherous assault, kept his eyes on the Leader and the bomb.

"Holla, Meester Shelton Thurner," greeted the Greek, "You ask Johnny Damokles dam' fool question. You want sky-hook? Good! I gots sky-hook." From a capacious pocket of his space britches he drew a hook and a dangling length of chain. He tightened the collar jabbed the hook through it. "Goombye, Meester No-goods!" he chortled. He jerked the rest of the chain from his pocket. A few scraps of treated impervium were hitched to its end. Light hit them. They shot aloft, dragging Thurner behind them like the tail of a crazy kite, and dangled high above the plain.

"How you like sky-hooks?" yelled the Greek.

Timmy laughed.

"I regret," said the Leader in a suavely courteous tone, "the loss of an aide. But tell me, how did you evolve this ingenious plan? Am I over-inquisitive?"

"The plan . . . belongs to Johnny Damokles."

"Sure Mikes!" blurted the Greek. "She are old Greeks' story. You tell her, Timmy. My talk all mixed with sky-hooks!"

Timmy fingered his control board. "Long ago," he said, "a Greek king acquired excessive power through force. As a symbol of that force . . . a sword dangled always above his head. By a hair. The king's name . . . like that of my friend . . . was Damocles. They call the story, *The Sword of Damocles*."

Above their heads hovered that menacing ball of *dynotron*, enough to blast all life from Neptune. The Neptunian leader watched it.

"I believe . . . that I understand." He turned away, then swung back again. "One must accept facts intelligently. Visiphone your Terrestrial diplomats. Neptune will accept any reasonable terms."

Overhead, the sword of Johnny Damokles glowed faintly.

"The Greeks," Johnny Damokles said softly to nobody in particular, "have a word for it. *Freedom!*" He smiled. "Let'sa call home, Tims. I'm cold!"

Dear Pop:

Even an old Rainbow Divisioner like you would pop your eyes at the army we're putting together this time. Let me tell you, they're doing everything to make up just about the best bunch of fighting galoots you ever saw.

And that goes for what they do for us off duty, too! Take this new clubhouse we got just outside of camp. It's got radios, dance floors, nice soft chairs and everything. And, Pop, you can get something to eat that won't cost you a month's pay!

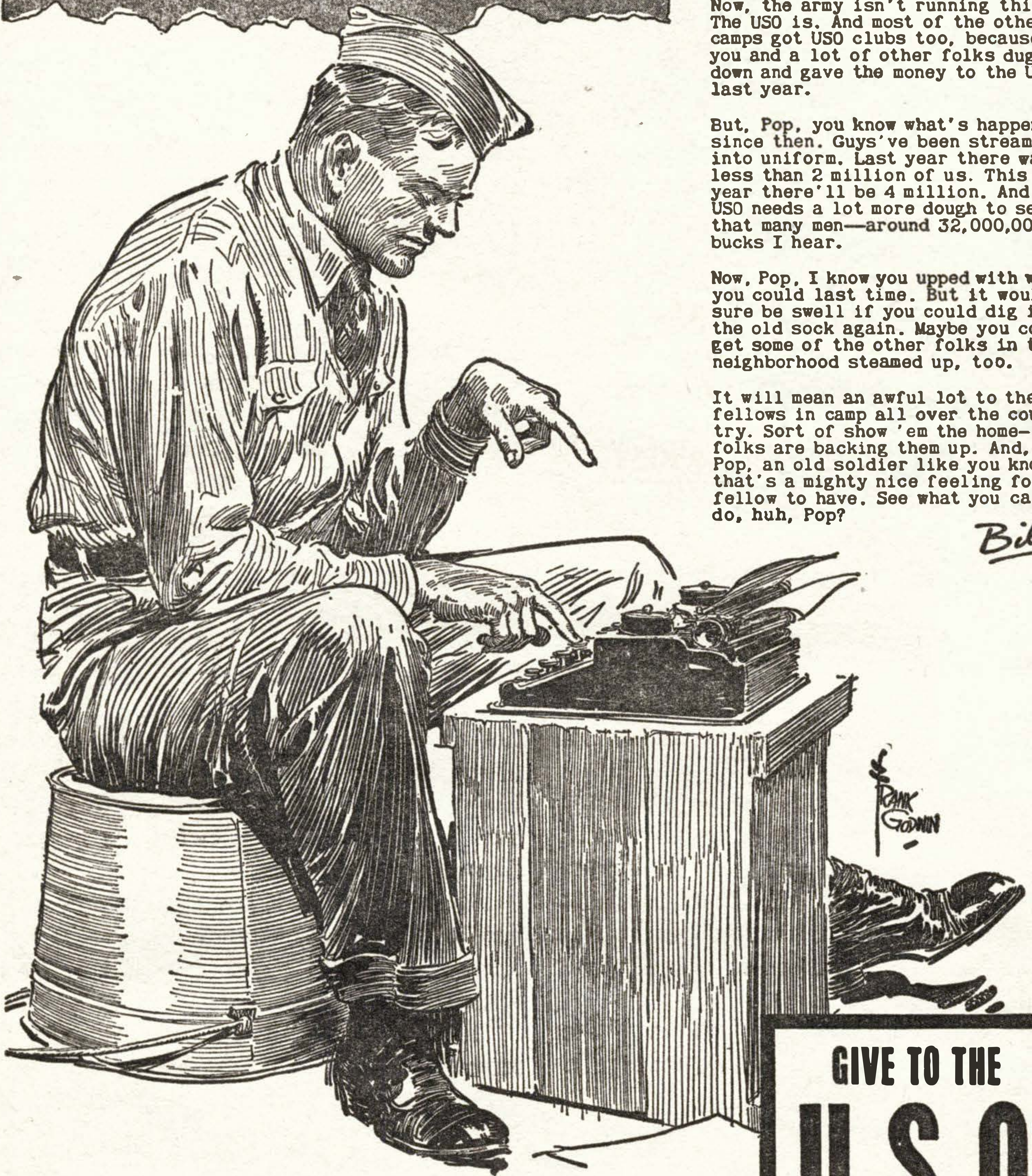
Now, the army isn't running this. The USO is. And most of the other camps got USO clubs too, because you and a lot of other folks dug down and gave the money to the USO last year.

But, Pop, you know what's happened since then. Guys've been streaming into uniform. Last year there was less than 2 million of us. This year there'll be 4 million. And the USO needs a lot more dough to serve that many men—around 32,000,000 bucks I hear.

Now, Pop, I know you upped with what you could last time. But it would sure be swell if you could dig into the old sock again. Maybe you could get some of the other folks in the neighborhood steamed up, too.

It will mean an awful lot to the fellows in camp all over the country. Sort of show 'em the home-folks are backing them up. And, Pop, an old soldier like you knows that's a mighty nice feeling for a fellow to have. See what you can do, huh, Pop?

Bill



Send your contribution to your local USO Committee or to National Headquarters,
USO, Empire State Building, New York, N. Y.

GIVE TO THE
USO

ORIDIN'S FORMULA

By R. R. WINTERBOTHAM

The formula was a simple equation, but Caddo had to have it—
for knowing its answer meant he would rule the universe.

Illustrated by Doolin



"Open up," Caddo snarled, "or I'll blow my way in!"

ORIDIN the Recluse listened to the threat wirelessly from the space ship that was hovering in a landing orbit about the planetoid Azair.

I've a bead on your atmosphere plant," said the snarling voice. "One false move and I'll blast it to star dust."

Oridin shrugged as he heard the words.

One more fool had come to Azair looking for the secret that the Recluse of the Asteroids was supposed to possess.

"Your threats are unnecessary, stranger," Oridin replied in the microphone of his radio. "Everyone is welcome here as long as he behaves. I have ways of dealing with those who don't."

"I'm warning you," came the voice again, "that I will stand for no foolishness. I'll kill you if you try to resist."

Oridin smiled. "Land, stranger, you need not fear me."

The hermit arose and went to the galley of the warm little house that seemed to grow from the solid rocks of the tiny planet. He pressed a button, waited a second and then opened a small compartment. In the box was a steaming pot of coffee, freshly made by Oridin's automatic cook.

Outside the transparent shelter, the air grew blue from the reflection of landing rockets. Oridin glanced to the leveled surface on which the ship was coming to rest. He saw a turret training on the little house. Oridin was not afraid; the visitor probably would be interesting. Even a recluse can grow lonesome on a minor planet.

A figure emerged from the spaceship. He wore an oxygen helmet, although Oridin plentifully supplied the planetoid with artificial atmosphere from a small plant at the north pole. The stranger did not believe that Oridin would not resist. Again Oridin smiled. Deep in the rocks of Azair were guns that could have blasted the visitor a thousand times, had Oridin wished. But there was nothing clever about blowing a foe to pieces. The foe too often was killed before he sensed defeat. Oridin enjoyed an equal battle, or even one against odds.

"Open up! Open up, I tell you, or I'll burn my way in!" demanded the visitor.

"He's certainly not deceiving me as to his intentions," Oridin decided.

The recluse pushed a button on the wall, and a giant gate swung outward admitting the stranger.

The fellow was as tall and as muscular as Oridin himself, but the space suit and the gaping blaster he held in his hand made the visitor seem much more for-

midable. Oridin himself was dressed in bell-bottomed slacks and a loosely fitting, slipover coat. His beard softened his countenance and made him seem quite gentle, except for a certain glitter in his eyes that seemed to warn that Oridin loved a contest. And this would seem to be a deadly contest.

Oridin bowed.

"You are welcome, stranger," he said. "Take off your helmet, for the air is pure. Put aside your gun, for I am unarmed and I do not intend to harm you."

The stranger hesitated, uncertainly.

"No tricks, Oridin!" he warned.

"Tricks?" Oridin laughed tauntingly. "You are not very confident for a man of your caliber. I've heard of you often, Caddo Velexis. They say you have conquered whole nations single-handed, and yet you are afraid of an unarmed hermit."

"I'm not afraid of you," Caddo said in a tone that hinted he was.

Caddo removed his helmet and holstered his blaster, but Oridin noted that the terrestrial giant did not move the firing button to safety.

"Will you have some coffee?" Oridin asked. "It will refresh you after your long trip, and you must have had a long trip, for we are in a very sparsely filled part of the sky."

Oridin lifted the pot and poured the brown steaming liquid into a thick, metal mug.

Caddo waved it aside.

"I have no time!"

"Do not be alarmed," Oridin said. "The patrol will not be near Azair for three days."

Oridin sat down. His fingers felt under the arm of the chair where a series of buttons controlled other mechanisms in the room. Caddo had relaxed his watchfulness.

"In three days I'll be well toward the other side of the solar system," Caddo said.

Oridin lifted his eyebrows.

"Toward the earth? You have undertaken something this time!"

"Yes!" Caddo said. "It's the Earth I am after! I have all I want of the outlying planets and planetoids. You can

capture a hundred of them and be no better off than you were at first. But if you capture the Earth, you can rule the universe."

Oridin touched one of the buttons. A tiny pinhole in the wall of the room seemed to blink. There was a blinding flash and the smell of burned leather permeated the place.

CADDO gave a cry of alarm and sprang back, knocking over his chair. He was on his feet holding his blaster in his hand in a second. Across the top of his helmet was a scorched streak.

"You tried to kill me!" Caddo screamed. "You dirty swine.

Oridin's lips parted in a smile as he looked without fear into the mouth of the trembling weapon.

"Don't underestimate yourself, Caddo," he said. "The hot beam was only a warning—something to let you know that I could kill you anytime I wished. Even now, before you could squeeze the trigger on the weapon, I could cause certain things to happen—no, no! You are safe, Caddo—I could cause you to die if I wish, but you are interesting, a dangerous man. It would be a better accomplishment for me to give you a punishment you deserve."

The fear that shone in Caddo's eyes faded away. For a moment he watched Oridin. Then he laughed.

"So it's that kind of a game, is it? I can play it too! Your threats do not frighten me. Nor am I afraid of your hot beam. Look!"

Caddo thrust his arm forward into the path of the beam. There was a puff of smoke as the tremendous heat vaporized particles of dust on the leather sleeves. Then nothing happened.

"I have a neutralizing force, powered with a small battery in my clothing," Caddo said. "Foolishly, I did not have it turned on a moment ago. But you can't hurt me now."

Oridin shrugged. "I am still not afraid of you Caddo. If you had come here to loot, you would have killed me long ago. But what you want is something you cannot gain by killing me. What is it?"

"You are going to give me the secret

that will make me the master of the earth, and the master of the universe," Caddo announced.

Oridin poured himself a mug of coffee.

"I knew you did not want gold, although Azair is filthy with the stuff," he said. "But what secret have I that is so powerful?"

"The *Discovery!*" Caddo said.

"I have many." Oridin nodded toward the wall, and the pinhole of light blinked out.

"I want the secret of the universe!" Caddo spoke tensely.

"Come! Don't be so melodramatic," Oridin chided. "The universe is full of secrets."

"You're stalling. You know what I mean!"

"I think I do," Oridin agreed. "My erratic experiments have revealed a certain mathematical function, J , which theoretically opens the door to action without probability. Is that what you want, Caddo? The value of J ?"

"The mathematical bombsight!" Caddo said. "It removes probability and makes certainty of everything. With my calculations based on certainty, I'll be fate itself! I can conquer the world, chain the universe and govern creation."

Oridin laughed quietly.

"Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon, Genghis Khan and Hitler spoke those words and they were willing to bargain with the devil himself to make them come true," he said. "I suppose I am the devil, for I know the answer and I can tell you the answer—for a price."

"You'll give it to me for nothing!" Caddo patted the blister, now in the holster at his side.

"Is that your only offer?" Oridin asked, still wearing an amused half-smile.

"It is!"

Oridin rose and moved toward a safe under two clocks on the wall across the room. One of these clocks gave the terrestrial days, hours and minutes according to the General Meridian time. The other registered the four-hour rotation of Azair.

"Wait!" Caddo halted Oridin. "No tricks. Give me the combination and I'll open the safe!"

Oridin turned to the space pirate.

"The safe is unlocked. The formula is inside."

Caddo's eyes betrayed his suspicion. The most valuable secret in the world was in an unlocked safe! Warily Caddo stepped forward. He hesitated, wondering if even his neutralizing force was enough to protect him.

"There's no danger. Go ahead. Help yourself," Oridin urged.

Caddo was desperate. He touched the handle of the door. It was unlocked. He flung it open. Inside the safe was a single sheet of white paper.

Caddo seized it eagerly. His eyes widened in amazement as he read:

"The certainty of success in any course of operations, expressed in mathematical terms, represents the sum of all factors, beginning at the starting point, which must be described as *real zero*, and ending with the objective, also reduced to a real numerical value. The constant of certainty, *J*, can be the determining factor which leads an operation from the beginning to the objective."

Caddo read the paper and reread it again and again.

"Is this all of it?" he asked, turning to Oridin.

"Every bit," Oridin replied. "The formula is simple, like the one to determine the sum of an arithmetical progression—the first number of the progression plus the last number, multiplied by the number of terms in the progression and divided by two. In your case the progression lies between what you have and what you want. The certainty of getting it is the sum of all the factors."

CADDO sat down in a chair at the desk. He seemed to forget his suspicions of Oridin, who had placed a stack of paper beside him. Caddo was engrossed in the formula and Caddo, as a mathematician, knew that everything in the world could be expressed in figures. What would Napoleon, or Hitler, have given for this formula!

"The beginning is *real zero*!" Caddo spoke aloud.

"Which is different from a mathematical zero," Oridin said. "I might say that zero, like absolute vacuum, never occurs. Even if we have two apples and eat two

of them the atoms of the apples continue to exist. In the formula you have a small fraction instead of zero. It serves the same purpose. If you multiply a number *X* by zero, the answer is zero. Multiply a fraction approaching zero, .000,000,001 by another number and that number approaches zero too. If that number is a fraction it will be even closer to zero than our *real zero*. In fact, we are dealing with trans-zero numbers, just like the transfinite numbers discovered by Georg Cantor."

"Yes, yes!" Caddo said eagerly. He picked up a pencil. He scribbled furiously. His objective was all of the power in the world expressed in ergs; all of the gold in the world, expressed in dollars; all of the land, expressed in acres; the people, in individuals.

Oridin moved softly behind him. A multiple-calculator made its appearance in the room. Paper flew from under Caddo's pencil. Sweat poured from his space-browned face.

The two clocks on the wall recorded the turning of the earth and the planetoid Azair.

Caddo forgot about Oridin. He forgot about everything except the figures that revolved in his brain.

Oridin moved out into the warm artificial atmosphere of his planetoid. He was a recluse again. He was alone. A momentary contact with the greed, and avarice of the human race had been wiped away.

Far out in space was a glow of rockets. A ship was going to land. It had seemed only a short time since Caddo had landed. But that was three terrestrial days ago. This was the patrol.

"I've a prisoner for you," Oridin informed the captain. "It's Caddo."

"Caddo! He's the No. 1 universal enemy. Man, you'll grow rich with the rewards offered on nine planets for his capture."

"You can have the reward," Oridin said. "Take him away. He's a nuisance."

They found Caddo in the lounge of Oridin's house chewing on a book of logarithms. His mind was gone. He could only babble figures. His fingers twitched with cramps from writing with a pencil and punching the keys of the

calculating machine. Every spark of vitality had been taken from his body. The batteries of his force armor had burned out.

"What's the matter with him?" the captain asked.

"He wanted too much," Oridin replied. "I gave him a simple little formula for success, but the formula ceases to be simple as the definition for success grows more demanding. Had he sought perfection, Caddo would have seen that even this was unrecognizable, although

"There's nothing difficult in the formula. It proves that certainty is unrecognizable. You'll have to admit that a goal, to be reached has to follow a path and that path is determined by two points. The beginning is one and the second one makes the ultimate objective certain. Therefore the second point is certainty. But certainty is unrecognizable—"

Oridin brought forth his formula and allowed the captain to read it. The patrol officer blinked his eyes and scratched his head. Oridin wrote his formula out:

$$J = \frac{(a + 1) \text{ times infinity}}{2}$$

2

"*J* is certainly, *a* our starting point and 1 is unity, or perfection," Oridin explained. "Our starting point is close to zero, but not zero. But for convenience we'll say that it's a fraction so close that we can call it zero. Then certainty, *J*, is one-half of infinity, which you'll have to agree does not approach infinity and may be well within the realm of human comprehension, although we will not recognize perfection because we do not know what number is halfway to infinity. Caddo overlooked the fact that he went further and further into the transinfinite with each number he added to his equation, for there are an infinity of numbers between any two whole numbers and any two fractions and their sum is always infinity."

The patrol captain already was muttering to himself and Oridin hurried him out of the house and into the patrol ship with his prisoner.

After the space craft had gone, Oridin returned to his living quarters and replaced his formula in the unlocked safe. He cleaned the litter made by Caddo and sat down. Once again, Oridin was a recluse and he would remain so until someone else had a dream of conquering the universe.



the certainty was only halfway to infinity—"

"Sorry, Mr. Oridin, but I'm not a mathematician," the captain said.



A Fiction House Magazine



Citadel of Lost Ships

By LEIGH BRACKETT

It was a Gypsy world, built of space flotsam, peopled with the few free races of the Solar System. Roy Campbell, outcast prey of the Coalition, entered its depths to seek haven for the Kraylens of Venus—only to find that it had become a slave trap from which there was no escape.



ROY CAMPBELL woke painfully. His body made a blind, instinctive lunge for the control panel, and it was only when his hands struck the

smooth, hard mud of the wall that he realized he wasn't in his ship any longer, and that the Spaceguard wasn't chasing him, their guns hammering death.



Campbell swung about, blasted shots at Tredrick and his men, while Stella pressed the Kraylens to greater speed in escaping.

He leaned against the wall, the perspiration thick on his heavy chest, his eyes wide and remembering. He could feel again, as though the running fight were still happening, the bucking of his sleek Fitz-Sothern beneath the calm control of his hands. He could remember the pencil rays lashing through the night, searching for him, seeking his life. He could recall the tiny prayer that lingered in his mem-

ory, as he fought so skillfully, so dangerously, to evade the relentless pursuer.

Then there was a hazy period, when a blasting cannon had twisted his ship like a wind-tossed leaf, and his head had smashed cruelly against the control panel. And then the slinking minutes when he had raced for safety—and then the sodden hours when sleep was the only thing in the Universe that he craved.

He sank back on the hide-frame cot with something between a laugh and a curse. He was sweating, and his wiry body twitched. He found a cigarette, lit it on the second try and sat still, listening to his heartbeats slow down.

He began to wonder, then, what had wakened him.

It was night, the deep indigo night of Venus. Beyond the open hut door, Campbell could see the *liha*-trees swaying a little in the hot, slow breeze. It seemed as though the whole night swayed, like a dark blue veil.

For a long time he didn't hear anything but the far-off screaming of some swamp-beast on the kill. Then, sharp and cruel against the blue silence, a drum began to beat.

It made Campbell's heart jerk. The sound wasn't loud, but it had a tight, hard quality of savagery, something as primal as the swamp and as alien, no matter how long a man lived with it.

The drumming stopped. The second, perhaps the third, ritual prelude. The first must have wakened him. Campbell stared with narrow dark eyes at the doorway.

He'd been with the Kraylens only two days this time, and he'd slept most of that. Now he realized, that in spite of his exhaustion, he had sensed something wrong in the village.

Something was wrong, very wrong, when the drum beat that way in the sticky night.

He pulled on his short, black space-man's boots and went out of the hut. No one moved in the village. Thatch rustled softly in the slow wind, and that was the only sign of life.

Campbell turned into a path under the whispering *liha*-trees. He wore nothing but the tight black pants of his space garb, and the hot wind lay on his skin like soft hands. He filled his lungs with it. It smelled of warm still water and green, growing things, and. . . .

Freedom. Above all, *freedom*. This was one place where a man could still stand on his legs and feel human.

The drumming started again, like a man's angry heart beating out of the indigo night. This time it didn't stop. Campbell shivered. The trees parted pres-

ently, showing a round dark hummock.

It was lit by the hot flare of burning *liha* pods. Sweet oily smoke curled up into the branches. There was a sullen glint of water through the trees, but there were closer glints, brighter, fiercer, more deadly.

The glinting eyes of men, silent men, standing in a circle around the hummock.

There was a little man crouched on the mound in the center. His skin had the blue-whiteness of skim milk. He wore a kilt of iridescent scales. His face was subtly reptilian, broad across the cheekbones and pointed below.

A crest of brilliant feathers—they weren't really feathers, but that was as close as Campbell could get—started just above his brow ridges and ran clean down his spine to the waist. They were standing erect now, glowing in the firelight.

He nursed a drum between his knees. It stopped being just a drum when he touched it. It was his own heart, singing and throbbing with the hate in it.

Campbell stopped short of the circle. His nerves, still tight from his near-fatal brush with the Spaceguard, stung with little flaring pains. He'd never seen anything like this before.

The little man rocked slightly, looking up into the smoke. His eyes were half closed. The drum was part of him and part of the indigo night. It was part of Campbell, beating in his blood.

It was the heart of the swamp, sobbing with hate and a towering anger that was as naked and simple as Adam on the morning of Creation.

CAMPBELL must have made some involuntary motion, because a man standing at the edge of the hummock turned his head and saw him. He was tall and slender, and his crest was pure white, a sign of age.

He turned and came to Campbell, looking at him with opalescent eyes. The firelight laid the Earthman's dark face in sharp relief, the lean hard angles, the high-bridged nose that had been broken and not set straight, the bitter mouth.

Campbell said, in pure liquid Venusian, "What is it, Father?"

The Kraylen's eyes dropped to the Earthman's naked breast. There was

black hair on it, and underneath the hair ran twisting, intricate lines of silver and deep blue, tattooed with exquisite skill.

The old man's white crest nodded. Campbell turned and went back down the path. The wind and the *liha*-trees, the hot blue night beat with the anger and the hate of the little man with the drum.

Neither spoke until they were back in the hut. Campbell lit a smoky lamp. The old Kraylen drew a long, slow breath.

"My almost-son," he said, "this is the last time I can give you refuge. When you are able, you must go and return no more."

Campbell stared at him. "But, Father! Why?"

The old man spread long blue-white hands. His voice was heavy.

"Because we, the Kraylens, shall have ceased to be."

Campbell didn't say anything for a minute. He sat down on the hide-frame cot and ran his fingers through his black hair.

"Tell me, Father," he said quietly, grimly.

The Kraylen's white crest rippled in the lamplight. "It is not your fight."

Campbell got up. "Look. You've saved my neck more times than I can count. You've accepted me as one of your own. I've been happier here than any—well, skip that. But don't say it isn't my fight."

The pale, triangular old face smiled. But the white crest shook.

"No. There is really no fight. Only death. We're a dying tribe, a mere scrap of old Venus. What matter if we die now—or later?"

Campbell lit a cigarette with quick, sharp motions. His voice was hard. "Tell me, Father. All, and quick."

Opalescent eyes met his. "It is better not."

"I said, 'tell me'!"

"Very well." The old man sighed. "You would hear, after all. You remember the frontier town of Lhi?"

"Remember it!" Campbell's white teeth flashed. "Every dirty stone in it, from the pumping conduits on up. Best place on three planets to fence the hot stuff."

He broke off, suddenly embarrassed. The Kraylen said gently,

"That is your affair, my son. You've been away a long time. Lhi has changed. The Terra-Venusian Coalition Government has taken it for the administration center of Tehara Province."

Campbell's eyes, at mention of the Coalition Government, acquired a hot, hard brightness. He said, "Go on."

The old man's face was cut from marble, his voice stiff and distant.

"There have been men in the swamps. Now word has been sent us. It seems there is coal here, and oil, and certain minerals that men prize. They will drain the swamps for many miles, and work them."

Campbell let smoke out of his lungs, very slowly. "Yeah? And what becomes of you?"

The Kraylen turned away and stood framed in the indigo square of the doorway. The distant drum sobbed and shouted. It was hot, and yet the sweat turned cold on Campbell's body.

The old man's voice was distant and throbbing and full of anger, like the drum. Campbell had to strain to hear it.

"They will take us and place us in camps in the great cities. Small groups of us, so that we are divided and split. Many people will pay to see us, the strange remnants of old Venus. They will pay for our skills in the curing of *leshenskins* and the writing of quaint music, and tattooing. We will grow rich."

Campbell dropped the cigarette and ground it on the dirt floor. Knotted veins stood out on his forehead, and his face was cruel. The old man whispered:

"We will die first."

IT was a long time since anyone had spoken. The drumming had stopped, but the echo of it throbbed in Campbell's pulses. He looked at his spread, sinewy hands on his knees and swallowed because the veins of his neck were swollen and hurting.

Presently he said, "Couldn't you go further back into the swamps?"

The old Kraylen spoke without moving. He still stood in the doorway, watching the trees sway in the slow wind.

"The Nahali live there. Besides, there is no clean water and no earth for crops. We are not lizard eaters."

"I've seen it happen," said Campbell somberly. "On Earth, and Mars, and Mercury, and the moons of Jupiter and Saturn. Little people driven from their homes, robbed of their way of life, exploited and for the gaping idiots in the trade centers. Little people who didn't care about progress, and making money. Little people who only wanted to live, and breathe, and be let alone."

He got up in a swift savage rush and hurled a gourd of water crashing into a corner and sat down again. He was shivering. The old Kraylen turned.

"Little people like you, my son?"

Campbell shrugged. "Maybe. We'd worked our farm for three hundred years. My father didn't want to sell. They condemned it anyhow. It's under water now, and the dam runs a hell of a big bunch of factories."

"I'm sorry."

Campbell looked up, and his face softened. "I've never understood," he said. "You people are the most law-abiding citizens I ever met. You don't like strangers. And yet I blunder in here, hot on the lam and ugly as a swamp-dragon, and you. . . ."

He stopped. It was probably the excitement that was making his throat knot up like that. The smoke from the lamp stung his eyes. He blinked and bent to trim it.

"You were wounded, my son, and in trouble. Your quarrel with the police was none of ours. We would have helped anyone. And then, while you had fever and your guard was down, you showed that more than your body needed help. We gave you what we could."

"Yeah," said Campbell huskily. He didn't say it, but he knew well enough that what the Kraylens had given him had kept him from blowing his top completely.

Now the Kraylens were going the way of the others, straws swept before the great broom of Progress. Nothing could stop it. Earth's empire surged out across the planets, building, bartering, crashing across time and custom and race to make money and the shining steel cage of efficiency.

A cage wherein a sheep could live happily enough, well-fed and opulent. But

Campbell wasn't a sheep. He'd tried it, and he couldn't bleat in tune. So he was a wolf, now, alone and worrying the flock.

Soon there wasn't going to be a place in the Solar System where a man could stand on his own feet and breathe.

He felt stifled. He got up and stood in the doorway, watching the trees stir in the hot indigo gloom. The trees would go. Wells and mines, slag and soot and clattering machinery, and men in sweat-stained shirts laboring night and day to get, to grow, to produce.

Campbell's mouth twisted, bitter and sardonic. He said softly:

"God help the unconstructive!"

The old Kraylen murmured, "What happened to those others, my son?"

Campbell's lean shoulders twitched. "Some of them died. Some of them submitted. The rest. . . ."

He turned, so suddenly that the old man flinched. Campbell's dark eyes had a hot light in them, and his face was sharply alive.

"The rest," he said evenly, "went to Romany."

HE talked, then. Urgently, pacing the hut in nervous catlike strides, trying to remember things he had heard and not been very much interested in at the time. When he was through, the Kraylen said:

"It would be better. Infinitely better. But—" He spread his long pale hands, and his white crest drooped. "But there is no time. Government men will come within three days to take us—that was the time set. And since we will not go. . . ."

Campbell thought of the things that had happened to other rebellious tribes. He felt sick. But he made his voice steady.

"We'll hope it's time, Father. Romany is in an orbit around Venus now—I nearly crashed it coming in. I'm going to try, anyhow. If I don't—well, stall as long as you can."

Remembering the drum and the way the men had looked, he didn't think that would be long. He pulled on a loose shirt of green spider-silk, slung the belt of his heavy needle-gun over one shoulder, and picked up his black tunic.

He put his hand on the Kraylen's shoulder and smiled. "We'll take care of it, Father."

The old man's opalescent eyes were shadowed. "I wish I could stop you. It's hopeless for us, and you are—*hot* is that the word?"

Campbell grinned. "Hot," he said, "is the word. Blistering! The Coalition gets awfully mad when someone pulls their own hi-jacking stunt on them. But I'm used to it."

It was beginning to get light outside. The old man said quietly, "The gods go with you, my son."

Campbell went out, thinking he'd need them.

It was full day when he reached his hidden ship—a sleek, souped-up Fitts-Sothern that had the legs of almost anything in space. He paused briefly by the airlock, looking at the sultry green of *liha*-trees under a pearl-grey sky, the white mist lapping around his narrow waist.

He spent a long time over his charts, feeding numbers to the calculators. When he got a set-up that suited him, he took the Fitts-Sothern up on purring 'copters, angling out over the deep swamps. He felt better, with the ship under his hands.

The Planetary Patrol blanket was thin over the deep swamps, but it was vigilant. Campbell's nerves were tight. They got tighter as he came closer to the place where he was going to have to begin his loop over to the night side.

He was just reaching for the rocket switch when the little red light started to flash on the indicator panel.

Somebody had a detector beam on him. And he was morally certain that the somebody was flying a Patrol boat.

II

THERE was one thing about the Venusian atmosphere. You couldn't see through it, even with infra-beams, at very long range. The intensity needle showed the Patrol ship still far off, probably not suspicious yet, although stray craft were rare over the swamps.

In a minute the copper would be call-

ing for information, with his mass-detectors giving the Fitts-Sothern a massage. Campbell didn't think he'd wait. He slammed in the drive rockets, holding them down till the tubes warmed. Even held down, they had plenty.

The Fitts-Sothern climbed in a whipping spiral. The red light wavered, died, glowed again. The copper was pretty good with his beam. Campbell fed in more juice.

The red light died again. But the Patrol boat had all its beams out now, spread like a fish net. The Fitts-Sothern struck another, lost it, struck again, and this time she didn't break out.

Campbell felt the sudden racking jar all through him. "Tractor beams," he said. "You think so, buddy?"

The drive jets were really warming now. He shot it to them. The Fitts-Sothern hung for a fractional instant, her triple-braced hull shuddering so that Campbell's teeth rang together.

Then she broke, blasting up right through the netted beams. Campbell jockeyed his port and starboard steering jets. The ship leaped and skittered wildly. The copper didn't have time to focus full power on her anywhere, and low power to the Fitts-Sothern was a nuisance and nothing more.

Campbell went up over the Patrol ship, veered off in the opposite direction from the one he intended to follow, hung in a tight spiral until he was sure he was clean, and then dived again.

The Patrol boat wasn't expecting him to come back. The pilot was concentrating on where Campbell had gone, not where he had been. Campbell grinned, opened full throttle, and went skittering over the curve of the planet to meet the night shadow rushing toward him.

He didn't meet any more ships. He was way off the trade lanes, and moving so fast that only blind luck could tag him. He hoped the Patrol was hunting for him in force, back where they'd lost him. He hoped they'd hunt a long time.

Presently he climbed, on slowed and muffled jets, out of the atmosphere. His black ship melted indistinguishably into the black shadow of the planet. He slowed still more, just balancing the Venus-drag, and crawled out toward a

spot marked on his astrogation chart.

An Outer Patrol boat went by, too far off to bother about. Campbell lit a cigarette with nervous hands. It was only a quarter smoked when the object he'd been waiting for loomed up in space.

His infra-beam showed it clearly. A round, plate-shaped mass about a mile in diameter, built of three tiers of spaceships. Hulks, ancient, rusty, pitted things that had died and not been decently buried, welded together in a solid mass by lengths of pipe let into their carcasses.

Before, when he had seen it, Campbell had been in too much of a hurry to do more than curse it for getting in his way. Now he thought it was the most desolate, Godforsaken mass of junk that had ever made him wonder why people bothered to live at all.

He touched the throttle, tempted to go back to the swamps. Then he thought of what was going to happen back there, and took his hand away.

"Hell!" he said. "I might as well look inside."

He didn't know anything about the internal set-up of Romany—what made it tick, and how. He knew Romany didn't love the Coalition, but whether they would run to harboring criminals was another thing.

It wouldn't be strange if they had been given pictures of Roy Campbell and told to watch for him. Thinking of the size of the reward for him, Campbell wished he were not quite so famous.

Romany reminded him of an old-fashioned circular mouse-trap. Once inside, it wouldn't be easy to get out.

"Of all the platinum-plated saps!" he snarled suddenly. "Why am I sticking my neck out for a bunch of semi-human swamp-crawlers, anyhow?"

He didn't answer that. The leading edge of Romany knifed toward him. There were lights in some of the hulks, mostly in the top layer. Campbell reached for the radio.

He had to contact the big shots. No one else could give him what he needed. To do that, he had to walk right up to the front door and announce himself. After that. . . .

The manual listed the wave-length he wanted. He juggled the dials and ver-

niers, wishing his hands wouldn't sweat.

"Spaceship *Black Star* calling Romany. Calling Romany. . . ."

His screen flashed, flickered, and cleared. "Romany acknowledging. Who are you and what do you want?"

CAMPBELL'S screen showed him a youngish man—a Taxil, he thought, from some Mercurian backwater. He was ebony-black and handsome, and he looked as though the sight of Campbell affected him like stale beer.

Campbell said, "Cordial guy, aren't you? I'm Thomas Black, trader out of Terra, and I want to come aboard."

"That requires permission."

"Yeah? Okay. Connect me with the boss."

The Taxil now looked as though he smelled something that had been dead a long time. "Possibly you mean Eran Mak, the Chief Councillor?"

"Possibly," admitted Campbell, "I do." If the rest of the gypsies were anything like this one, they sure had a hate on for outsiders.

Well, he didn't blame them. The screen blurred. It stayed that way while Campbell smoked three cigarettes and exhausted his excellent vocabulary. Then it cleared abruptly.

Eran Mak sounded Martian, but the man pictured on the screen was no Martian. He was an Earthman, with a face like a wedge of granite and a frame that was all gaunt bones and thrusting angles.

His hair was thin, pale-red and fuzzy. His mouth was thin. Even his eyes were thin, close slits of pale blue with no lashes. Campbell disliked him instantly.

"I'm Tredrick," said the Earthman. His voice was thin, with a sound in it like someone walking on cold gravel. "Terran Overchief. Why do you wish to land, Mister Black?"

"I bring a message from the Kraylen people of Venus. They need help."

Tredrick's eyes became, if possible, thinner and more pale.

"Help?"

"Yes. Help." Campbell was struck by a sudden suspicion, something he caught flickering across Tredrick's granite features when he said "Kraylen." He went on, slowly, "The Coalition is moving

in on them. I understand you people of Romany help in cases like that."

There was a small, tight silence.

"I'm sorry," said Tredrick. "There is nothing we can do."

Campbell's dark face tightened. "Why not? You helped the Shenyat people on Ganymede and the Drylanders on Mars. That's what Romany is, isn't it—a refuge for people like that?"

"As a *latnik*, there's a lot you don't know. At this time, we cannot help anyone. Sorry, Black. Please clear ship."

The screen went dead. Campbell stared at it with sultry eyes. Sorry. The hell you're sorry. What gives here, anyway?

He thrust out an angry hand to the transmitter. And then, quite suddenly, the Taxil was looking at him out of the screen.

The hostile look was gone. Anger replaced it, but not anger at Campbell. The Taxil said, in a low, rapid voice:

"You're not lying about coming from the Kraylens?"

"No. No, I'm not lying." He opened his shirt to show the tattoo.

"The dirty scut! Mister Black, clear ship, and then make contact with one of the outer hulks on the lowest tier. You'll find emergency hatchways in some of the pipes. Come inside, and wait."

His dark eyes had a savage glitter. "There are some of us, Mister Black, who still consider Romany a refuge!"

CAMPBELL cleared ship. His nerves were singing in little tight jerks. He'd stepped into something here. Something big and ugly. There had been a certain ring in the Taxil's voice.

The thin, gravelly Mr. Tredrick had something on his mind, too. Something important, about Kraylens. Why Kraylens, of all the unimportant people on Venus?

Trouble on Romany. Romany the gypsy world, the Solar System's stepchild. Strictly a family affair. What business did a Public Enemy with a low number and a high valuation have mixing into that?

Then he thought of the drum beating in the indigo night, and an old man watching *liha*-trees stir in a slow, hot wind.

Roy Campbell called himself a short, bitter name, and sighed, and reached lean brown hands for the controls. Presently, in the infra-field, he made out an ancient Krub freighter on the edge of the lowest level, connected to companion wrecks by sections of twelve-foot pipe. There was a hatch in one of the pipes, with a hand-wheel.

The Fitts-Sothern glided with exquisite daintiness to the pipe, touched it gently, threw out her magnetic grapples and suction flanges, and hung there. The airlock exactly covered the hatchway.

Campbell got up. He was sweating and as edgy as a tomcat on the prow. With great care he buckled his heavy gun around his narrow hips. Then he went into the airlock.

He checked grapples and flanges with inordinate thoroughness. The hatch-wheel jutted inside. He picked up a spanner and turned it, not touching the frigid metal.

There was a crude barrel-lock beyond. Campbell ran his tongue once over dry lips, shrugged, and climbed in.

He got through into a space that was black as the Coalsack. The air was thin and biting cold. Campbell shivered in his silk shirt. He laid his hand on his gun butt and took two cautious steps away from the bulge of the lock, wishing to hell he were some place else.

Cold green light exploded out of nowhere behind him. He half turned, his gun blurring into his palm. But he had no chance to fire it.

Something whipped down across the nerve-center in the side of his neck. His body simply faded out of existence. He fell on his face and lay there, struggling with all his might to move and achieving only a faint twitching of the muscles.

He knew vaguely that someone rolled him over. He blinked up into the green light, and heard a man's deep, soft voice say from the darkness behind it:

"What made you think you could get away with it?"

Campbell tried three times before he could speak. "With what?"

"Spying. Does Tredrick think we're children?"

"I wouldn't know." It was easier to speak this time. His body was beginning to fade in again, like something on a

television screen. He tried to close his hand. It didn't work very well, but it didn't matter. His gun was gone.

Something moved across the light. A man's body, a huge, supple, muscular thing the color of dark bronze. It knelt with a terrible tigerish ease beside Campbell, the bosses on its leather kilt making a clinking noise. There was a jeweled gorget of reddish metal around the base of its throat. The stones had a wicked glitter.

The deep, soft voice said, "Who are you?"

Campbell tried to force the returning life faster through his body. The man's face was in shadow. Campbell looked up with sultry, furious eyes and achieved a definite motion toward getting up.

The kneeling giant put out his right arm. The green light burned on it. Campbell's eyes followed it down toward his throat. His face became a harsh, irregular mask cut from dark wood.

The arm was heavily, beautifully muscled. But where the hand should have been there was a leather harness and a hook of polished Martian bronze.

CAMPBELL knew what had struck him. The thin, hard curve of that hook, more potent than the edge of any hand.

The point pricked his throat, just over the pulse on the left side. The man said softly:

"Lie still, little man, and answer."

Campbell lay still. There was nothing else to do. He said, "I'm Thomas Black, if that helps. Who are you?"

"What did Tredrick tell you to do?"

"To get the hell out. What gives with you?" If that Taxil was spreading the word about him, he'd better hurry. Campbell decided to take a chance. The guy with the hook didn't seem to love Tredrick.

"The black boy in the radio room told me to come aboard and wait. Seems he's sore at Tredrick, too. So am I. That makes us all pals, doesn't it?"

"You lie, little man." The deep voice was quietly certain. "You were sent to spy. Answer!"

The point of the hook put the exclamation point on that word. Campbell winced

away. He wished the lug wouldn't call him "little man." He wouldn't remember ever having felt more hopelessly scared.

He said, "Damn your eyes, I'm not lying. Check with the Taxil. He'll tell you."

"And betray him to Tredrick? You're clumsy, little man."

The hook bit deeper. Campbell's neck began to bleed. He felt all right again otherwise. He wondered whether he'd have a chance of kicking the man in the stomach before his throat was torn out. He tried to draw farther away, but the pipe wall wouldn't give.

A woman's voice spoke then, quite suddenly, from beyond the green light. Campbell jumped. He hadn't even thought about anyone else being there. Now it was obvious that someone was holding the light.

The voice said, "Wait, Marah. Zard is calling me now."

It was a clear, low voice. It had music in it. Campbell would have loved it if it had croaked, but as it was it made his nerves prick with sheer ecstasy.

The hook lifted out of the hole it had made, but it didn't go away. Campbell raised his head a little. The lower edge of the green light spilled across a pair of sandalled feet. The bare white legs above them were as beautiful as the voice, in the same strong clear way.

There was a long silence. Marah, the man with the hook, turned his face partly into the light. It was oblong and scarred and hard as beaten bronze. The eyes in it were smoky ember, set aslant under a tumbled crest of tawny hair.

After a long time the woman spoke again. Her voice was different this time. It was angry, and the anger made it sing and throb like the Kraylen's drum.

"The Earthman is telling the truth, Marah. Zard sent him. He's here about the Kraylens."

The big man—a Martian Drylander, Campbell thought, from somewhere around Kesh—got up, fast. "The Kraylens!"

"He asked for help, and Tredrick sent him away." The light moved closer. "But that's not all, Marah. Tredrick has found out about—us. Old Ekla talked. They're waiting for us at the ship!"

III

MARAH turned. His eyes had a greenish, feral glint like those of a lion on the kill. He said, "I'm sorry, little man."

Campbell was on his feet, now, and reasonably steady. "Think nothing of it," he said dourly. "A natural mistake." He looked at the hook and mopped the blood from his neck, and felt sick. He added, "The name's Black. Thomas Black."

"It wouldn't be Campbell?" asked the woman's voice. "Roy Campbell?"

He squinted into the light, not saying anything. The woman said, "You are Roy Campbell. The Spaceguard was here not long ago, hunting for you. They left your picture."

He shrugged. "All right. I'm Roy Campbell."

"That," said Marah softly, "helps a lot!" He could have meant it any way. His hook made a small, savage flash in the green light.

"There's trouble here on Romany. Civil war. Men are going to be killed before it's over—perhaps now. Where's your place in it?"

"How do I know? The Coalition is moving in on the Kraylens. I owe them something. So I came here for help. Help! Yeah."

"You'll get it," said the woman. "You'll get it, somehow, if any of us live."

Campbell raised his dark brows. "What goes on here, anyhow?"

The woman's low voice sang and throbbed against the pipe walls. "A long time ago there were a few ships. Old ships, crowded with people who had no homes. Little, drifting people who made a living selling their odd handicrafts in the spaceports, who were cursed as a menace to navigation and distrusted as thieves. Perhaps they were thieves. They were also cold, and hungry, and resentful.

"After a while the ships began to band together. It was easier that way—they could share food and fuel, and talk, and exchange ideas. Space wasn't so lonely. More and more ships drifted in. Pretty soon there were a lot of them. A new world, almost.

"They called it Romany, after the wandering people of Earth, because they were gypsies, too, in their own way.

"They clung to their own ways of life. They traded with the noisy, trampling people on the planets they had been driven away from because they had to. But they hated them, and were hated, just as gypsies always are.

"It wasn't an easy life, but they were free in it. They could stand anything, as long as they were free. And always, anywhere in the Solar System, wherever some little lost tribe was being swallowed up and needed help, ships from Romany went to help them."

Her voice dropped. Campbell thought again of the Kraylen's drum, singing its anger in the indigo night.

"That was the creed of Romany," she whispered. "Always to help, always to be a refuge for the little people who couldn't adjust themselves to progress, who only wanted to die in dignity and peace. And now. . . ."

"And now," said Marah somberly, "there is civil war."

CAMPBELL drew a long, unsteady breath. The woman's voice throbbed in him, and his throat was tight. He said "*Tredrick?*"

Marah nodded. "Tredrick. But it's more than that. If it were only Tredrick, it wouldn't be so bad."

He ran the curve of his hook over his scarred chin, and his eyes burned like candle flames.

"Romany is growing old, and soft. That's the real trouble. Decay. Otherwise, Tredrick would have been kicked into space long ago. There are old men in the Council, Campbell. They think more of comfort than they do of—well. . . ."

"Yeah. I know. What's Tredrick's angle?"

"I don't know. He's a strange man—you can't get a grip on him. Sometimes I think he's working for the Coalition."

Campbell scowled. "Could be. You gypsies have a lot of wild talents and some unique skills—I've met some of 'em. The man that controlled them would be sitting pretty. The Coalition would like it, too."

The woman said bitterly, "And they

could always exhibit us. Tours, at so much a head. So quaint—a cross-section of a lost world!”

“Tredrick’s the strong man,” Marah went on. “Eran Mak is Chief Councillor, but he does as Tredrick tells him. The idea is that if Romany settled down and stops getting into trouble with the Planetary Coalitions, we can have regular orbits, regular trade, and so on.”

“In other words,” said Campbell dryly, “stop being Romany.”

“You understand. A pet freak, a tourist attraction, a fat source of revenue.” Again the savage flash of the hook. “A damned circus!”

“And Tredrick, I take it, has decided that you’re endangering the future of Romany by rebellion, and put the finger on you.”

“Exactly.” Marah’s yellow eyes were bright and hard, meeting Campbell’s.

Campbell thought about the Fitts-Sothern outside, and all the lonely reaches of space where he could go. There were lots of Coalition ships to rob, a few plague-spots left to spend the loot in. All he had to do was walk out.

But there was a woman’s voice, with a note in it like a singing, angry drum. There was an old man’s voice, murmuring, “Little people like you, my son?”

It was funny, how a guy could be alone and not know he minded it, and then suddenly walk in on perfect strangers and not be alone any more—alone inside, that is—and know that he *had* minded it like hell.

It had been that way with the Kraylens. It was that way now. Campbell shrugged. “I’ll stick around.”

He added irritably, “Sister, will you for Pete’s sake get that light out of my eyes?”

She moved it, shining it down. “The name’s Moore. Stella Moore.”

He grinned. “Sorry. So you do have a face, after all.”

It wasn’t beautiful. It was pale and heart-shaped, framed in a mass of unruly red-gold hair. There were long, grey eyes under dark-gold brows that had never been plucked, and a red, sullen mouth.

Her teeth were white and uneven, when she smiled. He liked them. The red of her sullen lips was their own. She wore a short tunic the color of Tokay

grapes, and the body under it was long and clean-cut. Her arms and throat had the whiteness of pearl.

Marah said quietly, “Contact Zard. Tell him to throw the PA system wide open and say we’re taking the ship, now, to get the Kraylens!”

STELLA stood absolutely still. Her grey eyes took on an eerie, remote look, and Campbell shivered slightly. He’d seen telepathy often enough in the System’s backwaters, but it never seemed normal.

Presently she said, “It’s done,” and became human again. The green light went out. “Power,” she explained. “Besides, we don’t need it. Give me your hand, Mister Campbell.”

He did, with absolutely no aversion. “My friends,” he said, “generally call me Roy.” She laughed, and they started off, moving with quick sureness in the black, icy darkness.

The ship, it seemed, was up on the second level, on the edge of the living quarters. Down here was all the machinery that kept Romany alive—heat, light, water, air, and cooling systems—and a lot of storage hulks.

The third tier was a vast hydroponic farm, growing the grain and fruit and vegetables that fed the Romany thousands.

Stumbling through pipes and dismantled hulks that smelled of sacking and dried vegetables and oil, Campbell filled in the gaps.

The leaders of the rebel element had held a meeting down here, in secret. Marah and the girl had been coming from it when Campbell blundered into them. The decision had been to rescue the Kraylens no matter what happened.

They’d known about the Kraylens long before Campbell had. Gypsies trading in Lhi had brought word. Now the Kraylens were a symbol over which two points of view were clashing in deadly earnest.

Remembering Tredrick’s thin, harsh face, Campbell wondered uneasily how many of them *would* live to take that ship away.

He became aware gradually of a broken, rhythmic tap and clank transmitted along the metal walls.

“Hammers,” said Stella softly. “Ham-

mers and riveters and welders, fighting rust and age to keep Romany alive. There's no scrap of this world that wasn't discarded as junk, and reclaimed by us."

Her voice dropped. "Including the people."

Campbell said, "They're scrapping some beautiful things these days."

She knew what he meant. She even laughed a little. "I was born on Romany. There are a lot of Earth people who have no place at home."

"I know." Campbell remembered his father's farm, with blue cold water over the fields instead of sky. "And Tredrick?"

"He was born here, too. But the taint is in him. . . ." She caught her breath in a sudden sharp cry. "Marah! Marah, *it's Zard!*"

They stopped. A pulse began to beat under Campbell's jaw. Stella whispered, "He's gone. I felt him call, and now he's gone. He was trying to warn us."

Marah said grimly, "Tredrick's got him, then. Probably knocked him out while he was trying to escape from the radio room."

"He was frightened," said Stella quietly. "Tredrick has done something. He wanted to warn us."

Marah grunted. "Have your gun ready, Campbell. We go up, now."

THEY went up a wooden ladder. It was suddenly getting hot. Campbell guessed that Romany was in the sun again. The Martian opened a door at the top, very, very slowly.

A young, vibrant voice sang out, "All clear!" They piled out of the doorway. Four or five husky young Paniki barbarians from Venus stood grinning beside two bound and slumbering Earthmen.

Campbell stared past them. The air was still and hot, hung with veils of steamy mist. There was mossy earth dotted with warm pools. There were *liha*-trees, sultry green under a pearly light that was still brightening out of indigo gloom.

A slow, hot breath of wind stirred the mist and *liha*-trees. It smelt of warm still water and growing things, and—freedom.

Campbell drew a long breath. His eyes stung and the veins in his neck hurt. He knew it was a dead hulk, with an

iron sky above the pearl-grey mist. But it smelt of freedom.

He said, "What are we waiting for?"

Marah laughed, and the young Venusian laughed. Barbarians, going to fight and laughing about it. Stella's grey eyes held a sultry flame, and her lips were blood-orange and trembling.

Campbell kissed them. He laughed, too, softly, and said, "Okay, Gypsy. Let's go."

They went, through the seven hulks of the Venusian Quarter. Because of the Kraylens, most of the Venusians were with the rebels, but even so there were angry voices raised, and fists, and a few weapons, and some blood got spilled.

More tow-headed young men joined them, and squat little upland nomads who could talk to animals, and three four-armed, serpentine crawlers from the Lohari swamps.

They came presently to a huge dismantled Hoyt freighter on the edge of the Venusian Quarter. There were piles of goods waiting lading through the row of airlocks into smaller trading ships. Marah stopped, his gorget shooting wicked jeweled sparks in the sunlight that seared in through half-shuttered ports, and the others flowed in behind him.

They were on a narrow gallery about halfway up the inner wall. Campbell looked down. There were people on the ladders and the two balcony levels below. A sullen, ugly mob of people from Earth, from Venus, from Mars and Mercury and the moons of Jupiter and Saturn.

Men and near-men and sheer monstrosities, silent and watching in the hot light. Here a crest of scarlet antennae burning, there the sinuous flash of a scaled back, and beyond that the slow ominous weaving of light-black tentacles.

A creature like a huge blue spider with a child's face let out a shrill unearthly scream. "Traitor! Traitor!"

The whole packed mass on the ladders and the galleries stirred like a weird tapestry caught in a gust of wind. The rushing whisper of their movement, their breathing, and their anger sang across Campbell's nerves in points of fire.

Anger. Anger in the Kraylen's drum and Stella's voice and Marah's yellow eyes. Anger like the sunlight, hot and

primal. The anger of little men flogged into greatness.

A voice spoke from across the deck below, cold, clear, without the faintest tremor.

"We want no trouble. Return to your quarters quietly."

"*The Kraylens!*"

The name came thundering out of all those angry throats, beating down against the gaunt, erect figure standing in the forefront of a circle of Earthmen guarding the locks with ready guns.

Tredrick's thin, red head never stirred from its poised erectness. "The Kraylens are out of your hands, now. They harbored a dangerous criminal, and they are now being imprisoned in Lhi to answer for it."

Roy Campbell gripped the iron railing in front of him. It seemed to him that he could see, across all that space, the cold, bright flame of satisfaction in Tredrick's eyes.

The thin, calm voice slid across his eardrums with the cruel impersonality of a surgeon's knife.

"That criminal, Roy Campbell, is now on Romany. The Spaceguard is on its way here now. For the sake of the safety of your families, for the future of Romany, I advise no one to hide him or help him escape."

IV

CAMPBELL stood still, not moving or speaking, his hard, dark face lined and dead, like old wood. From a great distance he heard Marah's smothered, furious curse, the quick catch of Stella's breath, the sullen breathing and stirring of the mob that was no longer sure what it wanted to do.

But all he could see was the pale, kind face of an old man smiling in the warm, blue night, and the dirty, sordid stones of Lhi.

A voice spoke, from beside the circle of armed men. Campbell heard it with some part of his brain. An old voice, dry and rustling, possessed of great dignity and great pain.

"My children," it said. "Have patience. Have faith that we, your leaders, have the good of Romany at heart."

Campbell looked with dead, dark eyes at the speaker, standing beside Tredrick. A small man in a robe of white fur. A Martian from one of the Polar Cities, frail, black-eyed grave, and gently strong.

"Remember the cold, the hunger, the uncertainty we have endured. We have a chance now for security and peace. Let there be no trouble, now or when the Spaceguard comes. Return to your quarters quietly."

"Trouble!" Marah's voice roared out across the hot, still air. Every face down there below turned up toward the balcony. Campbell saw Tredrick start, and speak to one of the guards. The guard went out, not too fast. Campbell swore under his breath, and his brain began to tick over again, swift and hard.

Marah thundered on, a bronze Titan in the sultry glare. His gorget, his yellow eyes, the bosses on his kilt held points of angry flame.

"You, Eran Mak, a Martian! Have you forgotten Kesh, and Balakar, and the Wells of Tamboina? Can you crawl to the Coalition like a *sindar* for the sake of the bones they throw you? You, Tredrick! You've sold us out. Since when have *latniks* been called to meddle in Romany's affairs?"

Tredrick's cold voice was quite steady. "The Kraylens are beyond reach, Marah. A revolt will get you nothing. Do you want blood on your hands?"

"My hand," said Marah softly. His hook made a burning, vicious arc in the hot light. "If there's blood on this, the Coalition spilled it when their Frontier Marshal lopped my sword-hand for raising it against him."

The mob stirred and muttered. And Campbell said switly, "Tredrick's right. But there's still a chance, if you want to take it."

Stella Moore put a hand on Marah's arm. "How?"

Tredrick was still pretending he hadn't seen Campbell, pretending there weren't men crawling through dark tunnels to trap him.

"It'll mean trouble. It may mean death or imprisonment. It's a million-to-one shot. You'd better give me up and forget it."

The point of Marah's hook pricked un-

der his jaw. "Speak quickly, little man!"

"Okay. Tell 'em to behave. Then get me out of here, fast!"

TREDERICK'S men knew their way around. A lot of gypsies, moreover, who weren't with Tredrick, joined the hunt for the *latnik*. They didn't want trouble with the Spaceguard.

Campbell stumbled through a maze of dark and stifling passages, holding Stella's hand and thinking of the Spaceguard ships sweeping closer. They were almost caught a dozen times, trying to get across Romany to the Fitts-Sothern.

The hunt seemed to be an outlet for the pent feelings of Romany. Campbell decided he would never go hunting again. And then, just above where his ship lay, they stepped into a trap.

They were in the Saturnian Quarter, in the hulk devoted to refugees from Titan. There were coolers working here. There was snow on the barren rocks, glimmering in weird light like a dark rainbow.

"The caves," said Stella Moore. "The Baraki."

There was an echoing clamor of voices all around them, footsteps clattering over metal and icy rock. They ran, breathing hard. There were some low cliffs, and a ledge, and then caves with queer blue-violet fires burning in them.

Creatures sat at the cave mouths. They were small, vague anthropoid, dead white, and unpleasantly rubbery. They were quite naked, and their single eyes were phosphorescent. Marah knelt.

"Little Fathers, we ask shelter in the name of freedom."

The shouts and the footsteps were closer. There was sweat on Campbell's forehead. One of the white things nodded slightly.

"No disturbance," it whispered. "We will have no disturbance of our thoughts. You may shelter, to stop this ugly noise."

"Thank you, Little Father." Marah plunged into the cave, with the others on his heels. Campbell snarled, "They'll come and take us!"

Stella's sullen lips smiled wolfishly. "No. Watch."

The cave, the violet fire were suddenly gone. There was a queer darkness, a small electric shiver across Campbell's skin. He started, and the girl whispered:

"Telekinesis. They've built a wall of force around us. On the outside it seems to be rock like the cave wall."

Marah moved, the bosses on his kilt clinking slightly. "When the swine are gone, there's a trap in this hulk leading down to the pipe where your ship is. Now tell us your plan."

Campbell made a short, bitter laugh. "Plan, hell. It's a gamble on a fixed wheel, and you're fools if you play it."

"And if we don't?"

"I'm going anyway. The Kraylens—well, I owe them something."

"Tell us the plan."

He did, in rapid nervous sentences, crouched behind the shielding wall of thought from those alien brains. Marah laughed softly.

"By the gods, little man, you should have been a Keshi!"

"I can think of a lot of things I should have been, said Campbell dourly. "Hey, there goes our wall."

"I can think of a lot of things I should have been," said Campbell dourly. "Hey, there goes our wall."

It hadn't been more than four minutes. Long enough for them to look and go away again. There might still be time, before the Spaceguard came.

There was, just. The getaway couldn't have been more perfectly timed. Campbell grinned, feeding power into his jets with exquisite skill.

He didn't have a Chinaman's chance. He thought probably the gypsies had less than that of coming through. But the Kraylens weren't going to rot in the slavepens of Lhi because of Roy Campbell.

Not while Roy Campbell was alive to think about it. And that, of course, might not be long.

He sent the Fitts-Sothern shooting toward the night side of Venus, in full view and still throttled down. The Spaceguard ships, nine fast patrol boats, took out after him, giving Romany the go-by. No use stopping there. No mistaking that lean, black ship, or whose hands were on the controls.

Campbell stroked the firing keys, and the Fitts-Sothern purred under him like a cat. Just for a second he couldn't see clearly.

"I'm sorry, old girl," he said. "But that's how it has to be."

IT was a beautiful chase. The Guard ships pulled every trick they knew, and they knew plenty. Campbell hunched over the keys, sweating, his dark face set in a grin that held no mirth. Only his hands moved, with nervous, delicate speed.

It was the ship that did it. They slapped tractors on her, and she broke them. They tried to encircle her, and she walked away from them. That slight edge of power, that narrow margin of speed, pulled Roy Campbell away from what looked like instant, easy capture.

He got into the shadow, and then the Spaceguard began to get scared as well as angry. They stopped trying to capture him. They unlimbered their blasters and went to work.

Campbell was breathing hard now, through his teeth. His dark skin was oiled with sweat, pulled tight over the bones and the ridges of muscle and the knotted veins. Deliberately, he slowed a little.

A bolt flamed past the starboard ports. He slowed still more, and veered the slightest bit. The Fitts-Sothern was alive under his hands.

He didn't speak when the next bolt struck her. Not even to curse. He didn't know he was crying until he tasted the salt on his lips. He got up out of the pilot's seat, and then he said one word:

"Judas!"

The follow-up of the first shot blasted the control panel. It knocked him back across the cockpit, seared and scorched from the fusing metal. He got up, somehow, and down the passage to the lock compartment. There was a lot of blood running from his cheek, but he didn't care.

He could feel the ship dying under him. The timers were shot. She was running away in a crazy, blind spiral, racking her plates apart.

He climbed into his vac-suit. It was a special one, black even to the helmet, with a super-powerful harness-rocket with a jet illegally baffled. He hoped his hands weren't too badly burned.

The ship checked brutally, flinging him hard into the bulkhead. Tractors! He clawed toward the lock, an animal whimper

in his throat. He hoped he wasn't going to be sick inside the helmet.

The panel opened. Air blasted him out, into jet-black space. The tiny spearing flame of the harness-rocket flickered briefly and died, unnoticed among the trailing fires of the derelict.

Campbell lay quite still in the blackened suit. The Spaceguard ships flared by, playing the Fitts-Sothern like a tarp on the lines of their tractor beams. Campbell closed his eyes and cursed them, slowly and without expression, until the tightness in his throat choked him off.

He let them get a long way off. Then he pressed the plunger of the rocket, heading down for the night-shrouded swamps of Tehara Province.

He retained no very clear memory of the trip. Once, when he was quite low, a spaceship blazed by over him, heading toward Lhi. There were still about eight hours' darkness over the swamps.

He landed, eventually, in a clearing he was pretty sure only he knew about. He'd used it before when he'd had stuff to fence in Lhi and wasn't sure who owned the town at the time. He'd learned to be careful about those things.

There was a ship there now, a smallish trader of the inter-lunar type. He stared at it, not really believing it was there. Then, just in time, he got the helmet off.

When the world stopped turning over, he was lying with his head in Stella Moore's lap. She had changed her tunic for plain spaceman's black, and it made her face look whiter and lovelier in its frame of black hair. Her lips were still sullen, and still red.

Campbell sat up and kissed them. He felt much better. Not good, but he thought he'd live. Stella laughed and said, "Well! You're recovering."

He said, "Sister, you're good medicine for anything." A hand which he recognized as Marah's materialized out of the indigo gloom. It had a flask in it. Campbell accepted it gladly. Presently the icy deadness around his stomach thawed out and he could see things better.

He got up, rather unsteadily, and fumbled for a cigarette. His shirt had been mostly blown and charred off of him and his hands hurt like hell. Stella gave

him a smoke and a light. He sucked it in gratefully and said:

"Okay, kids. Are we all ready?"

They were.

CAMPBELL led off. He drained the flask and was pleased to find himself firing on all jets again. He felt empty and relaxed and ready for anything. He hoped the liquor wouldn't wear off too soon.

There was a path threaded through the hammocks, the bogs and potholes and reeds and *liha*-trees. Only Campbell, who had made it, could have followed it. Remembering his blind stumbling in the mazes of Romany, he felt pleased about that. He said, rather smugly:

"Be careful not to slip. How'd you fix the getaway?"

Marah made a grim little laugh. "Romany was a madhouse, hunting for you. Some of the hot-headed boys started minor wars over policy on top of that. Tredrick had to use most of his men to keep order. Besides, of course, he thought we were beaten on the Kraylen question."

"There were only four men guarding the locks," said Stella. "Marah and a couple of the Paniki boys took care of them."

Campbell remembered the spaceship flashing toward Lhi. He told them about it. "Could be Tredrick, coming to supervise our defeat in person." Defeat! It was because he was a little tight, of course, but he didn't think anyone could defeat him this night. He laughed.

Something rippled out of the indigo night to answer his laughter. Something so infinitely sweet and soft that it made him want to cry, and then shocked him with the deep and iron power in it. Campbell looked back over his shoulder. He thought:

"Me, hell. These are the guys who'll do it, if it's done."

Stella was behind him. Beyond her was a thin, small man with four arms. He wore no clothing but his own white fur and his head was crowned with feathery antennae. Even in the blue night the antennae and the man's eyes burned living scarlet.

He came from Callisto and he carried in

his four hands a thing vaguely like a harp, only the strings were double banked. It was the harp that had spoken. Campbell hoped it would never speak against him.

Marah brought up the rear, swinging along with no regard for the burden he bore. Over his naked shoulder, Campbell could see the still white face of the Baraki from Titan, the Little Father who had saved them from the hunters. There were tentacles around Marah's big body like white ropes.

Four gypsies and a Public Enemy. Five little people against the Terro-Venusian Coalition. It didn't make sense.

A hot, slow wind stirred the *liha*-trees. Campbell breathed it in, and grinned. "What does?" he wondered, and stooped to part a tangle of branches. There was a stone-lined tunnel beyond.

"Here we go, children. Join hands and make like little mousies." He took Stella's hand in his left. Because it was Stella's he didn't mind the way it hurt. In his right, he held his gun.

V

HE led them, quickly and quietly, along the disused branch of an old drainage system that he had used so often as a private entrance. Presently they dropped to a lower level and the conduit system proper.

When the rains were on, the drains would be running full. Now they were only pumping seepage. They waded in pitch darkness, by-passed a pumping station through a side tunnel once used for cold storage by one of Lhi's cautious business men, and then found steep, slippery steps going up.

"Careful," whispered Campbell. He stopped them on a narrow ledge and stood listening. The Callistan murmured, with faint amusement:

"There is no one beyond."

Antennae over ears. Campbells grinned and found a hidden spring. "Lhi is full of these things," he said. "The boys used to keep their little wars going just for fun, and every smart guy had several bolt holes. Maps used to sell high."

They emerged in a very deep, very dark cellar. It was utterly still. Campbell

felt a little sad. He could remember when Martian Mak's was the busiest thieves' market in Lhi, and a man could hear the fighting even here. He smiled bitterly and led the way upstairs.

Presently they looked down on the main gate, the main square, and the slave pens of Lhi. The surrounding streets were empty, the buildings mostly dark. The Coalition had certainly cleaned up when it took over the town. It was horribly depressing.

Campbell pointed. "Reception committee. Tredrick radioed, anyway. One'll get you twenty he followed it up in person."

The gate was floodlighted over a wide area and there were a lot of tough-looking men with heavy-duty needle guns. In this day of anaesthetic charges you could do a lot of effective shooting without doing permanent damage. There were more lights and more men by the slave pens.

Campbell couldn't see much over the high stone walls of the pens. Vague movement, the occasional flash of a brilliant crest. He had known the Kraylens would be there. It was the only place in Lhi where you could imprison a lot of people and be sure of keeping them.

Campbell's dark face was cruel. "Okay," he said. "Let's go."

DOWN the stone steps to the entrance. Stella's quick breathing in the hot darkness, the rhythmic clink of the bosses on Marah's kilt. Campbell saw the eyes of the Callistan harper, glowing red and angry. He realized he was sweating. He had forgotten his burns.

Stella opened the heavy steel-sheathed door. Quietly, slowly. The Baraki whispered, "Put me down."

Marah set him gently on the stone floor. He folded in upon himself, tentacles around white, rubbery flesh. His single eye burned with a cold phosphorescence.

He whispered, "Now."

The Callistan harper went to the door. Reflected light painted him briefly, white fur and scarlet crest and outlandish harp, and the glowing, angry eyes.

He vanished. Out of nowhere the harp began to sing.

Through the partly opened door Campbell had a clear view of the

square and the gate. In all that glare of light on empty stone nothing moved. And yet the music rippled out.

The guards. Campbell could see the startled glitter of their eyeballs in the light. There was nothing to shoot at. The harping was part of the night, as all-enveloping and intangible.

Campbell shivered. A pulse beat like a trip-hammer under his jaw. Stella's voice came to him, a faint breath out of the darkness.

"The Baraki is shielding him with thought. A wall of force that turns the light."

The edge of the faint light touched her cheek, the blackness of her hair. Marah crouched beyond her, motionless. His hook glinted dully, curved and cruel.

They were getting only the feeble backwash of the harping. The Callistan was aiming his music outward. Campbell felt it sweep and tremble, blend with the hot slow wind and the indigo sky.

It was some trick of vibrations, some diabolical thrusting of notes against the brain like fingers, to press and control. Something about the double-banked strings thrumming against each other under the cunning of four skilled hands. But it was like witchcraft.

"The Harp of Dagda," whispered Stella Moore, and the Irish music in her voice was older than time. The Scot in Campbell answered it.

Somewhere outside a man cursed, thickly, like one drugged with sleep and afraid of it. A gun went off with a sharp slapping sound. Some of the guards had fallen down.

The harp sang louder, throbbing along the grey stones. It was the slow wind, the heat, the deep blue night. It was sleep.

The floodlights blazed on empty stone, and the guards slept.

The Baraki sighed and shivered and closed his eye. Campbell saw the Callistan harper standing in the middle of the square, his scarlet crest erect, striking the last thrumming note.

Campbell straightened, catching his breath in a ragged sob. Marah picked up the Baraki. He was limp, like a tired child. Stella's eyes were glistening and

strange. Campbell went out ahead of them.

It was a long way across the square, in the silence and the glaring lights. Campbell thought the harp was a nice weapon. It didn't attract attention because everyone who heard it slept.

He flung back the three heavy bars of the slave gate. The pain of his burned hands jarred him out of the queer mood the harping and his Celtic blood had put on him. He began to think again.

"Hurry!" he snarled at the Kraylens. "Hurry up!" They came pouring out of the gate. Men, women with babies, little children. Their crests burned in the sullen glare.

Campbell pointed to Marah. "Follow him." They recognized him, tried to speak, but he cursed them on. And then an old man said,

"My son."

Campbell looked at him, and then down at the stones. "For God's sake, Father, hurry." A hand touched his shoulder gently. He looked up again, and grinned. He couldn't see anything. "Get the hell on, will you?" Somebody found the switch and the nearer lights went out.

The hand pressed his shoulder, and was gone. He shook his head savagely. The Kraylens were running now, toward the house. And then, suddenly, Marah yelled.

Men were running into the square. Eight or ten of them, probably the body-guard of the burly grey-haired man who led them. Beside the grey-haired man was Tredrick, Overchief of the Terran Quarter of Romany.

THEY were startled. They hadn't been expecting this. Campbell's battle-trained eye saw that. Probably they had been making a routine tour of inspection and just stumbled onto the crash-out.

Campbell fired, from the hip. Anaesthetic needles sprayed into the close-packed group. Two of them went down. The rest scattered, dropping flat. Campbell wished there had been time to kill the gate lights. At least, the shadows made shooting tricky.

He bent over and began to run, guarding the rear of the Kraylen's line. Stella,

in the cover of the doorway, was laying down a methodical wall of needles. Campbell grinned.

Some of the Kraylens caught it and had to be carried. That slowed things down. Campbell's gun clicked empty. He shoved in another clip, cursing his burned fingers. A charge sang by him, close enough to stir his hair. He fired again, blanketing the whole sector where the men lay. He wished he could blow Tredrick's head off.

The Kraylens were vanishing into the house. Marah and the Callistan had gone ahead, leading them. Campbell groaned. Speed was what they needed. Speed. A child, separated from his mother in the rush, knelt on the stones and shrieked. Campbell picked him up and ran on.

Enemy fire was slackening. Stella was doing all right. The last of the Kraylens shoved through the door. Campbell bounded up the steps. Stella got up off her belly and smiled at him. Her eyes shone. They were halfway through the door when the cold voice said behind them,

"There are lethal needles in my gun. You had better stop."

Campbell turned slowly. His face was wooden. Tredrick stood at the bottom of the steps. He must have crawled around the edge of the square, where the shadows were thick under the walls.

"Drop your gun, Campbell. And you, Stella Moore."

Campbell dropped it. Tredrick might be bluffing about those needles. But a Mickey at this stage of the game would be just as fatal. Stella's gun clattered beside him. She didn't say anything, but her face was coldly murderous.

Tredrick said evenly, "You might as well call them back, Campbell. You led them in, but you're not going to lead them out."

It was funny, Campbell thought, how a man's voice could be so cold when his eyes had fire in them. He said sullenly.

"Okay, Tredrick. You win. But what's the big idea behind this?"

Tredrick's face might have been cut from granite, except for the feral eyes. "I was born on Romany. I froze and starved in those rotten hulks. I hated it. I hated the darkness, the loneliness, the

uncertainty. But when I said I hated it, I got a beating.

"Everybody else thought it was worth it. I didn't. They talked about freedom, but Romany was a prison to me. I wanted to grow, and I was stifled inside it. Then I got an idea.

"If I could rule Romany and make a treaty with the Coalition, I'd have money and power. And I could fix it so no more kids would be brought up that way, cold and hungry and scared.

"Marah opposed me, and then the Kraylens became an issue." Tredrick smiled, but there was no mirth or softness in it. "It's a good thing. The Coalition can take of Marah and you others who were mixed up in this. My way is clear."

Stella Moore said softly between her teeth, "They'll never forgive you for turning Romany people over to the *latniks*. There'll be war."

Tredrick nodded soberly. "No great change is made without bloodshed. I'm sorry for that. But Romany will be happier."

"We don't ask to be happy. We only ask to be free."

Campbell said wearily, "Stella, take the kid, will you?" He held out the little Kraylen, droopy and quiet now. She looked at him in quick alarm. His feet were spread but not steady, his head sunk forward.

She took the child. Campbell's knees sagged. One seared arm in a tattered green sleeve came up to cover his face. The other groped blindly along the wall. He dropped, rather slowly, to his knees.

The groping hand fell across the gun by Stella's foot. In one quick sweep of motion Campbell got it, threw it, and followed it with his own body.

THE gun missed, but it came close enough to Tredrick's face to make him move his head. The involuntary muscular contraction of his whole body spoiled his aim. The charge went past Campbell into the wall.

They crashed down together on the stones. Campbell gripped Tredrick's wrist, knew he couldn't hold it, let go with one hand and slashed backward with his elbow at Tredrick's face.

The gun let off again, harmlessly, Tred-

rick groaned. His arm was weaker. Campbell thrashed over and got his knee on it. Tredrick's other fist was savaging his already tortured body.

Campbell brought his fist down into Tredrick's face. He did it twice, and wept and cursed because he was suddenly too weak to lift his arm again. Tredrick was bleeding, but far from out. His gun was coming up again. He didn't have much play, but enough.

Campbell set his teeth. He couldn't even see Tredrick, but he swung again. He never knew whether he connected or not.

Something thrummed past his head. He couldn't say he heard it. It was more like feeling. But it was something deadly, and strange. Tredrick didn't make a sound. Campbell knew suddenly that he was dead.

He got up, very slow, shaking and cold. The Callistan harper stood in the doorway. He was lowering his hands, and his eyes were living coals. He didn't say anything. Neither did Stella. But she laughed, and the child stirred and whimpered in her arms.

Campbell went to her. She looked at him with queer eyes and whispered, "I called him with my mind. I knew he'd kill."

He took her face in his two hands. "Listen, Stella. You've got to lead them back. You've got to touch my mind with yours and let me guide you that way, back to the ship."

Her eyes widened sharply. "But you can come. He's dead. You're free now."

"No." He could feel her throat quiver under his hands. Her blood was beating. So was his. He said harshly.

"You fool, do you think they'll let you get away with this? You're tackling the Coalition. They can't afford to look silly. They've got to have a scapegoat, something to save face!

"Romany, so far, is beyond planetary control. Slap your tractors on her, tow her out. Clear out to Saturn if you have to. Nobody saw the Callistan. Nobody saw anybody but me and the Kraylens and an unidentifiable somebody up here on the porch. Nobody, that is, but Tredrick, and he won't talk. Do you understand?"

She did, but she was still rebellious. Her sullen lips were angry, her eyes bright with tears and challenging. "But you, Roy!"

He took his hands away. "Damn you, woman! If I hide out on Romany I bring you into Spaceguard jurisdiction. I'll be trapped, and Romany's last chance to stay free will be gone."

She said stubbornly, "But you can get away. There are ships."

"Oh, sure. But the Kraylens are there. You can't hide them. The Coalition will search Romany. They'll ask questions. I tell you they've got to have a goat!"

He was really weak, now. He hoped he could hold out. He hoped he wouldn't do anything disgraceful. He turned away from her, looking out at the square. Some of the guards were beginning to stir.

"Will you go?" he said. "Will you get to hell out?"

She put her hand on him. "Roy . . ."

He jerked away. His dark face was set and cruel. "Do you have to make it harder? Do you think I want to rot on Phobos in their stinking mines, with shackles on my feet?" He swung around, challenging her with savage eyes.

"How else do you think Romany is going to stay free? You can't go on playing cat and mouse with the big shots this way. They're getting sick of it. They'll pass laws and tie you down. Somebody's got to spread Romany all over the Solar System. Somebody's got to pull a publicity campaign that'll make the great dumb public sit up and think. If public opinion's with you, you're safe."

He smiled. "I'm big news, sister. I'm Roy Campbell. I can splash your lousy little mess of tin cans all over with glamour, so the great dumb public won't let a hair of your little head be hurt. If

you want to, you can raise a statue to me in the Council hall.

"And now will you for God's sake go?"

SHE wasn't crying. Her gray eyes had lights in them. "You're wonderful, Roy. I didn't realize how wonderful."

He was ashamed, then. "Nuts. In my racket you don't expect to get away with it forever. Besides, I'm an old dog. I know my way around. I have a little dough saved up. I won't be in for long."

"I hope not," she said. "Oh, Roy, it's so stupid! Why do Earthmen have to change everything they lay their hands on?"

He looked at Tredrick, lying on the stones. His voice came slow and sombre.

"They're building, Stella. When they're finished they'll have a big, strong, prosperous world extending all across the planets, and the people who belong to that world will be happy.

"But before you can build you have to grade and level, destroy the things that get in your way. We're the things—the tree-stumps and the rocks that grew one way and can't be changed.

"They're building, Stella. They're growing. You can't stop that. In the end, it'll be a good thing, I suppose. But right now, for us . . ."

He broke off. He thrust her roughly inside and locked the steel-sheathed door. "You've got to go now."

It was dark, and hot. The Kraylen child whimpered. He could feel Stella close to him. He found her lips and kissed them.

He said, "So long, kid. And about that statue. You'd better wait till I come back to pose for it."

His voice became a longing whisper. "And I'll be back!" he promised.



PS's Feature Flash

FLASHING you the highlights on two of the men you've met in preceding issues—those cosmic-minded writers who help to nourish Planet Stories and the Vizigraph.

THE CORN PONE KID!

The Editor recently bowled me over with the jolting request that I submit a short—very short, I believe he put it—résumé of my life. I have very few vivid memories of my early existence, except those of my travels through thirteen states and three Canadian provinces. I have dunked my dogs in the Great Lakes, and tried to sell water that I claimed to have scooped up at Niagara Falls.

At present, I am imprisoned in a local grocery store, the boss of which must have never read about those "minimum wage laws." I stretch two and a half inches from six foot—it says here on my sugar ration card—and scale up at 132. I am thin, light complected, with a shock of hair that some people insist is red, though I proclaim vociferously that it is not!

I spend my spare time hunting in the thick woods hereabouts or fishing in the bayous. And don't believe what they say about Louisiana's swamps! I can't think of a decent-sized one within a half-block of here!

The rest of my time is spent fondly dreaming of the day I shall turn pro, while hacking out stf yarns by the hundreds. Other odd moments are spent in the sincere adoration and avid absorption of all forms of fantasy. I think that we of s-f have really got something here.

Manly Wade Wellman and Frank Paul, respectively, top the writing and art lines of stf, with PLANET's Leydenfrost giving stiff competition in the latter. I sincerely think PS is the best mag on the market. And in view of that, Mr. Editor, you wouldn't wanta buy an astonishing 16,000-word novelet of thrilling adventure beyond the far-flung galaxies, would ya?

ALFRED E. MAXWELL.

Maxwell is really in there, pitching, isn't he? We ask him to give us a short synopsis of his life, and he spreads a lot of words around, with practically no details—and ends up by trying to sell us a 'pig in a poke.'

Sure we'd like to buy a good sixteen thousand worder; we're a wide-open market for the best of science fiction with a *different* twist to it. Send it along, Maxwell, so that we can have a look.

But aside from that, we think this new idea of ours is a honey. Authors and artists have been getting write-ups for years; now some of the readers get a break, too. We're going to feature more of them in future issues of PLANET

STORIES, so that science-fictioners can get a better conception of some of the other contributors to the Vizigraph.

How about helping us do that job? Drop us a note, giving the name of the writer, artist, or Vizifanner whom you would like to read about. We'll carry on from there, via Uncle Sam's Postal system, and bring to you exactly what you want to know.

Of course, we'll spring a surprise from time to time, just to make this one of the more interesting departments of PLANET STORIES, along with Gifford's Cartoons, the now-famous Vizigraph, and a couple of others we're working on at this time.

But rather than go into that, let's have a few autobiographical words from that lad who seems to get in everybody's hair, the boy who goes smilingly and laughingly through life, the letter-writer whose missives bring merriment and plenty of imitators. You've guessed it already; it's—

OUR LITTLE GENIUS!

To begin with—I was born at a very young age. In fact, at that time, I was the youngest member of my family.

I first said "Ga Ga" in a quaint old neighborhood called Flatbush. I grew up in Flatbush, and will probably die—still a faithful Brooklyn Bum.

In my blossoming childhood I had two crowning, unattainable ambitions: at three I wanted to be a shoeshine boy; at four—I had matured—a street cleaner. When I heard of the Civil Service exams for the latter, I quickly, and decidedly, changed my mind.

Passing out—of what is commonly known as childhood, I became that noted personality;—the Happy Genius.

How?

Well, one day, about a year ago, someone truthfully remarked that I resembled a genius, while sitting busily at the typewriter. Someone else added sardonically, "All geniuses are sad."

A third person, my savior, announced with the voice of deliverance, "Aha, but he is a Happy Genius!"

So here I am!

Three years ago, by a joyful mistake, I was introduced to a copy of the old Future Fiction. It contained a novel, Laughter Out of Space, by Dennis Clive. That story sold me on science-fiction.

A month later, I bought the fourth issue of PLANET, and picked up one, two, and three, second hand. The Ultimate Salient sold me on your mag.

My hobby is reading and writing (?) science-fiction, but, frankly, sometimes I'd rather play a nice hard baseball game.

Height—average.

Color of eyes—An heroic steely gray.

Age—No worry about the draft getting me.

Truthfully, I am a successfully budding author—sadly, I am the only one who knows it!

In closing—no power on Earth could draw me away from Science Fiction and PLANET.

MILT LESSER.

STAR OF PANADUR

BY ALBERT de PINA AND HENRY HASSE

On the barren wastes of Europa, two marooned men fought, battling over an animal whose life one had saved. There was no fear in the animal's eyes—only the gleam of a weird unearthly knowledge that foretold the way the fight would end.



Illustration by Lubbers

HUGH! Hugh! There's life here . . . look . . . look at this! Found it in a cavern!" The shrill voice was exultant and gleeful.

5—Planet Stories—Mar.

Hugh Betancourt quickly rose from the fire he tended, and turned startled eyes on the furry bundle Jim Brannigan grasped firmly by the scruff of its neck. At first,

nothing was visible but the liquid sheen of the thing's silvery fur; but as Jim roughly thrust it out, Hugh gave an involuntary gasp of surprise. The creature's small, triangular face was nothing less than beautiful! Its eyes were soft and large and luminous, like beryls, set wide apart. Above its broad forehead a short mane of silver fur, beginning in a widow's peak, fell back cloud-soft and shimmering. It was about three feet tall, slim, furred to the throat-line; a strange biped with slender arms and six-fingered hands.

"Damn it, Jim, go easy! You've all but strangled it! Here give it to me." Hugh extended his arms.

"Don't let it get away from you, it's faster than a jack-rabbit," Jim cautioned, extending the ham-sized hand in which he held the creature. "Luckily, I surprised it in a sort of cave-like gully, where it couldn't escape. It means food, Hugh! Lots of food if we can find more of these animals!"

For a moment, the incipient madness of many days on this hellish satellite engulfed Hugh in a wave of nausea. He remembered the gravity-screen tearing from its pivots, and the spaceship caught in the tremendous pull of Jupiter; the last desperate try at the controls, and then the tiny dark bulk of Europa curving up to meet them headlong. There had been cheerless days of biting cold when the tiny satellite faced the distant pallid sun. There had been nights that were like a canto out of Dante, as they were bathed in Jupiter's red cold-glow. More recently, and for more reason, Hugh remembered the dwindling food supply which had now quite vanished.

"Yes, food," Hugh echoed Jim's words in a hoarse whisper. He grasped the soft warm body in his hands with gentle firmness. The creature did not try to escape, it lay limp and inert with its eyes closed. "But—but food doesn't quite solve our problem. Unless we can find some oxide crystal to alloy in the portable smelter, we're sunk. Jim, that jagged hole in the prow isn't going to repair itself!"

Jim's ordinarily red face grew redder with anger, until there was no distinguishing between the color of his hair and that of his face. "All right," he snarled, "so we need the oxide! For days we've been

searching all over this cold hell for some, and where are we? I still maintain our immediate problem is food!"

"Yes, yes, food," Hugh murmured. Why, he wondered vaguely, was he so reluctant to talk about it while he held this limp warm creature in his arms? He looked down at it again, and was startled to find himself staring into its extraordinary eyes. Limpid, brilliant, full of a semi-human intelligence now, they were scarcely a foot from Hugh's own eyes—and for a single instant Hugh had the crazy idea that they were filled with a strange fixity of purpose, almost as if it were trying to convey something to him there in the appalling silence of Europa.

A SUDDEN cold came over Hugh that was not the cold of Europa. It took quite an effort for him to tear his own eyes away, then he laughed and whispered inquiringly of himself, "Am I going crazy? Maybe this place is beginning to get me at last. For a moment I thought. . . ."

He shrugged uneasily.

"What are you mumbling?" Jim demanded irritably, his huge form bulking against the bizarre jagged landscape. "I'd have slit that thing's throat and skinned it already? Here, give it—"

"Wait, you fool!" Hugh's ordinarily thoughtful, hazel eyes were bright now and hard, as he drew back from Jim's grasping hand. "We're the first to find life on Europa, the only ones to see what inhabits it; and all you can think of is your damned stomach. You can't be starved, you ate this morning!"

"Yes, and that was the last of it," Jim snarled. His face was ugly now and purposeful. "Well, I'm hungry again, and now that I've found these European kangaroos I aim to be fed and kept warm. Notice how fine that pelt is?"

Hugh had noticed, indeed. He had noticed even more, the peculiar sheen and aliveness of it, as if it were surcharged with a definite energy. As he held the creature close, a warm feeling of well-being slowly diffused through him. And something, *something* like a faint echo in his brain was like a shadowy background to his thoughts. Yes, he knew; here was food and here was warm fur against the

eternal cold of the satellite. But their space suits protected them in a measure against the cold, and if necessary they could subsist a few more days without eating. Perhaps by then they would find some of the rare crystal oxide, enough to repair their ship and leave. Perhaps. . . .

It was a long chance, almost an impossibility, and Hugh knew it; but now, also, he knew what he must do.

He did it. With a distasteful glance at his now openly-belligerent partner, he stepped forward. Then with unexpected suddenness he lurched as if he'd lost his footing on the rough terrain. He stumbled sideways. He twisted and fell deliberately to the ground. He opened his arms wide.

It was rather clumsily done, Hugh realized that instantly.

FOR an infinitesimal moment, the furry creature sprawled too, immobile, where Hugh's momentum had flung it. It gazed with an uncanny intensity into the Earthman's eyes. Then in a single, graceful leap of incredible speed, it was gone into the growing red haze, as night came on and Jupiter's macabre glow shattered the surrounding crags.

"You fool, you utter damned fool!" Jim Brannigan screamed, livid with rage. "You did that deliberately!" Then his huge body was launching at Hugh, the great heavy fists lashing out with the force of pistons. Hugh, lighter but more lithe, had only time to roll to one side and regain his feet. Then he was ducking the barrage of blows, evading the murderous rushes, allowing Jim to tire out of his frantic rage. Only once did Hugh strike a blow, a terrific lashing left into the other's solar plexus that doubled the red giant into helpless nausea.

"That's all we need now," Hugh said with a measure of calm, "to maim or cripple each other. We'll never get back that way. Come out of it, man! What we've got to do is get that oxide!"

"What we've got to get is food! You let the only food go that we had!" Jim Brannigan began to weep, in great racking sobs.

Merely nerves, temporary hysterical reaction, Hugh decided. Jim wasn't really hungry yet; he was only an-

ticipating the event. When he got over this, he would sulk. When he got over that, he would start scheming, with that unpredictable mind of his. Knowing the man, Hugh decided to watch him carefully from now on.

He took Jim's arm and they walked over to the crippled spacer, lying like a great silver bug with its nose smashed, in the stark hollow of this ravine. They entered. Hugh walked forward and examined the thin sheet of beryllium that patched the ship's wounded hull for the night. He went astern and turned on the generators at quarter speed, to provide a miserly warmth. On his way back to the inner cabin he stopped and peered out of a port-hole at a now familiar scene: Europa's dark mad terrain becoming swiftly suffused with Jupiter's red.

He entered the cabin, glanced at Jim and saw that he was now in the sulking stage. The hunger problem pressed insistently upon Hugh's own mind. That little furry creature! In spite of hunger, he was still glad he had let it escape; but damn it, he wished he knew why! Hugh thrust the problem from him and glanced again at Jim. Soon Jim's mind, bordering upon necessity, would begin scheming.

Hugh knew the man. . . .

Despite an utter weariness, Hugh didn't sleep through the rest of that short night. His mind, alert and hunger-clear, wrestled with the problem of survival in this mad world of snow and silence. In the opposite beryllium-mesh bunk, Jim snored fitfully, as though rehearsing in his sleep some violence in his mind.

Hugh arose slowly, and donned with caution the stiff, heavy space-suit as protection against the cold. Adjusting the helmet and oxygen tank, he opened the airlock and ventured out into the Dantesque magnificence of Europa's night. The red opaline haze had the quality of a waking nightmare. The great snow crystals were drifting lazily again, appearing now like livid blotches of ruby. Jupiter loomed like a great gloating nemesis across the entire ragged horizon.

Hugh didn't know where he was going. No pre-determined plan guided his footsteps. There was only a great urgency to leave the spacer and go somewhere and seek. . . . Hugh stopped, brushed the

brittle red snow from his face-plate and wished he could wipe the sweat from his brow. Go where, and seek what? Seek oxide crystals of course, he told himself; but there was something else now, something strange and powerful that gripped a part of his mind and urged him on like the fear of madness.

He stumbled on for hours it seemed, until he was in the fearsome cavern country. Here the stark, heaven-rearing cliffs were honeycombed with tortuous caves and gullies and immense grottoes. He entered a low gallery-like cave that wound in and downward into the mass of a gigantic cliff.

Now an unshakable inner dread plucked at his mind and gripped his throat as he tried to check his precipitate descent, but couldn't. He no longer seemed possessed of any volition of his own. He shrugged fatalistically; then he felt a thrill of excitement, as he noticed a faint luminescence of the surrounding walls. This light increased as he descended deeper and deeper through widening passages. Then at last, at the end of a turn a burst of radiance met his eyes.

He was in a grotto of titanic proportions. The substance of its walls and distant ceiling gave it the gentle radiance of a sunless day. But it was a glaucous radiance, ineffably green as the light beneath the waters of a shallow sea.

"Holy, roaring comets!" Hugh swore aloud as he stood there quite still, staring. "By all the Red-Tails on Venus, it's oxide—all of it!" His voice echoed inside his helmet and beat against his eardrums.

Yes, it was beryllium oxide gleaming at his feet, crystalline and powdery just as men had found it for the first time a century before in the desert wastes of Arizona. The entire floor of the grotto was covered with it as far as his widening eyes could see. He bent in a frenzy of joy and scooped up whole handfuls. He half-babbled over it like a delirious King Midas. He let it trickle fondly through his fingers in a little glittering flood. Saved! Now they could repair the ship and return! Return to Earth and tell of this!

Not until several minutes later did Hugh begin to wonder how he had come here. With a rush of apprehension, he remembered a cold and tenacious something that had seized a part of his mind. But now it

was gone and he felt strangely limp and tired.

He leaped to his feet. Staring around, he wondered if he could retrace his steps back to the space-ship. And in that precise moment he felt his mind seized again with a sort of frantic suddenness. There was no mistaking that very clear warning of, "*Danger! Danger!*"

But he could not have acted in time. Even as he spun around he was unaware of the shadow that lengthened behind him, until it loomed very near and a part of it lashed out. Not until the last split second, did Hugh glimpse wild and red-streaked eyes in vivid contrast to the grim and purposeful face behind a helmet plate. Then the part of the shadow that was Jim Brannigan's arm, holding something massive like a rock, completed the swift arc and struck.

A sun exploded within Hugh's head. Livid flames engulfed him, consumed him, he tried to cry out but couldn't; then the sun fragments cruelly withdrew, leaving him helpless in a cold blackness through which he fell like a plummet to ultimate extinction.

JIM BRANNIGAN stood there tensely for a moment, looking at the man he had struck down. But only for a moment. His lips quirked into a tight smile, and his exulting keen eyes took in the cave's glittering expanse.

"A fortune in oxide crystals," he murmured, "an inexhaustible mine! And he thought he could cheat me out of it, keep it from me! Good thing I followed him. Serves him right if I've killed him."

He didn't seem too worried about it, and he didn't look at Hugh's body again as he started gathering in the rare crystals.

"Europa's uncharted, I can claim-deed this whole region! And probably there's another fortune in furs," he added as he suddenly remembered the creature he had captured. Already, in his greedy mind's eye, he saw himself a tycoon, the oxide king, with a corner on furs finer than anything ever seen on Earth, Venus or Mars.

This he saw. But what he didn't see were the myriad pairs of burning beryl eyes peering at him from concealed openings in the opaline walls. He was not aware of the increasing energy potential

being generated by a growing legion of furred bodies in surrounding caverns, as more and more Panadurs pressed forward to peer out at him. Around Jim Brannigan now the frigid atmosphere began to rise. At first it was pleasantly cool, then warm, and warmer, until it became suffocating.

Still the silvery-furred Panadurs, in utter silence, generated heat as their mental forces grew and deliberately united into a single, increasing potential. Their fur stood erect, an angry violet-silver now, crackling a little with the intensity of the effort. As a single unit, they waited, each furry Panadur now touching the other in a living, livid chain of cumulative power.

Jim Brannigan ceased his gloating and awoke at last to an indefinable danger. Swiftly he arose and whirled toward the entrance, peering back over his shoulder at the danger he could feel, that he knew was there, but could not see.

But already it was too late. Now that increasing energy potential, grown and united into a single purposeful weapon, was being aimed. Jim Brannigan hadn't taken three steps toward the entrance when suddenly, silently, intangible as thought, but infinitely more devastating, it was released! As the devastating bolt struck him, Brannigan collapsed into a crumpled heap, shattered, silent . . . inert.

FOR hours that lengthened into days, Hugh Betancourt lay unconscious. His blanched features were lifeless and cold, there in the same cavern where Brannigan's treacherous blow had toppled him into oblivion.

Then, as a hint of color returned to his cheeks, and a slow strength began to course through his limbs, he regained moments of lucidness; but they were brief and he always lapsed back into delirium.

With the wavering unreality of a mirage, vague memories of those strange furred creatures, encircling him, surged into his mind; they seemed to have pressed close to him, holding hands. Strange! They were joined by a line of their fellow Panadurs to a similar circle surrounding a huddled figure a short distance away. But that was crazy! And Hugh's mind would slide back into the darkness again.

Once, he thought one of the Panadurs

came and placed its exquisite face against his chest, and held it there a long time, as if it were testing the Earthman's metabolism. This seemed so very real! Hugh was aware of an almost crackling silence and the cave ceiling's unchanging luminescence.

Still a third time, he imagined that a silver-gray Panadur, almost stately in his measured movements, came over to him with a gleaming jewel in his hand. It was an inch in diameter and the same color as the creature's eyes, a pale luscious green. Majestically, despite his diminutive size, he placed the stone over Hugh's heart. Instantly the gem flamed with the effulgence of a glowing star. The Panadur seemed satisfied.

When at last Hugh Betancourt regained full consciousness, and was able to sit up and stare around him, he realized that he had not been a prey to delusions. Although he still felt weak, his mind was crystal clear. Here was the circle of Panadurs still enclosing him. *But the circle had grown*, as if a great many more creatures had joined the uncanny circle in an ecstasy to be in close proximity to the tall earthman. Their furry, vibrating bodies pressed close to him, and their strange, fragile hands touched his wrists and throat and face, as they seemed to caress him with infinite gentleness.

Waves of sheer energy seemed to envelop him and penetrate to the deepest recesses of his being, as if by some strange alchemy, these alien creatures of stark Europa were transmitting to him the elemental life force itself.

But strangely enough, that other circle of Panadurs enclosing that huddled figure over there, in the semi-gloom, was contracting as it grew smaller and smaller, day by day. Hugh ceased to wonder about all this as he lay back to gather his strength. He fell into a peaceful sleep.

THIS time when he awoke, it was a profound sense of well-being far beyond anything he'd ever known. It permeated his body the exhilarating glow of a rare Venusian wine.

One thing, however, still eluded him. He sat up and felt his head where the blow had fallen. He remembered only the excruciating pain in the microscopic in-

stant before the rushing darkness came. There was nothing there now. Not even a scar.

"A rock from the ceiling must have fallen," he thought. "My luck to be standing right under it."

"It was not a rock!"

The thought came into his mind clear and unmistakable. Then Hugh found himself staring into the beryl-green eyes of the stately keeper of the jewel. Like a flash, the scene he had not witnessed, of Jim Brannigan stalking him from the space-ship, the murderous blow and the vision of himself lying in a pool of blood on the glittering expanse of oxide crystals, was etched into his mind by the telepathic power of the Panadur.

"We know you would have spared us," came the uncanny stream of thought. "Your companion captured me when I, as the chosen leader, went to investigate your arrival. But you deliberately let me go when it meant your own life. But he, whose fur was like the angry spot of the greater world, would have destroyed us. We read his thoughts."

"Telepathy, by Mercury's molten heart!" Hugh exclaimed in awe, dimly sensing the prodigious mental power of the being. "And we were going to eat one of them!" He stared around the cave, remembering Jim Brannigan, and it was apparent that Hugh still didn't realize all that had occurred. "I suppose that murdering, mercenary scum's left long ago with the ship, and here I'm stranded! If I ever get my hands on him—"

"That you will never do."

Hugh was aware of the Panadur again, and he saw the shadowy copy of a smile flit over its features.

"We gave you of our energy," the shimmering silver being transmitted. "And we gave you of another life that you might have yours again. It was but justice!"

"What? What other life?" And then Hugh tottered where he stood, swayed sickeningly, as the entire meaning burst upon him. He remembered the scenes in his delirium, when two circles, one of which enclosed him and another that enclosed a huddled figure, had been formed

by Panadurs, while a living chain of the brooding creatures joined the two circles together. He shuddered as he remembered that his own circle seemed to expand as the other inexorably *contracted!*

"There was no choice!" The limpid thought-message from the Panadur impinged upon Hugh's mind. "We know the secret of the release of electronic energy by the disassociation of electronic and neutronic balance in the atomic scale. We reverse the vibration of matter and through magnetic means draw a steady stream of energy—pure energy from matter in whatever state. In your case, we simply transmitted the energy content of the red-furred one to you."

HUGH hardly dared to glance in the direction where the huddled figure had been, but with an effort of will he steeled himself against the growing nausea and resolutely walked over to the thing.

He felt his sanity reeling.

He was brought back to sanity by the Panadur, who, all along, had communicated with him. Its fragile, six-fingered hand was extended, palm-upwards and lying on it was a gleaming jewel.

"Take it and go!" The message came with majestic power, yet there was a world of kindness in it. "Go back to your ship. You will find its damage repaired. We have done that for you. With the star of Panadur you will be guided back as my thought centers upon it. On the day when you return to our world, gaze upon the star and you will be helped to find again and gather the crystals you seek. *But none from your planet must ever see us again, or even hear of us!*"

"I promise!" Hugh exclaimed fervently, remembering Jim Brannigan's intent and that there were many men like Brannigan.

Slowly Hugh left the cave, clutching the dazzling gem through which he could feel a directed flow of thought. He was still a little dazed at this miracle. He wanted to laugh and to cry. But the flooding realization that his ship, repaired and ready, awaited him; that he was free to leave this craggy hell of crimson shadows and arctic nights, left only a vast, singing quiet in his soul, too deep for tears.

The Flame Breathers

By RAY CUMMINGS



Vulcan was a doom-world. One expedition had mysteriously disappeared, and now another was following in its path—searching for the unknown menace that stalked Vulcan's shadowed gorges.

I WRITE this narrative, not with the idea of contributing any additional scientific data to the discovery of Vulcan, but to put upon the record the real

facts of our truly-amazing space voyage.

The newscasters have hailed me as a modern Columbus. Surely I would not want to appear ungracious, unappreciative

of all the applause that has been heaped upon me. But I do not deserve it. I did my job for my employers. The Society sent me to make a landing upon Vulcan—if the little planet existed. I found that it does exist; it was exactly where I was told it ought to be. I carried out my instructions, returned and made my report. There is no great heroism in that.

So I am writing the facts of what happened. Just a bald, factual account, without the imaginative trimmings. The real hero of the discovery of Vulcan was young Jan Holden. He did his job—did it well—and he did something just a little extra.

I'm Bob Grant, which of course you have guessed by now. Peter Torrence—the third member of our party—is in the Federal Prison up the Hudson. I had to turn him in.

We were given one of the smaller types of the Bentley—T-44—an alumite cylindrical hull, double-shelled, with the Erentz pressure-current circulating in it. It was a modern, well-equipped little spaceship. In its thirty-foot length of double-decked interior we three were entirely comfortable. . . . The voyage, past the orbit of Venus and then Mercury as we headed directly for the Sun—using the Sun's full attraction—was amazingly swift and devoid of incident beyond normal spaceflight routine. Much of our time was spent in the little forward control turret—the “greenhouse,” where below, above and to the sides the great glittering abyss of the firmament is spread out in all its amazing glory.

Vulcan, if it existed, would be almost directly behind the Sun now. We had no possible chance of sighting it, we knew, even when, heading inward, we cut the orbit of Mercury. Torrence, almost from the start of the trip, figured we should follow into the attraction of Mercury which was then far to one side.

“From that angle we'll see Vulcan just that much sooner,” he argued.

“They told me to head straight in, to twenty-nine million miles,” I said. “And that's what I'm doing—obeying orders.”

I held our plotted course. Torrence never ceased grumbling about it, and I must admit there was a lot of sense in his argument. He is a big fellow—burly, heavy-set and about my own height, which is six feet one. He had close-clipped hair

and a square, heavy face. He's just turned thirty, I understand. That's five years older than I—and I was in charge. Perhaps that irked him. He is unquestionably a headstrong fellow; self-confident. But he obeyed orders, though with grumbling. And as a mechanical technician—no one could do better. He knew the technical workings of the little ship inside out.

“We follow orders?” young Jan Holden said. “And when we reach twenty-nine million miles from the Sun—then we're on our own?”

“Yes,” I agreed.

“Then, when we head off to round the Sun, if Vulcan is where they think it is we ought to sight it in a few days?”

“I certainly hope so, Jan.”

“I wonder if it's inhabited. I wish it would be.” His dark eyes were shining. His thin cheeks, usually pale, were flushed with excitement. He was just eighteen—only a month past the legal minimum age for Interplanetary employment. A slim, romantic-looking boy, he was willing and eager to help in every way. A good cook, expert in handling his cramped quarters and preparing the many synthetic foods with which we were equipped.

“You hope it's inhabited, Jan?” I asked.

“I sure do.”

I grinned at him. “Well, if it is, you'll be disappointed to find I'll be doing my best to keep away from whatever living creatures are there. That's a job for a larger expedition than ours.”

“Yes, I suppose it is.”

JAN often sat with me through our long vigils up there in the greenhouse. Sometimes he wouldn't speak for an hour—just sitting there dreaming. Sometimes he would talk of the ill-fated Roberts and King Expedition—the only exploratory flight which ever had headed in this close to the Sun. That was five years ago. Roberts and King, with a crew of eight, had never been heard from since.

“I just think they found Vulcan,” Jan said once, out of one of his long silences.

“They were told to return after a routine landing,” Torrence put in.

“Well then, suppose they crashed their ship,” Jan said. “Suppose they can't get back—”

“What we ought to do is sight Vulcan,

round it and go home," Torrence said. "To the devil with orders to land. I'd go back and tell them that in my judgment—"

"We'll land," I said. "Determine gravity—meteorological conditions—secure samples of soil, vegetation—what-nots—you know the specifications, Torrence."

If indeed there was any Vulcan. If a landing upon what might be a fiery surface were physically possible . . .

Another day passed. And then another and another. We were all three tense, expectant. There was little apparent motion in the great starry cyclorama spread around us—just the slow dwindling of Earth and Venus, the monstrous Sun shifting slowly to the right with the starfield behind it progressively becoming visible.

"We're chasing a phantom," Torrence said, on the fourth day, with the Sun now almost abreast of us and some twenty-four million miles distant. "This damned heat! They sent us out for a salary that's a mere pittance—and give us inadequate equipment. No wonder there's been no exploration so close in here."

Bathed in the full, direct Sun-rays our interior air had heated into a torrid swelter. Stripped to the waist, with the sweat glistening on us, we sat in the shrouded greenhouse. . . . And then at last I saw Vulcan! A little round, lead-colored blur. Just a dot, but in a few hours it was clear of the intervening Sun. No question of its identity. Vulcan. The new world.

"We did it!" Jan murmured. "Oh, we did it."

IT was a busy time, for me especially, those next ninety-six hours. I was soon enabled to calculate, at least roughly, that Vulcan was a world of some eight hundred miles diameter, with an orbit approximately eighteen million miles from the Sun.

"It has an atmosphere?" Jan murmured anxiously.

"Yes, I think so." We kept away from the Sun for a time; and then at last we were able to head directly for Vulcan.

The atmosphere presently was visible. No need for us to use the pressure-suits. I envisaged at first that upon such a little world gravity would be very slight. But now the heavy, metallic quality of its rock-surface was apparent. A world, doubt-

less much denser than igneous Earth.

It was my plan to land on the side away from the Sun.

We rounded Vulcan at some two million miles out. The clouds were fairly dense in many places; sluggish, slow-moving. There were fires on the Sun side—a temperature there which would make it certainly uninhabitable to any creatures resembling humans. . . .

It was the ninth day after the sighting of Vulcan that quite by chance I discovered its *allurite*. We were now fairly close over the dark hemisphere, with the Sun occulted behind it. At a thousand miles of altitude, we were dropping slowly down upon the spreading dark disc which now occupied most of our lower firmament. I had been making a series of routine spectro-color-graphs to file with my reports.

Jan heard my muttered exclamation and came crowding to gaze over my shoulder at the dripping little color spectrograph.

"What is it, Bob? Something important?"

"That bond-line there—see it? That's a metal on Vulcan—shining of its own light—radioactive type-A."

That much, I could determine. Then Jan and I looked it up in the Hughson list of Identified Spectrae. It was *allurite*.

"That's valuable?" Torrence murmured. "Pure *allurite*—"

I laughed. "It certainly would be, if we could find any sizable deposits here. On Earth, it takes some seventeen tons of the very richest *allurium* to get maybe a grain of pure *allurite*. We'll take a look around, try and get a sample of the ore here. If it pans out rich enough, they can send a well-equipped mining expedition."

"We ought to get a bonus for this," Torrence said. "If you don't tell 'em so, I will."

THE descent upon Vulcan took another twenty-four hours. Then at last we had passed through a cloud-bank and, at some twenty thousand feet, the new world stretched dark and bleak beneath us. It certainly looked—to Jan's intense disappointment—wholly uninhabited. It was a tumbled, rocky landscape, barren and forbidding. Beneath us there were black ravines and canyons, little jagged peaks and hill-top spires, some of them sharp as

needle-points. Off at one of the distant horizons the tiered land, rising up, stretched into the foothills of serrated ranks of mountain peaks which loomed over the jagged dark horizon line.

A great metal desert here. In the fitful starlight, and the mellow light of little crescent Mercury which hung over the mountains like a falling, new moon, the metallic quality of the rock was obvious—sleek, bronzed metal ore, in places polished by erosion so that it shone mirror-like. In other places it was mottled with a greenish cast.

“Well,” Jan murmured, “not very hospitable-looking, is it? Don’t you suppose there’s any moisture, or any vegetation?”

There was no sign of any living creatures beneath us as we drifted diagonally downward. But presently, at lower altitude, I could see gleaming pools of water in the rock-hollows. The remains of a rainstorm here. Then we saw what looked like a great fissure—an open scar rifted in a glistening, polished metallic plateau. Grey-black steam was rising, condensing in the humid night-air. The hidden fires of the bowels of the little planet seemed close at this one point. As we stared, a red glow for a moment tinged the steam with a red and greenish reflection of some subterranean glare, far down.

Nothing but metal desert. But presently, as we slid forward, no more than a few thousand feet above the rocky surface now, Jan murmured suddenly,

“Look off there. Like a little oasis, isn’t it?”

There was a patch of what seemed to be rocky soil. Just a few hundred acres in extent, set in a cup-like depression with little buttes and needle-spires and the strewn boulders of the metal waste surrounding it. A clump of tangled vegetation covered it—a fantastic miniature jungle of interlaced, queerly shaped little trees, solid with air-vines and pods and clumps of monstrous, vivid-colored flowers. It was an amazing contrast to the bleakness of the bronze desert.

“Well, that’s more like it,” Jan exclaimed. “Not all desert, Bob. See that?”

Torrence, with his usual efficient practicality, had been busy getting our landing equipment in order. He paused beside me

in the greenhouse, where I sat at the rocket-stream controls which now were in operation for this atmospheric flight.

“Where you figure on landing?” he asked. “Somewhere about here? You want to locate that *allurite*?”

“Yes,” I agreed.

IT is not altogether safe, handling even so small a space-flight ship as ours, in atmosphere at low altitudes. Especially over unknown terrain. It seemed my best course now to make the landing here, secure my rock-samples and make my routine observations. I did not need Torrence to tell me that we were not equipped for extensive exploration of an unknown world. A trip on foot of perhaps a day or two, using the spaceship as a base, would suffice for my records.

“There’s a better chance of finding sizable deposits of allurium here than anywhere else?” Torrence suggested. “Don’t you think so?”

With that, too, I agreed. He prepared us for a night and a few meals of camping—a huge pack for himself, which with a grin he declared himself amply able to carry; a smaller one for Jan; and my instruments and electro-mining drills for me.

We dropped down within an hour or two, landing with a circular swing into a dim, cauldron-like depression of the desert where the polished ground was nearly level and free of boulders.

That was a thrill to me—my first step into the new world—even though I have experienced it several times before. Laden with our packs, we opened the lower-exit pressure porte. The night air, under heavier pressure than we were maintaining inside, oozed in with a little hiss—moist, queer-smelling air. It seemed at first heavy, oppressive. The acrid smell of chemicals was in it.

The night-temperature was hot—sultry as a summer tropic night on Earth. With the interior gravity shut off as we opened the porte, at once I felt a sense of lightness. But it was not extreme. Despite Vulcan’s small size, its great density gives it a gravity comparable to Earth’s.

In a little group we stood on the rocky ground with a dark, immense heavy silence around us—a silence that you could seem to hear—and yet a silence which seemed

pregnant with the mystery of the unknown. Somehow it made me suddenly think of weapons. Besides our utility-knives, we each had a small, short-range electro-flash gun. I saw that Torrence had his in his hand.

"Put it away," I said. "There's nothing here."

With a grin, he shoved it back into his belt. "Which way?" he demanded. "What will the ore of *allurium* look like? Green and red spots in sand-colored streaks of rock, that Hughson book says."

I figured that I could recognize it, though I am far from a skilled geologist. Certainly I agreed with Torrence that our most important job was to find some sizable lodes of *allurium*, measure its probable extent, and take average samples of it back with us.

WE climbed out of the little cauldron. In the tumbled darkness we picked our way among the crags. An Earth-mile, then another. Little Jan, like an eager hound was generally ahead of us, with his tiny search-glare sweeping the jagged rocks. We crossed a narrow winding canyon, inspected a slashed cliff-face. It was arduous going. Despite the sense of lightness and our tropic black-drill clothes of short trousers, thin jackets and shirts, we were panting, bathed in sweat within an hour. Silently, Torrence plodded at my side. It was my first trip with him; and I could see he did not altogether trust my efficiency.

"You can find the way back to the ship?" he demanded once. "To get lost in a place like this—"

I had marked it; little twin spires above the cauldron. They were visible now, looming against the dark sky behind us.

I showed him. "I saw them," he said. "I could lead us back. My idea is, if we cover about ten miles and then camp—"

A cry from Jan interrupted us. He was standing on a little ridge of rock like a bronze metal wave frozen into solidity. Against the deep purple sky his slim figure was a silhouette of solid black. He was staring off into the distance; his arm waved with a gesture as he called to us.

"Something off there! Something lying on the rocks—come look!"

We ran to join him. About a quarter

mile distant there was a broad gully. A dark blob was visible lying at the bottom of it—a sizable blob, something forty or fifty feet long. We picked our way there; climbed down into the ragged, thirty-foot ravine. It was a spaceship lying here—with its sleek alumite hull resting on its side with one of its rocket-stream fins bent and smashed under it.

"The Roberts-King ship," Torrence exclaimed. "So they got here. Cracked up in the landing."

There seemed no doubt of it. This was unquestionably the Roberts-King vehicle—an older version of our own vessel. We stood staring at it blankly—at its little bow pressure port which was wide open, a narrow rectangle with the interior blackness behind it.

Then I saw that here on the rocks near the doorway, a litter of tools and mechanisms were strewn; and a section of one of the gravity plates which had been disconnected and brought out here.

"Trying to repair it," I said to the silently staring, awed Torrence. "Five years ago. Now what do you suppose—"

A startled cry from Jan interrupted me.

The body was lying on the rocks, just beyond the bow of the ship. It was Jonathan Roberts—stocky, middle-aged leader of the expedition. Clad in a strange costume of thin brown material, seemingly animal skin, he lay crumpled. I had never met him, but from his published portraits I could recognize him at once. In the starlight here his dead face with staring eyes goggled up at us.

"Why—why—" Torrence gasped. "Five years—"

There was no great look of decay about the body. Roberts had died here, certainly not five years ago. I was bending down over the body; I shoved at one of the shoulders and turned it over. Stricken Jan, Torrence and I stared numbed. A thin bronze sliver of metal—fin-tipped like a metal arrow—was buried in Roberts' back!

Again the alert Jan was gazing at the dim, fantastic night-scene around us. Abruptly his hand gripped my arm as he gasped,

"Why—good Lord—what's that? Over there—"

In the blackness down the gully, perhaps a hundred feet from us, a little spiral of

fire had appeared. A tiny wisp of red-green flame. It seemed to hover in the air a few feet above the rocky gully floor. Like a phantom wraith of fire, it silently leaped and twisted.

"My God—it's coming toward us!" Torrence suddenly gasped.

In the darkness the silent wisp of fire had swayed sidewise, and then came along the edge of the gully, a disembodied conflagration in mid-air, as though wafted by a rush of wind we could not feel.

II

FOR a moment of startled horror we stood motionless. The floating little flame seemed bounding now, just over the rocks. Bounding? Abruptly I seemed to see a dark shape of solidity under it—something almost, but not quite invisible in the blackness. A tangible thing? A creature—burning? Thoughts are instant things. I recall that in that second, I had the impression of a four-legged thing like a huge dog, bounding toward us over the rocks. The flame in which it was enveloped, had spread—it was a blob of flame, but solidity was there.

All in a second. My little electro-gun was in my hand. And then from beside me, Torrence fired—his flash with a whining sizzle splitting the backness of the gully with its pencil-point of hurled electrons. His hasty aim quite evidently was wild. I saw the little splash of colored sparks where his charge hit the rocks. Too high.

My gun was leveled. But in that split-second, the oncoming blob of fire abruptly had been extinguished. There was only the faint blurred suggestion of the dog-like thing. It had stopped short, and then suddenly was retreating. My shot, and Jan's, followed it. In another few seconds there was no possibility of hitting it. Silently it had vanished. There was only the black silent gully around us, with the blurred crags standing like menacing dark ghosts.

My instinct then, I must admit, was for us to retreat at once to our ship. In the heavy empty silence we stood blankly gazing at each other. Torrence was grim; Jan was shaking with excitement and the fear all of us felt.

"You heard that whistle?" I murmured.

"I heard it," Jan exclaimed. "Something—somebody—human—" There were weird, hostile inhabitants on Vulcan—no question of that now! And here was Roberts' body with a metal sliver of arrow in its back, mute evidence of what we were facing. And already our presence here had been discovered. I stared around at the rocky darkness, every blurred crag now seeming to mask some unknown menace.

"That whistle," Torrence murmured, "calling off that flaming thing—started at our shots. Something is around here, watching us now, undoubtedly."

The yawning dark doorway of the wrecked spaceship was near us. Something seemed lying just beyond its threshold.

"You two stay here," I told Torrence and Jan. "Don't let them surprise us again. We'll have to get back to our ship—"

The port doorway led into a little pressure chamber. On its dark sloping floor, as the wrecked ship lay askew, I stood with my flashlight illumining so ghastly a scene that my blood chilled in my veins. It was a bloody shambles of horror. For a moment I gazed; and as I turned away, sickened, I found Jan at my elbow. He too, had been staring. He clutched at me, white and shaken, and I turned away my light.

"The rest of them," he murmured.

"Yes. Looks that way. All of them—"

The bodies were strewn, clothing and flesh ripped apart so that here were only the bones of men, with pulpy crimson—

"No humans did that, Jan."

"No," he shuddered. "That Thing in flames that came at us—"

HIS words died in his throat. Outside there was a scream—a shrill, eerie human cry. The high-pitched scream of a woman! Gun in hand, with Jan close behind me, I ran outside. The dimness of the rocky gully seemed empty. The cry had died away.

"Torrence! You Torrence—what in the devil—"

My low vehement words wafted away. There was no Torrence. Cautiously I ran around the bow of the wrecked ship, gazed down its other side.

"Torrence—Torrence—"

The nearby rocks seemed to echo back my words, mocking me.

"Why—why—" Jan gasped, "I left him right out here. He was just standing, looking down at Roberts' body with the arrow in it. I just thought I'd go inside with you for a minute."

I pulled him down to the ground. We crouched, close against the side of the ship. "That scream," I whispered, "wasn't far away. A few hundred feet down the gully."

"It sounded like a girl. It did, didn't it? Bob, if they got Torrence that quickly—an arrow in him—"

I peered, tense. The rock shadows were all motionless. In the heavy blank silence there was only my startled breathing, and Jan's; and the thumping of my own heart against my ribs. Had this weird enemy gotten Torrence so swiftly, so silently? Something not human, that had so quickly seized him and dragged him away? Or one of those metal arrows in his back, so that his body was lying around here somewhere, masked by the darkness. Jan and I had certainly not been inside the ship more than a minute or two—

A sharp clattering ping against the alumite side of the wrecked ship struck away my thoughts. A metal arrow! It bent against the hull-plate and dropped almost beside me! The still-hidden sniper had seen us, that was evident, for the arrow had whizzed only a foot or so over our heads.

"Jan—lower—"

We almost flattened ourselves against the bulge of the hull, with a little pile of boulders in front of us. My gun was leveled, but there was nothing to shoot at. Then from diagonally across the gully again there came a sharp human cry! A girl's voice? It was soft this time, a bursting little cry, half suppressed.

Thoughts are instant things. I was aware of the cry and with it there was another whizz. Another arrow. This one was wider of the mark; it hit far to one side of us, up near the bow of the ship.

"Jan! Wait!" His little flash gun was up in the crevice of the rocks in front of us. In another second he would have fired. I saw his target—two dim blobs across the gully. For just that second they were visible as they rose up out of a hollow.

A man; and the slighter figure with him seemed that of a girl. Her hair, glistening like spun metal in the dim light, hung over her shoulders.

The two figures were struggling. There was the sound of the girl's low cry, and a grunt from the man. . . . My low admonition stopped Jan from firing and in another second the shapes across the gully had vanished.

"That girl," I murmured. "She tried to keep him from killing us. Seemed that way, don't you think?"

"Well—"

WE waited. From across the gully there was no sound. I could see now that there was a little ridge in the broken, littered gully floor, behind which the two figures had vanished. A lateral depression was there, with the ragged, broken cliff-wall some ten feet behind it.

"Do you suppose there's only one of them?" Jan whispered. "One man—and that girl—"

"And that—that Thing in flames—"

There was no sign of the animal-like creature. For another moment we crouched tense, peering, listening. A loose stone the size of my fist was here beside us. I picked it up. It was weirdly heavy for its size. Then I flung it out into the gully to the right of us. It fell with a clatter.

Our enemy was there all right. An arrow whizzed in the darkness and struck near where the stone had fallen.

Jan laughed with contempt. "Dumb enough—that fellow. Bob, listen, we've got flash-guns. That fellow with no brains—and just with arrows—"

True enough. "You stay here," I whispered.

"What's the idea?"

"You wait a couple of minutes. Then throw another stone off to the right—about the same place. Understand?"

"No, I don't."

"Well, you do it, anyhow."

There seemed a line of shadow to the left of us, a shadow which extended well out into the gully. The ground dropped down in that area—a slope strewn with crags, broken with little crevices. Crouching low, I crept to the bow of the ship, to the left away from Jan; sank down, waited.

There was no sound; evidently I had not been seen. I started again, picking my way down the slope.

A minute. I was well out into the gully now, ten feet or so down, so that I could not see the wrecked ship where Jan was crouching. From here the opposite cliff-wall showed dark and ragged. Occasionally it yawned with openings, like little cave-mouths. The place where the figures had been crouching should be visible from here. The broken, lower side of the little ridge behind which they had dropped was in view to me now. It was dark with shadow, but there seemed nothing there.

Slowly, cautiously, I crossed the gully. Two minutes since I had left Jan? I melted down beside a rock, almost at the edge of the cliff-wall. And then, out in the gully, far to the right, I heard the stone clatter as Jan threw it.

There was no answering arrow-shot this time. . . . One can be very incautious, usually at just the wrong moment. I recall that I stood up to see better, though I flattened myself against a boulder. And suddenly, close behind me, I was aware of a padding, thudding rhythmic sound on the rocks. I whirled. I had only a second's vision of a dark bounding animal shape coming at me. My sizzling little flash went under it as it rose in one of its bounding leaps.

I had no time to fire another shot. Frantically I pulled the trigger-lever, but the gun's voltage had not yet rebuilt to firing pressure. Futilely I flung the gun into the creature's face as it bore down upon me.

The impact of the dark oblong body knocked me backward so that I fell with it sprawling, snarling upon me. In the chaos of my mind there was only the dim realization of a heavy body as big as my own; spindly legs, like the legs of a huge dog. There seemed six or eight legs, scrambling on me.

Wildly I fought to heave it off. There was a face—a ring of glaring green eyes; fang-like jaws of a long pointed snout which opened, snarling with a gibbering, gruesome cry. I shoved my left forearm into the jaws as they came at my face. They closed upon my arm, ripping, tearing.

BUT somehow I was aware that I had lunged to my feet. And the Thing reared up with me. It was a Thing almost as heavy as myself. My left arm had come loose from its jaws and as its scrambling weight pressed me I went down again. A Thing of rubber? It seemed boneless, the shape of it bending as I seized it. A gruesomely yielding body. My flailing blows bounded back from it. Then I knew that I was gripping it by the head, twisting it. The snarling, snapping jaws suddenly opened wide with a scream—a scream that faded into a mouthing gibber, and in my grip the Thing went limp. I cast it away and it sank to the rocks, quivering.

For an instant I stood panting, trembling with nausea sickening me. On my hands the flesh of the weird antagonist was sticking like viscous, gluey rubber. Hot and clinging. Hot? I stared at my hands in the dimness. For a second I thought it was phosphorescence. Then yellow-green wisps of flame were rising from my hands. Frantically I plunged them into my jacket pockets. The tiny flames were extinguished. I stripped off my jacket, flung it away and it lay with a little smoke rising from it where the weird stuff was trying again to burst into flame.

The skin of my hands was seared, but the contact with the flames had been only momentary and the burns were not severe. It had all happened in a minute or two. I recall that I was standing trembling, staring at the yawning mouth of a cave entrance which was nearby in the cliff-face. A movement in there? A moving blob? Then I was aware that there was a light behind me. Off across the gully there was a blob of light-fire. A red-green blob, swirling, scrambling. And the sound of a distant, gibbering snarl. . . .

The singing whizz of an arrow past my head made me turn again. My human adversary! I saw him now. He was coming at a run from the mouth of the cave—a wide-shouldered, grotesquely-shaped man with a brown hairy garment draped upon him. He swayed like a gorilla on thick bent legs. In one hand he held what seemed an arrow-sling. In the other he carried a long narrow segment of rock, swinging it like a club. He was no more than ten feet from me. In the dimness I could see his huge round head with

tangled, matted black hair. As I whirled to meet him, his voice was a bellow of guttural roar, like an animal bellowing to intimidate its enemy.

I turned, jumped sidewise. And abruptly from a rock-shadow another shape rose up! Slim, small white body, brown-draped with long, gleaming tawny hair. The girl! Her voice gasped,

"You run! He kill you! In here—this way—"

The bellowing savage had turned heavily in his rush and was charging us. In her terror and confusion the girl gripped me, shoving me toward the cave. As we ran I flung an arm around her, lifting her up. She weighed hardly more than a child. Then we were in the blackness of a tunnel-passage. I set her down.

"Lie down. Be quiet," I whispered vehemently. She understood me; she crouched back against the side wall. There seemed a little light here, a glow which I realized was inherent to the rocks, like a vague, faint phosphorescence. But it was brighter outside. The charging savage had evidently paused at the entrance. As I stared now, his bulky figure loomed there, grotesque silhouette. Then doubtless he saw me. With another bellow he came charging in.

I stood waiting, like a Toreador, in front of a heavily charging bull. It was something like that, for as he rushed me, swinging his club and plunging with lowered head of matted hair, nimbly I jumped aside. I had seized a rock half as big as my head. He had no time to turn and poise himself as I jumped on him, crashing the rock at the side of his broad ugly face as he straightened and swung around.

Ghastly blow. His face smashed in as the rock seemed to go into it. For a second his hulking body stood balanced upon the crooked legs and broad flat bare feet. Gruesome dead thing with the face and top of the head gone, it balanced on legs suddenly turned rigid. Then it toppled forward and thudded against the passage wall, sliding sidewise to the ground where it lay motionless.

IN the phosphorescent dimness, I dropped beside the girl. She was panting with terror, shuddering, with her hands before her face.

"It's all right," I murmured. "Or at least, maybe it isn't all right with you, but he's dead, anyway."

Utterly incongruous, the delicately formed bronze-white girl—and that hulking, grotesque, clumsy savage.

"Oh—yes," she murmured. "Dear—yes—"

"You speak English—strange, here on Vulcan—"

"But from your Captain Roberts—he was the fren' of mine—of all the Senzas—"

"He's dead. An arrow in him—lying over there by his wrecked ship—the rest of them, dead inside—"

"Yes. I know it. That was these Orgs. I was caught—just the last time of sleep. Tahg—surely it seems it must be Tahg who sent this Org to take me from my father's home—"

A captive! And she had fought with her savage captor to stop him from sending an arrow into me. Then, in his absorption as he tried to stalk me, she had broken loose from him.

"Just this one Org?" I murmured. "Is he the only one around here? He and that—animal-thing which I killed?"

"That—a female *mime*—you—you—"

She was huddling beside me, clinging to me, still shuddering. "Two Orgs there were," she whispered. "And another *mime*—a fire-male—"

The flame-creature! Queerly, it was not until that instant that I thought of Jan. Out there across the gully, that swirling swaying blob of light-fire! Those snarling sounds! Jan had been attacked by another of the savages, and by the weird flaming creature! The *mime* fire-male, as the girl called it.

I jumped to my feet. "What—what you do?" she demanded.

"You stay here. What's your name?"

"Ama. Daughter of Rohm, the Senza. He my father. He very good fren' of the Captain Roberts—good fren' of all the Earthmen. Like you? You are Earthman?"

"Yes. Now Ama, listen—I came here with another Earthman—with two others, in fact. One of them is over there by the Roberts' ship. . . . You wait here—"

"No!" she gasped. I had dashed toward the tunnel entrance, but I found her with me. "No—no, I stay with you."

From the entrance the gully showed dim and silent. Over the little rise of ground, just the top of the Roberts' spaceship was visible.

Ama clung to me. "I stay with you," she insisted.

Cautiously we picked our way across the gully, up the small ascending slope. No sound; nothing moving. But now there was a pungent, acrid chemical smell hanging here in the windless air.

"The fire-mime!" Ama whispered. "You smell the fire? Then he was angry, ready to fight—"

"He fought," I retorted grimly. "I saw it—"

"Look! Look there—"

HER slim arm as she gestured tinkled with metal baubles hanging on it . . . I saw, up the slope, the blob of something lying on the rocks. Jan! My heart pounded. But it wasn't Jan. The body of one of the weird oblong animals was lying there. Lying on its side, with its six legs stiffly outstretched. Ugly hairless thing, like a giant dog which had been skinned. I could see now that the grey-green flesh had a greasy, pulpy look. What strange organic material was this? Certainly nothing like it existed on Earth. Impervious to heat, as the human stomach tissue is impervious to the action of its own digestive juices. Evidence of the thing's flaming oxidation was here. Wisps of smoke were rising from the ground about the slack body.

Had Jan killed it? The ring of eyes above the long muzzle snout bulged with a glassy, goggling dead stare. The jaws were open, with a thick, forked black tongue protruding, and green, sticky-looking froth still oozing out. The teeth were long and sharp, fangs like polished black ivory protruding from the jaw. The cause of its death was obvious. A knife-slash had ripped, almost severed its throat in a hideous wound where green-black viscous ooze was still slowly dripping, with smoky vapor rising from it.

For a moment, with little Ama clinging to me, I must have stood appalled at the weird sight of the dead fire-mime. If Jan had fought and killed it—then where was he now? And where was that other Org, companion of the clumsy savage I had

killed when it had tried to attack me?

And where was Torrence?

"Your fren'—he did this?" Ama was murmuring.

"Yes, I guess so." I raised my voice cautiously. "Jan—Oh, Jan, where are you?"

The dark shadowed rocks mocked me with their muffled, blurred echo of my call. There seemed nothing here alive, save Ama and me. The wrecked spaceship lay broken and silent on the rocks, with the gruesome, strewn bodies of the Earthmen in it. And the body of Roberts still lay here outside, near the bow.

"Jan—Jan—"

Then Ama abruptly gasped, "The Orgs! See them—up there!"

The cliff which was the gully wall, at this point was some fifty feet high. I stared up to a patch of yellow light which had appeared there in the darkness. A band of the murderous Orgs! Carrying flaming torches, a dozen or more of the gargoyle savages stood above us on the cliff-brink. One stood in advance of them, pointing down at us. He was the other one, doubtless, who had originally been down here with Ama. Around them, half a dozen of the huge greenish mimes bounded, whining with gibbering cries of eagerness.

And in that instant, an arrow came down. I saw one of the savages sling it from a flexible, whip-like contrivance. The whizzing metal shaft sang past our heads and clattered on the rocks.

Ama was clutching me. "You come! Oh hurry—they kill us both."

There was no argument about that. I flung a last look around with the vague thought that I would see Jan lying here. Then I let Ama guide me. At a run, we headed back down the declivity and diagonally across the gully. A rain of arrows came down, clattering around us, but in a moment most of them were falling short.

"Which way, Ama? Where we go?"

"My people—my village—not too far."

"Which way?"

"Through this cliff. There are passages into the lower valley."

"You know the way?"

"Yes, oh yes."

A dark opening in the opposite cliff presently was before us. The Orgs were

coming down the other cliff now; their bellowing voices and the whining cries of the mimes were a blended babble.

"A storm is coming," Ama said suddenly.

The distant sky over the lower end of the gully was shot now with weird lurid colors. In the heavy dark silence here around us, a sudden sharp puff of wind plucked at us, tossing Ama's long tawny hair.

"This way—" she added.

My arm went around her as another wind-blast thrust us sidewise, almost knocking her off her feet. Then clinging together, fighting our way in a rush of wind which now abruptly was a roar, we plunged into the depths of the yawning tunnel.

III

I MUST recount now what happened to Jan, as he told it to me when after a sequence of weird events, he and I were together again. When I left him crouching there close against the hull of the wrecked Roberts' ship, he lost sight of me almost in a moment. There was just the faint blob of me sliding into a shadow; and then the lowering ground down which I went hid me. Tensely he crouched, peering across the gully, listening to the heavy silence.

Two minutes, I had said; and then he must throw the rock. His hand fumbled around, found a sizable rock-chunk. He understood my purpose, of course—to divert our adversary across the gully at a moment when I might be close to jump him from the other direction.

Jan was excited, apprehensive, just an inexperienced boy. Was the crouching savage with the girl still there across the gully? There was no sound, no movement. Was it two minutes now?

He flung the stone at last and raised himself up a little with his gun leveled. The stone clattered off to the right. But it provoked no whizzing arrow. No sound of me, jumping upon my adversary. . . . Nothing. . . . But what was that? Jan stiffened. Distinctly he heard the sizzling puff of a flashgun shot. My gun! He knew it must be; it was to the left, out in the gully. And following it there was a low

gibbering snarl. Faint in the distance, but in the heavy silence plainly audible.

I had been attacked! Jan found himself on his feet, with no thought in his mind save to dash to me. . . . He had taken no more than a few scrambling leaps on the rocks. He reached the brink of the descent. Far down and out in the gully it seemed that he could see the blur of something fighting.

His low incautious movement had betrayed him. From behind him there was a low whistling. A signal! An eager whining snarl instantly resounded to it. Jan had no more than time to whirl and face the sounds when a great bounding grey-green shape was on him!

Jan's shot missed it, and the next second the lunging oblong body struck him. The impact knocked him backward. His gun clattered away. Then the huge, hairless dog-like thing sprawled upon him, its slavering jaws snapping. They found his shoulder as he lunged and the fang-like teeth sank in. . . .

A miracle that Jan could have kept his wits so that he fumbled for his knife as he fell. But suddenly he got it out, stabbed and slashed wildly with it as he rolled and twisted on the ground with the snarling creature on top of him. . . . And suddenly he was aware that the thing had burst into flame!

It could have been only a few seconds during which Jan fought that weird living fire. It was a wild chaos of horror. . . . Licking, oozing flames exuding like an aura from the sticky viscous flesh that horribly sprawled upon him. Monstrous ghastly adversary, with flesh that seemed now like burning bubbling rubber, stenching with acrid gas-fumes. . . .

Just a few seconds, then Jan realized that somehow he had broken loose from the jaws that gripped his shoulder. He tried to scramble to his feet. The flames searing his face made him close his eyes. He was holding his breath, choking. His clothes were on fire. . . .

THEN the sprawling, lunging body knocked him down again. He was still wildly, blindly slashing with his knife. Vaguely he was aware, over the chaos of snapping snarls, that a human voice nearby with guttural shouts was urging the

animal to dispatch its victim. But suddenly—as Jan's knife-blade ripped into its throat—the snarls went into a ghastly, eerie animal scream of agony—a long scream that died into a gurgle of gluey, choking blood-fluid. . . .

Jan was aware that the creature had fallen from him with its flames dying. On the rocks he rolled away from it, with his scorched hands wildly brushing his clothes to extinguish them. Then he was on his feet, staggering, choking, coughing. But his knife, its blade dripping with an oozing flame, still wildly waved.

And then he was aware that twenty feet away, a heavy, grotesque man-like shape was standing with a club and arrow-sling. But with his flame-creature dead and the sight of the staggering, triumphant Jan waving his flaming knife-blade—the watching savage suddenly dropped his club and let out a cry of dismay and fear. And then he ran.

For a moment Jan, wildly, hysterically laughing, went in pursuit. But in the rocky darkness the fleeing savage already had vanished. . . .

Then reaction set in upon Jan. His burned face and hands stung as though still fire was upon him. He was still gasping, choking from the fumes of his smoldering clothes. His eyes, with lashes singed, smarted, watering so that all the vague night-scene was a swaying blur. . . . He found himself sitting down on the rocks. . . .

And then suddenly he remembered me. Where had I gone? What had happened? . . .

Vaguely Jan recalled that I had left him and gone across the gully. . . . Where was I now? . . . Then he seemed dimly to recall that he had heard my shot. . . .

In the dimness suddenly it seemed to Jan that he saw me, far up the gully to the right, up on the cliff-top. For just a moment he was sure that it was the shape of me, silhouetted against the sky. . . . The sight gave him strength. Still staggering, he ran wildly forward. . . . A quarter of a mile; certainly it seemed that far. He had crossed the gully by now. The figure up above had vanished. . . . Queer. What was I doing up there? Chasing the savage? . . .

Jan climbed the little cliff, which was

ragged, and lower here than elsewhere. It led him to the undulating, upper plateau, crag-strewn, dim under a leaden sky. But there was enough light so that he could see the distant figure. It was only two or three hundred yards away, plodding on, apparently not looking back. . . .

Jan ran after it. And then he was calling:

“Bob! You Bob—”

The figure turned. Started suddenly back, and called:

“Is that you? Jan?”

It was Torrence! He came back at a lumbering run now—Torrence, bare-headed, gun in hand. But he obviously hadn't had any encounter. His jacket was buttoned across his shirt; he looked just as he had when Jan had last seen him, out there at the bow of the wrecked spaceship when Jan had gone inside to join me.

Torrence stared at the burned Jan. “Why—good Heavens,” he gasped. “You—I saw that thing killing you. I was up here—I started down, but too late—”

“Where's Bob?”

“Bob? Why—he was killed. Burned—like you. I tried to help him—too late—the damned things—”

THE lameness of it was lost on the still-dazed Jan at that moment. I had been killed! It struck him with a shock. And as he stood wavering, trembling, Torrence drew him to a rock.

“Too bad,” Torrence murmured sympathetically.

“Where—where were you?” Jan said at last. “We came out of the ship—couldn't find you.”

“I was attacked by one of those cursed Things. Like the one that nearly got you—like the one that killed Bob. I chased it; shot at it when I got up here. But I shouldn't have come up—then I saw you and Bob—too late to get back to you. So I was starting for our ship. It's off this way, not so very far.”

For a little time Jan sat there numbed, and Torrence sat sympathetically, silently beside him.

“When we get back,” Torrence murmured at last, “you can put in your report with mine. We did our best—but there isn't any use now, us tackling this thing.”

Jan must have been wholly silent, think-

ing of me, dead, burned, back there in the darkness of the gully.

"You all right now, lad?"

"Yes," Jan said. "Yes—I'm all right."

"When we get back, we ought to get a bonus," Torrence said. "Don't worry, Jan—I'll see you get plenty. Your report and mine—to tell them the hazards of this trip—"

"We should go back?" Jan said.

"Yes, certainly we should. Get back to Earth as fast as we can. No chance of doing anything else—"

Torrence gazed apprehensively around them in the darkness. That much at least—the reality of his apprehension as they sat there on the open plateau—that was authentic enough. And Jan also felt that at any moment one of the flaming creatures might attack them.

"You strong enough to start now?"

"Yes, sure I am," Jan agreed.

They started, picking their way along. Jan tried to remember how far we three had come from our own ship until we had discovered the Roberts' vessel. . . . For ten or fifteen minutes now he and Torrence clambered over the rocks.

"You think you know the way?" Jan asked at last.

"Yes—or I thought I did." Torrence's tone was apprehensively dubious. And that, too must have been authentic. Certainly it would be a desperate plight to be lost here on Vulcan. "It was Bob who was sure he knew the way back—"

"I think we are all right," Jan agreed. "That big rock-spire off there—I remember it."

As they progressed, Jan was aware now that the sky behind them was brightening. They turned and stared at it.

"Weird—" Torrence muttered.

"Yes—some sort of storm. If it's bad—you suppose we ought to take shelter? It's pretty open up here."

The sky was certainly weird enough—a swirl of leaden clouds back there, shot now with lurid green and crimson. And suddenly there came a puff of wind. Then another. Stronger, it whined between the nearby naked crags. In a little nearby ravine it caught an area of loose metallic stones, whirled them before it with a tinkling clatter.

"We came through that ravine, coming

out this way," Jan said suddenly. "I'm sure of it."

Torrence remembered it also. Another blast of wind came; and with it blowing them, they scurried into the ravine. The lurid storm-sky painted it with a crimson and green glare, so that the narrow cut in the rocky plateau was eerie. To Jan it seemed suddenly infernal. He clutched at the larger, far more bulky Torrence as they hurried along with the wind blasting them.

Loose metallic stones were blowing around them now with a clatter. Then suddenly the sky seemed riven by a darting, jagged red shaft of lightning. And then red rain was pelting them.

"Got to find some place," Torrence panted. He had to shout it above the roar as the wind tore at his words and hurled them away.

"Over there?" Jan gestured. "Looks like a cave."

The sides of the ravine were rifted in many places with vertical crevices. They headed toward a wider slit of opening which seemed to lead well back underground. A place of shelter until this storm passed. . . .

TO Jan, what happened then was weirdly terrifying. He suddenly realized that as they approached the opening, they were being pulled at it. Into it! A suction, as though somewhere down underground this storm had created a partial vacuum—a far lesser pressure so that the air of the little ravine was rushing into it!

Terrified, both of them now were fighting to keep away. But it was no use. Like wind-blown puffs of cotton they were sucked into the yawning opening. A sudden chaos of roaring horror. Jan felt that he was still clutching at Torrence. Then both of them fell, sliding, sucked forward as a plunger cylinder is sucked through a pneumatic tube. The ground here in the passage felt smooth as polished marble.

For how long they plunged forward Jan had no conception. Roaring, sucking darkness. Then it seemed that there was a little light. An effulgence; a pallid, eerie glow, like phosphorescence streaming from the rocks. The narrow passage was steadily widening; and then abruptly they were blown out into emptiness.

It was a vast grotto, with smooth metallic floor almost level. The effulgence here was brighter, so that an undulating, vaulted ceiling glistened far overhead. For a moment the nearer wall was visible, smooth, burnished metal rock. Eroded by the winds of centuries, all the rock here was burnished until it shone mirror-like.

The huge pallid interior roared and echoed with the tumbling wind-torrents seething in it. A lashing cauldron jumbled with eddying blasts. Jan and Torrence tried to get to their feet. They could see now that they were far out from the wall—sliding, buffeted, desperately clinging together, hurled one way and then another. Bruised from head to foot, panting, gasping in the swiftly changing pressures, Jan felt his senses leaving him. A numbed vagueness was on him, so that there was only the suck and roar of the winds and the feel of Torrence to whom he was clinking. They were lying prone now—

“Easing up a little—” He heard Torrence’s voice as though from far away. And then he came to his senses to find that he and Torrence had hit against a wall of the grotto and were clinging to a projection of rock.

Easing up a little. . . . The storm outside lessening. . . . Jan must have drifted off again; and after another interval he was conscious that there was only a tossing, crazy breeze in here. It whined and moaned, echoing from one wall to another so that the pallid, silvery half-light seemed filled with a myriad gibbering little voices.

And Jan could see now that he and Torrence had been blown into a recess of the grotto—a smaller cave. The rock formation here was as though this were the heart of a monstrous crystal—vertical facets of strata that glistened pallidly.

“We’ll have to try and cross back,” Torrence said, and in the confined space his words weirdly echoed, split and duplicated so that there seemed many little whispering replicas of his words. “Find that passage where we came in—”

They were on their feet now—suddenly to Jan there was around them a vast vista of pallid dimness. A glowing, limitless abyss stretching off into shadowy nothingness, everywhere he looked.

“Why—why,” he murmured, “this place—so large—”

Torrence still had his flash cylinder. He fumbled in his jacket pocket, brought it out. Amazing thing! As he snapped it on, its tiny white beam showed mirrored in a hundred places of the paneled, crystalline walls! The blurred image of Torrence and Jan standing holding each other with their light-shaft before them, duplicated so that there were a hundred of them everywhere they looked! And countless other hundreds smaller and smaller in the myriad backgrounds!

WITH a startled curse Torrence took a few steps into what seemed pallid emptiness, and then suddenly his image was coming at him! Lost! To Jan came the rush of horror that they might wander in here, balked at every turn. . . .

Another startled cry from Torrence stuck away Jan’s thoughts. Neither he nor Torrence had time to make a move. There was suddenly everywhere the duplicated image of a thick, swaying, gargoyle savage, standing like a gorilla on thick bent legs, with one crooked arm holding a flaming torch over his head. A myriad replicas of him everywhere! Was he close to them, or far away? And in which direction?

In that stricken second the questions stabbed into Jan’s tumultuous mind. Then he was aware of something whirling in the air over his head—something crashing on his skull so that all the world seemed to go up into a splitting, blinding roar of light. He felt his legs buckling under him. There was only Torrence’s fighting outcry and the sound of a guttural echoing voice as Jan fell and his senses slid off into a blank and black, empty silence. . . .

IV

I GO back now to that moment when Ama and I, pursued by the roaming band of Orgs, plunged into a tunnel passage that led from the gully, near the wrecked Roberts’ spaceship. It was quite evident that Ama was aware of the dangers of the wind-storms of her little world. There was a swift air-current sucking into this passage. But it was not powerful enough to do more than hurry us along. Once, where the tunnel branched, there seemed

an open grotto up a little subterranean ascent to the right. It glowed with a brighter pallid light than was here in the passage. I turned that way with an interested gaze, but at once she clutched at me.

"No—no. In times of the storm, very bad sometimes in places under the ground."

There seemed no sign of pursuit behind us. "The Orgs—they run heavy," Ama said when I mentioned it. In the pale opalescent glow of the tunnel, I could see her faint triumphant smile as she gazed up at me sidewise. Strange little face, utterly foreign so that upon Earth, by Earth standards one would have been utterly baffled to identify her. But it was an appealing face, and now, with her terror gone, the sly glance she flung at me was wholly feminine.

"Those fire-mimes," I said. "Couldn't they rush ahead of their masters, trailing us?" I explained how on Earth dogs would do that, following their quarry by the scent. She looked puzzled, and then she brightened.

"I remember. The Captain Roberts told us about that. The mimes are different. The male and female both—they follow what it is they see, nothing else."

Then she told me about the weird, dog-like creatures. The male, exuding a scent—if you could call it that—a vapor which in the air bursts into spontaneous combustion as it combines with the atmospheric oxygen.

How long we ran through what proved to be a maze of passages in the honey-combed ground, I have no idea. Several Earth-miles, doubtless. Several times we stopped to rest, with the breezes tossing about us as I listened, tense, to be sure the Orgs were not coming. Then at last we emerged; and at the rocky exit I stood staring, amazed.

It was a wholly different looking world here. The pallid underground sheen was gone; and now again there was the dim twilight of the interminable Vulcan night. From where we stood the ground sloped down so that we were looking out over the top of a wide spread of lush, tangled forest. Weird jungle, rank and wild with spindly trees of fantastic shapes, heavy with pods and exotic flowers and tangled with masses of vines. Beyond it, far ahead of us there

seemed a line of little metal mountains at the horizon; and to the left an Earth-mile or so away, the forest was broken to disclose a winding thread of little river. It shone phosphorescent green in the half light. The storm was over now, but still the colors lingered in the cloud sky—a glorious palette of rainbow hues up there that tinted the forest-top.

Ama gestured toward the thread of river. "The Senzas—my people and my village—off that way beyond the little water. We go quickly. But we be careful, until we get beyond the water."

"Swim it?"

"We can. But I think I remember where there is a Senza boat hidden on this side."

SHE had already told me more of what happened to her. The Senzas, primitive obviously, yet with an orderly tribal civilization, were the dominant race here on little Vulcan. The savage Orgs—a far lower, more primitive type both mentally and physically—in nomadic fashion, roamed the metal deserts and little stunted forests which lay beyond the barren regions. They were, at times of religious frenzy, cannibalistic, with weird and gruesome festival rites which Ama only shudderingly sketched.

For the most part, the clumsy Orgs and their weird mime-creatures were kept from the Senza forests. But occasionally they raided, stealing the Senza women, and roaming the lush forests for food. There had been, in the Senza village, one Tahg, a wooer of Ama. An older man, but somehow well liked by the Senza tribal leader. Repulsed by Ama, he had threatened her—and then he had vanished from the village; gone hunting, and the Senzas considered that the Orgs might have killed him.

"But I think it was Org blood in him," Ama said. "I told the Captain Roberts that—I remember just before he and his men left us to finish the repairs of their ship—and then we found later that the Orgs had killed them all."

Tahg, Ama thought, had become the tribal leader of this group of the Orgs—indulging with them in their gruesome rites. . . . Then, just a few hours ago, two Orgs had crept upon Ama as she slept—with extraordinary daring for an Org,

had successfully seized her and carried her off. Taking her into the Org country, past the Roberts' spaceship, where they had come upon me, and Torrence and Jan. . . .

"We be careful now," she was telling me as we stood gazing out over the forested slope. "After a storm it is when the Orgs mostly roam—the hunting here is better when the little creatures are out after the water."

The little creatures! Best of the animal foods here on Vulcan. . . . The red-storm quite evidently had emptied torrential rain on the forest. The fantastic trees were heavy with it. Soddently it dripped from the overhead branches. And now as we started down the slope, I saw the little creatures. Insect or animal, no one could have said. A myriad sizes and shapes of them, from a finger-length to the size of a cat. Before our advance they scurried on the ground, scattering with weird little outcries. Some flew clumsily into the leaves overhead; others ran up there on the vines, peering down at us as we passed. We came suddenly upon a pool of rain-water. Greedily a hundred little orange-green things, seemingly almost all head and snout, were crowding at the pool, sucking up the water. With eerie, maniacal little voices they rolled and bounced away at our approach.

This weird forest! Abruptly I was aware that there were places where the rope-like vines and leafy branches of the underbrush shrank away from us as we advanced—slithering and swaying little vines in sudden movement before us. Sentient vegetation. There are plants on Earth which shrink and shudder at a touch. Others which snap and seize an unwary insect enemy. But here it was far more startling than that. I saw a vine on the ground rise up upon its myriad little tendrils; the pods, like a row of heads upon it were quivering, puffing. The extended length of it, like a snake slithered from my threatening tread.

"It fears every human," Ama said. "A strange thing to you Earthmen?"

"Well, slightly," I commented. "Suppose it—some of this vegetation got angry—" Fantastic thought, but the reality of it—a looping, swaying vine over our heads, as thick as my arm—that was a

stark reality. "Would a thing like that attack us, Ama?"

She shrugged. "There is talk of it. But I think no one is ever truthful to say it really happened."

We were in the depths of the forest now. In the humid, heavy darkness it was sometimes arduous going. That thread of river—we could not see it now, but I judged it still must be half an Earth-mile away. Once we sat down in a little open glade to rest. In the thick silence the throbbing voice of the forest, blended of the scurrying life and the rustling vines, was a faint steady hum. Then suddenly I saw that Ama was tense, alert, sitting up listening. She looked startled, abruptly frightened.

"What is it?" I whispered.

"Off there—the vines, they are frightened. You hear?"

IT seemed that somewhere near us, the vine-rustling had grown louder. A scurry, mingled with little popping sounds from the pods. Someone coming? I recall that the startled thought struck me. Then from a thicket near at hand a group of little creatures came dashing. They saw us, wheeled and scurried sidewise. I was on my feet, peering into the shadowed leafy darkness. I thought I heard a low, guttural voice. Whether I did or not, the whizz of an arrow past me was reality enough.

A wandering band of the Orgs were stalking us! At the whizz of the arrow I made a dash sidewise. My gun was gone; I jerked out my knife. Ama was up, and another arrow barely missed her—an arrow that came from a totally different direction so that I knew we must be already surrounded.

"Ama—lie down! Down—"

A woman under some circumstances can be a terrible handicap. She didn't drop to the ground; she stood gazing around her in terror, and then she came running at me, clutching me so that I was futilely struggling to cast her off. Another arrow sang past our heads, and then from several directions, the Orgs were bursting into the glade.

I tore loose from Ama, but it was no use. Whatever effective fight I might have put up, it could have brought a rain of arrows

which might, probably would, have killed the girl.

"Quiet," I murmured. "They've got us. No chance to fight."

I stood trying to shield her as in the dimness the Orgs crowded around us. Ten or more of them, jabbering at us, seizing me and presently shoving us off through the forest.

Two or three others seemed to join us in a moment; and abruptly Ama gasped: "Tahg! There is Tahg—"

The renegade Senza, quite obviously a leader here, shoved past his jabbering, triumphant men and confronted us. He was seemingly startled, and then triumphant at seeing Ama here. Then his gaze swept to me. He was a big, muscular, but slender fellow. He was clad in a brief brown drape; but his aspect was wholly different from the heavy, misshapen, clumsy-looking Orgs. His thick dark hair fell longish about his ears, framing his hawk-nosed, thin-lipped face. And his narrow dark eyes squinted at me as he frowned.

"Well," he said, "Earthman? New one?" His English was evidently less fluent than Ama's, but it was understandable enough.

"Yes," I agreed. "Friendly—like all Earthmen."

He had signaled to the Orgs, and two of them had shuffled forward and taken Ama from me.

"Jus' good time," Tahg said ironically. "Org gods pleased tonight to have Earthmen—"

Earthmen! The plural! I had little opportunity to ponder it. Roughly I was shoved onward through the forest, back to where it thinned into a stretch of metal desert—and beyond that into a new terrain of stunted, gnarled trees and rope vines on a rocky ground. To me it was an exhausting march. Ama, with Tahg beside her, usually was behind me. Once we stopped and food and water were given me. When we started again, I saw that, at Tahg's direction, one of the savages had hoisted Ama to his back, carrying her in a rope-vine sling. Occasionally other small bands of Orgs joined us, until there were fifty or more of them, triumphantly returning to their village. Their torches were burning now, and a little ahead of

us a pack of the huge green-grey mimes were leaping.

Then Tahg came toward me. "Good-bye," he said. "You look more good to me when I see you next time. The gods prepare you now."

HE turned and was lost in the darkness. My ankles had been fettered with a two-foot length of rope; my wrists were crossed and lashed behind me. No one was with me now but my two captors who urged me forward, impatient at my little jerky steps. The village and its jabbering turmoil and lights was in a moment hidden by a rise of the rocky ground. Then I saw before me a fairly large, square building of stone, flat-roofed, with a cone-shaped stone-pile on top like a crude church spire.

An Org temple. It was windowless; some twenty feet high from ground to its roof. A narrow, rectangular slit of doorway was in front, where two huge torches, like braziers one on either side, were burning. An Org stood between them, with the torchlight painting him—an aged savage in a long, white skin drape which was fantastically ornamented. He was thin and bent, his round brown skull almost hairless, his body shriveled, parched with age. His skinny arms were upraised, outstretched to welcome me.

But my startled gaze turned from him, for on the ground just at the edge of the swaying torchlight, I saw that two figures were lying. Two men, roped and tied into inert bundles.

They were Jan and Torrence!

V

THERE was a time when, roped and tied like Jan and Torrence, I was laid beside them while in the torchlight, alone with his pagan gods, the ancient Org priest stood intoning his prayers and incantations. It was then that Jan was able to tell me what had happened to him. He was lying between Torrence and me. I had little chance to talk to Torrence. Nor any great desire, for I considered him then merely a craven fellow who had deserted us at the very first of the weird attacks.

Human emotions work strangely. It was obvious now, as we lay there in the

darkness, with the aged savage in the torchlight near us—obvious enough that we were doomed to something horrible which at best would end in our death. Yet Jan and I—each having considered the other dead—were for a brief time at least, pleased that we were here. No one yet alive, can normally quite give up hope of escaping death. I recall that in the darkness I was furtively trying to loosen my bonds, twisting and squirming.

“You needn’t bother,” Torrence muttered. “I’ve tried all that. And those two damned Orgs who carried you here—they’re still watching us.”

“Going to take us inside, I guess,” Jan whispered. “Inside this temple to—to—”

His shuddering imagination supplied no words. But his idea was right, for presently the old priest was finished his incantations. His cracked voice called a command and the two savages who had brought me here came from nearby. One by one, they picked us up and carried us inside.

I was the last to go in. The place was a single stone square room. It was lurid with a swaying torchlight. Carved gargoyle images, crude and hideously ugly—grotesque personification of the pagan Vulcan gods—where ranged along the walls. The old priest was standing now on a little dais, between the two interior torches. His arms were upraised toward me as I was carried in; behind him there was a quick stone altar, with a line of smaller images on it. His voice rose, quavering, as I was slowly carried past him; and his hands over me might have been purifying me for the coming rite.

In the center of the room, raised some five feet above the floor, there was a broad stone slab, with a big, grinning, pot-bellied stone image mounted up there. Then I saw that the slab had a broad, cradle-like depression in front of the image. Still bound, lying there side by side, with the belly of the huge image projecting partly over them, were Jan and Torrence. And now the two savages hoisted me up and rolled me among them.

The sacrificial altar. Heaven knows, I could not miss the realization now. There was a weird, acrid, nauseous smell clinging here from former ceremonies. And as I was hoisted up, I saw that the smooth sides

of the altar were seared, blackened by the heat of flames which so many times before must have been here.

And the heat—the fire? Within a moment after I was rolled into the saucer-like depression of the altar—with Torrence muttering despairing curses and Jan pallid and grim beside me—outside the temple there sounded a weird gibbering chorus of baying. Ghastly, familiar sound! The mimes—the giant fire-males! Released at the temple doorway, they came bounding in—blobs of leaping red-green flame! A dozen or more of the weird creatures, all of these much larger than the male Jan had killed near the Roberts’ spaceship. Fire-males trained for this ceremony. Enveloped in their lurid flames they rushed at the altar, circling it, swiftly running one behind the other so that we were encircled with a ring of leaping flames.

I heard Torrence mutter, “To roast us! Just to roast us slowly—”

THE shoulders and heads of the running, circling fire-mimes were nearly as high as the altar slab on which we were lying. The flames of them swirled two or three feet higher—blobs of fire which merged one with the other. A circular curtain of mounting flame walling us in. Through it the temple interior was blurred, distorted. Vaguely the figure of the aged priest was visible. He was now on his knees, turned partly away from us as he faced his little row of god-images, supplicating them.

Curtain of swirling fire. Within a moment the heat of it was searing us. Heat slowly intensifying. It was bearable now; but the confined circle of air here was mounting in temperature; the big gargoyle image over us, the metallic-rock slab beneath us both were slowly heating. The smoke and the swirling gas-fumes would choke us into unconsciousness very quickly, I knew. And then the mounting heat would at last make this a sizzling griddle, on which we would lie, slowly roasting. . . .

A chaos of confused phantasmagoria blurred my mind in those first horrible moments. . . . I saw the old priest, so solemnly, humbly supplicating his gods as he officiated at this gruesome pagan ceremony . . . then I could envisage us being carried off, back to the Org village where

the people, not worthy of being here in the sacred temple, were so eagerly awaiting us . . . then the orgy—sacred feast, endowing its participants with what future virtues and panaceas they conceived their gods would give them. . . .

The end, for us. . . . Already Jan was pitifully coughing. . . . But what was this? I felt a shape stir beside me; a small, slender figure with dangling hair; I felt trembling fingers fumbling at my bonds.

Ama! She had crept from a little recess under the giant bulging statue of the gargoyle god, here on the altar. Ama, who had found a chance to slip away from the wooing Tahg, and had preceded us here—hiding up here so that she might try and release us. . . .

But it was too late now. So obviously too late! She had accomplished nothing, save to immolate herself here with us!

Into my ear her terrified voice was whispering, "I thought that the fire-males would not come so soon."

In the blurring, blasting heat and smoke, she had untied us, but of what use? "No—no chance to try and jump," she stammered. "As we fell they would leap upon us—kill us in a moment—"

The sizzling, crackling of the flames—the gibbering baying of the fire-mimes mingling with the incantations of the old priest—it was all a blurred chaos. . . . Then suddenly I was aware that Jan, coughing, choking, had struggled half erect on the slab. There was just an instant when I saw his contorted face, painted lurid by the flames. Wild despairing desperation was stamped there. But there was something else. An exaltation. . . .

"You—run—" he gasped.

And then he jumped. A wild, desperate leap, upward and outward. . . . It carried him through the curtain of flame and out some ten feet to the temple floor. The thud of his crashing body mingled with the gibbering yelps of the fire-mimes as they whirled and pounced upon him—all of them in a second, merged into a great blob of flame out there on the temple floor where they fought, scrambling over him, ripping—tearing—

Gruesome horror. . . . I knew in that second that already Jan was dead. . . . And then I was aware that the other side of the altar, behind the gargoyle image, was

momentarily completely dark. All the flaming creatures were fighting over Jan's body. Torrence, too, had realized it. I saw him stagger up and jump into the darkness. I shoved at Ama; rolled and tumbled her off the slab. We fell in a heap and scrambled erect. The pawing, snarling group of fire-mimes, twenty feet away with the big altar slab intervening, intent upon their scattering fragments, for that moment did not heed us. On his little dais by the wall, the old priest had turned and was standing numbed, confused. There was no one else in the sacred temple. The single doorway was a vertical slit of darkness. Already Torrence was running for it. I clutched at Ama and we ran.

OUT into the rocky blackness. I recall that I had the wits to turn us away from where the Org village lay nearby, behind the hillock. . . . Then, suddenly, from behind a crag, a dark figure rose up. Tahg! Tahg, who had been crouching here, evidently impatient for his feast so that he would be the first to see us as we were brought from the temple. . . .

He stood gasping, startled; and in that same second I was upon him, my fist crashing into his face so that he went backward and down. With desperate haste I caught up a rock from the ground—pounded it on his head—wildly pounding until his skull smashed. . . . Then I was up, clutching Ama. Torrence already was ten or twenty feet ahead of us in the darkness. We ran after him; he heard us coming and waited.

"Which way?" he gasped. "She ought to know. Our spaceship—that would be best—"

At the door of the temple the old priest now was standing screaming. From behind the little hill, answering shouts were responding. . . .

"Is it closer to your village, or to our ship?" I demanded of Ama.

"Why—why to your ship, I think."

"You know the way?"

"Yes—yes, I think so. Not to where you landed—that I do not know. But to the Roberts' ship—"

And the Orgs doubtless would consider that we would head into the Senza country. The forests in that direction would be full of roaming Orgs hunting us. . . .

She and I and Torrence ran, plunging

wildly forward in the rocky darkness, with the lights and the turmoil behind us presently fading away into the heavy blank silence of the Vulcan night. . . .

I THINK that there is little I need add. It was a long, arduous journey, but we reached our little spaceship safely. And in a moment, with the rocket-streams shoving downward and with the lower-hull gravity plates in neutral, slowly we were rising into the cloudy darkness.

"You will take me to my people?" Ama said anxiously. "You did promise me—"

"Yes, of course, Ama—we'll land you near your village—"

Queerly enough, it was not until that moment after all the tumultuous events which had engulfed us, that suddenly I remembered the deposits of *allurite* which we had hoped to locate upon Vulcan. If I could take back samples of the ore—to my sponsors that doubtless would be considered the major success—the only success indeed—of my expedition. . . . It occurred to me then that we could land at the Senza village, and for a little time, prospect from there. . . .

But even that plan was doomed to frustration. I mentioned it to Torrence. "We should head for Earth," he said dogmatically. "I have had enough of this."

It was then, before we had gone far toward the Senza country, that I noticed the rocket streams were acting queerly. A seeming lack of power. . . . Torrence had gone down into the hull; he came back presently to the turret.

"The Pelletier rotators are slowing," I said. "What's the matter?"

He shook his head. "I noticed it," he said. "Haven't found out yet. You want to come and look?"

I locked the controls, left Ama and went down into the hull with Torrence. In the

dim mechanism cubby, as I bent over the Pelletier mechanisms, suddenly Torrence leaped on me! It came as quickly, unexpectedly as that. The culmination of his brooding, murderous, cowardly plans. His heavy face was contorted, his eyes blazing. In his hand he held a sliver of metal arrow. It was bent, doubled over, so that all this time he had been able to keep it hidden in his clothes. The arrow he had taken from Roberts' body, as it lay there near the bow of the wrecked spaceship! The little light in the mechanism cubby gleamed on it now; glistened on the green and red spots of the sleek, sand-colored metal. *Allurite!* The precious substance—not an alloy, not a low-grade *allurium* ore, but *allurite* in its pure state! On Earth this single bent little arrow could be worth a fortune!

And the frenzied Torrence was gloating: "See it, you damn fool—your *allurite*—right under your nose all the time! And now it's mine—" In that second he would have plunged the needle-sharp arrow-point like a stiletto into my heart. But his own frenzied, murderous hysteria defeated him. My fist struck his wrist, knocked his stab-thrust away, with the arrow clattering to the floor. And then I had him by the throat, strangling him until he yielded and I tied him up. . . .

As you who read this, of course, already know from the news reports, I dropped Ama near the edge of the Senza village. I recall now how she stood in the Vulcan night, in the torchlight with the excited crowd of her people behind her; the last I saw of Vulcan was the little figure of her waving at me as I rose into the leaden sky and headed back for Earth. . . . Maybe—just maybe—I'll return some day to that land where Jan gave his life that his friends might live.



A Fiction House Magazine



TROUBLE ON TYCHO

By NELSON S. BOND

Isobar and his squeeze-pipes were the bane of the Moon Station's existence. But there came the day when his comrades found that the worth of a man lies sometimes in his nuisance value.

Illustration by Walker



Isobar played, blew with all his might, while the Grannies raged below.

THE audiophone buzzed thrice—one long, followed by two shorts—and Isobar Jones pressed the stud activating its glowing scanner-disc.

“Hummm?” he said absent-mindedly. The selenoplate glowed faintly, and the image of the Dome Commander appeared. “Report ready, Jones?”

"Almost," acknowledged Isobar gloomily. "It prob'ly ain't right, though. How anybody can be expected to get *anything* right on this dagnabbed hunk o' green cheese—"

"Send it up," interrupted Colonel Eagan, "as soon as you can. Sparks is making Terra contact now. That is all."

"That ain't all!" declared Isobar indignantly. "How about my bag—?"

It *was* all, so far as the D.C. was concerned. Isobar was talking to himself. The plate dulled. Isobar said, "Nuts!" and returned to his duties. He jotted neat ditto marks under the word "Clear" which, six months ago, he had placed beneath the column headed: *Cond. of Obs.* He noted the proper figures under the headings *Sun Spots: Max Freq.—Min. Freq.*; then he sketched careful curves in blue and red ink upon the Mercator projection of Earth which was his daily work sheet.

This done, he drew a clean sheet of paper out of his desk drawer, frowned thoughtfully at the tabulated results of his observations, and began writing.

"*Weather forecast for Terra,*" he wrote, his pen making scratching sounds.

The audiophone rasped again. Isobar jabbed the stud and answered without looking.

"O.Q.," he said wearily. "O.Q. I told you it would be ready in a couple o' minutes. Keep your pants on!"

"I—er—I beg your pardon, Isobar?" queried a mild voice.

Isobar started. His sallow cheeks achieved a sickly salmon hue. He blinked nervously.

"Oh, jumpin' jimminy!" he gulped. "You, Miss Sally! Golly—'scuse me! I didn't realize—"

The Dome Commander's niece giggled.

"That's all right, Isobar. I just called to ask you about the weather in Oceania Sector 4B next week. I've got a swimming date at Waikiki, but I won't make the shuttle unless the weather's going to be nice."

"It is," promised Isobar. "It'll be swell all week-end, Miss Sally. Fine sunshiny weather. You can go."

"That's wonderful. Thanks so much, Isobar."

"Don't mention it, ma'am," said Isobar, and returned to his work.

South America. Africa. Asia. Pan-

Europa. Swiftly he outlined the meteorological prospects for each sector. He enjoyed this part of his job. As he wrote forecasts for each area, in his mind's eye he saw himself enjoying such pastimes as each geographical division's terrain rendered possible.

IF home is where the heart is, Horatio Jones—known better as "Isobar" to his associates at the Experimental Dome on Luna—was a long, long way from home. His lean, gangling frame was immured, and had been for six tedious Earth months, beneath the *impervite* hemisphere of Lunar III—that frontier outpost which served as a rocket refueling station, teleradio transmission point and meteorological base.

"Six solid months! Six sad, dreary months!" thought Isobar, "Locked up in an airtight Dome like—like a goldfish in a glass bowl!" Sunlight? Oh, sure! But filtered through ultraviolet wave-traps so it could not burn, it left the skin pale and lustreless and clammy as the belly of a toad. Fresh air? Pooh! Nothing but that everlasting sickening, scented, reoxygenated stuff gushing from atmo-conditioning units.

Excitement? Adventure? The romance he had been led to expect when he signed on for frontier service? Bah! Only a weary, monotonous, routine existence.

"A pain!" declared Isobar Jones. "That's what it is; a pain in the stummick. Not even allowed to—Yeah?"

It was Sparks, audioing from the Dome's transmission turret. He said, "Hyah, Jonesy! How comes with the report?"

"Done," said Isobar. "I was just gettin' the sheets together for you."

"O.Q. But just bring *it*. Nothing else."

Isobar bridled.

"I don't know what you're talkin' about."

"Oh, no? Well, I'm talking about that squawk-filled doodlesack of yours, sonny boy. Don't bring that bag-full of noise up here with you."

Isobar said defiantly, "It ain't a doodlesack. It's a bagpipe. And I guess I can play it if I want to—"

"Not," said Sparks emphatically, "in *my*

cubby! I've got sensitive eardrums. Well, stir your stumps! I've got to get the report rolling quick today. Big doings up here."

"Yeah? What?"

"Well, it's Roberts and Brown—"

"What about 'em?"

"They've gone Outside to make foundation repairs."

"Lucky stiffs!" commented Isobar ruefully.

"Lucky, no. Stiffs, maybe—if they should meet any Grannies. Well, scoot along. I'm on the ether in four point sixteen minutes."

"Be right up," promised Isobar, and, sheets in hand, he ambled from his cloistered cell toward the central section of the Dome.

He didn't leave Sparks' turret after the sheets were delivered. Instead, he hung around, fidgeting so obtrusively that Riley finally turned to him in sheer exasperation.

"Sweet snakes of Saturn, Jonesy, what's the trouble? Bugs in your britches?"

Isobar said, "H-huh? Oh, you mean— Oh, thanks, no! I just thought mebbe you wouldn't mind if I—well—er—"

"I get it!" Sparks grinned. "Want to play peekaboo while the contact's open, eh? Well, O.Q. Watch the birdie!"

He twisted dials, adjusted verniers, fingered a host of incomprehensible keys. Current hummed and howled. Then a plate before him cleared, and the voice of the Earth operator came in, enunciating with painstaking clarity:

"Earth answering Luna. Earth answering Luna's call. Can you hear me, Luna? Can you hear—?"

"I can not only hear you," snorted Riley, "I can see you and smell you, as well. Stop hamming it, stupid! You're lousing up the earth!"

The now-visible face of the Earth radioman drew into a grimace of displeasure.

"Oh, it's *you?* Funny man, eh? Funny man Riley?"

"Sure," said Riley agreeably. "I'm a scream. Four-alarm Riley, the cosmic comedian—didn't you know? Flick on your dictacoder, oyster-puss; here's the weather report." He read it. "*Weather forecast for Terra, week of May 15-21—*"

Ask him," whispered Isobar eagerly. "Sparks, don't forget to ask him!"

RILEY motioned for silence, but nodded. He finished the weather report, entered the Dome Commander's log upon the Home Office records, and dictated a short entry from the Luna Biological Commission. Then:

"That is all," he concluded.

"O.Q.," verified the other radioman. Isobar writhed anxiously, prodded Riley's shoulder.

"Ask him, Sparks! Go on ask him!"

"Oh, cut jets, will you?" snapped Sparks. The Terra operator looked startled.

"How's that? I didn't say a word—"

"Don't be a dope," said Sparks, "you dope! I wasn't talking to you. I'm entertaining a visitor, a refugee from a cuckoo clock. Look, do me a favor, chum? Can you twist your mike around so it's pointing out a window?"

"What? Why—why, yes, but—"

"Without buts," said Sparks grumpily. "Yours not to reason why; yours but to do or don't. Will you do it?"

"Well, sure. But I don't understand—" The silver platter which had mirrored the radioman's face clouded as the Earth operator twirled the inonoscope. Walls and desks of an ordinary broadcasting office spun briefly into view; then the plate reflected a glimpse of an Earthly landscape. Soft blue sky warmed by an atmosphere-shielded sun . . . green trees firmly rooted in still-greener grass . . . flowers . . . birds . . . people . . .

"Enough?" asked Sparks.

Isobar Jones awakened from his trance, eyes dulling. Reluctantly he nodded. Riley stared at him strangely, almost gently. To the other radioman, "O.Q., pal," he said. "Cut!"

"Cut!" agreed the other. The plate blanked out.

"Thanks, Sparks," said Isobar.

"Nothing," shrugged Riley. "*He twisted the mike; not me. But—how come you always want to take a squint at Earth when the circuit's open, Jonesy? Homesick?*"

"Sort of," admitted Isobar guiltily.

"Well, hell, aren't we all? But we can't leave here for another six months at least. Not till our tricks are up. I should think

it'd only make you feel worse to see Earth."

"It ain't Earth I'm homesick for," explained Isobar. "It's—well, it's the things that go with it. I mean things like grass and flowers and trees."

Sparks grinned; a mirthless, lopsided grin.

"We've got *them* right here on Luna. Go look out the tower window, Jonesy. The Dome's nestled smack in the middle of the prettiest, greenest little valley you ever saw."

"I know," complained Isobar. "And that's what makes it even worse. All that pretty, soft, green stuff Outside—and we ain't allowed to go out in it. Sometimes I get so mad I'd like to—"

"To," interrupted a crisp voice, "what?"

Isobar spun, flushing; his eyes dropped before those of Dome Commander Eagan. He squirmed.

"N-nothing, sir. I was only saying—"

"I heard you, Jones. And please let me hear no more of such talk, sir! It is strictly forbidden for anyone to go Outside except in cases of absolute necessity. Such labor as caused Patrolmen Brown and Roberts to go, for example—"

"Any word from them yet, sir?" asked Sparks eagerly.

"Not yet. But we're expecting them to return at any minute now. Jones! Where are *you* going?"

"Why—why, just back to my quarters, sir."

"That's what I thought. And what did you plan to do there?"

Isobar said stubbornly, "Well, I sort of figured I'd amuse myself for a while—"

"I thought that, too. And with *what*, pray, Jones?"

"With the only dratted thing," said Isobar, suddenly petulant, "that gives me any fun around this dagnabbed place! With my bagpipe."

COMMANDER Eagan said, "You'd better find some new way of amusing yourself, Jones. Have you read General Order 17?"

Isobar said, "I seen it. But if you think—"

"It says," stated Eagan deliberately, "*In order that work or rest periods of the Dome's staff may not be disturbed, it is*

hereby ordered that the playing or practicing of all or any musical instruments must be discontinued immediately. By order of the Dome Commander, That means you, Jones!"

"But, dingbust it!" keened Isobar, "it don't disturb nobody for me to play my bagpipes! I know these lunks around here don't appreciate good music, so I always go in my office and lock the door after me—"

"But the Dome," pointed out Commander Eagan, "has an air-conditioning system which can't be shut off. The ungodly moans of your—er—so-called musical instrument can be heard through the entire structure."

He suddenly seemed to gain stature.

"No, Jones, this order is final! You cannot disrupt our entire organization for your own—er—amusement."

"But—" said Isobar.

"No!"

Isobar wriggled desperately. Life on Luna was sorry enough already. If now they took from him the last remaining solace he had, the last amusement which lightened his moments of freedom—

"Look, Commander!" he pleaded, "I tell you what I'll do. I won't bother nobody. I'll go Outside and play it—"

"Outside!" Eagan stared at him incredulously. "Are you mad? How about the Grannies?"

Isobar knew all about the Grannies. The only mobile form of life found by space-seeking man on Earth's satellite, their name was an abbreviation of the descriptive one applied to them by the first Lunar employers: Granitebacks. This was no exaggeration; if anything, it was an understatement. For the Grannies, though possessed of certain low intelligence, had quickly proven themselves a deadly, unyielding and implacable foe.

Worse yet, they were an enemy almost indestructible! No man had ever yet brought to Earth laboratories the carcass of a Grannie; science was completely baffled in its endeavors to explain the composition of Graniteback physiology—but it was known, from bitter experience, that the carapace or exoskeleton of the Grannies was formed of something harder than steel, diamond, or battleplate! This flesh could be penetrated by no weapon known

to man; neither by steel nor flame, by electronic nor ionic wave, nor by the lethal, newly discovered atomo-needle dispenser.

All this Isobar knew about the Grannies. Yet:

"They ain't been any Grannies seen around the Dome," he said, "for a 'coon's age. Anyhow, if I seen any comin', I could run right back inside—"

"No!" said Commander Eagan flatly. "Absolutely, *no!* I have no time for such nonsense. You know the orders—obey them! And now, gentlemen, good afternoon!"

He left. Sparks turned to Isobar, grinning.

"Well," he said, "one man's fish—hey, Jonesy? Too bad you can't play your doodlesack any more, but frankly, I'm just as glad. Of all the awful screeching wails—"

But Isobar Jones, generally mild and gentle, was now in a perfect fury. His pale eyes blazed, he stomped his foot on the floor, and from his lips poured a stream of such angry invective that Riley looked startled. Words that, to Isobar, were the utter dregs of violent profanity.

"Oh, dagnab it!" fumed Isobar Jones. "Oh, tarnation and dingbust! Oh—*fiddlesticks!*"

II

"AND so," chuckled Riley, "he left, bubbling like a kettle on a red-hot oven. But, boy! was he ever mad! Just about ready to bust, he was."

Some minutes had passed since Isobar had left; Riley was talking to Dr. Loesch, head of the Dome's Physics Research Division. The older man nodded commiseratingly.

"It is funny, yes," he agreed, "but at the same time it is not altogether amusing. I feel sorry for him. He is a very unhappy man, our poor Isobar."

"Yeah, I know," said Riley, "but, hell, we all get a little bit homesick now and then. He ought to learn to—"

"Excuse me, my boy," interrupted the aged physicist, his voice gentle, "it is not mere homesickness that troubles our friend. It is something deeper, much more vital and serious. It is what my people call:

weltschmerz. There is no accurate translation in English. It means 'world sickness,' or better, 'world weariness'—something like that but intensified a thousandfold.

"It is a deeply-rooted mental condition, sometimes a dangerous frame of mind. Under its grip, men do wild things. Hating the world on which they find themselves, they rebel in curious ways. Suicide . . . mad acts of valor . . . deeds of cunning or knavery. . . ."

"You mean," demanded Sparks anxiously, "Isobar ain't got all his buttons?"

"Not that exactly. He is perfectly sane. But he is in a dark morass of despair. He may try *anything* to retrieve his lost happiness, rid his soul of its dark oppression. His world-sickness is like a crying hunger—By the way, where is he now?"

"Below, I guess. In his quarters."

"Ah, good! Perhaps he is sleeping. Let us hope so. In slumber he will find peace and forgetfulness."

But Dr. Loesch would have been far less sanguine had some power the "giftie gi'en" him of watching Isobar Jones at that moment.

Isobar was not asleep. Far from it. Wide awake and very much astir, he was acting in a singularly sinister role: that of a slinking, furtive culprit.

Returning to his private cubicle after his conversation with Dome Commander Eagan, he had stalked straightway to the cabinet wherein was encased his precious set of bagpipes. These he had taken from their pegs, gazed upon defiantly, and fondled with almost parental affection.

"So I can't play you, huh?" he muttered darkly. "It disturbs the peace o' the ding-founded, dumblasted Dome staff, does it? Well, we'll *see* about that!"

And tucking the bag under his arm, he had cautiously slipped from the room, down little-used corridors, and now he stood before the huge *impervite* gates which were the entrance to the Dome and the doorway to Outside.

On all save those occasions when a spacecraft landed in the cradle adjacent the gateway, these portals were doubly locked and barred. But today they had been unbolted that the two maintenance men might venture out. And since it was quite possible that Brown and Roberts might have to get

inside in a hurry, their bolts remained drawn. Sole guardian of the entrance was a very bored Junior Patrolman.

Up to this worthy strode Isobar Jones, confident and assured, exuding an aura of propriety.

"Very well, Wilkins," he said. "I'll take over now. You may go to the meeting."

Wilkins looked at him bewilderedly.

"Huh? Whuzzat, Mr. Jones?"

Isobar's eyebrows arched.

"You mean you haven't been notified?"

"Notified of *what?*"

"Why, the general council of all Patrolmen! Weren't you told that I would take your place here while you reported to G.H.Q.?"

"I ain't," puzzled Wilkins, "heard nothing about it. Maybe I ought to call the office, maybe?"

And he moved the wall-audio. But Isobar said swiftly. "That—er—won't be necessary, Wilkins. My orders were plain enough. Now, you just run along. I'll watch this entrance for you."

"We-e-ell," said Wilkins, "if you say so. Orders is orders. But keep a sharp eye out, Mister Jones, in case Roberts and Brown should come back sudden-like."

"I will," promised Isobar, "don't worry."

WILKINS moved away. Isobar waited until the Patrolman was completely out of sight. Then swiftly he pulled open the massive gate, slipped through, and closed it behind him.

A flood of warmth, exhilarating after the constantly regulated temperature of the Dome, descended upon him. Fresh air, thin, but fragrant with the scent of growing things, made his pulses stir with joyous abandon. He was Outside! He was Outside, in good sunlight, at last! After six long and dreary months!

Raptly, blissfully, all thought of caution tossed to the gentle breezes that ruffled his sparse hair, Isobar Jones stepped forward into the lunar valley . . .

How long he wandered thus, carefree and utterly content, he could not afterward say. It seemed like minutes; it must have been longer. He only knew that the grass was green beneath his feet, the trees were a lacy network through which warm sunlight filtered benevolently, the chirrupings of small insects and the rustling whisper of

the breezes formed a tiny symphony of happiness through which he moved as one charmed.

It did not occur to him that he had wandered too far from the Dome's entrance until, strolling through an enchanting flower-decked glade, he was startled to hear—off to his right—the sharp, explosive bark of a Haemholtz ray pistol.

He whirled, staring about him wildly, and discovered that though his meandering had kept him near the Dome, he had unconsciously followed its hemispherical perimeter to a point nearly two miles from the Gateway. By the placement of ports and windows, Isobar was able to judge his location perfectly; he was opposite that portion of the structure which housed Sparks' radio turret.

And the shooting? That could only be—

He did not have to name its reason, even to himself. For at that moment, there came racing around the curve of the Dome a pair of figures, Patrolmen clad in fatigue drab. Roberts and Brown. Roberts was staggering, one foot dragged awkwardly as he ran; Brown's left arm, bloodstained from shoulder to elbow, hung limply at his side, but in his good right fist he held a spitting Haemholtz with which he tried to cover his comrade's sluggish retreat.

And behind these two, grim, grey, gaunt figures that moved with astonishing speed despite their massive bulk, came three . . . six . . . a dozen of those lunarites whom all men feared. The Grannies!

III

SIMULTANEOUSLY with his recognition of the pair, Joe Roberts saw him. A gasp of relief escaped the wounded man.

"Jones! Thank the Lord! Then you picked up our cry for help? Quick, man—where is it? There's not a moment to waste!"

"W-where," faltered Isobar feebly, "is *what?*"

"The tank, of course! Didn't you hear our telecast? We can't possibly make it back to the gate without an armored car. My foot's broken, and—" Roberts stopped suddenly, an abrupt horror in his eyes. "You don't have one! You're here *alone!*"

Then you didn't pick up our call? But, why—?"

"Never mind that," snapped Isobar, "now!" Placid by nature, he could move when urgency drove. His quick mind saw the immediateness of their peril. Unarmed, he could not help the Patrolmen fight a delaying action against their foes, nor could he hasten their retreat. Anyway, weapons were useless, and time was of the essence. There was but one temporary way of staving off disaster. "Over here . . . this tree! Quick! Up you go! Give him a lift, Brown— There! That's the stuff!"

He was the last to scramble up the gnarled bole to a tentative leafy sanctuary. He had barely gained the security of the lowermost bough when a thundering crash resounded, the sturdy trunk trembled beneath his clutch. Stony claws gouged yellow parallels in the bark scant inches beneath one kicking foot, then the Granny fell back with a thud. The Graniteback was *not* a climber. It was far too ungainly, much too weighty for that.

Roberts said weakly, "Th-thanks, Jonesy! That was a close call."

"That goes for me, too, Jonesy," added Brown from an upper bough. "But I'm afraid you just delayed matters. This tree's O.Q. as long as it lasts, but—" He stared down upon the gathering knot of Grannies unhappily—"it's not going to last long with that bunch of superdreadnaughts working out on it! Hold tight, fellows! Here they come!"

For the Grannies, who had huddled for a moment as if in telepathic consultation, now joined forces, turned, and as one body charged headlong toward the tree. The unified force of their attack was like the shattering impact of a battering ram. Bark rasped and gritted beneath the besieged men's hands, dry leaves and twigs pelted about them in a tiny rain, tormented fibrous sinews groaned as the aged forest monarch shuddered in agony.

Desperately they clung to their perches. Though the great tree bent, it did not break. But when it stopped trembling, it was canted drunkenly to one side, and the erstwhile solid earth about its base was broken and cracked—revealing fleshy tentacles uprooted from ancient moorings!

7—Planet—March

BROWN stared at this evidence of the Grannies' power with terror-fascinated eyes. His voice was none too firm.

"Lord! Piledrivers! A couple more like that—"

Isobar nodded. He knew what falling into the clutch of the Grannies meant. He had once seen the grisly aftermath of a Graniteback feast. Even now their adversaries had drawn back for a second attack. A sudden idea struck him. A straw of hope at which he grasped feverishly.

"You telecast a message to the Dome? Help should be on the way by now. If we can just hold out—"

But Roberts shook his head.

"We sent a message, Jonesy, but I don't think it got through. I've just been looking at my portable. It seems to be busted. Happened when they first attacked us, I guess. I tripped and fell on it.

Isobar's last hope flickered out.

"Then I—I guess it won't be long now," he mourned. "If we could have only got a message through, they would have sent out an armored car to pick us up. But as it is—"

Brown's shrug displayed a bravado he did not feel.

"Well, that's the way it goes. We knew what we were risking when we volunteered to come Outside. This damn moon! It'll never be worth a plugged credit until men find some way to fight those murderous stones-on-legs!"

Roberts said, "That's right. But what are *you* doing out here, Isobar? And why, for Pete's sake, the bagpipes?"

"Oh—the pipes?" Isobar flushed painfully. He had almost forgotten his original reason for adventuring Outside, had quite forgotten his instrument, and was now rather amazed to discover that somehow throughout all the excitement he had held onto it. "Why, I just happened to—Oh! *the pipes!*"

"Hold on!" roared Roberts. His warning came just in time. Once more, the three tree-sitters shook like dried peas in a pod as their leafy refuge trembled before the locomotive onslaught of the lunar beasts. This time the already-exposed roots strained and lifted, several snapped; when the Grannies again withdrew, complacently unaware that the "lethal ray" of Brown's Haemholtz was wasting itself upon their adamant hides

in futile fury, the tree was bent at a precarious angle.

Brown sobbed, not with fear but with impotent anger, and in a gesture of enraged desperation, hurled his now-empty weapon at the retreating Grannies.

"No good! Not a damn bit of good! Oh, if there was only some way of fighting those filthy things—"

But Isobar Jones had a one-track mind. "The pipes!" he cried again, excitedly. "That's the answer!" And he drew the instrument into playing position, bag cuddled beneath one arm-pit, drones stiffly erect over his shoulder, blow-pipe at his lips. His cheeks puffed, his breath expelled. The giant lung swelled, the chaunter emitted its distinctive, fearsome, "*Kaa-aa-o-o-o-oro-oong!*"

Roberts moaned.

"Oh, Lord! A guy can't even die in peace!"

And Brown stared at him hopelessly.

"It's no use, Isobar. You trying to scare them off? They have no sense of hearing. That's been proven—"

Isobar took his lips from the reed to explain.

"It's not that. I'm trying to rouse the boys in the Dome. We're right opposite the atmosphere-conditioning-unit. See that grilled duct over there? That's an inhalation-vent. The portable transmitter's out of order, and our voices ain't strong enough to carry into the Dome—but the sound of these pipes is! And Commander Eagan told me just a short while ago that the sound of the pipes carries all over the building!

"If they hear this, they'll get mad because I'm disobeyin' orders. They'll start lookin' for me. If they can't find me inside, maybe they'll look Outside. See that window? That's Sparks' turret. If we can make him look out here—"

"*Stop talking!*" roared Roberts. "Stop talking, guy, and start blowing! I think you've got something there. Anyhow, it's our last hope. *Blow!*"

"And quick!" appended Brown. "For here they come!"

He meant the Grannies. Again they were huddling for attack, once more, a solid phalanx of indestructible, granite flesh, they were smashing down upon the tree.

"*Haa-a-roong!*" blew Isobar Jones.

AND—even he could not have foreseen the astounding results of his piping! What happened next was as astonishing as it was incomprehensible. For as the pipes, filled now and primed to burst into whatever substitute for melody they were prodded into, wailed into action—the Grannies' rush came to an abrupt halt!

As one, they stopped cold in their tracks and turned dull, colorless, questioning eyes upward into the tree whence came this weird and vibrant droning!

So stunned with surprise was Isobar that his grip on the pipes relaxed, his lips almost slipped from the reed. But Brown's delighted bellow lifted his paralysis.

"Sacred rings of Saturn—look! They *like* it! Keep playing, Jonesy! Play, boy, like you never played before!"

And Roberts roared, above the skirling of the *piobaireachd* into which Isobar had instinctively swung, "Music hath charms to soothe the savage beast! Then we were wrong. They *can* hear, after all! See that? They're lying down to listen—like so many lambs! Keep playing, Isobar! For once in my life I'm glad to hear that lovely, wonderful music!"

Isobar needed no urging. He, too, had noted how the Grannies' attack had stopped, how every last one of the gaunt grey beasts had suddenly, quietly, almost happily, dropped to its haunches at the base of the tree.

There was no doubt about it; the Grannies *liked* this music. Eyes raptly fixed, unblinking, unwavering, they froze into postures of gentle beatitude. One stirred once, dangerously, as for a moment Isobar paused to catch his breath, but Isobar hastily lipped the blow-pipe with redoubled eagerness, and the Granny relapsed into quietude.

Followed then what, under somewhat different circumstances, should have been a piper's dream. For Isobar had an audience which would not—and in two cases *dared* not—allow him to stop playing. And to this audience he played over and over again his entire repertoire. Marches, flings, dances—the stirring *Rhoderik Dhu* and the lilting *Lassies O'Skye*, the mournful *Coghiegh nha Shie* whose keening is like the sound of a sobbing nation.

The *Cock o' the North*, he played, and *Mironton . . . Wee Flow'r o' Dee* and *MacArthur's March . . . La Cucuracha* and—

And his lungs were parched, his lips dry as swabs of cotton. Blood pounded through his temples, throbbing in time to the drone of the chaunter, and a dark mist gathered before his eyes. He tore the blow-pipe from his lips, gasped,

"Keep playing!" came the dim, distant howl of Johnny Brown. "Just a few minutes longer, Jonesy! Relief is on the way. Sparks saw us from his turret window five minutes ago!"

And Isobar played on. How, or what, he did not know. The memory of those next few minutes was never afterward clear in his mind. All he knew was that above the skirling drone of his pipes there came another sound, the metallic clanking of a man-made machine . . . an armored tank, sent from the Dome to rescue the beleaguered trio.

He was conscious, then, of a friendly voice shouting words of encouragement, of Joe Roberts calling a warning to those below.

"Careful, boys! Drive the tank right up beneath us so we can hop in and get out of here! Watch the Grannies—they'll be after us the minute Isobar stops playing!"

Then the answer from below. The fantastic answer in Sparks' familiar voice. The answer that caused the bagpipes to slip from Isobar's fingers as Isobar Jones passed out in a dead faint:

"After you? Those Grannies? Hell's howling acres—*those Grannies are stone dead!*"

AFTERWARD, Isobar Jones said weakly, "But—dead? I don't understand. Was it the sound-waves that killed them?"

Commander Eagan said, "No! Grannies absolutely cannot hear. That is one thing we do know about them—though we will soon know a great deal more, now that our biologists have a dozen carcasses to dissect, thanks to you. But Grannies have no auditory apparatus."

"But then—what?" puzzled Isobar. "It couldn't be vibration, because our Patrolmen tried shootin' 'em with the vibro-ray

pistol, and nothin' never happened—"

"Nevertheless," said Dr. Loesch quietly, "it *was* vibration which killed them, Isobar. That is, of course, only my conjecture, but I believe subsequent study will prove I am correct.

"It was the effect of *dual*, or disharmonic vibration. You see, the vibro-ray pistol expels an ultrasonic wave which disrupts molecular construction sensitive to a single harmonic. The Grannies' composition is more complex. It required the impact of two different wave-lengths, impinging on their nerve centers at the same moment, to destroy them."

"And the bagpipe—" said Isobar with slowly dawning comprehension — "emits two distinct tones at the same time!"

The full meaning of his words flashed upon Isobar. He turned to Commander Eagan, sallow cheeks glowing with new color.

"Then—then what means we've licked our problem!" he cried. "We've found a weapon that'll kill the Grannies, and it won't be necessary to live inside Domes no more! Now we can move out into the open and live like human beings!"

"Absolutely true!" agreed the Commander. "But *you* will not be living Outside, Jones. Not right away, anyway."

"H-uh? W-hat do you mean, Commander?"

"I mean," said Eagan sternly, "that regardless of results, you are still guilty of flagrant disobedience to orders! That, as Commander of this outpost, I cannot tolerate. You are hereby sentenced to thirty days confinement to quarters!"

"But—" stammered Isobar—"but tarnation golly—"

"In the course of which time," continued Commander Eagan imperturbably, "you will serve as Instructor for every man in the Dome—at double salary!"

"You can't *do* me like this!" wailed Isobar. "Jinky-wallopers, I won't—Huh? What's 'at? Instructor? Instructor in *what?*"

"In the—er—art," said Eagan, "of bagpipe playing. If we are to rid Luna of the Grannies, we must all learn how to perform on that—er—lethal weapon. And, Jones, I think I can truthfully say that this punishment hurts me more than it hurts you!"

SLAVES OF THE NINTH MOON

By **ROSS ROCKLYNNE**

Undercover jobs, too dirty and tough for the IPF, had always been Hallmyer's tasks. But never, in even his wildest dreams, had he thought that to fulfill his mission would he have to murder the girl he loved.

I FOUND my superior sitting in his swivel chair, palm propping up his fine greying head. He had a look on his face that I knew only too well, and I winced.

I said, "What is it, this time?"

He frowned uneasily, hardly able to meet my eyes. "I guess it's up to you again, Sid," he answered grimly.

"Yes," I said over-politely. "I'm afraid not. I don't want any. I'm right in the middle of a very tender experiment. I'm not going to—"

He stopped me with a brief wave of one hand. "Ever heard of Strilla MacCloud, Sid?" he asked.

The name exploded in my face like a bombshell. I sank to a chair, stared at him, and knew he knew about me.

Had I ever heard of Strilla MacCloud? That was a stupid question; of course I had. We had met on soggy Venus, where had been located a local Bureau of Transmitted Egos. She had saved my life from several Venusian thugs, and she was such a woman as a man cannot forget. Her eyes were dark and esoteric; her skin a rich gold, and the sun-stones about her throat enhanced its goldenness. She was slim, and virginal—and deadly!

She had been a slave-runner, one of the most ruthless; and she had tried to get me to handle her Venusian slave ship. Instead, I had turned her over to the Council of Ten, had started the ball rolling that had wiped out the vicious slave-traffic. She had hated me then, had sworn revenge, even though a few hours before, she had been soft and yielding in the circle of my arms.

Yes, I knew Strilla MacCloud. I had followed her career for years. She had

escaped from prison, had manned a pirate craft with the dregs of the spaceway's pirates and killers, and had fought the IPF throughout the passing years. Newsflashes of her skirmishes with the IPF had made the viziscreens time and again, but always she had avoided capture and fled into the vastness of space.

And then a few years before, with a score of her toughest men, she had disappeared entirely, in a Grimiel-Hammond seven-jet ship—and gradually she had been forgotten by all but the IPF.

So when my superior sprang her name on me in the office that day, all I could do was slump back in the chair, and feel the memories racing quicksilver-like about in my mind.

I grinned in a crazy, cock-eyed fashion, felt the hot blood pounding at my temples.

"Sure," I said. "Sure, I'm the guy that busted the slave-racket wide open, and the same guy who gave Strilla MacCloud the damndest headache she had had for many a year. But," I leaned forward intently, spread my hands, "if I ever meet up with Strilla MacCloud again, she'll bust *me* wide open. So whatever it is you've got in mind, count me out." I fumbled a cigarette out of my pack and lit it.

We exchanged glances for a minute, and finally he arose, and sat on the edge of his desk, facing me. Little wrinkles were on his brow.

"I can't count you out, Sid," he said gently. "Believe me, if I could I would. But I can't. The Council of Ten has the records of your slave-running episode—everything. You know Strilla McCloud, they say, and so you're the man for the job. Furthermore, they've been impressed with the way you've handled jobs of this



The Singer stood on the dais, and she was utterly lovely and exotic against the weird melancholy background of Ellil.

same general type, and I've got a special order-blank which names you as the agent in the case.

"Agent for what? To recover the sun-stone necklace Strilla MacCloud stole from the Empress of Mars some twelve years ago." I smoked hard. "That's a job for the IPF!"

He sighed. He picked up from his desk what looked like a compass in a universal joint.

"Know what that is?" he asked.

When I told him it was a compass, he scoffed. "And you an electrical engineer! If it was a compass, the needle wouldn't be pointing east and west, would it? No, Sid, it's a sun-stone detector, and it's got a radius of a million miles."

ABRUPTLY he turned and went behind his desk and sat down while I watched him in baffled, growing anger.

He pointed the compass at me, jerking it in little emphatic movements as he talked.

"It's this way, Sid. It all goes back to the radium mines on the dead sea-bottoms of Mars. As you know, Earth has a ninety-nine year lease on those mines. In another two months, the lease will be up, and Earth won't have a supply source for the radium she needs in such vast quantities."

I flicked ashes onto the rug and scowled at him. "Renew the lease. And besides, what's that got to do with—"

He interrupted, shaking his head emphatically. "We can't renew it. We submitted our formal option to the Empress. She refused it. She's on her high-horse. Twelve years ago, she asked the Council of Ten to restore her sun-stone necklace. The Council ignored the appeal. The Empress then appealed to Earth, since it was a human who had accomplished the piracy, and Earth was more directly responsible. Earth didn't pay any attention, either. And everybody was very relieved when the Empress dropped the whole subject—apparently."

He smiled ruefully. "She's a sly old bird, Sid. Last year she told us flatly that unless we recovered the sun-stone necklace she wouldn't renew our lease. Well, *that* brought action! We had to find her necklace, or face an absolute poverty

of radium. So the Earth representative sent me instructions to manufacture some sort of detector that would react to the characteristic vibrations given off by sun-stones. They loaned us the other sun-stone necklace for test purposes."

I threw my cigarette away and got up and picked up the detector. "This is it?"

"That's it, Sid."

"And it's pointing at the sun-stone necklace at the Smithsonian?"

He nodded. "Three months ago, we made a dozen of the detectors, and distributed them among the captains of a dozen freight and passenger ships. And last week, a passenger ship of the Outer Planet Corporation reported that the needle pointed toward perp-planet number three. The ship discovered it by accident. There aren't any traffic routes laid down to the perp-planets, you know. This particular captain had to rise a million miles out of the plane of the ecliptic in order to escape a meteor-bog. So the sun-stone necklace is on that planet, and there is every possibility that that is where Strilla MacCloud is too."

I felt faint. I had to sit down again. I said hoarsely, "Do you know what Strilla MacCloud will do to me if she ever gets her hands on me, chief? She'll tear me limb from limb. She'll gouge my eyes out and play marbles with 'em. She'll—" I stopped and got hold of myself. I said dangerously, "Why doesn't the Council put the IPF on this job?"

He said, "Because—" Then he flushed and bit his lip. He said lamely, "You and Will Carrist will have one of the new ships, armed to the hull—" He stopped, and his shoulders fell. He made a weary little motion, because he knew that I knew what he had started to say. Perp-planet number three was another of those insignificant little worlds which the Council of Ten made a habit of kicking around in any way it pleased. I was being given *carte blanche* to do anything I wanted to recover the sun-stone necklace, during which the Council would conveniently look the other way, something they couldn't do if the IPF were put on the job. . . .

I said glumly, "Let me have the detector," and I strapped it around my wrist.

I stuck out my hand and shook his. He

looked pained. I grinned in cockeyed fashion. "You never know," I told him. "Perchance we will not meet again."

And so I went.

OUR little ship, armored thickly, and armed with everything from hand weapons to flame-ropes and a whole brace of proton blasts, in addition to a needle-prow, thundered along through deep space. Our destination was one of that small group of little-studied, little-known planets which move in orbits perpendicular to the plane of the ecliptic. Hence, perp-planet.

Will Carrist, one of the ace pilots of the solar system, and certainly my best, though unimaginative friend, had his robot controls and meteor detectors set and was shoveling beans into his mouth. I sat across from him at the galley table, with a cup of coffee and a cigarette. I was in a black, scowling mood, and Will didn't help it any.

"But all I'm asking you," he complained miserably, "is where I should put the ship down. What kind of people? What kind of a planet? And what kind of an answer do I get? 'It just happens to be one of those unimportant planets the planetographers have passed by—'"

"Which happens to be the truth." I glared frostily. "I've given you all the information I could pick up from the Planet Atlas. There's a Bureau of Transmitted Egos, according to interplanetary law. They have one-fifth of one Tellurian gravity. Which is the reason why they live about five times as long as human beings, and why they're dying out—"

He dropped his fork and wiped his big hand across his mouth. "What's a shallow gravity got to do with—?" he began.

"Do I have to draw a diagram?" I demanded, being very polite. "Didn't I tell you before? It's a scientific fact that gravity, the pull of gravity, is the greatest single factor that causes death. Gravity pulls on you from the second you're born. It builds up waste products. It poisons tissues. The heavier the gravity, the sooner you die. So if you want to live on one of the minor planets in a space-suit the rest of your life, you too can be practically immortal."

"I know that, Sid," he protested. "But you said the reason they were dy—"

"The reason the Ellillians are dying out—Ellill is what they call their planet—the reason they're dying out is because of another law: long life exacts a price, and the price is a steadily falling birth-rate. The Ellillians are millions of years old, undoubtedly, but that particular law is just catching up with them. Another century and they'll be gone. There are any number of cities, but most of them are in ruins—just one of them is inhabited. But exactly where that particular city is, I don't know—"

"Just exactly where that particular city is I don't know." Carrist mimicked despairingly. He got up from the table and started from the galley in a bad humor. He stuck his head back in again. "And what if you're wrong about the gravity? What if it isn't one-fifth of a gravity after all? What if I crash the ship?" He scowled.

I unloosened my good humor and grinned sourly at him. "Hah!"

He scowled and went clomping down the companionway to the control room. I grinned to myself at the idea of Will Carrist crashing a ship. Absurd.

But not so absurd as that! Two million miles above the plane of the ecliptic, we picked up perp-planet number three. It swam out of the emptiness like a ghost, drear and white. A million miles from the planet, the detector began to quiver. A hundred thousand miles farther on, the needle was rigid, as the peculiarly characteristic vibrations from the sun-stone necklace struck it. The necklace was there.

And was Strilla MacCloud there, too? Pin-pricks of sweat were on my face.

CARRIST sent the ship bowling blithely along through space, while I went up to the telescope turret and glued my eyes to the photo-amplifiers. The planet grew swiftly. In no time, I saw a city in a mountain-enclosed valley, a great clot of monoliths standing in lonely, heart-aching grandeur. My detector needle was pointing farther east, however, and I started down to tell Will to shift course a few degrees.

The next thing I knew it seemed as if the ship had gone out of control. I slammed against the wall, and was plastered there, bruised and shaken, for a

couple of seconds, and then was flung the other way. I yelled furiously. I yelled for Will. I cursed him. The ship was rolling like mad, just outside the atmosphere. I clawed my way to a port, and saw the planet zipping up toward us and then I was flung away and I hit my head, and I was groggy. One fact stood out with stark certainty. We were going to crash!

We didn't though. Just at that moment when I knew we had to hit in our downward flight, the ship went on an even keel, poised for a heart-stopping moment, and then bumped gently.

I got up very slowly, bleary eyed, and went down to the control room.

Will was sitting there, facing the door as I came in, tapping his blunt fingers monotonously on the arm of the chair.

"So," he said very softly. "One fifth of a Tellurian gravity, you said. Very funny!"

I looked at the instrument board, and blinked. I said huskily, "Cut the comedy. What happened?"

Will said, "One fifth of a Tellurian gravity, you said. One fifth. Of course, you're right and the instruments are wrong. So is the planet." He looked as if he were about to explode. He said, "Two gravities, Sid. *Two.*"

"You're crazy!" I snapped. "It couldn't be. The Planet Atlas said the Ellillians were thin, weak-boned, fragile. Why—why they couldn't stand up in two gravities, or even a half gravity. It'd kill them!"

He jumped out of his chair. "It's two gravities!" he yelled. "I don't care what the Planet Atlas said. I came down expecting only a fifth of a gravity, and first thing you know the ship was out of control. I—"

"Shut up!" I yelled back angrily. He subsided, and I saw then that he was shaking. No wonder! There weren't three other pilots in the system who could have averted a crack-up under those conditions. I drew a deep breath and switched in the view plates. Cold barren land stretched away. I focussed the plates on the city. It was massive, Gargantuan. Whoever had built it, millions of years ago, had built it to endure against a monster gravity.

And perp-planet three was only a thousand miles in diameter!

Will said hoarsely, "It's a neutronium planet, Sid. It's got neutronium at its core. It has to be a neutronium planet, with that much gravity."

I nodded, and I was sweating, because it was a tough job my muscles had to keep me even in a sitting position against that gravity. It couldn't be anything but a planet with a neutronium core—a core maybe only a half-dozen feet in diameter. Neutronium was dense enough to give such a small planet its two gravities. But why had the Planet Atlas, a perfectly reliable publication, flatly stated that there was only one-fifth of a gravity?

"Something," I said grimly, "is *screwy*. We'll follow the needle though, and no matter what happens, don't take anything for granted."

Will lifted the ship again, and we plowed up through the air over those oppressive ruins and went south. I stayed in the control room. Will's job was no child's play. Terrific, driving, wailing winds grasped at the ship. Will had to fight his controls. We were at that time near the equator, and I guessed that our destination would be somewhere very near the south pole of the planet. What caused the winds, I couldn't begin to imagine. The planet was so far from the Sun that there couldn't be much temperature difference anywhere on its surface.

At one time, we now saw, the Ellillians had been a numerous race. We saw dozens of old, weather-beaten cities, the wind whining through their deserted structures with a devil's-song of sad aloneness.

The needle now began to point at a downward slant in its crystal universal joint. Out of the dark clouds that ringed the horizon, another city came into sight, like an unmanned ship from the night. This was precisely over the south pole. I gave Carrist the signal.

He looked pale, as if he distrusted the planet, but he dropped the ship—cautiously—and came to as light a landing as you please, about a mile from the city.

CARRIST was dumbfounded. I wasn't exactly undisturbed myself. I had told myself, flatly, that the Ellillians, with the skeletal structures of butterflies,

couldn't possibly have endured two gravities, even for a second. They couldn't have occupied the deserted cities for any length of time, for their bones would have cracked under the pull of the gravity. Nor, I knew, could they inhabit this city. Knew it, that is, until we landed.

The gravity indicator showed *one-fifth of a gravity!*

"One-fifth of a gravity!" Carrist stammered. "That makes it one-tenth of what it is on the other side of the planet!"

I gulped. I couldn't believe my senses. But in the end we had to believe our instruments. There was only one-fifth of a gravity. Stupefied, we got into spacesuits, and left the ship. We stood there, as light as paper dolls. A tremendous, blasting wind howled about us like dervishes, swooping down out of a sky that scudded with ominous clouds. The atmospheric pressure, I saw by the aneroid barometer inside my helmet, was scarcely three pounds to the square inch, and I knew we'd have to have bodies native to the planet.

We stood there and looked off toward the high-rising edifices of that ghostly city, and I knew we were both thinking of Strilla MacCloud. In my heart, I dreaded to meet her, even if I was bolstered by the Hampton swinging against my hip. I had never fooled myself into believing that, human though she might be, beautiful though she might be, she was not evil incarnate.

I drew a deep breath.

"Come on. We might as well get the job over with." Which was an optimistic way of looking at it.

Will followed me as I made my way along cold, barren lands. We saw no trace of farmlands, but there was vegetation of a sort—hard, glistening ice-colored bushes; trees, hundreds of feet high, hard-shelled nuts hanging from their limbs, or littering the ground around their gnarled boles. Now and then we heard a shrill piping sound from some kind of bird. Small animals scampered underfoot, things with small wicked eyes and thick fur. Mountains rose darkly in the far distance. The Sun was little more than a star, we were so far away.

We ran across a road that must have been built a thousand years before, and

had been untended since that time. We followed that, moving through an eternal, stupefying dusk which robbed us of speech. The gravity was so shallow that we had to be careful not to apply too much downward pressure, or we'd have gone shooting up a dozen feet. Will stayed close to me, probably sharing my oppressiveness as the first buildings of that silent city towered around us.

Weeds, thick with a stifling, aromatic oil, twined in confusion through doors and windows. These buildings were tall, and seemed massive, but in reality were constructed of slabs of rock carelessly supporting each other. One had the feeling that the whole city would come down if subjected to an untoward disturbance.

I stopped, looking down a littered street. I was looking for the Bureau of Transmitted Egos. Will suddenly grasped my arm painfully. "Look!"

I WHIRLED and looked and stiffened. It was a sight to chill the blood. Off to our right was an open square, centered by a dais, and grouped around the dais were perhaps a hundred of the inhabitants of this frozen world.

There was a woman on the dais, and it seemed that she was singing. A woman? My heart went to my mouth. I felt myself carried away by her radiant beauty, unreal to me then. She was a gossamer creature with pale glowing hair that streamed and whipped in the driving wind, away from her elfin thin, glowing face. Her arms and legs were bare, and they too glowed with a living radiance, through which one could see the very bones, like filaments in an electric globe.

And it didn't seem to me then that she could be talking, either. It was like a song. Her voice rose and fell sweetly, cadences that were sheer music, and I was held in a hypnosis as strong as that of the people who listened to her. I called her the *Singer*, in my mind, and I was held enthralled by her breath-taking beauty. Then I was walking forward, drinking in her beauty, and the liquid flow of her gushing voice.

"Sid!" Will no doubt thought he spoke in a whisper. It carried like a fog-horn, though. It impinged on the delicately flowered ears of the natives, and cut off

the song of the Singer as if a guillotine had fallen. Those Ellillians turned toward us as if they were one person. Their big shining eyes went wider in expressions of mortal terror such as I never hope to see again. I felt that we were devils, and I shuddered under the impact of their hate. The crowd broke into horrified wails, then, and suddenly they were gone.

How they went was strange. They spread their arms. Membraneous, transparent tissues opened like wings. The violent wind which was a characteristic of perp-planet number three caught at them, lifted them into the air and away, like fluttering butterflies. They swooped high above their precariously constructed buildings, and gaping black doors and windows engulfed them.

I turned a white face on Will. He looked as if here were wilting.

"It's always the same," he said hoarsely. "It never fails, Sid. They hate human beings! All the small races hate human beings, because they know what we've done to them. Let's find the Bureau, Sid. I want to get this job over with before something happens."

I trudged after him, slowly, thinking my own chill thoughts. I had a presentiment then; or, I had a presentiment, and it was not pleasant. I knew then that even the radium mines on Mars weren't enough to give anybody the right to step into this civilization and turn things haywire. I knew then that we should turn back. To hell with the sun-stone necklace and Strilla MacCloud.

But we didn't turn back.

WE found the Bureau. It reared upward, a solid, dome-shaped building, white as death, constructed by Earth engineers more than a century ago, when the secret of transferring egos from one body to another was discovered.

We went inside. Dust rose chokingly under our feet, and the sound of our footsteps boomed back from the arching walls. Carrist found a light switch. Three or four dull glow-lamps came on in the ceiling. We saw then that our footprints alone were visible in the dust overlaying the cold floor, proof enough that the Bureau had not been used for years.

A perfect silence was here, for the clos-

ing of the massive door had cut out the wind.

We groped our way toward a desk-like affair, but there was no signaling device, and there was no sign of a keeper. We stamped through room after room of that drear mausoleum. We found the transmitting machinery. We found the body storage chambers, but no bodies. I had been hoping to find the body of Strilla MacCloud.

I looked at Will. He was plainly unnerved. I said, "Come on. We have to find bodies. We'll go outside and get 'em if we have to knock some natives over the head." I thrust out my chin and was sore because there wasn't a caretaker; but I knew I was being sore because I wanted to drive away the oppressiveness that had lodged in my very bones.

We chose a back exit, and emerged into a narrow alley. Almost immediately, I saw one of the Ellillians, and I started forward grimly, not giving a hang. The Ellillian saw me. He started back in horror, and then he seemed to think better of it. But he was shaking in terror when I came up.

I halted in front of him, still sore. "We want some bodies," I snapped. "Two of 'em. And we want 'em quick." I spoke in the Universal tongue, probably the simplest language ever invented.

The Ellillian understood me, all right. "Bodies?" he whispered, and his smooth, radiant jaw dropped in horror. I saw then that he was standing at the entrance to a cylindrical building that was windowless. He stepped forward. "No," he cried softly. "You can have no bodies. This is the Place of Thinkers. Go away! Away! There are no bodies here, for they think."

I scowled at him threateningly. I took a step forward and the result was surprising. He threw himself at me with a tinny screech of rage. All I did was to throw up my hands, in an instinctive gesture of protest. I didn't mean to hit him. But I did. And it wasn't even a blow. But he moaned, and his fragile little body crumpled up on the broken steps, and he was silent.

I bent over him unsteadily. He was breathing all right, and I felt like a rat.

Will was chattering, but I told him to stay here and watch this body. better yet, to carry it across to the Bureau and strap it in the transmitting chair. "In the meantime," I told him grimly, "I'm going to get another body."

-Then I went into the Place of Thinkers.

I went padding up a circular staircase, up and up. And in a chill, windowless, bare stone room, I saw the Thinkers. They were sitting there, cross-legged, heads forward on their chests, glowing with dull inner lights.

Dust was on their heads, their shoulders, their knees; and dust was around them.

The dust of years.

I was sick, my stomach cold, my teeth shivering against each other, my skin covered with goose-flesh. I felt revolted by what I had to do. I picked out the youngest of the lot—and they were all old—and crossed toward him. The others, about a hundred of them, were turned toward him, like a school-class, he being their teacher. I leaned down and shook him violently. And I shook him again, irately. He came out of it all right, but slowly. He moaned and raised his wrinkled face and his eyes almost made a creaking sound when he opened them.

He looked at me. Slowly he comprehended who and what I was. He made a moaning sound and his face was crossed with revulsion. His chest began to pant, and his whole body gained in radiance as if he had pressed an electric switch in his stomach.

"Away!" his cracked voice burst out. "Away with you! Why did you disturb me, when I had almost solved the secret of the universe? Away!"

He glared at me once; then abruptly closed his eyes, dropped his chin on his chest, and the radiance began to die again.

I DIDN'T say anything. He was alive. I scooped him up in my arms and ignored the other Thinkers, went for the stairs again, and clattered down. My stomach was turning over, and I felt like a grave-robber, but I went through with it. I darted across the alley to the Bureau, and found Will in the transmitting room. He had the younger body strapped in its chair.

I plopped the old body down on a ledge that ran around the room. I looked at Will and grinned sourly. His lips were quivering, and he was looking at the old Thinker with horror.

I explained to him. He looked faint. "But—but what do they think about? And why?"

"How do I know?" I snapped.

"I'm—I'm not getting into that bag of bones, Sid," he chattered. "I—"

"I didn't ask you to, did I? Get into the chair," and he got.

I crossed to the controls, and threw over a lever. A generator kicked into action; and a whole bank of tubes lit up. While the machinery was warming up, I strapped Will to the chair, put the electrodes on his wrist, and the headset on his head, after taking his own helmet off. I did the same to the body his mind was to occupy. I went back to the control board and made final adjustments. I threw the lever down all the way.

Three minutes later, Will stepped out of his chair, looking groggy, and I went through the same thing. Will, in his new body, took my helmet off. I felt as if my lungs were going to burst as the low atmospheric pressure on the planet hit me. Then Will clamped the headset on, and a wave of gas hit my nostrils, and I went into that semi-conscious state which made my mind receptive to the stream of ego-charged isomers and giant molecules that came flowing along the fabric of wires leading from my chair to that of the old man's.

The change took place and, as always, I was horrified by my sensations. Two minds, or rather, two portions of two minds, changed places slowly, and I felt myself to be a double person. Then the transferral was complete, and I was looking across at my body, which had been given only a thin slice of mine and the old man's consciousness to let it know it was alive.

I stumbled out of the chair as Will unstrapped me—me, the Thinker. I remember the horror I felt at my first impulse—to drop to a sitting position and *think*. But Will held me up, chattering in terror.

"I'm all right," I mumbled. And I was. My mind was on top, and if I

wished I had access to all the memories, conscious as well as sub-conscious, of this creature.

We finally picked up our two bodies, handling them very carefully, you may be sure, and carried them into the storage chambers. We put them in their individual glass shelves, adjusted humidity and atmospheric pressure, watched the slow rise and fall of their chests for a queasy moment, and then left by the back door.

A minute later, we walked down a lonely street, through the howling, macabre wind, just two natives, out for a stroll. But I had the sun-stone necklace detector on my wrist, and beneath our baggy clothing, we had our Hamptons strapped to our hips.

Will's voice was strained. "Now what?"

"Now we find Strilla MacCloud," I muttered. "The detector needle is pointing down!"

And it was pointing down! That little sliver of treated steel, resting in its crystal universal joint, delicately sensitive to the ultra-microscopic wave-lengths given off by the sun-stones, was rigidly pointing to some undetermined spot beneath our very feet.

But how would we get down? Where were the stairs that led there? And once we got down, how would we find Strilla MacCloud and recover the necklace and come back up again? Questions which could have been answered if I had dared to look inside this body's mind. But I didn't dare. Too often, even as we walked along, I again felt the nameless, chilling impulse, to drop to a squatting position . . . and think!

I led the way, Will staying close to me. We entered open doorways, descended ramps and crumbled stairways only to discover chambers which had no outlets other than the ones we used, and so had to come up again. And as we walked though those dreary, dark streets, Ellillians walked and flew about us, silent and ghost-like, some glancing at us curiously, but saying nothing. I felt reasonably certain they didn't know that we were aliens, using alien bodies, so why were they curious. I should have known, for no old men other than myself were evident.

AND suddenly, we came upon the square where we had seen she whom I had named the Singer. Unconsciously, I knew, I must have deliberately guided myself here. I stopped with Will, and felt beneath my mind the indescribable squirming of a mind that rebelliously sought to free itself of my domination. I fought it, and tried to force it down, but I knew that slowly, slowly, it was gaining in power. I was in panic, and I was about to appeal to Will to snap me out of it. But then I saw that near the square, as if restlessly waiting for someone, was a small group of shining Ellillians.

They saw us, and slowly came toward us, or fluttered about us on their sail-boat gliders. There was a growing alarm in their muttered words, until at last one cried, in the native tongue, "Old man! Old man, why do you walk the streets? Why do you not think? Is there not much to think of? Oh, there is much sadness here, and you would have done well to remain immersed in your thoughts!"

They took up a chattering, a wailing which was directed at me, and me alone. I felt Will shuddering at me, pulling at my arm, but I shook free. I muttered, "I have thought too long. Now it has come to me that my people are in trouble, and I must free them."

"Free them! Free them!" they cried piteously, and swayed back and forth in an agony of mind. "It is too late. We are enslaved. There is nothing one can do. Would we incur her revenge, and slowly grow in weight, and flatten out on the streets as she threatens us, or would we live and take from life what we might? Old man, go to your thinking, and thinking, die!"

The mind beneath mine fought me, tigerishly, with the pettishness of an old man who will have his way. I gave way an inch, and then a foot. And there, by some miracle of adjustment, our two minds remained poised; but I was enough the other mind, to know much that I had not known before. If I, Sidney Hallmeyer, had not been at that moment a submerged entity, hardly possessed of emotion, that influx of knowledge would have made me turn, get back my body, and get off the planet, and leave the job up to the IPF whether they wanted it or not.

It was a wretched story that I now understood with a sort of vague clarity. Strilla MacCloud was here; and not only Strilla MacCloud, but a score of her men who had alone escaped the IPF ten years ago when they had cleaned up her slave-running empire. This planet was her hide-out, one of those lost planets which was almost entirely ignored by the rest of the solar system. She had come here, and she and her men had transferred to the bodies of Ellillians. Then Strilla, in her characteristically un-subtle way, had proceeded to enslave the rest of the inhabitants. She did a thorough job of it. Down below the city was the Machinery that the ancients had built, in a past so far away that the mind could not think it. It was a frightening machinery. What did it do? I, Sidney Hallmeyer, couldn't find out. The old mind which now lay side by side with mine thought the thought with dread, and would not go into details.

Strilla found the Machinery, learned its use, and made a threat so terrible that she didn't even need her Hampton guns and her men to teach the natives that Strilla was their master. They went to work for her. Below the city, they carved out palatial rooms. At their own looms, and at their own gardens, they worked to clothe and feed Strilla and her men.

For nine long years Strilla and her gang lived the lives of parasites. Now and then, in their real bodies, they ventured out in their Grimiell-Hammond ship, plundering minor planets, and came back with enough equipment to set up a body transferral station beneath the city. This so that, at a moment's warning, they could get back into their real bodies, and blast away in their ship if danger from the IPF should ever come.

This I discovered from my counter-ego, and what I did not discover directly, I pieced together. And there were other tales of horror, of slavery of a kind which hardly bears printing. I was revolted by my thoughts, and in me grew a terrible hatred for the sheer cruelty that Strilla MacCloud had unloosed on a dying race of people who had had no thoughts but those of peace, and who lived quietly on their own world, steeped in their memories of a lost, planet-wide glory.

These things I thought as I stood before

that small group of agonized Ellillians; and, as my mind slipped another notch toward the limbo of nonentity, I knew something else.

I stepped forward, and my glowing arms raised as if in a benediction.

“DO you not remember me?” I queried softly, looking into each of their faces in turn. “Oh, my people, I, a Thinker, have done what no Thinker has done before me! I have returned to free you from the Evil Ones, and I am your ruler!”

Their chatterings and wailing died. They huddled together, abysmal terror showing on their elfin-thin faces. Plainly they feared me, and did not believe. But in my composite mind, part Sidney Hallmeyer, and part an old man, who, before he had gone to the Place of Thinkers, had ruled his people for many centuries, I knew what I had to do. I saw the simple necessity of freeing my people from a terrible bondage, even at the price of death.

I fluffed my membraneous wings open, and the wind caught at me, lifted me, and I landed on the dais on which I had seen the Singer.

“I am your ruler!” my cracked, old man's voice cried out. “I am your ruler who ruled you wisely and well for many centuries. When the Evil Ones came, I bade you fight them, but you did not. Who of you remember me as your ruler before I went to the Place of Thinkers so that I might solve this problem that sits so heavily on our shoulders? Who of you remember, and will know that I have returned to guide you?”

They stared at me, and they broke into a muttering that grew more excited second by second. I now saw that Ellillians, as if drawn here magically, were fluttering down from the cloud-darkened sky, were running from open streets and alleys and doorways. And engulfed in the crowd, horror showing in his radiant eyes, I saw the body that held Will Carrist's mind. He was waving his arms at me, frantically. The Sidney Hallmeyer part of me recognized him with a start, and I remembered how chaotic my thoughts were for the moment. I forgot him almost instantly, as a half dozen Ellillians raised themselves

from that tumult of beings and excitedly fluttered about me, peering into my face, and deep into my eyes. Then they went fluttering back.

"It is he! It is he!" The cry rippled over the crowd, and grew into a pulse-hammering thing. "It is our ruler, come to lead us to freedom!"

They pressed around the dais, clamoring at me eagerly, wailing at me, their ruler, to give them their freedom. There must have been two hundred of them, at least, I knew. I felt a soaring triumph. I, who had ruled these people, and ruled them well, had returned from the Place of Thinkers, with a plan . . . a plan. What plan? What plan was it that could free the people from Strilla MacCloud? I could not think of it . . . now . . . it eluded me. But had I not gone to the Place of Thinkers so that I might think of a plan? Had I not returned with a plan? . . . Yes, a plan. A plan to free the people, *my* people. No matter, I did not remember it now, for I was old, and memory slips away from the aged, in time. But it will come back, and I will be a hero to my people. . . . So ran my old man's thoughts, confused, empty, vastly futile and horribly without reason.

But there I stood and I answered their pleas. Triumphant, I told them to follow me, that we would overrun the Evil Ones and would be as we were before the Evil Ones came. And now I remember that for a brief moment of clarity I, that mind within a mind, knew that something horrible was happening. And yet I could not stop it. I was immersed, powerless to do anything, or stop an aged mentality from taking over a task for which it was not fitted. I remember seeing Will in the crowd, his face convulsed with dread of what I was doing; I remember seeing him finally turn, and I knew he was going toward the Bureau of Transmitted Egos, why I did not know; and I did not care, and I forgot him.

"*Father!*"

It came that suddenly. A figure came fluttering down out of the sky like stardust, on the spread of membraneous gliders. The figure landed in front of me. She was that Ellillian whom I had in my mind referred to as the Singer. I

looked at her, stricken dumb, and strangely resentful.

"*Father!*" she whispered, stretching out her arms, not as if to embrace me, but as if to thrust me from her sight. Her delicate, radiant face was wracked with an amazed horror. She stood poised on the tips of her toes, as if in imminent flight. Her small, perfect lips opened and she whispered, "Return to the Place of Thinkers, Father! Return! You are a thinker, and it is not fitting that a Thinker should return to life again."

THE Sidney Hallmeyer part of me was held in hypnosis by the wondrous beauty of her eyes, the tender sadness of her. But the other part of me was resentful.

"I am tired of thinking, my daughter," I said pettishly. "My people are in fetters. Do you not see that I have returned to free them?"

"You must return to your thinking!" she cried imperiously.

"No, no!" I was beseeching, terribly earnest. "When you led me to the Place of Thinkers, was it not you who said that our people must be freed, and that I must think . . . think how to save them? Was it not you?"

She extended her arms in a voiceless longing, pain in her glorious, tear-starred eyes. "It was I, Father. But I led you there only because you were old . . . and because it was your destiny to become a Thinker, even as it will someday be my destiny to become a Thinker . . . and the destiny of all of us."

"You deceived me, my child," I said sadly, and yet I could find in my heart no anger against her, Queen of the Ellill, my successor. "But no matter, now. I have returned! The people are with me. They will follow me, and we will uproot this human who calls herself Strilla, and we will be rid of those who live on the sweat of our blood."

Suddenly hordes of the Ellillians rose into the air, swooped about us, shouting agreement, a mad triumph in their voices. "We will follow our king. You are queen no longer, for see! has not our king returned from the Thinking Sleep, where none have returned before?"

She quivered, her glorious head bowing

in grief. She extended her slender glowing arms. "My people, have I not led you all these years, since my Father became a Thinker? Have I not advised you wisely? There is none so cruel as Strilla, and if you rebel, we shall die. Let us take what there is of life."

She turned to me, a sudden flame of purpose, fighting a battle which even then she must have known was hopeless. All these years, she had pleaded with her people, counselled them to take what happiness they could, and to forget rebellion. Then, by some miracle, her Father, the former ruler, had returned, and in a moment destroyed her work. The people were inflamed now, bitter with a desire for revenge, and frantic for their freedom. When she came closely to me, searching my eyes with a pathetic intensity, I felt a burst of fury.

"Sleep," she whispered, and her voice dulled with its music. But I thrust her aside with an old man's petulance.

"I will not sleep! I rule my people!" I cried, and returned to the mob again. For they were a mob, as unreasonably emotional as a mob on Earth pummeled at by the jingoism of a tenth-rate orator. They raised a great cry, when I screamed at them to follow after me.

I spread my gliders, and they bellied out under the impulse of that unexplainable wind which tore across the surface of perp-planet number three; and I soared upward, and down the street, toward an ivory-white building under which I knew Strilla MacCloud and her gang lived in unparalleled luxury. And after me came my people, a radiant throng of butterfly-like creatures, their pent-up emotion at last breaking out.

We swept toward the ivory-white building and toward Strilla MacCloud's stronghold.

THE rest of that unbelievable assault is chaos, barely remembered. For I don't want to remember it. Oh, yes, we were a rage-maddened horde, sweeping into that towering edifice, with virtue and right and all that sort of thing on our side. There were two hundred of us, one-fifth of the population. But we had one weapon, which I brandished, and screamed as I brandished. We went plummeting

down flight after flight of stairs, and I led them, chuckling an old man's cackle of triumph.

We came into a corridor in which pale glow lamps were set. It was empty. We flung ourselves down its length, a ravaging mob. Ahead of us, I saw two space-suited figures. Momentarily, I was shocked. But I knew then that Strilla MacCloud, for some unguessed reason, had used her own body transference machinery to change her men back to their real bodies.

My Hampton came up, though, and I was glad, glad, that it was human beings I would kill, and not Ellillians.

I did kill them, too. I sprayed a heat-ray at them out of the leftward barrel of the Hampton. I couldn't have helped but hit them in that narrow corridor. There was the smell of burning rubber, and burned flesh. They crumbled, and we streamed over them, screaming our triumph.

The rest doesn't bear telling. Side-corridors branched away, but my people followed me, trusting in what I was doing. Suddenly, from those side-corridors, trapping us completely, men stepped. The weapons they were using were not play-things. They were Hamptons on a large scale, wheeled on metal frames. The men who operated them were filled with the murder-lust.

And they did murder us. We ran around screaming. Those heat rays picked us off, one and ten at a time. My Hampton got one of them, and I dashed past, unharmed. Now I heard the thrum of machinery, and a terrible dread ate at me. Suddenly, I was realizing that I was an old man, too old. My lungs were burning. Fear scalded at me. I was alone. Behind me, my people were being massacred. I smelled their flesh, and large tears began to run down my cheeks.

Ahead of me, was an open doorway, beyond which was a lighted room filled to overflowing with a machinery which I knew was *The Machinery*.

I stopped there, in that doorway, stopped flat, and saw a giant gear that dipped beneath the floor, and slowly, slowly turned, but was gaining ever in speed. A power bank rippled with energies titanic beyond imagination. A turbine roared and shook

the very floor. A dial, set above the gear, had a slender, giant needle which slowly crept around a graduated scale whose measurements were unknown to me.

My old head turned, frightened and appalled. And standing near me, was an Ellillian woman. But I knew she was not Ellillian. She could not have had that satanic smug hate on her face if she had been Ellillian.

She was Strilla MacCloud, and the sun-stone necklace burned on her neck. . . .

She was watching me, and though I could not have heard her voice above the roar of the machinery which the Ancients had built, I know now what her lips said, but it could not have meant anything to me then, who was so completely and only ruler of the Ellillians.

"We meet again, Sidney Hallmeyer," she said, and she smiled, a terrible, slow smile.

I awoke. I gave birth to a scream of rage. My Hampton came up but she was holding a weapon in her own hand. With hardly a motion of her body, a livid heat-beam snapped out toward me. I felt a scalding pain. I looked down and I saw that she had burned my arm off, the arm holding the Hampton. The real pain came then, and I know I must have gone mad with the agony of it. I screamed. I next remember that I was in the corridor from which I had come. I was staggering up that corridor, holding onto the stump of my arm, and I was whimpering.

Behind me I heard a laugh, high and shrill, and it was then that I stumbled for the first time. Stumbled because I couldn't hold myself up. I was old, and my bones and muscles were weak, and something pulled me down, to my knees. I remember the machinery, and the huge gear that turned. . . .

I knelt there, panting, while a mocking silence grew around me. I started crawling up the corridor, every motion a hell of effort, as my very bones grew leaden. I crawled over the charred bodies of my people whom I had led to their deaths. I wept bitterly, and I didn't care about the pain in my arm. I was remembering the Singer, my daughter, her poignant sweet sadness as she had pleaded

with me to abandon my fool-hardy plan. I felt that I was a traitor to my people, and I knew, too, that it was a human being who was killing my people. I cursed the human race as I scuttled along. I began to scream so that my voice blasted back at me.

I MADE the stairs. I began to crawl up. The first flight was a triumph of will. The next was an unending nightmare. Around me were ominous creaking sounds, as if masonry, under a dreadful, growing attraction downward, were settling into new positions. Soon, I knew, I would be pressed downward, unable to move. Gravity was growing. It was acting on my people on the surface, and they would die. Sweat streamed from my body, and I panted out curses and whimpered with pain and with longing as I crawled up, flight after flight. And still there was that creaking sound.

In front of me, a well fell inward. Flying chips struck me, dust choked me, and a hell of sound smote my ears. I clawed out of that, a specter emerging from its grave, and made the last flight of stairs, and crawled into the streets.

Then I could move no more. I simply knelt there, wracked with pain, in an agony of hopelessness. My people ran and flew about the streets, wails of bewilderment erupting from their throats. Once I saw a building fall as if in slow motion. A dozen of my people went down under the cataclysm, and I wept.

Then I saw the Singer. She was walking through the streets, unbowed, for she was young, and her muscles were strong enough to hold her upright against the increasing pull of our planet. Our planet! No longer ours. . . .

. . . The Singer walked alone, flesh of my flesh, memory of my memory, strong and vibrant, with head held high. Silently she walked, while the people went mad about her, and now and then stumbled and struggled painfully on.

Almost she passed me. Then she stopped and looked at me, and there was compassion on her face, her eyes sad and wistful. The Sidney Hallmeyer part of me rose a little then, squirmed and fought with an old man's mind. I tried to speak. I tried to tell her what I had done, and

that I was sorry, and that please, would she say it was all right? But I couldn't speak, and I only looked at her imploringly, and drew my only comfort from our knowledge that we both were to die, and she looked back at me, and she was sad and pitying of me and of her people.

Suddenly, she dropped to her knees.

She said, simply, "I can no longer stand, father."

Then she looked over my head. Her glorious, pain-filled eyes widened but a trifle. But she did not warn me. It was the last I saw of the Singer, my daughter, and yet not my daughter, alive. Something shaped itself around the back of my head, and ended for all time my agony—so I thought.

IV

I OPENED my eyes and I was looking into the eyes of that human being who was called Strilla MacCloud, and I knew we were thundering through space in her ship.

This moment might have been that same moment when I lay in the muck of a Venusian alley and looked upward, dazzled, at my deliverer, at her thin, perfect lips, and the gown that smoothed down from her neck to her ankles, bringing out all the sinuous curves of her body. Yet it was different, for I was not thankful, and my body was an old body with an arm burned away.

Her eyes looked down at me, pale with their hate. Suddenly she stepped forward, stooped over me, and once, twice, lashed out at my face with the stinging palm of her hand. I didn't move. I lay there and let my own hate match hers. I was Sidney Hallmeyer again, drained of all pain or fear, knowing only that this woman had killed the Singer and her people.

"You don't forget easily, Strilla," I whispered, and I managed a ghastly smile.

"Forget!" She mouthed the word, standing over me, panting, a smoldering cauldron of bestial malevolence. "I couldn't ever forget. Nor will you! You've suffered, haven't you? You suffered agonies of mind and body when you crawled up stairs with your burning stump

of an arm, didn't you?" She struck me, fiercely, and blood began to run down into my eyes. "And now you think I'll kill you, don't you?" She kicked at me with her pointed slipper. "But I won't kill you—oh, no!"

I was remembering the Singer. I said hollowly, "It doesn't matter, Strilla. Nothing matters."

She struck me again. She paced to the other side of the cabin, while the rocket blasts of her ship rumbled in my ears. She came back, kicked me again and all the while she was talking, with insane mouthings. She was fairly writhing under the sting of an unbearable humiliation. Her hands tore at each other. She flung words at me, recalling for me the way she'd had to run for her life, like a dog with its tail between its legs, and she reminded me that I was the traitor who had caused it. Tears of rage ran down her painted cheeks. She was livid with rage and hate. She told me how she knew I was on the planet. She told me of the tunnel that led from her luxurious quarters under the ship to the Bureau of Transmitted Egos, of seeing my body there.

"I would have disfigured it then, Hallmeyer," she whispered. "But it was your mind, I wanted. Your mind, do you hear?"

I said levelly, "Nine years of hiding out has made you insane, Strilla."

She looked as if she would tear my eyes out. Then she threw her head back, and laughed a high-pitched, goading laugh. She stood over me again, the smile on her waxy-like face strange and terrible. "You'll never live again, Sidney Hallmeyer," she whispered. "Your *mind* will live, oh yes. But you'll be frozen into the status of a watcher until the body you occupy dies. You'll sit back, and you'll think, and you'll also be thinking the crazy thoughts of the creature's mind within you. And I'll keep you, no matter where I go. I'll take care of you tenderly, and I'll know the idiotic tortures you're going through. You understand?"

I understood. I understood only too well. I thought very briefly over my thoroughly chaotic life, and I thought of the things I had done, and of what I had

done to Strilla. I knew I wouldn't change that if I could. Even though it meant freedom. Strilla was mad in every sense of the word, and no matter what she did to me, I had accomplished a great deal that was good in this life, so let her do her worse.

I had only one hope, and that was feeble. I was thinking of Will. I smiled and thought of Will, and wondered if I could depend on him the way I had depended on him so many times before. . . .

I said nothing, and lay there, smiling. She slapped me once more with the full strength of her muscular body. Half stunned, I knew the lights had dimmed, that a heady aromatic incense flooded the cabin. I felt my mind receding, receding far into uncharted blackness. The mind beneath mine seemed to move, leadenly. It awoke, and became alive, like an animal, and suddenly I was suspended in a void quivering with thought, and I myself was a coldly detached being hanging nearby, and listening, and thinking thoughts myself . . . questioning thoughts. But the old man within me, being a Thinker, knew that his thoughts must no longer deal with the drab affairs of life, but with profounder things. . . .

I MUST think big-thoughts, and not small thoughts. Now I am a Thinker, and I have attained the pinnacle of life. To Think is restful and proper, and of what shall I think. . . .

I, Sidney Hallmeyer, said, and hardly knew that I said it, "Old man, think of the past ages of your race."

Ah! Then I shall think of the grandeur of my race, before they became as they are. I shall think of the airliners that once plowed through the air above the great cities of Ellill. Of the busy ice-fleets that round their ways across the frozen oceans. Of the calm cold winds that flooded our planet, the winds which were gentle and not as they are now. Of the many millions of men and women. We were a gracious race, cultured, and of high attainments. The Thinkers sat in marble palaces and thought their big-thoughts, tended by their children; and we were a peaceful race. But now that peace is gone! Gone!

"No!" I cried softly. "The cities!"

The minds fought each other, and gradually the answers came from the Thinker's.

The cities . . . I do not want to think of them, for the thoughts hurt. The cities are deserted! And empty, empty! They are dead, and gone forever. What has become of our science and our culture and those things that made us great? Eptilon! It was he! Why did Eptilon do it to us who were so contended? Now we are sad, and we live in holes. Oh, sad.

. . . So came the winds and the storms, falling toward the Light Land, as Eptilon's machinery thrust the core of the planet farther and farther from its rightful place. Why did he do it? Oh, why? For we wanted nothing, not even longer lives. Yet Eptilon did it, thinking us to be grateful.

But Eptilon never knew! For in giving us long life, he ruined us, ruined us. There were the wars, as the increasing gravity of the northern lands forced men to migrate to the Light Lands over the thousands of years. . . .

"Go on!" I told his mind fiercely.

And leadenly came the thoughts, cold with sorrow:

. . . And after the thousands of years had passed, those who left the Heavy Land and went to the Light Land, could not leave the Light Land, where the pull of the planet nearly vanished, and where lives were long. They could not return, for the years had acted on them, and they were changed! None could return to the Heavy Land, for their bones and muscles had become weak. And so the cities of the Heavy Land were deserted, and evolution had worked a sorry prank on us.

Then came the wars. There were too many of us, crowding toward the Central Light Land, opposite the Core, where lives were longest, where men lived thousands of years. The wars for immortality . . . the recurring wars with the Central City as the objective . . . and after that, when we had weakened ourselves, there came amongst us, swiftly growing, the sterility that was but the payment for our long lives. . . .

I, Sidney Hallmeyer, lay and then groped with his thoughts, and knew of what

he spoke. But I must not let him cease his thoughts, for I was trapped, trapped in a mind that dominated mine, and I must at least continue to direct it.

"Speak more of the machine that Ep-tilon built!" I whispered. "Of the machine which forced the Core of Ellill ever northward. Of the machine—"

"*Let my thoughts dwell on space.*" The Thinker's mind said.

"Not on space!" I cried in horror. "Not on space!" But came the dreamy response:

On space, for surely there is a profound secret to be discovered there. Far from here, and who knows how far, there is space . . . but a small portion which one can hold in one hand and study interminably. Space is empty. It is nothingness. And yet, if it be true nothingness, then it cannot be named. For if there is such a thing as a quantity of nothing, then that empty portion of the void can be measured, and that which is measurable is not nothing, for then that same nothingness, in the act of being measured, becomes something. . . .

My mind trembled, and hovered on what I knew was the brink of complete negation.

"Not on space!" I implored madly.

Something, then, which is nothing, and so new truths are discovered. For if nothing becomes something, and is, in its own internal nature nothing, although something, there is an abrogation of natural law which but proves the non-existence of that portion of space which I have selected for study. But if I have selected to study it, then it exists, in my mind, though not in reality, then becoming real enough to measure. But if being nothingness it can be measured, then it cannot be named. Nothing has no limits, and that which is nothing that has limits and can be measured and named as nothing, then becomes something, and shall be designated as nothing but nothing, bounded by space, a not-nothing composed of no-space, and hence a hole in space. . . .

I did not endure it long, you may be sure. I fought from inclusion in that whirlpool of maddening "big-thoughts." But slowly, slowly, those thoughts swept me onto their merry-go-round, and I sank,

and I was but part of a mind which dwelt profoundly on nothing. . . . I was an Ellillian Thinker.

I know now that it didn't last long. Perhaps only a few moments. But while it lasted it was exquisite torture such as the finest barbarian mind could not have concocted. I knew the horror of my utter imprisonment, and yet could not help myself. I knew nothing of my own life, and I had forgotten Will.

Forgotten him until a red-hot needle of pain seemed to force itself between our merged minds, and forced them apart. Then the scalding shock of consciousness that returned. I awoke. I was myself. I was screaming in terror of the nothingness in which I was enclosed. I had slammed against a wall, hanging there plastered, and, then, as the ship quivered and shuddered rackingly, I was thrown in the other direction.

I was Sidney Hallmeyer again.

A SCREAM sounded through Strilla MacCloud's ship. Loose articles clouded the air, bombarded me. Suddenly I was reasoning, coldly. I knew where I was. I remembered everything, and I was Sidney Hallmeyer, out of a nightmare, and knew that Will Carrist had come along in our needle-prowed ship. I was Sidney Hallmeyer, who ages ago had started out to find a sun-stone necklace, and there was the detector, strapped on the thin old wrist of my one remaining arm . . . and it was pointing in a certain direction. Against the indescribable bucking of a ship that was spinning head over heels in mid-space I went in that direction, fighting crazily for balance, mad with the pain in my dangling stump of an arm, and mad with rage to meet Strilla MacCloud.

I hurled through the air, came flat up against a foot-size port. Beyond it I saw the stars, cold and remote and frightening. A chill, blasting draft was sweeping through the ship. I knew there was a hole in the bulkheads, somewhere. The stars, the whole heavens, were gyrating. I hurled myself toward a door that had been warped off its hinges. I went down a corridor, and a man came running toward me.

He roared. His Hampton came up, spouted lividly. There was another pain,

sharp, like a razor drawn across living flesh. But I don't know where it hit me. I threw myself at my attacker. He went off balance and my left hand clawed for the Hampton, and pressed the barrel against his chest, and pulled the trigger. Then I went on again. I went forward, toward the control cabin, following the needle of my detector. And there, standing in the doorway, quite alone, stood Strilla MacCloud.

She seemed to awaken from a deep trance. A muscle in her face twitched, her perfect body tensed, and a scream, long drawn out and savage, erupted from her carmined lips. She came at me and bore me backward, clawing at me and tearing at my face. I let her tear as she would, and wrapped my arm around her neck, and fumbled at the clasp of her necklace. It came free, and I held it, caring about nothing else.

She would have killed me, then, if the lights hadn't gone out, for I was old, and I knew I was dying. Howls of mortal fear echoed through the ship. Almost in my direct line of vision, a starkly gaping hole opened in the bulk-heads, and beyond the hole was the awesome black of empty, airless space. It was like an explosion. Air rushed outward, caught me up, exploded me without protection into sub-zero, airless space . . . and Strilla with me.

V

I CAME to a slow, painful consciousness which I knew would not last long. I knew where I was—in our ship, for there was a smoothness of rocket blasts hurling the ship through space at maximum speed; and I sensed that Will was standing over me. I didn't bother to open my eyes. I was remembering many things; the Singer uppermost amongst them.

I opened my eyes, but I hardly saw anything except Will, in his native body, which was plenty good for anybody to see at that time.

I said, "You've got the necklace?"

He choked and couldn't talk for a minute. But when he did manage to get coherent, I gathered that he had plucked me out of open space, dying, blood on my lips, and coming from my ears and my nose. I reasoned that that was perfectly

logical. Space isn't really cold. There's no danger of freezing. It's just the sudden loss of atmospheric pressure that's dangerous. From fifteen pounds a square inch to nothing a square inch. A vacuum. But rats have lived in vacuums, for minutes on end. Human beings could live after two or three or even four minutes. Will had got to me in time. And he had the necklace. And Strilla was out there, floating alone, and dead. . . .

I talked only with an effort. I said, "Well, it's too late anyway. You take the necklace back. But we can't go back to perp-planet number three. The gravity is too great. We can't get our bodies. I'll be dead long before we can get our bodies."

He was frantic with trying to make me understand. "But I've got our bodies!" he blasted out tearfully. "When you started acting up like the ruler of your people or whatever you said you were, I figured it was time for somebody to show some sense. I went back to the Bureau. I carried our bodies back to the ship. Two trips."

"I rammed the ship!" he choked. "I rammed it! I didn't know what she was doing to you. I had to take a chance."

"A very good chance," I told him, with the last of my strength. "Well, take the necklace back and tell the chief that now Earth can have her damned old radium mines. And tell him I said good-bye."

I must have died very soon after that.

AND I came to in a body-transferral chair in my real body, looking across at a dead Ellillian with his arm burned off.

Will almost collapsed as he unstrapped me.

"I thought you were a goner," he cried piteously. "You were dead, Sid, dead! But we were only a thousand miles from Callisto and I got you here in time to get your ego back into your real body."

I walked around unsteadily. Callisto. Of course. Perp-planet number three was only two million miles from Callisto.

But we went back to perp-planet number three, not because Will wanted to go, for he didn't, but because I wanted to. Thought of the Singer burned in me.

Two hours it took us, and we stood in

space-suits on the outskirts of the city—only it wasn't a city any more. A few buildings remained. The Bureau, constructed by Earth engineers, still stood. A few monoliths stood. But that was all. The rest of those buildings, built to withstand only a light gravity, had tumbled. Our gravity gauge showed a little more than one gravity.

Will hovered close to me, plainly resentful because we had come back. "But this Epsilon's machine," he cried. "You never did tell me about that, Sid. It couldn't have been a gravity machine—"

"Why not?" I asked bluntly.

He looked rebellious, and then triumphant. "Because, smarty-pants, only matter warps space and causes gravity. To *change* gravity you'd have to have a mass equally as big as this planet—"

I laughed softly. "You win. Anyway, Will, I happen to know it wasn't a gravity machine." I told him about Epsilon, as much as I knew. Epsilon must have been the mayor of this city. He had invented a machine which would decrease gravity and thereby increase the longevity of his people. He didn't seem to care much what happened to the rest of the planet.

"The machine, of course, was nothing but a peculiar type of magnet—a powerful one, too. But it acted solely on neutronium. The neutronium core of the planet. It repelled that mass of neutronium which gave the planet its comparatively large gravity—repelled it through solid magma toward the north. The gravity around the south pole decreased, naturally—and the gravity around the north pole—the north half of the planet—increased. The people of the north probably didn't like it, because they found it harder and harder to stand erect. They fought toward the south. The southern half of the planet was the Light Land. The people of the north fought the people of the south. Eventually, the northern half was entirely deserted. Then the people living on the rim of the Light Land began to migrate in the direction of the Central City—Epsilon's city, the lightest gravity. There were promises of long life in the Central City. So it went. They kept moving in over the thousands of years, moving

in and fighting. Eventually, evolution changed their bodies, so that they *had* to live in the Light Land. There were too many of them for the space. They kept on fighting, with the Central City as their goal. They killed themselves off—sterility started in to do the rest. . . . Ellill was simply an off-center planet—those were the consequences."

WE walked along, slowly, through the city, Will shivering beside me. We stepped over the debris of toppled buildings. Here and there we saw something from which the radiance was fading, something which had been alive. I bit my lip. Strilla MacCloud had done this. When I came, she knew she couldn't stay on the planet, because sooner or later the IPF would come to look for me. So she'd made good her threat and left; and that was good, because now she was dead—and that was very good.

We found the Singer after awhile—she who had been my daughter in a strange, alter-existence. I stopped and felt tired. She was miraculously surrounded by fallen masonry. I looked down at her radiant body—but not as radiant as it should have been—and I knew that Strilla MacCloud—or was it Epsilon—or was it I?—had caused her heart to stop, her breathing muscles to refuse to work. One of us, certainly, had done this.

I traced the soft curve of her small mouth, the tender sadness of her eyes. So we had the sun-stone necklace and Strilla MacCloud was dead. So the Empress of Mars would have the necklace to hang around her fat neck, and I was innocent, because the Council of Ten was behind me. So Earth would have her radium. So what? So the Singer was dead.

We left the Singer lying there, and we left her people, too. We turned back to the ship, walking slowly through the dead city of the Ellill, and I was not happy.

"Come on, Sid," Will muttered petulantly. "What ails you?"

"Nothing," I said. "Nothing ails me."

But my hand was in my pocket, gripping the necklace. So, not trusting myself, I gave it to Will; for safekeeping.



ALL RIGHT, you Vizifanners, this is your operator with a new load of kicks, kudos, bombs and bouquets from the dozens of letters sent to PLANET STORIES in the last few weeks. We're passing on a few for your enjoyment, and we hope you'll take the hint enough to add your own missives to this section.

A lot of these were held over from last issue, because they were so good; and some of the new ones will have to swing to the next issue. But then we'll get back in stride with the Vizifanners whose letters haven't been adjusted to the bi-monthly schedule, and we'll really make the best-letter competition tough.

All that we ask is that your letters be comparatively brief and to the point, so that more may be printed. And give us good constructive criticisms—and don't indulge in biting personalities. We like you fans, we want you to like us and each other. So drop us a line at any time, for this is your department.

And for those of you who raced in the Winter Futurity, here's the winning trio:

- 1..George Ebey
- 2..James R. Gray
- 3..Gwen Cunningham

PLANET'S NEW PAPA!

The Chastleton Hotel
Washington, D. C.

DEAR PLANET STORIES:

HAPPY BIRTHDAY! Yep, happy birthday little fella'. Three years ago, on October 10, 1939, you first saw the light of day. Of course, your first steps were a little wobbly, but you got over that after a while. Papa Reiss took you by the hand and got you started; experimenting and changing your diet, till gradually you began to mature. The fact that you only get out in the sun about four times a year may have something to do with slowing down your development and perhaps a little more Vitamin D wouldn't hurt you. However, that will be up to your step-father and I am sure Mr. Peacock will do everything in his power to make you grow. And don't complain because you have a step-father, because step-pops aren't a bad lot at all. Just work hard and keep your circulation up and some day you can swell out your front page and say, "Today I am a monthly magazine!" I realize, naturally you are only three years old, and I haven't known you all that time; but all in all we've come a long way together—and we still have a long way to go. Congratulations!

Because of the auspicious occasion I am breaking my self-imposed rule of writing every other issue. And now that you've exhausted your sugar ration, we'll get nasty and critical about the whole thing.

To begin: Put that d—— south end of a shotgun shell in one place and keep it there! You've had it everywhere but in the middle of the cover on the last six issues. And cut out all the story titles on the cover. What's the use of having a contents page? One story on the cover wouldn't be so bad; for instance, the story you consider the best or emphasize, as Hasse's in the last issue. And still on the subject of the cover; listing the authors at the bottom, like the Winter, 1941

issue, is good and much better than plastering the whole cover with printing.

Trimmed edges add an intangible something to a magazine, and make it stand out more on the stands. Also, if you're a *thumber* before a *buyer*, the thumbing is simplified. I don't guarantee an increase in circulation, but you might try it out for one or two issues for the reaction.

This suggestion would knock the paper bulget for a loop, I suppose, but—the spacing of the type on page three of the last issue was very good; made reading easier and looked much nicer. Oh, well—you ask for things like this.

How about article fillers of some sort at the story ends, where the page isn't finished out? Looking back at the last issue I'm tempted to withdraw the last suggestion. How do you guys manage to buy stories that just fit the spaces? I shouldn't imagine the above suggestion would increase the publication cost much, and the fact that people read them is evidenced by the Lone Ranger's satiny and vitriolic reply to Knight, in which several from other magazines are quoted and unquoted. Circulation might go up a notch or two—maybe. H——! I just looked at the last issue again. I guess the articles were full length ones. The idea is still there, though.

A blurb or two on stories and illustrations and that's all—it'll probably take another page, though.

Tops goes to the boxed story, City of the Living Flame—and this has nothing to do with the fact that Mr. Hasse just moved to Washington and personally paid off the debt incurred by my last letter. (Believe it or not, Henry walked into my parlor the other night and gave me the original typescript of "Out of this World." You birds better vote for Henry next time he writes in a letter to the Vizigraph—it pays! Sotto voce—politics!!)

The rest of the stories in order were: Space Oasis—Quest of Thig—Vampire Queen—Stellar Showboat—War-Gods of the Void—Thought-men of Mercury and Prison Planet.

Illustrations were not up to standard this time, but they weren't in the terrible class. Leydenfrost is good—keep him on, if he isn't getting swell-headed on account of that swell aircraft series in Esquire. Hoskins improved and almost graduated this time. Give him some more chances. The cover? Weeelll—it'll pass, but you've had better. Please, another Finlay??

Here's hoping I see this in a gala anniversary issue, but whatever you do—don't bring out one of those atrocities *some* magazines do. You have to take it home in a little wagon, and if you want to read it you have to break it up with a meat ax. But I should worry about that—I don't read 'em anyway.

Sincerely,
WILLIAM A. CONOVER.

PAPA'S WORKING ON IT!

We're sore at Conover; we're getting the idea that he'll be late to his own funeral. Shucks, this letter should have been in the Winter issue—but it came in too late. We're inclined to guess that he's absorbing some of that Washington atmosphere, where some people seem inclined to think that speed in these times is utterly ridiculous. Doggone it, Bill, get the lead out, the letters in, your enthusiasm up, and your ideas down to earth as you've done here. We're working on your suggestions, along with a lot of others, but—(yaaawwwnnnn)—oh well, haste makes waste!

Cordially,
THE EDITOR.

GERGEN'S GOT A GRIPE!

221 Melbourne SE
Mpls—Minn

DEAR EDITOR:

I am tempted to set forth my comments on your No. 12 issue—however, I warn you, all are not going to be any too complimentary. It's my opinion that your rag, instead of rising in general quality, has decreased disgustingly the last three issues.

I have reasons for my squawks, too. One is: Instead of appealing more to the adult reader, you have been presenting stories that are definitely juvenile. And still, your readers write in, comment on probably the most childish tale in the issue, and hold it up for public surveillance as undoubtedly the finest tale to appear in *any* science-fiction mag in the last three years.

I don't doubt that your readers are becoming not-a-little sick of it, too. When you first began PLANET, it showed definite promise of being a mag to watch—one that was really going places. I think fandom had its eyes on you, as being an editor who *tried* to give its reading-public the type of fiction and features it liked. That's undoubtedly why your letter-section has risen so fast in popularity. But fandom now, is probably wrinkling its nose in disgust—as I am—and who can blame them?

I must admit, though, that I *did* read three tales last issue. Ayre's, Winterbotham's and Tucker's. When I finished those, I didn't have time to polish off any more. I don't know if I would've wanted to. However, that's beside the point. And I don't see why I should comment on the ones I read, as this letter will never, never see print. Nevertheless, I shall.

Tucker's opus was disappointing—not that it wasn't good writing, you understand, just that it contained none of the Tucker humor, that his tales, both fan and pro, usually do. Parts of it are a little too dramatic, and/or not enough action in sore parts made the story hard to read. The tale was not quite balanced.

I really can't explain why I picked out Winterbotham's story. If you really know of another author that is *hackier*, please give me his name. Cummings might fill the bill, come to think of it, but Cummings at least, writes smoothly and with well-placed dramatics. Heh—and Winterbotham has nothing.

Ayre's caught my eye, because he is always a good author, and every story of his I've read has been interesting. Ayre, Fearn, Cross—each name probably a pseudonym; and of the same person. One can depend on the quality of a tale when he sees one of those names attached to that tale. (I wonder if Fearn classifies his stories—then writes his best ones under Fearn, his next-best under Ayre, worst under Cross?)

All the illustrations were at least fair, though none were outstanding. Leydenfrost, no matter who says what, just simply isn't a good artist. For you, that is. His pix for Blue Book were marvelous—yours have been mediocre and comic-bookish. Then, too, his covers, despite ravings from the readers, are terrible; and most especially this last one. I wouldn't be surprised to see such a cover on any of the numerous comic-magazines lying around on the newsstands, though I certainly wouldn't consider it good even for one of those. I suggest you dispense with Leydenfrost, get another Finlay, Bok, or decent Paul. Ignore all pleas for Rogers (because he's vastly overworked) and Morey (because he hasn't done a decent cover since '37!), and try to develop new talent.

As for letters—they are fairly good, as usual. Hang it all, though, editor, let's keep 'em down somehow. Let's say, uh, we limit every writer to the Vizigraph five originals—no more. This will of course, eliminate such friends as Lesser, Maxwell, Shaw, etc., etc., who win every time, anyway, and will give the other fellows, notably like myself, a chance.

Sincerely,
JOHN L. GERGEN.

PLANET'S PALLIATIVE!

You're inconsistent, Gergen. You say the readers write glowing letters about the stories—then about face and say they must be sick of the stories. And you judge with a prejudiced mind. To judge anything competently, a person must consider everything in regard to the subject. But you rated an entire issue after reading but three stories.

Too, you say Leydenfrost is terrible—yet admit that the readers rave about his work. And tsk, tsk, tsk! such an amateurish device for getting your letter printed: i.e. ("Why I should comment on the ones I read, as this letter will never, never see print.")

But your suggestion about the originals is worth consideration. We'll leave it up to the Vizifanners' votes. Maybe you'll rate a pic.

Anyway, keep us posted with your gripes and your kisses. We like 'em all.

Cordially,
THE EDITOR.

RAND McNALLY PLEASE OBLIGE!

111 Lake Ave.
Spring Lake, Michigan

DEAR EDITOR:

I have just finished my first copy of PLANET STORIES, and thinking you might be interested in the first impressions of a newcomer I am writing this note. Personally, I would like to see a little more *science* and a little less *fiction* in the stories. The tendency on the part of some of your writers seems to be to first write a modern western story. Then by substituting ray guns for six guns and changing the locale from Dead Man's Gulch to Jupiter,—they manage to concoct a science-fiction story. For example, Malcolm Jameson's Nick Carter novelet "Stellar Showboat" would have been eligible for publication in any detective story magazine if a train had been used for transportation instead of a rocket ship.

I wonder if you would ask Mr. Kuttner to clear up a point for me. In "War Gods of the Void" the earthmen on Venus are lured to the city of the Swamja by "North Fever." Now for the sake of argument let us say that this city on Venus is located similarly to the city of Chicago on Earth. Then from this point the virus-carrying spores are sent out over the entire planet. Now it is obvious that men leaving New York or Seattle, and heading North, will miss Chicago by miles. Then it seems that the only place the city of the Swamja could be located so as to catch all Northgoers would be right at top the North Pole. But here we have another difficulty, for when the Swamja themselves are infected by the virus, they pour out of the city heading North. We all know that the only direction one can go from the North Pole is South!

Incidentally, how does one locate North, or rather the North Pole on a planet that does not rotate?

"The Vizigraph" was a disappointment to me.

Eleven pages devoted to the puerile drivelings of a few immature schoolchildren! The letter of J. C. Ray and C. Hidley had some thought behind them, but as for the others,—what the writers of such sophomoric rot need is a good spanking and being sent to bed without their suppers.

Yours for more adult *science-fiction*,
Sincerely,
KENNETH MACKENZIE, II.

WE'RE OBLIGING, BUT—

That's right, upset us with your questions. Now we can't sleep, for wondering as to the answers you request. And as for the spankings—give them yourself! The last fan we met weighed two hundred, and was six foot two inches tall. Whew!

Cordially,
THE EDITOR.

GOOD LUCK, SOLDIER!

711 South Arch Street
Aberdeen, South Dakota

DEAR EDITOR:

Hah! *That's* my little man! PLANET is among the present—as good as, or even better than, ever.

The cover, Oh, well, the stories were good. Look. Leydenfrost is *not* a cover artist. He can't draw humans convincingly. Keep him on the more fantastic or mechanistic pix. (Look at that beeyootiful object behind the Swamja's right leg. Cute, huh?)

On to the interiors! 1—Leydenfrost, "Stellar Showboat"; 2—Paul, "Vampire Queen"; 3—Leydenfrost, "War Gods of the Void." (That latter one wasn't so hot, but the first was excellent, because, although Leydenfrost can't do humans seriously, he caricatures exceedingly well.) Lynch's pic this issue would have been very good, had it not been for that sloppy monster, while Morey exhibits a comic-book style which has no place in any magazine, least of all PLANET.

The stories: I gasp as I view the contents page. "No Cummings!" Is it possible? Can PLANET finally have risen above the Grand Hack? I fervently hope so.

My third favorite author (he's surpassed by Lovecraft and Merritt) scores again! A minor classic this time—perfectly plotted and excellently executed. Kuttner is a man of whom I never tire.

"Space Oasis": I like irony; I like to have heroes killed; I like endings of that sort. Summation: I *liked* "Space Oasis"! Gallun is always excellent on shorts.

"Quest Of Thig" is quite a remarkable short. And after the gooey mess Wells made of "Blue World"! This one will remain in my memory for some time to come.

Jameson presents a neat bit in "Stellar Showboat," which surprises me a little, as he does not, in my opinion, often turn out particularly commendable work. This is *not* the futuristic, slightly scientific sort of detective story against which I lament so loud and long.

"City of the Living Flame" fails to satisfy primarily because of its lack of continuity. It is written in a jerky and stilted style. The Martian animals and the recessive polar tract appear to have been introduced merely to extend the narrative, since they serve no pertinent purpose.

"Vampire Queen" was melodramatically written in an archaic style. The modern school of English popular writers is notable for its sloppy plotting—much of the development depends on coincidence.

"The Thought-Men of Mercury" was nothing unique. If Winterbotham had some slight semblance of a style, he might have salvaged this one.

"Prison Planet," aside from the "Rat a hero" angle, dialect, and titling, was disgustingly lousy. It's like a detective yarn in which the murderer is none of the suspects, but is some stranger brought into the story in the last chapter. I think you know what I mean.

The Vizigraph: First place to Conover's lead letter. Dunno why, but maybe it's sympathy. The poor guy sounds almost as nuts as I do!

Morojo: Is it a coincidence that "morojo" means "a woman of high morals"? —Or is my Esp. as lousy as my Latin?

Give Mosky second place—he does a neat bit of debunking. Y'know, Demon got in touch with me, and we carried on a nice li'l'debate. My arguments were different from Mosky's, but I think they were just as good. Witness the fact that I haven't heard a peep out of Demon in two months, at this writing.

Aw, nuts! Maybe this is getting to be too much, too. If so, it'll be the last time, for the draft has got me, and I leave shortly for camp. This will be my last fan letter for the duration, thus, and you won't be hearing from me again.

But this fair gem of the Midwest, this Hub City of the Dakotas, will not be without its representation in stfandom. My understudy will be taking over commentary henceforth, and I hope he'll be able to keep things humming.

Sincerely,

VICTOR KING.

IS IT A DATE?

King, we've enjoyed your letters, and we'll be looking for more, even if you are in the army. Squeeze us out something between KP and drill, willya? Plenty of Vizifanners are shouldering arms in all branches of the service, along with some of the crack writers. There'll be an editor there before long, too, so maybe we'll get together some day and do a bit of reminiscing. Anyway, drop us a line, and we'll keep PLANET STORIES rolling right along until you get back into civvies again. The very best of luck to you, King.

Cordially,

THE EDITOR.

SUPPOSITION!

5809 Beechwood Ave.
Indianapolis, Ind.

DEAR EDITOR:

First place goes to "Prison Planet," the kind of yarn you don't get enough of and I could read a lot more of. No overstuffed-on-the-muscular-side hero, no flashing thru billions of dimensions and dusting off universes by the score. No silly attempts to describe alien thought processes, or have the aforementioned hero run off with the daughter of the native chief of some planet over by Alpha Centaurus—said natives, incidentally, invariably being the general shape and ten times the size of a bullfrog. No accounting for what those wonderful little cosmic rays will do tho, I guess.

Say, I'm getting a big kick out of this! Now that I've started I think I'll just go ahead and make a complete outline, then if the readers like it I can write a novel mebbe.

Well, let's say that our hero—Hercules von Atlas de Pumperkickel, Jr.—is buzzing along out

by Pluto in his little strato-cruiser, the *Mudball*. Now the *Mudball*, being as it is a stratosphere ship, was of course never intended to be used on a jaunt to Pluto. Our pal, Herc, isn't worried, however, because papa can buy him another one if this breaks.

Suddenly a tremendous meteor leaps into view! Cool and collected as ever, Herc strolls leisurely to the controls and grasps the wheel, which is made, as are the wheels on all ships, of indestructible *impervum*. But the wheel is stuck!!!

Straining mightily, he twists the wheel right off, and, throwing—whoop!!! He'll need that later. Let's see now— Straining mightily, he finally twists the wheel right off, at the instant the meteor strikes the ship!

The *Mudball*, of course, is smashed all to hell, but Herky—lucky boy—is knocked into a buckle of the space-time continuum which happens to be passing, and when he wakes up he's on the planet Wugugug, still grasping the *impervum* wheel.

He immediately sets off through the thick tropical jungle, looking for civilization. On the way, he is bitten by the tiny Epell fly and gets a horrible fever. Effie Lou—the chieftain's daughter—finds him when he is only a hollow shell of a man and, falling in love with him on the spot, takes him to the village. The village witch-doctor says it will take months to cure him, so they dump him in a dirty old hut and go ahead with the plans to sacrifice Effie Lou to the horrible old god Habbiejeb.

The next scene is the sacrifice. Herky of course wakes up in time to save Effie Lou, and they run out of the village toward a rocket ship which is just now landing. It is from Earth, of course, and the commander, who was about to ray them in their tracks, takes them into the ship when he sees the *impervum* wheel that Herc is still carrying.

On the way back to Earth, Hercules learns that he spent fifty years in the space buckle and papa has died and left a million dollars and he and Effie Lou can live happily ever after.

FINIS

And now that my little splurge is over, we can go back to the job of rating again. Second place we shall give to "Stellar Showboat," and third to "The Thought-Men of Mercury." The other stories, dear editor, were utter tripe. I hope that I shall never again read such a bit of utter incompetence as "The Quest of Thig," or, led by my devotion to dear old PS, force myself to peruse such a hackneyed horror as "War-Gods of the Void." Aaaaaaaaagh! My soul shudders at the thought!

The art work, now, is an entirely different matter. An A-1 cover, backed by excellent work from Leydenfrost, Paul, and Lynch on the interior. And, of course, I cannot forget the good work of Knight, Hoskins, and the one good pic Morey turned out for Gallun's worthless mental maunderings.

Keep up the good (?) work!

Sincerely,

"MUSCLES" MARLOW.

PROPOSITION!

Gee, Muscles, you thrill us with your mastery of plot construction. We're thinking very seriously of drafting you to figure out a few for us, so that our regular authors can do nothing but write. Of course, the pay will be scaled according to each story's length—you'll only be charged for each thousand words of outline you submit.

So send us along about fifty bucks worth; we've

got a new overcoat to buy this Winter. Willya, huh?????

Cordially,
THE EDITOR.

DOES LOU RATE A PIC?

1119 8th Street,
Ft. Worth, Texas.

DEAR EDITOR:

It's Lou Wilson bursting a rocket again! If Victor King hadn't made me burst several, perhaps this letter would have been in the Fall issue. Shaw of Schenectady, has enabled me to cool off the jets sufficiently to feel so sorry for certain correspondents who just can't like anything or anybody. However, I think I came out with a feather in my cap to actually be criticized right along with Cummings! Ain't that something, tho'? To think a criticism of my little inquiry should rate over *eleven* lines in Vizigraph! Maybe I'll qualify with old-timers yet. (Well, Vic, if you wanted a rise out of me, you got it!)

Although I instinctively criticize those people who eternally say, "I don't like," I must confess Carlton Smith nearly jogged an "I don't like" out of me with his "As it Was." Well, "as it was" *one* of the very few and far-between sap stories *one ever* finds in P.S., we won't grumble too much.

I get more entertainment from Vizigraph than any other mag feature that's published. The stories must always wait until I've become acquainted with other "Vizigrafans."

Incidentally, if Larry Shaw did stay up all night to figure out my Time Travel question, I'd appreciate an answer. His letters are always first, anyway, in handing out general information on P.S. Why doesn't he rate another pic?

If I could rate a pic, I like Leydenfrost or Paul. Paul's little "Midges" were *too* cute! Or should I register a simper-in-writing and say "too, too, divine"—ha! but that would be unfair to the artist.

In closing, I do want to remind the readers who always glance over the list of authors in any S.F. mag, that PLANET Stories always have the pick and the head of those foremost writers, Cummings, Bond, Wellman, Rocklynne, etc. But please, Somebody, where, oh where is Ralph Farley?

Sincerely,
MRS. LUCILLE WILSON.

CQ—CQ—FARLEY?

You're right, Lou, PLANET STORIES really skims the cream from s-f milk. More than forty writers have been presented in PLANET STORIES, the best, and those traveling to that point. We're building every day, trying to maintain the high standards we have set for ourselves. Keep pace with us, for we've got some crackerjack stories scheduled.

And what *has* happened to Farley? We don't know—but we'd sure like to find out. And, Shaw, do your duty by the lady—maybe you'll get the pic Lou is lobbying for.

Cordially,
THE EDITOR.

MARCY WISES UP!

1362 Dean Street
Schenectady, New York

DEAR EDITOR:

A few weeks before school closed last June, Shaw comes up to me and says, "Hello, Harv old pal, nice weather we're havin', isn't it? (Heh,

heh). May I carry your books for you to class? Oh, no, it's not out of my way in the *least*. I just have to go back across to the other side of the building to my class. Er, are you going to the class outing? Well, well, so am I! You have a girl, don't you?

After a pause in which he caught his breath and thought out what he was going to say next, he started anew: "Are you taking Doris?" After affirming this, he continued, "Yes, *very* nice girl, isn't she? Um, ah, she has a sister, doesn't she, Harv old pal, old pal?" I groaned inwardly, knowing Doris' sister would forever after be as bothersome as big sister's little brother at a parlor date. I ground out, "How much?" He comes back with "The next ish of PLANET"—how can a guy refuse? So I tried. Louise (that's Doris' sister) had heard of Shaw before, so no soap. He still owes me the fall ish, understand. So comes October 1st, and he gives it to me. Why so late? He says he's too busy, so he kept it until he could read the stories.

"Well," I says, "why didn't you buy two copies?"

His face turned white.

He gasps, "Gosh, I never thought of that!" After reading his letter, I know the real reason for holding out on me.

He was *such* a nice boy.

This is the best ish of PS yet, for the simple reason—no Cummings. The cover was good, but I've seen better. Yeah. O. K.? Best story in the bunch was Kuttner's "War-Gods of the Void." It was good all the way through, except Kuttner hinted at a romantical angle all the way through, but nothing happened. It sort of left a feller up in the air. Second was a tie between "Space Oasis" and "Prison Planet," two stories which held my interest all the way through (as if the others didn't).

Well, now for the pics. First was—hey, wait! I didn't finish the stories, did I? I must've been thinking of how best to get rid of Shaw. Well, anyway, third was "Stellar Showboat," by Jameson. Wonderful. Following in order, were "City of the Living Flame," by Hasse (very good), "Vampire Queen," "Quest of Thig," and "The Thought Men of Mercury." Every darn one was good—something new has been added! Usually there was one story in the bunch that dragged down the rest.

For want of time, all I'll say about the pics is that Morey's improving. He did some real good work this time.

And now comes the time when I must bid all you nice gentlemen (and Shaw) a pleasant good night.

Goodnight!

I'll bet *I* don't sleep.

Sincerely,

HARVEY MARCY.

PLANET WISES SHAW!

This Shaw is beginning to get in everybody's hair; first, Lou, and now you. Doggone it, Shaw, justify your existence in one way or another. And please stop those gigolo tactics; after all, the Vizifanners aren't like *that!* Incidentally, your price is too low.

Cordially,

THE EDITOR.

SECOND SIGHT!

208 S. Oakhurst Dr.
Beverly Hills, Calif.

DEAR EDITOR:

You know, the other day I got to thinking about your mag. I soon found myself wondering what was holding PLANET to that blasted quarterly schedule. Could it be that they haven't got a large enough circulation? I guessed that was the reason, yet, I was still puzzled by another question. Why wasn't PLANET's circulation large enough to warrant a bi-monthly change? Now this had me stumped, for in my opinion you've got everything PLANET has what we fans have been waiting a long time for, a whole mag of the oldest type of true science-fiction, the interplanetary yarn.

The two so-called "big" mags in SF, and I'm sure you'll know who I mean, are veering away from the real SF yarn, yet they certainly have a large circulation. Could it be that the majority of the fans no longer want your type of fiction? I doubt it. Some say that the only reason they buy PS is because of the Vizigraph, but I also doubt that.

I disagree with Mr. King who says that a bi-monthly change would lower the quality of your fiction. I think it would rather lean towards raising your standards, since more and better authors would look towards your mag as a good market for their stories. However, we can only wait and see what is going to happen—and HOPE. I am of the belief, however, that you are going to turn bi-monthly soon. At any rate, most of us hope so. . . .

The fall issue was nothing short of stupendous, a great come-back from the summer slump. To start it off, Leydenfrost's cover was terrific. He seems to give us something that many cover artists can't get, a clear and perfect background instead of the usual large purple blurb of paint. The only wee complaint might be that I don't care for breast plates on the babes, which Leydenfrost seems to favor. I will, however, stick with the majority if they like 'em.

This artist's inside pic for Kuttner's yarn was also par *excellance*. Really one of the best you've ever had. Second place would also go to him for his "Stellar Showboat" scene. Nuts to Mr. King, who says Leydenfrost can't portray faces. I refer him to this masterpiece. Other good pics were Paul's for "Vampire Queen" and Hoskin's for "Quest of Thig."

Topping the yarn column this month was a neat, well written tale with good science as a framework, Raymond Gallun's "Space Oasis." There's really not much more to say about this one, it just hit the spot.

Second place and only a nose behind comes Ayre's "Vampire Queen." A novel plot ably written by a veteran of the SF game.

"Stellar Showboat" by Jameson ranks third as a neat detective yarn with a futuristic setting. More of this type story, please.

Although the ending was obvious, and the title atrocious, "War-Gods of the Void" takes fourth spot. Kuttner saved himself by his ability to make a good yarn out of a worn out plot. Too bad Mr. Cummings can't do the same. All he uses is worn out plots.

And now for "City of the Living Flame." Fifth is as high as I can rank it, though I'll be the only one. Hasse worked his plot out carefully and the yarn was well written, but I just couldn't like it. I guess I just don't go for the old "entity" business. The other fans will like it, though.

"Quest of Thig" tops the shorts for the sixth spot. Wells quite ably redeemed himself for that awful "Queen of the Blue World."

Winterbotham's "The Thought-Men of Mercury," rather good, but another of those that I just couldn't like very much. It ought to be greeted by much applause from the other fans however.

Last comes the one story of the ish that was bad, "Prison Planet." It just seemed a waste of space to me, space that would greatly enlarge the Vizigraph. Oh, please don't cut the Vizigraph. Anything else, but not that. What Lesser said about cutting letters goes for me too. There's nothing worse than a reader's department of short numerous letters. The Vizigraph, while we're on the subject, was exceptionally good this month. Well, I see this letter is already too long to insure a berth in the Vizi, so I guess I'd better sign off. Yours, I remain, for a better and bigger PLANET STORIES.

Sincerely,
ALDEN M. VERITY.

HIND SIGHT!

There is an old fable dealing with a man, his son, and a donkey. I have no room for telling it again here; but some of you Vizifanners will recall it, and perhaps will see my point. All of which adds up to the fact that it is impossible to please everybody in regard to PLANET STORIES. But in the staff's muddling way, we do our best to make PLANET the very best in the field. We are bi-monthly now with the mag, and we are buying better stories and illustrations every day. We are in there pitching; and we ask only that you bear with us in every way, and write us frank letters of your opinions. We'll do our best to give you what you want. As you say: Circulation is the deciding factor in a mag's development. Help build us up—and we won't let you down.

Cordially,
THE EDITOR.

CURTAIN GOING UP!

3217 N. Newstead Ave.
St. Louis, Missouri.

DEAR EDITOR:

The Living Dead

As the final echo of the curfew
Breathes its last beyond the blankened cliffs,
The shaggy shade slinks silently from his
Nitered grot, and steals into the damp shadows
By the new turned grave.

That's the way PLANET STORIES affect me. I have to write poetry and no matter how pretty it is when I think of it, why out comes some weird idea like that. I've got hundreds in my trunk.

Yes, I said trunk. No, I'm not an elephant, but you see I don't have the ordinary places to stash things that other guys have. Which is the reason for writing this letter. No, not to get the extra paper out of my trunk. It's all about Stellar Showboat. I belong to that kind of people, not interplanetary yet, but to the present day counterpart of those people described in Jameson's swell story. You see, I'm a traveling actor. In fact, my whole family are actors and have been for over a hundred years. The present Fontinelle Stock Company was organized by my Dad exactly fifty years ago, and as this is our anniversary, we have spent

quite a bit of time on our scenery and plays for this season. But we don't have scenery quite like Jameson's troupe. Gee, I wish we had; it wouldn't be nearly as much trouble to tear down after the show.

I do know a little about showboats, too, as most of my family have worked on the Golden Rod Showboat here in St. Louis. This boat is the original one that Edna Ferber wrote about in her novel, so if any of you fellows that live around St. Louis haven't seen it, you are missing a bet. It's one of the few real old-time boats left on the river.

The Ray Cummings stories you have been using recently seem to be on the up-grade. I'm like the rest of the fans, that is, I didn't like to read Ray's time-worn, nay, moth-eaten, plots over and over; but I do like his stories when he gets out of the rut. I think his "Brand New World" was a wonderful bit of literature:

Well, that is about all I have to say this time. I have read PLANET since its inception and have been an avid reader of science fiction for ten years. I think PLANET is getting very near the top. I guess I'll close now and get my make-up on. It's about time for orchestra and "the show must go on."

Sincerely,
ROBERT FONTINELLE.

CURTAIN GOING DOWN

Gosh, but your letter brought memories to the Editor. He played in stock for a couple of years, and thought he was pretty good. Now, he does his hamming through the medium of these pages. But aside from that, we're glad you dropped us a line. Vizifanners do about everything, but you're our first actor—and, somehow, we kinda envy your way of life. Write us again, between shows—and we'll both wait for the day when "Stellar Showboats" become a reality.

Cordially,
THE EDITOR.

HOY PING PONG WITH WHISKERS?

139-09 34 Rd.,
Flushing, L. I.

DEAR EDITOR:

Hmm! H. P. Pongley. The H is for Hoy, the P is for Ping, and Pongley becomes Pong. Hoy Ping Pong. Very clever, Tucker, but those whiskers on this gag are the you-know-how-long length. Tsk-tsk!!

Stories: Very good. I refrain from commenting on them for this reason. Quote:—"A story is only as good so long as I do not criticize it"—Unquote.

Art: Some good, some bad. Good; Leydenfrost—Paul—Fox—Doolin. Bad; Graef.

Cartoon: Dear CC.—Tain't funny, ARB.

Letters—

Mrs. Wells—Asinov is a chemist in Phil. and get this, has just recently been married!!!

For first place, the ever persistent Bill Stoy. Will this estimable gentleman communicate with me about several things we have in common.

For second, Milt Lesser, though he comes from you-know-where.

And third, Paul Carter, just to be different.

Since everyone else has taken a crack at Vol. 1, Nos. 1-12. So shall I.

Only one story has really stuck in my mind, or rather two.

1. Cosmic Juggernaut by J. R. Fearn. Truly

a great yarn and one worthy of science fiction.

2. The Forbidden Dream by R. Rocklyne. The only story that he has written that surpasses this is "Into The Darkness," so it has to be good.

There have been others but these two were the only ones which made any lasting and profound impression on me.

The bi-monthly idea is quite good, but only time will tell. Anyway, here's good luck. Also you have as yet not felt the wrath of the SFTPOBEMOTCOSFP. But—when a magazine starts issuing more copies per annum, the cover resolves into a BEM, so beware!

Sincerely,
A. R. BROWN.

WE'RE SCARED!

Brrrrrrrrrrrr!

Cordially,
THE EDITOR.

QUESTION!

2302 Ave. O,
Brooklyn, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

Loyal M. Sanford says I waste too much valuable letter space with my wit. Yet, one thing, as you say, Mr. Peacock, that has made PLANET what it is today in science fiction is the unabridged, jestful:—Vizigraph: and there's no doubt about that.

OK, Mr. Rigor Mortis Sanford, I won't argue the point with you. No, that would waste too much valuable space. Note the stressed sarcasm. (I ain't 'fraid uv you er any other entity alive, Rigor. Nope, any time yuh say, I'll take you on with Q rays. Any time!)

Instead of arguing, what, then, will I do? All right, everyone, what then will I do? I'll proceed in my utterly unpurbered manner, and include both merriment and "statistics" in my Vizinote. How will this be accomplished? Don't tell me no one knows yet. A longer letter, you people who are heterogeneous to anything remotely resembling rapport with my confused thoughts. Who's crazy, Peacock? Please unscramble this mess. I can't.

I'm smart, devilishly so. Why? Well, like most fans, I am not going to run through the Viz first of all. No, if I did that, all the readers would hate me for not casting the ballot in their direction. Instead, I'll leave that bit of cataclysmic torture for the end. Let 'em wait, see if I care.

No, Rigor Mortis, I won't vote for you, even though you claim you don't want to receive votes anyway—or so you say—stop pestering me! (only four paragraphs before this one, Rigor, I'm cutting them down too, fair enough?)

Now to get to the more important contents of the WINTER PLANET. Which do I consider most important? The notice, of course. Now, I am a funny sort of fan. No, not just eccentric, queer, egostitcal, great, etc., but strange in my likes and dislikes. For one thing—I insist that no mag can turn out story matter on such a consistently good quality as a quarterly can.

Now about PLANET, itself. Pardon me while I relax contentedly, drooling, every now and then. Yes, of course. You, dear, smiling, unsuspecting brave editor, have discovered THE cover artist. Anderson—jumping jovian jackels? Can that man draw. He's the best, nay the super-best,

you've ever had. Goodbye to your fame, Mr. Bok, for last fall's cover. This one is greater. Vastly so! Look at the coloration, at the monumental figure of Colossus, why, men and girls, it's great! Notice the toe and skyscraper combination on the right, perhaps the best detail of the painting. There seems to be some eerie quality Anderson has put into his work. I repeat, unless I'm wrong, he's the man to solve your cover problems from now on.

Now about the much discussed lettering on the front; as yet, I don't think I've gone into that in any of my notes—maybe I did, though. Look carefully at the entire cover. Do the words 'PLANET STORIES' actually stand out. Do they act as a center of attraction? No.

Instead, and maybe you'll get more suggestions along this line, how about using the style printing of the title of Bond's tale. It's easy to read, and very 'stand-outish'. What, dear Ed, do you think of that for an idea? Well, don't toss this flash away—it was just an opinion.

So what if you don't like my opinions, Rigor Moris Sanford. I'm entitled to them. And I'll bet my best Q ray cannon against your bottom dollar that any of my suggestions would be more practical than yours. You'd probably insist on poor Peacock putting the letters on the cover in skull and crossbones if you had your way!

Have the clear, block type print on the top of the cover, an Anderson pic beneath it, and the name of ONE story and author in a box SEPARATED from the rest of the cover.

By the way, the BEM wasn't BEM, it was simply M. But what's the difference; some humans are monsters even without being a mile in height. (Don't get so darn sore, Rigor. I didn't imply a thing. If you have a guilty conscience, I can't help it. No, I shall not refer to you again in this letter, don't worry!)

About the interior art. My comment on the art of a good deal of the pics would simply be—where in my astral's aunt's neighborhood is it? The art, in case any one don't catch. I said . . . forget it!

Opinions on artists:

Paul: Feature drawing, good average, Jones thing—the same. His only really above par one was for Miss B. This was neat. Second choice, please, if I merit an original.

Fox: Shows promise, fine shading. Develop him, give him a chance, in fact, to put it mildly, I think he can become one of the topnotchers, sooner or later.

Doolin: YOU'RE KIDDING, AREN'T YOU, ED, THIS CHARACTER CAN'T DRAW!

Graef: Good grief! (Get that). Same comment as above.

Knight: Surely you're joking. I think PLANET is above his style. Take some of his letters, though. He knows how to write them. Except when he tries to take apart an author as he did Sam Moskowitz. Am I glad, and was I pleased when King told the Vapid Vassel where to get off!

Leydenfrost: Ah, the savior. He did it, and no kidding. That pic for the last story is truly a masterpiece, Leyd's best, I think. Notice the clear-cut machinery under the slab. First choice for prize, naturally.

Where's Morey? Just when he was getting good, you canned him. Don't be coy, Peacock, Leo can still draw better than most of them.

Thanx a lot, Ed, for saying you agreed with me in your footnote. And the scope of the stories is picking up. Congrats. But we still want 'em longer. Look, puh-leeze, a thirty-thousand worder. (Now I have one on hand . . .) Hhuh!

This is the first time in sooooo long that this Happy G. can truthfully say that every single story wasn't only away from the bad variety, but everyone, in its own right, was over average. Egad! Some vast improvement. I hope the art takes an upward climb, too, by next issue. Remember, no Doolin, Knight, or Graef.

As far as the stories went, naturally, Bond's big NOVEL has to take first place. Tremendous life spawn pregated out of the cosmos now that is scope, that's what I go for. "Colossus of Chaos" was excellent and Bond's best for you since the "Ultimate Salient."

I should really be ashamed of myself. Why? Well for my second choice story. The utter plotlessness of the thing, the simple, breath-taking adventure should actually make a science fiction fan hate it. And yet, Cord and Kline handled "Meteor Men of Mars" in such a unique and startling fashion, that it simply won me to its cause. Congrats to the authors and you, Ed—at last someone has been brave enough to put the Amazon on another planet besides Venus! This story was actually con to anything in my policy—no scope, and so forth. Yet, I liked it. It takes all kinds to make a world, you say. (You're right. Now please tell me, which kind am I?)

Richard Wilson writes in a breezy, refreshing style; his effort in this issue proved his worth. "The Man from Siykul" rates third place.

(4th): "Peril Of The Blue Word" by Abernathy. Different, almost satirical. Extra-good, and let's have more from same, please. (5th): "Outpost on Io" by Brackett. Swell adventure, good future war plot. This lass can really swing the ink (typing) lately. (6th): Editor, it's you! "Planet of No Return" is a fine, adventurous sequel to "The Thing of Venus." (7th): "Galactic Ghost. As this yarn proves, Kubilius is a fine writer of short stories. Don't have him work on anything longer, though—he excels under five-thousand words.

So for the stories.

Gee, I have to have some humor. So:

(I am the happy G.—the best Vizifan, that's me!—I love every single fan thar be—except, of course, those who don't vote for them. . . .)

That's all this time!

This is the Nagging, Nasty, Nauseating (or so your first letter last issue says), Necessary, Noble (these last two are more like it), Notable, Noteworthy, Nincompoop clearing the Viziwaves for some fan to come in and take over. Of course I'll be back next issue!

Sincerely,

MILT LESSER

The Happily Reformed Genius

ANSWER!

Sanford and Lesser have both had their little say, both indulged in personalities. There the matter rests, for we have no desire to permit the Vizigraph to degenerate into a personality duel. Further commenting upon each other between the two shall not see print.

As for the cover lettering, well, we're working on that point. But for shame, you Vizifanners, there is one important feature of the mag that everyone has missed! I guess we'll have to change it without suggestions.

There is one question that is puzzling me, personally. I claim to be a writer; in fact, much of my income is made that way. Now, I can do this: I can publish my stuff in PLANET STORIES

under my name—or under a pen name. In the latter, I don't think it would be fair to either you or myself. Yet quite a few people might think that I buy my own stories. The last is not true; my stuff is passed upon by Mr. Reiss, and he rejects plenty. So drop me a line about the subject, will you? I'll abide by your decision. Go easy, and remember that, editor or not, I'd still sell fiction to this mag. The question is: should I try to fool you and lose a certain amount of publicity in the writing game, by using a pen-name—or will you bear with my stuff in the hope that I turn out something fairly good?

The above paragraph has nothing to do with Lesser's letter, but we thought it as good a place as any to propose the question. Our apologies for injecting the too personal note, and thanks for listening. Do drop me a note when you find the time.

Cordially,
THE EDITOR...

NOT SATISFIED YET?

3956 Ledgewood,
Cincinnati, Ohio.

Dear Editor:

"Yes?" Here I am again to make my usual report to dear old PLANET. Shall we proceed?

Using the 1 to 10 rating system, the stories come out thusly:

"Peril of the Blue World"—9.5. No comment.

"Outpost on Io"—9.4. A bit gruesome, with a plot that was a classic example of hack, it rates this high because of one thing: Brackett's excellent writing.

"Meteor—Men of Mars"—9.3. Quite good in all respects.

"Planet of No Return"—9.1. Good, and then some.

"Galactic Ghost"—8.9. Well-written.

"Colossus of Chaos"—8.7. Parts of this yarn were excellent. And parts of it were not. Watch yourself, Mr. Bond! Poetry expresses my opinion very nicely:

Blood and gore,
And hack galore;
This is not
The Bond of yore.

"Spoilers of the Spaceways"—8.4.

"The Man from Siykul"—8.1. This yarn was readable, but not up to PLANET's high standard.

"Doorway to Destruction"—7.8. Hmmm!!!

Looking over this issue, I must confess that it is a let-down after last issue, which was excellent. However, I have faith in PLANET and have no doubt that next issue will be better.

As for the cover, I definitely did not like it. But, then again, it was not as bad as some of your older covers. In other words, it was not quite fair. Confusing, eh?

The interior pix were better than last time, I think. Best was Paul's on page 59. Second place also goes to Paul for the pic on page 41, while third place belongs to Leydenfrost. By the way, that monster of Leydenfrost's is one of the few I have seen that really looked like a monster. Brrrrr!

Honorable mention is deserved by both Fox on page 29 and Paul on pages 2 and 3.

The others stink. Where is Morey?

And now the Vizigraph, which is the best item in this or any other magazine. As for Mr. Sanford's remarks about the Vizigraph, I can do no better than to quote Bill Stoy:

"The Vizi has a certain appeal that I can't resist . . . it's the only S-F letter department where everyone really lets his hair down and is his usual infantile self."

Best letters were (1) Carter, (2) Lesser and, simply because I want a pic, I'll tie my humble missive with Gray's excellent letter for third place.

I don't agree with Lesser on your stories in general. I think that, up until this issue, they have improved right along. But he is correct on one item. Very correct. The yarn that I put in first place with a perfect 10 last issue, Ray Galun's "Space Oasis," cannot begin to compare with, for example, Bond's "The Ultimate Salient," or Binder's "Vassels of the Master World." It lacks, as Lesser puts it, scope and power. This situation can be remedied, I think. Can do, Mr. Editor?

Back to the brighter side, congratulations on going bi-monthly. That should, I suppose, satisfy us. However, Er, Ah, that is . . . well, don't you think monthly would be even better?

Sincerely,

CHAD OLIVER,
The Looney Lad of Ledgewood

WELL, NEITHER ARE WE!

How do youse guys do it? Just about the time we get the idea that things are beginning to shape up—Bingo! in comes another missive telling us of something else that should be changed. So take a look—another cover artist—and we'll take no back talk, this artist is *good*.

We're mad now, and getting madder by the minute. We're doing nothing more or less than snooping through PLANET STORIES, looking for things to improve and change. We're not satisfied—but come the day when all the letters are glowing epistles of praise, that is the day we change the entire setup of the mag. 'Cause you see, it is impossible to please everybody.

But go ahead, sling trouble at us; we can take it, i.e., are taking it! We've got a warm feeling for all of you; probably because we're catching (deleted) from somebody all of the time.

Cordially,
THE EDITOR.

THE SECRET IS OUT!

240 N. Reservoir,
Lancaster, Penna.

DEAR EDITOR:

My roommates here at the laughing academy warned me that if I persisted in reading these sf stories this would happen. So beating back the roaches with one hand and typing with the index finger of the other, I'll try and give youse bums a resumé of what I'm raving about.

Six months ago, I was innocently minding my own business, deftly snitching candy out of the corner drug store's opened display-cases, when suddenly. . . . OK OK OK. . . . have it your way . . . when after about half an hour my eyes were drawn to a new magazine among the fly-specked collection on the rack. Heroically withdrawing from the tempting candy case, I tottered over and snatched a mag from the pink little hands of a 5 yr. old girl, who, by the way, was taking it home for her dear old sick mother. While I avidly scanned the pages of the book, holding it in one hand and wadding gum-drops into my mouth in a dainty manner with the other, I was distracted by the sweet little girl who, on her knees and with tears in her eyes, begged for the book to take home to her mother,

so that she might be happy and get well. Kicking her in the face I plunked down a cast iron wo-bit piece and screamed for my nickle change. Thus I became the furtive possessor of my first PLANES STORIES.

The third time I read the mag through I discovered the VIZIGRAPH. Well bless my soul and break my bones if it didn't seem nice and homey to lean back and read the ravings and ratings of a dozen or so fugitives from a monkey house. . . . I saw the cutest straight jacket the other day . . . and as I have hither-to-for never sent love letters to editors of any sf magazines that I manage to absorb, (mostly because I can't write), I will at last break my steadfast silence and make history in the literary world. Yes, yes, yes . . . that's it! I . . . I would be the first to write a sensible, sane, cool-headed letter to the VIZ!

The blare of trumpets! The roll of a hundred drums, and the wild ringing of acclaiming bells smote the air . . . and, ah yes . . . the persistant attacks of those dam roaches. Anyway, what I'm trying to say is that your mag is terrific, stupendous, magnificent, and even might be good if a couple of white-coated gentlemen, would nab a few mindless, stark-staring-mad contributors to the VIZ. F'instance: Paetzke, Maxwell and Shaw. The only things that save the VIZ are the choice bits of thoughts offered by Lesser, King, and Mrs. Wells.

Take notice, Ed, that when I talk of your mag, I attribute half of its popularity to the VIZ. Oh well . . . 2¾ per cent anyway. Sorry to hear you have a cold Lesser; in your fall issue you were BOK BOK BOK'in all over the place. Personally, Ed, Leydenfrost is good enough for me.

Now to settle down to the light fluffy part of my missive.

With pounding hearts and bated breath, (pfooie), (some one was eating garlic), you are all undoubtedly waiting to hear my expert and concise report on your Fall issue. On the whole, I've yet to find any of your stories really terrific. Don't be offended tho, Ed. I've been reading since '30, and have collected only seven terrific stories in all that time. (Choosey, hain't I?) Because I say your stories aren't terrific, doesn't mean that they're lousy; (although occasionally, you'll have to admit there are two or three.) On the contrary, your mag usually has a nice collection of good stories.

The whole secret of your mag, (in case you didn't know it), is the variety of stories. How many times have you mugs out there picked up a sf mag, to find that both the main novel and most of the short stories are about interplanetary war, or some other mutilated plot. Where is the originality that these brain boys used to employ? In days long gone, when adventure took place on any of the planets it was under conditions that startled and fascinated the reader. Now-a-days the idea-mongers that slap out several stories a week, seemed to have met in a convention somewhere, and decided to adopt a standard set of rules as to the natural character of each of the separate planets. You read two or three stories in the same book and the descriptions of the Martian landscape are almost identical. I'm beginning to know the Martian Desert better than my confinement cell. The old-timers thought it a blot on their integrity, if their planetary characterizing coincided with another author's. They deftly manipulated the known natural laws

of each planet in so many different ways, that no two stories coincided. Thus the readers were spellbound by the new original characterization of the same planets. Today its different; the author does the same thing that a director could do if he were as unoriginal. Use the same background drops for all of his plays. That's stupid, and yet it's what they're doing.

Just a sentence to let you know that I favor a novel and three or four short stories in each issue. For instance, in the story, "WAR-GODS OF THE VOID," by Henry Kuttner; if the description of the imprisonment of our hero and his love by the Venus war-gods had been stretched out into a novel of a gripping story of an organized plot to seize control of the decadent civilization by the slaves, and further scientific divulgings about the mysterious black pool, which, by the way, unconsciously stuck in the reader's memory, would have made it a magnificent novel, with a spell-binding climax of not just a few slaves escaping, but the arising of a new civilization from the shambles of a bloody battle for slavery. Instead what does Kuttner do but wipe out the entire race of war-gods!

E'en tho Hank Kuttner did brutally moider d'bums in a single grandiose sweep of his pen, I still put his story in first place. A close second was Hank Hasse, with his CITY OF THE LIVING FLAME, (and I'm not just partial to "Hanks" either). Tying for third were STELLAR SHOWBOAT and SPACE OASIS. S'help me, if anyone else dares write another story in the same vein as Basil Well's, QUEST OF THIG, I'll demand solitary from my keeper. Within the last two months I've read exactly three stories, in which a being from another planet landed on an unsuspecting Earth and became so attached that they either stayed, or in kindness did not mention their presence. (No doubt this planet would be a living hell for a visitor from another planet, anyway.)

Well, Ed, I'd better close this time; the salesman just asked me if I was satisfied with the trial performance of this typewriter. And . . . oh yes; don't send any sketches to yours truly, in case you happen to overlook my letter and it accidentally gets printed. I won't be here, I'll be in Uncle Sam's armed forces by that time.

Sincerely,

CASE NUMER 4U-2-A-10,
WARREN "WIZARD" WADE.

AND WE'RE ALL IN!

We like you, Wizard; you're our type exactly! There is absolutely nothing that compares with stealing mags from tiny kids, then kicking their molars down their pretty throats—unless it's kicking the teeth down such fiends as you. Shame for parading your vices before such innocents as the Vizifanners; your letter may start a wave of BEASTLY things being done.

As for the suggestions . . . let's not talk shop. C'mon over to my cell block some day soon, and we'll compare the hemstitching on our strait-jackets, or the length of our leashes. I've got a perfectly wonderful room, without an exposure—and we can take turns bouncing our heads against the wall. Until then, better snitching, kicking and reading. We'll see you around the guard-house.

Cordially,

THE EDITOR.

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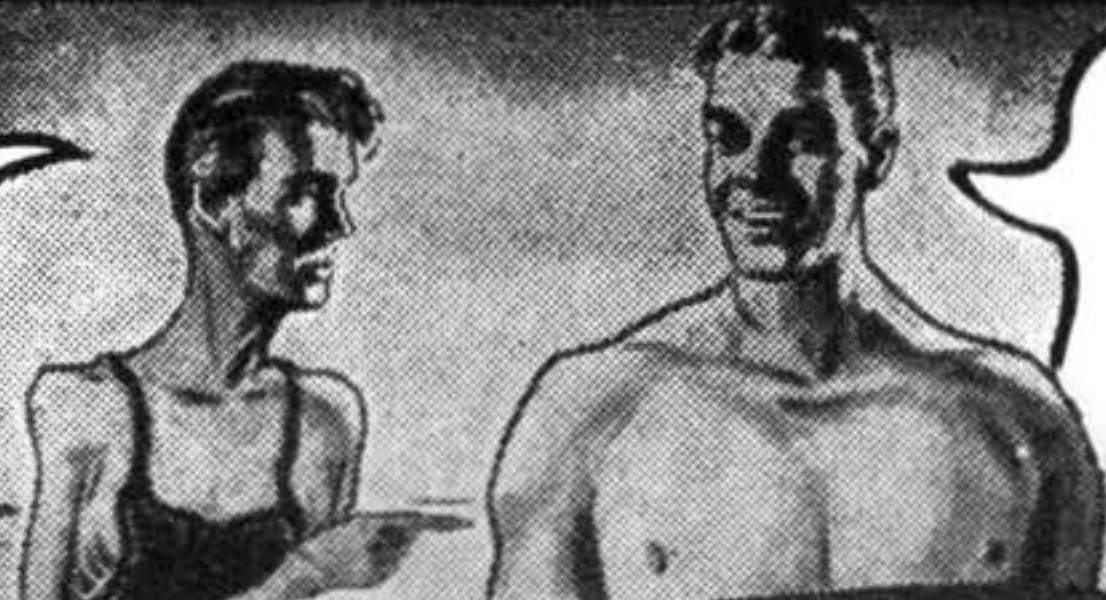
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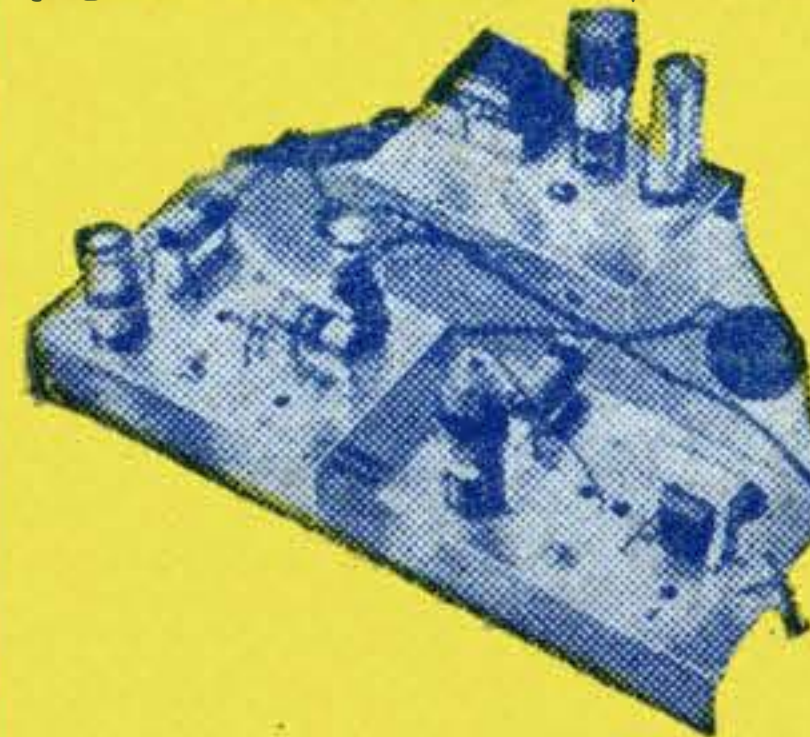
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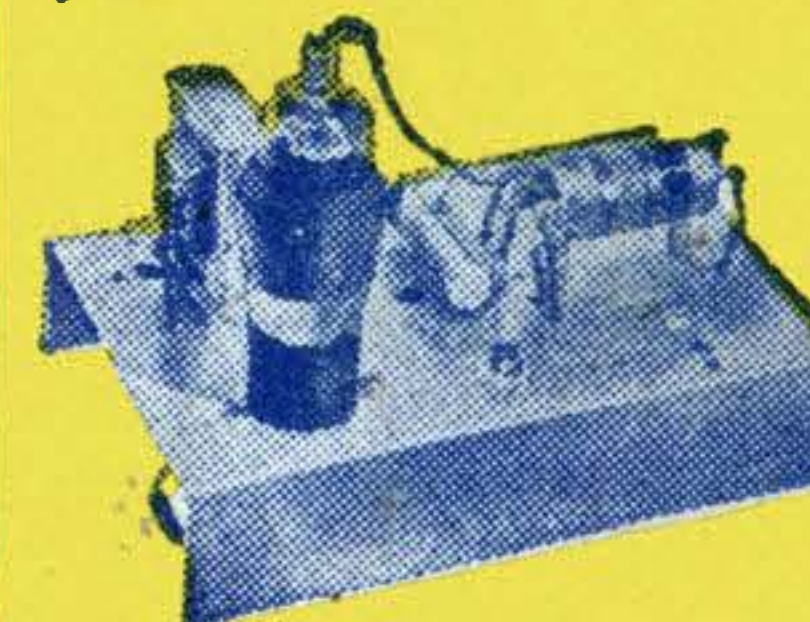
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