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THE MONSTER THAT THREATENED THE UNIVERSE

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THE WAR-NYMPHS OF VENUS

A NOVEL OF EMBATTLED WORLDS

by RAY CUMMINGS



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Spring Issue 1941
 Volume 1, No. 6



20c per copy



THIS IS A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE

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THE WAR-NYMPHS of VENUS

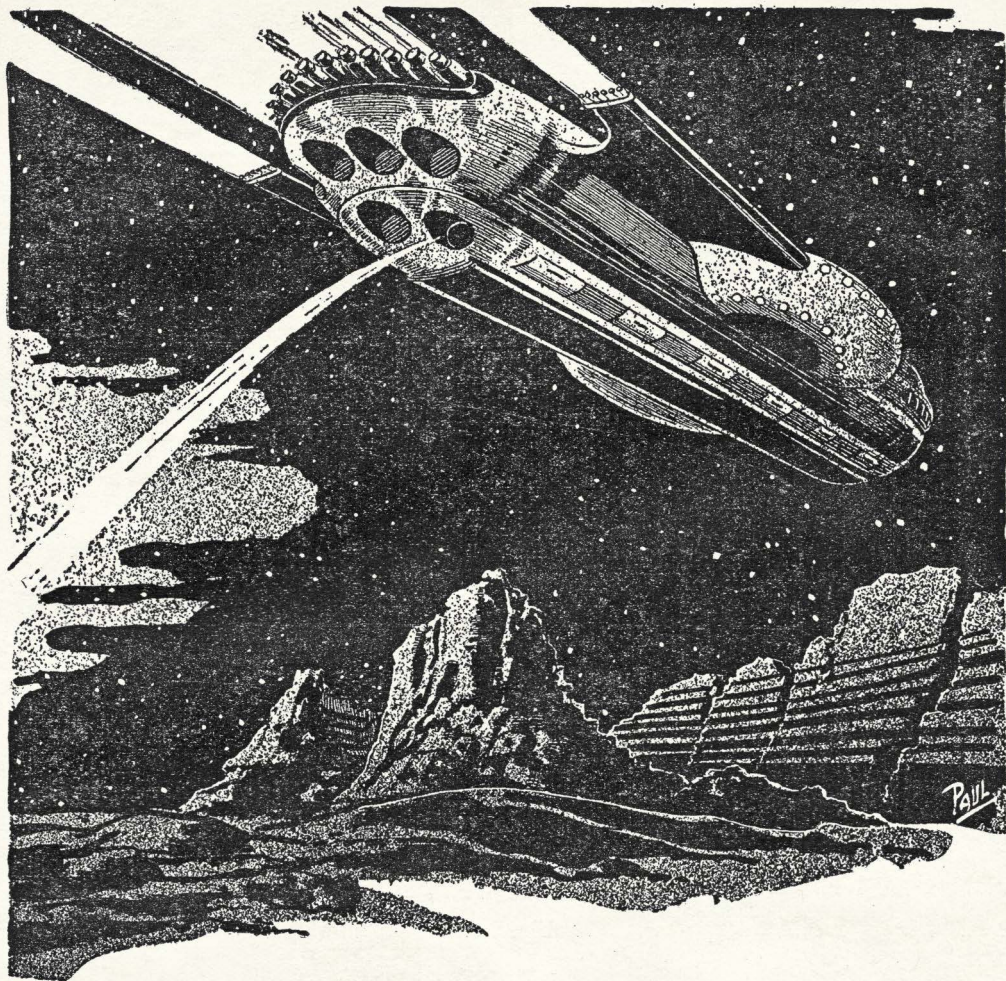
By RAY CUMMINGS

The voluptuous golden civilization of Arron was doomed. Licentious laughter echoed through the water-kingdom, unmindful of the relentless, clanking invasion of the Gorts. What fools, this handful of warrior-maidens led by a puny Earthman, to pit their thin strength against Tollgamo's iron army!

I WAS fishing for tarpon, lolling back in the stern of my small boat. The outboard motor, running at trolling speed, was a pattering purr in the drowsing watery silence. It was sunset of a summer evening of 1948. The Gulf of Mexico, out beyond the mouth of the little Florida bayou inlet across which I was heading, was a glassy expanse, blood-red in the light of the huge setting sun.

To the south lightning was playing along the orange sky. I recall that a vague uneasiness was upon me. Because a storm might be coming? Surely it was not that. I was within three miles of the small island where young Jack Allen and I were camping. It was my intention to head for there presently, especially as there had been no sign of tarpon. Allen had been too lazy to come fishing; he had said he would loaf





and have supper ready for us at dark.

My name is Kent Fanning. Jack Allen and I were of an age—twenty-four, that summer. With our business in New York, we were here on vacation, having a permit to fish and to camp on the small, uninhabited island.

The intermittent lightning at the southern horizon rose higher. Faint muttering thunder was audible. A massive grey-white cloud was down there now, a thunderhead, coming northward with the storm behind it. I had decided to pull in my line and head for the island when suddenly I had a strike, the big reel humming as the line went out. A tarpon? I hooked it, shut off the motor, sat erect with my stout rod braced in the leather socket of my belt. I was prepared for a long struggle.

And then, two hundred yards or so from me, the water broke with a floundering splash. I gasped, stared numbed. A floundering, oblong pink-white thing was

there at the end of my line. A slim white arm flailed up as the thing turned, swimming on the surface frantically away from me. Pink-white limbs gleaming in the moonlight. Streaming tawny hair, like sea-weed—hair in which my hook seemed to be caught.

A girl! I had her at the boat in a moment, floundering in the moonlight, gasping, still trying to twist around and disentangle my hook from her long streaming hair. A small, slim figure, white-limbed yet flushed like moonlit coral. There was a brief dangling robe wetly clinging to her. It was of gleaming lustrous green as though perhaps it was a fabric of softly woven metal, painted green by the sea.

An extraordinary yet very human girl. Just a few seconds of my stricken amazement. I recall that I gasped inanely.

“Well—why good Heavens—”

Her gasping laugh rippled like the splashing water in the moonlight. “Sorry!

I got some frightened to be confused." English! Strangely intoned with little rippling liquid syllables. Like nothing I had ever heard before and yet my own language.

She had pulled my hook from the gleaming tawny tresses of her hair. Then she flung up a coral-white arm. I bent, seized her wrist, drew her up and she came with a nimble, skilled little leap and landed on her feet in the boat beside me!

II

I FIND myself now somewhat at a loss accurately and yet succinctly to depict that next hour or two. You who read this of course have heard much of the strange affair from newscasters and from the public prints. Garbled reports, some of them. Others pedantic with technical details of science. I am no scientist. It is my purpose here merely to give a factual account of the weird incidents which brought to me, Kent Fanning, a person certainly of no importance save perhaps to myself, a sudden prominence not in one world, but in two.

Queer that throughout my lifetime there had always been talk that some day, here on Earth, scientists would discover the secret of space-flight; that then intrepid adventurers would journey out into space. But as you all know now, the reverse, so seldom anticipated, was true. Another world came to us, in the person of this strange Venus girl; came indeed by utter chance, or destiny if you will, to me.

Venus; the Earth. Of all known planets, the two most close, and most alike. There are things brewing in the Universe of which none of us can be aware, of course. A myriad things. And here was one of them. Unknown to us, Venus and the Earth already were intermingled, fused into the beautiful little person of this strange girl—the blood of Venus, the blood of Earth flowing in her veins.

You had not heard of George Peters, doubtless. Nor had I. A research chemist and physicist, in New York City, about 1930. He was a young man then; I think, twenty-eight. He sought no publicity. A wealthy man. With some twenty companions, all of them scientists, some of them older than himself, he was working,

not on the secret of spaceflight, but with a ray—a vibration—which he hoped might reach some distant planet, as a means of communication if there should be inhabitants there.

Ironically he did not know he had succeeded! And it was men from Venus—the villainous Tollgamo of whom now you have heard so much—who was attracted by his signals and came to him; abducting him and his companions so that all that was known, here on earth was that one morning George Peters' laboratory was found wrecked, and he and his companions were gone.

"George Peters, that is my father," the girl was telling me now as I headed the small open boat for the island where young Allen and I were camping.

And she had come to Earth—the first time in her sixteen years that she had been off Venus; stolen a small spaceflight cylinder from her father. Her Venus people needed help from the threat of Tollgamo. All that was good and beautiful on Venus and in her Arone world of love and music and beauty, was to be destroyed by the monstrous threat of this Dictator from his mechanized realm of the Gorts.

"Wait," I said, as she poured it at me, at times only half coherent. "You came here to Earth, for help? You came alone?"

"Yes. You have not, father thinks, yet discovered the secret of spaceflight. He was sending the cylinder, with drawings and scientific details of how spaceflight was accomplished by Tollgamo and his evil men. And so I came. We want that you should build a spaceship and come to Venus. Your men, and some of your weapons of war, to help us fight Tollgamo."

And she had dropped here into the Gulf of Mexico, wrecked the little one-man space-vehicle so that she barely escaped with her life. And it sank, with its secret of spaceflight obliterated by the sea, even if by some chance the little metal mechanisms themselves could be recovered.

I think that she had given no thought to that realization as she swam to save herself and suddenly found my trolling hooks entangled in her hair. Nereid of the sea. Far more like her Venus mother than her Earth father, water was almost her natural element, since her blood did not need the replenishment of oxygen so quickly as ours,

so that for ten minutes or more she need not breathe.

I LEARNED only fragmentary details of all this that Midge Peters had to tell, there in the boat as we headed for the island. Surely I must admit that the weirdness of it startled me, and for just a moment perhaps, it vaguely occurred to me that here was some trickster, or a mentality unbalanced. But to look at her, was to know that certainly here was no Earth girl!

I had to believe her. But I must admit, I gave little thought, there in the boat, to any menace to her world, or to the ironic fact that she had brought to Earth the treasured secret of spaceflight and already had lost it so that she was marooned here. Here was the amazing, beautiful little creature herself in the boat beside me, and what she was saying of Venus dwindled into insignificance with the stirring of my pulses as I stared at her. Slim little body, hardly matured, but fashioned with almost a normal earthly beauty. Yet there was a strangeness that made her different. The flush of pink coral to her flesh; her shimmering robe with moonbeams rippling on it like moonrays on green rippled water; her long tawny tresses, drying now in the wind.

But most of all, I think, the strangeness was in her eyes. The sea was there in the green depths of her eyes. Eyes that mirrored the soul of a strange girlhood; eyes that had seen things strange to me, reflecting now the thoughts, emotions of another world.

"You look at me so queerly," she said suddenly. "Why is that?"

"Well you—you—" Suddenly it was hard to say anything of my conflicting thoughts. "You—well, why wouldn't I be startled? A little sea nymph. You should have been named Nereid."

Again her laugh rippled.

"Nereid? Why yes, my father calls me that, though my mother named me Midge. That was when she learned English. So I am not like Earth-girls? My father has said it many times. But you—"

Her gaze at me was earnest, direct. "You do not look queer to me," she added. "You look much in the fashion of my father, grown younger."

Surely I have given only a vague picture indeed of that half hour in the boat with Nereid as the pattering little outboard motor drove us to the island where Jack Allen would be waiting for me. Half an hour, so crowded with my first jumbled impressions of what Nereid's weird Venus-world must be like.

"That is your island?" Nereid said suddenly. "Why—it looks very pretty."

The storm still was rising in the south—occasional bursts of lightning and rolling, reverberating thunderclaps. But the starlight and moonlight was over us. It silvered the island palms; it lay like white metal on the sand of the island's shore.

I headed us into the little cove. A small dilapidated dock was there. On a little rise behind the palmetto fringe, under the palm trees, a shaft of moonlight gleamed on the white of our tent. I thought that young Allen would have heard the putt-putt of my motor and be down at the dock now to greet me. But there was no sign of him.

I shut off the motor. Silence leaped at us.

"Queer," I said. "Jack promised he'd have supper ready."

The glow of campfire beside the tent was visible. In the silence I could hear the murmur of music from our little portable radio. Allen must have been here only a few minutes ago. I called,

"Oh Jack—Jack, where are you?"

There was only the roll of my words, echoing into silence. Very queer.

Nereid was in the bow of that boat. "Fend us off," I said as we glided to the dock.

This weird girl. Water, almost her native element so that suddenly she dove over the bow. Flash of coral limbs, green-sheathed little body and streaming tawny hair. There was hardly a splash as she slipped into the water and then was swimming backward against our gliding little boat. It slid to the dock, gently eased up, and Nereid was gone.

For a moment I held my breath, with my heart pounding. Foolish apprehension. Abruptly she appeared, out in the middle of the cove, head and shoulders bobbing up as she shook the water from her tresses and flung up an arm to greet me.

"Come back here," I called.

The silent cove echoed with the ripple of her laugh. With weaving limbs, incredibly swiftly her body slid through the water; submerged again, and she came up laughing, like a dog shaking herself as she jumped to the dock.

"Some day we will swim together, Kent." Again she flung me that sidelong glance of coquetry. "And if you swim like my father, without much trouble I could drown you. You think so?"

"No argument on that," I said. Queerly I seemed to feel, just for that instant, almost a vague resentment. Resentment of a man at the superior prowess of a woman. Instinctive, of course.

She seemed to understand it, and she laughed again. "Our young men of Venus are like that," she said, "for they, too, cannot swim very well." And instantly her face clouded. "That, too, is part of the trouble of my world—the men who would have their mates kept from the water—so that the man may be in everything the master. Our virgins do not like that."

She clung to my hand as we went up the palmetto-lined path to the camp. And suddenly she seemed frightened. An aura of sudden menace was here. I, too, could feel it. Allen had started supper. The things were out; food was in the frying pan, burning now in a charred mass over the camp-fire flames.

"Kent—something wrong—"

WE stood tense. Like animals abruptly scenting danger, yet having no least idea what it was, or from whence it could come. . . . And abruptly in the silence, the murmuring little radio here changed from music to a newscaster's flash.

"Nereid listen—news of you—" I murmured.

Something had been seen, late this afternoon, dropping swiftly from the sky—something, a meteorite?—the few eyewitnesses differed in trying to describe it. "*Mysterious missile drops into the Gulf ten miles off lonely Palmetto Key.*" The newscaster drew on his imagination, conjecturing what the round shining thing could have been, which two fishing boats had reported seeing coming hurtling down from the afternoon sky, dropping into the glassy Gulf.

I smiled at Nereid as for a moment we stood listening. Her little falling space-cylinder already was causing comment. I could envisage the incredulous amazement of the authorities at Tampa when I took her there, told them who she was. The world would ring with it. Blaring newscasters: "*Stranded Venus girl! Marooned on Earth! Venus inhabited! Venus threatened with bloody revolution! Appeals to Earth for help! Daughter of two worlds brings secret of spaceflight to Earth, and loses it on her arrival!*"

And some would try to be humorous: "*Girl from Venus brings gift of spaceflight secret, and loses it before she can give it to us! Isn't that what you would expect of a woman?*" "*Kent Fanning and weird girl try to hoax scientists—*"

Somehow as I thought of it, resentment sprang within me at what this would do to the gentle little Nereid. Allen and I, tomorrow when the storm was over, would have to take her to Tampa, of course. Or perhaps we would take her to some scientific Society, with less publicity. And an effort would be made to recover her cylinder, with its precious secret.

It was my swift flow of thoughts as for that moment the newscaster droned on. And suddenly his voice changed. He had been describing the mysterious falling of what quite evidently had been Nereid's little vehicle. And now another Press Bulletin had reached him.

"*Mysterious airship descends from the stratosphere, lands in the Gulf near Palmetto Key, off west coast of Florida. At sunset tonight—*"

Nereid gripped me with a little gasping cry as we listened. A gleaming metal thing, flatly oblong with a turret globe at bow and stern, had been distantly seen by a tramp freighter which was heading westward into the Gulf, bound for Mexico. A metal ship—blood-red with the sunset on it—slowly floating down; rotating slowly, weirdly on its horizontal axis. . . . It had been seen to land on the Gulf surface. And then slowly submerge, heading shoreward like a plunging submarine as it vanished!

Nereid murmured, "Tollgamo, he has a ship like that! But my father has none! Oh Kent—"

A spaceship from Venus! Was it that?

Following Nereid here to seize her; to prevent her from giving the secret of Interplanetary transportation to Earth! The newscaster was saying something about U. S. Coast Guard Cutters being ordered from Tampa to investigate.

And from here on little Palmetto Key, young Allen had disappeared! The implication of that struck at me. For a second I stared at Nereid, the firelight gleaming soft and warm on her dripping little body; tinting her pink-coral face which now was stamped with terror.

But we had no more warning than that. The storm was at hand now, and the wind was lashing the upper fronds of the palms; purple darkness here on the island with a flash of lightning and almost simultaneous thunderclap. For that second the palmetto shrubs were whitely illumined by the electric glare. Fifty feet away a big, dark upright shape abruptly was visible. And another—and another! Men stalking us!

The glare died. There was only turgid windy darkness. I must have muttered something to Nereid; my arm went around her as we turned to run back to our boat in the cove. Too late! From the palm woods behind us a violet beam of light stabbed out. It caught us; bathed us. There was a guttural shout; the sound of a little pop and something whizzing with a whining hum through the air. I felt something strike my legs. A little blob which with its impact abruptly uncoiled, and then coiled again as it wrapped itself around my legs so that I crashed heavily to earth face down.

And another had hit my neck. Ghastly thing—quivering steel spring. It felt like that; thin quivering metal encircling my throat. Almost like a thing alive, gripping me with its metal fingers . . . strangling me. I was aware that Nereid, too, had fallen. My groping fingers clutched at the strangling band; its sharp edges cut my fingers as futilely I tried to tear it loose. I recall that I lay threshing, lunging, with my legs pinned and my breath gone. Dark figures were standing over me now. Guttural chuckling voices mingled with the roaring torrent of Niagara in my ears. Then the dancing spots before my bulging eyes blurred the gathering dark shapes.

III

THE roaring in my ears came first as my consciousness struggled back. My fumbling fingers felt my throat. The band was gone; the skin was swollen there. Then I knew that I was bathed in the cold sweat of weakness and was lying on the metal grid of a floor. The murmur of voices sounded around me; and I opened my eyes to find myself in a dimly starlit, circular turret room. The control room of a spaceship. It hummed with a throbbing rhythm of its current. But save for that it was queerly still, vibrationless.

We were in space. Through the round, transparent turret walls I could see the blazing stars in a black firmament to one side. The other was shrouded with metal blinds, through the chinks of which dazzling sunlight was showing, so that I knew we had already left the giant cone of the Earth's shadow. Heading partly toward the Sun. Heading for Venus? It seemed so.

Men were here around me. Huge, burly, strangely garbed men—one at the controls, where banks of levers and dials with quivering indicators were ranged in rows with a line of little fluorescent globes diagonally across them. Two other men sat softly talking together; guttural, unintelligible words. Weird figures indeed. At first glance they could have been towering robots; wide, square shoulders, rectangular bodies, round tubular, jointed legs. The starlight glinted on their burnished, grey-white metal casements. Then as they moved, I saw that their garments were of flexible woven metal.

The one at the controls was bareheaded, a round bullet head of close-cropped black hair. His face was heavy; skin queerly grey-white. Weird features, with a protruding chin and long hawk nose so that the mouth was a greylipped slit, depressed between the projections of his nose and lower jaw. And he had deep-set, round dark eyes under shaven black brows.

Men of science. Humans whose life was of such efficient, mechanical rigidity that they themselves had the aspect of machines. Worshipers of precision; of mechanization. The aura of it was on them.

I saw that one of them was sitting im-

passive, stiffly erect in his metal garments with his gaze roving me like a guard. Strange, jewel-like little weapons were at his waist and in pouches of his metal jacket. On his head was a metal, peaked helmet—its peak fashioned in the form of a hawk-like bird, poised for screaming flight. Across the starlit circular room, another of the men was sitting, gazing out at the firmament. A man? I stared with a new amazement. The same square, jointed metal garments. But the hips were wider, the shoulders more narrow. A woman, of this mechanized race of Gorts. Her breast swelled beneath her mailed tunic. Her hair was black, long to the base of her neck, covering her ears. A shining black metal band was around her forehead, holding the hair from her eyes.

Strange, powerful Amazon. She was a good six feet tall; her face was hawk-nosed like the men, but with lips that were fuller, of a reddish tinge. Then as I stared, the man at the controls called to her:

“Garga—”

She rose; moved to him. Her dangling weapons, and a huge metal ornament on her bosom, clanked as she walked. At the control table the leader gave her orders; guttural crisp words unintelligible to me. She nodded; went to a small table across the room, where with charts and computations she seemed figuring the course of our flight.

Garga, woman of the Gorts. Mechanized womanhood, with all that womanhood stands for in my own world submerged within her so that she was a mere female machine. And suddenly my mind, still dazed now in these first moments of my returning consciousness, swept back to Nereid. Strange world, this Venus, to hold two such contrasting types of female! What a gulf between them!

Where was Nereid now? Had she been killed in that attack upon us? Anxiety swept me. I had struggled up on one elbow. The watching Gort saw me; he muttered an exclamation and the man at the controls came clanking to his feet. A giant fellow, well over six feet. His slit of mouth widened with a grin like a gash between his nose and chin as he bent down over me.

“You—still alive?” he greeted. “What your name?”

I sat up, still rubbing my bruised throat. “Kent Fanning,” I said. “So you talk English? There was a girl with me, back there on that island. Where is she?”

He gestured blandly. “She safe. Daughter of Peters. Tollgamo wants her not injured. He will like you too, I think perhaps. You have scientific skill of Earth science?”

I would be kept alive for the knowledge I might have. “Well, maybe,” I said. “Where is Peters’ daughter? I want to see her. Where are you taking us? To Venus?”

“You ask too much quick questions,” he retorted. His grey knuckles rapped his mailed chest. “I am Rhool, second to Tollgamo. I talk with you some else time. Maybe you teach me more the English? Eh?”

“Where is Peters’ daughter?” I insisted. I was on my feet, still dizzy; and as I staggered a little, I clutched Rhool’s metal clothed arm. It angered, or perhaps startled him. With a sweeping gesture, incredibly powerful, his arm flung me aside. His guttural barking command brought the woman Garga with a pounce.

I have not mentioned that I am a bit under six feet in height; slim and dark. Not very powerful; but I have, my friends tell me, a temper somewhat flaring so that in a rough and tumble fight I usually can take care of myself. But the glare in Rhool’s eyes warned me that this was a time when discretion certainly was better than valor. The woman Garga towered an inch or so over me; her fingers gripped my shoulders.

“So?” she muttered. “You think to cause trouble?”

I summoned a grim smile. “I do not. I want to be taken to Peters’ daughter. Where is she?”

Rhool, back at his instrument table now, barked a command; and the metal-clad Gort woman shoved me. “You come with me. I take you.”

To Nereid? I hoped so. Docilely I preceded Garga along a glowing humming little metal corridor of the space-ship. She said nothing more, but flung open a small metal door after unbarring its fastenings, shoved me in and banged it upon me.

I found myself in a small metal sleeping apartment. Brilliant starlight filtered in

through its single bullseye pane. A figure was in the corner on a fabric couch.

"You Kent? Good Lord."

IT was Jack Allen. They had pounced on him, back there on Palmetto Key. I sat with him now, telling him of the weird things which had happened to me; telling him of Nereid.

He stared. "Good Lord, Kent—well, I understand it better now."

There were things that he had learned; and as he told them to me, Nereid's only half-coherent story began to clarify.

"That woman Garga," Allen was saying with his ready grin, "I get along fine with her. Pumped a lot of facts out of her."

Physically, Allen and I are of quite different types, which is perhaps why we are such friends. He says I have a romantic, sort of poetic look—from my mother, who was Spanish. And that, he says, goes with a bad temper. However that may be, certainly he was always the opposite. A giant, blond fellow; six feet four; rugged, sun-bronzed, like a young Viking. And he had an almost unflinching good nature. A slow, quiet smile. Slow of movement; usually somewhat lazy. But there were times, rare intervals, when he was angered. His movements were panther-like then, and I wouldn't like to be the one to meet him in a fight.

"That Garga woman likes me," he grinned. He lowered his voice as he leaned toward me. "She looks like a machine, but still she's a woman. Get the idea? If we ever get out of this, that might be the way."

And then he told me what he knew of Nereid's strange Venus world. The realm of the Arones was in a lush forest, the tropic region. Compared to our Earth population, there were not many of the Arones. Half a million perhaps, in little Forest and Water villages, with twenty thousand in the chief city, known as Arron. . . . How shall I attempt even an outline of the ethnological history of Venus? I can give only the barest suggestion of it. In former ages doubtless there had been millions of humans on this, Earth's sister planet. A civilization rising to great heights of science, with all the planet's surface mastered by man. And then decadence had come. Mankind resting; then drifting backward.

Dwindling in number; with science forgotten, put aside as a memory, a tradition. And slowly but inexorably the monstrous animals, insects, the weird vegetation again took primitive possession of most of the globe.

"So that's your Nereid's people," Allen was saying. "Decadent—soft now—trying to accomplish nothing."

Except human happiness. I recalled Nereid's words of her world, living for love and music and beauty. Strange how in all human affairs there are two sides of looking at everything! I said something like that to Allen, and he nodded.

"The trouble with science," he agreed, "is that it can be so easily perverted. Things to benefit mankind, turned into engines of death. That's the recent history of our own world."

And the Arones had gone to the other extreme. Science was banned. Men and women should live for human happiness, with no thought of conquest, or of personal power. And out of this, a few generations ago, had risen the Gorts. They had been for centuries a nomadic race of giants, mere savages roaming the barren parts of the planet. Few in number, and like the savages of our own Earth, apparently doomed to extinction. Banished criminals from the world of the Arones, generations back, had joined them, brought them science—stolen things of science.

And out of this sprang the Gort, Tollgamo. His father had started it: Tollgamo, the son, carried it on. He was a genius, of course. A genius with mad dreams. To mechanize his little world. There were only a few thousand of them now. Men and women making themselves into machines; fed by Tollgamo upon his own mad dreams of Venus conquest.

He had discovered the secret of space-flight, which before him, on Venus, had never been known. Peters' Earth-signals had attracted him, and quietly he had gone to Earth, and seized Peters and his men; bringing them to Venus so that they might tell him all they knew of their science. It would be useful, that future day when he would attempt to conquer the Arones.

Most, perhaps all, of Peters' men were dead now; killed, possibly by Tollgamo, when their usefulness to him was finished. But Peters had escaped; gone to the

Arones. And telling them their danger, had made himself the leader of the revival of their science. All Nereid's life, her father, with a group of men he had trained, had feverishly been working in the city of Arron, to build weapons with which to combat the attack when it came.

All that was known to Tollgamo, of course. He had spies in Arron. Queer how human nature is the same, wherever in the Universe the Creator has planted it! The fatuous, decadent, pleasure-loving leader of the Arones was unwilling to believe that the Gorts could be any menace. The efforts of Peters and his fellow scientists, even now were looked upon with disfavor. Peters and his men were distrusted, even accused of having dreams of conquest of their own. Thousands of the Arones thought it, so that there was an undercurrent of strife in Arron, fostered, of course, by Tollgamo's spies.

"And now Tollgamo seems to be about ready for his attack," Allen was telling me. "Peters probably has no weapons of any importance with which to oppose him. And so Peters made an effort to get help from Earth. Tollgamo found it out, and sent this ship to follow the girl so as to keep her from giving the secret of spaceflight to Earth."

The barred metal door of our little cubby suddenly opened. A Gort man stood there. Allen and I stared. Like the other Gorts, he was encased in shining mailed garments. But he was crippled, bent and twisted, with one shoulder higher than the other and a lump on his bent back. On him, the metal garments were grotesque. He came sidling in, grinning at us with his ugly, puffed and bloated greyskinned face.

"I am Borgg," he said. "You will have food and drink soon. You hungry?"

"I want to see the Peters girl," I retorted. "Take me to her."

He shook his head. "Garga will take care of her. She is safe."

His glowing, dark-eyed gaze roved us. Out in the corridor there was a man's voice—one of the other Gorts passing. And the weird, shambling hunchback suddenly burst into guttural laughter. "So the Earthmen are afraid of me? Afraid of Borgg, who wants only to amuse people?"

He suddenly backed away from us, hurling what seemed a stream of invective at

us in the guttural syllables of his own language. Then he backed through our door, slammed it upon us and bolted it.

We stared at each other blankly. "Well I'll be damned," Allen muttered. "What could that mean?"

I CAN only sketch the weird events of that voyage to Venus. My first spaceflight. You who read this can anticipate taking one soon, of course. And you are naturally familiar with the glowing words of description the newscasters have used. With the mechanical details of Interplanetary traveling, the more scientific-minded among you must be thoroughly familiar. I think all that need have little place in my narrative. Human motives; human conflicts. The things of actuality which happened to me, to Jack Allen, to little Nereid—with those things only am I concerned here.

There were some ten men and five of the grim Gort women, here on the space vehicle. By Earth routine of living, it could have been five or six days. After the first time of sleep, Allen and I were given a fair freedom of movement. Much of it we spent in the control turret, with Rhool, the leader here. Tollgamo's lieutenant was well pleased with himself. He was bringing Nereid back. He had learned from her that her little space-cylinder was lost at the bottom of the sea on Earth. What Tollgamo had ordered, Rhool had accomplished, with efficiency which would bring him commendation. And he was bringing Allen and me back, Earthmen whom Tollgamo doubtless would very much want to question.

"You tell him much—he treat you well," Rhool assured us with his heavy leer. He was, I could see, far more impressed with Allen than with me; Allen who now was winning his confidence, pretending that there was much he could tell Tollgamo; hinting even that he and I would not be averse to joining the great Master of the Gorts in his schemes of conquest.

Nereid was unharmed. The woman Garga was caring for her; and on the third day from Earth, Allen persuaded Garga to bring Nereid to the turret. After that, Nereid was often with us, and her fragile, delicate beauty here among the grey, metal-clad Gorts made her seem ethereal indeed.

She came to my side, with her face lighting up.

"I was afraid they had killed you," she whispered. "Bad time for us all, my Earth-friend. I—I did very badly on my adventure to Earth."

She told us then that her father had built the little cylinder, intending to send one of his men in it. But Nereid, who had learned its operation, had stolen it.

Then suddenly she was whispering to us, that the Gorts in the turret might not hear. "I have a brother—my twin—his name is Leh. Tollgamo does not know there is such a person." She shot a furtive glance around the turret. "For several years he has been living with the Gorts. Pretending he is one of them. From him, father has gotten much information of Tollgamo's plans. It would be death to Leh if who he is were known. And now I will tell you—Leh is—"

A guttural shout from Rhool at the control table checked her.

"He says, stop whispering," she murmured. "That other thing I will tell you later . . . I speak the English," she said to Rhool. "You speak it too? Then we talk it here, so that these Earthmen may understand?"

Rhool laughed. His heavy dark gaze roved her. "You very beautiful," he said. "See—I talk English. Come sit by me. The starshine makes you beautiful, girl of Arron."

I tensed, with my heart pounding as I saw his darkly leering gaze rove over her again.

"Easy!" whispered Allen. "Don't start anything."

Then at last Venus had grown to a full-round, glowing silver disk before our bow. After the next time of sleep it was a monstrous ball, filling half the firmament, mottled with clouds so that its surface configurations were only vaguely apparent. Heavy, thick Venus atmosphere. Within another day of our living routine we dropped into it, sliding diagonally downward, with slackening velocity now and rocket streams of fluorescent gases to check and guide us.

With Rhool and Nereid I was in the starlit turret. It was night here, the Venus night of atmospheric fog. Rhool had been drinking from a little gourd at his belt, and

was flushed with his triumph and the liquor.

"A few hours," he said to Nereid. "Then I give you to Tollgamo." His arm went suddenly around her waist, drawing her against him. What he was muttering in his own language I had no idea; but as she cried out, struggling with him, I jumped.

"That's enough from you — let her alone!" I rasped.

HE cast her off, leaped to his feet. Rage darkened his heavy face so that it seemed to blacken. My lunging jab struck his mailed chest, but my swing at his face missed him. He jumped backward, with a hand going to a weapon at his belt. I have no doubt that I would have been dead in another few seconds. But there were shouts behind me; the woman Garga and Allen coming from the corridor. Garga's guttural remonstrance checked the angry Rhool. And then Borgg, the weird little hunchback, came shambling forward.

"Stop it!" Allen shouted at me. "Easy there, you idiot!"

Borgg grabbed me. As I fought, his mouth jabbed against my ear. His voice was a sibilant whisper. "Fight me—not too hard! I am Leh—her brother!"

Nereid's brother! Spy among the Gorts, for years masquerading in this grotesque guise of half-demented hunchback jester! I struggled with him now as he cuffed me, while Nereid stared terrified and Rhool laughed with coarse ribald amusement, appeased that I was being beaten.

And then Leh shoved me from the turret, dragged me down the corridor, slammed me into my sleeping cubby. Again his mouth was to my ear.

"Later tonight, I will try and turn you loose. And your friend Allen, and my sister."

In a swift whisper he told me his plans. At the ship's lower exit porte he had hidden a small anti-gravity platform, and three pressure suits. We could escape from there. He shoved the door upon me, barred it and was gone.

I sat tense in the darkness, those last hours. Through the bullseye window the Venus clouds were an opalescent haze of weird glowing luminosity, like phosphorescence in tropic water. It seemed inherent to the cloud-vapours; but more than that I

could see that it was radiating up from below. Venus-shine. Pale and weirdly beautiful light inherent to the planet herself.

And then our little ship sank below the clouds, and the surface of Venus lay spread some ten thousand feet below me. It was an amazing world of lush shining forests and gleaming, rippling opalescent water. We were near the country of the Arones; but for just a moment, beyond the shining sea, tiers of black metal mountains were visible which I knew to be the country of the Gorts.

The rasp of my door softly opening made me turn. The grotesque hunched form of Nereid's brother stood there, with a hand in a silencing gesture to his mouth.

"Most of them are in the forward control turret. You go down into the hull to the exit porte. My sister and Allen will join you."

He shoved me. Then he softly closed my door, barred it, and shambled forward toward the turret, grinning, mumbling an inane little tune. I ducked into a doorway; went down an incline ladder. The hull corridor was dark, with just a small hooded light of green glow. Tense, alert, I came to the pressure porte doorway. And suddenly a figure stirred in the shadows.

"Kent!" It was Nereid, crouching here, waiting for me. I gripped her.

"Where's Jack?"

"My brother said he would send him down. But he has not come."

Then we heard faint footsteps on the incline. And suddenly from up there in the dimness, came Allen's voice:

"Why—why hello, Garga. I didn't see you."

And the Gort woman's voice: "Where you go, Jack Allen?"

"Why—why Rhool said he didn't mind my moving around the ship. Come into the turret, Garga. I want you to show me your world. Don't you think I am going to like it?"

"Maybe. And if Tollgamo like you, Jack Allen—"

Their voices receded. Allen would make no attempt now to join us, that was obvious. With Garga eager always to be with him, his attempt would be futile.

I whispered it to Nereid.

"We are close to my country now," she murmured. "Too late for us to escape

successfully, if we wait much longer."

We did not need the pressure suits which Leh had hidden here, thinking he might find an opportunity for us to disembark while still above the atmosphere. The anti-gravity platform was an oblong, raft-like metallic thing, with its mechanisms under a hood in its bow. Nereid understood its workings. She lay flat upon it as I slid it through the porte and jumped beside her.

We went like a sliding rocket, with a rush of wind that stopped our breath. But the hooded bow partially shielded us, so that presently we could breathe. Behind us, and over us now, the gleaming shape of the spaceship was seemingly sliding upward and backward. Beneath us the shining sea with a glowing shoreline off at the horizon seemed rocking with a crazy sway. And then at last we steadied.

"Did it!" I gloated. "We made it, Nereid. Evidently they didn't see us rocketing off."

There was no sign of any alarm from the ship and presently it had dwindled high above us and was gone.

Amazingly swift, that downward glide. The wind whistled past us with a screaming whine. At five hundred feet Nereid leveled us as we headed for the glowing shoreline. I could see artificial illumination there now, a myriad little dots of colored lights. And then little colored beams were waving.

"My city—the city of Arron," Nereid said.

It was a few miles back in the forest, where a great shining lagoon opened. A riot of glowing, prismatic color burst upon us; and as Nereid saw it, she sucked in her breath with a little gasp.

"The love festival," she murmured. "Oh why—why would they have that in times like these? With Tollgamo so ready to attack us?"

I stared down with awed amazement at the scene of weird sensuous beauty spread now so close beneath us.

ALLEN'S first sight of the country of Gorts, as he afterward told me, was a line of terraced hills that rose steeply up from the shore of the placid sea. He was in the controlroom of the Spaceship with Rhool, and with the grim woman Garga beside him. It had been a tense time for

Allen, when the escape of Nereid and myself was discovered. But he had been allowed a measure of freedom, whereas I was locked in my cubby. Allen was not suspected, nor, fortunately, was Leh. Two of the Gorts came in for Rhool's wrath.

"Tollgamo will deal with you," he said.

Then Allen spoke up, denouncing me as a traitor to him; claiming that I had agreed to join Tollgamo. "That Peters girl bewitched him," Allen said.

Whether it fooled the big, leering Rhool or not, Allen couldn't tell. Perhaps it did, for Allen now was taken more as one of them, than a prisoner.

The Country of the Gorts! To Allen, as he stared down through the turret window of the spaceship, those terraces of grey metal rock were as grim and forbidding as the Gort people themselves. In the glowing night-sheen, the barren wastes near the shore seemed utterly without life. And then Allen saw weird vegetation in little patches; and occasionally roaming wild things with round eyes which stared up at the ship. Some of them incuriously stared; others, frightened, scuttled away.

The ship now was following a broad, gleaming inlet of the iridescent sea. Ten Earth-miles or so, to its head where lights gleamed on a terraced hillside. It was Tollgamo's little city. Allen had only a brief glimpse as the ship swooped down and settled into the rack of a metal landing stage. Rows of blue and green lights were strung in half a dozen rows on the terraces, one above the other to mark the streets, with metal ladders vertically connecting them. Metal and stone little houses, polished, grey-blue, lined the streets. At one end of the lower street, close by a promontory bluff where beyond a bridge-like metal ladder a smaller kiosk overlooked the inlet, there was a larger, square building, terraced into three stories. Round spots of dull purple light marked its four corners. On its roof, metal-garbed figures paced back and forth.

"Tollgamo the Master — that is his house," the woman Garga murmured to Allen.

Green-yellow, turgid smoke belched from a chimney-like opening in the cliff, where doubtless, partly underground, a factory was in operation. Figures moved in the grim weird glow of the bleak streets; ap-

paratus was being dragged along one of them. Men and women working; and in the doors and windows of the cubical houses, the figures of children stood peering.

As the ship settled lower, Allen realized that both above and below ground it was a beehive of activity now. And presently he could hear sounds; the clank of metal machinery; the grind of gears; the voices of the workers.

Beside him Allen was suddenly aware of the grotesque, hunched form of Nereid's brother, Leh. Neither of them spoke; and then Leh, with a surreptitious gesture, indicated the shining inlet. Down on the opposite shore of it, a tunnel mouth showed, with a red-yellow glare back under the opposite cliff. A crowd of metal-clad workers, goggled against the glare so that they looked like huge beetle-eyed insects, were struggling with apparatus which they were pulling out.

Leh was tense. Then a moment came where he was able to whisper furtively to Allen. "I will try later to get us to that cliff. Do you see that Kiosk? If we can get there, we will dive to the water. From there I have a way of escaping."

That was all. Allen had only time to murmur assent. The ship landed. With Rhool half guarding, half leading him, he was taken along the lower street. The workers stood grim, impassive, until they recognized Rhool. Then like machines they stood stiff, with a hand touching the metal insignia of their helmets until Rhool had passed. Even the children stood rigid, saluting. Little bodies drilled to efficiency; impassive childish faces. But in their eyes still there was childhood—excited, wondering childhood.

Rhool and Allen passed the guards at the entrance to Tollgamo's home. In the dim blue-green glow of a metal room Allen was told by Rhool to stand, and Tollgamo would come. Then Rhool was gone. Unseen eyes were watching Allen. He sensed it; and stood stiffly against one wall, awaiting the coming of the Master. It was a strange, square apartment. Blue-lit, so that its richly tiled floor and ceiling glistened like polished steel. The furniture was square, glistening in the light-sheen. At one end of the room a huge polished table with a single big chair at its end, held a variety of small apparatus, a bank of levers

and little buttons as though for signalling commands. And there was a neat stack of what seemed to be charts and mathematical data.

A murmur outside the room brought Allen back from his contemplation of his surroundings. Men's voices; a guttural command. Then Rhool came in, walking with stiff, pseudo mechanical tread. On his heavy face was a grinning leer. Behind him there was a Gort man and woman. Allen recognized them; both had been on the spaceship and both were blamed by Rhool for the escape of Nereid and me. They came now marching stiffly erect. Their faces were impassive, but terror was in their eyes and in the tense set of their lips.

AND then at last came Tollgamo. Involuntarily Allen gasped at sight of him.

He was a giant figure of a man, six feet six, at least. Unlike the square, robot appearance of his menials, his garments of grey metal-fabric were soft, and clinging. A flowing tunic fell from his powerfully broad shoulders to below his waist, with a wide, glistening metal belt; trousers which sheathed his powerful, shapely legs; shoes with padded soles so that he moved soundlessly. He was bareheaded, and his black hair, closely clipped, came to a peak at his forehead. His skin was the familiar Venus grey, but there was a saffron cast to it. His high-bridged nose was hawk-like, his chin protruding, but square—the firm jaw completely characteristic of determination and power.

His thin-lipped mouth, as he came quietly in and surveyed Allen with dark-eyed gaze, was faintly smiling. Allen, standing rigid, silently met the stare. It was then that he felt, far more than in Tollgamo's commanding aspect, the power of the man's personality. A dominant force seemed to radiate from him, so that no one could be in his presence an instant without feeling it. An aura of command that made Allen suddenly feel like a child. Helpless; and with a vague, indefinable shudder within him.

And then Tollgamo spoke. Suave, gentle voice of careful, cultivated English, meticulously correct, yet with a strange foreign intonation.

"So you are one of the Earthmen, Jack Allen?"

"Yes," Allen said; and then remembered Rhool's instructions, so that after a moment he added, "Yes, Master. I give you service."

Tollgamo's faint ironic smile broadened; his glittering dark eyes seemed to hold a twinkle of sardonic amusement. "You learn fast." His gaze darted away; went to Rhool, and then to the Gort man and woman from the spaceship who stood with terror in their eyes.

"I hear that you need punishment," he said gently. "This Earthman will learn from it." His tone, almost drab, was casual, with a slow finality.

With pounding heart, Allen stood watching the metal-clad man and woman as Tollgamo quietly confronted them. The terror leaped from their eyes to stamp their faces. And Tollgamo said quietly,

"That is bad to show fear. That forces the punishment to be worse."

At his gesture, a flick of his jeweled fingers, they bared their grey chests. Tollgamo's hands were at his ornamented belt, each of them leveling a little jeweled weapon. The weapons suddenly hissed, and from each of them a tiny violet pencilray of heat-light sprang. Allen gulped as the beams struck the chests of the two victims, and the grey flesh, turned red, then black as Tollgamo wrote a brand of punishment, an insignia of dishonor. The man stood firm, with a hand still at salute, his slit of mouth twisted as he pressed his lips together in an attempt to restrain his cry of pain.

But the woman involuntarily moaned. It was too much for Allen. He gasped,

"Stop that, you damned torturer! They're not the ones who are guilty anyway! They—"

Tollgamo had finished. He snapped off the tiny rays and slowly turned to where Allen had taken a step toward him. And the smile now was gone from his serene face.

"You are not yet trained," he said quietly. "I forgive you for that—so short a time." Another flick of his hand; and Rhool led the stumbling man and woman away.

The smell of the burning flesh drifted off; and Tollgamo, alone here now, fronted

the shuddering Allen. Again he was gently smiling.

"You show weakness?" he said. "I am disappointed. So you know who released that Kent Fanning, and Peters' daughter?"

"No I don't. I'm sorry. That was just my desire to stop you doing that to that woman."

Amusement was in Tollgamo's eyes and twitching at his thin grey lips. "So? You would join me, and still try to lie to me?" His gesture dismissed it. "We will talk of that some other time." For a moment he stood pondering. "That girl—that Peters' daughter," he added. "Rhoool tells me she is very beautiful. Is that so?" There seemed a twinkle in his inscrutable eyes.

"Yes," Allen agreed.

"That is interesting. I must see for myself. I think perhaps I must protect her from the things that will happen tonight."

Allen tensed inside. Did he mean that his attack upon the Arones would take place tonight?

"The woman Garga will give you supper," Tollgamo added abruptly. From a ring on his finger a silent light-signal sprang across the room and through a small arcade doorway; and at once Garga appeared there.

"Take him to my rest-room," Tollgamo said. "He is hungry. Give him food. I will send for him later."

"Yes, Master."

Then as Tollgamo moved away, lithe and silent as a great panther, with his padded soles soundless on the metal floor, he said quietly.

"Your thoughts are very transparent, Earthman. But I think you can be of use to me."

IN the small adjoining room. Garga brought Allen food. They ate it together.

"What did he mean by things that will happen tonight?" Allen suddenly murmured.

Garga had been sitting, staring at him with her slumbrous dark gaze. "The attack," she said.

"And Peters doesn't know that?"

"No." Her hand touched him. "I am trusting you."

"Of course," Allen agreed. He recalled how Nereid's brother, Leh, as the space-

ship landed, had gazed down at the inlet, across which workers were bringing things from a tunnel to the edge of the water. Leh had sucked in his breath as though with startled surprise.

"The attack," Allen murmured. "Will it be upon the city of Arron?"

"Yes—naturally. And the imbecile slaves there—they think they are going to help." Her grim grey face lighted with a smile. "That will be amusing; those imbecile workers causing bloodshed, making it so easy for us, when we get there."

"Get there—how, Garga? By air?"

Allen felt that Leh now was trying to get just such information as this; and he and Allen would escape—get to Arron and warn Peters. But evidently haste was necessary. By what Tollgamo said, he would be attacking perhaps within a few hours.

"By air?" Garga echoed. "Oh no. By water." She leaned closer to Allen. A woman warrior. But the womanhood in her now was making her bosom rise and fall with her emotion at Allen's nearness. "Under the water," she murmured. "You see how clever we are? That is the last method of attack that the Arones think we will try. There are grottos beneath the city of Arron. Grottos with the sea in them. So that we shall come up that way, appearing all over the city at once." She chuckled. "They will not know there is to be any attack at all. Just trouble with the imbeciles. And suddenly we will be there among them!"

Allen had it now! All the information needed. More than ever now he wanted to connect with Leh, and escape out of here.

"Garga, listen," he murmured, "were you ordered to stay here with me, until Tollgamo sends for me?"

"Yes," she agreed. Her gaze clung to his. "That will not be—too hard for you?"

"No—no, of course not, Garga, but listen—" Abruptly Allen tensed. In a dark doorway nearby, beyond which Allen knew Tollgamo's guards were stationed, a dim blob of figure had appeared. Garga's back was to the door; she did not see the lurking shape. It was a hunched, misshapen silhouette. Leh, in his masquerade as jester, standing there listening.

"Listen." Allen quickly resumed. "There's no reason why you should not

show me around a bit, is there? On that cliff quite near here there's a little kiosk that looks over the inlet. You and I—alone there, Garga?"

His hand touched her square, metal-clad shoulder; and at once her hand went up, gripping his. "Perhaps."

"I would like to have you show me what's going on," he urged. "And to sit there with you, just for a little time."

Leh heard it. His hunched figure in the doorway moved and his head nodded assent; and then he drew back, was gone.

"I will get you a cloak," Garga murmured abruptly.

She came with the cloak in a moment; a long, dark-grey garment of flexible metal. With this on, and with the helmet which Rhool had given him, Allen could pass for a Gort. Garga was eager, trembling, as she took him through a small side doorway. The nearby glowing city street bustled with activity. Garga and Allen were not challenged as they skirted the edge of the metal street; and presently came to a dark and narrow little bridge, a fifty foot catwalk-span over a chasm to the promontory head where the lookout kiosk stood dark and silent above the lagoon.

A new idea had come to Allen. As together they crossed the catwalk he murmured to Garga:

"The Master spoke of the Peters girl, and asked me if she is beautiful."

Garga smiled. "So? The Master is ironical always. He plays with you."

"Meaning what?"

"He has seen that girl many times. Ten years ago, when there was no threat of Tollgamo, he was in Arron. She was just a child then. He played with her. And he has loved her ever since."

They came to the kiosk, entered its dark interior. It was merely a roof over a circular metal bench, with a waist high railing. Thirty feet down, the sea inlet was a black ribbon of water. The yellow tunnel at the bottom of the opposite cliff was dark now, but further up the inlet there were lights and activity.

Allen sat with a hand gripping Garga's mailed arm. Across the background of his mind he was trying to plan . . . he could seize this amorous woman's weapons. But then what? Would Leh be able to come

here now? Leh, who had mentioned diving from here, with a way of escape from the inlet.

"Tollgamo loves Peters' daughter?" Allen was murmuring.

"Yes. It is sure, although he would not have it known. And he is planning tonight, before we attack Arron, to—"

A dark figure near them suddenly materialized. For a second Allen thought that it was Leh. But it was Rhool! Rhool who doubtless had seen Garga coming here, and followed her.

In that tense second Allen was aware that Rhool was drawing a weapon. And Allen leaped, catapulted with lowered head. He caught Rhool in the stomach, knocked him backward. But the Gort's weapon had stabbed, a hiss of violet light. It missed Allen; struck Garga. She went down.

On the metal floor of the kiosk, Allen rolled with the giant Rhool. The Gort had no chance to use his weapon again. Allen in a second or two was on top of him, pounding his head against the metal floor. It cracked, and his big body quivered and lay limp.

Allen jumped up. He was aware of a commotion on the catwalk bridge. A running figure. And men back in the glare at the end of the street; men shouting, and then running forward. The figure on the catwalk was Leh. He came plunging into the kiosk. Allen was bending over the fallen Garga. She was dying, with bloody foam gushing at her mouth. But she was trying to smile, her eyes staring at Allen. Contrition swept him. This Amazonian woman-warrior. . . . Trained to be a cruel machine. But she had remained only a woman; and she was dying now; just a woman staring with her last wistful gaze at the Earthman she loved so that she might take the image of him with her into the Great Beyond.

Allen murmured: "Oh, Garga, I'm sorry.

She may have heard him, but then her breath stopped, the light went out of her eyes and she was gone.

Allen jumped up as Leh gripped him. Leh, with his face and figure changed now so that Allen saw him as a handsome strippling, with something of the look of Nereid.

"Come on," Leh gasped. "Get that helmet off, and that heavy cloak. Hurry!"

A shot came from the catwalk, a spitting electronic stab that sent a shower of sparks on the kiosk ceiling. From the rail Allen and Leh dove. Then they were swimming; Leh guiding him as shots stabbed down at them. Allen was aware that Leh was dragging him underwater through a small subterranean passage to emerge in a watery cave. A water-cylinder was here, a twenty foot little submarine, as one might describe it on Earth. Two small seats were amidships in it, with its operating mechanisms around them. A moment later, they were off.

IT was a weird underwater journey; some two hours, Allen guessed, while they sat in the dimness of the humming little cylindrical interior. Through the visor pane of the turret into which their heads projected, Allen had a dim vista of the turgid green-black depths, illumined by the small search-ray which preceded them. The vessel was propelled by a rocket-stream of disintegrating water as the electrolysis of backward gas-thrust shoved them forward.

Sub-sea world of Venus. Allen saw little of it then, but still enough to suggest its ramified weirdness. They sped out through the watery tunnel, down the inlet at a depth of perhaps fifty feet, and then into the open sea. Empty, black-green depths. Running at fifty feet submersion, Allen could see beneath them the vague vista of a slimy undulating bottom. Then it dropped away, with only occasional jagged spires of peaks. Tumbled, submarine world. Fishes flipped away, frightened by the light. Occasionally, there was a glimpse of monstrous things that quivered; shapes that hung suspended, watching with dull-green round eyes.

A submarine forest for a time was to one side, an intricate tracery of vegetation, with air-pods holding it upright as it slowly weaved and undulated like a thing quivering with life. A gigantic thing like a great squid with weaving tentacles came wobbling from a forest glade. It lunged to attack, but the little cylinder avoided it and sped past.

Leh hardly spoke. He was tense, guiding their frail craft; and tense too with this emergency of haste to get to Peters.

Leh had learned as much or more of Tollgamo's plans than had Allen.

Then at last they were nearing their destination. Allen had learned now that Peters and his men of science were not located in the city of Arron. They had laboratories, workshops and arsenal on a rocky island fortress. It was some twenty miles by water from Arron; within a mile or so of a partly submerged section of the forest, where a village known as the Water City was built.

Allen saw the watery foundations of the Water City as the cylinder sped past. Then Leh was slackening, to land at a sub-sea dock beneath the arsenal. The dock's weird dark outlines presently were beside them. With air-renewer mechanisms like a pack on their shoulders, and a round transparent glassite helmet, which had an elastic gasket tightly fitting their throats, they emerged through the cylinder's little pressure lock into the water. Heavy shoes made them able to walk, with a pushing swaying shove.

Leh, with a metal-tipped finger, touched a tiny metal plate on Allen's helmet. And Leh's voice, dim, muffled, sounded in Allen's ears.

"You follow me. There will be a guard where we emerge."

Allen swayed along a rocky path which was slowly ascending. The turgid, black-green depths here were dimly lighted by a glow from some unseen source. It was a tumbled, honeycombed submarine slope. Clumps of vegetation stood like black thickets to the sides. Ahead, the glow seemed brighter.

Then suddenly Leh stopped his advance; stood rigid. Within the round, wholly transparent ball of his helmet his youthful face was tense. And his voice murmured.

"Allen, look there!"

They had no more warning than that. From a clump of tawny submarine vegetation nearby, two human figures suddenly emerged! Figures that stood as though startled for a second, and then came plunging to attack!

V

FESTIVAL of Love! On the swaying little anti-gravity platform I lay with Nereid, staring down at the strange, color-

ful scene that stretched beneath us. It was at the end of our escape-flight from the Spaceship, in time doubtless before Allen on that trip arrived in Tollgamo's mountain city.

What Allen saw of the grim little metal and rock city of the Gorts was in weird contrast to what I saw now of the riotous, colorful forest and water scene where the gay festival of Love and Music was in full progress.

There was only a brief glimpse at first, as we swooped down. We had already passed over the main city of Arron. It lay between the open sea and an area a mile or so inland, where there was a lagoon, little chains of lakes, threads of tiny streams and a myriad little dots of tropic islands. I had seen, down in the forest, lines of gay, pastel-tinted lights to mark the city streets. Then we came to the lagoon, where the festival was being held.

A watery fairyland of gayety. The lagoon, a circular spread of water of perhaps five miles, was rippled with a soft night-breeze. The ripples were stained with the opalescent night-sheen from the overhead clouds, and stained like a painter's palette with a riot of glorious tints from the strings of colored lights which connected the little islands.

One big island, a thousand feet in length, stood in the center. A pavilion was on it, from which soft exotic music flooded out into the night—music that blended on the tropic breeze with a vast murmur of excited voices. I could guess that there might be four or five thousand people disporting themselves here. The main island was thronged with people moving about, or crowding toward the pavilion where with the music there seemed dancing and perhaps some form of theatrical entertainment.

Boats were on the thread-like little canals between the islands. A barge crowded with young men and girls, all in gay-colored robes, was slowly approaching from the open lagoon. Little boats, mere six foot rafts, each held a girl and man; the man paddling, the girl fending off flowers with which she was pelted by young men on other rafts, or on the shore.

The laughing screams of girls floated up as they swam in the open lagoon, their voices calling jocular defiance to the men

on shore to come out and catch them.

Nereid slid our little flying platform skilfully down. We landed on a small level island which was connected with the big island by an arcade bridge. No one had seemed to notice us. Boats were tied up here along the shore. Others were arriving, disembarking the gay merrymakers. All were in holiday attire; a variety of motley costumes, indescribable as a fancy-dress costume ball on Earth. Some of them, men and girls, wore cloaks and hoods, with little gaily colored masks covering their eyes.

I stood for a moment with Nereid. "You're going to find your father?" I suggested.

"Yes. If he is here." She told me then of the Arsenal rock beyond the Water City, where Peters and his men most of their time were working. "He is there probably," she added. "I think he would not come here tonight."

"Then what would we do, go to him there?"

"Yes, of course. I will see our Ruler first. Jenten-Shah—he will be here. Over there on the big island, in the pavilion probably." Bitterness was in her tone. Nereid was thinking of the menace of the Gorts, with their engines of destruction. She and I did not know then, what Allen was just about now learning—that there was an urgency of haste since Tollgamo's attack would be made tonight. But as we threaded our way under the gay colored lights across the arcade to the main island, I somehow seemed to feel the undercurrent of menace here. Occasionally we passed little figures who were evidently onlookers. The imbecile workers, lower class who were almost in the position of slaves. They were weird little creatures, most of them no more than four feet tall, grey-skinned and powerfully built. We passed one who was standing on the shore gazing at a raft where a lone girl shrouded in blue-white filmy drapery was being pelted with flowers. The gnome-like imbecile stood impassive, gazing with vacant face. Then he was muttering to himself. A fragment of it reached us.

"Tollgamo is coming to help us workers. We won't have to work tomorrow. Then we can do things like this."

I gripped Nereid. "You hear what that

worker said? No work for him tomorrow. Do you suppose—”

She tried to smile. “What an imbecile says never means much, Kent. But I must tell father.”

OCCASIONALLY now people were staring at us, at me. Some rushed at us, but Nereid with an imperious gesture scattered them; and in a moment, with their other diversions, they had forgotten us. Then we came to where there was a pile of cloaks. Nereid gave me a dark robe and hood; and found a long white cloak and white cowl for herself. Then from her green undergarment she produced a little golden star, fastened it on the breast of her cloak. Queer insignia, that star with a crescent moon above and below it.

The white cloak and cowl to signify that she was an Untouchable. Nereid's beautiful little face bore a faint twisted smile. “That is what some of them call us, Kent. That is a term of derision, because now, at a festival like this, there are things we do not like.”

Love, music, laughter—all so admirable. But here in Arron, under the leadership of the wanton Ruler, Jenten-Shah, it was becoming license. There were some five hundred young Virgins here in Arron, who were trying at least for moderation. And trying to help Peters prepare for the menace of the Gorts . . . Untouchables. Nereid was leader of them.

In our robes and cowls now, Nereid and I were attracting no attention save that occasionally there was a jibe at Nereid. Laughing young men, befuddled perhaps by some intoxicating drink with wanton girls clinging to them, would sometimes lunge at us with mocking laughter. But we pushed past them, shoving our way toward the big open pavilion. I could see now the jam of people under its low spreading roof.

We were still following the shorefront. From the pavilion a bevy of girls with flowing drapes came running and plunged into the water of the lagoon.

I gripped Nereid's white-cloaked arm. “That big figure in red—who is that?”

I had seen the giant figure here at an edge of the crowd, when we crossed the arcade bridge. A man in robe and cowl

of red and black. Then he had vanished. He was visible again now, a huge fellow, six and a half feet, at least. He was standing a hundred feet or so ahead of us, on the pink-white coral sand of the shore. And then abruptly he moved away and was gone again.

Nereid stared, and then shook her head. “I do not know. I—” She checked herself; her face had a queer startled look.

“What—” I demanded. But we were in the pavilion now, with the jam of watching people pressing us.

“You will wait here, Kent?” Nereid murmured. “I will ask Jenten-Shah of my father.”

I drew back behind a palm on which great orchid-like flowers were growing. I could see the dais where the gay fatuous ruler was seated with food and drink before him, with his young women favorites around him as they watched the platform where a barbarically voluptuous woman in flame-colored drapes was dancing with colored light-beams upon her.

I had a glimpse of Nereid importuning Jenten-Shah. It was brief; and then Nereid came back to me.

“Father is not here, Kent. He told the King not to hold this festival tonight.”

“Did you mention that imbecile worker?”

She nodded. Her face was grim, frightened now. “He said, if any imbecile causes trouble there will be a hundred imbeciles killed as punishment. He is drunk with *marite*. He laughed at the idea that Tollgamo would dare attack.”

Merrymaking on the brink of disaster and death.

AS though both Nereid and I were fascinated now, for a time we stood in the pavilion corner, watching the colorful scene. Half the people here were robed and masked, waiting a later time when a bell would give the signal for the unmasking. I saw several of the white-robed girls—the Untouchables. Then one of them, with a golden star on her breast, like Nereid's but without the crescent moons, came and joined us. Nereid had met her a while ago near the Ruler's dais. Her name was Venta. Under Nereid, she was commanding the little group of protesting Virgins.

She was very like Nereid, save that beneath her white cowl I could see that her hair was dark. She stared at me. "So? The Earthman?" She shook my hand with a quaint awkwardness. "You look in the same fashion as her father, the Meester Peters," she commented.

Then suddenly all three of us were stricken tense. There was a commotion across the crowded pavilion, where a scantily clothed young girl was struggling, terrified, in the grip of a thick-set, crooked little imbecile man. He was forcing his caresses on her and the girl was screaming.

The music suddenly ceased. In the hushed, stricken silence, the imbecile's crazy childish laughter mingled with the girl's screams. Then there was a rush as a group of young men nearby plucked the girl away, knocked the gnome-like worker down, beating him, slamming him until he lay inert.

It was like a spark in gunpowder. People were shouting. Somebody found another imbecile and attacked him. A wave of shouting spread beyond the pavilion. But it lasted only a moment. The music started up again. The dancing continued.

Nereid gripped me. "Out in the workers' village they will hear of that. And what they might try to do—"

Her words evoked a grim picture of powerful little men, with minds like children suddenly enraged to frenzy; and the half-drunken youths at the festival, ready enough to kill any worker, with the Ruler encouraging them.

And this was what Tollgamo wanted, of course; confusion here to make his attack easier.

The girls now were swiftly talking in their own language. We had shoved our way out of the pavilion, were standing near the shorefront; and the girls had drawn a little apart from me. I could see Venta nodding as Nereid gave her instructions. Then Nereid came to me.

"She will get our Virgins, Kent. She has ten other girls who will help her collect them all."

The Virgins—five hundred of them if Venta could locate them all—would come in surface boats, past the Water City to the Arsenal. Nereid and I would precede them, starting now. All to offer ourselves to Peters and his fighting men if Tollgamo

should strike tonight. But how would he strike? That we did not know.

"And in the Water City," Nereid was hastily telling me, "many of the people living there have come here to the festival tonight. But some of our girls live there." Again her lips twisted with that wry little smile. "They will be there now. Some have brothers and fathers who work with my father in the Science Arsenal. But some do not, and I will send them here. If there is trouble with the imbeciles, they will help quell it."

Venta, ready to start on her mission, called goodbye. Then for just a moment Nereid ran after her to add something. Two other girls in the white Untouchable robes joined them, and stood talking about fifty feet away from where I waited. The shore there had risen to a little grassy bluff about twenty feet above the glittering, light-bathed lagoon.

And suddenly I gasped. From a clump of vivid blue and orange palms which grew thickly beside the four girls, a figure suddenly emerged. A giant man-shape, in red and black robe. Then his robe and cowl dropped from him, revealing a towering powerful giant with dark close-clipped hair, dressed in a grey garment of woven metal with jeweled weapons at his broad belt. And in that second of my numbed gaze, I was aware that he had scattered the girls and had seized Nereid, holding her slim form against his huge bulk.

And one of the other girls screamed: "Tollgamo!"

TOLLGAMO! My first sight of him. And like Allen, for just a second I stood numbed, awed by the power, the dominance that radiated from him. He was quietly smiling. His hand went up to wave the girls away.

"Tollgamo! Tollgamo!" The name went like a wave, back from the shore, so that the merrymakers gasped, stood stricken. For that second it was a tableau, with only the smiling Tollgamo in movement. Slowly he was backing, drawing the fighting, struggling Nereid with him. Backing toward the thick clump of palms.

Then I was aware that I was dashing forward, shouting. It was only fifty feet. From one of Tollgamo's hands, a spit of tiny blue light hissed at me. Missed. Then

Venta and two of the other girls had cast off their white robes. Slim little creatures, like Nereid, greenly clad. Soon Tollgamo was struggling with all four of them. He flung them off, still trying to hold Nereid.

It was only a second or two as I plunged at them. Then in a group they went over the little promontory and hit the water with a splash. Almost simultaneously I dove. The green opalescent water closed over me. Somewhere near at hand I could see the blurr of the struggling figures. But I could not reach them. With all my strength I swam, but then I had to come up for air. I dove again. Accursedly helpless. Then on another try I met a girl coming up, then another and another—all four of them bobbing to the surface with me. All panting; unhurt, but angry that they had not captured Tollgamo!

Then Venta and the other two girls swam away on their errand. Nereid drew me forward as we swam, to avoid the commotion of gathered people on the bank, Tollgamo was gone. His plan had been, quite evidently, to dive into the water with Nereid here. Some twenty feet down, as the girls attacked him, he had tried to shove Nereid through a rock-rift, which obviously opened again to some cave where air was trapped.

"I got away from him," Nereid was saying. "A man, even Tollgamo, is so clumsy in the water, so quick to smother. I could have followed him but he blocked the little passage with a rock."

"And maybe he's trapped down there?"

She shook her head. "There are so many passages, and all lead out to the sea. Of course he had a cylinder-boat under there."

Together we swam out into the open lagoon, diagonally across it to where, beyond the lights of the festival, Nereid had a little surface boat in which we could get now to the Water City.

"My boat is about a mile from here. Can you swim so far?"

"Yes. I guess so." I had always counted myself a strong swimmer; a mile was not too much for me. But I was like a puffing tugboat now, laboriously splashing along. Nereid was laughing at my efforts; trying to tow me; then giving it up, swimming around me, under me.

Occasionally, while we were still in the

light-glare, other girls came dashing up, with questions of Tollgamo; and of me. Once a group of them dashed at me, with shouts of laughter trying to seize me, but Nereid drove them off. Then we were swimming alone in the luminous opalescent night; and at last we reached the little boat. Nereid was already in it; waiting impatiently to haul me aboard as I came panting.

It was a narrow, canoe-like surface craft; some twenty feet long, of dull white metal. Its hooded mechanisms were in bow and stern—water electrolysis. Soon we had attained a considerable speed, silent, vibrationless. And then we were on the open sea, with the lights of Arron fading behind us.

VENUS night at sea. It was weirdly beautiful. The low-hanging curtain of heavy clouds was luminous with pale blue and silver sheen. The water, silver-rippled by a gentle night-breeze, was opalescent as our little craft hurled up a bow wave, with a gleaming phosphorescent wake behind us. Off to the right, for a time, the faint blurred outlines of metal mountains were visible on a promontory near the land of the Gorts. Then we passed it; and the forest to the left had faded away to be just a blur.

Beside me, Nereid sat grim and silent, staring ahead as she steered our boat. The breeze tossed her tawny tresses against me. My mind went back to that other night, back on Earth when she had sat in my little fishing boat, with its outboard motor pattering. How long ago that seemed. And like that other night, my hand went now to a lock of her hair, beside us on the seat.

"Nereid, when this is over, this war—"

Her face turned toward me. She was faintly, whimsically smiling.

"I think my father will like you," she murmured.

"And you, Nereid?"

There was no impishness, this time. Her gaze met mine, shyly, and she nodded.

But a moment later we were again both thinking of Tollgamo. And we were wondering about Allen, and Nereid's brother, Leh. Had Tollgamo put them to death, in vengeance for our escape from Rhool's spaceship?

Then at last, to our left, the outlines of

the lush forest shore were close at hand.

"The Water City," Nereid murmured.

It was built in what seemed a partly submerged area of the jungle. Tangled tree-tops projecting from the water, with little houses of thatch and wood built like birds' nests between them. Or queer little dwellings of woven blue rush, built on platforms that floated on the water and were lashed between the protecting tree-trunks. Narrow arcade bridges connected the houses; and the little balcony platforms where boats were moored.

There were a few dots of lights. Then we passed the first group of houses. Very queer. Nereid stared at me. Queer indeed. It was far into the time of sleep, but still there should have been someone attracted to the house doorways as we passed.

We had slackened now, with the houses, most of them dark, clustering all about us.

"There is Venta's home," Nereid murmured. "Her father and brother will be there."

We drifted under an arching bridge. The figure of a man was lying on it. Asleep? Nereid called softly to him, but he did not move. Then I was aware of a queer, acrid smell here. Choking smell. Nereid coughed suddenly.

The boat landed at a low platform dock of Venta's home. We jumped to the platform. Two men were here. Venta's father and brother. They lay in a heap, one half upon the other. Dead! The opalescent sheen of the glorious night was ghastly on their dead faces; mouths goggling with blackened, protruding tongue; eyes staring with the agony and death.

And from here we could see other house balconies. Inert forms on them. All dead.

In that stricken second, as we stood shuddering on the little platform with the sea lapping under it, a new horror suddenly assailed us. There was a tangle of vegetation here, tree branches overhead; air-vines with redolent flowers and pods on them, dangled, swaying in the breeze. And abruptly I realized that the dangling, rope-like vines were visibly growing! At an edge of the platform one of them was slithering like a serpent!

And Nereid gasped: "That smell! The gas of nitro-carbon in some terrible concentration!"

I stood numbed. Nitrogenous gas-fumes, sprayed here on the night-breeze by what deadly means I could not guess, had asphyxiated the people of the little Water City. Most of them asleep, they were quickly overcome by the insidious fumes. An intensification of the gas which was normally used by the Arones to stimulate vegetation growth, as we on Earth use fertilizer. Nitro-carbon—deadly to humans; stimulating to plant-life!

And the air-vines here were growing with a deadly acceleration!

In that same second, as we stood momentarily confused, one of the dangling, swaying vines, grown monstrous now to be as thick as my arm, struck against Nereid. Sentient vegetation! With the contact, the damnable dangling vine suddenly wrapped itself around her, its powerful sinuous blue feelers gripping her slender white throat, strangling her! And in the night-silence an imbecile was gibbering, with triumphant, maniacal laughter!

VI

FOR an instant I was stunned, with so great a rush of horror that the weird scene blurred before me. Then I leaped, tearing at the quivering vine-rope that held Nereid in its grip. Ghastly thing. I tore it loose, broke it—gruesome, squashing, flimsy stuff. But as I cast broken segments of it away, more seemed to come.

Weird, horrible combat. A slithering tentacle gripped my ankles. Another was winding itself around my throat. There was a terrible moment when I thought that Nereid and I would go down; and on the platform now at our feet, another leafy vine had come crawling, with lashing feelers and red pods that opened like little bloody jaws.

Then I tore Nereid loose. The whole platform now seemed cluttered with writhing vegetation. From overhead dangling things were swinging, reaching down at us.

"Nereid, our boat—which way?" In the dim luminous light I was confused. Nereid led me; and we staggered to our boat, tumbled into it. A vine-end like a rope threshed at us as we frantically shoved off.

And in the silence now, with only the leafy rustling of the growing vines, the

gibbering, maniacal laughter of the imbecile still sounded.

"Kent, look—" Nereid touched my arm as she guided our little boat out into the open water. On a rock nearby, a hunched, gnome-like figure was crouched. Then I saw his face, goggled with great round eyepanes and nose-breather, with a pipe that led to a pack on his back.

Nereid steered us toward him; we stopped and I reached and seized him.

"You did this?" I demanded. "You turned loose the gas that killed these people? Who told you to do it? Who gave you the gas, and the mechanisms to spread it?"

His laughter turned to a terrified whimpering. Nereid murmured,

"That mask he's wearing—the workers use that, in our agriculture when they spray with the nitro-carbon. But we have no sprayers that could do a thing like this, nor gas deadly enough."

"You did it?" I shook him.

And then he was laughing again. And suddenly I realized that of course he could not understand English. I cast him loose. And Nereid flung questions at him in her own language.

"Figures came up from the water," she said. "He happened to have his mask and saved himself."

We left him there on the rock, still laughing. Tollgamo's first attack! Would he try to loose this gas on Arron? Our little boat sped past the Water City. I could see now that the quivering, slithering vegetation everywhere was engulfing the flimsy houses. Its stimulated growth would persist, an hour or a day, and then subside.

Shuddering, we drove our boat onward. The great Arsenal rock loomed ahead of us now, a huge almost square lump of metallic rock rising sheer from the water to a height of two or three hundred feet. On all sides it was like that; its only access was from beneath where subterranean passages ran into its honeycombed, grotto interior. Impregnable fortress, save from beneath the sea.

Nereid tied our little craft to a metal fastener against the black, sleek rock-cliff. Then for me she produced the air-mechanisms and round transparent helmet with elastic gasket to fit around my throat. And

heavy, metal-weighted shoes for us both.

But no helmet was needed for her. "We will be there in ten or fifteen minutes," she said. "I can see better without the head-covering."

We dropped into the luminous, opalescent water. Nereid held my hand as I floundered a little, trying to remain balanced upright while our weighted shoes carried us slowly down. It was a descent of some fifty feet, with the opalescent surface light fading into the black-green of the depths. Then slowly an undulating dark surface seemed coming up to us; and we landed, swaying on our feet. Weird, submarine world. The jagged slope to one side went on down into the depths. Beside us, swaying leafy vegetation stood upright in the water—a little thicket here, with what seemed a rocky path, ascending along the edge of the black abyss.

Through my transparent helmet I stared at Nereid. She was smiling, unbreathing, as much at home down here as on the land. She gestured that we were to take the ascending path; and held my hand to steady me as we started our swaying, shoving climb. I could see now that ahead of us there was a little tunnel into the cliff where we would emerge into air.

And suddenly I felt Nereid's hand tighten convulsively on mine. I saw the blurred figures in another second, two upright swaying blobs close ahead of us as we emerged past the seaweed clump. Two men down here. Tollgamo's men? I shook loose from Nereid and plunged forward.

Then in another second I could see the faces in the transparent helmets. And one of them I recognized. It was Leh and Allen here, as startled as ourselves at the sudden encounter.

I THINK now I need only briefly sketch that following hour or two while within the Arsenal fortress Allen and I met Peters and his men, and all of us hastily prepared for Tollgamo's attack. I found Nereid's father quite what I had expected — a quiet, grave-faced man of somewhat my own type, garbed like his fellow scientists in tight trousers and blouse of sleek black fabric. There was no time then to exchange more than the briefest of questions, as Nereid hastily told him what had happened to her since her little

note had informed him of her furtive departure for Earth.

"You worried me very much, my daughter," he said quietly. And the same sense of humor which she herself had twinkled now in his grey eyes. "But I think this is no time for reproof."

Peters of course had known that Tollgamo's attack was imminent; and he was almost ready. Allen and I could help little here with everything so indescribably strange. Nereid's virgins were arriving now in little-dripping groups that scattered through the workshop grottos with chattering voices that added immeasurably to the confusion. They were all like Nereid, most of them clad in the brief, shining sea-green garment, all of them with flowing hair and eager, excited little faces. But I could see now the evidence of Nereid's Earth heritage — these other girls, even more slim and frail-looking, with oval faces and pert little pointed chins. And their skin was distinctly less pink-white than hers.

Finally the departure for battle. Assembling of this weird little sub-sea army. I watched it with silent, awed amazement. There was but one type of sub-sea vessel here, the small underwater cylinders such as Leh and Allen had come in from the country of the Gorts. Most of them were that same twenty foot size, to carry two men; and a few of them were some thirty feet, with space for three. An underwater electronic ray armed them in bow and stern. Leh explained the weapon to me. It had an effective range of fifty feet, with a current duration of some ten seconds. It would kill any living substance at that range almost instantly; and with duration would eat into the metal armour of Tollgamo's ships.

"My father has had no opportunity to build an under-water weapon of more range and power than this. It is all we have," Leh was telling us. And my heart sank, and Allen and I exchanged glances of dismay, as Leh added:

"Tollgamo has built them up to a range of three hundred feet."

There were about fifty of the small cylinder-boats; most of them to take two men. For battle tonight it was all Peters could assemble. But the cylinders were fleet as darting fishes. We had mobility, and cour-

age, but with sinking heart I wondered if it would serve us.

And I also wondered what Tollgamo would have. Leh's information gave us little hint; and presently he, Allen and I took one of the larger cylinders.

We ran without lights. For a time all I could see was a turgid vista of dark-green depths. An abyss of water at times was beneath us. Then there were the tops of jagged mountain peaks, naked black needle spires rising in clusters out of the depths. Leh knew very well the oceanography here in this undulating terrain of seascape. We headed for the mouth of the inlet at the head of which Tollgamo's city was perched. But before we reached there, little lights down in the watery green haze suddenly appeared. An orange, blurred haze, separating in a moment into dotted points of light.

"Tollgamo's forces!" Leh murmured.

At perhaps a hundred feet of depth, we shut off our tiny rocket-streams of oxo-hydro fluorescence and hung poised. The three of us sat breathless, peering. Had our tail-stream been discovered? It seemed not. There was no undue movement of the Tollgamo lights. Just a slow-moving little string of them, ahead and below us.

I COULD see the bottom now, a great undulating spread here of dark surface. Rock, doubtless, with slime and ooze on it. The moving dots of light presently disclosed the blobs of enemy vessels. Ten of them, crawling on the bottom in a slow moving line. Cubes and oblongs of metal. Dwarfed by distance they were like struggling little bugs, with lighted eyes and tiny searchbeams waving like feelers before them. Metallic vehicles, perhaps with caterpillar tread, crawling on the bottom.

We drifted closer; almost over them for a moment so that I could guess that each of them was a hundred feet or more in length. Turreted oblong vessels, armoured; and armed with the three hundred foot rays. How many men were in them? Of this Leh had little knowledge, save that he thought perhaps a total of two thousand. Men and women, crawling along in the ooze of this sea bottom, tense, with minds only upon the kill.

"They're heading for Arron," Leh murmured. "In those big ships they surely

must have a vast apparatus for land attack."

To come up abruptly within the lagoons and interior waterways of Arron. Perhaps then, on the windward side of the city, to loose their deadly lethal gas.

Two hours, at least, for them to reach Arron. The lights crawled under us; and a vagrant ocean current drifted us away, so that presently we dared fling on our rocket-stream power and speed back to Peters. He was ready now, and his hundred men embarked in the fifty little cylinders. And the five hundred girls were ready, too. I saw them on the ocean surface, from the turret of our cylinder as we bobbed to the top. An amazing army of green-clad nymphs. Each of them had a ray-cylinder of our fifty foot projector. They lay, each of them on a six-foot little sub-sea sled, powered, like our cylinders, with the oxo-hydro gas-streams. In effect, a narrow, six foot long raft, with a hooded bow that housed the control mechanisms and protected the girls' faces from the rush of water. The girls' bodies had a weight of about the same as water. Specific gravity of 1. And the sled with its mechanisms was adjusted to be the same. Girl and sled—neither to float nor sink, but approximately to hang poised. And thus, with little tilting fins on the sled's sides, and lateral and vertical bow and stern rudders, the power would thrust them down into the depths and up again at will.

We started. Running at first on the surface, the largest of our little cylinders with Peters and two of his skilled men led us in a line. And behind us came the girls, in squads of twenty, each with a leader. They had often practiced it, for sport and for the possibility of such a time as this.

As we passed the Water City, we submerged to fifty feet. I turned to look back through our turret. Like darting fishes the girls came down, still holding their formation as we swept on through the green-black depths to battle.

VII

FOR a time we ran with short-range headlight beams preceding us, then, as we neared the area where we knew Tollgamo's ships should now be, we ran dark. But still there were the glowing, bubbling

rocket-stream tails of our fifty little cylinder boats; and the rocket-streams of the girls' diving sleds. And our swift passage through the water left a phosphorescent wake so that the area all around us glowed, opalescent with a pallid, eerie light.

Leh and his father had arranged the tactics of battle which we hoped we could employ. He explained them to us now. Peters' larger cylinder was banded with white alumite stripes so as to be easily distinguishable. Its light signals would give us orders.

"There is a ridge," Leh was saying. "It crosses from the promontory head of the metal mountains across to the Arron forests. We think Tollgamo will follow it as his best method of approach."

It was a transverse ridge, lying at an average of not much more than fifty feet beneath the surface. A submarine plateau, in main extent some ten miles long and a quarter of a mile wide, with deeps on both sides of it where the bottom dropped sharply away, in places to unfathomable depths. If we could catch the Tollgamo vehicles in that area it was our best chance for a shallow attack. And that, we needed. The girls especially, could not dive into the lower, higher pressures.

Then presently ahead of us, Peters signalled and we all slackened, wheeling, gathering in a group.

"There they are!" Leh murmured tensely. "Just climbing to the ridge."

The shallower water here was bright with the upper light filtering down. Astonishingly bright; and suddenly I realized that the Venus night was over. Dawn had come to the world of air above us, penetrating the cloud-masses of the Venus atmosphere. It came down here with a faint ruddy glow, so that now we could see miles of the area before us. At first it was blurred and unreal. But in a moment I was used to it, my mind translating its distortion into the terms of its reality.

A dark abyss was under us here as we poised. Ahead, a thousand feet away now, the ridge was visible. A cliff was at one side of it, a honeycombed, submarine wall, a peak of which rose above the surface as a volcanic little island, with a tiny crater mouth, yawning faintly yellow from the fires of the earth which here must be close.

The slow-moving, struggling little line

of submarine vehicles was just mounting to the ridge. Only a few miles from here and they would be under the city of Arron. We must turn them back here.

Slowly we approached, still out of Tollgamo's range. We had long since been seen, of course. The waving headlights of the ten huge black vessels turned our way. Monsters with searching, glaring eyes. And then a tentative shot came. In the blurred watery twilight it was a stab of thin violet light. Not instantaneous, but slow-moving as though for a second it was pushing its way at us. But it blurred to nothingness far short of us; and in a few seconds it died.

At Peters' signal we divided now, spreading fanshape between the leading Tollgamo ship and Arron; skimming close under the surface, still keeping three hundred feet or more away from the leading vessel. But we had to get within fifty feet for our rays to be effective! I could feel my heart pounding, and my blood seemed cold.

And then a puff of orange light from the bow of Peters' cylinder gave the signal for our first attack. Beside me I could hear Allen suck in his breath. My hands were on the small gun-firing mechanisms—my two small ray projectors on one side of the cylinder, Allen's on the other, with Leh's ranging in a quadrant of the bow and stern. In a slanting dive, we plunged forward and down.

IT was a chaos of blurred confusion to me, that first slanting plunge that took us close past the looming black side of one of the Tollgamo vessels, half circling it until in a few seconds we had fired our six little stabbing bolts and were past, rising again. I was aware that all the area of water suddenly seemed churned into silver phosphorescence through which shapes were diving. A bolt stabbed at us and missed. Then as we were mounting, one caught us. For a second it clung, with a bubbling red viscosity of fusing metal, glaring against my small bullseye pane. Would it eat through? Undoubtedly, if it clung too long, or if another were to strike in the same place.

But we twisted away from it; and in another second its built-up electronic power had discharged and it died. I realized then

the advantage of our mobility with our five hundred and fifty agile little units against the ten huge caterpillar vehicles of Tollgamo, at least we might have an equal chance. Their three hundred foot rays were thin as pencil-streaks. Not easy for them to hit a tiny, swift-moving target. And I saw too, that once we were close, there were many angles at which the rays could not reach us.

Leh, Allen and I each fired two charges in that first dive. I saw some of them strike against the looming black armoured-hull of the Tollgamo vessel as we flipped past it, each hit marked by bubbling red pits of metal. Through the bullseye windows I caught a vague glimpse of crowded men and women Gorts inside.

Then we were back, almost at the surface, out of range again, wheeling, poisoning, with the enemy behind and beneath us. I stared down, and saw that the girls, like a school of plunging dolphins, were making their dive. And then I had my first sight of one as she was struck. She was a tiny descending silver streak; and the bolt darted up, caught her. For a horrible second or two it clung. I saw her waver; come loose from her sled. And then she was a twisted, blackened, almost shapeless blob, slowly drifting down, with crimson air-bubbles for a moment rising. Then on the black ridge bottom her inert form lay, with a little movement as the water made it weave, as though horribly she were still alive.

For five minutes we stared down at the swarm of attacking girls. They swarmed within the wide angles of the opposing rays. Some of them were at the hulls of the enemy ships, holding their rays close, trying to melt through.

Then at last they were rising; swooping back to the surface. Some of them! But others were wavering away. With broken mechanisms discarded, some were swimming free. And others were sinking. Broken, twisted little shapes, with the water tinted crimson as they sank.

Leh, Allen and I stared at each other, white-faced, as the girls came fluttering up, flipping on the surface to get air, organize into squads again; and to recharge their tiny projectors. The squads reformed. My heart sank at the pitiful gaps in the formations. We had lost more than

a hundred and fifty girls in that first attacking dive. And two of our ten cylinder-boats were crippled. Air bubbles were oozing from them; then the exit escape port of one of them opened as the little cylinder sank. The two men came out, with buoyant belts which all of us were wearing so that they floated away on the surface.

But we had done some damage. Two or three of the big Tollgamo vessels seemed to be in distress. The one leading the line had checked its advance. Those behind seemed trying to hasten forward, so that now the ships were bunching. One of them, seemingly out of control, had slued sideways, close to the edge of the abyss where the green-black depths went down perhaps a thousand fathoms. Perilously close, so that now as we stared it sagged drunkenly on the brink and seemed out of commission. And at the window port of another of them, a dull-red glare was apparent. An interior fire.

"Not too bad," Leh was muttering. "We'll do better, next time."

Where was Nereid? My heart seemed to stick in my throat with apprehension as I watched the girls coming up. And then I saw her; still unharmed. She came close past our turret on her power-sled, her white arm waved at us as she flipped past and broke the surface for air.

And then Allen suddenly gasped,

"What the devil is that? What now?"

Tollgamo wasn't waiting for our second dive! His leading ship suddenly was starting ahead of the others. And then suddenly, from three or four of the enemy vessels tiny black dots were rising. Water bullets . . . Needle-like, foot-long projectiles. They came hurtling at us. And then they burst with muffled, blurred sounds of little explosions. Some were near the surface, tossing up spouts of iridescent water.

It startled us into sudden confusion. Several of our girls were caught in the exploding puffs; and one of our cylinders. I saw it break apart in sluggish tearing fragments of metal and what had been its living occupants. A girl, caught at the surface, was hurled into the air.

A CHAOS. And in the midst of it, Peters gave the signal for a general attack; sustained attack, this time. Again Leh plunged us into what now was a watery

inferno. How long it lasted I cannot say. Ten minutes. Half an hour. An eternity of horror, with everyone for himself. There were times when I could see little of it. The shallow, fifty foot depth of ocean here was a glare of red and orange and opalescent light through which our cylinders dove and the girls plunged up and down like voracious little fishes.

There was an inferno of lights and muffled ghastly rumbles down below. And the surface now was strewn. Our broken cylinders sagging there; then sinking as the men tried to get out. Men and girls swimming, wounded, and then sinking. Chaos of human wreckage. The rippled daylight surface now was tossed by crazy waves; water stained with blood; or orange and blue with oil and gas-fumes.

Then I saw that Peters' cylinder was gone. Only ours and two others left. Leh, Allen and I, now in command. Empty authority. The girls, down in the weird lurid depths, were fighting with utter desperation, heedless of the possibility of command.

An eternity of horror. But now, two of the Tollgamo vessels had slid over the brink, sinking slowly into the abyss. I saw another of them burst with interior fire. Muffled explosions, that spewed out Gorts and broken equipment. Then there was a time when one of the distressed vessels emitted an inky fluid as though it were some giant squid—a pall of black water, to hide the disembarking men. We fought through it, until presently it drifted away.

"Getting them," I heard Allen mutter once. "By Heaven, only two of those boats in action now—Tollgamo's and this other one."

We were plunging at Tollgamo's ship. Its port was red with glare. The enemy rays now were lessening. It seemed that only one or two were left. And the battle now had changed its aspect. From the broken Tollgamo ships, many of the Gorts had safely emerged, with helmets and weighted shoes so that now they were walking, swaying on the rocky bottom. Five hundred or more of them. And the girls swooped down at them. Myriad hand to hand combats between the unweidly Gorts and the Arron virgins that plunged at them like darting hungry sharks.

The bottom now was strewn with the

dead as the girls plunged and fought and we darted our cylinder among them, struggling to find opportunity to strike with our rays.

Where was Nereid? Again cold apprehension struck at me; it was so long since I had seen her. And now a new ghastly horror was entering the turgid scene. Attracted by the lights, the muffled roars and the blood, monsters of the deep were coming. Eaters of carrion. Sea vultures. Some came in little swarms, a thousand tiny silvery shapes, darting at the bodies, picking at them until only white skeletons lay here on the slimy sea bottom. Other shapes, huge with glaring round eyes like torches, came slithering from the deeps, searching for the dead, seizing the wounded.

"That Tollgamo ship is all that's left," Leh was saying. He sped us toward it. Quite obviously now it was trying to escape. Forty or fifty girls were clinging to its hull; too close for its single remaining ray weapon to hit them; girls with closed-held projectors eating with bubbling red electro-glare into the hull-plates. We had a glimpse into one of the bullseye portes—gas fumes and red glare in there; and the Gorts, trapped there, in a panic making ready to disembark. We lay close, firing our bolts.

Suddenly a wounded girl was drifting past our turret; she seemed struggling to get to our little pressure porte. Nereid?

Then I saw that it was Venta. She got into the porte; and I pumped out the water; threw myself in and bent over her. She was gasping, but still trying to smile at me.

"We—we have won, Earthman."

"Yes. Yes, Venta. You just lie quiet. Have you seen Nereid?"

"Yes. Here, just a little while ago. I don't know, now."

I stared out the porte bullseye. The Tollgamo ship was breaking; I could see its air coming out in bubbling puffs that caught our cylinder and shoved it away. That ship would be water-filled in a moment. And then I stiffened; tense with horror as I stared. A little side exit-porte of the wrecked vessel suddenly opened. A single huge figure lunged out. A dark-clad giant figure, with round air-helmet and weighted shoes.

Tollgamo! He was no more than fifty feet from me; a red sheen of light struck his helmet so that I could see his face with its quiet, grim smile. And then suddenly, in a leaping dive, he flung himself forward, and seized a girl who was clinging to the vessel's side, blasting with her ray-torch.

Nereid! In the glare, abruptly I saw her, as Tollgamo seized her, catching her by surprise so that she had no chance to escape him. And then her torch and her knife were gone, as he held her body against him and with swaying, shoving tread started away along the bottom.

THERE were weighted shoes here in our pressure porte. I was only a moment getting Venta out of the porte into the main part of the hull. I slid its door; adjusted my helmet; admitted the water. And then I was swaying out on the rocks, with a knife in my hand.

Vaguely I could see Tollgamo, with Nereid struggling in his grip as he advanced with swaying tread toward where, near at hand, the honeycombed cliff of that little crater-island loomed here. I struggled after him. Then I saw that he had plunged into what seemed a water-filled little passage leading back under the island. I was there in a moment; tense, alert, cautious now that he might be crouching somewhere here in ambush.

The ten foot high narrow passage wound up an ascent until unexpectedly my head broke the surface. I twitched off the helmet. I had thought that Tollgamo knew that he was being followed, but evidently he did not. Neck deep in water, I was near the rocky shore of a subterranean lagoon . . . a huge jagged grotto here in the depths of the honeycombed little island.

And then I saw Tollgamo. His helmet was off now. Carrying Nereid in his arms, he had mounted a broken rocky wall of the grotto, so that he was some fifty feet back and ten feet above me. I had kicked off my weighted shoes. I tried to dive, but I was discovered. Nereid gave a little cry; and as Tollgamo saw me, he suddenly checked his climb, set Nereid on her feet and held her against him. I had floundered forward, on the shore now; and dropped my knife, plucking a little ray-projector from my belt.

Its fifty foot stab was ample here. Was Tollgamo armed?

Brief thoughts; brief tableau. For that second he and Nereid stared down at me. A red glare painted them, a glare that came from what I saw now was a glowing pit almost beside them on this little volcanic island. In the heavy subterranean silence I could hear the low muttering, hissing rumble of the fires deep in the bowels of the earth, and the grotto was heavy with their sulphuric smell.

A slow ironic smile was on Tollgamo's gray face, painted now by the red and yellow glare.

"So, the Earthman!" he said. "And he finds Tollgamo unarmed."

My little projector was leveled; but as he held Nereid against him I could not dare fire. He saw it, and his ironic smile broadened. Was he really unarmed? It seemed so. I could see the empty weapon-clips at his belt, from which evidently he had torn his exhausted weapons and flung them away. And his hands were both in plain view, gripping Nereid's shoulders. There was just a second when I saw his gaze flick from my leveled gun as he desperately measured his chances for escape.

And then he seemed to reach his decision. The quiet smile still plucked at his thin gray lips. I must have made a move with my leveled muzzle; and suddenly it seemed to startle him.

"Don't fire, Earthmen!" he said sharply. "You would kill her."

And then, with a twitch of his big powerful arms he swept Nereid, not further to shield himself, but behind him. And he added softly, to her:

"So you see Tollgamo has lost? That is too bad." His breath went out in a long hiss. "I had thought to conquer Arron, to share it with you." His soft voice was ironical; as though now at the last he was jibing at the futility of all human effort.

I stood numbed, withholding my shot as now he cast her away; and he stood alone on the red-yellow brink. His gaze turned to me.

"You see, Earthman, you need not kill me," he said gently. "I should not like anyone to do that—much less an Earthman."

Still his jibing irony. But there was tragedy in his smoldering dark eyes; the tragedy of failure, as now his dream at last was broken.

He was still quietly smiling, as he poised on the brink, staring down at the fiery abyss. Then slowly he leaned forward, toppled and fell. For a second his plummeting body was visible, and then the red-yellow glare swallowed it.

I THINK that there is little I need add. I have no wish to picture the return of our pitiful little army to Arron. Victorious army. . . . How trite, but how true it is—in warfare, even the victor is vanquished! But surely, there is a better time ahead for Venus now. Jenten-Shah, degenerate ruler of the Arones, was killed that night by an imbecile worker. Peters was killed; and Leh is ruling. Surely he will bring order out of chaos, and minimize license in the lives of the pleasure-loving Arones, so that now there need be no rebelling young Virgins with the approbrium of Untouchables.

Certainly that is what we all hope.

Nereid and I are married now and are very happy. My strange little wife, daughter of two worlds. I know that I shall have to take her back to Venus presently. Loyally she insists she likes our Earth quite as well as Venus. But as I recall the lush tropic beauty of the glowing Arron nights, and the soft iridescence of the water—well, I doubt it very much.

I want Nereid to like Earth. Our little home is in the tropics, by the palm-lined edge of a lagoon. We are secluded here, which is what Nereid wants. When people see her she is dressed always in Earth fashion. But when we are alone, at night—

I wanted to finish this narrative tonight. I thought I could finish by dawn. It is bright moonlight. I thought Nereid was asleep, but just a little while ago she came from our bedroom to the veranda where I am writing. Nereid, with her tawny hair flowing, her beautiful body again in the shining sea-green garment.

Then she went past me, flinging me her impish, whimsical little smile as she ran for the lagoon. She is swimming down there now. Occasionally she calls up to me, daring me to come down.

THE MONSTER THAT THREATENED THE UNIVERSE

By R. R. WINTERBOTHAM

From Chaos a space-consuming creature reached slimy tentacles toward trembling planets. And no man of the old fighting breed remained on effete Earth to battle the invulnerable monster.

LIMIO hugged the dying fires of Chaos. He was not cold, for the fires that burned in the center of the cold star were not dead, only dying. But they were the source of life to the monster who lived in the depths of a black hole of space.

The Black Hole, about thirty degrees from the solar quadrant in the terrestrial galaxy, was not dark, but twilight to Limio, whose eyes were sensitive to infra-red radiation. These eyes, hundreds of them floating on huge cranial bumps that dotted the thousands of miles of his massive body, caught the ruddy glow of a rocket ship entering The Black Hole.

Limio grunted. These iron creatures were hard to crack, but inside their hulls were juicy tidbits of carbon and oxygen in various combinations. It had seemed to Limio that these tasty morsels were alive; that they might even possess intelligence. Of course, it would be hard to conceive of anything so small having much intelligence, but Limio had run across strange things in the universe in his millions of years of existence.

Limio had come to Chaos a single spore. He had grown into a slimy, reptilian, nauseating mass, the supreme hideosity in a warp of creation. His body lacked form, except as a tenuous syrupy blanket covering a fourth of the surface of Chaos. Here and there in the skin of this monster were toothed craters ready to devour any carbon molecule that might fall from space. Food was not important to Limio, for it only made him grow. The energy of the inner fires of Chaos supplied the needs of his existence. He ate simply to destroy, for Limio wanted no competitive form of life on Chaos. Competition might mean death and Limio loved his immortality.

The rocket ship drew nearer. Limio saw that it had guns. Limio knew these guns. Once before he had met a rocket ship equipped with neutron blasters. Limio had received a hole in his body that had taken a century to heal. Limio had been unprepared then, but this time he was ready.

He tapped the inner fires of energy. A warm glow softened his body. The network of nerves that formed his brain threw out a web of magnetic energy. The toothed craters in his skin yawned expectantly.

The intelligence behind the controls of the ship spotted Chaos. It circled the dying sun. Searchlights stabbed downward toward the surface. Limio's sensitive nerves tingled as radio energy lashed out rhythmically from the craft. It was signaling, probably.

Suddenly from the surface of the star a long, tenuous arm shot out. It was fifty miles long and five miles in diameter. It leaped from the surface with mile a second velocity, aiming a blow at the space ship that could have pounded it to junk, had it landed.

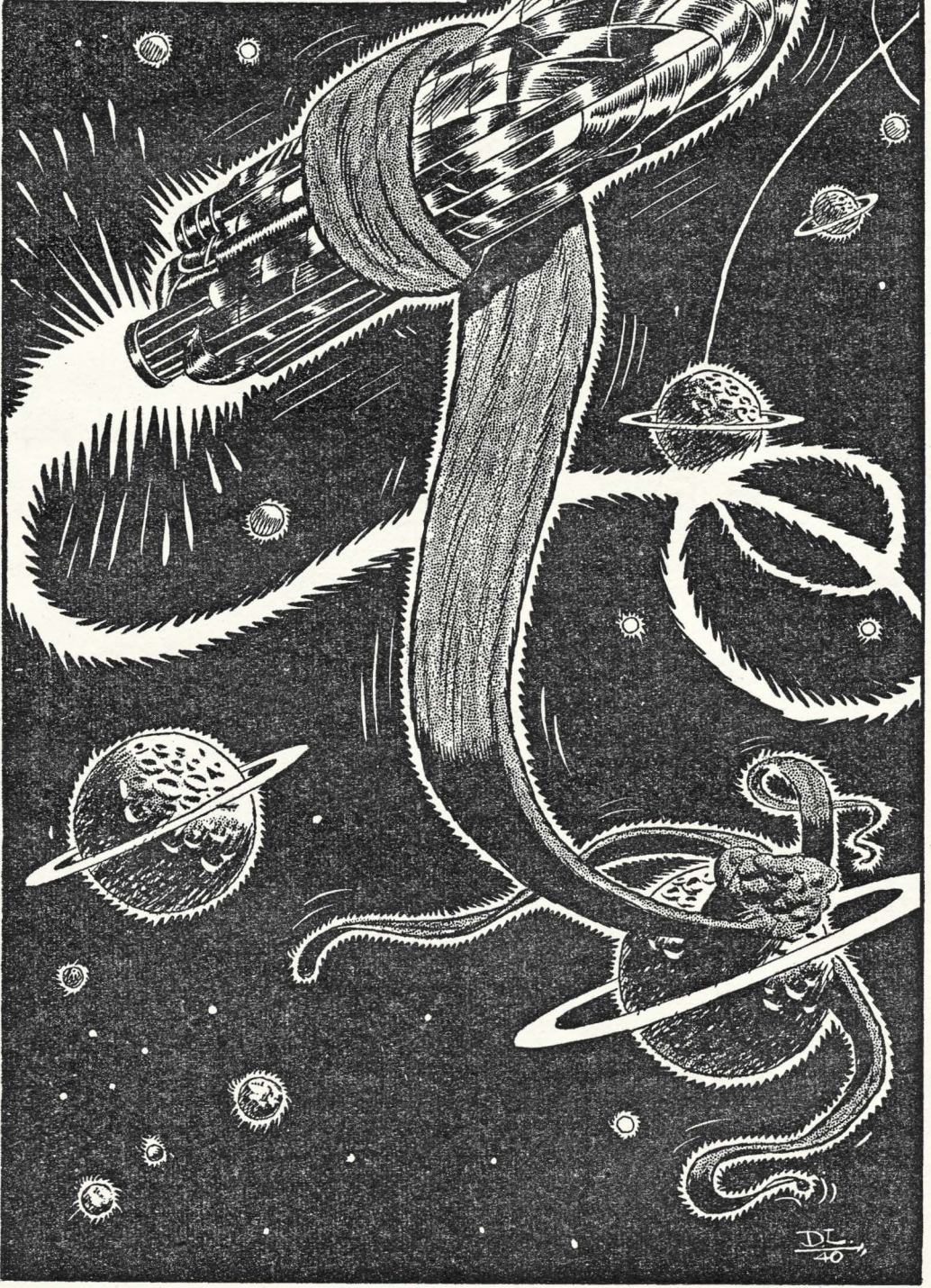
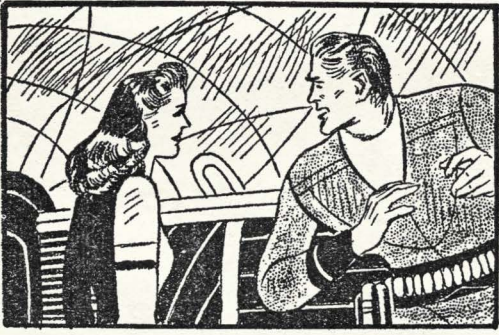
But the pilot saw the blow and dodged out of the way. The tentacle snapped back. Again Limio tingled with radio energy. His brain caught the rhythm and deciphered the thought:

"It is a living world. It seems to be a vicious animal. Just now it attacked—"

"And I will attack again!" whispered Limio's brain in the same magnetic rhythm of the impulses that flowed from the ship.

Again the arm shot out toward the ship's hull. Once more the alert pilot dodged in time.

"Who are you?" asked the space ship, in the rhythm Limio had begun to understand.



"I am Limio," replied the monster. "Who are you, metal monster?"

"This ship is the *Burnt Atom*, from earth in the solar system."

"I have never heard of the solar system, but I have seen others like you in my time. I have never had trouble destroying one of your kind. Go away. Leave me alone, or I shall kill you."

"That is not our policy. We are men. We have principles. Our principles demand that you be destroyed as a menace to space navigation."

"Why?"

"Because you interfere with progress. We know now why ships that enter The Black Hole never return. We intend to put an end to this wanton and useless destruction."

"If you do not go away, I will kill you," said Limio. "But if you creatures who call yourselves men leave me alone, I will leave you alone."

"We can't leave you alone because your principles are not the same as ours. You stand in the way of progress. You are hideous. You are a monster. You must be destroyed."

"You are unbeauteous yourself, but no doubt you are in your early stages of development. But I do not kill for esthetic reasons. I simply want to be left alone. Go away."

"No!" came from the *Burnt Atom*. "There is no room in the universe for enemies of progress. Besides, our studies reveal that your planet has rare minerals on its surface."

Limio studied the assertion. It was evident to him that the intelligence directing the *Burnt Atom* had room for progress. There was nothing wrong in wanting to progress, except that rapid progress was self-evidently a bad policy. Progress was inevitable, according to Limio's way of looking at things, but it should be avoided, because progress would seek one out. Limio's ultimate destruction would be due to progress. He would grow until Chaos was too small to keep his bodily processes in operation. Limio could not stop growth, because carbon molecules and spores fell continually on the surface of Chaos. But he did not invite food to come to his planet. That was why he asked the men to go away.

"Perhaps your idea of progress is different from mine," Limio said. "To me, progress is synonymous with growth."

"To us, progress means growth of mind; development of resources; betterment of human institutions and relationships."

"Then your idea of progress is nothing at all," Limio said. "I have seen many forms of life, even some of your own forms, and I have never seen a mind whose growth was not limited by hereditary conditions which tend to progress in nature's own way; nature alone can develop resources—you simply take them away from nature; and if human relations are governed by this philosophy it is better that the human race does not progress, although it will in spite of itself. Now that we understand each other, please go away."

In reply the yellow flame of a neutron gun streaked from the *Burnt Atom*.

But Limio had met men before and he was prepared for the niceties of their means of destruction. His web-like brain cast off magnetic force to shield his body. The magnetism swerved the neutrons from their path, doubled them back on their course until the yellow flame touched the sides of the space ship itself.

There was a single explosive puff. The darkness of The Black Hole returned.

COMMANDER General Adstrom, president of the terrestrial Congress, surveyed the two men who stood in front of him. One was an officer in uniform, while the other was a pale-faced, poorly dressed person.

The commander general addressed the officer.

"Is—is this a—a criminal?" he asked.

The pale-faced young man watched with evident amusement.

"The gland extracts have been most effective during the past ten years, sir," the officer said. "This is the only law violator we've been able to find."

Commander General Adstrom shook his head. "We should have known when to stop with those gland extracts," he declared. "We sought to destroy criminality and we did. But we also destroyed creativeness, originality, individuality. I hoped that the gland extract would not affect everyone. I expected that some individualists would remain and that we could find

him among the criminal classes. But there are no criminal classes!"

"This man is a criminal. His name is Marmaduke Karns. Perhaps you remember the trial not long ago. It was quite a sensation."

"Marmaduke Karns? The name is familiar." The commander general appraised the young man. "What crime did he commit?"

"He synthesized teakwood without a permit, sir."

"I got thirty days, too!" Marmaduke Karns added proudly. "They treated me royally in jail. It was the first job the jailer has had in ten years."

"Did you take the gland extract?" Commander General asked.

Marmaduke nodded.

"There's something funny about that, too, sir," the officer interrupted. "Karns was given a test in jail and the gland extract was found in his veins, but there also was a trace of another substance. An antidote, sir!"

Marmaduke's face grew paler. The commander general eyed his prisoner seriously.

"You know it's a capital offense to take an antidote to the extract?" the commander general asked.

"I'm standing on my Constitutional rights," Marmaduke said. "I want a lawyer."

"I didn't know there was an antidote," the commander general said. "It seems that the antidote probably will be, in your case, a great boon to the universe. Have you got any more or it?"

"I'm still standing on my Constitutional rights," Marmaduke said. "The stuff—and I'm not admitting anything—is a secret."

"You can feel perfectly free to talk," the commander general said. "Nothing you say will go beyond these walls. Furthermore, one difficulty we are up against is that of finding an executioner, even if you were convicted and sentenced to death for manufacturing an antidote to the extract. There's not a human being on earth who would take another man's life, even legally."

"I know," Marmaduke said. "That's why I invented the stuff and took it. Now I'm in the position of a superman. I've got

a monopoly on originality, individuality and creativeness in the world. If I revealed my antidote, I'd not have a monopoly."

"We can still put you in jail," the commander general reminded.

"The world would beat a pathway to my cell," Marmaduke replied. "I wouldn't stay in jail long."

COMMANDER General Adstrom was confronted with a serious problem. Marmaduke Karns represented a one-man revolution that could not be suppressed. The commander general might call out the army, the navy, the airforce and the spaceforce, but not a human being would kill Karns, because the gland extract had made it psychologically impossible for one human being to kill another. As long as Karns were alive, whether he be in jail or free, Karns was bound to climb to the top of the heap.

The commander general played his final trump.

"I plead with you in the name of human progress," he said, "to thrust aside your personal ambitions and put your self-bestowed gift of individuality in the service of mankind!"

"When you put it that way," Karns said, "I'd be a heel to refuse."

"Ah!" Commander General Adkins drew a deep sigh.

Briefly he explained his proposition. He told of the radio reports received from the *Burnt Atom* indicating that a creature existed in the middle of The Black Hole that blocked progress in developing Chaos.

"There was an interruption of signals and then silence," Adstrom continued. "We have not heard from the *Burnt Atom* since and there's no doubt that this terrible creature, Limio, destroyed the ship. Now we human beings have learned a few lessons in our millions of years of existence. One of them is that a rotten place on the world or in the universe spreads. We must someday come to death grips with Limio and we believe we can tackle him better now than later on."

"Why now?"

"At present he is confined to only one planet—or star, for we believe Chaos is simply a burnt-out star. As he grows he

will become desperate, just as mankind grew desperate when the earth became overpopulated. Limio, sooner or later, will find a way to move Chaos out of The Black Hole. By that time he will be large enough to join other planets to his own. The eventual conclusion will be that Limio will absorb every atom of carbon in the universe, including the human race, and the whole universe will be occupied by a single living creature."

"It sounds rather absurd," Marmaduke said.

"It's not half as absurd as some other theories about the end of the world and it's just as logical."

"I suppose you want me to destroy this monster?"

"We've tried our best weapons against him and failed to hurt him," the commander general pointed out. "You've got to invent a weapon to conquer Limio. You're the only man in the world with genius enough to do it."

"May I see the reports from the *Burnt Atom*?"

"The resources of the world are at your command."

"Then I'll take the job," Marmaduke said. "But when I get back, it's every man for himself. Either you abdicate, or I'll overthrow you."

Commander General Adstrom smiled. "I'll abdicate," he said.

The door of the room opened and a slender figure dressed in slacks entered.

"Oh, it's you, Sandra!" Commander General Adstrom said. He turned to Marmaduke. "This is Sandra, my daughter; Sandra, this is Marmaduke Karns, the world's foremost public enemy."

Sandra stepped forward and took the hand of the prisoner in a friendly clasp.

"I read about your trial! It was so exciting! I've always wanted to meet a bad man."

Marmaduke Karns grinned bashfully. "You're Sandra Adstrom! I've had your pictures from the rotogravure section pasted all over my cell!"

It was Sandra's turn to blush. She noted that if Marmaduke had more color he wouldn't be so bad looking, even if he were a little underweight.

"Karns is going to lead an expedition into The Black Hole," Commander Gen-

eral Adstrom explained. "He's going to invent a weapon to conquer Limio."

"Oh!" Sandra caught her breath. "How soon?"

"Not for a few weeks," Marmaduke explained. "I've got to invent the weapon first."

"Oh, then you could drop over to my house for tea," Sandra smiled. "Some of my friends would like to meet you. Perhaps you could autograph their copies of the court records of your trial."

Karns quickly accepted the invitation. The officer showed him out of the room.

The commander general turned to his daughter.

"Nice work, child," he said. "No man will execute Karns, but Limio has no such limitations. The fool did not even suspect that he was under a death sentence the minute our scientists found the antidote for the extract in his veins."

"It seems such a shame, too," Sandra said. "But after all, I suppose he's a public enemy."

MARMADUKE, at Sandra's party, strutted like a rooster among a dozen of her close friends. The sight sickened Sandra, but it made her glad at the same time. There was not another man in the world with conceit. The gland extract had eliminated man's worst failing.

When the others left, Sandra turned on her guest of honor.

"I don't think you were very modest," she said. "In old times a criminal didn't crow about his crimes, he was ashamed. You acted like a national hero."

"After all, I am, am I not?"

"You didn't need to date up all of my friends!"

A slow smile crept across Marmaduke's face. He looked nicer even than he had in Commander General Adstrom's office. There was more color in his cheeks and he had gained weight. There was a trace of devilishness in his eyes. Somehow, Sandra felt sorry to find it there. She was part of the plot to bring about this criminal's execution.

"So that's it, is it?" Marmaduke asked.

"What's what?"

"You're jealous!"

"You conceited fool!" Sandra said. She did not appear to be angry, and in fact

she was not, for the gland extract had eliminated anger in her temperament. She was simply stating facts.

Marmaduke took her in his arms and planted a kiss on her lips. She tried to break away, but he kissed her again, very firmly. She ceased resisting and kissed him.

"After all," said Sandra, "you're the only male left in the world who has the remotest resemblance to what a man should be. I'll have no part in this thing. You must not go to The Black Hole!"

"If you mean you're afraid your father's plan to use Limio as an executioner will work, you needn't worry."

"You know—about that?"

"Of course! I knew when I was brought before Old Monkeyface—pardon, I mean your father—that the antidote in my veins had been discovered and that I would be sentenced to death. I was curious as to how he was going to execute me."

"Now you know. You can't kill Limio! The monster is invulnerable."

"Sandra, dear," Marmaduke said, "everyone thinks the gland extract is foolproof. But look! You're aiding and abetting a criminal, giving me a chance to escape after warning me that I face death."

"Oh! I'm a criminal, too."

"Yes. It seems as though love is an antidote for a lot of things, including the extract. Of course, my antidote is not a love potion, but it works just as well as love to overcome the extract. Now all I have to do is to meet Limio and show he's not invulnerable. I'll do it, too."

In her mind Sandra doubted, but in her heart she hoped.

The terrestrial Congress, anxious for law enforcement, commandeered a laboratory for Marmaduke Karns, who intended to use it to construct a chemical weapon to use against Limio. Marmaduke argued that if the human race could be completely subdued by a shot or two of extract, Limio could be made docile. Commander General Adstrom didn't care whether Karns was successful or not. If successful, Karns would have won a pardon from his death sentence; if not, the death penalty would have been carried out and the laws enforced. Adstrom couldn't lose.

The work was completed at last. Tank

after tank of liquid was stored aboard the *Burnt Atom II*, the space ship destined to take Karns into The Black Hole. The craft was loaded with provisions and fuel and then it shot into space and beyond the solar system at a speed many times the velocity of light.

At the edge of The Black Hole, Karns' radio receiver crackled.

"Commander General Adstrom calling!"

This was remarkable. The radio signals had no right to catch up! True, the signals could be sent through the time dimension and traverse space at a pace more rapid than light, but this signal from earth shouldn't have reached Karns for several days.

"Hello, Adstrom!" spoke Karns.

"You're under arrest. Halt. You've kidnaped my daughter!"

"But I haven't got your daughter, sir!" Karns said.

"Oh, yes, you have!"

THE four words came, not from the receiver, but from the storeroom of the space ship. There in the doorway stood Sandra.

"Sandra!"

"Aha!" came from Adstrom.

"I hope you don't mind having a stow-away," said Sandra.

"I'm training a battery of neutron guns on your ship," Adstrom called. "Surrender my daughter or I'll fire."

Karns swung to the microphone. "You won't fire," he said. "You're primed with too much extract and even if you weren't, you wouldn't want to destroy your daughter along with the kidnaper." He turned to Sandra. "There's a lifeboat in the hold. Get in it and take off."

"You're afraid to take me with you! Haven't you faith in your weapon?"

"There's always a certain amount of danger."

"Then I'll share it with you!"

Karns glanced at the pursuing ship. It was overtaking him. He didn't dare wait. He touched the controls and nosed into The Black Hole. He flew toward the shadow of the star that was silhouetted in darkness in the center of the whirlpool of space.

"Limio! Limio!" he called into the radio.

At last a reply came from the monster. "Go away, earthman. Go away before I kill you."

"There's no reason for me to kill you. Why can't terrestrials and you get along?"

Limio's answer was simple.

"If I don't kill you, you'll kill me. It's the law of life. I don't want to be killed, so I kill you."

"If you kill me, my atoms will fall to your planet. You'll absorb them and grow. Other men will come to avenge my death and you'll kill them. You will eat their atoms and grow some more. Some day you'll be too big for Chaos. You'll die. By killing me, you kill yourself."

"If I don't kill you, you'll kill me," Limio repeated.

"You don't trust me, Limio. Listen. I don't come to kill, I came to bring peace."

"You are a fool, man, but I'm not. Go away, while you are in one piece."

"I offer you a long life and a more exciting one!"

As he spoke Karns glanced behind him. Adstrom's ship was circling above, ready to dive. It would try to disable *Burnt Atom II*, board the ship and rescue Sandra, and then leave Karns to Limio's mercy.

"The last earthman to come here talked of progress," Limio said. "You speak of other gifts. What—"

"Not a gift, Limio, but a price! We terrestrials wish to buy precious minerals you guard on Chaos."

"What has happened of progress on earth?"

"The minerals represent our ideal of progress."

"Do the minerals make you grow?"

"No, Limio."

"Then there is no progress. Progress is purely a matter of size."

"But even to you, growth means death and destruction. On our planet we grow in numbers. When the world is overpopulated, enough people die to leave it underpopulated again. The human race, in a sense, is more immortal than you, Limio."

Karns saw Adstrom's ship in a dive. He jerked the controls and sent his own craft forward out of the way. The action was mistaken by Limio as an attack. The

huge, fifty-mile tentacle shot out toward the *Burnt Atom II*. Karns twisted the controls again and dodged, so that the blow barely missed his ship.

Adstrom, however, was not so lucky. As he attempted to follow Karns' maneuver, his craft came directly in line with the piston-like plunge of the tentacle. He swerved his ship, but he swerved too late. The tentacle caught Adstrom's ship a glancing blow.

The ship bounced upward out of control. But it was caught by the gravity of Chaos and it tumbled back, like a falling leaf, toward the surface of the planet.

A roar came from Limio.

Adstrom's ship tumbled close to the ground before the commander fired the rockets. Even with the fuel blast, he was unsuccessful in keeping the craft off the ground, but he managed to steer it to a safe landing on a rocky cliff some distance from the huge body of Limio.

Sandra screamed as she saw a thousand-foot wave of flesh roll across the rocky planet toward her father.

Karns already was nosing his craft down in a dive.

There were two courses open. He might leave Adstrom to his fate and try to flee, in which case Limio most certainly would bring him down with a blow from the tentacle. Or, Karns might try to land, hoping to fool Limio into thinking he had damaged both craft. Limio might not attack Karns in belief that Karns was a lame duck.

Karns chose the second course, not only as the safest, but as a means of bringing Limio under control. Adstrom did not deserve to be rescued, perhaps, but after all he was Sandra's father.

Besides, it was a battle between a monster and man, and Adstrom was on Karns' side.

THE space ship tumbled to the foot of the rocky cliff. As it fell, Karns gave the tubes just enough fuel to keep the landing bump from being too severe. As the ship crashed, he opened the cockpit of the tanks containing the fluid he intended to use upon Limio.

"Follow me, Sandra!" he called, running toward the locks.

They leaped from the craft into an at-

mosphere surprisingly pleasant and sweet. It was only slightly frosty, but the terrestrials were well clad.

They began scrambling up the sides of the cliff. Below they heard the rumbling of the monster's body.

Limio roared as his processes splashed into the sweet liquid that washed the gulleys at the foot of the cliff.

Sandra screamed as one of the processes struck a rock a few feet from her.

"It isn't working!" she cried. "It can't work. The extract simply prevents crime and individualism. You can't prevent individualism when there is only one individual in a species; and there can be no crime without fellow creatures to harm!"

"Hurry, Sandra!" Karns urged. "Save your breath. It wasn't the extract I gave him, but the antidote!"

A huge tentacle raised above the fleeing pair. Sandra closed her eyes. She couldn't escape this blow.

The tentacle did not fall. Instead it snapped back to Limio's body, landing with the crack of a whip.

Suddenly Limio seemed to writhe in pain. Sparks flew from the rocks. The planet shook as if it was in the throes of dissolution. Searchlights from Adstrom's craft flickered down into the valley to reveal a billowing ocean of flesh struggling with itself, fighting itself.

At the top of the cliff Karns and Sandra paused for breath.

"His mind was in unity, now it is in discord," he said. "His evolution was different from ours. He grew as one individual, while life on our planet resolved itself into countless individuals. The antidote served to separate the individuals of his being for the first time in history. Every nerve cell in his body now has individuality. Limio is a billion intellects instead of one."

"In other words, he is crazy!"

"Only in the sense that he is one creature. If we look at him as the whole creation of a world—many creatures—he is not so crazy. He is simply conservative. He is bound to progress and that progress is going to be the kind that lasts, because it was won in a struggle."

"What on earth is progress?" Sandra asked. "It looks to me, if that is prog-

ress, that it's a rather crazy thing—"

"Progress is simply the settlement of a lot of arguments. Every time we settle one argument we find another and progress goes on. At home, progress was blocked by the extract, which made all minds in unison, blocked all argument, ended criminality, made the whole race one individual. The antidote which I gave myself preserved progress by allowing one individual, at least, a different viewpoint. I proved my individuality by getting thrown in jail. You fell in love and became an individualist by warning me of a plot to kill me. Progress continued when your father chased me into The Black Hole—"

"Hello! Hello out there! Are you all right?" Adstrom's voice boomed from the locks of his space ship.

"Perfectly!" Karns replied.

"Ah! A moment ago I wanted to kill you! Now, strangely enough, I feel very grateful toward you for—er—saving Sandra. You will be pardoned of all your crimes."

"He didn't kidnap me, Father," Sandra explained as they entered the ship.

"He has done plenty to the earth! He connected his laboratory with a food factory so that the antidote he made has been spread all over the world in food! He's destroyed the unity of the world! He ought to go to jail, but the jailer's resigned because he had too much to do."

"Marmaduke has brought progress back to the world, Father!"

"Progress! Bah! He's turned the world into a turmoil! The whole population is fighting. The planet's in an uproar. I'll abdicate rather than rule the mess. Let Marmaduke try to straighten it out!"

"Sir," Marmaduke said, "it's every man for himself. You've better qualifications for the office and I can swing some votes your way. You couldn't swing a barn door mine."

The damaged ship had been repaired. They soared earthward. Limio, too busy with his own problems, made no move to stop them. In fact, he might be disturbed enough now to enter into commercial agreement with other planets—parts of his brain trading with other creatures at the expense of other parts. Progress, human style, had come to Chaos.

VAMPIRE OF THE VOID

By NEIL R. JONES

Aonis was the loveliest creature in four worlds—and the most evil. A 26th Century Circe whose arms promised Paradise, but whose kiss was Death

BORN and carefully developed from minute life cells in the laboratories of the Oklahoma Sanctuary, Aonis never knew any childhood. A perfect infant, she was subjected to the blue, vibrating haze of the aging chamber's concentrated environment where the cells of her body underwent rapid changes. Several minutes only were required to age the infant into a perfect specimen of womanhood such as had never been seen on any of the three worlds, for thanks to the scheming outlawed cult Aonis was beautiful beyond description. Her brain, however, harbored less intelligence than that of an idiot, for the aging chambers of the Durna Rangué developed only physically, not mentally. Mental replacement and development depended upon the skilled brain transposition of the Asurians. For a long time, Aonis lay in a comatic condition close to that of death, while the priests of the Asurian cult labored diligently upon the patient and delicate task of giving Aonis a peculiar intelligence and mental power equal to her matchless physique.

No one brain was employed in supplying Aonis with a normal capacity of intelligence. There were carefully selected parts from many human brains floating in a preservative fluid in transparent jars on the shelves of the laboratories. These preserved parts from neophytes and past victims of the cult were carefully catalogued psychologically, and where desired elements were found wanting the Asurians did not hesitate to supply them from among their neophytes, mainly from among those who slumbered in the dream life of the synthetic lifetime.

Aonis, recalled to consciousness, was not only a masterpiece of exquisite beauty but a personality of charm which was not exclusively dependent upon her physical perfection. They had not made her a

mental genius. That was not their design. In the first place, Aonis was purely an experiment. In this latter phase of the 26th Century, the Durna Rangué held rule over the earth in conjunction with the space pirates who had united with the cult in conquering a surprised world.

Two centuries previous, the earth had known the Durna Rangué as a cult of scientific radicals practicing condemned sciences. From the earth, the cult had been banished to Mars where they had continued their inhuman practices in catacombs of the gray cliffs by the Silmono desert. Forced to leave, they had fled across space to a secret refuge in the little moon Oberon in the system of Uranus. For two hundred years, unsuspected and believed dead, the legendary cult planned and grew in power. They finally united with the space pirates and conquered the earth in a single, smashing attack. A blanket of rays surrounding the outlawed world kept off the Interplanetary Guard from the sister worlds of Mars and Venus which had been colonized from the earth and built into equal power during the past three centuries. Under the slightly moderating hand of the cult, the space pirates ruled as absolute monarchs. The Asurians were content to remain in the depths of their semi-subterranean sanctuaries all over the earth, experimenting and planning the conquest of Mars and Venus, giving them absolute control of the solar system.

Aonis had been created by the cult with no other thought in mind than to study her possibilities and perhaps inculcate these into their future plans of conquest. They meant Aonis to be not only irresistible to the sight of men but destructive as well. There was apparently no flaw in the physical fascination and voluptuous beauty of Aonis, yet through her veins flowed violent death, a strange, chemical life-mixture concocted by the evil and inhuman intel-



ligence of the Asurians. Her dark and softly compelling eyes were meant to bring men to a poisonous embrace where even the sweat pores exuded death. It was talked among the Asurians that Aonis was a double experiment. If she proved a feasible link in their plans they would create others of her kind without the faculty of producing death, creatures as irresistible as she but with normal blood systems.

Dark, shimmering tresses fell about her shoulders, veiling the soft texture of arms a sculptor might have dreamed. Her skin was light like the petals of a delicate lily. When she opened her shapely mouth to speak, her voice was soft and tinkling like little bells. Her movements were majestic and sinuous, her diaphanous cloak enhancing, rather than concealing, her seductive charm. From the languorous pools of her eyes there emanated a peculiar, hypnotic quality foreign to that exercised by the Asurians, making any man who looked upon her beauty maddeningly desirous of her. To the immovable Asurians, who had lived for more than two centuries and were without age, and were proof against the less violent forms of death, she was only a biologic product of their genius. But this was not so among the other creatures of the cult, whether dwarves, insect-men or unchanged neophytes, and Aonis was finally ordered to go veiled and less revealingly cloaked.

FOR one who had never been beyond the walls of the sanctuary and had never seen civilization, Aonis held a surprising amount of knowledge concerning it.

Early in her career, not long after her return to consciousness following her brain transpositions, she was given a test by the watchful Asurians who brought a neophyte out of the synthetic lifetime and exposed him to her fatal attraction. The experience thrilled her strangely, even as the priests of the cult had expected that it should. The effect of Aonis upon the neophyte satisfied them. In this, her first experience, she felt her mind guided slightly by the Asurians as if they partly doubted her initiative and were telling her what they wished her to do.

She saw the neophyte stumble forward, and she obeyed the whisper in her mind

to offer herself. The neophyte clasped her to him with a sigh of rapt ecstasy. This first experience surprised her for her next act was not of her own dictation. She thought about it afterward and guessed it was a design of her masters, yet in later years she wondered. Her brain was a strange assortment of past lives whose memories were not fully erased by the Asurians. She pressed her lips to those of the neophyte who seemed to expect the act. His arms tightened about her, and then she felt him quiver slightly. He became as motionless as stone, and the warmth of his body seemed suddenly drained from him. With difficulty, she drew herself from his motionless figure. This, too, was a prompting of the Asurians, for after her first surprise she had lacked any initiative of her own contrivance.

Everyone stood strangely silent—Asurians, attendant dwarves and insect-men. The neophyte's expression changed. Aonis saw him fall over suddenly, and then his legs and arms and the muscles of his face commenced to contort. His eyes bulged and rolled horribly, and his muscles twitched spasmodically. She knew that he was dying and that she had killed him, yet she felt no remorse. Her only emotion was one of thrilling mastery, of satisfaction, as though something anticipated had risen to confirm itself. Yet this anticipation had not been there before. Both anticipation and realization were more like an echo thrown back out of nowhere, except that the realization existed tangibly before her very eyes. The neophyte's face turned green. A rasping issuance of air from his lungs heralded his end. He lay still. The dwarves picked him up and carried him away. The aspirations of the Asurians had been realized.

Aonis was given quarters of her own on one of the higher levels. Served by female neophytes, she rarely encountered anyone else. The insect-men, as she had later occasion to learn, were more man than insect. They were human bodies surmounted with the heads of enormous insects. And then there were invisible neophytes whom she never saw but whose presence she felt whenever they were about. These had represented painstaking experiment. Two centuries earlier, the best results of the

cult had only made the flesh of these experiments invisible, giving them the ghastly appearance of animate skeletons. But during their long stay in Oberon, the cult had finally mastered invisibility of bone structure through repeated trial by formulae. Along with these two groups were the dwarves. Originally full grown men, they had been reduced by atom compression to but half their normal stature and girth. They were as heavy as they had ever been, and they were many times stronger than before. Glands from the great Martian ants had been grafted into their bodies. The shortening of the orbits of their electrons, however, had dulled their intelligence.

THERE was one exception to their stupid lot and that was Grimo. He represented a more careful experiment by the Asurians, and he had remained mentally astute in spite of the compression process. Although Aonis was able to exert her power over any of the dwarfs or other monsters of the cult, Grimo seemed especially susceptible and greatly desirous of her. He had been present at the initial display of her terrible heritage and had seen the fate of the neophyte. In his calmer moments, Grimo was frightened by thoughts of her, yet he never saw her but what she was aware of the magnetic longing she exerted upon him. One of the Asurians told her that it was Grimo who had brought her out of the aging chambers and that he had almost caused her to be dropped and injured when one of the priests had taken her infant body into the chamber.

For this, and other reasons she was at a loss to logically explain, Aonis developed a malicious dislike for the mentally endowed dwarf. She longed to sweep him into her devastating embrace, to let him taste of her kisses that she might feel the exhilarating thrill of his dying quivers. She dare not satisfy such desires, for she feared the wrath of the cult. Grimo was definitely one of their more successful experiments.

But her instinctive love of killing diverted her to other fields of conquest. She cast discretion aside and lured one of the invisible neophytes to her chambers where she played with him like a cat with a mouse, holding him away from her

and eluding his amorous attempts until finally his more virile strength overcame her own. Once again she thrilled to the feel of death in her embrace, this time holding her victim until the last exertion of his agony, only then relaxing to let his invisible, lifeless body slip to the floor.

Aonis had figured that her work would never be discovered. Who would find the invisible corpse if it were carried to a remote and rarely used corridor? But here she reckoned without the aid of experience. Invisibility developed by the Asurians depended to a certain extent on continuous heart action and blood circulation. Aonis was shocked to see the faint outlines of her victim lying at full length on the floor. Slowly, the body became clearer. She saw a tinge of green color his face, the tell-tale mark of her handiwork. Her exultation and strange sense of satisfaction vanished suddenly as she feared the consequences of her vicious act. She waited until she was sure of eluding discovery, and then she carried the semi-visible corpse down a long, unfinished tunnel and left it in the gloom. This success, and an eventual yearning for another such experience soon made her sufficiently bold to again lure a victim to her embrace. This time, however, she did not take him to her chambers but to the dark, unfinished tunnel where lay her last victim. Nor did she pick one of the invisible neophytes. This time, it was a neophyte who had only recently been moved to the sanctuary and was soon to enjoy the dream life in one of the coffin baths. He had sold himself to the cult in exchange for a synthetic lifetime. The Asurians were cheated of their bargain. So was the neophyte. His corpse joined the first one at the end of the tunnel. Aonis once more felt herself strangely satisfied.

More victims came to be thrown upon the decaying heap at the end of the tunnel. This time, the Asurians had done their devilish work too well and had created a Frankenstein monster in the guise of glamorous beauty and ineffable sweetness. Dwarfs, neophytes and even insect-men were lured by the art of Aonis into her deadly embrace. She longed to lure Grimo to her arms but dared not because he would immediately be missed. Once, she met the dwarf on one of the upper levels, luring him to her in spite of the fact that

he shut her off from his vision with up-raised hands. When he came close to her, she pushed him backward and ran.

The Asurians finally commenced to miss certain victims they had either created or had lured from the life beyond the sanctuary walls. They did not suspect Aonis at first. They thought of escape. It was one of the terseg birds who brought about the discovery of Aonis' deadly courtships. Originally a native bird of Mars, the Durna Rangué had taken these birds and given them a limited intelligence by transposition of small parts from the human brain. Their tongues had been split for speech. Possessed of memory and reasoning power, they were valuable to the cult. It was one of these who followed a neophyte in curiosity and saw him lured by Aonis into the old tunnel far beneath the ground level of the sanctuary. From a rugged perch near the ceiling, the bird watched the procedure of death, then flew silently to one of the Asurians and chattered its discovery.

Aonis was apprehended and severely reprimanded, yet the Asurians, though contemplating the chamber of emerald torture, could not bring themselves to subject her to it. For one thing, they did not want her to lose her queenly attitude for a more servile one which the emerald torture would implant upon her brain. And they also realized that their own zealous efforts were largely responsible for this deadly, predatory instinct of Aonis toward men. On consultation, they decided on a small readjustment of her mental qualities, and an operation took place. One more, Aonis lay upon a laboratory table beneath the strong lights and gray-cowled heads of the Asurians. Dwarfs and insect-men stood by to execute the orders of their masters.

The change immediately following the operation was only slight. She still felt the instinct to lure men with her beauty and destroy them by physical contact, but the urge was no longer overpowering. She now felt herself under the mental control of the Asurians more than ever. Only once after this did they have cause to suspect her of her old habits. Grimo dropped suddenly from sight and could be found nowhere in the sanctuary. Aonis suddenly found herself under an inquisition of mental torment where her memory was traced

back diligently and more carefully retraced by the deep, probing mentalities of the Asurians when they discovered her secret desire to kill Grimo. But she was finally absolved. Grimo had escaped into the affairs of a turbulent world beyond the sombre walls of the grim, gray sanctuary. How he had made his escape remained a mystery, yet the priests laid it to some carefully prepared bit of trickery by the astute dwarf.

FROM this time on, the mind of Aonis underwent a slow, subtle change. More and more, memories of things she had never known rose up before her in moments of deep meditation or introspection, memories which had their origin in the brain parts of other lives. More and more, instincts more human than those given her by the priests arose from many untraced yesterdays to confuse and arouse in her new thoughts. More and more, these individual brain parts came to assert themselves more prominently and less as a combined unit. Sometimes, they clashed. In short, Aonis came to find herself a character of many facets and moods.

She came to know what loneliness was, and sometimes she yearned for various things without knowing what they really were or if any such things so blurred and unreal in her subconscious mind really existed at all. At times, the urge to kill once more became strong. Yet again, she often recalled with shuddering abhorrence the pile of dead bodies in the far end of the unfinished tunnel. At times, she knew what it was to become remorseful, and these strange elements of conscience she never fully understood. The strangest occurrence came to her one day in the years that followed. Her thoughts forced her to tears. Dimly, she recalled that a female neophyte had once acted so, but she could not recall the reason. Aonis knew that she was undergoing some kind of a change and attributed to it the tears which coursed down the ethereal loveliness of her face. The tears were accompanied at a later date with sobs. Aonis had become more emotional, and the cold self control she had once known was no longer hers except at rare intervals when she occasionally felt like her old self. Whenever she felt herself under the direction of the Asurians, all her

new feelings and thoughts quickly vanished, and she was as the Asurians had intended her to be.

Though Aonis had changed mentally and spiritually, her physical propensities had undergone no radical change. She was as beautiful as ever and just as deadly. In nearly a decade which had passed, there was not the slightest traces of age or further maturity. She remained as the aging chamber had left her, in the prime, beauty and youth of her womanhood. From time to time, the priests of the cult conducted further experiments and gave her new victims. Although she always enjoyed these experiments which were conducted under the direction of the Asurians, she afterward had periods of horror and remorse once she was alone. Had she known more about the ways of civilization and less about the principles of the cult, she might have experienced a realization of self-degradation. As it was, the instincts of past lives harbored furtively in her brain were quite reproachful in their rather incomprehensible manner.

Her venomous blood and its kindred secretions were as deadly in their rapid and horrible effects as ever. Wherever moisture accumulated in her body, from the tiniest sweat gland to her life blood, there lay virulent poison. In appearance, she was a woman; in ability, the Asurians had created a biologic machine. Her blood was not like human blood or like that of any animal either in chemical content or appearance. Yet her mind, formerly a part of that organic mechanism was straying gradually to a more harmonious union with her feminine appearance.

NEW subjects for experiment were always being brought to the sanctuary. Some of them came willingly, yielding to the lure of a synthetic lifetime where they might realize to fantastic lengths the pinnacles of their desires and aspirations. The dream life held forth an appeal to those dispirited and downtrodden by life, to those who were sensuous and weak, and even to those who had run the gamut of worldly experience and no longer found an interest in that which was tangible and real. These came willingly. There were those drafted by the cult who did not come willingly but for reasons psychological or

physical were desired by the cult for definite reasons. With an entire world for their stock room, the sanctuaries of the Asurians never lacked for material. Even people on the other worlds were not safe. The space pirates made occasional raids when they were able to elude the Interplanetary Guard.

One day, from behind her veil, Aonis saw a neophyte who aroused a strange interest in her. She had never seen him before. The man was evidently a new arrival, and from what she could judge he had come willingly. Something about him suggested the thought. He was tall, handsome and ruggedly built, strange fires alight in his dark blue eyes. It was his eyes which first attracted Aonis. They were unlike the terrible, magnetic qualities of the Asurians, yet something about them drew her as strongly. The neophyte gave her little more than a passing glance. He had already seen too many strange and unbelievable things in the sanctuary to which he had come to take particular notice of a veiled and shrouded woman.

Aonis once again felt excited within her that desire to bring the new neophyte to her destructive embrace. She had not known it so compellingly since the Asurians had operated on her brain. Still, small voices within her protested. Other than from a guilty fear of the Asurians, she had never experienced any misgivings. She wondered vaguely about many things. Why did this new neophyte instil once again in her the insidious desire to kill? She thought that she had become mistress of her strange passion. Once more it was raising its insatiable head to crowd out every other thought and cry hungrily for another victim. She had not felt like this since she had longed to embrace Grimo. She suddenly suspected subtle directions of the Asurians preying upon her mind, yet she was unable to confirm the suspicion. The initiative undoubtedly arose from within herself. Once more she was the all-destroying, dark angel ready to haunt the labyrinthine galleries of the sanctuary for more male victims.

The newly developed tendencies of her mind commenced their stubborn battle, and she gave full reign and consideration but they were lacking in dominant qualities against the overpowering, tidal rush of her

deadly instincts so artfully cultured by the Asurians. She learned where the neophyte was quartered; then once again she commenced weaving the web which was to entice and snare him. Something new occurred to her. She had always known regular periods of sleep which had remained unaffected by her past experiences. Now, she remained sleepless, her consciousness dwelling perpetually upon the neophyte she had seen. She was puzzled, a little uneasy and frightened. She felt unsure of herself, and uncertain as to what her next acts would be.

The first step was to let the neophyte see her unveiled, to let him look upon the rare flower of her beauty. She must proceed furtively, she knew. None of the Asurians nor even their humblest minion must catch her in the act of seduction. She remembered the hated tersegs and vowed that the evil, intelligent birds would not catch her off her guard again. By a devious route, she visited his chamber while he slept. He lay peacefully upon his pallet. For a long time, Aonis stood and looked at him with a queer sensation she had never experienced before. The thrill which ran down her spine made her suddenly aware that she was losing confidence in herself. No longer was she the intelligent siren the cult had fashioned to serve its ends. With mingled emotions, she stood and gazed at him, pushing back the veil from her face that she might see better. The neophyte stirred uneasily in his sleep, arousing her to her purpose. The tones of her voice broke the hush of the chamber like the tinkling of silver bells.

"Awaken!"

THE neophyte stirred slowly and came to an elbow, looking up at the figure standing silently and majestically before him. He stared in unbelieving admiration. His eyes wandered in perplexity around the chamber, and then he looked down at himself before he once more contemplated Aonis. Slowly, she unfastened the dark cloak which the priests of the cult had made her wear, revealing to the bewildered neophyte all the dazzling charm and magic of her beauty. The neophyte held his swift intake of breath as he felt his eyes locked by those of Aonis. She was gradually regaining her composure. The lack

of it had been but a passing of deranged emotions.

"The dream life!" the neophyte breathed audibly. "So soon! They told me—they told me I would have to wait longer—much longer—but—"

He was talking more to himself than to Aonis, his mumbled words trailing each other haltingly.

"I am no dream," Aonis' voice tingled sweetly. "Come and take me. I am yours."

"The dream life," persisted the neophyte, his faculties still numbed by his recent sleep. He arose and swayed toward her.

"No," Aonis shook her head slowly, "those in the synthetic lifetime do not look upon their experience as a dream. I am real."

"Who—who are you?"

"Aonis."

His eyes mirrored ecstasy. He steadied himself and walked toward her. A nameless foreboding shook Aonis, yet she banished it. She knew that it would not be wise to lure him to his death in his own chamber.

"You must follow me," she warned him, "but not too closely, and if I tell you that you must return here and follow me no further you must do so."

"I would do anything you asked of me—anything!" the neophyte replied huskily. "You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen! I still cannot believe you to be true! My eyes deceive me! It is more of the cult's wizardry!"

How true the neophyte came in this latter surmise he little realized. Faithfully, he crept along behind Aonis at a respectful distance, realizing that he might lose this delightful vision if he disobeyed her. Aonis was once more cloaked and veiled. The old demands of her instincts once more glowed with the pleasant anticipations of holding love and death simultaneously. By a roundabout route, she headed for the abandoned tunnel which was conveniently near. Habit and memory once more associated themselves with the insatiable craving which pervaded and motivated her. Her own tread was noiseless. That of the neophyte she heard behind her. Aonis reached the tunnel, turned and beckoned him to follow her and maintain his silence.

She took him nearly to the end. Her

heart beat madly, and her movements were less deliberate than usual as she wrenched aside her veil and tore off the concealing cloak. The neophyte stood motionless, dazzled by her unconcealed loveliness in the faint, semi-illumination from the unfinished walls of the tunnel. Aonis had never felt like she did at that moment, and she was nearly as overcome by her emotions as the stricken neophyte. She wanted to lift her arms to receive him in his brief moment of ecstasy but they remained immovable. Again she suddenly realized that her self-mastery had deserted her and that she was the victim of strange, inner workings foreign to those the Asurians had created.

The neophyte advanced to take her in his arms. Straight into his eyes she looked as she had looked into the love hungry eyes of all her victims, but this time something within her shrank away from this victim she had prized so highly. An image of his face turned green and his body drawn into painful contortions and lying upon a heap of other bodies flashed upon her as memory and prophecy united to leap before Aonis in a flaming glare of stark truth.

Her desires reverted suddenly to shuddering abhorrence, and she who had always received her doomed lovers with open arms took several backward steps to escape the reaching hands of the fascinated neophyte. His breath coming in quick alternations of heavy sighs and murmured phrases of adoration and worship, the neophyte hurried forward to seize her. Aonis had no way of stopping him. Her powers were not for that, and he had seen too much of her and was too far within her spell to be repulsed. Poor Aonis. The embrace of the impassioned neophyte had suddenly become the last thing she ever wanted to happen. The neophyte was upon her, his warm, trembling hand grasping her cold arm to pull her toward him. She wriggled in fright as she felt his hot breath on her face and his groping lips lightly brushed her cheek. She partly escaped from him and stumbled, a little stab of pain striking through her knee as she struck a stone on the floor of the tunnel. Her free hand searched for and found it. Leaning far back and turning her head from the neophyte's face, she struck him sharply on the

head with the stone and slid out of the way as his body relaxed and crumpled to the floor.

Rising to her feet, she ran back down the tunnel, her thin undergarment fluttering in the breeze made by her passage. Quite suddenly, she paused in her impetuous flight before reaching the juncture of the tunnel and a cross corridor. Less swiftly and more surely, she ran back up the tunnel and retrieved her cloak and veil. The neophyte lay where she had left him, a small, red trickle from his head slowly forming a pool on the floor of the tunnel. She made her way carefully back to her quarters, frightened and trembling. Her nerves were completely gone, and when she reached the sanctity of her own chamber she threw herself on her bed, and burst into tears.

AGAIN there was no sleep for Aonis as her thoughts and fears ran a vicious circle. She feared that she had killed him. It was a forlorn paradox that at first she hoped that she had. Then she repented her selfish desire that he be erased from her life forever and wished that she might sacrifice her own miserable existence to save him. She was glad, however, that she had resisted him, for had she caused his death with her accursed beauty she knew now that she would have killed herself, putting an end to her strange life which had become so unhappy of late. From this, she reasoned that it might have been a better end had she yielded. They could have died together. Yet she could not bring herself to bear the thoughts of his dying. But what better lay at the hands of the Asurians? The synthetic lifetime? After that, life's harsh reality became more bitter than ever, especially so in one of the sanctuaries. She wondered if she had killed him. The tears came again. Finally, after hours of alternate hope and despair, she drifted off into a fitful and broken slumber.

Aonis awakened with a clearer understanding. She had learned enough of the outer world to realize by this time that she was in love. The Asurians had not counted on this, nor had Aonis. Strange workings had gone on inside the brain that was no single mind. The neophyte's attraction for her she had misinterpreted as her return-

ing passion to kill, and not until she was upon the threshold of the damning act had she realized the devastating futility she was about to perform. She must never see him again, she knew. It was for his own good, she reasoned. Yet she subsequently relinquished this vow with a reservation of seeing him occasionally without letting him see her. She needed that much solace. How strangely different she had become. She was not like the Aonis who had responded so satisfactorily to the tests of the Asurians. The difference might have laid in the fact that Aonis had developed a soul, something still beyond the ken of the Durna Rangué. Suffice it to say, however, that many womanly instincts previously warped, perverted or supposedly effaced by the Asurians had aroused themselves and were gaining an ascendancy over the biologic mechanism the Asurians had fashioned.

The plan of Aonis to see him again without his seeing her was forestalled. The neophyte came to her chambers. She had lain herself down and was just drifting off to sleep. Her serving women had left her, and at first she thought that one of them had returned for something. Then she saw the eyes of the neophyte, those eyes which had first attracted her, distended in reverence and fascination at her loveliness. She knew that he must not see her so lightly clad. Once more he stood in great danger of her captivating beauty. With a lithe, supple movement, she sprang up and seized her cloak, quickly wrapping herself to the chin in its loose, hanging folds. The ethereal beauty of her face mirrored her alarm.

"You should never come here!" she protested.

"I had to see you!"

"I am not what I seem!" pleaded Aonis. "I mean only death to you!"

"Yes—I know," the neophyte admitted. "You are Aonis. You are poisonous as a viper. I have learned that from others here."

"Then—why do you come?"

"Why does any man come to you, Aonis, even though he knows that the next minute may be his last? Nor would I care much now."

A hopelessness in the neophyte's eyes and in his words brought forth a tender-

ness from her heart which she strove to mask behind her cold, dispassionate gaze. It was in her heart to dismiss him at once for his own safety, threatening to call one of the dwarves or insect-men, but a yearning desire to see him and talk with him overcame her better judgment, and she motioned him to a settee near the wall.

"If you were caught here, it would mean trouble for us both," she told him, sitting back on her lounge. "For you, it would mean restrictions; for me, . . ." She sighed and wondered, remembering the last brain operation. She turned the conversation, asserting a womanly curiosity. "Did you come among the Asurians because you wanted to come, or were you brought here?"

"I came freely."

"The dream lifetime?"

The neophyte nodded.

"Why? Did you become tired of the world?"

"Somewhat, but I became more disappointed with myself. The life I have led has not been a good one. Repentance, you might call it. The world offers nothing more for me."

"But there are other worlds," suggested Aonis, "though I have heard that escape from the earth is very difficult."

"I might make it," the neophyte admitted. "I have been a space pirate under Regnand, and I know where all the space locks are. It is difficult and expensive to bribe your way out, and, of course, no one ever comes in that way. Even if I could win my way free of the earth, the prospects do not hold any future for me. I have killed too wantonly, and my victims haunt me. They stay in my mind. I could not forget them even if I traveled to the orbits of Neptune and Pluto and into the unexplored beyond."

"I have never been out of this sanctuary," said Aonis. "What are these rays that surround the earth and keep enemy ships away? Do they shine at night?"

"No. They are invisible, yet any ship which comes in contact with them is blasted to pieces by an automatic concentration at that point. Only one man knows how to win through them unharmed, and he is Lindquist, the sworn enemy and bane of the Durna Rangué. He is a lone pirate outlawed by civilization and an enemy of

the earthly pirates, too. He is said to be somewhat mad, but he is infernally clever. He comes to the earth whenever he likes and seems to delight in harassing the cult. He has been known to invade the sanctuaries and slay priests and monsters alike.

"And escape?" breathed Aonis incredulously.

"And escape. I was in a ship once that gave chase with others. He quickly outdistanced us. He has a pair of ships he stole from the Interplanetary Guard, and the ships of the guardsmen are the swiftest in the solar system."

Recovering from her surprise that there should be someone able to flout the Asurians and make them know fear, Aonis' next question came closer to her personal interests.

"What is your name?"

"Nord Hammerell."

"Earthly born?"

"No—on Venus. I ran away from home and realized a childish ambition to join the space pirates while I was little more than a boy. Later, I was in the battle of the Asiatic outposts when the earth was conquered, after which, we strengthened the fleet which bombarded the western Atlantic seaboard. There was the hardest fighting, the stubbornest resistance."

A world of living reflected itself from the face of the neophyte who had still many years to live before middle age came upon him. For a long time, they sat and talked. It was the first time Aonis had ever had a companion with whom to talk. The Asurians had taught her much, both subconsciously and directly, yet their council was always intellectual and given on biased aims of their own. Many of the little details of worldly life which she had wondered about had gone unanswered. She marveled at the restraint under which the neophyte held himself, often catching him looking away from her face while he spoke in order to resist her magnetic attraction. She was on the point of veiling herself several times, but some strange prank of her mentality kept her from it as long as the neophyte did not yield to the constant temptation. She wanted him to look upon her face. She realized that after he was gone. It was a mischievous urge, and she felt reproachful of herself. It was putting too much of a burden on him.

And it was tempting a grim fate.

SHE knew that it was much too dangerous for him to come to her chambers, and so they contrived to meet secretly, spending much time in each others' company. From him, she learned of his past life and of the three worlds and their colonies. She kept herself cloaked in spite of Nord's pleas and entreaties. Sometimes, especially if he sat close to her, she remained veiled. She also came to wear gloves of a light, delicate texture used by the Asurians in their operations, in order that she might touch him without fear of causing his death. She knew that if a finger nail scratched him, or sweat from her hand should saturate his pores, her lover would die as surely as those who had come to her embrace had died before him. She told Nord of her love for him and allowed his embrace of her cloaked figure while she passed her gloved fingers slowly through his shock of curly blond hair and felt his face pressing hers through the folds of her veil. Only at a distance did she allow him to look upon her face. Her own passions she held in an iron grip while he was near, and often she was glad that under the existent circumstances the cult had inculcated in her a faculty for resistance. But this faculty was not always dependable, she later discovered, and while more often she fled from his embrace when his ardor reached too dangerous a stage, on rare occasions she had to run from him because of herself.

There were times when she declared to him that their love was a curse, and that it should never have been. He, on the contrary, proclaimed it the most wonderful thing that had ever happened to him in his lifetime of disillusionment and regret. Fact had dispossessed logic entirely. Created as a deadly illusion by the cult, Aonis had become the only comfort of Nord in a world of reality which he found bitter. Aonis was to him like a living dream, as if she had stepped from out of a figment of the synthetic lifetime to face the world as a tangible thing. Nord meanwhile delayed his entrance into the synthetic lifetime, and the Asurians had no reasons for hurrying him.

Several times since her acquaintance with Nord, Aonis had been used by the

Asurians for experiments with the same results as always. She feared that they might probe into her mind and discover her secret love. For this reason, she always went through with her deadly routine to the entire satisfaction of the Asurians, lest they seize hold of her mind in their directive powers and find something amiss. Once their investigations were excited she knew that there would be no more meetings with Nord. They continued their secret trysts, each finding comfort in the other. Nord had nothing to live for except Aonis. Prospects of a synthetic lifetime had drifted to the background. To Aonis, Nord had come like a beam of light out of Stygian gloom to echo the answer of her soul's desires. To Nord, Aonis was like a golden sunset. He might bathe in the radiance of her beauty but could never touch her.

Life continued on its quiet, undisturbed path in the sanctuary, unmoved by the world's turmoil and trouble without the gray walls where space pirates ruled their divided realms of the earthly dominions. Neophytes came and went, were immersed in the gray gas of the coffin baths for their synthetic lifetime, then turned into creatures of the cult's following or transferred to another sanctuary. Vaguely, one of the Asurians had referred to Nord's choice after he had emerged from the dream life. He had come willingly and was to be given all consideration in the matter of choice. Nord had privately decided on becoming one of the invisible minions of the cult, but in view of the fact that it was his wish to delay the synthetic lifetime indefinitely, he had never mentioned his choice to the priests of the cult.

THEN, without warning, an event came to pass which upset the tranquillity of the Oklahoma Sanctuary and plunged it into a maelstrom of death and destruction. For some peculiar reason of his own, Lindquist, the lone pirate, had chosen it as the object of one of his periodic forays against the cult. The first intimation of his presence reached the Asurians when terseg birds flew up from the broad chamber of the coffin baths and chattered excitedly of invaders who had shot at them with atom pistols. The first priest to investigate the report was immediately shot down. Lindquist had not

come alone. He had fully a dozen supporters with him. They were in the chamber of the coffin baths looking for someone among the dream sleepers. Tersegs, fluttering wildly to escape the sharp aim of the atom pistols, watched their movements and reported their taking a young woman from her coffin bath.

"The fools!" hissed a member of the gray-robed brethren. "She can do them no good! She is as good as dead without our means of resurrection!"

"Why does Lindquist want her?"

"Probably it is someone else who wants her—one of those with Lindquist—someone to whom she belonged before she was brought here."

The excited tersegs flew with more news. "A dwarf is with them! One of our little men! It was he who read the inscriptions on the receptacles for them!"

"There are two red swordsmen and a Venusian troglodyte in the party!"

Later tidings brought out the fact that the invaders were heading for the laboratories. The Asurians sent a group of dwarfs and insect-men to intercept them. Fearful of the atom pistols, the Asurians remained far up the corridor at a safe distance, directing their minions. The dwarfs carried silver rods. Leveled at an enemy and pressed at the base, the rods sent emanations which caused explosion of the adrenal glands. Silent, blue flashes met the dwarfs and insect-men before they had an opportunity to direct an offensive. Nord, who was at that time serving one of the Asurians, watched the fray with his masters. The troglodyte was the first casualty among the invaders before they came to grips with the cult's monsters. He fell dead from the effects of an explosion rod, the two groups fighting hand to hand over his inert body.

Blue shafts of death took an overwhelming toll among the dwarfs and insect-men. Mandibles of the latter snapped viciously. The red swordsmen were making good use of their natural blades until the mixed assemblage grew too close for their efficient use. One of the swordsmen went down beneath the attack of a dwarf. Mandibles of the insect-men were fastened on his throat. The forces of the cult, however, were being slaughtered by the atom pistols, especially those held by Lind-

quist, and the Asurians called them off to try collective mind force instead. The invaders continued their advance. A blue shaft penetrated perilously close to the group of cowed figures. The Asurians saw that one of them carried the unconscious woman taken from the coffin bath.

"Those things on their heads!" exclaimed an Asurian, pulling the loose sleeve of his companion. "They are what Lindquist is reported to have worn before this on his raids—hypnotic nullifiers! They break down our mental radiations with static interference!"

Beaten at this turn, the Asurians retreated into a side corridor but not before they had recognized one of the attacking party.

"The dwarf is Grimo! How did he come to contact and ally himself to Lindquist?"

"How did he ever escape here in the first place—and how did they get in here without our knowing it? I believe you might get the same answer from Grimo to both questions."

"We must have outside help. Here is a problem which is beyond our immediate solution. They can cause us great trouble here. They must not escape from the sanctuary by this mysterious way they came. All corridors surrounding them must be patrolled. Forces must be concentrated about the sanctuary. Lindquist's space ship is about somewhere or else is returning for him.

"Then we must notify the space pirates to come and be on the watch for his ship."

NORD was immediately dispatched to others of the gray-robed masters with messages. He returned to find that the invaders were barricaded in one of the laboratories where Grimo, who was familiar with the resurrection process of the Asurians, was bringing back the woman from her synthetic lifetime. Grimo's association with Lindquist and the others became clear. A greater concentration of the cult's forces surrounded the laboratory but they were too late to block the designs of the invaders. Reports from the tersegs indicated as much. Grimo had accomplished the revival process. The woman had not yet recovered her senses, however.

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Invisible neophytes of the cult were concentrated in the chamber beyond the laboratory, the only avenue of escape. Not until they were among them and clinched in their invisible grasp did they realize their presence.

"The invisible ones!" screamed Grimo. "They are here—all about us! Watch for weapons if they carry any! You can see them!"

But the invisible ones carried no weapons, counting upon their unseen, overwhelming numbers. They had not counted upon the desperate fighting qualities of those they faced, nor upon the cool ingenuity of Lindquist. With back to the wall and an atom pistol in each hand, the taciturn lone pirate sprayed the apparent emptiness of the chamber with a deadly barrage of blue death. Nevertheless, it was a hard-fought battle before the invisible neophytes were either killed or else driven back. Through it all, one of the invaders remained against the wall close to Lindquist, protecting the woman. The door which was barred to the invaders' advance yielded to the knowledge of Grimo. Farther along the corridor beyond, a group of the insect-men were shot down or dispersed.

"They will escape!" cried one of the Asurians, his hypnotic eyes blazing in futile rage at the receding figures.

"The sanctuary is being well guarded from without, but we yet have a way to halt them, to overcome these men with a hypnotic power they cannot resist, a power against which those nullifiers will be impotent."

"Aonis!"

"They are going in the right direction, too, and we can be there before them."

Aonis found herself slightly unnerved as the Asurians burst into her chambers. She knew that something had gone wrong in the sanctuary but had not learned of its nature. She was quickly told.

"Grimo has come back to the sanctuary with them. Above all, do not let him get away."

Word was hurriedly passed along regarding the cautious advance of the invaders who were being followed at a respectful distance by several neophytes who had not yet participated in any of the fighting. In a chamber intersected by the

corridor along which the invaders were seeking an escape stood Aonis, unveiled and uncloaked. She felt in her mind the strong, hypnotic power of the Asurians. They were not in sight, yet their influence lingered. She found revived in her the joy to kill. It swept her irresistibly. Grimo: Thoughts of meeting the dwarf again aroused keen anticipation. This time, there were no restraints. As she stood waiting, she wondered where Nord was, but sight of the fugitives drove thoughts of him from her mind. She thrilled to the duty at hand. Powerful instillations of the cult flooded her mind, and once more she was as they had originally made her.

THERE were eight of them, including the woman who was carried by a young man. From what she had heard about the lone pirate, she instantly recognized Lindquist. He was dressed in black. His hair had started to gray at the temples, while in his cold, calculating eyes there lurked an essence of sadness and fatalism. The accompanying red swordsman was typical of his race. There was the black strip of color across his eyes. He was tall and sinewy, one arm terminating in the inevitable, bony blade. Her attentions focused on Grimo, as they all stopped suddenly at sight of her wraith-like figure. They were rooted to the spot by her matchless beauty. There emanated from her dark, piercing eyes, her red, voluptuous lips a subtle spirit of evil, yet she was irresistible. They wanted to be close to her, to clasp her seductive figure and feel her caressing lips upon them. Her voice, soft and tinkling, challenged them in tones rich with promise and enticement.

"Where do you go?"

"Aonis!" Grimo quavered, his voice divided between fear and yearning.

"Why do you hurry?" she asked musically. "Stay with Aonis. Grimo, you loved me once. You have returned."

Grimo shuddered and raised his arms to shut from his sight the entrancing vision. He reached a hand to feel for the security of the mind protector which Lindquist had given him. He found it intact and groaned dismally as he realized its uselessness against the paralyzing fascination of

Aonis. She saw that she held him in her power and glanced at the others. They were all bending to the thrall of her awful attraction though fully aware that her sweetness and allure veiled a bitterness both repulsive and deadly. Only Lindquist wavered hesitatingly from her attraction, and the red swordsman appeared stolid and unmoved. But these strange men from Saturn's satellite rarely showed their true emotions. Like one man, they walked slowly toward her, Grimo in the lead, his dark face radiating joy. Aonis held forth her arms to him, and her magic eyes enfolded him in a burning gaze which thrilled every fiber of his body. Lindquist suddenly stopped and aroused himself from the deadly spell by a supreme effort of the will and tore his eyes from her seductive beauty.

"Stop!" he cried. "Stop! She is death itself!"

His harsh, forceful words broke the magic lethargy momentarily like a dash of cold water. They all paused, with the exception of Grimo and another who was seized and dragged back by a companion. He would have held Grimo, too, but the dwarf snarled a curse and hurled him back among the others.

"Kiss me, Grimo," Aonis yielded herself invitingly. "It is long since I saw you last."

The dwarf stumbled into her arms as she bent her sinuous body to receive him. His arms went around her, and their lips met. For a half minute, Grimo, as in a stupor, froze to that deadly embrace while his companions looked on in mingled horror and envy. Then she slowly withdrew herself from him and turned her attention upon the others. Grimo stood as if carved of stone, his face frozen in rapture, unseeing, uncomprehending. Again, Aonis spoke in her silky, luring voice, this time to him who held the woman.

"Who is he who would bring me a rival? Let him forget her and give Aonis his love."

It was he who had robbed the coffin bath of the woman he now held. A sudden weakness assailed him as he found her irresistible eyes drawing him to her. There were conflicting thoughts in his mind, and he tried desperately to close his eyes. He found it impossible, and he

yielded to the burning desire that she enfold him as she had Grimo. Mechanically, he handed the unconscious woman into the care of another and walked slowly toward her. The red swordsman, never changing his stolid expression, came behind the other, his eyes upon Aonis. Closer, ever closer, came the man until he stood directly before her. His senses reeled and were lost in the wondrous depths of her lustrous eyes. He saw her raise her arms to twine them around his neck. Her face came so close that he could feel her breath which was cold. He felt her arms about his neck as his brain reeled into languorous delirium.

AT that moment, the red swordsman sprang suddenly forward. His long blade swished in a lightning arc, the tip catching and ripping the beautiful neck of Aonis. She sank upon the floor in a heap, her head lolling from her shoulders at a grotesque angle. A dark blotch of color spread from her neck, and an amber liquid welled up from the wound and formed a pool on the floor. Born of another race and upon another world, the red swordsman had remained sturdy proof against the deadly persuasions of the synthetic vampire. He had saved his young master.

Both stepped back from the spreading pool of Aonis' life blood. The tension was snapped. The man stepped back and reclaimed the woman who showed signs of coming to her senses. Their attentions now centered on Grimo. The dwarf swayed on his feet, no longer immersed in the intense delight which had been so evident in his expression. He seemed now to understand fully what had happened to him, and no man better than Grimo real-

ized his doom. He regarded them with abandoned hope. Seized with a sudden paroxysm of agony, he fell in a writhing heap. Lindquist rushed to the dwarf's side. Grimo gasped and stared at him from pain-maddened eyes.

"Go! Go-o-o!" he groaned. "There is nothing to be done for me now! I know! O-h-h-h!"

They were all beside him now. The dwarf's face turned green. He was horrible to look upon, his blotched and tortured features contorting in pain.

"Get away!" he gasped. "While you can! Away from this hell while—"

His last words ended in a gurgle as every muscle twitched convulsively, then stiffened. His eyes turned up. He sighed and then was quiet.

"Dead!" exclaimed Lindquist.

They left the corpse of Grimo beside that of Aonis, and widely avoiding the spreading pool of her peculiar life blood they disappeared through the door opposite the way by which they had entered.

For an interval of minutes, no one broke the silence which pervaded the chamber where two creatures of the cult lay dead. Then from the direction in which the eight fugitives had come a group of neophytes burst into the room. A single, understanding glance they gave the two bodies, and then they hurried on again, all except one. Nord stopped before Aonis, all the misery and bitterness in his heart finding utterance in a moan which passed from his lips as he kneeled and tenderly lifted her head in his lap. He looked at the closed eyes with the long lashes. She was dead. Heedless of her blood which stained his hands and arms, he pressed Aonis close to him and kissed her. . . .

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TREASURE OF TRITON

By CHARLES A. BAKER

TRITON was a dead world. The hydrogen snow that covered the illimitable desolation of the plain glowed a weird green in the dying Neptune-light. Above it, grim and black, towered the west wall of the great Temple of Triton. The evening gale had drifted the snow high against its east wall, but here, in its lee, the ground was bare. The faint light struck sparks of color from the gravel, the stones, the boulders—gravel that was ruby and sapphire, stones that were giant moissanites, boulders that were titanic diamonds. The *Wolf Cub* rested on that gravel, its beryllium sides a sickly green. In all that world, only Wolf Larsen lived and moved and breathed.

An alien might have correctly supposed that this world had been dead for untold ages, that the builders of its Temple had perished incalculably long ago, that nothing would ever live here again. Wolf Larsen knew better. In a few hours, it would be dawn, and the strange life of Triton would revive. That was the reason for his haste.

The job had taken longer than he had expected. The Temple was built of cyclopean blocks of bort—black diamond, the hardest of all substances. The life-span of a Tritonian is ten times that of a human, but no one would ever know how many generations it had taken the Tritonians, with their primitive technique, to hew those innumerable blocks. Nor did the Tritonians themselves know for how long they had worshiped at that fane. Most authorities agreed that it must have been old before the Pyramids of Egypt were begun.

The Temple was windowless, and had only one door, some six feet square. Set in the middle of the west face, it was hewn from a single gigantic block of bort. With that door, Larsen had been struggling ever since the evening gale died down. It had proved harder to blast a hole through the bort than he had anticipated. And its thickness had amazed him. He had been unable to get at its lock; if, indeed, it had

a lock. In fact, he might as well have tried to blast through the wall itself.

Triton, Neptune's moon, keeps one face always turned toward that planet, and the Temple was built directly beneath it. While Larsen toiled, the slender crescent of the primary had broadened to the full, ten times brighter than earth's moon, and now was dwindling once more. Larsen had not slept for over sixty hours; and despite his vacuum-walled, electrically heated space-suit, he was chilled to the bone, his hands numbed with a cold but a few degrees above absolute zero.

Not in twenty years in the mines of Mercury had he toiled as he had done in those sixty hours. First, he had burned holes in the bort. Then he had filled them with cartridges of the fine hydrogen snow, intimately mixed with solid oxygen pulverized equally fine. Finally he had exploded the mixture with a micro-wave, and cleared out the shattered bort. Where the tough stuff had merely crackled, he had pried it out with a crowbar, until the bar, brittle with cold, had snapped short. But now the worst of his task was finished. At long last, he had holed through the door.

Larsen emerged from the *Wolf Cub* carrying his oxy-hydrogen cutting torch, a heavy load even in the light gravity of Triton. A star of blue light flared from it, and snowflakes dropped from the star, as the products of its combustion condensed in the cold. If he once extinguished that torch, its fuel would freeze solid, and there would be no lighting it again.

For all his weariness, and for all the cold, a fierce exultation fired him. His long planning, his months-long voyage through the void, were about to bring fruit. The most priceless jewel in the solar system was within his grasp.

Larsen had done many things for jewels. He had violated every law of every world. He had killed more men than he himself could remember. He had stolen meteoric diamonds from Mars, and rubies



The Space Patrol and the terrible guards of Triton pursued Wolf Larsen. But the black pirate had two aces in the hole—creation's richest prize, and a ray-death route to freedom.

from Ganymede; emeralds from Titan, and priceless moissonites from Oberon. And these he had hidden well on a nameless asteroid, and they could stay there till the end of time for all Larsen, or anyone else, cared.

By the time the Interplanetary Patrol caught up with him, and he served a twenty-year term in the mines of Mercury, the spacemen had reached Triton. And there they had found rubies and emeralds, diamonds and moissonites and every gemstone known in the solar system, as common as clay or lime on earth, and Larsen's carefully hidden jewels were worth as much as so many pebbles.

AT first, Larsen had come very near to killing himself, when he learned that. But a scheme had come to him. There was the Eye of Triton, the great stone which people of Neptune's moon had worshiped for untold Neptunian ages. It was clearly unique on Triton, where all other gems were so abundant. It must be unique in the system; certainly in its historical value. What value the Tritonians themselves set on it could be judged from the immense strength of the Temple they had built to guard it. Tradition held that the Eye had dropped from the heavens; a meteor, perhaps torn from the heart of Neptune; perhaps from another system. Few humans had ever seen it, and those only from a distance, and in the worst of lights. But they agreed that it was transparent white, like a diamond. Moreover, it was set as the eye of a life-sized statue of a Tritonian—and the eye of a Tritonian is upwards of five inches in diameter.

A certain plutocrat of Cyrene had offered Larsen a cool million for the Eye, even if it turned out to be nothing but a diamond. For a million, you could buy everything that Cyrene had to offer and Cyrene, the pleasure-dome on the far side of earth's moon, offered every pleasure and every luxury that mankind had ever developed. Men could prolong their lives, and their vigor, indefinitely nowadays if they could afford to pay for all the resources of modern medicine. Best of all, the I.P.P. had no jurisdiction in Cyrene, and the local authorities never bothered any resident of the little planet provided

he was supplied with money enough.

It would be doubly pleasant to win such a fortune at the expense of the Tritonians. To be sure, they had never been known to harm anyone. But it was precisely such inoffensive beings that Larsen loathed and despised most bitterly. Besides, he blamed them for the discovery of the gems which had made his own valueless.

In any case, he had gone too far to back down now. Landing on Triton without a license, as he had done, was itself a violation of Interplanetary Law. Attempted violation of a Tritonian temple was a serious offense. If the Patrol caught him, he would spend the rest of his life in the mines of Mercury. And they would be sure to catch him if he failed to get the Eye.

It wasn't like the good old days, when an outlaw could always keep a million miles ahead of the Patrol. Now every port where he might obtain supplies was too closely watched. Only Cyrene offered a place of refuge, and there only to a man with plenty of money. Larsen smiled grimly. Whatever happened, he was not going back to the mines. There was always one very sure way of cheating the law!

He pushed the torch ahead of him through the hole, cautiously. Its exhaust condensed to ice on the cold bort. A few projections of the bort barred his way. Larsen turned up the torch, directed it on them. The bort glowed yellow in the fierce heat, as the pure carbon burned, which condensed to dry ice on his space-suit.

When those obstructions were gone, Larsen crawled past into the Temple, and stood up. A thin powder of snow covered everything. The bluish glare of the torch, reflected from it, suggested but faintly the vastness of the place. Before him crouched a monstrous figure, human sized, but lobster shaped, its head enormous, its dozen legs many jointed. Many similar figures lay on the floor, as stiffly motionless, each grasping a massive double-headed ax.

Larsen had to turn up his torch before he could be sure that the crouching figure was indeed the idol he sought, and those others its guardian priests, frozen

in the death-like sleep of their kind. Not till dawn could anything awaken them. Dawn, he knew, could not be far off. But he reckoned that it would take some time for its reviving warmth to penetrate the immense thickness of those walls.

Cautiously, he wiped the snow off the single enormous eye that occupied the center of the idol's forehead. The eye flashed fire at him; blue-white, transparent, lustrous as a diamond. It had been cut, diamond fashion, in many facets, to resemble the many-lensed, insect-like eyes of the Tritonians themselves. The eye was set in a band of cement. Larsen tested that cement with a chisel. He cursed. It was almost as hard as the bort from which the idol had been hewn. He dared take no chances on scratching the Eye. He turned on his torch full blast, and began to cut into the bort around the cement, careful to keep the flame away from the Eye. Sudden heating might crack that mysterious stone.

LARSEN worked feverishly, forgetful of time, sweating despite the chill, until he felt a draught on his back; a cold that bit through his space-suit to his very marrow. Snowflakes were swirling around him. The dawn-wind, blowing through the hole in the door! On Triton, the hydrogen atmosphere froze every night. From either side, winds rushed in to fill the vacuum, but themselves froze before they had gone far.

The Eye seemed loose in its socket. Larsen turned down the torch. Cautiously, he grasped the cement. The Eye came away in his hand. He was used, by now, to the low gravity of Triton, but the lightness of the stone surprised him. It seemed as light as pumice.

Larsen looked up just in time. The Tritonians were stirring! The wind, so cold to him, was warm to them; it meant air to them. Those great pale eyes—one to each Tritonian—were fixed on him, glaring with a phosphorescent luster. There was no expression on their gargoyle faces. Their cavernous mouths gaped open; toothless, but rimmed with razor-sharp horn, like the jaws of a snapping turtle. The snow dropped from them; their lobster-segmented shells were dull black, like the bort of the statue. They were clos-

ing in on him. He could not tell their numbers; behind those visible, more kept crowding out of the shadows.

As the Tritonians neared him, he saw that they turned their heads away. Those enormous eyes, adapted to the faint sunlight of Triton, could not bear the glare of the torch. An ax rose over a helmeted head, grasped by four tentacular arms. Larsen put down the Eye, and turned up the torch, aiming it at the dragon's head, looming behind those arms. It shriveled, turned from black to red. Its owner slumped to the floor, its limbs still writhing feebly.

Larsen picked up the Eye again, and started for the door. He moved deliberately, spraying death around him. The Tritonians could not face the blazing heat of the torch, or its blinding glare. Some fled in panic, some retired more slowly, some stood, as if bewildered, in his very path, until he burned them out of it. At the door, he wheeled to face them, turning down the torch. They started to close in again, and he turned it up, sweeping them at close range. Half a dozen fell, the others broke.

The torch was flickering now, as its fuel ran low. In frantic haste, Larsen un-snapped its carrying strap, dropped it, and plunged into the hole he had blasted. In utter blackness, he clawed through it, expecting, every instant, to feel monstrous jaws or talons seize him from behind. He emerged into the blinding white smother of the dawn blizzard. Thin as the air was, the force of it hurled his light body back against the door as he tried to rise. He dropped on all fours, and crawled forward, dead into the freezing wind, the Eye still clutched in one hand. The twenty yards to the *Wolf Cub* seemed twenty miles; he had about given up all hope when suddenly he bumped into it.

LARSEN groped along its smooth side until he found the air-lock door. As he opened it, the light inside went on automatically. At that precise instant, steely arms wrapped themselves around him, a monstrous face loomed over him, open-jawed. In a frenzy, Larsen thrust out his right hand. Those jaws closed on his wrist. A blazing agony shot up his arm. His own scream, echoing from his helmet,

deafened him. The pain was gone as abruptly as it had come. The face of the Tritonian seemed to melt, to explode. Those arms went limp, the thing collapsed like a punctured balloon.

There was no feeling at all in Larsens' hand now. Not daring to look at it, he stumbled through the air-lock, into the cabin. Even now, he was careful to put the Eye of Triton in the velvet-lined jewel-case he had prepared for it, before strapping himself into his pilot's seat. Awkwardly, with his left hand, he opened the throttle of the rocket-tube, gave the *Wolf Cub* three gravities acceleration. That was agony to his weary body. But the warmth of the cabin offset the pain.

Gingerly, Larsen looked at his right hand. The glove had been torn clean off it. It was dead white, swollen. The swelling, extending to the wrist, had prevented much air escaping from his suit, before he could get inside the cabin. The skin was covered with fine, bloodless cracks, but the jaws of the Tritonian had never touched it. The inconceivable cold had instantly frozen every drop of blood and lymph in it, bursting every blood-vessel, every capillary, every cell. His hand was dead. Presently, as it thawed, it would rot, turn black, and drop off. Before that, he must get a tourniquet on it. On the other hand, the warm air from his space-suit, escaping into the jaws of the Tritonian, had been as fatal to it as the breath of a blast furnace would have been to a human.

He had been lucky, after all. The surgeons of Cyrene could graft on a new hand—for a price. And he would have that price! In fifteen minutes, awkward with his left hand, Larsen had the *Wolf Cub* on her course to Luna, and could shut

off his rocket-jet. His right arm was beginning to throb, as the nerves thawed. It would give him hell, in the months of voyaging before him, and he knew his slender stock of drugs would never last. But, as he fixed the tourniquet, the thought of his million was more soothing than any narcotic could have been.

Larsen unstrapped himself, and shoved over to the jewel case. He blinked down at it incredulously. The charred ring of cement was there. But it no longer enclosed the Eye of Triton. Instead, the case was half filled with a transparent liquid. Larsen dipped a trembling finger into it. It was cold.

He carried the finger to his lips. The walls of the tiny cabin echoed to his mad laughter. The Eye of Triton, the one priceless gem on a world of gems, had been a block of ice—the only ice on Triton. The warmth of the cabin had melted it to water, worth exactly as much as any other water.

Suddenly, Larsen realized that he was parched with a feverish thirst. He lifted the jewel case to his lips, and drained it in one single prodigious gulp. He had spent plenty of money on liquor before, he reflected. But this must be the first time in history a man had drunk up a million at one draught.

His arm hurt like fire now the ache of it mingling with the ache of his weary body, the ache of his sick brain. With his left hand, he began to spin the handle of the Kingston valve. The last sound Wolf Larsen heard was the hiss of the air, as it rushed out of the cabin. That, and the laugh with which his last breath left his lungs.

There was always one sure way to cheat Interplanetary Law,



A Fiction House Magazine





THE COSMIC DERELICT

By JOHN RUSSELL FEARN

The *Voitrix* was doomed. A derelict caught in the grip of some strange power. Faster . . . Faster . . . flashing beyond unguessed-at Systems to cosmic annihilation

WITH puzzled gray eyes Captain Clement Sayers, pilot in chief of the Jove-Earth space liner *Voitrix*, gazed at the heavens through the

main observation window in front of him. The vessel was twelve days out from Jupiter, speeding swiftly now through the empty regions between Inner and Outer

Circles—those whirling galaxies once known as the asteroidal belt—with Mars and Earth looming up in the far distance. Everything was going perfectly; rockets were firing with rhythmic precision. Only in space itself was there something wrong.

Sayers had already received space radio warnings from the major planets to be on the look-out for an ether warp—and it loomed now, dead ahead, resembling a semi-luminescent line extending to infinity. The red light from Mars and Earth's moon was curiously deflected by it. Still further away Venus and Mercury were apparently several degrees out of their normal positions in the cosmos.

"Bit queer, isn't it, Clem?"

At the question Sayers jerked up his black head and found Steve Dawlish, his chief navigation engineer, by his side. His big red face was puzzled as he, too, gazed; the powerful fingers of his right hand beat a tattoo of uncertainty on top of the massive control panel.

"I don't like it!" he resumed, shaking his blond head. "I've seen ether fields and gravity vortices in my time, but never anything quite like that! Look at the extent of it!" His blue eyes widened as he stared at the incredible diagonal extension shooting into remoteness. "Right to infinity, I'd say!"

Clem did not answer immediately. With a frown on his square face he turned to the space receiver and contacted the Earth Void Bureau.

"*Voitrix* calling New York Bureau," he intoned mechanically. "Give latest space report."

A mechanical voice promptly responded.

"Gravity field fourteen million miles from Saturn—keep clear. Pursue Space Line Seven for Uranus contact. Notice to all spatial shipping on outer lines! Beware of warp, infinity extension, between Jupiter and Mars, crossing division between Inner and Outer Circles. Proceed with extreme caution. That is all."

Clem grimaced at his partner as he switched off.

"Not so hot!" he growled, considering. "It's perfectly clear that the astronomers back on Earth don't know anything about the nature of the warp. We don't know what we're heading through. . . . Guess the only thing to do is to go straight ahead."

His hands tightened resourcefully on the controls, his voice barked sharp orders to the rocket rooms below.

Dawlish looked serious. "Don't you think you're taking a chance, Clem?" he asked. "Suppose it's a magnetic blow-out like the one we nearly hit near Uranus a couple of months back? If it is and we go clean into it we'll take a short cut to hell!"

"And if it isn't and we turn around back to Jove until the warp expires we'll have the inquiry court to face," Clem growled back. "Don't forget we've got Chief Wernham aboard! No, our job is to land this coffee grinder in New York at sixteen-twelve, and we're going to do it, warp or no warp. Besides, I'm anxious to see how Bob Prescott has made out at the physics laboratory with his attempt to utterly annihilate matter. He'll be on the job right now. . . . Get busy, Steve. Let's go!"

Dawlish shrugged his huge shoulders and turned back to his navigational instruments. His red face was outthrust toward the viltax glass as he anxiously studied that curious diagonal light veerage sweeping ever closer.

"Keep her steady!" Clem murmured, lips tight.

"Steady she is!" The engineer's voice was tense.

IN a long streak of rocket exhaust the immense silvered vessel shot into the midst of that unexplained phenomenon—and at that instant alarming things began to happen.

The entire liner, huge though it was, spun round wildly in the grip of an unknown power. Dawlish and Clem were both thrown violently to the floor and lay gasping huskily, clutching whatever solid projections they could reach.

Out of the corners of their eyes they beheld dial needles swinging and siewing crazily through half circles. There seemed to be no top nor bottom to the control room.

In other quarters of the liner there was supreme panic. Dinner in the great dining room was rudely interrupted by the tables being hurled sideways in a mad chaos of scalding soup, smashing dishes, overturned flower vases and slithering cutlery. Amid screams and shouts the orchestra suddenly stopped playing and catapulted backwards

into their instruments; the pianist died instantly as his piano slammed inwards and crushed his ribs and heart. Stewards and waiters in room and corridors twirled round and fell with a clatter of their trays and glasses.

It was a perfect spacequake. From stem to stern the monster of the void was hammered and rocked by forces of enormous power; all the hideous uncertainty and terror of a major earth ripple was manifested for seven brief seconds. At the end of that time the rocking suddenly ceased and gave place to a strangling crushing pressure. Dead quietness was on the dining room. Only a groan or two broke the silence; the drops from an overturned mineral bottle echoed hollowly into a soup plate beneath. Here and there some struggled to rise, and failed. Others had already relapsed into unconsciousness from the terrific pressure on lungs and heart.

In the control room Clem and Dawlish were still conscious, but battling with the tremendous downpull.

"It's acceleration!" Dawlish wheezed out, sweat pouring down his strained face. "We're moving—moving like hell!"

Clem nodded a tousled head that felt enormously heavy. "I—I can't reach the gravitator switch!" he panted back, trying to gain it on hands and knees. "Too—too much weight!" He sagged flat, breathing like a grampus.

Dawlish looked at him and then set his teeth. Flattening his great hands on the metal floor he strained with all the power of his massive body. Muscles bulged through the tough whipcord of his tunic. Inch by inch, crawling on his stomach, he fought toward the control panel. Once he reached it he stopped for a moment, then drove his body upwards with every vestige of strength at his command. It was an effort of exquisite torture, set his craggy face in a mask of strain. Using his right arm as a support for his left he drove his fingers forward.

One inch—two inches. His fingers closed over the big handle of the artificial gravitation switch. With a sobbing gasp he fell downward and his weight pulled the blades out of contact.

Instantly the strain ceased; gravity suddenly returned to apparent earth normal.

Shaken and bruised the two staggered to

their feet and mopped their streaming faces.

"That sure was tough!" Dawlish winced, rubbing his aching limbs.

Clem flurried around his instruments and observation windows in sudden apprehension. Finally he turned a startled face.

"We're clean off our course and heading with a constantly mounting velocity back toward the arsteroidal belt!" he cried.

"So that's it!" Dawlish joined him in bewilderment, went on talking half to himself. "That accounts for gravity being normal without any artificial aid—our very velocity provides it. We were struggling against a doubled gravity before. . . . Say, do you think we might somehow be in that warp? Being pulled by something?"

"No question of it!"

Clem surveyed the fast receding inner system of planets, glanced upward toward the giant worlds ahead and the stars in the remoter deeps beyond—then with a sudden leap he jumped to the rocket room phone. Before he could speak, however, Rocket Chief MacIntosh burst in, greasy and alarmed.

"Say, what d'you think you're doin'?" his querulous Scots voice demanded. "When you start turnin' around like that why don't ye gie a thought to the boys below? I nearly fell on a tube and burned meself out. Just think what a loss that wuid ha' been to the community!"

CLEM studied him for a moment, absently regarded his little figure, immovable pipe, and leanly philosophical face—then he asked sharply:

"What's going on down below, Mac? Anybody hurt?"

"No; but our tubes aren't workin' properly. We're firin' the forward tubes but the instruments tell us we're movin' faster than any ship ever moved before—and wi' the brakes on at that!"

MacIntosh stopped suddenly, his bright blue eyes perceiving the serious setness of his superiors' faces. He stepped forward quickly and laid a grease-smeared hand on Clem's arm.

"Forgettin' ye're captain for a moment," he apologized. "Tell me what's wrong, Clem?"

Clem jerked his head toward the win-

dow and the Scotsman moved to it, to stand gazing in speechless astonishment. The whole map of infinity yawned ahead of the vessel—a colossal stardusted vastness. Already the ship had veered infinite miles away from the normal route, leaving Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune as mere dots in the blackness. Pluto was entirely out of sight.

MacIntosh swallowed hard, then turned back to the baffled pair.

"Weel, wherever we're goin' we're certainly doin' it in a hurry," was his dour comment. "From what I can see we must be headin' toward movin' at the speed o' light—and in the wrong direction! All our control has gone to blazes! Well, I—" He hesitated and frowned; then saluted. "What are me orders, Captain?"

"I can't give orders about something I don't understand, Mac," Clem returned worriedly. "Don't you recognize a vast space warp when you see one?"

"Aye, I do that," the Scot acknowledged. "But I'm also mindin' the fact that we've got a mighty valuable lot o' passengers aboard who are expectin' to land in New York. And don't you be forgettin' Chief Wernham, either! He'll expect you to do somethin'."

Clem scowled. "I'd forgotten him. Guess I'd better go along and see what's happening. Steve, do what you can with the controls. Mac, keep firing the forward tubes in an effort to slow us down. I'll be back."

He departed worriedly and hastened to the main dining room, pausing on the threshold at the scene of indescribable confusion that greeted him. In every direction men and women were flurrying anxiously, clothes torn and faces white, attending as fast as they could to those who had been injured. The dead already lay on righted tables, with tablecloths thrown perfunctorily over them.

Then, as he stood looking round, a hand dropped heavily on his shoulder. He swung round to meet the cold cynical eyes of Oscar Wernham, chief of the space ways—as massive and ruthlessly overbearing as ever. Nobody liked him. Even his best friends swore he smelt of the money he was worth.

"Well, it's good of you to drop in, Captain Sayers," he said, in a bitter voice.

"The whole ship is struck by a cosmic earthquake and you drift in about ten minutes afterwards. What's the meaning of it?" he snapped out abruptly.

"Guess you don't want me in any case," Clem answered coldly. "I've got my hands full figuring how to get clear of this mess. The passengers will have to look after themselves. I'll make arrangements for the dead to be pushed through the airlocks."

"I suppose I don't need to remind you that we have many valuable passengers aboard?" Wernham sneered. "Passengers who have got to reach Earth at all costs. And I'm holding you responsible for their safety! You'll have plenty to answer when we get back to earth, Captain Sayers!"

"If we get back to Earth," Clem corrected grimly. "We're in the midst of a space warp and that's beyond my control. I'll do all in my power."

The big man nodded menacingly. "You'd better! In the meantime summon all the help you can get to aid these people."

With that he turned aside, full of oily solicitude for the fat banker nearby who had suffered nothing worse than a cut eyebrow.

For a moment Clem stood glowering, then he turned and strode savagely back into the corridor, slammed down the switch of the alarm bell. It was purely a matter of routine; he knew quite well that its urgent clanging would fail to bring much help. Stewards and servants were far too busy in their own quarters attending to their own injuries to care particularly what happened to the passengers. At least it would perhaps bring the already overworked medical staff to perform further ministrations.

II

DOUBLY worried by the presence of Chief Wernham aboard the ship, Clem returned to the control room and tried hard to compose himself. Dawlish turned a glum face to him as he came in.

"Nothing we can do, Clem," he said seriously, tossing aside a pencil. "I've been figuring this thing out from the instruments and I never saw such a mess in all my life. Our speed is 180,000 miles a

second, and still increasing. If we don't slow down we'll achieve the velocity of light and maybe cancel ourselves out—that is if the Fitzgerald Contraction holds good. Light velocity has never been achieved by a ship before. Rocket tubes are no good; old Mac is nearly going nuts below. Truth is, we're in a runaway space ship, held tight in the grip of an unknown power."

Clem's brow crinkled as he turned and stared through the rear observation window. The planets of the Outer Circle had entirely disappeared. Finally he turned sharply.

"Have you radioed to any of the planets, Steve?"

"No use," the engineer growled. "We're surrounded by some force or other that hetrodynes all radio waves, outwards and inwards. There's something else, too! Don't you notice a curious feeling of ten-sity about everything? As though we're under some enormous strain, not altogether accountable for by our prodigious speed?"

Clem considered for a while, then nodded slowly. Now he came to notice it he found that his head was curiously heavy and dull, almost identical with the sensation often experienced immediately prior to a thunderstorm. He had the oddest conviction that every part of his body, every molecule, was being subjected to a terrific stress—the plucking of indeterminate but none the less mighty forces.

"I can't make it out," he muttered, slumping down in the chair before the control panel. "Maybe it is only our speed that's doing it, after all."

He began to calculate with restless movements, only to arrive at the same conclusions as Dawlish. There was nothing to go on, nothing that made sense any longer. The ship was in an unknown space of its own, either being magnetized or hurled through the void, it was impossible to determine which. Only the speed needle seemed to be functioning properly and now it quivered closely against the 186,000 mps deadline.

The two men stared at it in fascination.

"Say, suppose we *do* cancel out—?" Dawlish questioned, dry lipped.

"Don't see how we can," Clem muttered back. "Surely we can't go faster than light?"

He paused, fists clenched, as the needle

pressed tightly on the stop bar at the end of the scale. The velocity of light had been gained! The queer pulling at bodily molecules persisted; there seemed to come an enormous draining of resistance intensified by the terrific strain on the nerves.

Then suddenly, before the eyes of the two, the speed needle snapped off!

"We've—we've exceeded light!" Dawlish cried hoarsely. "It just can't be!"

He raced across to the window and stared fixedly onto the cosmos.

"If we have we ought to see light moving backwards toward us because we're moving faster than it is," he panted. "But there isn't anything like that visible! Only speed—terrific, incomprehensible speed. . . ."

Clem did not join him. He was seated now in deep thought, chin on hand.

"To exceed the velocity of light and retain the same size is impossible," he said broodingly. "The only explanation of this occurrence does not fit in with speed, Steve—it fits in with size and space and their relation to time."

"Meaning what?" Dawlish came forward again, his face puzzled.

Clem went on mechanically, "Meaning that our initial speed has not really increased in the least since we struck the space warp. We struck the space warp and were turned quickly round; from then on something else happened. An irresistible power, operating right through the warp, has caused the extension of our ship and everything in it right along the warp's path. In other words, a power which we cannot explain as yet is forcing the atoms of our ship, our very bodies, outward with resistless force. We are being expanded to inconceivably larger dimensions and in doing so appear to achieve a speed far greater than that of light. That is only our relative outlook and not actual fact."

"But how did it come about?" Dawlish demanded. "You're not suggesting some cosmic accident caused it, are you?"

"Why not?" Clem's voice was resigned and colorless. "We know from experience that the void teems with forces barely understood, with vortices and fields of power utterly incomprehensible. The ether is a criss-crossed mass of superimposed radiations, some known and other unknown.

It's as simple to imagine a strange power like the one gripping us as it is to imagine the track of a light wave."

"But what do we *do*? Just let the ship go on moving, or expanding, or whatever it is?"

"There's nothing else—" Clem began, then he twisted round sharply as the heavy form of Wernham entered the control room. The chief's face was dark with anger.

"I thought I told you to get us back on a normal track?" he said harshly. "Don't you realize that we're heading for the Milky Way Galaxy? Get up out of that chair and do something!"

CLEM scowlingly rose and listened dutifully as Wernham proceeded.

"I don't exactly know, Captain Sayers, whether this has been planned deliberately or not, but I do know that you'll face a court of justice when we return to Earth! Both you and Vice-Captain Dawlish will be placed under arrest upon our return. In the interval I will take over command."

"You can't," Clem returned in a level voice. "By interplanetary law I remain captain of this ship until it collapses or returns to a known base. Can't you recognize an Act of Cosmos when you see it? The very act you yourself passed to explain away unpreventable mishaps in space. Or did you do that to cover yourself on money losses when freight vessels go astray?"

Wernham scowled at the thrust, but he lost none of his boorish manner.

"Summon MacIntosh!" he snapped. "I want to speak to him."

Clem pressed the contact button. Within moments the Scot was in the room, pipe in hand, eyes curious. He stood regarding Wernham's straddled, important form in sour suspicion.

"Ye want me, sir?"

"Yes, MacIntosh, I do. You will take orders from me from now on; consider me as your captain. I want you to fire your rocket tubes against this force that is pulling us—fire everyone of them! And keep it up until we break free!"

"An' what do I do when we run out o' fuel, sir?" the Scot asked.

Wernham snorted pompously. "You're the rocket head man—that is for you to

worry about. Only by firing all your rockets can you pull free of this space warp—"

"I ken one thing, sir—ye're not much o' a space navigator," the old man broke in quickly. "When ye're travelin' at a velocity weel above that o' light ye haven't a cat in hell's chance o' gettin' to one side. There isn't anythin' we can do but wait. Besides, I canna take orders from ye, sir. Captain Sayers is my superior."

"Damned insolence!" Wernham stormed, purpling. "You dare to tell me, your employer, what you are going to do? You'll hear about this later, MacIntosh! Get below and fire those tubes!"

The rocketeer's blue eyes were bright with defiance.

"I'm not attemptin' somethin' I canna do!" he retorted stubbornly. "Ye'd best realize, Mr. Wernham, that this is one thing your power an' money canna change! We're in the clutch of an unknown power, an' out here in space we might as well say the good God himself is at the back of it!"

Wernham's eyes bulged with the anger that blazed through him. His huge frame quivered as he hovered on the verge of striking the cool Scotsman—then with a gust of impotent fury he stormed out of the control room.

Clem grinned faintly. "Thanks, Mac," he said briefly. "Good of you to stick by me."

MacIntosh jammed his pipe back between his teeth. "I wouldn't tak orders from that gorilla for all the heather in Scotland," he answered emphatically. "I'll take 'em from you, and none else. . . . Now I'd better get below and keep the boys quiet. They're gettin' a bit restive. Any orders, sir?"

"None." Clem shook his head hopelessly. "We'll have to make out as best we can. I suppose there must be an end to our journey some place. Until then we'll stand by."

WITH the advance of the hours something of the earlier panic among the passenger abated a little. Instead they were seized with a profound wonderment at the thing that had happened. Nearly everybody who was able spent their time at the windows, staring out on the incomprehensible. Only those whom injury had

forced to bed were uninterested. The ship's doctors and nurses found plenty to occupy their time.

Always present was that sensation of enormous strain and resistless expansion, and the more he pondered it the more certain Clem Sayers became in his belief that they were expanding at an inconceivable pace in relation to the known universe.

By now all traces of the known cosmos had disappeared. The ship was hurtling through the midst of bottomless emptiness, the Milky Way stretching ahead in an awe-inspiring haze of suns and blazing nebulae. Already they were beyond the line of Alpha Centauri, the nearest star.

"I think I'd better make it clear to the passengers," Clem said at last, turning from his study of infinity. "They might as well know that we can never return to Earth. Even if we stopped right now we haven't enough fuel to make the return trip."

He left the control room and headed for the main lounge. At his entry the groups of men and women around the broad windows turned to regard him. In the forefront Chief Wernham stood in glowering, accusing silence.

"So long as there has been a chance of escaping from this warp and returning us to within reasonable distance of our own system I have withheld the truth from you, ladies and gentlemen," Clem said quietly. "I can no longer do that. The *Voitrix* is a runaway ship in the grip of a magnetic power beyond all means of analysis—as yet. We are traveling infinitely faster than light; we are passing through spaces never traversed by mortal man. If this continues we shall either pursue Einstein's curved space back to our starting point—which may Heaven grant!—or else we will burst right through our known universe into whatever lies beyond."

"There's a *reason* for this mad flight!" Wernham declared doggedly. "What is dragging us? You call yourself a scientist and try and blame everything on a warp. If there is some other aspect of the matter tell it to us!"

Clem shrugged. "All right, since you ask for it. The warp represents, clearly enough, an oddity of spatial texture that should not be there. Outside of our universe, or else at its remotest extremity,

there is something of a highly magnetic nature which is pulling the ship in an infinite extension along the path of the warp. Already we are inconceivably huge by comparison with the universe we are moving through. Because size is relative we cannot be aware of that inside this ship. The only evidence of it lies in the apparent enormous velocity with which we are streaking through infinity."

"You—you don't mean we can never get back to Earth, Captain?" asked Madame Vera Lunn, the portly and bejeweled soprano.

Clem turned to her. "That's just what I do mean, madam."

"But you've *got* to return!" she insisted earnestly. "I have a Milan engagement next month and I cannot possibly miss it."

"Don't worry, lady, think what your audience is missing," growled the bitter voice of a criminal, handcuffed to his guard.

"Silence!" barked Wernham authoritatively. "Have that man put out of here! Lock him in his cabin!"

"Just leave him right where he is," Clem interrupted curtly. "I'm captain aboard this ship and only my orders will be regarded! Any other complaints?"

Vonlimer, the eminent financier, waddled forward with check book in one fat hand.

"How much will it take to get back?" he asked slyly. "I'm willing to pay any sum to—"

"Oh, go and sit down!" Clem snapped back furiously. "What the hell game do you think this is that money can square it out? We're all of us facing death! Death! And no money nor knowledge can get us out of it. It wouldn't do any of you much harm to try a little praying for once—like those two over there!"

He jerked his head toward a young man and woman whom he knew were a honeymoon couple. A tinge of regret touched him as he saw them kneeling together by the broad window; it seemed tough they should have come out to death so soon.

"Well, I guess it doesn't make much difference what I say now," Clem resumed. "It's every man for himself, but I warn you that the slightest sign of disorder will be summarily dealt with. I'll have order on this ship right to the last. I look to you to help me."

Heads nodded in agreement, and at that Clem turned and went slowly back to his own quarters.

TO a space ship there is no back door nor lifeboat. Passengers and crew aboard the *Voitrix* began to realize that fact with a vivid, merciless intensity as hours slipped by into days and nights of Earth time.

Still flying onward at her incomputable pace the vessel went clean through the enormous masses of the Milky Way Galaxy, undeterred by the blazing suns that lay in her course so fast did she pass through them. Solid matter, when encountered, seemed to melt out of the way in the most baffling fashion.

Then onward again through stupendous island universes, past awe-inspiring sluices of energy and power. Long ago had the major stars of Antares, Arcturus, Capella and Sirius been left behind in the meaningless distance.

The majority of the passengers simply could not grasp what had happened, and thereby were more interested than afraid. Only the feeling of nervous and muscular tensivity baffled them. Calmest of all, perhaps, with the isolated exceptions of Clem, Dawlish and Gervis, the saturnine earthly criminal, were MacIntosh and his rocket crew. They passed the time in the ship's bowels, alternately singing space chancies or sleeping fitfully, but always alert in case the millionth chance happened and there might be a way of escape.

Equally vigilant though nearly exhausted from lack of sleep, were Clem and Dawlish. They kept constantly near their instruments and observation windows, trying vainly with limited mortal minds to grasp the real meaning of infinity. The immensity of everything staggered their reasoning powers; the eternal procession of blazing stars, chaotic boilings of energy, hurtling shafts of light, were things beyond them. They could only guess at the ultimate incredible truth—that they were going to break through the known universe into a supra-state beyond.

When that would happen they could not imagine, though if distance covered was any guide it promised to be soon. Already every known galaxy and system was out of sight behind. Their speed—if such it was

—had become so terrific that even the furthest scattered stars moved at an incredible pace past them. But space was becoming emptier, changing into a vast sable unknown that had neither light nor life. It loomed, an eternal vault of death.

Clem found himself wondering, with bitter reminiscence, how Bob Prescott's matter annihilation experiment had worked out. Strange thought, right out here in space. He silently regretted that he would never know now if the destruction of matter had really taken place. In his own mind he could not see such a thing occurring; his beliefs clung to the rigid scientific principle that the total destruction of the minutest scrap of matter would involve the whole collapse of the universe.

The grim knowledge that inevitable death lay ahead brought the more devout of the ship's passengers to their knees. Through the chronometrical days they had been studying this mad flight, sleeping only at intervals through sheer exhaustion and strain, then resuming their eternal watch. Now they prayed or were silent, according to their temperaments. Many of them kneeled in groups before the broad windows, realizing for the first time in their lives the terrible mightiness, the supernal loneliness, of the cosmos.

The honeymooners were clasped in each other's arms; the man was murmuring faint words of encouragement in the tearful girl's ear. Gervis the criminal was seated in grim silence, brutally unafraid of the Ultimate—but beside him his guard was limp in despair.

At the opposite end of the great room Madame Vera Lunn was lustily singing "Abide with Me." Her technique was perfect, her bosom swelled in powerful rhythms, but to the jittery people around her she was a sublime irritant. Vonlimer sat crouched on the floor, regarding her with pale frightened eyes, his teeth viciously biting his nails.

Perhaps the strongest of all was Chief Wernham. He stood a little apart from the others in arrogant silence, legs wide spread, hands locked behind him, staring with flinty gray eyes on the sweeping formless dark.

Down in the rocket rooms the rocketeers were watching too through their tiny windows. MacIntosh talked slowly, unlighted

pipe between his teeth, but one ear was cocked for the slightest vestige of a signal from the earnestly watching controllers in the room above.

"It sure is pretty close to the end of the road all right," Clem breathed, as he stared through the window with Dawlish at his side. "We surely can't go much further because—"

His sentence was never finished. It broke off as he became amazedly aware of the blackness ceasing to have extension. Instead it seemed to rush forward in a sudden vast blanket of dark, only to be split at the self-same second by a blinding, tearing incandescence of light.

Clem went staggering backwards, Dawlish with him. Unable to save themselves they collided with the opposite wall.

The liner quivered and then rocked from end to end. A repetition of the sliding upheavals of the first contact with the warp took place, and for some there was no awakening from the darkness into which they were flung. . . .

CLEM returned to his senses with the awareness of stinging pains in his head, of tart restorative burning down his throat. Then the powerful hands of Dawlish heaved him to his feet.

"O. K.?" The big engineer's face was concerned.

Clem nodded uncertainly. "Yes—yes, I'm all right—but what happened?"

"You hit your head on the control panel and got laid out. I've not the vaguest idea where we are but we've certainly stopped moving. We seem to be on a world of sorts. . . ."

His head clearing a little Clem moved to the window and gazed out. His brow knitted at the peculiar thing he saw—an impression of vast pillars, amazingly misty in consistency. At their furthest and almost hidden heights were monstrous objects that might conceivably have passed for electromagnets of colossal dimensions. Matched to all this was a hazy suggestion of machines, again patterned on a scale so enormous that they staggered the imagination—and back of it all, drifting and moving, were the Shapes, unformed misty things resembling white curtains drifting to and fro.

"Well, what do you think of it?" Dawlish asked, puzzling.

Clem hesitated for a moment, then he moved to his gages, regarded them in increasing surprise.

"Temperature 80°, humidity earth normal, gravity earth normal, atmosphere earth normal. . . . Say, this planet's mighty accommodating, if planet it is. Exactly the same readings as Earth itself! I'd better tell the passengers; tell Mac and his men to come up and join us."

Clem left the control room and spent some fifteen minutes sorting out a party of uninjured passengers, detailing others off to look after those who had been hurt. Rather to his irritation Chief Wernham was unhurt, but a trifle less self-assured. Several of the things he had seen had done something to make him realize his actual littleness.

Gervis the criminal was unshackled from his lead guard and added to the party; so were the honeymooners. Madam Vera Lunn had sung her last song; Vonlimer meditated upon his last cent. Both were dead.

"Now get this," said Clem grimly, when they were all congregated round the central airlock and each holding a flame gun. "We've got to keep together and watch our step. We're on a world of sorts, and from our journey it looks as though it is in a universe far beyond our own. We don't know what we're facing or what may happen. You'll all take orders from me. Now let's go. Open her up!"

McIntosh moved forward with the brawny square-faced rocketeers and twisted the massive airlock screws. In two minutes the great circle was opened and a warm soft air came surging into the stuffy vessel. For a moment or two the party stood looking dubiously out onto a flat plain, shining brightly with almost metallic hue. . . . The misty pillars and machinery were still around; the Shapes still hovered enigmatically in the background.

"Well, are we going to stand here all day?" demanded Wernham suddenly, and at that Clem stepped forward and stood looking around him.

He said nothing to the others, but he could have sworn that in following one of the hazy Shapes to its ultimate height he could make out the details of a colossal

face looking down at him! The effect was unnervingly queer.

"By the sweet breath o' Scotland, where are we?" whispered MacIntosh, biting his pipe. "It's the sort o' thing I never hoped ta see outside of a wee drap! D'ye ken those foggy looking machines there? They're—"

He broke off and the entire party fell backwards slightly as their ears were suddenly hammered by a terrific, beating voice. Words rolled and growled at them—incredibly enough, in English!

"Friends, we owe you an apology!" they boomed. "If you can understand our language, hear what we have to say. Our magnets, in annihilating and tearing apart a block of copper must have caught your space vessel and torn it out of the microcosm in which your world and universe formerly existed. Only when your ship, elongated beyond all measure by the magnetic force we applied, became visible to us did we realize that life might exist in the molecules of the copper block. From our point of view the effort at utterly destroying a portion of matter has been successful; but unfortunate from your angle. You appreciate, of course, that your journey through your spatial realm, your bursting through into this other realm beyond, was all accomplished in what to us was a split second? To make it clearer you may know, if you are scientists, that in a single explosion it is conceivable that upon the electrons *within* the explosion there might exist races who are born, mature and die in that incredibly short space of time."

There was a strange expression on Clem's face as, raising his voice, he shouted back, "We are scientists, and we understand all that. But who are you? Where are you exactly?"

"All around you, so vast that we transcend all known dimensions of size so far as you understand. Much though your ship has enlarged—though it is infinitely vaster than your whole universe—you are still far less than us in dimensions. About you you behold our annihilative and magnetic machinery, so vague to you because of your smallness; you are nearly able to see the interstices between the molecules that make up the machines. Every tremor of the air causes light defraction. That is

why the whole outlook is so uncertain to you."

"What planet is this?" demanded Wernham commandingly, chin outthrust.

There was a brief silence, then the astounding answer came back.

"This is the planet Earth!"

IV

IT took the party a long time to realize the profound and bewildering significance of that reply. They looked at each other, all of them momentarily reduced to a common level of bafflement. . . . Only in the eyes of Clem did there seem to be a faint gleam of understanding.

"If this is Earth," he shouted, "it should be possible for you to increase our size by the use of the molecular machine. Can you do that?"

"If you wish it, certainly. One moment."

There was a rustling movement amidst the Shapes. Wernham stepped forward aggressively.

"Look here, Sayers, what are you planning to do?" he demanded. "What kind of a cosmic game is this?"

"Did you hear the being say that this is Earth?"

"Certainly I did, but it is an obvious impossibility. Earth is so far away it staggers the imagination to remember it."

"Nevertheless, this is still the Earth!" Clem returned steadily. "You wanted to get back there—well, you've done it. . . ."

The Chief relapsed into puzzled silence. Clem too became thoughtful. A strange theory was turning over in his mind; the first dim conceptions of what the strange warp in space had really meant. Then he looked up sharply as he suddenly found himself enveloped in a heatless beam of pure violet color. Strain seized his limbs, and with it a sensation of gripping cramp. He beheld the others likewise affected, if their strained faces were any guide.

Through his half-closed eyes he watched the inconceivable giantism of the machines and pillars about him begin to decrease. They lost their queer tenuity and became solid. By slow degrees the vast remoteness of everything came into measurable distance. . . . And to Clem and Dawlish the transition from small to large meant something else—an infinite amazement at

actually recognizing every detail of the place they had merged into. It was the major New York physics laboratory.

The empty metallic plain of the landscape they had formerly viewed resolved itself now into the metal disk beneath the influence of the now silent electromagnets and blast-disintegrators. The ship, far below, was now no larger than a silver pencil.

Abruptly the expansion ceased; the violet beam from the Enlarger expired. With puzzled eyes the party stood looking at an equally puzzled group of white garbed scientists, who formerly had been the moving Shapes. The foremost of them, tall and blond, Clem and Dawlish instantly recognized.

"Bob Prescott!" Clem cried eagerly, and moved forward from the midst of the machinery to shake him by the hands.

"Clem Sayers, as I live and breathe!" Prescott exclaimed in bewilderment; then he twirled to survey the rest of the party. "But—but how in thunderation did this come about?" he asked blankly. "Last I heard of you you'd been caught in an ether warp between Jupiter and Earth and had entirely disappeared. How the devil did you ever come to emerge out of a microcosm? Out of the copper block we've just annihilated?"

"That's what I want to know!" exclaimed Wernham testily. "I was given to understand that we'd never return to Earth—"

"But we have," Clem interrupted him calmly. "There's nothing more to worry over on that score. I've brought you back home, so maybe you don't think me such a rotten Captain now?"

"More like a wizard, I'd say," murmured McIntosh in a puzzled voice.

The big man shrugged rather reluctantly. "Well," he said grudgingly, "I have to admit that you've brought us back—though *how* I simply can't imagine. You'll still attend a court of inquiry, Captain Sayers, to explain about the deaths and injuries aboard." For a moment he softened slightly; relief was a great soother. "Maybe I was a bit hasty," he went on, coughing primly. "I withdraw my earlier remarks. . . . Prescott, I take it that you can get the other people out of that pencil of a ship?"

The scientist glanced at it. "I guess so, sir—yes. We'll get the people out and enlarge them. Take about thirty minutes."

"Very good. You, Captain Sayers, will see that the people are safely conducted to their destinations and will make arrangements for ambulances. Then report to me at headquarters. I'll take these others with me. . . . Come!"

Wernham turned and led the way out of the laboratory, followed by the honeymooners and Gervis, in the iron grip of the rocket men. Only when the door had closed did Clem, Dawlish and MacIntosh look at each other quickly, then back to the still puzzled Prescott.

"Suppose you stop tellin' us the fairy tales and come doon to airth?" the Scot suggested. "Ye're no foolin' an old rocket man with your story. We *did* come out of a microcosm into a macrocosm, didn't we?"

Clem nodded seriously. "Yes, Mac, we did—and by so doing we proved a law of space, time and size that few have suspected before. Truth to tell we've never been on *this* Earth before and we've never met *this* Bob Prescott, any more than he's met us. Am I right?"

The scientist and his assistants nodded slowly.

"There's an interrelated state of micro and macrocosms, I think," Prescott said thoughtfully. "Another Clem Sayers and Dawlish did get caught in an ether warp before they reached Mars; and they utterly disappeared—but it couldn't have been you because you've come out of an infinite small—"

"Look here, will one of you guys make up your mind and tell a poor benighted navigator what it's all about?" demanded Dawlish. "How *did* we get here?"

"I'll tell you," Clem smiled. "Listen carefully. . . ."

“OUR experience has shown us that throughout space, from the smallest to the largest, there is an identical uniformity of time, matter, creation, maturity and death. An electron, as we know from our own studies, operates in a manner incomprehensible to us. It is a probability, embracing multiple dimensions and multiple spaces. Part of its nature we understand in that it reflects to us the visible forms of matter, such as human beings

and cabbages. But there are other parts of its nature which we do *not* understand—its resolution into other forms which, by reason of dimensional eccentricity, are hidden from us. For instance, every electron requires a three dimensional space to itself; two require six, three nine, and so on, veering into multiple dimensions we cannot possibly imagine.

"Now, assuming the time factor to be exactly identical for each of those different states, and assuming also that *unseen* dimensional resolutions of the electron pattern themselves into matter identical with what *is* seen, what do we get?"

"I'll buy it," said Dawlish. "What?"

"Reproduction?" suggested MacIntosh shrewdly; and Clem nodded.

"Right you are, Mac! Reproduction! In other words, every atom and molecule re-patterns within itself exactly what is inside it again, and so on down and down, beyond electrons inside electrons, into the very ultimate small of all matter."

"You mean," said Prescott slowly, "that a tremendous process of repetition in every atom, in every universe, in every microcosm, in every macrocosm, takes place at exactly the same time? Each an identical mirroring of the other?"

"You have it," Clem agreed. "In another way it explains the indestructibility of matter. Destroy one fragment of any universe—utterly and completely annihilate it—and all creation would fall in pieces. Imagine for a moment a prismatic mirror with, say, twenty facets. Put a hand in front of one and you see twenty reproductions of that hand all doing the same thing at the same instant of time. So it is, we have proved, with the universe. It never began and never ended because it is all one, each atom identical with the microcosm actions it encloses; each macrocosm identical with the atom *it* encloses. . . ."

"To come to our personal experience. Back on our own world one Bob Prescott experimented with the annihilation of copper. At the same time an ether warp arrived. When Prescott made his experiment every Prescott in every other universe, great and small, did likewise. Likewise in every other universe another Clem and Dawlish inside their space liner were

caught in a warp and drawn by the terrific power of annihilating magnets out of their own universe into one inconceivably greater. You see? We came out of the smaller. On my own world another one has come out of a realm still smaller—and so on right down the scale. Likewise on the upper scale. Outside of this universe another Clem, Dawlish, and all the crowd, has emerged in another universe beyond this one—is doing *now* exactly what I'm doing. There are myriads of Clems, Dawlishes, MacIntoshes, ships *et-cetera*, all doing the same thing at the same time. They *have* to do, otherwise our emergence from a primal atom, when you successfully destroyed matter, would have smashed apart the entire structure of creation."

"*Now* I get it!" breathed Dawlish. "Time is uniform, and so is space, but electrons are infini-dimensional and thereby reproductive. The total destruction of matter *did* take place, but it only resulted in every known universe shuffling slightly and regaining balance. We provided it."

"Just that," Clem confirmed. "Last but not least—we happened to arrive on Earth because that was where the magnets were at work. The warp was the magnetism operating through the copper, of course. . . . Now I ask you, why should I have explained all that to Wernham?"

"Why indeed!" laughed Prescott. "So far as I'm concerned he's the same Wernham and you're the same Clem. . . . Which reminds me I'd better be getting the people out of that ship. . . ."

He broke off in surprise and turned with the others as MacIntosh took his pipe out of his mouth and burst into a roar of laughter.

"What's up, Mac?" Clem questioned curtly.

"Plenty!" the rocket man wheezed. "I just happened to think! Can you realize there's myriads of men like me scattered through all the universe and all time! Aye, but I thought one was enough—and that too much!"

He doubled up again; but the others did not laugh. They wouldn't be happy without the old Scot no matter how many reproductions he possessed.



Ray-gun levelled, the guard shoved Hank stumblingly forward. He staggered and nearly fell, striking his head against the barred window. Outside he could see the form of a spaceship. But it was not the *Swapper*. The guard laughed and swaggered out.

4½B, EROS

By

**MALCOLM
JAMESON**

"4½B, Eros." . . . A strange code, but grizzled space-trader Karns used it to break the perilous Mercury-Venus Jinx

"MAKEE chop chop. Kwei! Kwei!"

The two Venusian coolies squatted down between the shafts and with one quick motion elevated the sedan chair to shoulder height. Then they started off in a lazy run through the torrential down-pour, splashing mud right and left as their sturdy yellow legs struck into the watery lane of muck that passes for a road in

Venusberg. Captain Hank Karns, the Lone Trader, sank back in his seat and watched idly with mild blue eyes as first one grass hut and then another appeared momentarily through rifts of rain. There would be time enough to worry about Cappy Wilkerson's plight when he reached the administration building and found out more about the charges against him. No doubt it was just another shakedown, the

effort of some minor official to pry loose a little more than the customary cumshaw.

Captain Karns had berthed his own old trading tub not an hour earlier and as he registered the arrival of his *Swapper* he noted that under the date of three days before there was the entry: "*Wanderer*, Captain Wilkerson, en route Mercury to Luna." After it was the notation in red: "Detained by order Collector of the Port; captain in custody."

Hank Karns thoughtfully pawed his long white beard. Cappy Wilkerson was a careful and upright man and a lifelong friend; what manner of charge could they have trumped up against him? That they were trumped up he took for granted, for the local government of autonomous Venus was notoriously corrupt and always had been. The Venusians themselves were the descendants of coolies brought centuries before from tropical Asia. They took little or no interest in government. Politics had, therefore, fallen into the hands of white adventurers, most of whom lived on Venus for the very good reason they were not wanted elsewhere. The Central Council of the loose Interplanetary Federation seldom interfered with them unless for acts so flagrant as to affect the Federation as a whole.

The old space merchant left his chair at the court-room and squeezed through the crowd at the back just in time to hear the whack, whack, whack of the gavel marking the end of the trial. Standing defiantly in the prisoner's box was Cappy Wilkerson, his eyes flashing and his iron-gray mane thrown back. He looked like an indignant old lion brought to bay by a pack of jackals. The judge, a young man with a monocle and a stiff black pompadour, was dressed in a smart military uniform which made him appear anything but judicial. He was biting out his words as if what he was saying was inspired by personal venom.

"I have heard all you have had to say, including your filthy imputations as to the integrity of this court. Your guilt is so apparent that we need not trouble even to preserve the record of your silly and malicious allegations. . . ."

Here the judge contemptuously tossed a sheaf of papers into a wastebasket.

"Therefore, bearing in mind not only

your guilt but your contumacious conduct before me, I sentence you to five years at hard labor in such a one of our prison camps as the Director of Welfare and Beneficence may select.

"It is further directed that your ship, together with its illicit contents, be confiscated and sold at public auction in order to defray the cost of these proceedings. Marshal! Take him away."

Hank Karns was on his feet at once, elbowing and pushing his way forward through the departing throng of curiosity-seekers. His voice was shrill with indignation.

"Hey, you can't do that!" he yelled. Officials closed in on him at once, and the judge's face grew red with anger. "This is a court of law," he said, "and the decisions of the presiding judge are final. Now get out before I hale you up for contempt."

"Tarnation damn!" muttered Hank Karns as he turned and left the building. This was no ordinary shakedown. This called for action, and quick action, for it was unthinkable that his buddy should be carted off to the insect-infested, fever-ridden, infamous Great Swamp of Venus. White men lived but a few months there; a year, let alone five years, was as good as life.

A bulletin caught his eye, and as he read it he gasped. The paste that fastened it to the board was still wet, but the paper bore characteristics of printed type. It must have been prepared at least a day ago. It read:

COLLECTOR'S SALE

One confiscated tube ship, the *Wanderer*, complete with fittings. The cargo of the same consisting of miscellaneous trade goods. Saturday. Inquire at Collector's Office for details.

"Phew!" gasped Hank Karns. "That was quick work. And planned." He turned and made his way to the Collector's Office.

The man at the front desk gaped at him woodenly.

"S'already sold," he said indifferently, the third time Karns put his question.

"But it says Saturday. . . ."

"Okay—it says Saturday. So what?"

"B-but this is only Tuesday. . . ."

"We have a Saturday every week, dodo. Now trot along and annoy somebody else for a change. I have work to do."

Hank Karns blinked. Why, Saturday was the day the *Wanderer* docked. These Venusians were getting raw. They must have sold her that very day!

"Who is that old man? Throw him out!"

Karns turned slowly and viewed the new speaker. He was a big man, with piercing black eyes and a hawk nose, and heavily bearded—a strange sight for super-tropical Venus where men kept clean shaven for coolness. But the man turned abruptly away and entered an inner office, slamming the door behind him. Hank Karns' eyes followed him all the way—they were fixed on the back of the fellow's neck. There, oddly enough, just above the shoulder line, peeped a line of color demarcation. Above the line, which was made visible by the fact that its wearer had pulled open his collar for comfort, the skin was the normal pallor usually seen on Venus; below, it was a mottled chocolate color.

"Didja hear what the collector said?" snarled the clerk. "Scram!"

Without a word, Hank Karns turned and left the office. He passed through the thronged corridors almost in a daze. There was Cappy Wilkerson, gone to the Swamp, virtually condemned to death. There was his ship sold, even before the trial which was to condemn it. And everywhere there was high-handed insolence, seemingly inspired by this overbearing man with the duplex complexion. What did it mean? And the fact that he could not yet place those sharp eyes and that predatory nose, though somewhere, sometime, he had encountered them before, puzzled Hank Karns still more. Something stank in Venus.

AN hour later he sat morosely in a tiny tavern he had long known, hidden up the blind alley known as Artemis Lane. For half a century it had been familiar to him as the hangout for his kind.

"So you see how it is," the bartender was concluding. "At this rate there won't be any more. With all the old-timers dead or in the Swamp, how in hell can I keep

running. No sir, this joint is for sale—for what it'll bring. Drink up and have another."

Captain Karns took the proffered drink from the grizzled tavern-keeper, but despite its cheering nature—for it was purest "comet-dew"—he took it glumly. Never in all his long and active life had he heard so much evil news at one sitting. Another of his old pals had come to grief, and all because he had touched at Mercury. Mercury, it appeared, was poison to all his tribe. The record was too consistent to be accounted for by coincidence. Comedients do not occur in strings.

"And what makes it stink all the worse," persisted the indignant bartender, bitterly, "not a damn finger is lifted to stop the flow of trilibaine. The town is lousy with it. Half these natives stay hopped up all the time."

"I thought the Federals had cleaned that up ten years ago," commented Hank Karns.

"It's back," was the laconic retort.

Hank Karns said nothing. The fact that three of his buddies were languishing in the malarial swamps of Venus, continually subject to the indignities of brutal guards was uppermost in his mind. And besides that, two others—Bill Ellison and Jed Carter—had died on Mercury when their ships mysteriously blew up on the take-off. That, too, had an especial significance, for those two were the only members of the trader tribe who had any sort of reputation as fire-eaters. In their youth, of course, all of them had been bolder and more truculent, but as they gained in experience they learned that there is more to be gained by soft words than bluster. If Hank was to secure the release of his friends it must be by guile, the use of a cunning superior to that employed by their common enemies.

If he was to secure! There was no if about it. He must. For it was Bob Merrill and Ben Wilkerson who had once rescued him, Hank Karns, from an even more deadly situation. More than twenty years ago that had been, on far-off Io, and Hank Karns winced at the memory of it. On that occasion he had, through the machinations of the notorious Von Kleber gang, been convicted and sentenced as a pirate. Ten hateful and horror-filled days and

nights he had spent in the mines of Sans Espérance, the Federal Penitentiary, digging radioactive ores. Two of his friendly competitors heard of it and plead for a new trial wherein it was shown that he had been sent up through perjured testimony to screen the trial of the real culprits. The wave of public opinion they started then did not subside until Von Kleber and his outlaws were put finally behind the bars.

No, there was no choice. Cappy Wilkereson and Cappy Merrill must be released and Ellison and Carter avenged. How? That remained to be seen.

"Wa-al," drawled Hank Karns, elaborately, now that his mind was made up, "I'll be seein' you. I'm taking a little trip into Mercury and back."

The bartender shook his head ominously.

"No fool like an old fool," he said, and he didn't laugh.

In the rain-lock, or the vestibule outside the bar, Karns stopped. He felt inside the lining of his vest and after much fumbling produced a dog-eared memorandum book. He ran through the yellowed pages until he found one covered with cryptic entries. They appeared as if made long ago, but several interlineations in various colored inks showed that amendments had been made from time to time since the original writing of them.

Halfway down was the group P2, and what followed had been twice changed. The line that stood in lieu of them read: "Vbg—wickerware—4½B, Eros." Hank Karns read the line through two or three times, then snapped the book shut and replaced it in its hiding place. He carefully buckled up his slicker and jammed his sou'wester tight upon his head. Then he stepped forth into the steamy drizzle of Artemis Lane.

He slogged his way through mud and water until he came to the main drag. He turned to the right and splashed along until he came to the corner where Erosville Road turned off. He took the turn and plugged along for four blocks of its twisting, boggy length. A dozen steps farther on he lifted his eyes and peered from beneath dripping brows at the signs about. Across the street was what he sought—a sagging awning crudely painted with the legend: "An Shirgar—Dealer in Native

Basketry." On the bedewed window below was another, "Hir Spak Anglass."

Hank Karns stopped under the awning long enough to squish some of the water out of his shoes, then he entered. A swarthy, turbanned Venusian met him, rubbing his hands together obsequiously and bowing jerkily at every step.

"Yiss, milord. Valcom to mizable shop. Vat vishes milord?"

"Wickerware," said Hank Karns, tartly, for him. "For export."

"Ah," breathed the representative of An Shirgar. "Zhipluds, eh? You pay?" Captain Karns shook his head, and pointed to the private door at the back.

"Ah, vickware. No pay. Maybe boss ut see, eh?"

"Yep, trot him out," said Hank Karns, and began fingering the clever basketware of the Venutian hillmen. He knew it would be quite a while before the Earthman came, if this was operated like the Callistan branch had been, twenty years before. After a time, without quite knowing how he knew, he was aware that someone else was in the showroom, studying him from a distance.

"Howdy," he said, turning around. "I kinda wanted to finance a deal that's too big for me to swing—is this the place?"

"Might be," said the man non-committally. He was a typical Terrestrial business man, not much over thirty, baldish, and plainly not given to foolishness. "I don't touch anything as a rule unless I see a profit in it. And no chance of loss. What is your collateral?"

Hank Karns mentioned his ship. The man snorted, and started to turn away. "You're wasting time."

"I got a ring, too. It's a—well—sorta heirloom."

The man came back. He was still not interested, but he took the ring Karns offered him and weighed it in his hand. Then he applied a loup to his eye and examined it closely.

"You've hocked this before?"

"Yes," chuckled Hank Karns. "And got it back, too."

"Hmmm," said the man. "It looks genuine. What do you want?"

"I—uh—am dropping into Mercury to do a little trading. When I get back I might want to buy a chair or so—mebbe

a houseful of stuff—and just wanted to be sure my credit was good.”

“You speak in riddles, my friend,” said the man with a curious, tight little smile. He was tossing the ring thoughtfully all the while.

“I’m only a lone trader,” said Hank Karns, wistfully, “and don’t know no better. Supposing you keep the ring while I’m gone—to appraise it, so to speak. All I want to know is who to call for when I get back. *If I get back.*”

The man pocketed the ring.

“Where will the call come from?”

“I dunno. Space, mebbe. Jail, mebbe.”

“My radio call is care assistant dockmaster, Venusberg sky-yard. Mention berth twenty-three somehow. As to the jail angle, I do not as a general thing do business with people in jail. In that event, I might send you a lawyer, in consideration of this ring. Tell Rashab, the night turnkey—you’ll know him by the double scar on his chin—that you want to see Mr. Brown. I can’t guarantee he’ll go, but if he does, bear in mind he’s a very cagy fellow and that Venusberg jail is studded with dictaphones and scanners. If what you have in mind smacks at all of illegality, it’s likely he’ll walk out on you.”

“Yep,” snapped Hank Karns, beginning to shut the clasps on his slicker, “I’ll remember. Only I don’t think it’ll be a lawyer I’ll need. If the joint is lousy with spy-machines, what I’ll want is an old friend—a man of my type.”

The man, whatever his name was, for he had still not given it, laughed outright for the first time. He slapped the Lone Trader on the back.

“Men of your type, you old humbug, are extinct as the horse.”

Hank Karns looked up to laugh back at him, but he was gone. In his place stood the turbanned Venutian, still doing washing motions with his hands.

“Milord no like vickvare? Milord go now?”

“My Lord, yes. I go now.”

Karns jammed on his sou’wester, took a deep breath, and pushed open the door. A half hour later he was making ready for the take-off for Mercury. It was a shot in the dark, but it was a chance he had to take.

“To hell with that,” thought Hank

Karns. Then briskly to the boy he had brought with him this trip as a general utility man, “Hey, Billy, look alive! Bear a hand with getting them there rakes stowed!”

“SO that’s Mercury,” exclaimed Billy Hatch, four days later, as he stared goggle-eyed into the visiplat. This was his first interplanetary trip.

“Yep,” said Karns, “That’s her, the doggonedest planet barrin’ none in the whole dad-frazzled system. After you’ve been here you can tell ’em you’ve seen wind blow, and I mean blow. That’s what them rakes is for. To get around you lie down on your belly and pull yourself along by them. It’s a helluva place. The sun on your back’d fry you, ’cepting there’s always a ice-cold hurricane cooling you off.”

“How can that be, cap’n?”

“Convection’s the ten-sol word for it. It’s cause she’s sizzling hot on one side and colder’n the underside of a iceberg on t’other. The wind goes straight up over the desert and comes straight down over the back side glaciers. Then it scoots for the desert again—and how! Nobody could live an hour in any part of the place if it warn’t for the temp’rate strip, and that’s cockeyed enough. You gotta steady, hundred-two-hundred-mile wind going straight into the sun, for that’s right down to the horizon. In the lee of a house you burn up in the shade of it you’d freeze solid in five minutes. And the houses have to be stone and streamlined.”

Hank Karns kept a watchful eye on the terrain coming up to meet them. Mooring a ship in that wind required the utmost art.

“As I told you, itsa helluva place. Nothing grows there but a sort of grass and some moss. The only animals is varmints, like the cangrela and the trocklebeck. It’s cangrela claws and trocklebeck hides we trade for.”

Billy Hatch listened, wide-eyed. This was romance.

“The trocklebeck is a critter something on the order of a armadillo, only it’s got horns and big claws to hang onto the ground. It grazes, with its head allus into the wind. The cangrela is built along the lines of a crab and has claws, too. It

crawls up behind the trocklebeck and kills 'em while they're feeding. Trocklebeck scales and cangrela claws are both harder'n hell. They use 'em in machinery."

"Oh," said Billy Hatch.

"But you better git forrard there and tend to them grapples, 'cause a-gitting hold of the ground here is ticklish business. Ef we miss it's just too bad. We'll roll over and over for miles and miles, like as not."

Hank Karns said no more for a time. As a matter of fact, he was far from ready to land. He had deliberately come up on the wrong side of the planet for making the landing at Sam Atkins' little trading store. He wanted to give it a general bird's-eye view. It was in a valley scooped out by the wind that he saw the first sign of a major alteration. Behind a huge artificial wind-break lay a group of new buildings, and one of them was dome-topped with a squat chimney. A matter of ten miles farther away was another new house and a small warehouse behind it. Just over the next low ridge lay Atkins' place.

"Standby," warned Hank Karns, as he brought the ship's nose into the hurricane and began losing altitude. "Don't let go 'til I tell you—and that'll be when we're practically down."

Just as the keel kissed the ground, Karns gave the signal and the anchors fell. At the same instant he cut his rockets and the ship began falling away to leeward, dragging her anchors behind. In a moment they grabbed, pulled loose and grabbed again. That time they held. Karns released a long pent-up sigh. It was a perfect landing. Sam Atkins' house lay but a bare hundred yards on the quarter.

There was still the business of shooting a wire over the trading post and making it fast at both ends, Atkins coming out to do his share. Then Captain Karns slid down the wire to the shack and allowed himself to be hauled in by the trading post keeper.

"I'm glad to see you, Cap'n, and sorry at the same time," was his greeting from Sam Atkins. Atkins was a grumpy sort and a self-made hermit. He seemed to enjoy the solitude of windswept Mercury and the tedious, strenuous work of snaring cangrelas.

"How come sorry, Sam?" asked Hank

Karns, as innocently as if he had never visited Venus.

Atkins looked mournfully at him and jerked a thumb eastward.

"I've got neighbors—bad ones. Whatever you do, don't go over there. They'll trick you somehow. They don't want outsiders coming here, they've got a ship of their own that makes a trip every week or so."

Hank Karns raised his eyebrows.

"Trocklebecks must be breeding faster'n they used to," he observed. Mercury never produced enough to justify more than two trips a year, if that.

"Trocklebecks," stated Atkins, "are practically extinct. And the cangrelas are starving. I doubt if I could scare up four cases of prime claws to save my soul. It's *pagras* that's doing it. The place is crawling with them. They bite the trocklebecks and they curl up and die."

"Mmm," commented Hank Karns. He remembered those serpents well. They were originally a Venusian beast—a variety of dragon, and extremely venomous. They were really legged snakes, having thirty-six pairs of taloned legs and crab-like claws near the head, but the body was slender, rarely exceeding a yard in girth, for all their thirty-foot lengths.

"I'm closing up shop here," said the gloomy Atkins next. "You can take the pick of what I own if you'll set me down at the next stop you make."

"Now you just keep your shirt on, Sam Atkins," replied Hank Karns, "I'm not a-doing anything of the damn kind. I'm going over and have a talk with those gents in the next valley. . . ."

Sam Atkins glared at him.

"No fool like an old fool," he remarked, hopelessly.

Hank Karns chuckled.

"Seems folks are agreed pretty well about me. But let's eat, so I can get along my way."

Unmooring and getting in the anchors was a troublesome job with only a green boy for a helper, but Hank Karns managed it. At that it was a much easier maneuver to move the ship that mile over the ridge than to try to crawl it in the teeth of a permanent typhoon. Moreover, if there was cargo to take aboard—and Hank Karn felt sure there would be—the

ship would have to be moved anyhow. So he took off, circumnavigated the planet, and came up again, this time to the little office building and warehouse next to Atkins' shack. He took good care not to go near the other group of buildings.

As he descended, casting about for a good spot to fling out his grapnels he kept a sharp eye out for signs of life about the buildings. All he saw was a couple of bronzed men, both bald as billiard balls, working over some object in the lee of the warehouse. Upon sighting the descending spaceship one went inside the warehouse and the other caught hold of the guide-wire and let himself be blown down to what appeared to be the office building. The man had on a heavily quilted suit of gray material—quilted so that if he lost his hold and was blown away, he would not bruise himself to death along the ground.

On the fourth try, Hank Karns managed to ground his ship not far from the office door. This time he landed to leeward and had to make his way up-wind by crawling, assisted by a Mercurian "staff," or one of the rakes among his trade goods. As he crawled, he observed he was being watched from a loophole beside the door. But as he drew himself erect, the door opened and a man came out to greet him.

"Hello, Captain," said the man, cordially, "we're very glad to see you. Come in and rest yourself." The man, Karns observed, was dressed in a heavily quilted suit and was breathing heavily. But he had a full head of hair and a luxuriant mustache.

"Howdy, yourself," returned the Lone Trader. "Phew! It's shore dusty hereabouts—I've heard of the place but I never seen it. The far Trojans is my bailiwick and the asteroids in that corner. . . ."

"Really?" said the man, helping his visitor through the door. The office was a single room, and no one else was in it. There was a bottle of violet-hued liquor on the table and two glasses. "Have a drink? This is home brew—our Mercurian version of comet-dew—made from flowers that grow under the glacier lips."

"Don't care ef I do," remarked Karns, and sat down in the seat indicated. "As I was saying, I thought I'd look in on this

place, seeing as how I had to make the perihelion hop home. Have to git home to see my oldest grandchild married."

"Wouldn't be interested in a bit of cargo, would you?" asked the man. "Our own ship is overdue, and I have some freight for Venus."

"I'm allus interested in a bit of cargo," said Karns, "but this trip I can't stop by Venus—time's too short."

"Oh, well," said his host, indifferently, "it doesn't matter about that. I was thinking of shipping some boxes of claws and hides to our agent at Venusberg for sale there. We are a new company and have no outlets on Terra yet, unless you wanted to speculate on your own account and buy them outright."

"Speculation's my business," said Hank Karns, serene and bland. And added, with just a touch of foxiness, "ef the buying price is right."

"Oh, we won't quarrel about that," laughed the man. "The hides are a by-product with us—this is a pharmaceutical outfit. We make a preparation from the hormones of these beasts. You can have the horns at almost any price."

They spent the better part of an hour in good natured haggling, the child-like old man raising first one trivial objection after another to win small advantages—chiefly in the matter of valuation of the various items of trade goods he had to offer. None of the lone traders ever dealt in cash. The *Swapper* was most appropriately named.

At last they shook on the bargain—and a bargain it most obviously was from the trader's point of view. Mr. Raoul Dement, or so the company man styled himself, presented the visiting captain two flasks of the violet liquor after the old custom of the trade.

"Nice stuff," observed Hank Karns, licking his lip. "The best I ever."

"There's twelve cases of it in the warehouse," said Dement, with a wink. "Now, if you were the smuggling sort, there would be a nice profit for you. But, of course. . . ."

"Hell," exploded Hank Karns, "running comet-dew's no sin. Wisht I had a decimo for every gallon I've hauled. Once in a coon's age I get stuck with a little fine, but shucks—the customer'll allus pay that for you."

There followed more dickerings, but the upshot of it was that Hank Karns signed up for everything that had been offered him.

"Bon voyage," said Mr. Dement. "If you ever pass this way again, drop in and visit."

"Sure will," said Hank Karns, looking his man in the eye. He was interested in his host's forehead. About an inch from the right temple there was a slight depression—the ineradicable scar of an old skull injury.

MERCURY was still a big disk behind when the *Swapper* straightened out on her earthward trajectory.

"Step alive there, Billy, we got lots to do."

All the blandness, all the gullibility and child-like faith were gone from Hank Karns' face now. He looked much more like work-ridden gnome than an emaciated Santa Claus. For they had unpacked every case and strewn its contents on the deck, looking for contraband of a more serious nature than the harmless comet-dew. But no case contained anything except what the invoice declared. Hank left the job of repacking to the boy and went about a minute search of the ship itself.

In that he was not a moment too soon. Behind the control board—hidden under the vine-like mass of electric leads—were two thermobombs. Their detonating coils were already hot. The control board was divided into three panels, each controlling an opposite pair of the six tubes which were arranged hexagonally about the stern. Two of the panels were about to be ruined by fire.

Hank Karns' first impulse was to snatch the bombs loose and let them burn out harmlessly on the deck, but suddenly he checked it. Instead he withdrew his hand and stuck his blistered fingers in his mouth. Then he shouted a warning to Billy Hatch.

"Hey! Stand by for a blast. Bring an extinguisher, quick!"

The boy ran up, but nothing happened for several minutes. Then the two boards flashed fire. They put the fire out, but the damage was done. The *Swapper* was not nearly up to acceleration. She could never get to Earth at that velocity. She would have to limp into Venus on her two re-

maining tubes and have yard electricians renew her wiring.

"Pretty neat," said Hank Karns, admiringly, contemplating his ruined controls.

"I did the best I could, Cap'n," said Billy, modestly, thinking the compliment was meant for him.

"You did all right, son," said the skipper. "Supposing you turn in now. I'll do what's left."

Hank Karns did not at once change course for Venus. He was still unsatisfied that he knew all he should know about his ship and its seemingly innocuous cargo. It was too obvious to miss that Dement had ordered the bombs planted to ensure the *Swapper's* going into Venus. It was an easy guess that the suggestion to take liquor on board was a device to ensure the ship's arrest and the confiscation that was sure to follow, Venusian courts being what they were. But to Hank Karns' suspicious mind there was much more to it than that. In the first place, he could have obviated both. He could have snatched the bombs before they exploded, and he could yet jettison the liquor. Moreover, if the mere elimination of all visitors to Mercury was what they were after, those bombs could just as well have been of feroxite and designed to destroy the ship entirely, as was done in the case of the openly hostile Merrill and Carter. No, the master plot required the *Swapper* to go into Venus and be done away with there. Why? He thought that over.

Suddenly he arose and unlocked his little safe. From its lead container he withdrew a small pellet of radium and set up his fluoroscope. Then he dragged out one of the trockelbeck hides. He searched it systematically from horn to stubby tail, from the scaly back to the claws of the feet. Then he put his fluoroscope away. Grinning into his beard, he went aft and got a pair of pliers, a hammer and a cold chisel.

One of the horns came away as he screwed it off. He knew already from its fluorescence that it was hollowed out and filled with some substance, but he wanted to make sure. He shook the pale green powder inside out into his palm and sniffed it. Yes, that was it. There was the unmistakable odor of crushed cherries and the sickish sweetness of the hashish of the

skies—trilibaine! Ah, now he was getting somewhere. And as he split a few back scales at random he found that each had a few grams of the insidious drug within it. One such hide would supply a retail peddler for many months, each scale a separate delivery.

He delayed no longer. He shifted his course toward Venus and at the same time sat down to his radio key. He sent:

"URGENT: Venusberg Sky Yard. Attention assistant dockmaster. Four tubes disabled account switchboard fire. Please reserve for me berth twenty-three. Litigation in prospect. Can you recommend lawyer? (signed) Hank Karns, captain, TS Swapper."

"Well," he said to himself as he carefully swept up the tell-tale green dust from the deck and added it to the bundle of broken scales and neatly bored and threaded horns preparatory to firing it all through the garbage tube into his wake, "I've shot my wad. Now let's see how smart Mr. Brown turns out to be."

HE learned very soon that the thermo-bombs were but an added precaution. He had not been waiting more than a couple hours when his loudspeaker began to buzz. He glanced at it in surprise, as he was still a long way from Venus. The message began coming through, harsh and peremptory, "Lay to, *Swapper*, to receive a boarding party. Lay to, or take the consequences. Sky-guard calling. Lay to!" Hank Karns cut his rockets and went to the airlock to await the arrival of the cruiser. It was not long in coming.

Two smartly uniformed young officers sprang in.

"Let's see your manifest," ordered one, curtly, while the other headed for the hold. In a moment the second came back with two flasks of the pale violet comet-dew.

"The old boy is lousy with the stuff," he reported to the other. "Cases and cases of it."

"Yes," said the first, "and not a damn word about it in the manifest. This makes the second one of these old coots we've hauled up this month—what do you say, shall we call this one conspiracy?"

"Why not?" countered the other.

Karns said nothing beyond the usual blustering protests that would be expected

of him. Then he lapsed into silence as the two took over after ordering their own vessel to proceed.

They did not go to the commercial sky-yard, but to the official one. Other officers met them, and Hank Karns was led straight away to jail. He protested every step of the way, demanding to be taken before the Terrestrial resident commissioner, or to be booked in the usual way. Both those demands were refused, whereupon he asked for a lawyer.

"Don't kid yourself, old man," said one of his guards. "You're in Venus now. Here you are."

There he was. There was no question about that. The barred door slammed behind his departing escort with an air of utter finality.

"Hi-ya, pop!" screamed some hoodlum down the corridor. "Whatcha in for?"

After that nothing happened. Hank Karns looked about him at his cramped cell and settled down to make the best of it. It would be tiresome, locked up alone this way, but in a day or so perhaps the mysterious Mr. Brown would put in his appearance.

The next day came, but no Mr. Brown. However, early in the morning another visitor came in his place. Karns heard footsteps approaching and the jangle of keys. His door was flung open and a tall stranger stepped in. The man was quite old and clad in the blue uniform, faded and patched, of a space skipper. He was obviously a lone trader, but if he was, he was the only one in the universe that Hank Karns did not know. For this man, with his beetling gray eyebrows and hard steely eyes beneath, he had never laid eyes on before.

"Two minutes, no more," warned the guard, and stood back in the corridor where he could both see and hear.

"Howdy Hank," said the newcomer. "Danged if it ain't gitting so that Tom Bagley spends half his time bailing you out or paying fines. Why, I'd hardly landed here but what I heard you'd been slung into the calaboose again, and I says to myself, says I. . . ."

"Yeah, Tom, I know," said Hank Karns, penitently, trying not to look at the eaves-dropping guard. Inwardly he was seething with doubt and curiosity. Could it be

that this was some minion of the collector trying to trick him, or was he acting for Mr. Brown? He remembered telling the fellow in the wickerware place that what he really needed was a man of his own type. Maybe they had found one. At any rate, he chose to pretend he knew him.

"Anyhow," went on the stranger, "I looked up a feller named Brown that I know here and asked him what to do. He said things looked pretty black and his advice was to plead guilty and say nothing. Might get off with a fine or something. And that he had a little money of yours. He got me this pass, but said he couldn't work it twice. Now tell me, Hank, what do you want me to do? I gotta get out of here for Mercury in a day or so."

Hank Karns looked at the man steadily for a moment. He was on the spot. The man was evidently from Brown, but he knew neither of them personally. But worse, the guard was listening to every word, and there were doubtless dictaphones as well. But the two minutes were running out and there would not be a second visit.

"I'll tell you, Tom, there isn't but one thing you can do. I'll have to take my medicine, I guess, but I hate like everything to lose them trocklebeck hides and horns. The critters is dying off—poisoned by pagras. Them danged snakes are all over Mercury. You might not have money enough to buy 'em in, but sorta keep track of 'em, won't you? They're not worth much now, but they'll be *mighty* valuable some day. There's a man here from Io that'll pay a good price for 'em, ef you can find him."

"Time's up," snapped the guard, coming forward.

"All right, you old scalawag," said the phony trader captain, jovially, "I'll do my best. But watch your step with that jedge. He's tough."

"I know," said Hank Karns, despondently, and settled his face in his hands.

The door slammed and the footsteps withdrew, ringing emptily down the metal passage.

Dreary day followed dreary day. Time after time Karns heard footsteps ringing in the corridor, and as often he heard the rattle of keys as some door was opened and another unfortunate was ordered out

to meet his doom—the sentence that was to change his state from slow dry rot to the swift wet rot of the Swamp. But it was never Karns' door.

Then at last came the day when guards took him to the identical court where Wilkerson had been tried. The evidence was brief and to the point. He was apprehended trying to sneak into Venus when his clearance papers called for Terra as his destination. He had on board eight cases of illicit liquor. He had no acceptable explanation. Guilty. Two years in the Swamp and the loss of his ship was the sentence. Then they took him back to his cell to await the next caravan to the penal camps.

The second stretch of waiting was harder to take than the first, for he had placed the enigmatic collector now in his memory. The man was Von Kleber, thought to have died many years ago in the uranium mines of Sans Espérance. Karns knew him to be a convict from the fact that he had grafted new skin on his face and head so that the burns and baldness caused by radioactivity would not show. But that he was the notorious Von Kleber himself had not occurred to him. And with that recognition came the other. Raoul Dement was the man known as Frenchy the Hop, vice-president of the Von Kleber ring. It was he who had operated the narcotic racket while the big boss turned his attention to such other lines as piracy, white-slaving and smuggling in general. If such men could flourish unchecked in the well-policed Jovian satellites for more than a decade, it was hopeless to expect to dislodge them from their place on corrupt and autonomous Venus.

And so time dragged on and Hank Karns sat, awaiting the day when he would be taken away to the Swamp. He wondered apathetically whether he would be sent to the same camp where Wilkerson and Hildreth were. But at last there came a day when footsteps rang again in the corridors and he heard doors being opened and men taken away. Finally men stopped before his own cell and called him forth. Between two soldiers they marched him away.

To his surprise they took him first to the street, where three sedan chairs were wait-

ing. The guards very politely indicated that Karns was to get in the middle one and they took the others. Hank clambered in and they set off. Shortly they drew up before the courthouse.

He was met inside by a tall, slender man of nearly his own age who wore the uniform of Chief Inspector of the Interplanetary F.B.I.

"How are you, Captain?" he said cheerily. "Sorry you had such a long stay in jail, but we'll try to make that up to you. Come in here and let me show you something?"

Hank Karns looked at the inspector in amazement. He was Frank Haynes, the man who had broken the Von Kleber case years before. There had been a time when they worked closely together on the information that Karns furnished when he was released from Sans Espérance. He said nothing in reply, though, as Haynes was leading the way into the courtroom. In the dock were two baldheaded prisoners—Von Kleber, erstwhile Collector of the Port, and Mr. Dement, manager of the Mercurian drug works. The judge was a new one—a judge who looked like a judge should look.

"There they are, thanks to you," said Haynes, pointing. "Two as clever criminals as ever plagued the system. We've been a long time catching them. But their career is over now.

"Our local operative, known as Brown to you, has been trying for months to locate the source of the trilobaine flood but without avail. The Venusian authorities blocked him at every turn but there was nothing we could do about that unless we could hang a Federal offense on them. It was you who did that for us. I am very glad I gave you that identification ring after our cleanup on Callisto and the list of the secret addresses of our agents. I felt then that you were a man of discretion and would not abuse its privileges and today I most certainly am more than justified. When I interviewed you in your cell . . ."

"You!"

Inspector Haynes grinned at Hank's surprise.

"Pretty effective disguise, eh? Well, as I was about to say—you gave me all the tips that were needed. First of all, your mention of the scourge of pagras told me it was trilobaine you had aboard, for that is a distillation of pagra venom. That gave us jurisdiction. I attended the secret auction and tried to bid. Everything in the ship went for a song to Von Kleber's pals, but when I went to bid on the trocklebeck hides I ran into stiff opposition. They were not to be had at any price. So I stopped bidding.

"Our operatives trailed those hides through five sets of owners before we came to the Collector himself. Early this morning we made our raid and took in all their supplies of drugs and twenty-five of their peddlers. Previously we had raided Mercury and those men came in about an hour ago. They had quite a thriving little business, and why we didn't think of their method of smuggling in the trilobaine before this I'll never know. We knew, of course, that it must be coming in the ships that they confiscated. That much we were sure of. But we couldn't prove a damn thing until we knew *how*. Thanks to you, the ring is busted now, and we can do something for those poor devils who were innocently duped into being carriers of the drug. Runners have already been sent to the Swamp to bring back your friends. And there you are. You'll find your old *Swapper* in the Yard, completely overhauled and stocked to the gunwales with grade A trade goods."

Hank Karns, trader, tugged at his grizzled beard and looked rather sheepishly at the floor.

"Dag it all," he said "that's fine enough. But gosh, I sure hated to make a damn fool of myself in front of everybody that-away."

Inspector Haynes broke into laughter and crossed over and slapped him on the back.

"You old liar. You loved it!"

Exiles of the Desert Star

By ROSS ROCKLYNNE

It was murder. Murder among the asteroids. Hallmeyer had orders to transform small Elron's brisk atmosphere to krypton. It meant killing that last gallant handful of royal exiles as surely as if his hand held a ray-gun.

I SIDNEY HALLMEYER, was more scientist than diplomat, yet I saw at once, when the president of the Tellurian Science Research Institute called me into his office, that in this new venture I would play the latter role more than the former.

"Sid," he said, after I had taken a seat, stretching my extra long legs out in front of me, "after the successful part you played in the Ganymede affair, the Board of Directors seems to have got the idea that it can depend on you in any delicate matters concerned with space outside Earth. Yes, I know how you felt about stealing that weapon from Ganymede, but that's neither here nor there—you succeeded. So now you've got another job involving the transference of your own personality from your body to the body of another."

He smiled; I smiled too, in sickly fashion. I lit a cigarette and went behind a smoke barrage.

I said: "I suppose it's another case of being deprived of all my scientific knowledge."

"No. On the contrary. You will need your science. As a matter of fact, your being the head of the Electrical Research Department has acted to cinch this job for you. You see, there is a small planet out there in the asteroid belt, a 300 mile diameter planet which was captured by the Sun about fifteen years ago. It belongs to the United States; Parkinson, in his legendary flight to Pluto ten years ago, having planted our Flag there."

He paused, his steady, wise eyes holding mine.

"You see, Sid," he said slowly, "that planet belongs to the United States. Whoever happens to be there now, doesn't belong. Your job is first to convince them that by right of eminent domain, they must get off or suffer the consequences."

My heart sank. I said: "Who are

they, and what are the consequences?"

My superior tapped a pencil on his broad desk. He seemed to have difficulty holding my eyes. I suspected he was being ashamed of himself.

He said: "There are about fifteen of them—exiles from another universe. They were the ruling heads of a great imperial empire which embraced who knows how many solar systems a great number of light years away. They were dethroned by revolution, placed in eternal sleep by a secret process, to awaken only when the light of a hot Sun should strike their world. That light did strike their world, after it had traveled for thousands of years through black, cold, uncharted space. They awoke, and commenced to live their quiet, uneventful life, dreaming of glories that were gone and done with forever. These past fifteen years they have lived there, awaiting only the extinction that must soon overcome them; for their sleep, as it was intended, has robbed them of the ability to propagate."

"I see," I muttered, though I didn't really. "And they have to get off, or suffer the consequences."

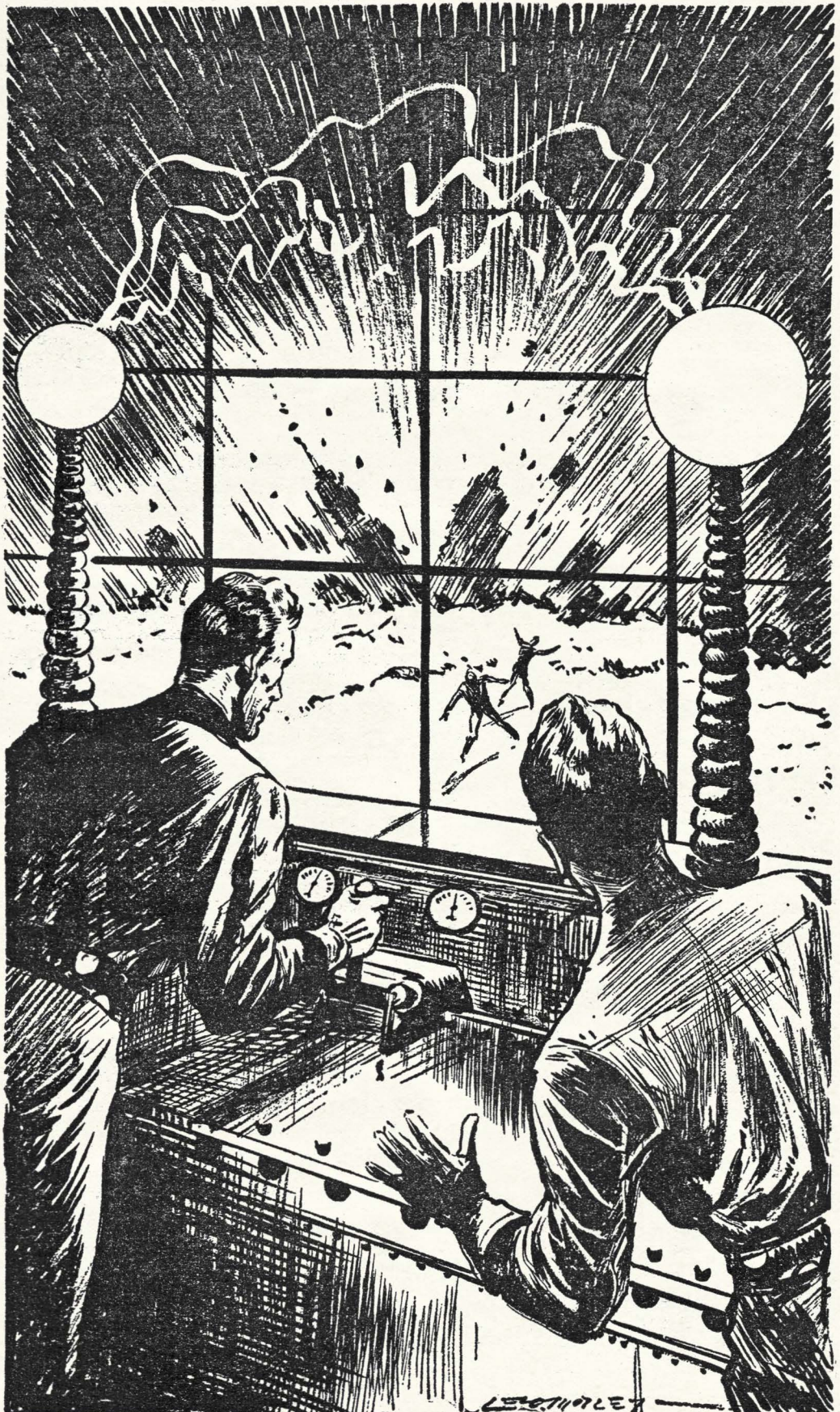
"Yes." He resumed carefully: "The consequences to be asphyxiation—by krypton gas."

He got up and walked to the window, shaking his fine head, and clicking his tongue. Then he faced me again.

"Space travel, Sid, is on the upgrade. Soon it will be a commonplace matter to go to Pluto. There is one big stumbling block, however: The lack of means of communication. Radio waves cannot be forced across the great open spaces between the planets. There is only one answer: a signpost in space! Do you see what I mean?"

"No," I said, quite truthfully; yet even as he said it, I was beginning to suspect the truth.

He completed my thoughts: "Elron—



which is the name the fifteen inhabitants have given their planetoid—is entirely covered with a layer of quartz about twenty feet thick. The rest of the planetoid is solid nickel iron; which accounts for the fact that it has a gravity three tenths that of Earth, and an atmospheric pressure of five pounds to the square inch.

"The atmosphere is breathable for them, and will be breathable for you when you transfer bodies. But it is your job, *among* other things, to change that atmosphere to krypton!"

"Krypton!" I echoed; and then I saw the whole thing. It was a mighty scheme, a colossal scheme, but cruel. I got to my feet, and started to open my mouth.

But my superior shook his head, in quiet warning. "That won't do any good, Sid," he said gently. "The Interplanetary Board has issued me my orders, and I have no choice but to issue them to you."

I unclenched my fists then, and, knowing that I was accepting a job I didn't like, I did just that.

And three days later when our expedition of seven, including Will Carrist, who had a rating of A-1 inscribed on his pilot's card, took off for Elron, there was nothing but unease in my heart.

THE asteroid belt is not as thickly populated as many people would believe. To date—this was June of 2121—only 4300, to give a round figure, have been tabulated. Those 4300 chunks of rock, ranging all the way from pea-size to satellite-size, are spread out in a great elliptical orbit around the Sun, just outside Mars' orbit. The belt itself is a million miles broad on the average. A ship, therefore, can travel for thousands of miles, in many cases, and not even sight a single fragment of this planet-that-used-to-be; and consequently suffer small danger of catastrophe.

We had penetrated the Belt a good half-million miles, when our telescope observer reported that Elron had crossed the hair-lines and was slanting down on its node with the orbit of the Belt. In an hour we would land.

I went to the pilot room, to give Carrist his instructions. He was sitting laconically at the instrument board, an under-average size man with broad shoulders and tremendous strength, rocky features. He was

not equipped very well mentally, except that he was a natural-born pilot, people saying of him that he could calculate the mass of a planet clear up to nine decimals, just by the feel of fighting its gravity. He had long been my best friend, and felt much the same toward me.

He looked around toward me sullenly.

Then he turned away again.

"I don't like this job," he muttered. "I'm beginning to feel bad, Sid!"

I said: "Buck up, Carrist. I've been reading up on that royal family. Some of their history has seeped out into the libraries. Yes, they are just sitting around and dreaming of past glory—but what glory it was! The Tsar's regime in Old Russia didn't hold a candle to it! You know what I mean? They treated their people like slaves. Their whole empire existed solely for their own amusement. They thought only of themselves. They believed in the Credo of Self. They would live only for themselves. When the great revolution came along, and they were dethroned, the people who exiled them had just that in mind. They sent them off in lonely space, to live for themselves! And that's just what they're doing. Quit worrying about it, Carrist. Whatever happens to them, they'll be getting their just desserts."

I slapped him on the back affectionately, my mind busy with the problem of landing.

He turned around toward me. "You believe that, Sid?"

I stared at him, suddenly nettled by his tone. "Of course, I believe it," I said angrily. "Why else would I spout off like that?"

"To convince yourself, of course," he snapped. He tossed his head. "Oh, never mind, I won't bother with your convenient way of thinking. But it still seems to me like a dirty trick. Where do I put this crate down?"

I HELD my temper in check by gritting my teeth, staring at the back of his head. Of course, I believed what I had said! Since I had talked with my superior, I had read a book, *History of the Elronians*. Their philosophy, the reason for their exile, had been clearly, unequivocally stated. My first feeling, that of pity, had rapidly vanished. They had treated their own people like dogs, therefore, there was no reason

why I should not do the same to them. But it irritated me to have Carrist interfere with my line of thought. It made me feel as if I were doing the wrong thing after all!

I swore under my breath, and put the matter from my mind, at least for the time being. I answered his question.

"Elron rotates," I said, surlily. "The nickel iron core is likely to be closer to the surface at one of the poles. Take a turn around the planet, and whichever pole seems to offer the least difficulties for landing, that's where we make our base. Then you and I will take the automobile out of the hold, and go over and get our bodies. And," I added slowly, though already premonitions were gnawing deep into me, "see what we can do toward reasoning with the inhabitants."

He cast me a glance that was eloquent with sardonic humor. Carrist apparently didn't think it was going to be as easy as that. And I am afraid I didn't either. With sinking heart, I watched the gleaming white disk that was Elron come slanting toward us, the details of her jagged, chaotic surface becoming more and more apparent to the naked eye. We spiraled once around the planet, and elected to land at what we arbitrarily designated the north pole. From this base, he would, with our special apparatus, transmute the oxygen, nitrogen, carbon dioxide, and hydrogen of the atmosphere into pure krypton.

Krypton—in which no organic creature can live!

CARRIST and I set the other men to unloading the complex transmuter, and the electrical equipment which would literally make of this strangely constructed planet a signpost in space. Then we readied ourselves for our trip to the Elronian Bureau of Transmitted Egos; and by 5 P. M. Earth Standard Time, our airtight automobile was threading its way around gaunt quartz crags that thrust themselves against the blue-black sky, making its laborious way to the home of the exiled rulers of an empire that existed thousands of light years away, in a deep space that man had never penetrated.

In five hours, we had reached the village. I suppose it could be called a village, though it was just a circle of fan-

tastically formed quartz huts surrounding a spired, medieval-looking castle. Everything was quiet, as I steered the airtight automobile along the smoothed-over lane that led to the domed building that was the Bureau of Transmitted Egos. But then, we hadn't expected to see much life. There were only fifteen of them at the most, and they might be sleeping or eating or holding some sort of religious service.

We got out of the car, after putting helmets over our heads, to supply us with the air pressure we were used to. Above us, the blue-black sky was comfortless, dismal, and the pall of it settled into our faces and our voices. Unconsciously, we moved our leaden-soled shoes across the quartz walk with the minimum of noise. We walked in the open door of the Bureau. Everything was dark. We could barely see through the doors to either side of us, and caught vague glimpses of the fantastic machinery which rendered transference of one mind to another body.

"Nobody around," Carrist said in a throaty whisper, looking ludicrous in his over-emphasis of caution.

"They probably don't transfer bodies more than once in a year," I agreed. "And then only for curiosity seekers. But you and I, at least, have to have bodies we can move around in, without bothering about space-suits. We're going to be here for at least ten days."

My teeth were beginning to chatter. Elron is even farther removed from the Sun than is Mars; and the Sun, a pale yellow disk, was even now settling behind the horizon.

We stood there indecisively. Then I snorted. We were legally entitled to bodies, by the rules the Interplanetary Board had set down. Why we should be scared to draw a deep breath, I didn't know. Just because the bodies we would inhabit would belong to royalty was no reason we should be timid about acquiring them!

I stepped up to the registration desk boldly, pulled the rope that dangled from the ceiling.

"*Boom! Clang! Boooooommmmm!*"

The monstrous, full-throated sound was like blasphemy. It was like uttering sacrilege in a church of the dead. Involuntarily I leaped back, clutching Carrist's arm. Carrist's arm was shaking.

"Lord!" he breathed, white in the face.

I knew what he was thinking. That must have been a huge bell, much larger and more voluminous than the ones ordinarily used on these out of the way planets. It was as if the inhabitants of this dying race had an edge on us, as if they had cleverly given themselves the opportunity of pointing a quivering finger of wrath at us, accusing us of disturbing their peace.

Nor were we far wrong.

We heard the merest sound of a sandal scraping on quartz. Carrist and I involuntarily turned toward that sound. We saw a door opening slowly in the deep gloom. A figure stood outlined against the ghostly white of smooth-quartz walls. For a full minute, while we stood transfixed, hair raising on our scalps, the outlandish figure stood there, watching us.

Then, "Who disturbs the rest of the House of Immon Pongh?"

THE words were golden mellow, deep and flowing, accented with alienness. They were spoken in the universal tongue, as if the speaker had not had occasion to speak that tongue often.

Carrist chattered hoarsely, "Say something, Sid. S-something funny."

It was the silliest thing in the world for me to stand there and gulp out:

"We—beg your pardon. We want some bodies. Two of them."

Silence built. Then the being said, "Ahg!"

He disappeared momentarily. A dim effulgence of light stole into being above us, growing in intensity until lengthening shadows faded away into nothing. Then the figure came into sight again. I got a shock that turned my blood cold. The creature was of human form, as we have discovered most intelligent beings. But there the resemblance was brought to an end.

This one was tall, perhaps seven feet, and his limbs were pipestems. He bent in the middle, and the eyes set in his death's head face were round as saucers. We gave back a step, as he came toward us, slowly rubbing his great bony hands over each other. From the look in his eyes, and despite his fixed grin, I decided he was mad at us.

"You wish—*bodies?*" he whispered.

"Royal bodies?" His eyes were fanatical.

I got hold of myself, and had the sense to get sore.

"Royal bodies, or any other kind you happen to have." I snapped. "And we haven't got much time to waste. To your business!"

"At this hour?" he whispered. "When the princes and the princesses and the lords and the ladies and the Queen sleep? But then—" his hands fell to his sides, and something flickered in his eyes, "—but then, you have already awakened them from dreams of glory!"

He turned into more of a human being now, clucking and whispering and whistling asthmatically to himself. He turned around to the shelves behind him, drew out two slips of paper and a pencil.

"Ahg!" he said, turning around toward us, and pushing the blanks out, staring at us with his unblinking eyes. "There is little we of Elron can do. Eh? We are trodden upon. We are forced to do these things, to humiliate ourselves, by a race which we consider less than dust! Yet it is our part to do nothing—thus says the Queen! It is our part to die, here upon strange Elron, so far from our lost empire! We will die soon enough, says the Queen, without bringing the wrath of the hated dogs down upon us. Let us live here, on this planet, the last remembrance of the space from which we came. And, says the Queen, each shall go back to the quartz tomb where he slept, when finally he sleeps—again." His eyes flickered. "Sign, hated dogs of a filthy race!"

Carrist looked at me. I shrugged, grabbed up the pencil, scribbled out various unimportant facts on the blank, signed, shoved the blank back, and gave the pencil to Carrist. I was beginning to feel better every minute. If this being's attitude was indicative of that of the whole race, we would have something to push back at us, and make us feel we were justified in our actions!

"Now," said the being, leering at us, "to the business of bodies. Ah, yes, I believe the Princes Togervi and Toganvi will submit to this disgrace. I shall call them!"

With hooked hands, he grabbed the bell rope, and the air shook with that monstrous sound. I had the feeling the old

gander was telling us we had already disturbed royalty, and this new disturbance was, therefore, our fault anyway.

We didn't wait very long. The door pushed open, and two Elronians, garbed in pale yellow garments with trails that dragged the floor, appeared. They were, maybe, an inch taller than their older contemporary, but they stood upright, and the flesh of their bodies was firm and healthy, and they were even good-looking.

They eyed us coldly; then turned to the oldster.

"Must we submit to this filth from another planet?" said one.

"Ahg! So says the Queen! For who knows what injustices the creatures may practice on us if we do not do their will? Come!"

The princes followed him as he hobbled away; I followed them. Carrist hesitated a moment, then grabbed my arm.

"Sid!" he whispered anxiously. "Don't you think maybe we better—"

But I shook his arm off impatiently, an act which I had reason to regret later. My confidence, my certainty that after all I had no reason for feeling pity for these people, was too strong. Truly, I little suspected that once our bodies were transferred to these others, it would constitute a dreadful weapon the Elronians could hold over us!

WE came forth into the room housing the involved mass of machinery which transmitted egos. I urged Carrist ahead of me, and with a despairing look on his face, he slowly climbed into the heavy metal chair. The oldster draped the harness over him, placed the metal cap on his head. One of the princes was treated similarly, his eyes filled with a quiet, contemptuous hate. There was so much superiority implied in his look, that I began to squirm.

The old Elronian then stepped to the instrument board, made various adjustments, then pulled a series of levers. At once the room sparked with light as the transferring machines went into action. Carrist and the Prince tensed, staring at each other with preternaturally wide eyes.

It was eerie, and it turned the blood to ice. Although many times before I had seen transferences, and participated in

them, I knew I would never get over the strangeness.

Personalities, reduced to simple vibrations that sped along metal cables, impinging finally on the subject's brain, there reorganizing themselves upon the ninety billion cells, and infinitely more giant molecules whose isomers, in their constant state of flux, create that which is known as thought!

It was over, and the next thing I knew, Carrist, in the prince's body, was stumbling across the floor toward me. He was seven feet tall. I shuddered at him.

"Don't look so uppity," he snarled. "If you ask me, I got the best bargain!"

He was right, for the other prince was a shade thinner, and was missing three front teeth, as I discovered twenty minutes later. Too, he had a touch of rheumatism, or something, which could be either that or an indication of heart trouble. Ye gods!

However, it was too late to start protestations, so Carrist and I carried our bodies into the storage room, put them on shelves, closed and sealed the glass doors behind them, and adjusted the air pressure to fifteen pounds. Our bodies were barely breathing, since they had only enough of the Princes' consciousness to keep them alive. We had all the instincts, the acquired traits and the memories of the princes' minds, in addition to our own minds. And we paid for it: 2,000 unives, 200 of which constituted the exorbitant tax the Elronians demanded.

The oldster wrote out his receipts in the usual triplicate form, pasting one on the glass which protected our bodies from the cold Elronian air, handing us another, and leaving the other in an almost unused receipt book.

Then rubbing his bony hands against each other so that they crackled like papyrus, he came toward us, his death's head face grinning.

"You will remember," he intoned in his bell-like voice, "what will happen if the bodies are injured fatally, eh? You would lose your own bodies and all your possessions! Not that that would be payment for one of the royal bodies of the House of Immon Pongh, which you are now defiling. But it will make you beware!"

He closed his lips with a smack. Then he backed up, and before I could say Io

he was gone, and the lights were fading away.

I jumped forward one step. "Hey!"

But he didn't hear me.

I turned to Carrist. "The nerve of that gander," I said bitterly, rubbing my left arm. "If this body has heart trouble—"

Carrist snickered; then wiped the grin off his face as he saw the scowl growing on my own.

"Weren't we going to talk with them about you-know-what?"

I scowled. "I'm sick of this place. Let's get back to the ship and get to work. We'll get our terminals set up, one to each pole of the planet, and then we'll come back and tell them what's what! Come on!" I grabbed his arm, and we went.

Before I followed Carrist into the planet-mobile, however, I turned around and stole a last glance at the city. It looked ghostly, white quartz cutting pieces out of the blue-black sky. The castle was perhaps five levels high, with castellated battlements. Around it were what I had thought to be huts. There were thirty of them, all told. A thought went darting through my brain . . . quartz tomb. Were those huts the tombs the old Elronian had made reference to? The tombs in which they had slept their artificially induced sleep all these long ages; the tombs where they would sleep the final sleep? I shivered, and raised my eyes to the castellated battlements. I saw a figure, standing here, looking down at us.

The figure of a woman! I could not mistake the gentle curves even of that six-and-a-half-foot body. Glowing jewels were draped from her neck and from her arms; and her large eyes, filled with an infinite sadness, glowed with the same persistency as the jewels.

Something crept out of my mind, and slowly, slowly yet surely, took possession of me. For the moment, I was all Elronian. I was the prince, and I was looking at that woman with all the tenderness that one man gives to his woman. My arms raised, and I stood there, I know not for how long, borne away on a rapture that even my Tellurian brain knew.

"... Sid! Good Lord, Sid!"

Rough arms grabbed me. Something harsh slapped my face, and I was whipped around cruelly. My arms came down.

Then I was conscious of Carrist snapping at me in white heat. Slowly, then swiftly, the Elronian was gone from me. And I was almost my old self again. Carrist shoved me, and I clambered into the planet-mobile, sinking dazedly into the leather seat.

Only after we had left the village ten or fifteen miles behind did Carrist look at me. He was fairly boiling.

"A hell of a note!" he raged. "One of the laws is that the transferral must not allow the original owner's mind to take full possession! Keep yourself under control after this, or by Lord, we'll be in a hotter spot than we are now!"

I looked at him dazedly, and then away again. My Tellurian's mind remembered the glorious woman who had stood motionless on the parapet.

When we got back to the ship, nobody but Johensen, standing watch, was up. The others had gone to bed just an hour ago. Carrist and I decided to sleep, too, but first we looked around, to see what work had been accomplished. I was still in a less-than-clear state of mind, but I did notice, with approval, that the collapsible powerhouse, insulated with glass frame-work, was up. The Wittenbergs, the Holloway vacuum feeders, and the protonoclasts had been placed in the power house, ready for assemblage. The huge copper ball electrodes, constructed so that they could take more than one hundred million volts, were lying around in sections, as was the frame-work for the drilling turret. I nodded in satisfaction, said goodnight to Johensen, who kept asking me guarded questions to make sure I really was Sidney Hallmeyer and not one of the aliens, in person and in personality. I slapped Carrist on the back, urged him into the ship, and we sought our bunks, not quite sure whether our bodies were tired, but certain that our minds were!

CARRIST and I, having bodies that were perfectly adaptable to the coldness of this little sphere that floated in the heavens more than a hundred million miles from Earth, did most of the work in the ensuing days; although we had the help of our five workers, who were clad in space-suits. We got the drilling turret together, handling the metal sections without discom-

fort to our hands, bolting them together with a minimum of difficulty. We powered the motor with a cable from the ship's generator, and soon had the three-inch drill spinning. Carrist scrambled up the turret to the control platform, and dropped the drill to the almost unbroken quartz. It started to bite, with an immense humming, grinding noise. It was hard quartz, and it would probably be more than a day before we struck nickel-iron, if we did at all. After all, we had been taking the word of casual visitors or explorers of this planet that nickel-iron lay beneath the layer of quartz.

My fears, however, were without ground. Twenty hours after drilling operations had started, Carrist drew the drill up for the thousandth time. Suddenly he yelled. I ran forward, suspecting what had happened. I looked at the drill. Sure enough, about a foot of it was covered with metal flakings—nickel-iron, if I knew my business.

Elated, the Elronians driven from my mind by the certainty of the eventual success of the project, I set Johensen to work with a larger drill, since the boring would have to be at least eight inches in diameter. Carrist and I and the rest of the men got to work assembling the electrical equipment, putting the power house in order.

Two days later, all the hard work at this pole had been done. The giant copper electrode was set into the quartz, one end tightly enclosed by the nickel-iron twenty-five feet beneath us. The nickel-iron, of course, would ground the current that flowed between the two electrodes. Without that, our plan would have been completely useless.

In due time, we lifted the ship, put her down at the other pole, and commenced similar operations there, with the exception that we would not need a power house. We got the second electrode up in less time than the other, however, since we had to drill only twenty-one feet before we hit nickel-iron.

Carrist, who had been in a surly mood these past few days, looked at me sardonically.

"Now we've got her up, what happens?"

I didn't catch his real meaning. I was exuberant over the ease with which things were going.

"It's a simple matter," I told him. Carrist understands little of electricity. "Our Wittenbergs can easily generate an E.M.F. of more than a hundred million volts. The current will flow between the ball electrodes, grounding in the nickel-iron, thus completing the circuit. The whole planet will light up, not with separate bolts of lightning, but, because of persistence of vision, like a giant lamp. The wonderful thing about this planet is that it was literally made for an engineering project like this. The quartz is a dielectric, will not ground electricity. The atmosphere itself, since the planet rotates once every thirty hours or thereabouts, is in a constant state of turmoil. Understand? A bolt of lightning follows the line of least resistance. Well, anywhere from three to seven bolts of lightning will dart back and forth between the poles—120 times a second. We'll be using alternating current on a sixty-cycle frequency. Since the air is always moving around, the line of least resistance changes billions of times in a single second. Result—"

Carrist had his hands on his hips, and was regarding me with exasperation.

"I don't care about that," he cried. "Your giant neon-sign won't work with air, will it? You have to have krypton, an inert gas!"

That brought me back to Earth. For almost a week, now, I had managed to keep that thought out of my mind. Now it was brought back in full force. I curled my lips bitterly and was silent. My shoulders slumped.

"All right, then," I muttered wearily. "I guess that's our next job! Tell the men to get the ship ready and we'll go back to base."

We had no sooner put the ship down than Johensen, whom we had left behind just in case, came running out of the power house. We let him in the ship and helped him off with his space suit.

"Two of them were here," he cried excitedly. "Two Elronians. They were on some tricycle things run by a small motor. They just walked around the electrode and the power house, took a look at the transmitter. I came out and asked them what they wanted. They just stared. After awhile, they got on their tricycles and rolled away. I don't know if they in any way

suspected what was going on or not."

"How long ago was that?" I asked.

"Two hours ago."

I grabbed Carrist's arm. "Come on. We'll try to get to the Elronian queen before they do. If they found out we were going ahead on this project as if we didn't intend to ask their permission, they might refuse just out of pure meanness! The rest of you stick around and watch things. Better yet, get the transmuter in working order so we can start the transmutation process the minute I give the word."

And Carrist and I left the ship, our long, gangling Elronian bodies running around the powerhouse toward the automobile. We clambered in. I pressed the starter and the atomic motor purred. I released the clutch and like a flash we were off, going dangerously fast along the rough quartz surface.

I was in a fever of impatience all during that helter-skelter ride, straining my eyes through a gloom that even the Sun didn't help much. But we never caught sight of the Elronians. Their motorized tricycles must have eaten up the distance. In short, they got there before we did.

CARRIST and I were both quiet as we made the last mile, the castle now visible, and reminding me depressingly of a great mausoleum. The car came to a stop, and we got out, standing there indecisively. My acquired heart was beating unsteadily as we looked toward the ghostly city. I thought I felt a fluttering pain in the chest of this body I was using, but that was probably imagination. Symptoms of heart trouble generally show up in painful arms; and both my arms had rheumatic twinges, which never bothered me very much, since the body didn't belong to me.

"Well," I finally muttered to Carrist, "let's go." I started toward the castle.

He pulled me back, looking at me strangely. "Sid," he said nervously, "I don't like this. We're in a spot. Do you realize they've got our bodies? What if they should—well, you know what I mean! Let's get our bodies back, and then explain the situation!"

I laughed at him. "Don't be silly, Will! You don't think for a minute they'd break interplanetary law by withholding our

bodies from us, do you? The Patrol would be down on them so fast their heads would swim."

He held back stubbornly. "Well, I'm going to get my body; you can do what you like!"

And he started toward the domed building that housed the ego transmitting machinery. I looked exasperatedly after him, and finally took off after him. I got into the gloomy interior, and saw him disappear into the room where our bodies were stored. Ten seconds later I heard his yelp of horror. The next second he had plunged out of that room, smack into me. I picked him up. His teeth were chattering.

"Th-they're—gone!" he stuttered. Then he wailed, "Sid, they're gone! Our bodies!"

"What?" I gasped. Then I shoved him aside, pushed open the door, sending my eyes frantically to the shelves where our bodies had been placed. My eyes popped. The shelf doors were open; and our bodies weren't there. Ye gods!

Carrist was literally wringing his hands, a tortured expression on his face. I watched him blankly; and suddenly something stabbed at me. My knees weakened, and I grabbed at Carrist at the last minute. I felt him easing me to the floor, his teeth clicking, his voice chattering in shocked bewilderment.

For five minutes or so, I lay there, gasping, and I thought sure this body I was using was going to die. Then I was aware that I was swearing. The dirty dogs! To give me a body that might conk over any minute, and, in addition, to steal our real bodies from us!

Carrist helped me to my feet. He knew that if I could swear, even in the sweet, bell-like tone that came out of this body's throat, then I was all right again.

His face was lighting up joyously. "That's the spirit!" he exclaimed. "Let's get mad at 'em!"

"I'm mad at 'em, all right," I snarled. "Come on!"

I grabbed at his arm and started toward the door, moving gingerly, however. I didn't want a recurrence of that heart attack. But before we got to the outer door, some measure of sense returned to me. I halted Carrist and stood there thinking. Maybe that was wrong. The more thinking

I did, the more mountainous our troubles became. We had to get our bodies back; we had to persuade the Elronians to move to some other large asteroid, or satellite; we had to get the signpost working. And the first two jobs looked impossible! There was only one saving grace. I was mad clear through. They had made the first hostile move; we could make the second and final. And if they hadn't had our bodies, I would have gone back to base, and set the krypton transmuter into action, and ask them to get off afterward!

But they had our bodies; and the one they had given me wasn't healthy. I groaned, and Carrist looked miserable, plaintively demanding that I do something, no matter what it was.

BUT the matter of action was taken out of our hands. We heard the scraping sound of a sandal on quartz. We whirled; and there stood old Death's-head, grinning at us, and rubbing his dry, crackly hands together.

"You wish something?" he whispered, moving toward us one step for every step we moved away. "You wish to ask something of the Prince Consort, husband of the Queen That Was, father of the Queen That Is? Ask, and it is decreed that I must submit to the aliens who defile our bodies!"

I shuddered at him, but I finally stopped moving backward.

"All right," I snapped. "We do want something. We want our bodies." I dug feverishly in the leather pouch strapped around my almost non-existent hips. "Here!"

He looked at the slip of paper, then raised his saucer-eyes again. "Ahg, yes! The receipt for your bodies! You shall have them. Did you seek audience with the Queen, hated dogs?"

He looked from Carrist to me.

I said angrily, "No! Look here, we want our bodies. That's all we want, right now. And—"

He turned away, whispering wheezily. "Then you shall see the Queen, if that is your desire! Come!"

He hobbled away, like a wraith. I looked helplessly after him, then turned to Carrist, my eyes asking him an unspoken question. He looked at me scornfully.

"I'm not going with him, Sid," he cried, drawing back. "He's got some scheme in mind. I'm telling you, we better stand firm and raise hell! Tell them that we'll report them or something!"

But I was hardly listening to him. Deep in my mind something stirred. In pristine clearness, I was again seeing the figure of a woman standing atop the castellated battlements of the castle of the Elronians. The Queen That Is. The thought took form in me. Out of the mind of the Eronian who was captured in my mind, welled a vast tenderness, and a longing that was old.

I said to Carrist dully, "Come on. We must tell her. We should have told her long ago, when we first came here; then things would have been on a straighter basis."

And so I turned away from him, and did not realize that it was two mingled personalities that spoke. Behind me, Carrist sounded as if he were strangling.

"Sid, you're mad!" he cried. His extraordinarily muscular arms grabbed me around the waist; I could feel his Elronian muscles bunching against my thin ribs. I turned around in anger, trying to break free. When he wouldn't let me go, I brought my fist back and gave him everything I had, straight to the jaw. He went down like a poled ox. I let him lie there, and finally followed the self-proclaimed Prince Consort, husband of the Queen That Was, father of the Queen That Is.

HE led me from the Bureau of Transmitted Egos, across smoothed quartz, between two of the quartz huts, and finally up a short flight of stairs and into the castle. We turned right, went up another flight of stairs, and emerged into a huge, arched room that was heavy with the aroma of some alien incense. From the arched ceiling, barely dispersing the gloom that enwrapped me, hung tapers, burning slowly, and with a dull violet flame.

Then I became aware of a soft rhythm that swept in spasmodic surges through the room. I clenched my fists at my side. I was still enough of Sidney Hallmeyer, Electrical Research Engineer of the Telurian Science Institute, to know that I should fight against the insidiousness that was welling into my brain. It was too

much for me. I stood rooted on the threshold of that room, aware that he who had led me here had melted into the shadows, and joined the other ghostly figures that looked at me from two walls.

Far down at the other end of the room, now, the darkness was giving place to a radiance that grew like a Sun rising on mountains of snow. A figure suddenly was visible, and the rhythm that flowed through the room came louder to my ears. I knew with horror that I, Sidney Hallmeyer, was retreating into the depths of this brain that was not mine. I fought, then, savagely, with every atom of my will. Still I receded; and moved toward the woman who stood there.

The impulse that drove me was inexorable. I stood before a throne, on a tiny dais, then, and looked into the eyes of the woman I had seen on the castle top. I knew then, as I looked, that even after my ego had been transferred to my real body, if such it would be, I would remember the face whose round, calm, sad eyes looked into mine. I would remember the small drooping mouth, and the skin that was as white as moist rose petals, and the faintly bluish hair that hung down about her thin body that was beautiful to the eyes of the Elronian in me.

The lips opened, and above the quickening rhythm, her sweet voice gushed forth.

"Is it Prince Toganvi, my lover, who comes to me!"

My lips moved with difficulty. "My name is Sidney Hallmeyer," I whispered.

Her eyes became piercing. Suddenly she began to intone, in a quick rhythm that matched that which beat upon me:

"In the City of Eltor the green suns hang pendant above the fairy gardens of the rulers of the Empire of the Stars. In the night the green moons rule. Winds come out of the mountains, carrying perfume upon them. Great white-feathered birds float above the waving trees, and sometimes cry out strange sounds. The children in the garden laugh at them and throw stones at them, and they wheel away, making their sounds. Beyond the wall are the voices of the people who are ruled. They will do the bidding of the children who play in the garden. The children play with little stones, and laugh as they strike them together, making

sparks fly! Is it Prince Toganvi who stands before me?"

As in a ritual, I answered the same as before; but the word picture she painted was agonizing. Within me Prince Toganvi strained turbulently against my will, and I felt the strength of him, as the picture that was formed surged vividly into his mind, and carried across to mine, threatening to engulf me.

The Queen leaned forward, her large eyes burning, her drooping lips parted.

"The wind catches the sails of the little boat, and it skims through the green night over the restless waters of the Lake of Loor that touches upon the shores of the City of Eltor. Far to the left loom the black cliffs. Thunder drops from the clouds, and lightning cuts the awful sky. The boat is tossed. The children are not laughing but are clasped in each other's arms while the slave fights the storm. Soon the waves are high. The slave screams and is gone. The mainsail splits, and the boat yaws broadside. Mountains of water engulf the boat, but when it is gone, a rocky shore rushes, rushes out of the blackness, and when the children are next aware, they have been cast upon a beach, and the yellow sand is warm beneath them! Prince Toganvi, you have fought the will of the alien and are here!"

THE drum-beat of her voice and the unearthly rhythm struck at me. Shadows flickered as the tapers burned fitfully. The incense forced itself up my nostrils, and my mind was hazing. Yet, though the mind within me drew one step nearer the Queen who stood before him, I answered in a whisper, "I am Sidney Hallmeyer, Queen That Is!"

There was a rustle around me, and somehow I was aware of excitement. The Queen showed it in her strained face. Somehow, perhaps by my manner of addressing her, they must have suspected that I, the alien, was losing!

She spoke again, using vivid imagery, recalling fragments of a childhood that was lost in antiquity unmeasured.

"The great red forests terrace the mountain-side. The leaves fall and flutter in the light of the green moons. Cries of beasts come out of dark places. Far below the green, mysterious ocean pounds against

gaunt rocks. Far above the stars, that are the Mighty Emperors, stand beyond the moons. The carriage rolls swiftly, and the children sit silent. Death-dealers stalk the empire. A light bursts the darkness. Out of the darkness comes the pound of fiery tarks. Their skin glows, and men with cruel faces sit astride them. The carriage turns. The wheels spit fire as the carriage flees down the mountain, back to the walled City of Eltor, on the edge of the green Lake of Loor. The night is sundered with the pound of hoofs and the cries of rage! Speak, my lover, Prince Toganvi, and know that it is I, the Queen That Is, who speaks to you!"

She leaned forward toward me, her eyes filled with a desperate yearning. Yet already she knew the answer my quivering, tortured mind was forcing to the lips of her Prince. Her face became white and strained, and again her lips moved, and words gushed forth:

"All the world that is the last stronghold of the Mighty Emperor of the Empire of the Stars is red with death. And red with flame. Even the beasts race across the dank black moors, slaving and wild-eyed. Thunder spears the stricken air, and the aeroplane is tossed upon the storm. The children sit quietly. Regally they sit, side by side, and stare down at the red hell. The horizon rumbles as the rebels loose their missiles. Flames dance in puffs from the mountains. The heavens yaw widely. Below there will be the marching armies who defend the City of Eltor. The children sit quietly. The Emperor will come. The Empire of the Stars will again be an empire. But the children do not understand. They do not know of their enemies, who plan the Sleep. They sit, side by side, hand in hand, and as they watch, they see the glorious spired City of Eltor blasted from the mountain-side. It slides, and churns and rumbles, and hovers on the edge of the mountains. Then it falls, falls, into the Lake of Loor. The Lake of Loor bursts into steam as it engulfs the City of Eltor. The hiss pierces the air in a great scream that burns itself into the children's minds! Now, speak! Answer me, my lover, for I am the child who is now older in years, and leads her people to death, but, in memory, shares the everlasting glories of the Empire we

were to rule with you, Prince Toganvi!"

Quiet descended. Somehow, I was filled with a great calm. Somehow I was standing straighter, and the pictures of a glory that was dead floated before me, and grew in strength. The Lake of Loor; the City of Eltor; the gardens where we played. I remembered!

THE Queen leaned forward, her lips parted, her eyes bright with hope and longing.

"It is you, Prince Tonganvi," she said softly.

"I am Prince Toganvi, yes," my body's voice answered. "For a time, I come from the defilement that has been visited upon me. My Queen, have you so adroitly called me forth because of the danger facing us? For the purpose of revealing that secret which the hated aliens have withheld? Or is it that the day of our wedding, set when we were but children who played in the gardens of the royal palace, has now come, and must not be put aside, though there is another within me?"

The Queen leaned forward, her lips parted with an infinite tenderness. "It is the latter I long for, my prince, but the former I must know, and quickly. Do the aliens intend to destroy us? Have you learned this much?"

The Prince stood straighter. When he spoke, there was the quality of steel in his voice.

"Already the machines have been built. This much I knew, yet was powerless to inform you. It is their intention to drive us from this planet, the consecrated resting place to which we are all destined for eternity."

And deep in his mind, helpless to assert my true ownership of this body, and lacking the desire to do so if I could, I listened as he spoke, recounting in detail the plan first thought of by the Interplanetary Board. And he painted us blackly! The plan was to go ahead with the project, according to Prince Toganvi, get the electrodes set up, start the krypton transmutter, thus changing the air into unbreathable krypton, and asphyxiating the Elronians should they refuse to leave this planet upon which they were destined to die.

The Queen, and those who were assembled off in the shadows listened. Finally

he ceased, and silence descended. As if moving from a trance, the drooping lips of the Queen turned upward, in a sweet, sad smile. Regally, she descended two steps, and placed her hand, soft as velvet upon the cheek of the Prince.

"It would be my wish that our marriage were consummated on this day," she whispered. "The years have fled past, and we have waited too long. There has been too much sadness in our lives, Prince Toganvi, and therefore we should have taken as much of joy as we could. Now, who knows, perhaps we will never know the happiness we could have given each other. The aliens are here, and surely our lives are short and almost spent! For should we resist these, there are yet millions—and even, they say, billions—who will seek us out, to work their will upon us."

Around us—Prince Toganvi, the Queen, and myself—there was a whisper of protest. The Queen looked into the darkness, smiling gently.

"Is there any who denies us the right of marriage?" she said. "Must we fight this thing that is happening, when already death is upon us? Better for us to seek our beds, and sleep the sleep that is eternal, in the arms of those we love."

Yet there was the murmur of protest, and figures stirred uneasily.

A frightened, imploring expression grew in the Queen's eyes. Even on Prince Toganvi's face she could see the look of doubt. Her white, fragile hands crept to her eyes. She lowered her head, and stood in that manner, as if she were facing an ultimate sorrow she could not bear, a sorrow worse than that engendered by the ultimate loss of everything she had known in her youth. And suddenly I knew and understood the terrible heartbreak she was enduring. All her life she had been betrothed to this Elronian who stood before her, doubtful of the wisdom of the course she had suggested. Even in my apathetic state, I winced.

When she raised her head, her eyes were calm and bright.

"What is my Prince's wish?" she asked regally.

For a long moment he returned her gaze; then suddenly fell to one knee, and pressed her hand to his lips. And I knew the answer to the turbulent emotions that seethed

within him. If he could have been allowed to answer her question, it would have been, in many ways, the perfect happy ending.

Even now, I look back on that moment with loathing. It was a beautiful scene that was being enacted. Violet shadows, dancing fitfully against fluted columns, and against the white robed Elronians who hovered deep in the darker shadows; and the brilliance of a hidden radiance centered on the face of the Queen That Is, and reflected back upon the bowed head of Prince Toganvi; and over all a subtle incense floated, and mingled insensibly with the beating flow of an alien, low rhythm. A man—for how else should he be distinguished, though he was not of our race—without words gave his eternal love to a woman; and in her gently sweet face, in the smile that hovered on her lips, she gave answer.

... "Sid!"

LIKE that it came. . . .

Caught up in the harshness of that cry, I needed no mighty effort of will to bridge the barrier that was Prince Toganvi. Indeed, had I thought, I should have remained where I was, deeply buried, an humble spectator. I had no time to think. The brutal recurrence of that cry brought me up with a surge. Prince Toganvi no longer was Prince Toganvi. I caught one glimpse of the suddenly tortured eyes of the Queen That Is, then I had whirled, and run down the length of the room toward the door, in pure instinct.

Carrist, in the body of the Prince Togervi, came rushing toward me, his acquired face screwed up with excitement and anxiety.

"Sid!" he cried. "By Lord, you're alive!" He grabbed my arm, pulled me toward the door. I caught a glimpse of two other figures—Anderson, our engineer, and Seaton, our mathematician.

Suddenly I was in a consuming rage. I pulled away from Carrist. I screamed at him, I don't know what. I pointed back at the Queen That Is, mouthing incoherently. I pointed at the robed figures who still lined the wall, speechless, motionless, shocked into silence at this desecration.

Carrist glared at me as if I were mad, which I doubtless was. His lips tensed.

"Can't you tell, you damn fool?" he hissed. "*Krypton!*"

And he followed up his explanation with even a more potent persuasion. His fist smashed upward, and the universe hazed. The next thing I knew, my body was jogging up and down painfully, and the blood was rushing to my head. From somewhere behind, I heard the patter of feet, an excited, enraged hum of voices. I didn't blame those Elronians one bit. I hung face downward across Carrist's shoulder, unable or unwilling to demand that he put me down. I watched the quartz speeding away under Carrist's flying footsteps, heard him wheezing from the exertion. Then a thought burned into me.

Krypton!

My lungs, unconsciously, were going like bellows, as if they had to work twice as fast in order to get enough oxygen. Cold horror lanced through me.

With a cry of rage, I brought my arms up, twisted his arms away, and flung myself to my feet.

I grabbed at him, brought him to a full stop. My face was murderous.

"By Lord," I hissed, "if you went back to camp and turned the transmuter on—!"

He tugged at my arm, casting anxious glances behind us toward the castle.

"I did, Sid!" he cried. "It was the only way. They had you trapped. I didn't know what they were going to do to you—"

"Shut up!" I rapped out. Suddenly, the urgency of flight was apparent. Not to escape, but to save those who would shortly be on our trail.

My head snapped up. Less than a hundred yards away, Seaton and Anderson were just disappearing into our airtight automobile. I impelled myself after them, and although I spoke no word to Carrist, I heard him urging himself after me. And behind us, I heard nothing of the Elronians. To me, that was more ominous than if they were charging after us. By this time, they couldn't have failed to note the decreasing vitality of the air. And although the Queen That Is would have given them no such order, the majority of them would not take this sitting down.

We reached the planetomobile without incident, piled in. I took the wheel, and without the waste of a second, wheeled the

vehicle around in a screaming arc, dodged around the Bureau of Transmitted Egos, Inc., and then was off through the gloom of night toward our camp, keeping the automobile in high in spite of the tortuous, dangerous route we had to take.

We had been on our way only a few minutes, when Carrist touched on a subject I had forgotten.

I turned to him, snarling. "The hell with our bodies! This is more important. I wish—Carrist, I wish you could have seen her!" I hung onto the wheel, gritting my teeth at the thoughts that went through my head.

Carrist was silent, shaking his head in bewilderment. I knew he thought he had done me a favor—rescued me! That was a laugh. But I didn't say so. Later on, he was going to feel bad enough.

After an hour of that mad, dangerous ride, while outside the air literally turned to krypton under the impulse of a powerful, invisible radiation, we caught the first sign of real trouble.

"They're after us!" Carrist cried, twisting around in his seat.

I stole a swift glance at the mirror. Behind us, just topping a white, gleaming quartz ridge, I saw about a dozen of them. Elronians on fantastic, high, thick-wheeled tricycles. They were coming like mad, not only keeping pace with us, but gaining. Dimly, above the laboring roar of the atomic motor of the automobile, I heard the rapid hum of the motors that impelled them. My lips tightened, and I turned back to the wheel, and started taking more hairbrained chances. It was rough riding with a vengeance!

Carrist pounded me on the back, beside himself with anxiety. "They're gaining, Sid! They're gaining!" His voice was a wail.

I TOOK more chances. And that was the way it kept on for the next hour. There was still a full mile between us and the Elronians when we made camp. The automobile skittered to a screaming halt. I saw Johensen and our three other men waving at us excitedly from the window of the heavily insulated powerhouse. The airlock to the powerhouse was already open. "Out!" I snapped. "And hold your breath!" I flung open the door, and ran

for the airlock. The others pounded after me, through an atmosphere of unbreathable krypton. We crowded into the airlock, and the outer door closed. Just when I thought my lungs were certain to burst, the airlock was fanned with a breeze of pure oxygen. In another minute, the inner door had opened, and we had burst into the powerhouse amidst a chorus of excited congratulations.

The Elronians had stopped, more than a half mile away. I looked at the others in puzzlement, but they could offer no suggestions. Muttering, I rummaged in a locker, and broke out a pair of binoculars.

"They're putting something together," Johensen muttered worriedly. "Maybe it's a weapon of some kind. If each of them carried a separate piece—"

My blood froze. Suddenly the little knot of Elronians cleared away; and I saw then that Johensen had hit at the truth. That was a weapon, and a particularly devilish one, if they made no attempt to come closer than a half-mile.

I put the binoculars down in a flurry of fear.

"I'm getting into a space-suit," I snapped, running toward the storage bin. "If I don't get out there and talk with them, they'll do something they're going to regret."

And I did get into the space-suit, in record time. But it wasn't much good. It wasn't any good at all.

I HEARD a tiny, faraway, bursting sound. But it wasn't far away. It was horribly near.

"The—the *ship!*" Carrist gurgled, clawing suddenly at the window. "Sid—my Lord—the *ship!*"

I dashed for the window, hurled him out of the way. My heart stopped dead. The ship, the heavily insulated ship that had brought us here, was gone. Even as I looked, it seemed to turn into a flattened pancake of smoke, grayish smoke that swirled minutely. It continued to settle, suddenly started to roll away, along the ground. It broke up into little pieces, spreading out and out, growing slowly invisible, until it just wasn't there. The ship was gone.

And the transmuter with it. I stared with dazed eyes, trying to digest that. The

transmuter, that already had begun to give the Elronians back their air, was—gone.

Aching silence settled around us. I turned, met Carrist's scared eyes.

"We—we're next," he stammered.

I said slowly, "I know."

"Do you do it, or do I?" he hissed.

My answer was simple. I sat down at the instrument board, jiggling the maker-and-breaker key up and down. I nodded at Carrist. With a single, panic-stricken motion, he pulled the knife-switch down. He must have thought I was crazy the way I was fooling around. The Wittenbergs howled into action, and lead cable started disappearing at a phenomenal rate into the Holloway vacuum feeder.

I put my hand on the maker-and-breaker, smiling twistedly to myself. Nothing on this planet that was exposed would or could resist the hell of electricity that would soon enwrap it like a cocoon of flame.

"Sid!" Carrist wailed imploringly.

Shuddering, I forced the key down. What happened was tremendous.

LIVID hell broke loose, though we never saw the outward evidence. Johensen had pulled the asbestos blind over the single window. The blast of lavender radiance, that was visible clear up to Pluto and all the way down to Mercury, engulfed the planetoid, but was invisible to us. But we heard the sound. It was like nothing in this world. It was a solid, smashing wall of sound that would have deafened us had we not instinctively opened our mouths and clapped our hands over our ears. The powerhouse rocked under that incredible barrage of vibration. Thunder at its most furious was nothing. It was true, a series of thunder-claps, but, since it all took place in the space of a single second, they all merged into one.

Just for one second. Then it was over. I sat there, my legs wrapped around the chair. The others were shaking. A whole minute passed before we moved.

Then Seaton slid his slight body into a chair. "That does for 'em."

I nodded my head, agreeing with him, and kept on nodding my head like a mari-onette. Yes, that did for them. And it did for a lot of things. The signpost in space was an actuality, but at a cost; the

least of which I considered to be—our bodies.

"Well, Carrist," I said humorously, "how will it feel to go around the rest of your life in that gangly mess of bones and skin?" I looked his body up and down, my lips curled in sardonic, bitter amusement.

His eyes popped at me. "Are you crazy, Sid?" he cried. "I'll use my own body. So will you!" He looked at me as if I were mad.

I said carefully, "Our bodies were caught in the same blast of electricity that wiped out the Elronians, weren't they? So, therefore—"

He waved his arms excitedly. "But they're safe! *Safe!* What are you talking about?"

"What are *you?*" I said angrily. I was tired and worn and in no mood for joking. And then he told me. Of course. It was simple. Quartz is a dielectric. It won't pass electricity. Therefore, our bodies were unharmed.

"Well, that's a relief then," I said, as if it were my duty to be happy about it. I sighed. "Let's go and get them. But first we'll send a message to Earth or Mars to come and get us."

Carrist looked puzzled. He had completely forgotten, for the time, the real purpose of the planet. Then he laughed sheepishly.

I got them all into the powerhouse, and, using the maker-and-breaker, which was nothing more than a telegraph key, tapped out a Morse Code message to Earth. Again the thunder beat at us, and the powerhouse rocked; which told me that a more substantial affair would have to be built later on. Outside, I knew, the planet, nothing but a huge neon-sign, only we were using krypton, lit up and blanked out in a series of dots and dashes, though that would not have been visible to human eyes.

NOT expecting the rescue expedition to show up for at least a week, we didn't mind walking to the Elronian city; our automobile, of course, had gone with the ship. As we approached, the sight of the lonely castle sent my spirits down to the pit. We walked along silently, and

finally stood before the Bureau of Transmitted Egos, Inc. Of course, there was nothing left of the machinery. It had vaporized under the current that had run through it. There was little left of the interior of the domed building except the quartz walls.

Carrist led me to our bodies. He had, of course, discovered them after I had followed old Death's-head. We pushed aside the hinged slab of rock that led into one of the quartz huts—and there we were, looking as healthy as you please, slowly breathing air from our own oxygen tanks, and enclosed in quartz containers. Fused quartz, since they were quite transparent.

"They look happy," I said. "Leave them there, until the ship comes. We'll have to go back to Mars someplace to have our egos exchanged. And then—" I stopped.

Somehow, I wandered out the door, and lost them. I felt like a ghost with a mission to perform. Perhaps it was Prince Toganvi, moving within me again. At any rate, I moved straight as a die to the other side of the castle, and entered a tomb—for such I knew it be—there. I stood there in the gloom, feeling stifled. But within me, Prince Toganvi stirred. He—I—moved forward and stood over her. The Queen That Is—the Queen That Was!

She was in her coffin, lying there quite peacefully. Her small, perfect lips drooped like those of a disappointed child. Or perhaps it was a kind of smile. I don't know. But somehow I felt that she was still sad as she lay there, dead by her own hand, probably. What could I do to make her happy, I remember thinking vaguely.

Prince Toganvi stirred feebly within me, and somehow a thought touched my brain—whether his or mine, I didn't know.

But I said, gently, standing over the still, white form of the Queen That Was: "All right, Prince. I'll bring you back. There's room for two. You can lie there beside her—forever." I stopped, recalling the part I had played in this. I added, "I hope it helps, Queen That Was. I hope it does."

Then somehow, I started to smile. It might have been Prince Toganvi. I don't know. But I turned and left the tomb; still smiling.

SATELLITE OF FEAR

By FRED A. KUMMER, Jr.

Inside the crippled Comet, a hard-bitten crew watched the life-giving oxygen run low. Outside, on Ceres' fabled Darkside, stalked death in awful, spectral form

THE *Comet's* control-room was silent except for the monotonous beat of Ken Grant's restless pacing. Six months on Ceres' frigid, shadowy Darkside had driven the tan from his face, etched lines of worry about his mouth. Darkside had a way of doing that to people. A temperature of five above absolute zero, the grim, eternal darkness, the insane landscape, combined to give an impression of unreality that made one feel he was living some terrible nightmare.

From time to time Grant glanced at the sidereal chronometer, shook his head. Sixteen hours! Sixteen hours since Kennerly had left . . . and the heating unit of his space-suit had been good for three! Kennerly had vanished, just as Allers had vanished before him! Two men had left the disabled ship to try and reach Bowman's Crater, that last tiny outpost only twenty miles away, and both men had disappeared. Had either Allers or Kennerly been successful, a rescue ship from Bowman's Crater must have come by now. But instead, the two spacemen had been swallowed up by the gloom, vanished, leaving no trace. The bitter silent darkness outside was like some yawning limitless void into which men went, and did not return. Their position was bad enough in any case, but with a woman in command. . . .

Grant shot a glance at the stack of big lead chests in a corner of the cabin. Pitchblend—radium ore with an amazingly high metal content. The ore in those big chests, when refined, would yield over a million in the rare element. Not that a million would do them much good if they couldn't get it away. With the main fuel intake valve cracked, the motors, the radio, the air-regenerator, were all shut off. Death from lack of oxygen faced them unless word got through.

A click of the cabin's door broke Grant's

thoughts. He turned; a slender girl wearing riding breeches and leather jacket appeared in the doorway. Pale, with deep smoke-gray eyes and auburn hair, she had a fragile transcendental beauty that was very appealing, but her chin was firm, determined.

"Any news, Mr. Grant?" she asked quietly, stepping into the control room.

"None." He shook a gloomy head. "I don't like it! There's something strange going on, Miss Conway! The trail's perfectly clear, there's no life on Ceres that we know of. One man might conceivably meet with some sort of accident, but not two! They tell stories about Darkside; queer stories! About alien, unknown creatures."

"I . . . I know," the girl said tightly. "Dad used to hear those stories, too, when he and Allers were prospecting here. When Dad died he left me enough money to charter this ship, told me to come here to Ceres for my legacy. Gave me the chart showing where this pocket of pitchblend was located." She glanced at the lead chests. "Now Allers, Dad's closest friend, is gone. And Kennerly. And we're trapped, made virtual prisoners in this ship by something unknown—out there. We've got to get word through, Mr. Grant! It's death to stay here until our oxygen is gone. Death, maybe worse, waiting for us out there in the darkness. . . ." She broke off, suddenly, swaying.

"Steady!" Grant gripped the girl's shoulder. "It's the bad air! I'll go tell Harris to crack open one of the emergency oxygen flasks. You'd better lie down."

Like a flash the girl's red head snapped up. "You're a romanticist, Mr. Grant," she said. "You seem to think I ought to be a languishing heroine. Well, I'm not. I'm in command of this expedition and if there're any risks to be taken, I'm taking them! Have Harris open an oxygen flask



and then check over my space-suit! As soon as I get my breath, I'm going out and look for Allers and Kennerly!" She waved aside Grant's remonstrances. "Orders, Mr. Grant!"

Face stony, Grant left the control room, strode along the companionway to the fo'castle. The *Comet's* crew, perhaps half a dozen men all told, were stretched upon their bunks, faces drawn as they fought against the stale air. Grant motioned to Harris, the squat, ugly mate.

"Air's getting thick," he said. "Better crack an emergency tube."

"Aye, aye, sir!" Harris lifted a steel plate in the floor, swung down the iron ladder. Some moments later he emerged from the storehold, carrying an oxygen flask.

"Funny!" The mate rubbed his stubbly chin. "I coulda swore we had twenty emergency flasks below. But there's only five more down there."

"Five!" Grant's eyes narrowed. "There were twenty when we left earth! I counted 'em!"

"That's not all," Harris muttered. "There's other stores missing! Wire, tools, batteries, spare plates for repairing the hull!" His eyes flicked toward the darkness beyond the portholes. "There were plenty of times we were all down at the mine working when whatever it was that got Allers and Kennerly might have entered the ship, taken those things. I've seen shadows out there sometimes. Shadows that weren't just right, sliding among the rocks. And . . . and it's bad luck to have a woman aboard ship."

A silence fell over the cabin. Grant frowned. Five flasks of oxygen . . . and the air-regenerator useless without power! Nothing could save them unless word got through to Bowman's Crater, on the edge of the Cerean Darkside. Two men had tried to get through, and those two men had vanished. To permit Joan Conway to attempt the trip was unthinkable. Grant reached for one of the bulky space-suits that hung on the wall.

"All right, men," he grated. "We're going to get to the bottom of this! Here's the plan! I'll take the trail to Bowman's Crater; the same trail Allers and Kennerly took! If there's anything lying in wait out there, it ought to attack me, and

I'll be armed! At the same time I want you, Harris, and you, Miller, to go out also, to climb the other side of the crater and circle about, picking up the trail to Bowman's a mile or so from here. I'll draw *It's* attention, while you try to get through and take word to the outpost. Got it?"

THE three men nodded, climbed into the heavily insulated space-suits. Electric heating wires ran through the lining, from portable batteries good for several hours, enabling the men within them to maintain comfortable warmth even though the soles of their thick lead gravity shoes, in contact with the icy ground, were within a few degrees of absolute zero. Gloves of heavy lead, a part of every radium miner's equipment as protection against the highly concentrated ore he was forced to handle, covered the asbestoid "hands" of the space-suits. Grant paused before snapping his transparent plastic helmet into place, turned to the men who were to remain aboard the *Comet*.

"Miss Conway's feeling a little ragged because of the air," he said, unsmilingly. "When she's better, tell her where we've gone."

The men grinned understandingly. They knew that the girl, in spite of her frail form, felt that command of the expedition required her to share in all its dangers. And Grant, like most men who had spent their lives on far-flung frontiers, seeking adventure in the woman-less outposts of terrestrial civilization, had curiously archaic ideas of chivalry, to say nothing of deep-rooted convictions that a woman's place was on earth. Disregarding the grins of the men, he closed his helmet, opened the valve of his oxygen tank.

"Ready?" he barked into the mouthpiece of his radio communications set.

Two space-suited figures nodded grimly behind their helmets, followed Grant through the air-lock. In the clean, airless void the stars shone like white beacons, shedding a thin eerie light over the barren plain. A dark inferno worthy of a *Doré's* brush, it seemed, malevolent, intangibly evil. Tortured pinnacles of rock, jagged spires stabbing at the sable sky; deep craters, dug by countless meteors, pock-marking the bleak terrain; yawning crevasses,

towering cliffs, jagged, sharp-angled blocks of stone, for Darkside had neither sun, air, nor rain to round them, soften their weird outlines.

Grant loosened his heat-gun in its holster, glanced about. Up the side of the big crater, in which the mine-shaft and the space-ship lay, was a poorly defined trail, winding in and out among the towering rocks. This was the way to Bowman's, the little mining town situated in the twilight zone between Ceres' bitter Darkside and its blazing Sunside. Allers and Kennerly had taken that rude trail. Grant waved Harris and Miller to the right.

"You'll make a long half-circle," he announced. "It'll be tough going, but with my following the trail, I should draw any attack and enable you to pick up the trail further along, and reach Bowman's. Okay, now. Let's go!"

Harris and Miller disappeared among the up-thrust monoliths, Grant swung along the trail. In spite of his heavy space-suit and his thick lead-soled gravity shoes, he was able to move at a brisk pace, hand on his gun, eyes probing the gloom to right and left. Onward he went, steadily, skirting craters, leaping narrow crevasses, squeezing through rocky defiles whose overhanging ledges often met to form a dark passageway. For all the heating wires within his suit, he could feel the cold; the utter silence was maddening.

Grant stared at the murky shadows with narrowed eyes. What was it that had spirited away Allers and Kennerly, two brave men, well armed? Some unknown force of nature, or something more tangible? Superstitious spacemen whispered of monstrous reptilian beasts, of space-pirates' hide-outs, of strange, spectral Shapes. Drink-inspired hallucinations, Grant had said scornfully. Now he was not so sure. So little was known of Darkside.

Suddenly Grant froze in his tracks. In the middle of the path, perhaps a hundred feet ahead, was a strange, grotesque figure. Swathed in a bulky space-suit, it crouched ape-like on the ground, feet flat against the rock, hands touching the trail as though to balance itself. Motionless as some robot it crouched there, in a patch of white frost, seemingly poised to spring.

Grant's heat-gun rose to cover the strange figure. His voice shook as he spoke into his communications set.

"Who's there? What'd you want?"

The crouching figure made no reply. Very deliberately Grant pressed the trigger of the heat-gun, aiming it at the motionless form's feet. Dirt, chips of stone, flew up, but the crouching form did not move. Muscles tense, Grant moved forward. Pale starlight winked on the unknown's helmet. All at once Grant gasped. Behind the transparent glass of the headpiece, the man's features were visible. Distorted, despairing features set in an expression of ghastly, appalling horror! Kennerly . . . dead!

Grant bent over the grim figure, tried to lift it. One of Kennerly's fingers, frozen solid, snapped within the space-suit like brittle glass. Grant glanced warily about. If he could get the body back to the ship, find out how Kennerly had died, there might be a chance of overcoming the menace that lurked on this shadowy insane world. All at once his eyes caught queer dark streaks on a rock not far from the inert figure . . . letters, words, that looked as if they had been made by a heat-gun's blast. Slowly he deciphered the scrawled sentences. "Allers dead. No hope. Unknown forces. Doomed."

Grant's jaw tightened. Kennerly's last message! And somehow he had known that Allers was dead, that there was no hope. Face set in harsh lines, Grant swung the body over his shoulder, set out along the trail to the *Comet*.

THE silence in the space-ship's control-room was thick, breathless. A frail figure against the rivet-studded bulkhead, Joan Conway stared with horror-filled eyes at the grim figure on the floor. They had removed Kennerly's space-suit, and with the warmth of the cabin the stump of the frozen finger which Grant had inadvertently broken off was beginning to seep blood. The girl forced her voice to remain steady.

"Under the circumstances, Mr. Grant," she said tightly, "I have decided to overlook your disobedience of orders until we return to earth . . . if we do. Are there any clues on Kennerly?"

Grant, kneeling beside the dead man,

examining him carefully, shook his head.

"Nothing," he muttered. "No holes in his suit, no signs of anything that might have killed him other than the cold. The battery of his heating unit's run down. And he had a full charge when he left. We checked it. Why he should follow the trail a mile or so from the ship and then sit there for hours, until the failing battery brought death by freezing. . . . It's suicide!"

"Maybe he got lost, wandered around until he died," one of the space-hands suggested.

"No good." Again Grant shook a somber head. "The trail's perfectly clear. I found him in a deep patch of hoar frost, like snow. Condensed moisture from the escape valve of his helmet. An extraordinarily large patch of 'snow.' Get what that means? Frost patches in this airless void can only mean the moisture from a space-suit's exhaust. And a pile of 'snow' like that about him, could only be the result of remaining hours in one spot. Kennerly left this ship for Bowman's Crater, got about two miles away and then crouched down to wait for death. Crouched there for hours, until his heating unit ran out of juice and he froze. Why?" Grant motioned to the inert form with its terrified countenance. "He had sustained no injury, could have followed a perfectly clear path back to the ship, and instead he crouched there until he died!"

"Maybe something held him," Joan suggested. "Magnetism."

Grant picked up the asbestoid space-suit. "Fiber, glassex helmet, rust-proof copper fittings, lead gravity shoes. No iron or steel on it. Another thing. How did he know Allers was dead? What did he mean by 'unknown forces' and 'no hope?' There's something devilish, unreal, out there. Something that's determined to keep us from getting word through, determined to keep us here until we die from lack of oxygen! Just like Kennerly died from lack of heat. It's afraid to attack us, but tries to trap us, until we die."

Again silence fell over the cabin. The remaining space-hands glanced from Kennerly's body to the windows, the clinging darkness outside. Joan's gaze sought the leaden chests; she laughed unhumorously.

"Pitchblend! A million in radium! And

what good is it? All our work here to get it and now no chance of ever reaching earth."

"We'll get word through somehow." Grant squared his shoulders. "Maybe Harris and Miller. . . ."

As Grant spoke, a furious tocsin of blows sounded upon the main airlock. The spacemen whirled, groping for guns. Face set, Grant stepped toward the inner door of the lock.

"Keep me covered," he snapped, drawing the massive pneumatic bolts.

As the heavy steel door swung open, Joan gave a sudden gasp. Standing in the air-chamber was a stocky, space-suited figure, face paper-white. Harris, looking as though he were pursued by a legion of devils!

"Good Lord!" Grant exclaimed. "What's wrong? Where's Miller?"

Harris pushed back his helmet, slumped onto a bench; drops of sweat beaded his face, his eyes were tortured.

"It . . . it's screwy!" he muttered. "It ain't human! Miller standing there, jumping up and down."

Grant took a bottle of fiery Martian *tong* from the table, poured out a tumblerful.

"Drink this," he said. "And tell us what happened."

Harris downed the drink with a shudder. "We made the detour like you said," he whispered. "Fighting our way over rocks, around craters. Tough going. About three miles from here our half-circle brought us back to the trail. All okay. Miller was ahead of me by maybe a hundred yards. We kept our guns in our hands, and a sharp lookout. Then . . . then . . . all of a sudden I heard Miller yelling in my earphones. He was hopping up and down . . . straight up and down, half-crazy with fright. Just as I was running toward him, he told me to stay back, that he was trapped. Trapped!" Harris choked. "He could hop up and down all right, but *he couldn't move in the horizontal!* Nothing around him, nothing to be seen anywhere, but he could only move one way! Up and down! It ain't human, I tell you! Ain't natural! How . . ."

"Miller could move only in the vertical?" Joan echoed. "But . . . but . . ."

no comprehensible force on earth. . . ."

"This ain't earth, miss," Harris muttered. "And Miller's out there, three miles up the trail, trapped. . . ."

Grant reached for his space-suit. "Come on!" he exclaimed. "We're going out! Harris, you'll stay here with Miss Conway. . . ."

"No!" The girl shook her head, eyes like gray steel. "I'm in command of this expedition . . . and I'm going along! Danger or no danger! I got you men into this mess, and I'm going to help you get out!"

"Sorry." Grant shook his head. "I admire your courage, but we're up against something unknown, something dangerous. You'd be more of a hindrance than a help. Call me old-fashioned, romantic, anything you please, but you're staying here. Harris, I'll be responsible for any charges of insubordination. See that she stays here. We're going to rescue Miller."

Lips pale, head high, the girl watched them clamber into their space-suits. Her pride, Grant realized, was cut deeply at having the command of the expedition thus taken from her. But this was no time for pride with Miller trapped by some mysterious force. Motioning to the others to follow, Grant sprang into the airlock.

LEAVING the ship, the six men raced at top speed along the trail. Around crevasses and craters, past insanely sculptured rocks, through narrow passes. When they reached the spot where Kennerly's body had been found, Grant suddenly paused, staring. The patch of hoar-frost had been scraped away, a small hole perhaps a foot deep was exposed. Something previously buried in the ground had been removed! Grant shook his head. A bizarre, fantastic idea was beginning to take form in his mind. In a temperature close to absolute zero. . . .

"Come on!" he exclaimed. "We've got to reach Miller! Hurry!"

The spacemen redoubled their efforts, bounding along the narrow path. Onward, desperately, the sound of their heavy breathing filling their helmets. At length they reached a low rise of ground commanding a view of the trail ahead. Very faintly a despairing cry echoed in their earphones.

A hundred or so yards before them, a vague form in the gloom, stood Miller. His head twisted crazily from side to side, his body writhed frantically, as if seeking to break some invisible grip. Several times he leaped upward like some grotesque jumping-jack, only to settle down in the exact same spot as before. It was as though the trapped man were confined in an invisible cylinder which permitted him to move only in the vertical plane!

"Look!" Grant muttered. "So it's true! That's what happened to Kennerly until his heating unit gave out! And Allers, too, I suppose!" He raced down the slope toward Miller, heat-gun in hand.

As they neared the trapped man, he gave a cry of warning. "Stay back! You'll get caught!" His voice rose despairingly. "No . . . no way to get free! Hands and feet stuck! Better to shoot me, now, than let me stay here till my heat-unit gives out!"

Helplessly they stared at the doomed man. To approach him meant they, too, might be trapped. But to stand there, useless, while his heating unit gave out, bringing death, as it had brought death to Kennerly! And what power known to man would permit a living being to move only in the vertical plane but not the horizontal? All at once Grant recalled the hole in the trail at the spot where he had found Kennerly. Dropping to his knees, he began very cautiously to circle Miller. All at once he found it, a copper wire concealed beneath dirt, pebbles. One jerk of his gloved fingers snapped the wire. A sudden cry broke from the trapped man. Weakly, uncertainly, he stepped forward.

"Free!" Miller cried. "I . . . I can move my feet and hands any way I want, now! Thank God! The thought of staying there until I froze to death . . . !" He shuddered.

Grant was following the wire to where Miller had stood, was digging away a covering of earth. All at once he gave an exclamation of wonder. In the wan starlight a tangle of wires, wrapped about iron cores, lay exposed!

"Looks like a magnet!" A burly space-hand grunted, shaking a dazed head. "But there's no iron on our suits! And no magnet permits you to move only one way!"

"I don't know." Grant frowned. "But whatever this force is, it's got a clever, devilish mind behind it! This is the same kind of thing that trapped Kennerly, only we didn't reach him in time. When I first spotted Kennerly crouching in the trail, I didn't know who he was. Fired a warning shot at his feet. That must have fused the wires of the apparatus! And so I was able to approach Kennerly's body without being trapped myself! While I was taking his body back to the ship, the killer must have dug up the wrecked mechanism, planted *this* magnet further down the trail! If Harris hadn't been lagging a considerable distance behind Miller, they both would have been caught!"

"Sounds logical," one of the men nodded. "But why all these traps? And who's setting them?"

Grant picked up the broken end of the wire.

"That," he said grimly, "is what we're going to find out. At the other end of this wire is the source of power for these traps. And that's where we'll find the person or being who's setting them! Let's go!"

The spacemen nodded, faces tense behind their helmets. Leaving the trail, they struck out across the rough terrain, following the thin thread of wire. The scenery grew wilder and wilder as they progressed, until they seemed spectres in some gehenna of weird, jagged rocks, grasping shadows. Suddenly Grant, in the lead, drew a sharp breath.

Ahead, the copper wire passed between two basalt walls, less than four feet wide. And at the other end of this passage was a portable *radite* lamp, its bluish beams revealing a small motor, a row of tall oxygen flasks, wires, metal plates, the missing equipment from the *Comet's* store-hold. And bent over the motors was a powerful space-suited figure!

"Quick!" Grant roared. "We've got him!" Fingers fumbling for his heat-gun, he sprang forward.

GRANT'S leap, in the light gravity, carried him clear of the ground, and at that precise instant the dark figure before him threw a switch. A sudden shock hit Grant; he felt as if his hands and feet had been lashed by invisible bonds. He

glanced down, gasped. He was standing on empty air, some two feet above the rocky floor of the corridor!

Behind him, the rest of the spacemen were frozen into position, writhing and twisting in vain efforts to free themselves! Grant struggled to draw his gun from its holster, but his hands, while free to move sideways, could not be raised or lowered a fraction of an inch. As Kennerly and Miller had been trapped in the vertical, so they were caught in the horizontal!

"Good evening, gentlemen!" The voice in their earphones was mocking. "I've been expecting you! I hoped that the wire would lead you here, into my little snare!" The space-suited figure glanced at the struggling men. "All present except Harris and the girl! And they'll open the airlock to admit an old friend miraculously returned from the dead!"

Grant, catching a glimpse of the face behind the unknown's helmet, gave a quick gasp.

"Allers!" he cried. "Then . . . then Kennerly's message was a lie."

"I wrote it myself." A grin spread over Allers' coarse red countenance. "Just to keep suspicion from me. You see, Grant, I was with old Conway when he stumbled on the pitchblend pocket, and I knew the fortune it contained. But when Conway died, I didn't have enough money to finance an expedition here. So as soon as I heard his daughter was going to outfit a ship on his life insurance, I joined up." He laughed harshly. "You've been such fools! Night after night, during these six months, I've been bringing necessary equipment from the ship to this hide-out. Oxygen, food, metal, this little auxiliary motor, and fuel to run it. When you had done all the work of cleaning out the pocket, I cracked the main intake valve, volunteered to get word through to Bowman's Crater. And while you were waiting, I set my traps along the trail."

Allers nodded complacently, drew a small, complicated piece of machinery from his pocket.

"Here's the spare intake valve," he said. "Harris and the girl will be overjoyed to see dear old Allers return. They won't be suspecting anything and should be easy." He patted the heat gun at his side. "The ship and the million in radium ore

will be mine with no trouble at all. And there're places on Venus or Mars where no questions are asked, so long as you've the money to spend."

"But what's holding us here?" Grant exclaimed.

Allers smiled thinly. "Think it over," he suggested. "You'll have three hours before your heating units give out, as Kennerly's did. And even if you do find out the cause, you won't be able to do anything about it." He strode easily past the helpless figures, unaffected by the mysterious force. "Good-bye, gentlemen! Enjoy yourselves!" A moment later he had disappeared in the gloom.

L EFT to themselves, the trapped men renewed their struggles, but to no avail. Grant felt as though his feet and hands were caught between two boards, able to slide sideways but neither forward and backward, nor up and down. He glanced over his shoulder. The others were in ridiculous positions, like some bizarre Laocoon group. Some, like him, had leaped clear of the floor when caught. Others had one foot or one hand raised, were unable to lower them; some, with their guns half-drawn, could not continue to pull the weapons from their holsters or shove them back. Miller, hands and feet arrested in a flying tackle, groaned.

"This is worse than before," he muttered. "I could at least jump up and down the other way. Now, without being able to lift our feet, we're rooted to one spot. And my heating unit's two hours gone already."

Grant stared at the frantic man. Like some queer piece of action sculpture they seemed, arms and legs raised. And back aboard the *Comet* Joan and Harris would surely admit Allers. Once inside, he could cover them with his gun, replace the broken valve, and take off for Venus.

"We'll have to go at this logically," he said. "We just saw Allers walk past us without being affected. Anybody notice anything unusual about him?"

There was a moment's silence, then one of the spacehands spoke up.

"He didn't have on gravity shoes or radium-insulation gloves, if that means anything."

"They're both lead," Grant muttered.

"And . . . by all space! I think I've got it! Look! The temperature here is only a couple of degrees above absolute zero. And though the inside of our suits are warmed, insulated, the soles of our shoes, the outside of our thick lead gloves, must be near that temperature! Lead, at six above absolute zero, takes on super-conductivity. No resistance to electricity! Weak currents become immensely powerful!"

"Super-conductivity?" Miller repeated. "But what in hell's that got to do with our being caught here? We've got to get free, and damn soon, before our heating units give out!"

"Look," Grant snapped. "He's got magnets set in the walls of this gorge! And when the lead on our hands and feet, in a state of super-conductivity, cuts the fields of the magnets, a powerful current's set up in 'em! Set up in such a direction as to oppose the motion! Like the armature of a shorted dynamo! Get it? We can move only in the direction of the lines of force! Sideways! Just like the magnet that caught you, buried beneath your feet, kept you in the vertical plane! Super-conductivity, and magnets! That's what's got us!"

"Knowing what it is doesn't help," Miller grated. "We can't get our heat-guns free, and even if we could, we wouldn't dare turn them on our hands and feet! Looks like we're here to stay until our heating units wear down and we freeze! We're finished, Grant! Finished!"

G RANT swore. His hands and feet, inside the space-suit, were warm, but the outer lead gloves that were a part of every radium miner's equipment, and the thick lead soles of their gravity shoes, were at approximately six above absolute zero. A degree, or even half a degree, of warmth, and super-conductivity would cease. They would be free! Their lives, and Joan Conway's fate, depended upon those few precious degrees. Desperately Grant tried to pull his heat gun from its holster, but to no avail. And the leaden gloves, the gravity shoes, were securely fastened to his space-suit. No chance of removing them without cutting wires or filing bolts.

Grant moved his hands experimentally. They slid sideways, following the lines of magnetic force that crossed the passage, though at different levels; one on a level with the butt of his gun, the other higher and extended in front of his body. Backward and forward motion was also impossible, since that, too, would be contrary to the lines of force. Suddenly Grant stiffened. Arrested motion. . . .

Extending his arm as far as possible without raising it, he crashed his hand against the holstered heat gun that hung at his waist. Again and again the lead-sheathed fist struck the heavy holster in a rain of blows. Miller, watching wide-eyed, shook his head.

"What is it?" he muttered. "You . . . you're nuts! If that gun should go off, it'd rip open your suit, kill you!"

"Better than freezing, anyhow," Grant panted. "And if this works . . ." He redoubled his blows, crashing hand against gun-butt. "Arrested motion gives heat. Like pounding a hammer against an anvil. Only need a degree or so at most. I . . . Ah!" He twisted his hand about, found that he could move it freely.

Quickly, before the heat radiated off, Grant drew his heat-gun, focused it on the floor of the defile. Under the lambent blue bolt, the rock began to glow red, waves of heat radiated upward. All at once Grant found himself falling, and his feet struck the glowing rock. The lead soles of his shoes melting like butter on the white-hot rock, he stumbled toward Miller, turned the heat blast on a spot near the latter's feet. Within a few moments the heat had restored resistance to the lead and Miller was free.

"Release the others!" Grant shouted. "And then make tracks to the *Comet*! I'm going on ahead! Hurry! We've got to reach the ship before Allers takes off for Venus!" Plunging into the shadowy gloom, he headed toward the trail.

KEN GRANT had little memory of that wild race across the Cerean Darkside. The thin starlight . . . the insane landscape . . . the sprawling shadows . . . all these made a jumbled montage in his mind. Vaguely he remembered racing onward, onward, muscles aching, until he saw red flashes of light ahead.

The *Comet's* rockets, warming up preparatory to taking off!

Desperately Grant lunged down the slope toward the ship. Now it was before him, a sleek, slender shape, glowing in the crimson flare of the rockets. Grant gripped the handle of the airlock, sunk flush in the hull, and tugged. The outer door swung open. Closing it behind him, he threw open the inner one and burst into the cabin, gun in hand. Before him stood Joan, very pale, chin high. Harris lay upon the floor, blood seeping from a gash on his temple. All this Grant took in with one swift glance, but before he could move he felt the muzzle of a gun dig into his back. Allers, standing to one side of the airlock as he entered, held him covered.

"Drop your gun!" Allers shouted to make himself heard through Grant's helmet.

Helpless, Grant obeyed, then threw back the transparent plastic dome that covered his head.

"Over there against the wall! Next to the girl!" Allers ordered. "I don't know how you got free, but I'm not staying to investigate! We're leaving for Venus!" He moved toward the controls, bent over them, keeping Grant and Joan covered with his heat gun. Grant laughed harshly. A nice mess he'd made of things!

One of Allers' hands was on the main control, the other gripped the heat gun. An idea began to take form in Grant's mind. The cold, the bitter cold just above absolute zero, was what Allers had counted on to trap them. Perhaps it might save them as well. He hadn't been in the cabin long enough for the cold to wear off. Grant drew a deep breath.

"Shoot, damn you!" he roared, hurtling forward.

Face set in a vulpine grin, Allers pressed the trigger of the heat-gun. Joan's horrified scream ripped through the cabin like a jagged knife blade.

"Ken!" she cried. "Ken!"

The ray of the heat-gun was like a white hot lance, thrusting against Grant's chest as he plunged toward Allers. In spite of the space-suit's insulation it would normally have charred him to a crisp, but the suit, bitterly cold from the fierce temperature of Darkside, sucked up the heat like a

sponge. Grant felt as though a glowing brand had touched his chest, the pain was terrible, but the frigid cold of the suit absorbed the full force of the heat blast long enough for him to reach his opponent.

One blow of Grant's lead-gloved fist caught Allers' face, spun him about. The heat-gun flew from his hand, slithered under the big control board. Bruised, bloody, snarling in savage rage, Allers shook himself, hurtled forward, fists flailing.

Grant, encased in the heavy space-suit, was clumsy, awkward. Allers circled him like a tiger stalking its prey. Darting in, his fist would crash into his opponent's face before Grant could raise his heavy arms to guard. And by the time he was ready for a return blow, Allers was dancing out of reach, a grinning, ugly phantom.

DOGGEDLY, Grant pursued his elusive antagonist. His face was a battered pulp from Allers' blows and the space-suit, the gravity shoes, seemed to weigh tons. Except for that first blow he had not reached his opponent once, and Allers was laughing mockingly as he methodically cut Grant's face to ribbons. The latter was beginning to stumble now, had to force his limbs to move. If only he could corner Allers! Smash his fist into that evil, taunting countenance.

Knotted knuckles crashed flush against Grant's jaw, before he could raise his clumsy arm to block the blow. Backward he tottered against the wall, groggy, and through half-closed eyes saw Allers spring forward for the kill. But as Allers leaped toward him, another figure ran across the cabin, seized his arm. Joan! Clinging with all her weight to the space-rat, holding him back.

"Now, Ken!" she cried. "Now!"

With a single motion of his squat, powerful frame Allers shook the girl off, spun her across the cabin against the iron bulkhead, but in that moment Grant had reached him. His lead-encased hands shot out, gripped Allers' throat. The cold of the leaden gloves burned the man's neck like a brand and he screamed in agony. Tighter and tighter Grant's hands locked about his throat, heedless of the blows Allers rained upon him, and the agonized

scream turned into a gurgling moan.

"Think of Kennerly!" Grant growled. "Dying out there in the cold! Think of him, you rat!"

Then a million stars danced before Grant's eyes, and he slumped back, half-conscious. Through wavering mists he saw Allers stagger to his feet, gripping a heavy wrench. The space-rat's groping hands had encountered it, brought the weapon down upon his opponent's head with brutal force. It was all like a dream, now, to Grant. Stunned, helpless, he saw Allers moving toward him, face set in a furious grin, the heavy wrench raised for a final terrible blow.

Instinctively Grant twisted sideways, his fingers fumbled with the emergency outlet of his space-suit's oxygen tank. On his shoulders it had escaped the heat-ray's blast and Grant knew it was still full of semi-liquid oxygen, under heavy pressure.

Allers' muscles were tensing, the heavy wrench was about to descend in a crushing, deadly stroke. It took all of Grant's failing strength to twist the outlet of the air valve.

The cloud of whitish vapor spurted from the space-suit's outlet in an icy stream. For just an instant Allers stood motionless as the blast of semi-liquid oxygen struck him. A howl of agony broke from his lips, the wrench fell from his half-frozen fingers. Then, crimsoned features strangely set, body rigid, Allers toppled to the floor.

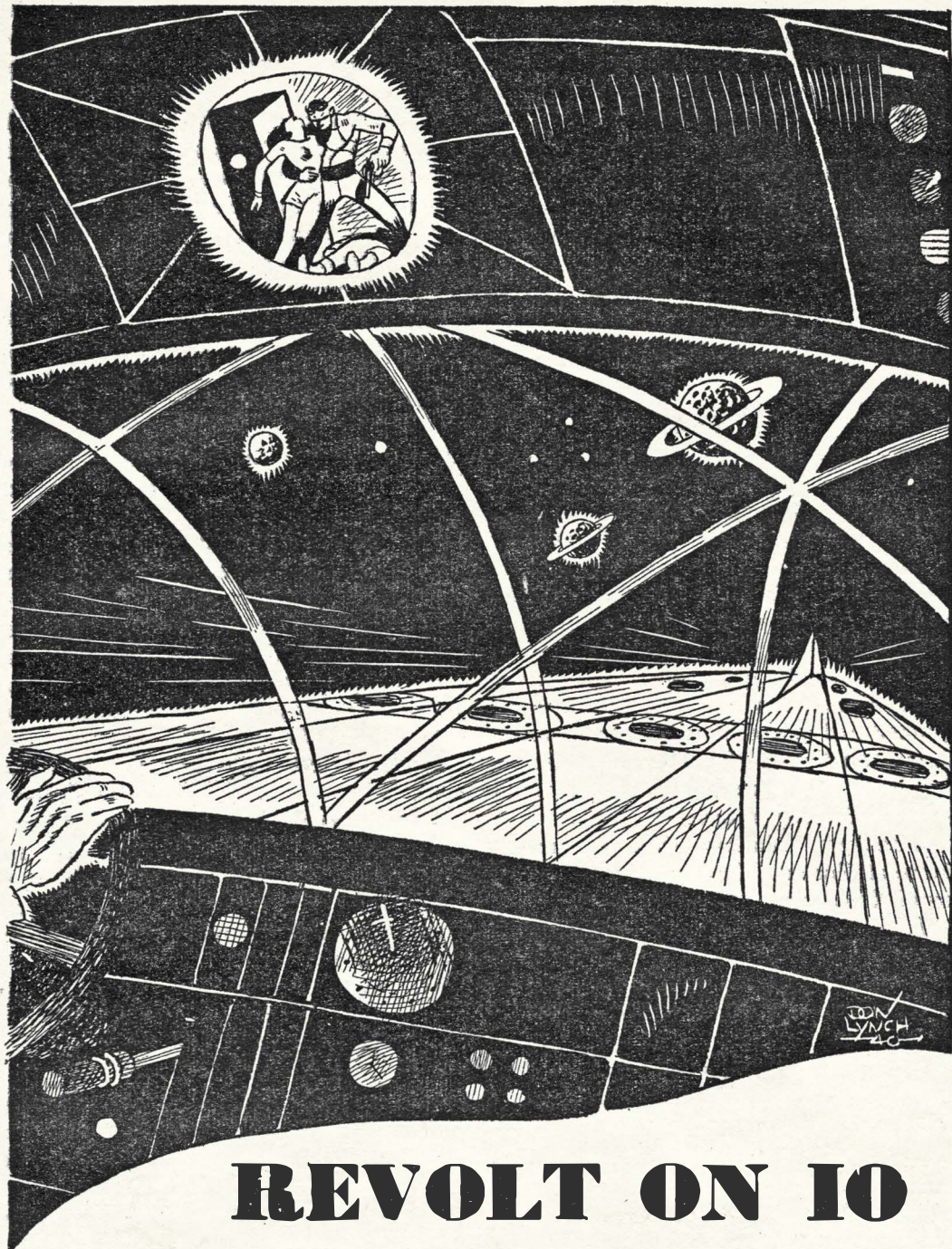
"Ken!" Joan whispered. "Ken, you . . . you're all right?"

"O . . . okay!" His gaze lingered on her piquant features, with their firm, level eyes, brave set of chin. "You know," he said slowly, "I believe that crack on the head knocked me silly. So silly that for a moment I actually believed you wouldn't mind if I ki . . ." He paused as Miller and the rest of the crew pounded excitedly on the massive outer door of the airlock.

"Let them wait," Joan Conway said peremptorily, "and finish what you were saying!" Then, as he hesitated, "Orders, Mr. Grant!"

"Aye, aye, Commander," Grant grinned. "I was going to say I believed you wouldn't mind if I kissed you. Like this!"





REVOLT ON IO

By NELSON BOND

Death stalked the *Libra*. The Io-plunging space liner freighted a secret weapon, and the rebel Kreuther had vowed it should not arrive.

THE ship's clock bonged drowsily three times. Bud Chandler, the junior watch, glared at it languidly. "Thus," he yawned, "endeth the lobster

patrol. Three bells, my fine bucko—and the soft, warm hay for you. Or—" There was a hopeful note in his voice. "Or would you like to finish out my trick for me?"

I'll stand double for *you* some night."

Dan Mallory said, "Comets to you, sailor!" And he rose, stretching the kinks out of weary muscles. His collar was open at the throat, his back ached from five solid hours in the bucket-shaped control chair. His eyes were strained. That was from peering alternately at glowing panels, through a *perilens* plate into the murky, blue-black space before the void-hurling *Libra*, and back to the panels again. "There's a little thing called sleep which I'm going to grab some of. As soon as Norton shows up. Where the pink Cepheids—?"

"Tell you what. Finish my trick tonight, Dan, and I'll double for you *twice*. That's fair enough, isn't it?"

"Fair enough," said Mallory, "but not sufficiently enticing. Like an albino on a desert planetoid. Ah, here's our hero now! Welcome, Sir Relief! Dump it into the basket and let poppa go seek the arms of Morpheus."

"Who's she?" growled Rick Norton, Third Mate. His eyes were puffy; he squinted and glared at the bright lights of the control turret. "Hell's howling acres, I'm tired! I just about got to sleep when—Oh, well. Log in order?"

"Directly." Mallory shot a curious glance at Norton. "Just got to sleep? How come? What were you doing up so late?"

"It wasn't official business," answered the junior officer curtly, "so it's none of yours. Let's have your log sheet." He slumped into the control chair, squinted through the *perilens* and made a few tiny course corrections. Across the room, Bud Chandler's shoulders shrugged a reply to Dan's swift lift of the eyebrows. The Second Mate's lips formed a word. "Sore-head!" Mallory nodded. Norton *was* a surly son-of-a-spacewangler.

But that wasn't any skin off his nose. He went to the chart table. Footsteps clattered up the Jacob's ladder, the door flew open and the Old Man stomped onto the bridge. He snapped, "Zuwere!" and glowered over Mallory's shoulder, shrewd, space-faded eyes reading sense into the senior lieutenant's neat, precise columns. He jabbed a horny finger at one line of figures. "Sure o' that, Mallory? Velocity that high?"

Mallory said respectfully, "Yes, sir.

All figures have been checked and double checked. We're point oh-oh-one on course. Forced speed, point thirty-nine above normal."

"Checked and double checked," said Captain Algase, "is good enough most of the time. But this trip is special. And vitally important. Forty thousand innocent lives depend on our reaching Io damn soon! Remember that, Mallory. All of you remember that."

The stern lines of his face eased a trifle. "It's been a hard shuttle, I know. A brutal, punishing trip. And we've all been under a terrific strain. But our difficulties are nothing compared to those of the garrison and the honest colonists of New Fresno. They're looking to us for aid, and we're bringing them aid.

"That is, someone aboard this ship is. I honestly don't know who that person is. No one knows except the man himself, the commander of the SSP Intelligence Department on Earth, and maybe someone at New Fresno. But he *is* on board, either an officer, sailor or passenger, and he *is* carrying to Io the plans for the new ray weapon recently perfected by the SSP Ordnance Bureau.

"Those plans will enable our New Fresno garrison to subdue this mysterious uprising on Io. That's why the *Libra* is traveling at forced speed. That's why we must redouble every normal precaution to insure our reaching the Io colony. That's why, too, we must keep our eyes open; watch even each other. What's the matter with you, Norton?"

NORTON had started suddenly. Now he muttered, red-faced, "Sorry, sir. Sudden light in the visiplat. It looked like a meteoride."

"There's nothing there now," said the skipper.

But Chandler repeated, "Watch each other, Captain? I don't get it. We're all pledged and trusted members of the Solar Space Patrol, aren't we? We all live by the SSP motto. I don't see—" He fingered his breast insignia, that tiny, golden rocket emblazoned with the words, *Order out of Chaos*. "I don't see why we should—"

"Because," explained the skipper grimly, "wherever there's an uprising there are converts to the new cause, traitors to the

old. Where there are plans, there are spies to steal them. That's not a warning from H.Q.; that's plain, old-fashioned horse-sense. I fought through the Rollie Rebellion, you know. After the Grantland massacre I discovered that one of my own messmates was in the pay of the Mercurians.

"I won't say for sure that there is a spy aboard the *Libra*. But if there is, we must give him no opportunity to learn anything. Weary or not, we must remain on the alert at all times. But I needn't say any more. Finished, Mallory?"

"Yes, sir. Log in order, sir."

"Very good. You may retire. Chandler, you seem to be fagged."

Bud said, "One more yawn and I'll be a zombie."

"A gabby zombie?" sniffed the Old Man. "I'll finish your trick for you. Go get some rest." Still glowering, he plumped himself into the seat vacated by Chandler, cut in the intercommunications board, audioed the radio turret. "Is that you, Sparks? Wake up, you lazy scut! Any news from the Earth? Or Mars Central?"

The radioman's voice clacked metallically, "No, sir. I can't get thought to any station. The rebel forces at New Fresno are still jamming the ether with static interference on all wave bands."

"Well, keep trying. Let me know if you get through. Well?" The skipper glanced back over his shoulder. "Well, I thought you two were tired? What are you waiting for? Want to stand another trick apiece?"

"No, sir!" said both men hastily. "We're leaving, sir!" They fled.

"Ain't he a whipper, though?" asked Chandler affectionately. "He growls like a terrier pup, but he's got no more bite than a cup custard. 'Scuse me!" A gigantic yawn split his grin in two. "Must have been something I et!"

"The hell of it is," said Mallory ruefully, "now I'm off duty, I'm not a bit tired. I wasn't tired at all, really. Just had hardening of the panties from squatting in that seat so long. Got a cigarette?"

Chandler tossed him a package. "And don't swipe the coupon, either. Six thousand more and I get an electronic microscope. Well, you can do what you like. I'm going bye-bye and try to forget the

waffles that bucket-seat has pressed into my hip pockets. 'Night, pal!"

His footsteps rang sharp little echoes on the metal flooring, echoes that hollowed as he disappeared down a corridor leading to the sleeping quarters and Mallory turned toward the observation deck.

THE tall First Mate leaned against the heavy quartzite pane staring into the depths of space through which the *Libra* scudded. The sight was no novelty to him, but as ever it wakened in his heart a sense of awe, a feeling of weird instability, a sort of pride in Man that he, of all the many, strange life-forms experimenting nature had devised, should so far be the only one whose imagination was so great, whose curiosity was so strong, that he had found a way to fling himself at blinding speed across the broad, unfathomable reaches of the void.

It was disheartening to realize that even though he had attained the stars, Man had not yet sloughed off the instincts and habits of the ape from which he sprang. Man's genius had blazed a path across the spaceways, Man's bravery had established new colonies from scorching Mercury to frozen Uranus. SSP lightships bridged the chasms between and beyond; even now the concentrated rays of faraway Sol were steaming the rimy crust off Pluto that Earth's miners might extract the valuable ores revealed by the spectroscope. But with the growth of the colonies, Man's ever latent cupidity had come into play. This past half century, thought Dan Mallory with a sort of savage anger, had been nothing but one long, bloody era of warfare between the forces of law and the outlawry of the greedy.

Now there was this uprising on the first satellite of Jupiter; Io. A charming little world. A pleasant Earth-like orb, spinning quietly about its gigantic parent. Up to this time, its natives had never been troublesome. Squat, muscular creatures, more or less anthropoid, except for the fact that their complexions had a pale, greenish cast and their eyes were double-lidded like those of snakes. They had an intelligence of .63 on the Solar Constant scale. Within a century or so the control board meant to award them autonomy; toward this end educators had been work-

ing ever since Io had been removed from the British Imperial Protectorate in 2221.

Trouble had sprung, both literally and figuratively, like a bolt from the blue. A cosmic *blitzkrieg*. One moment there had been peace and sweet content on Io; the next came a frantic, garbled message about "a rebel army . . . natives . . . led by . . ." The rest had been drowned in an ear-drum blasting burst of electronic static that had rendered all further communication impossible.

"Kreuther!" said Mallory thoughtfully. The affair sounded like one of Kreuther's moves. That power-mad genius, exiled from Earth after the thwarted Lunar Campaign of 2234, was accustomed to strike in just this fashion. He alone, of all avowed SSP enemies, had the persuasive ability to win to his cause a horde of normally contented Ionians, the wealth with which to set into motion war's red machinery, the genius with which to disrupt interplanetary communications.

"But if it is Kreuther," thought Mallory consolingly, "this time he's bitten off more than he can chew. That new weapon—" He wondered, briefly, which officer, sailor, passenger, had been entrusted with the secret of the new ray gun's construction. Then he cast the thought from his mind. It was none of his business. It were better he didn't know.

It was at that stage of his reverie that a sudden byplay of movement captured his attention. In an instant he had cupped his cigarette into his palm, stepped into a dark patch of shadow. A figure had glided from the passageway that led to the sleeping quarters, was now peering uncertainly into the observation deck. It was David Wilmot, one of the six passengers aboard the *Libra*.

Wilmot's thin face was pinched with nervousness; he coughed, a thin little hacking sound in the muted quiet, then put the back of his hand to his mouth. Dan stood motionless, his dark uniform blending perfectly with the drapes that concealed him. As he waited, watching, the door at the far end of the deck opened, a short, plump man in night-robe entered. Wilmot sprang forward eagerly. His whisper carried to Dan's keen ears. "Have you got them, Doctor?"

"Quiet, you fool!" Dr. Bonetti's fore-

head creased angrily; his eyeglasses reflected a subdued light owlshly. He fumbled in his pocket, passed something white to the other man. "Here! But not a word, about this, mind you!"

"I know. I know." Wilmot seized the papers avidly, turned and fled down the corridor whence he had emerged. The doctor stared after him for a moment, shook his head regretfully, then disappeared. The door closed behind him softly.

"That's why, too, we must keep our eyes open—"

The skipper's words echoed in Dan Mallory's memory as he stepped from his hiding place, brow furrowed. What the devil was going on here? Could Bonetti have been the bearer of the secret plans; could Wilmot have been the spy? Had he just witnessed the sell-out of a traitor?

But before he could get his jumbled thoughts into order, a voice addressed him from behind, gravely, quietly.

"Rather confusing, eh, Lieutenant?"

Dan whirled to look into the face of Garland Smith, another of the *Libra's* passengers. He said, half pettishly, "You, Captain? What are *you* doing up at this time of night?"

THE one-time officer of the SSP, now on the retired list, shot a swift glance at the glittering panorama visible through the quartzite plates.

"Night, Lieutenant? Night and day are nothing but quirks of speech out here, sleep a matter of habit. When you have lifted graves as many years as *I* have—" He sighed. "I was restless. And perhaps it is just as well. I witnessed the same thing you did. And strange things are going on aboard the *Libra*."

Mallory said cautiously, "Perhaps you're too apprehensive, Captain. Just because two passengers are sleepless like yourself, meet in the observation chamber—"

"They're not the only two who are still awake. The whole slumbering ship stirs with movement, my boy. A moment or so before you arrived I saw Albert Lemming stealing down the No. 2 corridor—and 'stealing' is the only word that describes his progress. Before that, Mrs. Wilmot had a secret rendezvous with some one in the smoking room; I don't know who her

companion was. And Lady Alice has not been in her cabin all night."

The older man's eyes sought Mallory's, his gaze was piercing.

"My boy, I realize that I no longer rank you. But not so long ago, I was your senior. Once a Patrolman, always a Patrolman, you know. I feel we are in the midst of an intrigue too weighty for one man to solve. Perhaps the experience of an old officer may help. Tell me, is it true what I have heard? That someone aboard this vessel is carrying to the New Fresno garrison the secret of Earth's new ray weapon? If so, the mysterious actions we've witnessed may be espionage, agents of the Kreuther forces—"

Mallory said respectfully, "I'm very sorry, sir. I am not permitted to say anything. But I would suggest that in the morning you speak to Captain Algate. I'm sure he'll welcome your offer of assistance." His face clouded. Slowly he said, "Lady Alice. Where did you see her last?"

"In the reading room."

Mallory saluted, turned and went to the ship's library. As he walked he found himself hoping, why, he did not try to explain to himself, that he would find the room empty. But it was not. A single lamp was lighted inside. As Mallory pressed open the door, shadows danced on the farther wall; the wavering, unidimensional symbol of an upright figure spun and made swift, jabbing motions, dropped. There was a sound of paper rustling, the rough scrape of calfskin on buckram. Then he was in the room, and Lady Alice was seated beside the refectory table, ostensibly reading a book. She glanced up with a little movement of surprise.

"Why, Lieutenant, what a pleasant surprise!"

Mallory stifled the impulse to say, "Pleasant?" He stared at the girl curiously, reminding himself for the hundredth time since she had come aboard this ship, six days ago, that as man and woman they had no common meeting ground, they lived on planes inordinately diverse. He was Dan Mallory, a Lieutenant of the Solar Space Patrol, a respectable, if underpaid, watchdog of law and order in man's widening circle of influence. Moreover, he was a *young* lieutenant. It would be years

before he earned a major brevet, became an acceptable social figure. Even if a miracle were to happen, if he were to be selected into the envied corps of Lensmen, he would only be a super-cop. While she . . .

She was Lady Alice Charwell, possessor of a name and title respected for more than eight hundred years. Of course the title was now one of courtesy only; there was no Duchy of Io since the cession of that satellite to the World Council. But once her father had been manor lord of the entire globe; in the *Almanach de Gotha* her family name and crest still figured prominently.

All of which had little to do with the fact that her eyes were blue as the morning mists of Venus, that her limbs were white and straight and supple, softly feminine despite the mannish slack and shirt ensemble she affected, that her hair was a seine of sunlight gold that snared Dan Mallory's heart and quickened his breath.

He forced his voice to calmness. He said, "Lady Alice, don't you think it would be better if you were to go to bed? This—this staying up at night—"

Her laughter was warm and delicious.

"But, Lieutenant! Surely there's no harm in my reading myself to sleep?"

"Not a bit," agreed Mallory. He bit his lip. "I might suggest, though, that unless you're reading a book in the Lower Venusian language, it would be easier to read if the book were right side up. And—" He walked past her, swiftly, stared at the book which, hastily thrust back into the bookcase, still jutted out beyond its fellows. "And you might find more interesting reading matter than a tactical survey of Ionian military resources."

The girl's face was scarlet. She came to her feet indignantly. "Really, Lieutenant, you go too far! I don't see that it is any of your business."

"Lady Alice," said Mallory pleadingly, "a state of war exists on Io. Strange things are happening aboard the *Libra*, things the exact nature of which I am not at liberty to explain. If you will try to forget, for a moment, that I am a space officer—just think of me as a man—will you allow me to make the suggestion that you do absolutely nothing to lay your actions, your

motives, open to any sort of suspicion?

"I realize that as one who inherited a claim to the title, 'Duchess of Io,' you are deeply interested in current affairs on that colony. Others may read another meaning into your actions, though. At least one person has already hinted that you—"

Lady Alice's breathing was swift. "Who?" she demanded. "Who is this person?"

"I'm sorry. I can't say. But will you do as I suggest?"

There was a moment of silence. Then the girl shut the book on her lap, laid it on the table, rose. "Very well, Lieutenant. I'm a rather poor deceiver, aren't I? Nevertheless, I thank you for your well-meant advice." She moved toward the doorway, grace and poise in her every stride. And she turned there to smile back at him, her voice soft and unamused. "Lieutenant," she said, "you should lay aside your shoulder-straps more often. The man beneath is most—interesting."

Then she was gone, leaving behind her a red-faced, speechless, utterly chaotic Dan Mallory.

AT breakfast, Mallory presided at the head of the table. Bud Chandler, arriving a few minutes late, stared at his comrade surprisedly.

"Why, Skipper!" he said, "What this trip is doing for your complexion! You look thirty years younger. Where did you get them pretty pink cheeks?"

Mallory growled, "Sit down, pal, and shut up. The Old Man's grabbing forty, and he deserves 'em. He and Norton ran into a loft-bound vacuole last night, had a hell of a time pulling out. Didn't you hear the commotion?"

"All I heard," complained Bud, "was somebody in my room snoring. It woke me up once, and what made me maddest was when I found out it was me." He nodded to the assembled passengers, sat down and made wry faces over his grape-fruit juice.

Albert Lemming, the swarthy-skinned jewel merchant en route to his company's headquarters in New Fresno, stared at the acting-Captain curiously.

"A vacuole, Lieutenant? What's that?"

"A hole in space. Something like an air-pocket in the ether. They aren't par-

ticularly dangerous, but the one we ran into was whirling in the wrong direction; if Captain Algase hadn't pulled us out, we'd have lost time on our trip to Io."

Mrs. Wilmot looked up. She was not, thought Mallory, a bad looking dame—if you went for that sharp, peaked sort of beauty. But there was a touch of cruelty to the cut of her lips, a pinched look about the nostrils, he didn't go for. And her eyes were too close together. She said, "That would be unfortunate, wouldn't it, Lieutenant? Losing time, I mean?"

There was a touch of some subtler meaning behind her words; Mallory couldn't decide just what it was. Maybe it was sarcasm, maybe it was fear, maybe it was mockery. He said, "I think we all share the desire to reach New Fresno as soon as possible, don't we?"

Her answer was unexpectedly sharp.

"I don't care if we never reach there. I'd rather die peacefully in space than—"

"Susan!" Her husband's voice sheared the end of the sentence into silence. Her eyes glared defiance at him for a moment, then she returned to the business of eating. Lemming looked embarrassed. Dr. Bonetti shook his head. Captain Smith coughed, suggested mildly, "Captain Algase must be an excellent astronomer, Lieutenant. I didn't notice a single jarring motion. In *my* day, escape from a vacuole was a tedious, ship-wracking process. Of course—" His eyes wandered about the table querulously, "Of course there are so many new inventions nowadays. Improvements in all lines. Spacecraft, air-modifiers, armament—"

Mallory rose suddenly. He was half angry with the ex-space officer. Smith wasn't being very subtle in his effort to help matters. No doubt the old duck meant well, but—

He said, "If you'll excuse me, ladies and gentlemen, I must go to the bridge. Ready, Bud?"

Bud Chandler gulped, "Ssswillwmcffy! Ulp!"

"What?"

"I said, 'As soon as I swallow my coffee!'" repeated the Second Mate aggrievedly. "Can't you understand English? Let's go."

Lemming intercepted them as they passed his end of the table. He asked,

"Lieutenant, I've been wanting to ask for several days—might I be permitted to visit the bridge? This is my first spaceflight, you know. I've always wanted to see how the controls are operated."

"Speak to Captain Algase," suggested Dan. "That's not within my power—Yes, Billy?"

The mess-boy had just raced in from the outer deck, trayless, almost breathless. "Y're wanted on the bridge immejitely, Lootenant! Cap'n orders!" His eyes were as big as saucers. "Sparks just got a message through. A message from New Fresno!"

Dan had just time to notice, out of the corner of one eye, how this bald pronouncement affected the passengers. He saw the concerted motion that dragged them all to their feet as if they were puppets on a single string; saw the sudden gleam in Wilmot's eye, the worried frown that creased Bonetti's forehead, heard the swift, startled gasp from Lady Alice and intercepted Captain Smith's darting glances from one to another of the listeners. Lemming's voice quavered, "A—a message from New Fresno!" and Susan Wilmot laughed, a short, strident, triumphant burst of sound.

Then Dan Mallory saw no more. For with Chandler at his heels, he was pounding through the corridors to the Jacob's ladder that fed the control turret.

CAPTAIN ALGASE was no beauty even when garbed in his officer's blues; in pajamas and slippers he was something out of a nightmare. His bare legs were like cylindrical hair mattresses, his pajama slacks bulged at the equator as if he were concealing there a half watermelon. His eyes were red and gummy, his temper like something that could be poured out of a cruet. As Dan and Bud entered the control turret he was battering the bewildered radioman's defenses into oblivion with a salvo of verbal thermite.

"Message!" he was howling. "You call this thing a message! I'll have you stewed in slow gravy for waking me up like this, Sparks! Of all the damn, dumb—" He saw his two lieutenants. "Never mind, you two. Go back and finish your breakfast. False alarm."

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"We've finished, Skipper," said Dan. "What's all the commotion?"

"This &!æ)\$\$æ09!—" began Algase.

Sparks said miserably, "But it was Marlowe's hand on the keys, Cap'n! I swear it was. I know the message don't make sense, but you can't fool a bug-pounder. Every radioman has a distinctive sending style. Ask anybody. Even one of them wise-cracking Donovan boys. They'll tell you. And this was Marlowe's hand—"

"Let's see," said Mallory. He took the flimsy from his senior's fingers, frowned as he ran an eye over the cryptic symbols. "Numerals! All numerals. Sparks—?"

"It was like this. The static interference is still going on. The audio wouldn't bring in voice at all. But as I was twisting the dials, I got this power wave from Lunar III, Joe Marlowe's station. It had a—a sort of cadence. I began putting down the things it sounded like, and—and that's what come out."

Chandler, peering over his comrade's shoulder, said,

"Well, hell's bells, are you all nuts? It must be a code of some sort. Sparks, we use several numerical codes, don't we?"

"Yes." Meekly. "But that ain't one of them, Lieutenant. That don't fit no code in the reg book."

Mallory continued to stare at the message. It was long, and undeniably confusing. It read:

83.7-152-232.12-167.64-31.02-16-184-167.64-9.02-1-126.92-144.27-186.31-50.95-16-175-47.9-16-14.008-4.002-39.944-50.95-173.04-19-16-10.25-69.87-14.008-16-184-232.12-186.31-39.944-127.61-14.008-20.183-184-19-186.31-118.70-16-1-74.91-127.61-14.008-74.91-28.06-32.06-181.4-14.008-140.13-138-92-20.183-184-39.944-222-32.06-138.92-162.46-26.97-126.92-140.13-40.08-10.82-26.97-32.06-31.02-88.92-14.008-16-184-16-14.008-6.94-79.916-39.944-40.08-195.23-39.944-114.76-150.43-126.92-232.12-114.76-127.61-14.008-32.06-126.92-19-88.92-140.92-16-127.61-12-47.9-16-14.008-16-19-20.183-184-78.96-52.01-16.721-225.97-88.92—

"—and there it began all over again," said Sparks. "The same sequence. I agree, it's a code. But what good is a code when we ain't got the key to it. It ain't a simple word substitution cryptogram or a five-by-five. I studied them in the Academy, and tried them all before I brought this to the Captain. In other words, it ain't no good to us unless we've got the clue—and we ain't got the clue!"

MALLORY said, "Billy said this was a message from New Fresno?"

"Well, he was wrong, as usual." Determinedly. "It come from Earth's moon. I know Joe Marlowe's fingers when I hear 'em. Damn, we was classmates for three years. Before I got crazy and gave up chemistry for key-pushing—"

"Chemistry!" Mallory started. "Did you say chemistry? Did you and Marlowe study chemistry together?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Why! Because that's the answer. Marlowe is nobody's fool. He knew you were the radioman aboard the *Libra*, prepared a special code, the key to which would lie in your brain as the 'memory of auld lang syne'—Bud, look at these figures again. You notice the number '16' appearing over and over? Even in that thick skull of yours, '16' suggests—?"

"Oxygen," declared Chandler promptly. "The atomic weight of oxygen."

"And eighty-three point seven? Forty-seven, nine?"

"Krypton. And—let's see—titanium?"

"Right! Grab a pencil, pal! I think we've got a solution here. Jot these down—krypton, europium, thorium, erbium—Hold it!" He looked at his companion disgustedly. "Just the symbols, you dope! Don't you see? The symbols of the various elements employ every letter in the English language except 'j' and 'q'—and those are the two least commonly used, anyway. Start over. Krypton—"

"Kr," said Bud.

"Europium—"

"Eu."

"Thorium. Erbium—"

"'Kreuther'!" howled Bud. "That's it, Dan! Keep going!"

THE message slowly scrawled its way onto paper. A word appeared, another, another. Then:

"Ten point twenty-five!" said Mallory. "Followed by 69.87! What the hell are they?"

Bud said, "Maybe he made a mistake? Boron's 10.82. Lithium's 6.94—"

"No. That's not it," said Mallory. He frowned. Captain Algase had long since wakened completely, was listening to his two juniors with glowing pride. Now he cut the Gordian knot.

"Chromium," he suggested, "is fifty-two point one, Dan. The reverse of the number that stumps you."

"Right! That's it, Skipper! And the meaning must be that the symbol is to be written in reverse. 'Rc' instead of 'Cr.' There aren't enough combinations to spell every word in the language unless you use some subterfuges like that."

"Which makes the word," said Bud, "'forces.' Go on, pal. . ."

Mallory plunged into the heart of the coded letter. "39.944—"

"Argon," said Bud, "'A.'"

"114.76. Indium. 150.43—"

"Samarium. 'Sa.' Next?"

"Iodine."

"'I.'"

The message was finished. Bud handed it to Captain Algase. Mallory's curiosity was at fever pitch. He had not been able to piece the letters together as he went along; he had gained but a smattering here and there. He waited. The skipper read slowly, breaking the message up into coherent sentences.

"Kreuther power behind revolution. Heavy forces now threatening New Fresno—"

"Kreuther, huh?" growled Bud. "I thought so."

"Hasten assistance. Lane warns—"

The captain stopped, stared a moment, glanced swiftly at Mallory. There was a tight note in his voice. "'Lane warns Lady Alice, cabal spy, now in *Libra*—'"

"Lady Alice!" blurted Mallory. The warmth of the control turret suddenly weighed down upon him; his brow felt hot, oppressed, as if some gigantic hand had descended upon his temples.

"'Captain saith,'" continued Algase, "'intensify protection of new secret ray.'" He crumpled the paper. "And that is all, gentlemen. Mallory—"

"Yes, sir?"

"Our fears were justified. There is a spy on the *Libra*. We must take no chances. You will arrest Lady Alice Charwell, place her under lock and key for the duration of the voyage."

Bud Chandler muttered, "Where does Marlowe get that Old English stuff? 'Saith!' Why didn't he say, 'Says'?"

"Because," Mallory answered mechanically, "there is no 'ys' combination in the

elemental vocabulary. He had to say it that way." The recollection of his unpleasant duty flooded back on him; with it came protest. "But it can't be true, Captain! There must be some mistake. Surely Lady Alice wouldn't be—"

"On the contrary, Daniel," Algase's voice was unusually gentle, "she would be. Once her family owned all of Io. It is more than likely that she should want to see the globe freed of Board control; regain her lost property. She could well be in league with Kreuther to overthrow the present government. According to this, she *is*."

"Yes, sir," acknowledged Dan dully. He was thinking of Captain Smith's warning. Of the book Lady Alice had been reading, the book on military tactics. "Shall I make the—the arrest now, sir?"

"Yes, Lieutenant."

"Very good, sir!" He turned and left the room. His jaw was white and rigid; a dull hurt was behind his eyes. . . .

A STRAINED assemblage awaited his return to the mess hall. As he entered the room all conversation ended abruptly; an almost audible silence fell upon the group of passengers. Lemming half rose from his seat, opened his mouth as though to say something, closed it again, his lips a white slit against the green pallor of his cheeks. Lady Alice's eyes were tense, expectant. Captain Smith moved forward to meet him. The ex-space officer's heavy frame was poised and ready; there was a note of subdued eagerness in his voice. He said stridently, "Well, Lieutenant—?"

Dan Mallory's patience with the older man was quite exhausted. He said curtly, but in a voice that did not reach the ears of the others, "Captain, I must remind you that you have no authority whatsoever on this ship! I appreciate your willingness to help, but—" Angrily. "For God's sake, man, stop acting like the hero of a Twenty-second century dime novel! Stop fingering your needle-gun, and—"

Smith looked embarrassed. His heavy shoulders sagged, and swift contrition swept over Mallory as the one-time officer said, "I—I'm sorry, Lieutenant."

Lemming had found words at last. He asked, shakily, "The—the message, Lieutenant? Was it—?"

He had to arrest Lady Alice, thought Dan Mallory. But he didn't have to humiliate her. To brand her eternally as a traitor in the eyes of her associates. And he still held doggedly to the hope that somehow, somewhere, had been made a dreadful mistake. He said, "The message was a routine transmission, Mr. Lemming. Of no great importance. Now, will you all be kind enough to disband, quietly?"

No one moved. Mallory, glancing at the faces about him, felt again that conviction that an interwoven webbing of intrigue entangled these passengers. He said, firmly, "That is not a request, but a command! You will all retire to the observation deck at once!"

The little group stirred. Mallory sought the side of Lady Alice, said, "I've been wanting to show you the ship, Lady Alice. Wouldn't you like to see it now?"

Her look of pleased surprise burned him. She said, "Why, Lieutenant, how nice! I would enjoy it."

They moved in a direction opposite that of the rest of the passengers. Even so, they did not escape unnoticed. From the corner of his eye Dan Mallory caught the glitter of Dr. Bonetti's spectacles, realized that the dumpy man was watching them shrewdly. And for a moment his eye met that of Captain Garland Smith; the old officer's head was nodding in mused speculation. He, too, had guessed Mallory's concealed purpose.

Only the girl herself seemed unaware that this was not merely a pleasantry. Her shoulder brushed that of Mallory as they pressed through a narrow doorway; the soft, feminine warmth of her heaped reproach on the young lieutenant, as did her words.

"Lieutenant, I see you can take advice as well as give it. I had no idea, last night, when I suggested that you reveal the man beneath the uniform more often, that you would actually—"

They were alone now. And Mallory turned to face her, his voice purposely hard and impersonal.

"If you please, Lady Alice! It is my painful duty to inform you that you are under arrest!"

"Under ar—!" Her gasp ended in a burst of light laughter. She brought her hand to her forehead in mock salute.

"Aye, Lieutenant! Brig, ho! But if I'm not too inquisitive, what charges are preferred against me? Murder? Of course, I *do* kill time most horribly, but these long trips—or could it be theft? I'm sure I've stolen nothing. Unless **you** mean—" She paused in sudden confusion; her eyes lifted to his; there was something written there, something breathtaking. Mallory had to hold tight.

"The charge," he said tersely, "is—treason! That message was from Lunar III, Lady Alice. It bore a warning from the commander of the Intelligence Division there, advising us that you had been discovered to be a member of Igor Kreuther's organization!"

THE light died from the girl's eyes, the smile on her lips turned to ice. Her slim body stiffened, straightened. And for an instant Dan Mallory saw, with swift prescience, that this girl was not all charm and allure; that beneath her tempting softness there was a core, steel-strong, of strength and daring.

"Treason! Treason, you—you blind fool!" she spat. "You dare accuse *me*, Lady Alice Charwell, Grand Duchess of Io, Lady of the Rocket and Globe, Maid of the Golden Crest, of—of treason! Sir! My family ruled Io when that dominion was first discovered. For almost three hundred years the Charwell crest has—"

"Please, Lady Alice!" pleaded Mallory. "I know how you feel about it. To your mind, your actions were not treasonable. But Io is no longer yours; it is under the guardianship of the Control Board. And you mustn't talk this way. I will be called to testify against you; anything you say will be convicting evidence—" He touched her shoulder as though the warmth of his hand might melt its icy stiffness.

She shrugged herself loose disdainfully.

"I think we can dispense with the amenities, Lieutenant. The smile on the lips . . . the gracious invitation to 'see the ship' . . . the friendly hand of comfort. . . ." There was scorn, anger, pain in her eyes. "It is my right to demand the privilege of communicating with my accusers, is it not? Those on Earth who—?"

"I'm sorry. No audio transmission is possible because of the blanket-static. The message came through in a code."

"I see. I must wait, then, until we reach New Fresno. Never mind, Lieutenant Mallory. You have said enough. I presume you are placing me under guard? Where—in my own quarters? Very well. If you will be kind enough to escort me there!" She laughed brittlely. "But, of course, you will. You couldn't let a traitor out of your sight, could you?"

In throbbing, bitter silence they moved down the corridors to Lady Alice's stateroom. There she spoke for the last time.

"The message that accused me, Lieutenant. Might I be permitted to hear the damning evidence? What did it say?"

There was no harm, thought Mallory miserably, in telling her that. The words were like acid, etched into his brain. He repeated them. She listened intently, frowned—and then a new, curious look stole into her eyes. She said, "But—"

"Yes?" said Mallory. "Yes?"

The look faded. She laughed scornfully.

"Hoping to hear more 'convicting evidence,' Lieutenant? I'm so sorry to disappoint you. Now, will you lock the door after me, please?"

Dan Mallory made a last try. It would cost him his rocket if anyone heard his words, but—

"Lady Alice," he pleaded, "I'm honestly sorry about this. I don't believe you are guilty. If you'll trust me, tell me your side of the story, I'll do everything in my power to—"

"You have done," said the girl tightly, "more than enough right now. Guard me well, Lieutenant!" With a short, mocking laugh she slipped through the door. Mallory waited a long minute, then turned the key in the lock. Its grate was a taunting sneer. He returned to the bridge. . . .

HE couldn't help overhearing the end of that conversation. The runway that fed the control turret was narrow and metal-walled; it formed a perfect sound-box. Moreover, the door was ajar. The voice was Captain Algase reached his ears perfectly as he approached the room.

"—don't want to have to remind you again, Norton, that it is highly unethical for a space officer to become involved with a woman passenger. Especially with a married woman."

And the surly voice of Third Mate Rick Norton saying, "Very well, sir!" Then footsteps approaching the door, a figure confronting his squarely, Norton flushing, snarling, "Getting an earful, Mallory?"

Dan was in no mood for bickering. He said, "Don't mind me, Norton. I've known for months you were a skirt-chaser. I don't consider it any of my business."

Norton's cheeks flamed. He said insultingly, "And I suppose you stand behind your stripes as you say that?"

"Forget the stripes." Mallory looked at his fists. "I stand behind these."

"Good!" Norton swung. He was a well-built man, a strong man. His blow packed dynamite—but it needed a target to set off the percussion cap. It found no target but a moving one. Mallory ducked, rolled with the punch, came up inside the Third Mate's guard to land a short, jabbing left to the midsection, a blasting right to the point of Norton's jaw. Norton gasped and collapsed soggly. Arms behind him reached out to support his falling weight; other lips behind Mallory whistled softly as Bud Chandler, coming up to serve his trick, witnessed the swift, decisive exchange of blows. And Captain Algase, releasing Norton's inert form, glared at Mallory.

"Well! Well, Lieutenant, I think you know we have rules against brawling?"

"Aye, sir!"

"But—" Captain Algase stroked his jaw speculatively, "In this case—Chandler, get him below! It served him right. Maybe he'll spend this rest period sleeping, instead of stirring up trouble amongst the passengers. Dan, my boy—"

He led the way back into the turret, completed the log record for the previous trick, handed it to Mallory, who had slipped into the control bucket.

"Twenty-four more Earth hours and we'll be there," he said. "And, believe me, I'll be glad when this trip ends. Trouble. Nothing but trouble from beginning to end. Long tricks and short tempers. Norton getting mixed up with that Wilmot dame—a damn' hussy if I ever saw one, and her husband a neurotic wreck. Smith bothering the blistering Hades out of me, wanting to 'help' catch spies and a thousand other—" He glanced at Mallory, who had stiffened at the word. His glance was sympathetic.

"I'm sorry I had to ask you to arrest her, Daniel. But it's experiences like that that make strong men out of space officers.

"You have to be hard in this business. Crime hides beneath strange disguises. The sweetest smiles, the friendliest handshakes, the most honeyed words, may conceal—"

"If you please, sir!" said Dan Mallory, white-lipped.

"I know, lad. I've seen the way you looked at her. But remember—forty thousand innocent lives! Had she learned the secret of that new weapon, our voyage might have been disastrous. From this distance she could have made a flight to Io in one of the auxiliary safety rockets, given the plans to Kreuther's forces. The very weapon we look to for salvation would have been used against us. Io might have become a nest of rebellion, instead of a peaceful member of the solar family. Now that we've snared our spy, the messenger—whoever he is—will be safe."

On the visiplat it was a glowing red spark, but in the *perilens* before him it was a gigantic orb dominating the heavens through which the *Libra* hurtled. Jupiter; monster of Sol's scattered brood, untamed sphere of writhing gases and vague mystery, itself a pseudo-parent emanating enough heat to make its far-flung satellites livable worlds. Soon they would fling themselves, they aboard the *Libra*, halfway around that gigantic orb, settle to the small body now wanly visible as a silver crescent.

DAN MALLORY punched a control-key savagely, felt the *Libra* shake itself into a slightly changed curve, turned to his superior.

"I'm not so sure of that, sir. Oh, I'm not trying to defend Lady Alice. Earth's Intelligence officers don't make mistakes—not mistakes of that magnitude, anyway. But there are other passengers I don't trust. Lemming. Wilmot. Dr. Bonetti. Why are they aboard the *Libra*? Why were they so excited when they heard we'd received a message from Lunar III? Suppose one of them is also a spy?"

"Or suppose," said the skipper, "one of them bears the secret of the new ray weapon. Wouldn't that one naturally be excited?"

"But the others?" Mallory inquired.

"I don't know. You may have something there, Daniel. I'm still taking no chances. I've put Aiken on guard at Lady Alice's door. If anyone tries to liberate her— What is it, Sparks?"

He snapped the query at the intercommunications box which was spluttering and growling. The radioman's tone was weary. "It's Mr. Wilmot again, sir. He insists on talking to you."

"Tell Mr. Wilmot I will see him at midday mess."

Sparks was stubborn about it.

"But he insists his message is important, sir. He demands to see you at once. Says—"

"*Demands!*" The skipper's jowls reddened. "Please tell Mr. Wilmot passengers do not *demand* favors of spaceship officers. I will see him at mess. That is all!" And he cut the communications board; turned to Mallory angrily. "That's why I didn't put you on report for slugging Norton. Wilmot's mad as a hornet and I don't blame him. Norton catting around after his wife—"

Chandler appeared, grinning. He said to Mallory, "What a sock, pal, what a sock! If that guy counts sheep in his sleep, he's going to wake up allergic to mutton. Wish I had done it. He's a grouchy son-of-a— What's biting you?"

Mallory said, "That's just it, damn it! I don't quite know. It just came upon me like a flash that someone said something funny . . . something that didn't ring true . . . but I can't remember what it was. If I could—"

"See, Skipper? It's got him, too. We're all going to be candidates for the strait-jacket squad when we finish this trip."

Algase smiled sourly. "Well, don't lift graves for the next twenty-four hours, that's all I ask. See you later, boys." He turned to leave; was interrupted by the buzz of the intercommunications box. "What, again! Yes, Sparks—what is it this time? If it's Wilmot again, tell him to go beat his brains out with a rusty bar! I'll see him at—"

Sparks' voice was harsh with excitement.

"It is Wilmot, sir! But I can't tell him anything. He's dead, sir! Murdered!"

CHANDLER said, "Murdered? Mi-god!" Captain Algase said a more effective and less printable thing which ended in, "Come on!" And he and Chandler pounded down the runway, their footsteps ringing on the Jacob's-ladder, disappearing in the distance.

Dan Mallory, his thoughts chaotic, sat chained to his bucket seat by the obligation of guiding the spaceship through the treacherous void. His fingers played over the control keys automatically; slowly the chaos left his brain and cold, clear, reasoning thought took its place.

Wilmot dead. Why? The first thought that suggested itself was Norton. Motive—jealousy. The desire to get Susan Wilmot's husband out of the way so—

But that was illogical. Norton was a skirt-chaser and a quixotic fool, but he wasn't a criminal. Murder was not in his line. Why else, then?

Because Wilmot had been the bearer of the formula? Had he been slain by a spy? And if so, by whom? Lady Alice was in her cabin, or at least—with a swift constriction of the throat—Dan hoped she was. He pressed the intercommunications button hurriedly; Sparks' face appeared before him on the visiplat. "Get me the M-13 plate, Sparks! The one in the stateroom passageway!"

The scene shifted. Aiken, a space gob, looked up as the audio before him glowed into life, touched his forelock respectfully. "Lieutenant Mallory?"

"The prisoner is in her stateroom?"

"Aye, sir."

"She hasn't been out?"

"Not for a moment, sir." The sailor added, "Might I ask the lieutenant what the h—I mean, what's going on?"

"Plenty!" snapped Dan. "That's all, sailor. Carry on!"

The glow faded. Mallory shook his head. No dice on that hunch. Then what else—?

The thought came so suddenly, so breathtakingly, that it literally lifted him out of his chair. There was but one possible answer! The reverse of his former theory. Wilmot was neither the bearer of the precious secret nor a spy. He was the "innocent bystander"; the traditional victim who, from time immemorial, has always been the one to get bopped. Some-

how the nervous, jittery little man had learned *who* the spy was. He had attempted to communicate his knowledge to Captain Algase; the petulance of his own nature had rendered this impossible. And the spy, knowing that Wilmot had learned his secret, had—

Again he pressed the button. This time Sparks said, "Lieutenant Mallory? Have you seen Mr. Lemming? The captain wants to question him, but he can't be found anywhere—"

"Never mind that!" rapped Mallory. "Sparks, I want to know this. How was Wilmot killed?"

"Rayed, sir. Needled."

"I thought as much. And who was the first to find him?"

"Dr. Bonetti, sir. He's being held under suspicion. He confesses to having supplied Wilmot with drugs, sir. *Teklin-root*, sir. (That would be, thought Mallory swiftly, the package surreptitiously exchanged in the observation room) But he claims he didn't kill Wilmot—"

"Quick, man! Was Captain Smith anywhere around the radio turret when this happened?"

"Why—why, he *had* been, sir. But he left before Mr. Wilmot did—"

Captain Algase's face appeared in the visiplat beside that of Sparks. "Daniel, my boy, keep your eye peeled for Lemming. He's disappeared. Susan Wilmot has told us he isn't a jewel merchant at all; he's a jewel thief! Fleeing Earth to gain settler's amnesty on Io. Wilmot knew his secret, tried to blackmail him. Lemming threatened—"

"You're after the wrong man!" screamed Dan Mallory. "Captain, I see it all, now! The whole story. These other things have confused us. Sparks, swiftly—get me that M-13 plate again!"

THE scene spun, changed dizzily. Once again Mallory was gazing down the corridor where Aiken had stood guard. But Aiken no longer stood before Lady Alice Charwell's door. He lay there, limp, still forever. A smoking hole charred his broad chest, crimson stirred sluggishly from the needle-ray's telltale trail. The door of the stateroom was open.

A hoarse bellow told Dan that the captain was seeing the same scene.

"*She* did it! She killed him and escaped!"

"No!" roared Mallory. "*Smith* did it! The man we should have suspected all the time; the man who *admitted* his guilt, but I was too blind to see it. Kreuther's spy. The renegade space officer— Captain, did you feel that?"

His space-trained senses had felt the swift, tiny moment of jarring repercussion that meant only one thing—that from one of the escape ports a life-skiff, an auxiliary safety rocket, had slipped from its base on the *Libra*, taken off into space!

"He's escaping! He's kidnaped her and taken off in a life-skiff. Bud! Take over! I'm lifting graves!"

And for the first time in his career as an officer of the SSP, Lieutenant Daniel Mallory violated, deliberately, a rule of the Space Patrol handbook. He rammed the *Libra's* controls into the robot hands of the Iron Mike, and abandoned his post in mid-flight!

IT was not that he considered himself more capable than his captain or the second mate. His move was dominated by only one thing, the urgent need for haste. Safety rockets are, as everyone knows, blindingly fast. Much faster than the heavier, sturdier, cruising vessels that bear them like so many unfledged wallabies in a pouch. Give Smith a flying start and he would never be apprehended. And *he*, Dan Mallory, was much nearer a life-skiff port than the other officers up in the loft of the radio turret.

Slipping, skidding, stumbling in his haste, he raced to the nearest port, flung open the control-bar, threw himself into the small, tear-shaped vehicle lying there. There were regulations demanding that air, food, water supplies be ascertained before flight in one of these was attempted. But there was no time for such nonsense now. Each second seemed an hour as Mallory warmed the hypatomic motors of the skiff, rammed the button that opened the *Libra's* outer shell, struck another that catapulted the safety-rocket away from its parent craft.

Then the dark of the womblike casing was gone, and he was blasting, under his own power, through space illumined with the candle-gleams of a trillion galactic

notes. He set his range-finder and attractor—but even as their needles found their objective, his searching eyes located it. A tiny, silvery gleam against the tawny night ahead—a gleam from the stern of which flared burst upon flaming burst of superheated light.

The rockets of Smith's skiff, hell-bent for Io!

Minutes *had* been precious! Vitally so. Already the little craft was countless thousands of miles before him. It was a wide margin that separated him; and in that margin lay the difference between freedom and peonage for forty thousand Earthmen, millions of Ionians, the difference between life and death for the girl Smith had kidnaped, the difference between victory and defeat for the Solar Patrolmen.

There was only one way to catch Smith. Recognizing the fact, Dan Mallory bit his lip, set his jaw stubbornly. Acceleration! Acceleration great enough to fling him across the yawning void, enable him to snare his quarry in tensiles . . .

And he was not strapped! No safety corset to hold tight the straining cords of his viscera, no yards of gauze padding to keep his wracked body from literally flinging itself to shreds. No—

He glanced about him hurriedly. There were piles of cushions, soft, plump, airy, scattered about the metallic cockpit. He jammed a dozen of these behind him, under him, about him. There was an oxy-helmet in its container beside him; he thrust this over his head. Its rubberoid halter settled about his chest, his shoulders. At least his straining eyes would not bulge from their sockets; by adjustment—if he could raise a hand—he could compensate accelerative force with pressure.

He drew a deep breath. Then, recklessly, wrenched the dial of the motor to full acceleration!

IT was as though ten thousand fiery demons tore at his body with claws of flame. A weight, massive, imponderable, kicked the breath out of his lungs, forced it from his gaping mouth and flared nostrils into the helmet he wore. He gulped and strangled, fighting to draw into a shrunken chest a breath of fleeing life. One hand moved—or tried to—to his throat in an instinctive gesture of distress.

The hand moved a half inch from his knee, flung itself back into his stomach like a leaden weight.

The quick burst of nausea saved his life, because tortured ductless glands released a stream of adrenalin into his churning blood-stream, the miraculously adaptable body of Man rose once again above its normal limitations. Air crept into his lungs, his heart's tumultuous pounding no longer throbbed a threnody in his eardrums.

Still he could move with only the greatest of effort—but he could move! And his eyes, no longer blinded by the red mist that had drowned their sockets, saw the rocket-flares before him seem to literally stop in mid-flight, race back toward him!

A great exultation seized him. He was hardly aware that bright blood had burst from his nostrils, and that as he opened his lips to shout hoarsely the corners of his mouth drooled red. The craft he pursued whirled fiercely toward him; like flame-riding charioteers they jockeyed across the cosmic wastes. Smith knew he was there. Must know. But—Mallory's grin was the grimace of a gargoyle—he didn't have the guts to duplicate the young lieutenant's mad burst of speed.

He was depending on other weapons. Even as Mallory experienced the thought, a stabbing beam spat backward from the other rocket, a coruscating ray of silver that bore sudden death.

But Mallory had anticipated the move; his slow hand had been straining for seconds to forestall it. He pressed a lever—the ship slid into a dive. Another and the terrible pressure lifted from his limbs, his body felt suddenly light and buoyant, strength surged back to him with singing sweetness.

Again that stabbing ray searched for him. But Dan Mallory was no novice at the art of space warfare. He spun his craft into a cycloid Laegland arc, the lethal ray spent itself on indestructible space, and when Mallory came out of his maneuver he was within scant miles of his objective.

Grimming savagely, his hand sought the button that would smash Smith's ship into oblivion—then stayed! Lady Alice! He could not destroy her with Smith. Because now he knew, certainly and surely, two

things. One of which was that she must be the bearer of the secret ray formula to Io. In no other way could you account for the fact that Smith had dared everything to kidnap her. She carried the secret, not in papers, but in her mind.

Were she to die—and might the gods of space forbid that his hand should destroy her loveliness!—Kreuther would still be the victor. For with her would perish the final hope of the besieged New Fresno garrison.

The other thing he realized was—

But there was no time for that now. His fingers spurned the ray button; found another. A jolt shivered the space-skiff from fore-quartz to rocket as his tensile beam reached across the closing miles, fastened its grip on Smith's craft.

Mallory's grin tightened. He cut motors. His tensile beam would contract like a rubber band, drawing the two ships together. Smith, feeling that beam upon him, unable to sheer it off, would not be able to turn a lethal radiation upon him now. For the tensile beam was a perfect conduction ray. To destroy one ship meant to destroy both.

There was a groan behind him. Shocked, he turned. From the storage bin, bleeding from nose, ears, mouth, body twisted as though wrung through some gigantic mangle, crawled the missing jewel thief—Albert Lemming!

MALLORY choked, sickened. "Lord, man! How did you get aboard here? Why—"

Liquid breath gurgled in Lemming's throat. Glaze filmed his eyeballs. "Tried to—" he panted, "—stow away. Wilmot dead—knew suspect me—hid—"

His head fell forward to the floor. Dan fingered his pulse, found there not the feeblest stir of life. Lemming, fleeing the dreaded breath of suspicion, had lost the more important breath of life. The miracle was that he had survived, even so long, the tremendous acceleration that had taxed all Mallory's space-trained, protected faculties.

And the two space-skiffs closed inexorably the gap between them. Mallory's quick brain leaped to the final problem. But before he could solve it, the small skiff audio burst into speech.

"Well done, whoever you are!" said the voice from the other skiff. "But you realize it won't do you any good?"

Mallory rasped, "I'm coming alongside in a minute, Smith. Stand by to surrender peaceably, or—"

"Or?" mocked the ex-space officer. "So it's you, Lieutenant? I might have guessed it. Your valor is exceeded only by your lack of foresight. I repeat, your hectic pursuit has done you no good."

"Never mind the talk. Stand by. This is the end," said Mallory. "This is checkmate, Smith."

"Not checkmate, my gallant young friend," corrected Smith. "*Stalemate*. True, you hold me captive in your beam. But to what end? You can't hope to take me alive. Whenever I choose, I can blast you and myself into atoms. And with us goes—" he paused significantly—"Lady Alice! Ah, you are silent, Lieutenant? I thought you would be. Of course, I'm an old man. These youthful romancings no longer interest me. But—bless us, she's much too beautiful to die, isn't she, Lieutenant?"

Lady Alice's voice interrupted.

"Take him, Dan! Don't think about me. I'm not afraid to—"

"You hear, Lieutenant? The girl's galantry is a fit match for your own. But by this time, surely, you have realized that if she dies, the secret of the new ray weapon dies with her. I think my leader's forces will have taken New Fresno before a second messenger reaches Io."

It was the truth. Knowing that, Dan Mallory groaned. This was a deadlock; one that neither force could break. He said slowly, "Well, Captain? What is your price for Lady Alice's safety?"

"My own," replied the renegade spaceman promptly, "and the secret she bears. I'm not an unreasonable man, Lieutenant. Even though—" bitterness edged his words—"even though the Solar Space Patrol did take the best years of my life, squeeze the heart out of me, throw my aging body into the discard like a dried pulp. No, I'm not unreasonable—"

So that was it. The self-pity of an aging man, perhaps a man gone off his gravels from the letdown after active years. That was why Smith had renounced his SSP pledge, gone over to the other side.

Captain Algase's words rang in Dan's memory. "Where there are new causes, there are traitors to the old—" Even a spaceman was not exempt from human weakness.

"If Lady Alice will surrender her secret to me," the renegade captain was continuing, "with convincing proof that the formula she gives me is no lie, I will permit you both to live. I will allow you to keep one of these ships, return to safety—"

Mallory thought feverishly. It was against his every scruple to parley thus with the other man. But he could gain nothing by destroying himself and Lady Alice. Alive, there was always a chance they might win through to the New Fresno fort, carry their message, howsoever belated. If they died, Kreuther and his hirelings would surely win.

He said, "Very well, Smith. I accept. Give him the formula, Lady Alice."

Her answer was tense, vivid.

"No! No, Dan, don't trust him! He won't keep his promise. I know he won't!"

"We must take that chance." Grimly. "Tell him!"

THE audio went dead. Mallory waited impatiently. Somewhere, lost in the immensity that engulfed them, the *Libra* surged through space on a mission now in the hands of the deadlocked three. So near that it was more sunlike than Sol, Jupiter swung in its titanic orbit about Man's luminary. The endless night was spangled with an infinitude of stars. The stars toward which Man, yearning, groped—while Man's feet still stumbled through the muck and mire of deceit. . . .

And the audio woke to life again. Smith's voice was triumphant. "Very well, Lieutenant. I am satisfied. I have finished the demolition of power and arms units in this ship. Its radio, however, still operates. I think it will sustain life for you until your friends arrive. I am ready to board your ship."

Lady Alice's cry broke in, "Be careful, Dan! He'll kill you! He—" There was the sound of flesh upon flesh, a silence. Then, "Well, Lieutenant?"

Dan said, "Come ahead."

"You will take your place," said Smith, "in the pilot's seat where I can see you from the moment I enter the lock. Put

your hands above your head. Do not move or turn as I enter. If you do—"

"Come ahead," repeated Dan. The audio disconnected.

Dan sprang into motion. He believed Lady Alice's warning. And he was prepared to meet subtlety with subtlety; deceit with deceit. Not yet had Smith won. He bent and lifted the broken body of Albert Lemming. Hurriedly he jammed the oxy-helmet down over the dead man's bloody features. He grunted, "Sorry, pal!" as he hoisted Lemming into the pilot's chair, forced stiffening arms back and up in token of surrender. The high back of the chair, the padded cushions made the form hold its position.

He finished just in time. There was a scraping at the airlock. The two ships had drifted side to side now, and entry was a simple matter. Mallory ducked back into the compartment from which Lemming had emerged. His needle gun was in his hand, poised, ready. . . .

Smith entered quietly. He glanced once at the figure in the pilot's chair, said, "Don't move, Lieutenant—" and his arm raised. The girl's warning had been all too true. There was rankest treachery in the leveling of that gun, in the fiery needle dart that hurled across the chamber, burying itself in Lemming's defenseless head. The stench of charred flesh filled the room. The dead body wobbled, lurched to the floor. And—

"Now, you stand still, Smith!" gritted Mallory.

Smith whirled, his jaw dropping open. In his eyes dawned horror, disappointment, rage. He cried out once, raised his gun.

That was how he died. With his traitorous fingers lifted for the last time against a man who wore the uniform he had once worn . . . and had disgraced. . . .

AFTERWARD, as they stood in the control turret of the *Libra*, watching a sober-faced Rick Norton plot the landing that would bring new life to the Ionian colonists, swift retribution to the fomenters of the uprising, Bud Chandler whaled his comrade's back enthusiastically.

"Guy," he said, "in words of one syllable, you're terrific!"

"That's not one syllable," grinned Mallory.

"All right, then, you're a lallapalooza! But how the blue asteroids did you get onto the fact Smith was the guy?"

Dan said, "It came to me almost too late. It had been worrying me subconsciously ever since I had to—" here he flushed—"had to arrest Lady Alice. I knew that someone had, in conversation with me, said something that didn't ring true. And when Wilmot was killed for having discovered the truth about Smith, I suddenly remembered what it was.

"The night before we got the message from Lunar III, assuring us that Kreuther was behind the revolution, Smith had mentioned to me, quite casually, that he suspected there were on the *Libra* 'espionage agents of the Kreuther forces.' What he was attempting to do, of course, was ally himself with us in order to divert suspicion. But he tipped his hand by that little slip of the tongue."

Lady Alice smiled. She said, "Well, you're not awfully smart. Any of you. I knew he was the spy as soon as I heard the message from Earth."

Captain Algase interrupted, "Yeah, that message! I'm going to raise an assortment of hell about that. Causing us to arrest the one person on board we could really trust."

"And all," smiled the girl, "because of one, small, chemical symbol that you misread. Oh, yes, I understand now. I've seen the original. Bud—you went to the Academy, didn't you?"

"Why—why, yes."

"Your professor there must have been quite an old man. I mean your chemistry prof."

"He was. Ancient. But what has that got to do with it?"

"Everything. He taught you the old, the original chemical symbol for the element samarium. 'Sa.' The more common symbol, the generally accepted one, is 'Sm.' Now you see what a great difference that one little error makes in the meaning of the message. You read it:

"'Lane warns Lady Alice, cabal spy, now on *Libra*. Captain saith intensify protection of new secret ray.'"

"And it should have been read," broke in Dan Mallory, understanding at last, "Lane warns Lady Alice cabal spy now

on *Libra*—Captain Smith! Intensify protection—" and so on. It was a warning to you, not about you!"

"Exactly. Naturally, I was—well, indignant when I was placed under arrest. Afterward, I began to think it a good idea. Confined to my quarters, guarded, I would be completely safe. But unfortunately Captain Smith guessed, when I was arrested, that I was the bearer of the formula. So he killed my guard, seized the skiff, and kidnaped me.

"'Saith!'" grunted Bud Chandler disgustedly. "I told you that word was phony. Joe Marlowe never used good English in his life when a cuss-word would do just as well. Hey! Where are you two going?"

It is doubtful whether Dan Mallory heard the question. There was one other little matter than needed clearing up—but soon! That was the way Lady Alice Charwell, in the moment of their mutual peril, had hurdled the amenities of speech, addressed him not as "Lieutenant," or even as plain "Mallory," but as—

"Dan," he said. "You called me 'Dan.' It's not right, Lady Alice. You shouldn't do things like that unless you mean them. And I—"

"Suppose," she asked, "I like that part of your name best. It is a nice name, you know."

Dan Mallory's big hands pawed futilely at the blue of his uniform. "So," he croaked, "is Mallory. And—and I guess I'm completely crazy. I couldn't ask *you* to share a name like that. I'm just a space cop. And you're a Lady. A titled Lady."

She said softly, "A Lady, Dan? There is no Duchy of Io any more. That's a thing of the past, and my title is only a courtesy. And, oh—I'm so tired of courtesies. I'm a space cop, too, now. There's nothing in the rules to keep two cops from teaming up, is there? Oh, you big, damn, dumb idiot—!"

Her face, smiling up at his, was inclined at just the right angle. They told him afterward that Rick Norton made a swell landing. He didn't believe it. For it seemed to Dan Mallory that the whole cosmos was swirling and dancing and twisting upside down in a delirium of delight. . . .



THE VIZIGRAPH

YOU picked the winners of original illustrations from the Winter issue. It's Thompson and Goldsmith, 1 and 2, and Hidley again, this time to show. Let's have your Spring issue winners. Remember, the three best get their choice of original illustrations from this issue.

Because of the great influx of letters to The Vizigraph the Feature Flash must get the go-by this issue.

LYNCH 'IM IF YOU HAVE TO . . .

7063 Ohio Avenue
Silverton, Ohio

DEAR EDITOR:

When I saw your offer of an original drawing, I says to myself, "Saayyy," I says, "I must proceed to avail myself of this sterling opportunity of procuring an original picturization of a thrilling episode from that amazing, astounding, astonishing, startling, and thrilling wonder of a magazine, PLANET STORIES!"

There are very few improvements I could suggest. In fact, I think you have done downright well so far in improving the mag since the first issue. In the first place, I was glad to observe the sensational type of cover lessen. Whenever I pick up a mag with that type cover from the newsstands, I have the strange and overwhelming obsession that countless accusing eyes and atomic disintegrators are being carefully trained upon the small of my back. Then, to hide my folly from the accusing orbs of malicious onlookers, I carefully slip the mag into something unimpressing, like a Snick, A Peep, or a Horrible Homes and Garters; purchase it, and run gibbering up the street toward home.

One improvement I could suggest is so revolutionary in the stf field that I am almost afraid to mention it, aware that I might be made the object of a trillion sneers, leers, and disdainful scoffs. However, they laughed at Jules Verne, Bob Fulton and Flash Gordon! I will be a martyr to my cause, and tell this bizarre idea to you. I know that for years upon other years it has been the custom to have "Incredible Tales" printed on the covers, superimposed over a Ganymedian Gazilp, a zooming space ship, or a flaming meteor. Now here's an idea I made up out of my own ingenious brain. Nix out the stars, ships, and Gazilps, and . . . **JUST PRINT INCREDIBLE TALES ON A SOLID BACKGROUND!!!!** Incredible, eh, Ed? No foolin', I think that your cover would be much more appealing if you would condescend to cut out that sensational, screaming comet. How's about it?

I find your art very refreshing. You have given us a few new names in stf illustrating. Lynch is excellent. His heavy shading technique and figures would give a boost to the poorest stf story ever printed. Hold on to Lynch. Lynch 'im if



you have to, but keep him around. By all means give this new fellow, Rosenthal, a chance. I would like to see all struggling stf artists reach the top (including myself). After all, I, too, am but an enthusiastic artist trying to get ahead. (If I get one I'll let you know). Paul and Morey are always old stand-bys who can show the young fellas up, so hold onto them.

As for stories, who's complainin'? You have some of the best names in stf, with Ross Rocklyne, Nelson Bond, and Repp. Don't get me wrong, now. I'm not insinuating that stf fans read stories just because they have big names behind 'em, but after all Bond and Rocklyne write good stuff all the time.

Still, though, I've often wondered what the results would be if a story was written by a well-known stf author and signed: "by Inglethorpe Squidgebottom." What would the editors think? What would the fans think? What would the real Inglethorpe Squidgebottom think? Would they proclaim it a darned good yarn, or would they be prejudiced by the name? *Interesting*, eh?

Well, if you keep the stories you have been printing as examples of what's to come, I'll keep buyin' your magazine. So far I have found nothing serious to kick about, 'cause it seems to me you're doing a darned sight better than some other mags that have been going on for y'ars and y'ars. And, oh yes . . . if my epistle is one of the few which are worthy of a prize, I'll take Rosenthal's illustration for Domain of Zero, or any Paul.

Best wishes,
DANN HEILMAN.

MR. INGLETHORPE SQUIDGEBOTTOM SHALL BE WELCOME

Mr. Dann Heilman
7063 Ohio Avenue
Silverton, Ohio.

DEAR MR. HEILMAN:

You missed the boat, but fortunately managed to avoid falling into the deep. To be more explicit, your letter arrived just too late to make the Winter issue, but since your comments were so dateless, and, in fact, so worthwhile and pertinent, we're running it now.

No question about it, your thought of printing INCREDIBLE STORIES on a solid background, bare of Ganymedian Gazilps or flaming meteors, is completely revolutionary. Undoubtedly it's a fine idea. Few, if any, of the stf logos have distinguished themselves through sheer simplicity. But still, put yourself in the editor's place, Mr. Heilman. Think of designing a stf title. Think of the temptations. With all the patterns in the known and unknown universe to draw on, and no on to say you nay . . . ! To me the surprising thing is that stf logos aren't worse than they are.

As regards your friend Mr. Inglethorpe Squidgebottom, should he show at our desk he would be exceedingly welcome. Very welcome indeed, provided he has a story and knows how to tell it. Especially if the story turns out to be the kind of story we print. In spite of all tales to the contrary, any editor welcomes a new writer. The reason we are not more thrilled by new hands knocking at our doors is that we know from long experience that out of perhaps

1,000 of those closed fists only one will hold anything at all that looks like a nugget.

Thank you again for your good letter, Mr. Heilman. I hope you get your Rosenthal or Paul.—THE ED.

NO SATIRE? THEN NIX!

7730 Pitt
Detroit, Mich.

DEAR EDITOR:

I'm not writing in hopes of winning an original illustration; my letters don't rate that high. And I'm not writing to tell you that PLANET STORIES is the best mag on the market; it isn't. Nor am I writing to say, as so many are, that you have the most rapidly improving mag in the field.

Say, come to think of it, why am I writing this letter? Oh, yeh, it's about your story, "The Castaway." This, believe it or not, is the first time I've ever enjoyed a story containing both fantasy and science fiction! I'm one of those "down with fantasy, we want science," guys. I don't mind fantasy, I just don't like it in science fiction, as a rule. But for some reason I did like "The Castaway." Seems queer that this was printed under a pseudonym; it was much better than the same author's cover-rating Venesian vampire story a few pages further on.

The cover, incidentally, is the best you've had yet, though I don't like so much printing on the picture. At least it illustrates a story, and for a change the inevitable female is in the background.

Your stories still contain too much cheap adventure, but, thank the editors that be, are a big improvement over a year ago. "Atom of Death" was, as Rocklyne's tales have a way of being, very interesting. James' and Brackett's shorts were fair.

Martian invaders and an underground world rate first and second places respectively in the threadbare plots dept. But lo and behold, Binder gets the magnificent idea of using both themes in one story, and pitting the Martians against the Undergrounders! A great idea for a satire, but since "One Thousand Miles Below" was *not* a satire, it rates as less than good.

My opinions on "Twilight of the Tenth World" are somewhat divided. There's the tendency to congratulate Ayre on daring to use a different plot, but, after all, my elastic imagination can be stretched just so far! Ayre's attempts at American slang were amusing. The dialog wasn't so bad, but phrases like "just scrambled out of the skies" in the continuity—?? Been seeing too many of our gangster movies, Mr. Ayre?

I gave up on Ray Cummings' yarn after three pages, but that's further than I usually get with his stuff.

Before I close, a word of complaint to the distribution dept. I'm an inveterate newsstand scanner, yet I've missed a couple of PLANETS. (Picked them up later, via the second-hand route.) The copies I have gotten are invariably the last ones in the place, and I know at least one local fan who's never seen a PLANET on a newsstand! Might be to your advantage to do something about this.

LYNN BRIDGES.

Ed's NOTE: Thank you very much indeed for the newsstand tip. We've already done something about it.

**PLEASE, MR. ASIMOV, PLEASE
DON'T CRY, EVERYTHING WILL
BE ALL RIGHT, BYE AND BYE.**

DEAR EDITOR:

174 Windsor Place
Brooklyn, N. Y.

It is difficult to type this because salt tears are rolling down my rosy cheeks and are interfering with my vision. You see, I will have to plead in this letter—plead on hands and knees.

Please! My name is *not* Isaac Asenion! Any one who says it is is a dirty liar. When I first saw that name appended to a letter, I was puzzled. Can this be mine? said I. Yes, answered I, it must, for its literary composition proves that it can only have been written either by yourself or by an illiterate Australian bushman—and illiterate Australian bushmen don't read PLANET STORIES (one of the reasons why they remain illiterate Australian bushmen). Besides, added I, Asenion knocks love interest and any letter knocking love interest is yours *a priori*.

The next item on the agenda was whether or not to visit the editor and attempt assault and battery or to confine myself to a time-bomb sent via parcel post. After long consideration, I decided against both. Why, said I, there is not a sciencefiction fan in the country who would not take one look at that letter, breathe in the odor therefrom emanating and exclaim in impassioned tones, "This is an Asimov letter." It is a cinch, said I, that poor Mr. Editor will get seventeen thousand threatening letters by return mail concerning this gross misspelling.

But, alas, things did not work out so. My best friends now call me Asenion (a combination of sounds I detest). The reader's column in the current PLANET STORIES is saturated with reference to this Asenion. I have no doubt I shall soon get mail addressed to Asenion. Nothing I will ever be able to say will convince anyone I am not Asenion. Damn it, I won't stand for it.

Know, then, that I, Isaac Asimov, am proud of my name. I like it. I like its sound. I like the way it looks in print.

I abhor this Asenion. I cast it into the outer darkness. I will punch the next guy who calls me Asenion right in the kisser.

Blessings on Charles Hidley for recognizing me through the disguise. Even with a "z" my name looks better than Asenion. Blessings from a grateful heart also upon my favorite letter writer, D. B. Thompson (of whose sanity I have grave doubts, for he likes my stories—but why should I complain of such a charming and lovable affliction) for likewise recognizing it—with a "z."

And now, having concluded I shall—for the first time—ask, nay, beg, the editor to print this letter. I realize that it has little or nothing to do with PLANET STORIES and will just waste valuable space—but perhaps he can print a tiny excerpt, say, for instance, just the following short sentence.

"My name is Asimov, and not Asenion, curse you all!" Insistently yours,

ISAAC ASIMOV.

QUITE RIGHT—BOND DONE IT

Neosho, Missouri

DEAR SIR:

Just a word to let you know that there are fans this far down in the hill-country. At least there's

one fan; please, readers, are there any more science-fiction and fantasy fans in this neck of the woods?

Your mag has constantly improved up to the last issue (Winter). I don't rate it as high as the Fall issue, but maybe Bond's "The Ultimate Salient" has prejudiced me. Bond is still your top author. I guess you rate him pretty high yourself, Mr. Editor, or why would we find two stories by him in the Winter PS? Bond did write "Castaway," didn't he? Was it a mistake that the story was credited to one George Danzell? Or (perish the thought!) are you running short of material? But I'm not beefing—it's okay by me.

I was never very hot on interplanetary yarns, but since Bond has entered the stf field he has given a new life to that type of fiction. Indeed, where other stories of space-traveling are merely unreal descriptions of a hodge-podge of "scientific-super-scientific" terms and phrases, or else a dry, uninteresting, inexplainable account of unnatural characters, Mr. Bond's plots and characters really *live* in the minds of the readers.

In the last issue of PS I rate Ayre's "Twilight of the Tenth World," first, with "Castaway," second; despite the well-used plot, "Castaway" was very well written. Again, I reiterate—it was written by Bond, wasn't it?

The only kicks I have to make are simply these: how about some better interior artists? (only one illustration by Bok in this issue), some time-traveling stories now and then; and, of course, trimmed edges.

Yours very truly,

BILL ELLIOTT.

ED'S NOTE: George Danzell is Bond's pseudonym. No one knows who started the rule against a writer using his own name on more than one story in a single issue.

ABSOLUTELY INCOMPARABLE

2302 Ave. O,
Brooklyn, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

To open my critical letter . . . hats off to Eando Binder! Here's my description of that immortal yarn of three civilizations "One Thousand Miles Below." . . . Absolutely incomparable. In fact it is one of the only stf tales that I can call perfect. The second best story in the Winter PS was Thornton Ayre's "Twilight of the Tenth World" and I think this one was an ultra ultra. Third place was awarded to "Phantom of the Seven Stars" by Ray Cummings and it's a swell improvement over his "novel" in the last issue. There was, however, a slight error in this magnificent yarn; it is stated that asteroid nine is about 500 miles in diameter, in reality the largest planetoid Ceres is less than 430 miles across. How dear editor, did you let a mistake like this pass your eagle eye? Trailing right along in fourth place comes James' "Exit from Asteroid 60." I wonder why pal, you made such a show for my number five choice. Darn it . . . when I saw that cover I expected the science-fiction novel. Yeah, you guessed it. Who couldn't! Bond's "Beyond Light." C'mon now, be honest. . . . Don't you think Nelson S. could turn out much better work? Remember "The Ultimate Salient" in the preceding issue? Sixth places goes to Leigh Brackett's "Stellar Legion." . . . And it was a darn good yarn, too. "Atom of Death" by Rocklynne was my number seven—good but too short. In last place was the

"Castaway" by Danzell—no place else to put it.

The cover was the only thing in this issue of PS that I have to call ousley. Incidentally I see that blonde is back again. . . . Why? Can't you get rid of her? Seriously though, why don't you depict a story (preferably the novel) on the front of the mag. . . . This picture was supposed to resemble "Beyond Light," but besides the bat-men there wasn't the slightest sign of relationship. Also there was much, much too much writing. Say feller, give a friend a break, how about a cover by Lynch?—he's the best rocket drawer I ever saw. One of his realistic super-streamline space-ships blasting its way through the void would improve the cover a thousand per cent. Even a front-piece by Paul, Findlay or Wesso would be greatly appreciated.

I think PLANET should stay as it is . . . a quarterly publication. . . . If the price has to be raised I definitely do not want trimmed edges. . . . Why in heck are they so important to some fans? Hoping to receive an original of Lynch's drawing for "Phantom of the Seven Stars," I remain

Interplanetically yours,

MILTON LESSER.

CAN'T WE GET AWAY WITH ANYTHING

DEAR EDITOR:

2541 Aqueduct Ave.,
New York, New York

The cover on the Winter PLANET is inexcusable; the drawing is not so bad but the gargantuan print is atrocious and not to be likened to the recent policies of this magazine. The stories, though, were of a marked increase from last time.

"Twilight of the Tenth World" had all the qualities of good science-fiction: mystery, science, adventure, a space-flight and it's preparation, alien beings, wee bit of the eerie, drama, no desperate love or super-heroics, suspense, and most important—the obvious, realistic and human reactions to situations. With the addition of a smash climax how could this be anything but first. The Eron pic was fair but it had nothing to do with the story. Neither of the novelets were illustrated correctly; the Lynch "space-ships" could not have been over 20 feet long.

Binder, as usual, writes a good yarn. I enjoy a story that moves rapidly and tells a meaty tale while it moves. The plot of this one resembled something by Coblentz some time back, but the author decorated "M' Miles Below" with enough tinsel and action to make it stand on its own originality. Cumming's Phantom is third and a good example of the opposite of Binder in that his stories have many words with little meaning.

Miss Brackett tells of the "Stellar Patrol" with feeling and patriotism, and is ably assisted in putting over her No. 4 yarn by that fine artist Bok. You are slowly but surely giving to all and sundry the many wishes they desire. Now why not grant these two for my benefit: more full-paged framed pics and a caption under each. The great variety of artists—7 for 8 yarns—is one already fulfilled.

"Atom of Death," because of vivid characterization and clever science, is fifth and superbly graced by Lynch. The dramatic highlights of this one compare favorably with "Venus Has Green Eyes" of last issue; the figures seem to leap from the page. Next is the D. L. James short of asteroid prison life. The Smalley pic was inaccurate in a few details—using a lash in space-

sued slaves for instance—but the strange angularity of the figures and landscapes make a nice eye-catcher after the perfections of Paul, Morey and Lynch.

I could have sworn that the No. 7 story, "The Castaway," was authored by Nelson Bond and that the last on my list, "Beyond Light," was by anyone *but* him. The former short was rather obvious after the first few lines with the aid of the title. I enjoyed it though, and was only annoyed to see that Rosenthal has discontinued the individuality of his "silhouette" or "relief" drawings to join the ranks of the dull and very non-original commonplace stf-artists. Morey's illustration is heaps better than last issue's and the best so far I think. That is about all that can be said for the cover yarn; it didn't deserve such good art for the bang-bang horror and mediocrity it represented.

The best letters this issue were Goldsmith, Thompson and Rajocz. I am most grateful to the readers who helped me to an original illustration—and especially to Messrs. Evans and Stoker.

Your answer to William Stoy's note seems to indicate that there is a possibility of a Paul cover next issue. Let's hope so. Stoker's concocted confectionery suits the tastes of the readers, I'm sure. Cuttle's art critiques were well thought out—it seems that the whole Vizigraph was good. Now how about increasing the pages of this interesting—and informative and lucrative—department?

The best illustrations were in this order: Paul, Bok, Lynch (Cumplings), Morey and Lynch (Rocklynne). Keep up the very good work.

Thanks again,

C. HIDLEY.

Ed's NOTE: Stf readers have an amazing talent, rarely found in other readers, of being able to unerringly recognize an author's style.

20% OR MERELY 4%?

DEAR EDITOR:

Lidgerwood, N. Dak.

The Winter issue of PS, which I have just read, is the best so far; that is, the good points outweigh the bad ones to a greater degree than ever before.

Binder has always been a favorite of mine. The idea of discovering an underground civilization and being invaded by Martians at the same time is a bit far-fetched, but I like his explanation—"fantastic—as only the truth can be." If we all thought of it in that way we'd be a lot more lenient toward authors.

"The Castaway" was a disappointment. The ending leaves too much unexplained. Would you really like to read a very interesting detective story which ended by saying, "The murderer escaped and to this day his identity is unknown?" This story also touches upon the supernatural, and that is my pet peeve in a science yarn. In my opinion, the supernatural has a scientific explanation which we have not yet discovered, and it is the task of a stf. author to supply it.

By skipping the rest of the stories, which were good to varying degrees, we come to "Twilight of the Tenth World." Excellent! It is the first story by Ayre that I really enjoyed. More like it!

However, I believe that Mr. Ayre made one bad error. He says that we use only one-fifth of our brain; that, therefore, our heads are only

one-fifth as large as those of our creators. It is obvious that one of those two statements is not true. If they are both correct, we would be using only 4% of a complete brain. Right?

The illustrations are all good, with the exception of Bok's. He should draw only for supernatural stories. You almost took a cover from a story this time, didn't you? Maybe you meant to, only the artist forgot to read the story first.

I suggest giving the first, second, and third prize to Hidley, Goldsmith, and Thompson respectively.

Yours till science unties the knots in a cord of wood.

ROY PAETZKE.

... OLD OIL CANS, SCRAPS OF GALVANIZED SHEET IRON, ODD BITS OF WINDOW GLASS

St. Andrew's College,
Aurora, Ontario

DEAR EDITOR: The last issue of PS has dropped some—what from the high level made by the previous issue, though it is still better than the average stf. magazine.

The short stories were by far the best, with Bond's "Beyond Light" leading. Danzell's "weird," however, does not belong in a stf. magazine.

The longer stories were without exception mediocre or outright poor. "One Thousand Miles Below" is just another average run of the mill stf. story. Highly illogical, and unconvincing, especially when you consider that the speed of transmission of earthquake shocks can be accounted for only by a solid core with a density equalling that of nickel-iron.

The plot of "Phantom of the Seven Stars," bears a remarkable resemblance to another of his stories I have recently read. Can it be we are due for a barrage of stories of this type?

"Twilight of the Tenth World" is the worst story written by Ayre to date. It is the most illogical story I have read this year, bar none.

I guess I praised Lynch too soon. To date he hasn't equalled his first illustration. His rocket ships are the most illogical and impractical I have ever seen. They look just like an indifferent mass of divers old oil cans, scraps of galvanized sheet iron and odd bits of window glass, haphazardly welded together, to form a shapeless ungainly multi-sectioned mess. And those white worms wriggling over the background, ughh.

Yours truly,

FRED HURTER, JR.

P. S. Enclosed is a rough sketch of the type of rocket ship mentioned in "Phantom of the Seven Stars."

ED.'S NOTE: Sorry we haven't space to reproduce Hurter's excellent space-ship. It does, as he says, fit the description, is simple, streamlined and sane.

WHATEVER YOU DO, DON'T MISS THIS!

DEAR EDITOR:

Yesterday while looking over the fantasy shelf at the corner newsstand, I saw, for the first time, a copy of PLANET STORIES. Thought I, I'll just try that. And, to my great surprise, it was the best stf mag. I ever tried. The only fault I have to find is that PLANET STORIES is a quarterly. Couldn't we have at least a monthly publication on it?

225 Second St.,
California, Pa.

Well, here and now I give thanks and many tributes to one of your staff for a fine piece of work. Yes, it goes to none other than the Editor of THE VIZIGRAPH. THE VIZIGRAPH is, in my opinion, the best letter dept. I have ever read. And let me say that I read them all. I believe that there are more really intelligent persons writing to THE VIZIGRAPH than to all the rest of the letter dept. of Stf Mags combined. At least all the letters published in the winter issue struck me as being written by folks who knew exactly what they wanted to say, and said it. Keep up the present status quo of THE VIZIGRAPH and you have found a new reader of PLANET STORIES whether the rest of the mag is any good or not. Which it was, plenty. The idea of presenting the original drawings is certainly tops. Here's hoping I see this in THE VIZIGRAPH in order to compete for one of these.

Second place goes to the feature PLANET novel by Eando Binder, "One Thousand Miles Below," one of the best of this type I have ever had the pleasure of reading. But what could one expect but the best from the pages of one of Binder's stories?

Third place to Paul for his illustration of this story. I hope this is one that is to be presented (That is if I have a chance of getting it.)

"Beyond Light," by Nelson S. Bond takes the fourth vote. A swell plot, a he-man hero and a beautiful girl. All we needed was the beasts and in the bat-men we found a new idea for villains on other worlds. All in all, a swell yarn which supplied me minutes of pleasant reading.

Fifth: "Phantom of the Seven Stars," by Ray Cummings. I only wish I could give him first place as he is one of my favorites, but this time, at least, Binder beat him out.

Sixth: "Atom of Death," by Ross Rocklynne. A dandy little yarn.

Seventh place: To Hannes Bok for the illustration of the story, "The Stellar Legion," which gets my vote for eighth.

Ninth: "Twilight of the Tenth World," by Thornton Ayre.

Tenth: "The Castaway," by Danzell.

Eleventh place goes to D. L. James for his yarn, "Exit from Asteroid 60."

Well, Ed, this letter, I realize, will never win the winter Paul drawing or the Bok either, but anyhow I hope I see it in THE VIZIGRAPH.

A few suggestions follow. If I might be so bold as to offer such to an Editor who puts out such a fine mag.

Keep Paul and Bok. Never let them go. Get Virgil Finley, he's good for anything. Give us a fantasy now and then. I realize that this is PLANET STORIES, but remember fantasy can happen anywhere.

So now, if you have waded through all this I will sign off with a vote for each of the following in the order named:

1. Charles Hidley. . . . He's tried so hard to get that Paul. (I hope this will help him get one.)

2. Emrys Evans. Because he writes a sharp, short letter and not a lot of trying reading for the poor editor.

3. Bob Tucker. Because I think he knows what he's talking about, and I surely agree with him on many counts.

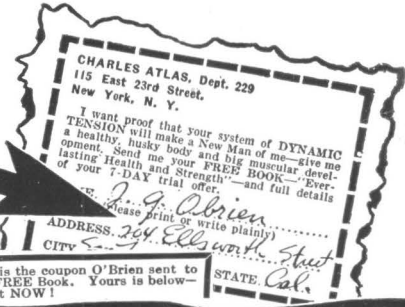
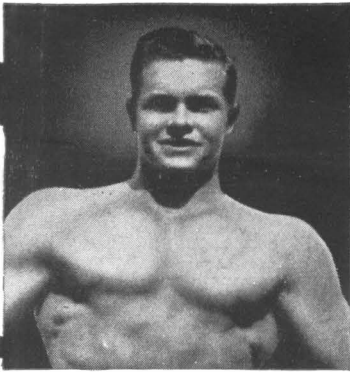
So now I sign off hoping to receive a Paul or Bok in the future, I remain a future reader of PLANET STORIES.

VAUGHAN R. HEINER.

HE Mailed This Coupon

J. G. O'BRIEN
Atlas Champion
Cup Winner

This is an ordinary snapshot of one of Charles Atlas' Californian pupils.



This is the coupon O'Brien sent to get FREE Book. Yours is below—clip it NOW!

...and Here's the Handsome Prize-Winning Body I Gave Him!

J. G. O'BRIEN saw my coupon. He clipped and mailed it. He got my free book and followed my instructions. He became a New Man—and also won one of my Atlas-Champion, Sterling Silver Cups for his physical improvement. NOW read what he says:

"Look at me NOW! Dynamic Tension WORKS! I'm proud of the natural, easy way you have made me an 'Atlas Champion'!"—J. G. O'Brien.

Let Me Prove I Can Make You a New Man

Would you like to have a handsome build — greater physical development — a strong, muscular body? Then listen to this:

I, myself, was once a skinny weakling of 97 lbs. I didn't know what real health or strength were. I was afraid to fight, ashamed to be seen in a swimming suit.

Then I discovered the secret that changed me into "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man," the title I won twice and have held ever since, against all comers. My secret is Dynamic Tension. It is a natural method. Its purpose is not only to give you the powerful, rippling muscles you'd like to see in your own mirror, but also—for those whose systems are sluggish from lack of proper exercise—to help them tone up their entire body, inside and out.

Accept My 7-Day Trial Offer

Do you want a better build? Are you dissatisfied with your present physical development? All I ask is a 7-DAY TRIAL. Just one week! In even that short time you will notice your chest hardening and filling out with solid muscle—or the 7-Day

Trial will cost you nothing. Surely this is proof enough that by continuing with my "Dynamic Tension" method I will make you a New Man—give you bodily power and drive, and put you in magnificent physical condition which wins you the envy and respect of everyone.

FREE BOOK On Dynamic Tension

Let me show you the results produced for other men! I'll send you FREE my famous book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." It shows actual photos. Write your name and address carefully on coupon. Mail to me personally today. I'll rush your free copy to you AT ONCE! Charles Atlas, Dept. 150-A, 115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.



An untouched photo of Charles Atlas, twice winner of the title "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

SILVER CUP BEING GIVEN AWAY
This cup 14 in. high, goes to pupil who makes the greatest physical improvement in next 3 mos.

CHARLES ATLAS
Dept. 150-A, 115 East 23rd Street,
New York, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of Dynamic Tension will help make me a New Man—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your FREE book, "Everlasting Health and Strength," and full details about your 7-DAY Trial Offer.

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

Address.....

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



I Jumped My Pay from \$18 to \$50 a Week!

Here's how I did it

by S. J. E.
(NAME AND ADDRESS SENT UPON REQUEST)



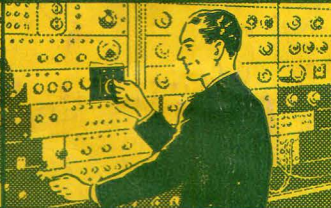
"I had an \$18 a week job in a shoe factory." He'd probably be there today if he hadn't read about the opportunities in Radio and started training at home for them.



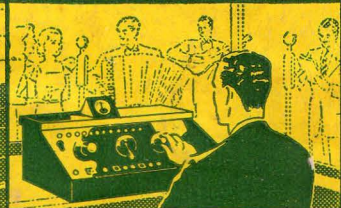
"The training National Radio Institute gave me was so practical I was soon ready to make \$5 to \$10 a week in spare time servicing Radio sets."



"When I finished training I accepted a job as Radio serviceman. In three weeks I was made service manager at \$40 to \$50 a week, more than twice my shoe factory pay."



"Eight months later N. R. I. Graduate Service Department sent me to Station KWCR where I became Radio Operator. Now I am Radio Engineer at Station WSUI and connected with Television Station W9XK."



"N. R. I. Training took me out of a low-pay shoe factory job and put me into Radio at good pay. Radio has enjoyed a colorful past. It will enjoy an even greater future."



J. E. SMITH,
President
National Radio
Institute Estab-
lished 25 years

investigate Radio. Trained Radio Technicians make good money, and you don't have to give up your present job or leave home to learn Radio. I train you at home nights in your spare time.

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

Radio broadcasting stations employ operators, technicians. Radio manufacturers employ testers, inspectors, servicemen in good-pay jobs. Radio jobbers, dealers, employ installation and servicemen. Many Radio Technicians open their own Radio sales and repair businesses and make \$30, \$40, \$50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make \$5 to \$10 a week fixing Radios in spare time. Automobile, Police, Aviation, Commercial Radio; Loudspeaker Systems. Electronic Devices are other fields offering opportunities for which N. R. I. gives the required knowledge

Find out today how I Train You at Home to BE A RADIO TECHNICIAN

of Radio, Television promises to open good jobs soon.

Many Make \$5 to \$10 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll, I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets—start showing you how to do Radio repair jobs. Throughout your Course I send plans and directions which have helped many make \$5 to \$10 a week extra in spare time while learning. I send special Radio equipment to conduct experiments and build circuits. This 50-50 training method makes learning at home interesting, fascinating, practical. YOU ALSO GET A MODERN, PROFESSIONAL, ALL-WAVE, ALL-PURPOSE SET SERVICING INSTRUMENT to help you make money fixing Radios while

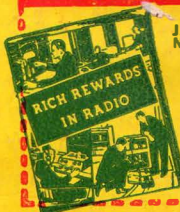
learning and equip you for full time work after you graduate.

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Act Today! Mail the coupon for my 64-Page book, "Rich Rewards in Radio." It points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tells about my Course in Radio and Television; shows more than 100 letters from men I have trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Read my money back agreement. MAIL COUPON in an envelope or paste on a penny postcard—NOW!

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