

No. 10

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INVADER

By
RAY CUMMINGS

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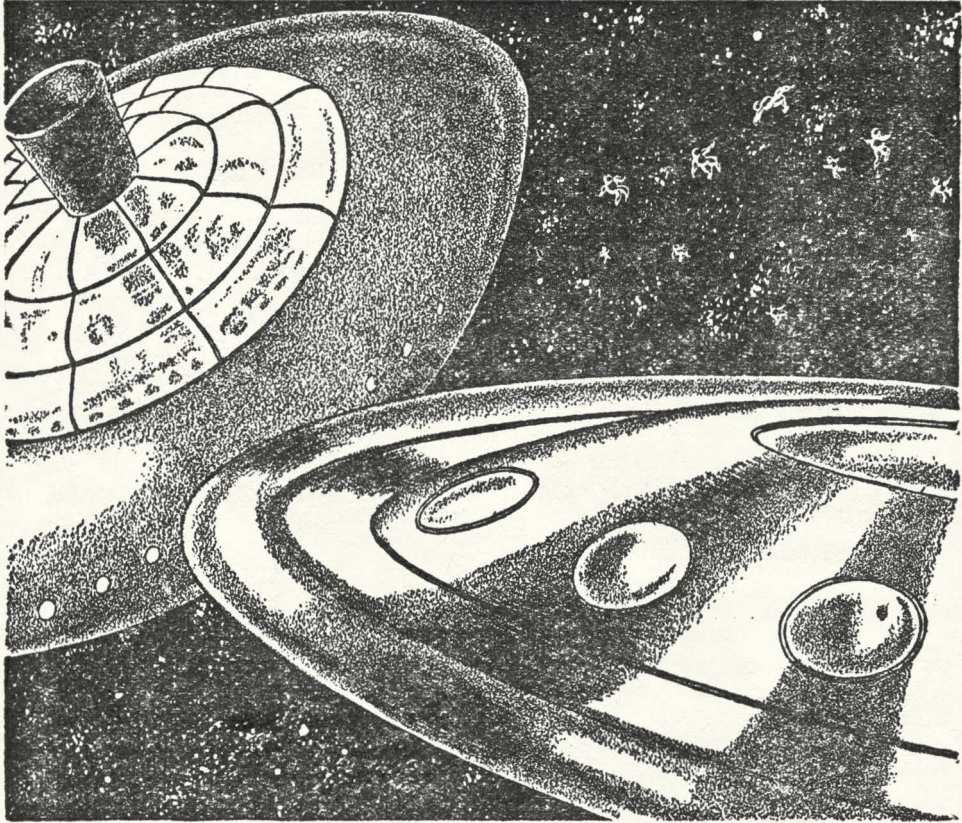
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WANDL, THE INVADER



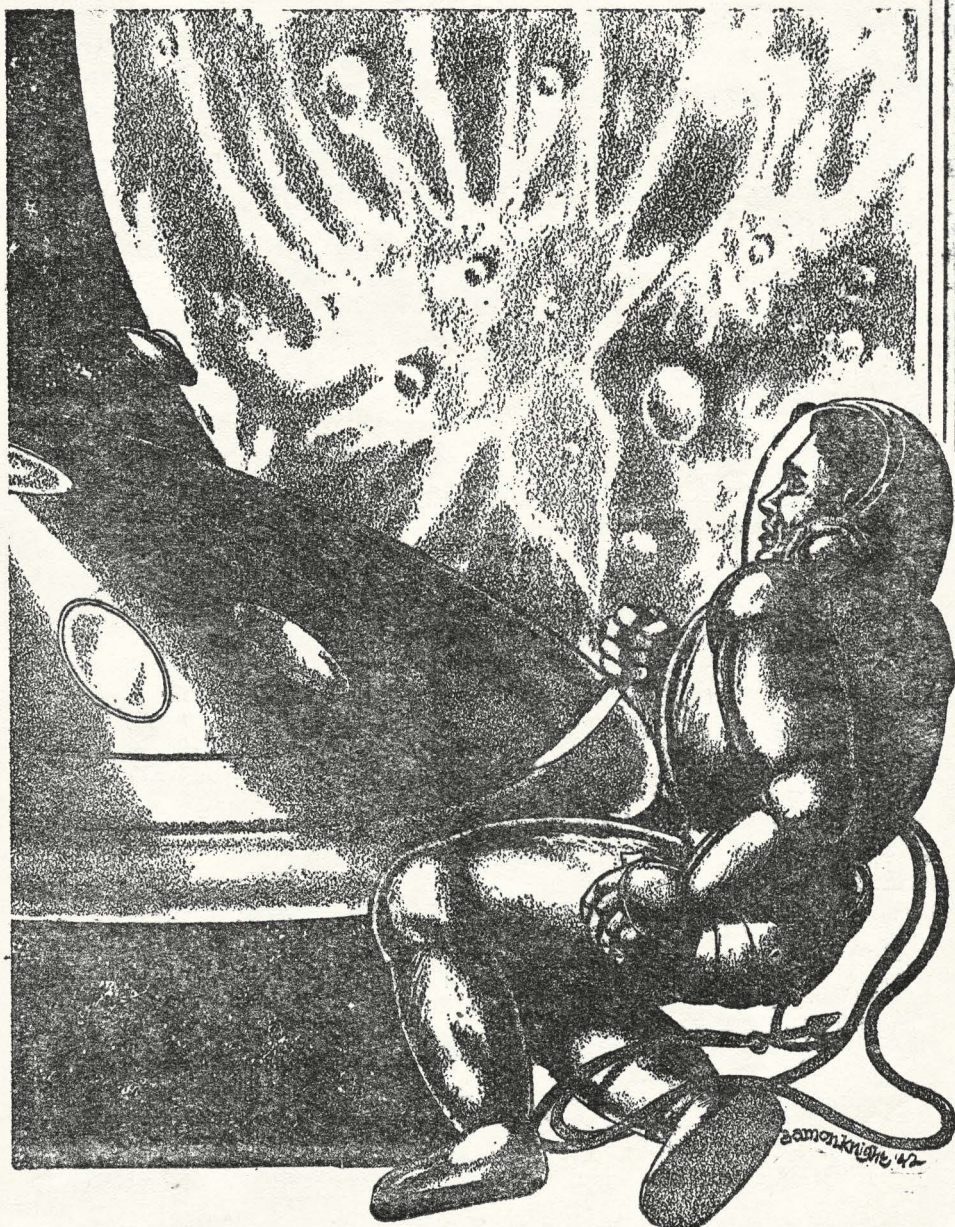
By Ray Cummings



Out of distant space came the robber-planet Wandl, seeking new worlds to conquer and steal away from their mother sun. And strange were the ways of the invader, whose creatures paid little attention to the peoples of the three worlds — Earth, Venus, and Mars. But the menace was none the less real and Gregg Haljan, Snap Dean, Anita, and Venza found themselves again united in deadly peril — the lone vanguard of the three worlds' defense against eerie, overwhelming weapons! Here is a classic of science fiction!

Here is another great science fiction novel — a sequel to the popular "Brigands of the Moon"—reprinted by your request.

illustrated by demon knight



WANDL, THE INVADER

By Ray Cummings

CHAPTER I

Menace from the Stars

“IT’S a planet,” I said. “A little world.”

“How little?” Venza demanded.

“One-fifth the mass of the Moon. That’s what they’ve calculated now.”

“And how far is it away?” Anita asked. “I heard a newscaster say yesterday—”

“Newcasters!” Venza broke in scornfully. “Say, you can take what they tell you about any danger or trouble and cut it in half. And even then you’ll be on the gloomy side. See here, Gregg Haljan—”

“I’m not giving you newcasters’ blare,” I retorted. Venza’s extravagant vehemence was always refreshing. The Venus girl, as different from Anita as Venus is from the Earth, sat and glared at me. I added, “Anita mentioned newcasters; I didn’t.”

Anita was in no mood for smiling. “Tell us, Gregg.” She sat upright and tense in the big metal-framed, upholstered chair with her knees drawn up under a dark red skirt. “Tell us.”

“For a fact, they don’t know much about it yet,” I resumed. “A planet—you can call it that. A wanderer—”

“I should say it was a wanderer,” Venza exclaimed. “Coming from heaven knows where beyond the stars—swimming in here like a comet!”

“They calculated its distance yesterday at some sixty-five million miles from Earth,” I said. “It isn’t so far beyond the orbit of Mars, coming diagonally and heading very

nearly for the Sun. But it’s not a comet. It’s not rational.”

THE thing was indeed inexplicable. For many weeks now astronomers had been studying it. This was early summer of the year 2070 A. D. We had all of us only recently returned from those extraordinary incidents which I have already recounted, when very nearly we lost the radium treasure of Johnny Grantline on the Moon; and very nearly lost our lives as well. My ship, the *Planetara*, which in the astronomical seasons when the Earth, Mars and Venus were within comfortable traveling distances of each other, carried mail and passengers from Great-New York to Ferrok-Shahn, of the Martian Union, and to Grebbar, of the Venus Free State—that ship was wrecked now, upon the Moon.*

I had been an under navigating officer of the *Planetara*. Upon her, I had met Anita Prince, whose brother and only relative now was dead; and Anita and I were soon to marry.

I was waiting now in Great-New York upon the decision of the Line officials regarding another space-flyer. Perhaps I would have command of it, since Captain Carter of the *Planetara* had been killed. Certainly Anita and I hoped so.

And then, in April of 2070, this mysterious visitor from interstellar space appeared upon our astronomical horizon. A little thing at first—a mere unusual dot, a pin point on a

*An account of these incidents was given by Gregg Haljan in “Brigands of the Moon,” which appeared in the Number 8, Fall 1942, issue of *Science Fiction Quarterly*.

photo-electric star-diagram which should not have been there. It occasioned no comment at first, save that the astronomers thought it might be another lost outpost beyond Pluto, belonging to our solar system.

Then presently they saw it was not that, for it was coming in with the great curve of an elongated ellipse. Coming at tremendous speed, it daily changed its aspect, gathering velocity until soon it was not a dot, but a streak on every diagram-plate.

In a week or so the thing passed from a mere technical astronomical curiosity to an item of public news. And now, early in June, when it had cut through the orbit of Jupiter and was approaching that of Mars, the people of all our three inhabited worlds were in a fever of curiosity. And fear was growing. The visitor was a menace. No astronomical body with a mass as great as a fifth of the Moon could come among us without causing trouble—or disaster, perhaps. The newscasters, with a ready skill for lurid possibilities, were blaring all sorts of horrible events impending.

“SO I’ve heard,” Venza interrupted me. “They say that, and then they stop. Why can’t a newscaster tell you what is so mysterious?”

“For a very good reason, Venza: because the government holds it back. You can’t throw people into a panic. This whole thing, up to today, has been withheld from the Earth and the Venus publics. The Martian Union tried to withhold it, but could not. Every heliogram between the worlds is censored.”

“And still,” said Venza sarcastically, “you don’t tell us what is so mysterious about this wanderer.”

“For one thing,” I said, “it changes its direction. No rational heavenly body does that. They calculated the elements of its orbit way back last April. They’ve done it

twenty times since, and every time the projected orbit is different. Just a little at first, so that it could have been the mathematician’s error. But last week the accursed thing actually changed direction as though it were a space-ship!”

The girls stared at me. “What does that mean?” Anita asked finally.

I shrugged. “They’re beginning to make wild guesses—we won’t go into that.”

It was far from me to frighten these two girls. I had that feeling now, but within a few hours I was forced to abandon it!

“What else mysterious?” Venza demanded.

“The thing isn’t normally visible.”

Venza shifted her silk-sheathed legs. “Don’t talk in code!”

“Not normally visible,” I repeated. “A world one-fifth as large as the Moon could be seen plainly by our electrotelescopes when well beyond Pluto. It’s now between Jupiter and Mars. Invisible to the naked eye, of course, but still it’s not very far away—I’ve been out there myself. With instruments we ought to be able to see its surface; see whether it has land and water—inhabitants, perhaps. You should be able to distinguish an object on its surface as large as a city—but you can’t.”

“Why not?” asked Anita. “Because there are clouds? It has an atmosphere?”

“THEY don’t even know that,” I retorted. “There is something abnormal about the lightwaves coming from it. Not exactly blurred, but a distortion, a fading. It’s obviously some aberration, some abnormality of the light-waves, so that our telescopes can almost, but not quite distinguish the details. Even the spectro operates abnormally. Hydrogen photo-diagrams with stereoscopic lenses and wave-length selection should give a surface depth of vision.”

"Cannot you say it in Anglo-Saxon, Gregg?" Venza frowned.

"I mean, the thing should not look like a disc. You ought to be able to tell a mountain height from a valley. But you can't. Nothing works normally. Everything is weird—"

A swift rapping on our door-grid interrupted me, and Snap Dean burst in upon us.

"Hola-lo, everybody! Is it a conference? You look so solemn."

He dashed across the room, kissed Venza, pretended that he was about to kiss Anita, and winked at me. As always, Snap lunged upon us with an energy like a battery supercharged. He was a dynamic little fellow, small, wiry, red-headed and freckle-faced, and had been the radio operator of the ill-fated *Plane-tara*.

"And where have you been?" Venza demanded.

"Me? My private life is my own—so far. We're not married yet, since you insist on us going to Greb-bar for the ceremony."

"Stop it," protested Anita. "We've been talking of—"

"I know very well what you've been talking about. Everybody is. I've got news for you, Gregg." He went abruptly solemn and lowered his voice. "Halsey wants to see us. Right away—this evening."

I REGARDED him blankly and my mind swept back. No more than a few short months ago Detective-Colonel Halsey of Divisional Headquarters here in Great-New York had sent for us, and we had been precipitated into many dire events. Was this a meaningless coincidence? Or an omen?

"Halsey!" I burst out.

"Easy, Gregg!" Snap cast a vague look around Anita's draped apartment. An open window was beside us, leading to a tiny catwalk balcony. It was moonlit now, and two hun-

dred feet above the pedestrian viaduct.

But Snap frowned at it. "Easy, I tell you! Why shout about Halsey? The air can have ears upon occasion."

Venza moved and closed the window.

"What is it?" I asked, more softly.

But Snap was not satisfied. "Anita, have you got an isolation barrage for this room?"

"Of course I haven't, Snap."

"Well, you never can tell. It seems to me that anyone who even speaks to Halsey is cursed with eavesdroppers. And I've just had his office on the audiphone. Gregg, have you got a detector with you? Mine is out of order."

I had none. Snap produced his little coil and indicator dial.

"Shove me over that chair, Gregg."

He was resourceful. He disconnected one of the room's tubelights and connected with the cathode. It was a makeshift method at best, but as he dropped to the floor, uncoiling a little length of his wire for an external pick-up, we saw that the thing worked. The pointer on the dial-face was swaying.

"Gregg! Look at that! Didn't I tell you?"

THE pointer quivered, prised with a positive reaction. An eavesdropping ray of some sort was upon us!

Anita gasped, "Good Lord, I had no idea!"

"No, you didn't. But I did." Snap drew the balcony sheath curtains closer together. They were metallic dyed, but it helped little. With this crude equipment we could not tell if it were eavesdropping for audibility, or visibility, or even if someone with a magnetic non-reflecting invisible cloak were near us.

"No one very close," Snap said softly. He and I carried the detector to the length of the wire out

into the arcade hall. The indicator went nearer normal.

"It's the other way," I whispered.

We went to the moonlight balcony. I searched its little length with my hands. No one—nothing here.

"Way down there on the pedestrian arcade," I said.

"To hell with it," Snap murmured. "I'll fix that."

Inside the room we made connection with a newscaster's blaring voice. Under cover of it we could talk.

Snap gathered us close around him. "Halsey has something important—by the gods of the airways he has! And what's more"—his voice was a furtive whisper—"it's about this damned interstellar invader. Would you think that could be connected in any way with humans here in the city, so that they would bother to eavesdrop us?"

"No," I murmured, "I wouldn't."

"Well, evidently it's true. Halsey's office paged me on a public mirror. I happened to see it at Park-Circle 40. When I answered it, Halsey's man wanted me to talk in code! I can't talk in code; I have enough to worry over with the interplanetary radio. Then they sent me to an official booth, where I got examined for positive legal identification, and then they put me on the official split-wave length. After all of which precautions I was told to be at Halsey's office tonight at midnight. And told a few other things."

"What?" demanded Venza breathlessly.

"Only hints. What's the use of taking a chance by repeating them now?"

"You said he wants me also?" I put in.

"Yes. You and Venza. We've got to get into his office secretly, by the vacuum cylinders. We're to meet a man from his office at the Eighth Postal switch-station."

"Venza?" Anita said sharply.

"What in the universe can he want with Venza?"

"Don't ask me, because I don't know."

"Well, if he wants Venza, I'm going."

Snap gazed at her, and grinned. "That sounds like a logical deduction. Naturally he must want you—that's why he said Venza."

"I'm going," Anita insisted.

VENZA thought it a good idea, and Snap and I had crossed these two girls before and been defeated at it. We left about half an hour before midnight. The girls were both in gray, with long dark capes. We took the public monorail down into the mid-Manhattan section under the city roof of the business district, and into the Eighth Postal switch-station where the sleek bronze cylinders came tumbling out of the vacuum portes to be rerouted and dispatched again.

A man was on the lookout for us.

"Daniel Dean and party?"

"Yes," said Snap. "We were ordered here."

The detective gazed at the girls and at me. "It was three altogether, Dean."

"And now it's four," said Snap cheerfully. "The extra one is Miss Anita Prince. Ever heard of her?"

He had indeed. "All right," he said, "if you and Haljan say so."

We were put into one of the over-size mail cylinders, routed through the tubes like sacks of recorded letters; and in ten minutes, with a thump that knocked the breath from all of us, we were in the switch-rack of Halsey's outer office.

We climbed from the cylinder. Our guide led us down one of the gloomy metal corridors. It echoed with our tread.

A door lifted.

"Daniel Dean and party."

The guard stood aside. "Come in."

The door slid down behind us. We

advanced into the small blue-lit apartment, steel-lined like a vault, and were in the presence of Detective-Colonel Halsey, who matched wits with the criminals of three worlds and now seemed concerned with another.

CHAPTER II

The Brain in the Box

COLONEL HALSEY sat at his desk, with a few papers before him and a bank of instrument controls at his elbow. He pushed his audiphone and vision-grid to one side.

"Sit down, please." He gave us each the benefit of welcoming smiles, and his gaze finished upon Anita.

"I came because you sent for Venza," Anita said quickly. "Please, Colonel Halsey, let me stay. I thought, whatever you wanted her for, you might need me."

"Quite so, Miss Prince. Perhaps I shall." It seemed that in his mind were many of the thoughts thronging my own, for he added:

"Haljan, I recall I sent for you like this once before. I hope this may be a more auspicious occasion."

"So do I, sir."

Snap said, "We've been afraid to do more than whisper. But you're insulated here, and we're mighty curious—"

Halsey nodded. "I can talk freely to you, and yet—well, even so, I cannot." His gaze went to Venza. "It is you in whom at the moment I am most interested."

"Me? You flatter me, Colonel Halsey." She sat gracefully reclining in the metal chair before his desk, seeming small as a child between its big, broad arms. But her posture was anything but child-like. Her long gray skirt had parted to display her shapely, gray-satined legs. She had thrown off the hood of her cloak.

Her thick black hair was coiled in a knot low at the back of her neck; her carmined lips bore an alluring smile. It was all instinctive. To this girl from Venus it came as naturally as she breathed.

HALSEY'S gray eyes twinkled. "Do not look at me quite like that, Miss Venza, or I shall forget what I have to say. You would get the better of me; I'm glad you're not a criminal."

"So am I," she declared. "What can I do for you, Colonel Halsey?"

His admiring, amused smile faded at once. His glance included us all.

"Just this. There is a man here in Great-New York—a Martian, whom they call Set Molo. He has a younger sister, Setta Meka. Have any of you heard of them?"

We had not. Halsey went on, slowly now, apparently choosing his words with the greatest care.

"There are things that I can tell you, and things that I cannot."

"Why not?" asked Venza.

"My dear, for one thing, if you are going to help me you can do it best by not knowing too much. For another, I have my orders. I am only supreme in this department, you know, and this thing concerns the very highest authorities, not only of the U. S. W., but in Ferrok-Shahn and Grebbar too."

He paused, but none of us spoke. It seemed to me that here in the dim muffled seclusion of this vault-like room we were dabbling with things gigantic, sinister, diabolical perhaps; things about which one dared not talk openly. And to me there came a presage of infinite evil. The life or death of a few people—what is that? The capture of this criminal or that one; the recovery of stolen money; a little treasure which one might put into a bank and find a few extra ciphers on his deposit balance! All that seemed so trivial.

BUT this which was now upon us, I could envisage, was a thing very different. Nations, worlds involved. The life or death perhaps of millions of people. It swept me with a breathless feeling of awe.

Halsey was saying quietly, "Well, this Martian and his sister are here now in Great-New York. They have some secret—they are engaged in some activity—and I want to find out what it is. Little parts of it I have picked up—"

He stopped; and out of the silence Snap said, "If you don't mind, Colonel Halsey, it seems to me you are mostly talking in code."

"I'm not. But I'm trying to tell you as little as possible. You, Miss Venza—well, you need only understand this: the Martian, Set Molo, must be tricked into giving you some idea of what he is doing here in Great-New York."

"And I am to trick him?" Venza said calmly.

"That is my idea. By what method—" The faint shadow of a smile swept Halsey's thin, intent face. "My dear, you are a girl of Venus. More than that, you are traveled, sophisticated, and you have far more than your normal share of wits and brains."

It did not make Venza smile. She sat tense now, with her dark-eyed gaze fastened on Halsey's face. Anita, equally breathless, reached over and gripped her hand.

Then Venza said slowly, "I realize, Colonel Halsey, that this is something vital."

"As vital, my child, as it well could be." He drew a long breath. "I want you to understand I am doing my duty. Doing what seems the best thing—not for you, perhaps, but for the world."

I SEEMED to see into his mind at that moment. He might have been a father, sending a daughter into danger.

He added abruptly, "I need not disguise the danger. I have lost a dozen men." He lighted a cigarette. "I don't seem to be able to frighten you?"

"No," she said. And I heard Anita murmur, "Oh, Venza!"

"But you frighten me," said Snap. "Colonel Halsey, look here; you know I'm going to marry this girl very soon?"

"If you live to marry her," he said quickly. And he added, "But I think we're needlessly pessimistic. You can call it a sacrifice, a voluntary going into danger, great danger, for a great cause, in a great crisis. That's rather a usual thing; it's been done many times. You four—you have just come out of a very considerable danger. We know of what stuff you are made—all of you."

He smiled again. "Perhaps that prominence is unfortunate for you. But let me settle it now. Is there any one of you who will not take my orders and trust my judgment of what is best? And do it, if need be, blindly? Will you offer yourselves to me?"

We gazed at each other. Both the girls instantly murmured, "Yes." The feminine mind needs no slow process of thought!

"Yes," I said at last. And it came not too hard for me, for I thought I was yielding him Venza; not Anita.

Snap was very pale. He stared from one to the other of us.

"Yes," he said finally. "But Colonel Halsey, surely you can tell us—"

HALSEY tossed his cigarette away. "I will tell you as much as I think best. These Martians, this Set Molo and his sister, do not know of Venza. Or, at least, I think they do not. They apparently have not been here very long. How they got here we don't know. There was no passenger or freight ship. They have, in Ferrok-Shahn, a dubious

reputation at best. I won't go into that.

"Venza, I will show you these Martians—and the rest depends upon you. There is a mystery; you will find out what it is! Get me even a hint of it!"

He reached for his inter-office audiphone. "I want to locate the Martian Set Molo. Francis, Staff X2, has it in charge."

The audible connection came in a moment.

"Francis?"

We could hear the answering microphonic voice.

"Yes, Colonel."

"Is the fellow in a public place by any chance?"

"In the Red Spark Cafe, Colonel. With his sister, and a party."

"Good enough! The Red Spark has an image-finder. Have you visual connection?"

"Yes. The whole damn room; they got a dozen finders. Any time the Red Spark passes up publicly—"

"Connect it."

In a moment our vision-grid was glowing with the two-foot square image of the interior of the Red Spark Cafe. I knew the place by reputation: a fashionable, more or less disreputable eating, drinking and dancing restaurant, where money and alcohol flowed freely, and the patrons were drawn from all the most successful criminals of the three worlds, intermingled with thrilled, respectable tourists who hoped they would see something really evil—and generally were disappointed.

The Red Spark was not far from Halsey's office; it was perched high in a break of the city roof, almost directly over Park-Circle 29.

"There he is," said Halsey.

WE crowded around his desk. The image showed the interior of a large oval room, balconied and terraced; a dais dance-floor, raised high in the center with three profes-

sional couples gyrating there; and beneath them the public dance-grid, slowly rotating on its central axis. A hundred or so couples were dancing. The lower floor was crowded with dining tables; others were upon the little catwalk balconies, and still others in the terraced nooks and side niches, half enshrouded, half revealed by colored draperies.

The image now was silent, for Halsey was not bothering with audible connection. But it was a riot of color—flashing colored flood-lights bathing the dancers in vivid tints; and there were twinkling spots of colored tube-lights on all the tables. I saw, too, the blank rectangles of darkness against the walls which marked the private dining rooms, insulated against sight and sound, where one might go for frivolous indiscretion—or for dire plotting, perhaps—and be as secure from interruption as we were, here in Halsey's office.

Venza asked eagerly, "Which is he?"

"Over there on the third terrace, to the left. That table. There seem to be six of them in the party."

We heard Francis' voice; he was in Halsey's lower Manhattan office, with this same image before him.

"We'll get a closer viewpoint."

THE table in question was no more than a square inch on our image. We could see an apparently gay party of men and women. One of the couples was gigantic, a Martian man and woman obviously. The others seemed to be Earth or Venus people.

Francis' voice added:

"I've got a hound-wave magnifier on them. Foley's been listening for an hour. Nice, clear English—much good it does you! This fellow is as cautious as a director of the lower air-lane.... Here's your near-look."

Our image shifted to another viewpoint. The lens-eye with which we

were connected now was mounted over the draperies behind the Martian's table. We were looking down diagonally upon the table, at a distance of no more than ten or fifteen feet, so that its image filled all our grid.

There were three Earth-women in the party. There was nothing peculiar about them: rather handsome, dissolute in appearance, all of them obviously befuddled by alcoholite. There was a man who could have been Anglo-Saxon; about him too there appeared nothing unusual—a wastrel, probably with more money than wit. He wore a black dinner suit, edged with white.

Our attention focussed upon the other two. They were tall, as are all Martians. The young woman—Setta Meka—seemed perhaps twenty or twenty-five years of age, by Earth clocking; and in stature perhaps very nearly my own height, which is six feet two. It is difficult to tell a Martian's age; but she was, I saw, a very handsome young woman, even by Earth standards; and in Ferrök-Shahn she would be considered a beauty. Her gray-black hair was parted and tied at the back with a plaited metal rope. Her short dark cloak—so luminous a fabric that it caught and reflected the sheen of all the gaudy restaurant lights—was parted, its ends thrown back over her shoulders. Beneath it she wore the characteristic Martian leathern jacket, and short wide leather trousers ornamented with spun metal fringes and tassels. Most Martian women have a very war-like aspect, more masculine than feminine; but I saw now that Setta Meka was an exception.

HER brother, who sat beside her, was a full seven feet or more. A hulking sort of fellow, far less spindly than most of his race, so that I judged he might have come from the polar outposts beyond the

Martian Union. He was bare-headed, his gray-black hair clipped close upon a round bullet head, with the familiar Martian round eyes.

I gazed from the viewpoint of ten feet or so into the face of this Set Molo, as momentarily he turned toward the concealed lens-eye. It was a rough-hewn, strongly masculine face of high-bridged, hawk-like nose; bushy black brows frowning above deep-set round eyes. The face of a keen-brained villain, I could not doubt, though the smooth-plucked gray skin was flushed now with alcoholite, and the wide, thin-lipped mouth was leering at the woman across the table from him.

Like his sister, he too had thrown back his cloak, disclosing a brawny, powerful figure, leather-clad, with a wide belt of dangling ornaments, some of which probably were weapons.

How long we gazed at this silent colored image of the restaurant table I do not know. I was aware of Halsey's quiet voice:

"Look him over, Miss Venza. It depends upon you."

Another interval passed. It seemed, as we watched, that Molo's interest in his drunken party was very slight. I got the impression too that though he seemed intoxicated, he was not. Nor was his sister. An anxiety seemed upon her. The smile she had for the drunken jests seemed forced; and at intervals she would cast a swift, furtive glance across the gay restaurant scene.

More drink arrived. The Earth people at the table here seemed upon the verge of stupor; and suddenly it appeared that Molo had completely lost his interest in them. With a gesture to his sister, he abruptly rose from his seat. She joined him. They left the table; and a red-clad floor manager of the restaurant came at their call. Then in a moment they were moving across the room.

Halsey called sharply into his audi-

phone: "Francis! Hold us to them if you can!"

OUR image blurred. Then Foley, in the restaurant, picked them up from another viewpoint. They were standing now by the opened door of one of the Red Spark's private insulated rooms. We caught a glimpse of its interior—a gaily set table with a bank of colored lights over it.

The figure of a man was in there. He was on his feet, as though he had just arrived to meet the Martians here, and a hooded long cloak wholly enveloped him. It may have been a magnetic "invisible" cloak, with the current now off. I think perhaps that it was.

We caught only the fleetest of impressions before the insulated door closed and barred our vision. The glimpse was an accident. Molo, taken by surprise at this appearance of his visitor, could hardly have guarded against it. The waiting figure was very tall—I thought some ten feet—and very thin. The hood shrouded his face and head. In his hand he held a large circular box of black shiny leather, of the sort in which women carry wide-brimmed festive hats. As Molo joined him he put the box gently upon the floor. He handled it as though it were extraordinarily heavy. And as he took a step or two, he seemed weighted down. Just as the room door was hastily closing—Meka sliding it from the inside—we caught a fleeting glimpse of horror.

The lid of the hat box on the floor had lifted up. Inside the box was a great round thing of gray-white—a living thing; a distended ball of membrane, with a network of veins and arteries showing beneath the transparent skin.

For that instant we gazed, stricken. The ball was palpitating, breathing! I saw convolutions of inner tissue under the transparent skin of mem-

brane. A little tentacle, like an arm with a flat-webbed hand, was holding up the lid of the box. The lid rose a trifle higher; the colored lights overhead gleamed down and gave us a brief but clear view of it.

The thing in the box was a huge, living brain! I saw goggling, protruding eyes; an orifice that could have been a nose, and a gash upended for a vertical mouth. It was a face! And the little tentacle arm holding up the box-lid was joined to where the ear should have been!

Was this something human? A huge distended human brain, with the body withered to that tiny arm?

The palpitating thing sank down in the box and the lid dropped. And upon our horrified gaze the insulated door of the room slid closed—a blank rectangle of darkness, with the silence and invisibility of the barrage upon it!

CHAPTER III

Diabolical Mystery

"BY the gods!" exclaimed Halsey. "One of them dares come to the Red Spark! Here, almost in public!"

So Halsey knew what this meant? But he would not tell us. His eyes were blazing now; his face was white, and with an intensity of emotion which transfigured it.

"Francis, did you see that? No, I don't want you to do anything; let them alone in there. Tell Foley I'll be in the manager's office in five minutes. I'm coming."

He snapped off. Our image connection with the Red Spark went dead.

"We're going to the Red Spark?" I demanded.

"Yes. You can come. And I want you, Venza. This changes everything—yet I don't know. I may need you more than ever, now."

"No!" protested Snap.

But Halsey was herding us to the office door and he did not answer. From his desk he had snatched up a few portable instruments, and he flung on a cloak.

It was a brief trip to the Red Spark, on foot through the sub-cellar arcade to where, under Park-Circle 29, we went up in a vertical lift to the roof. We were in the side entrance oval of the restaurant in under five minutes.

I had tried to question Halsey. "That thing in the box—" But he silenced me. In the dim metal room of Orentino, the Red Spark's manager, where Foley was waiting for us, a barrage was up. We could hear it faintly humming, and see the little line of blue-yellow sparks snapping along the angles of the walls. Now we could talk.

HALSEY slammed the door down. He said swiftly, "My men caught one of those things this morning. They have it now, and I think Molo does not yet know we captured it. A human brain; we're convinced that it understands English and can talk—but no one has been able to make it talk yet! Foley, order that damned Orentino to de-insulate the room Molo is in. Now, by the gods, we may see and hear something!"

The frightened Italian manager of the Red Spark was in the restaurant's control room. Halsey killed our barrage to let the outside connections get through to us. We all crowded around the vision-grid which stood here on Orentino's desk. Foley gave us connection with the control room; we saw Orentino's fat, swarthy face, with his eyes nearly popping from fright.

"But yet, Colonel Halsey, I will do whatever you tell me!"

"What room is that Martian occupying?"

"Insulated 39."

"Break off the insulation. Do it slowly and he may not notice. Then

give us connection—audible and visible."

"But I have no image-finders in the insulated rooms, for why should I have installed—"

"Cut off the barrage—I'll get connection there!"

Foley was already setting up his eavesdropper on the desk. The mirror blurred a little; then it clarified. We had the interior of the secret room! And voices were coming out of Foley's tiny receiver!

THE image showed the box on the floor, with its lid down. The tall hooded shape of the stranger stood with Molo and his sister by the table. They were talking in swift, vehement undertones. The language was Martian, a dialect principally used in Ferrok-Shahn. Our equipment brought it in, blurred and scratched, but clear enough to be distinguishable. I could understand it.

Molo was saying: "But you are the fool to have dared come here!"

"The master is confused. He knows that there is danger. Something is wrong." The hooded stranger spoke like a foreigner. Not a Martian, not an Earthman—and not like any person of Venus I had ever heard. A strange, weirdly indescribable intonation. It was a queerly flat, hollow voice.

"I am saying the master is confused—"

"Well, let him be."

"And he demanded I bring him here to find you. He is displeased that you are here."

What gruesome thing was this? Their glances seemed to go to the box on the floor at their feet, as though the master were in there. But the lid of the box did not rise.

"Well, you have found me," Molo declared impatiently. "When you know me better, always you will find I have my wits. The thing is for tomorrow night—not tonight."

"But that, my master is not sure."

The hollow voice was deferential but insistent. "He fears danger. He swears that something has gone wrong. He is working on it now, striving to receive the message. There is a message! He knows that much. Perhaps from our world Wandl itself."

FOR a moment Molo had no answer. His sister had not spoken. I noticed suddenly that her gaze seemed to be roving the room.

"What is it I should do?" Molo asked at last.

"Come with us to your home-room."

"But I have everything ready there. The contact is ready for tomorrow night. Your world will control Earth! Tomorrow night—"

"But if it be tonight?"

Again Molo was silent. My breath stopped. On our mirror I saw the stranger's hood part just a little. There seemed to be no face; just the blur of something brownish!

"But if it be tonight?" insisted the voice.

"I will go," Molo agreed abruptly. "But your coming here was dangerous. Suppose we cannot get out undetected? You know I will never go to where all our instruments are set up and have some damnable spy follow me. Is all going well on Venus and Mars?"

"Yes. My master feels so. He seems to get messages; the contacts will be made simultaneously." A gruesome chuckle! "The capture of these three worlds—we shall have all three enchained at once! Helpless!"

The lid of the black box seemed again about to rise when there came a sharp cry from Meka. "This room is not insulated! The hum is gone—the sparks!"

Our eavesdropping was discovered! Beside me I heard Halsey give a low curse. On our mirror we saw sudden action. The ten-foot cloaked figure laboriously lifted the black

box, and swung with it toward the outer wall of the room. I saw now clearly with what a dragging, heavy tread that giant shape moved—as though it weighed, here on Earth, far more than the normal weight to which it was accustomed.

"Over there!" Molo gasped. "The escape-port; this room has one! Meka, go with him! I will join you—you know where!"

Foley cried, "Colonel, I may be able to stop them!"

But Halsey saw on our image that Molo was staying. "Wait! Let them go! If we have the Martian here we'll do better."

I saw the room's escape-port swing open as Meka and the hooded shape carrying the box moved for it. How many indiscreet wives, upon frivolous occasions, had done just that! The moonlit darkness of the outer catwalk enveloped the disappearing figures.

MOLO was left alone. He closed the porte swiftly. His detector was now in his hand, but Halsey anticipated him by a second or two. Our listener went dead; our mirror darkened. Doubtless Molo was never sure whether he had been spied upon or not.

Halsey was on his feet. "Foley, get out into the main room! Stay with him!"

But there was no need to follow Molo. Evidently he had stayed to allay suspicion; sent his visitor and sister out by the escape-port, which was usual enough; and now he was back in the main room as though nothing important had happened. An appearance of intoxication had again come to him. He wavered jovially across the room, threading his way through the gay diners, and reached the table where his drunken party still sat carousing.

We saw all this from Orentino's vision-grid, here in the manager's office. And then we saw that sur-

reptitiously Molo was using his detector, trying to verify if ray-vibrations were upon him. We saw him turn and gaze toward the lens-eye in the curtains behind him.

Again Halsey shut us off. "He won't make a move with any ray on him, that's evident."

"You want him to leave?" I murmured.

"Of course I do. I want him to leave unsuspecting. If we had caught him—and that thing in the box—it would have told us nothing. He's got a base somewhere in the city—something damnable—diabolic! You heard what they said about it. We've got to trick him into going there, unsuspecting."

HALSEY seized the audiphone. His gaze went to Venza. "Your chance. It's the only way. Foley? Keep away from that Martian! Shut off every ray, every lens in the place. I'll meet you out there in a moment. I'm sending a girl; she'll go after him."

"You—you want me to go now?" murmured Venza.

"Yes. It's the only way. He'll think, presently, that no one is interested in him. Perhaps you can get him drinking. Venza, if you have any wiles to beguile men, use them now!"

"No!" gasped Snap. "No, I tell you!"

Anita was clinging to Venza. She cried abruptly, "Colonel Halsey, I'm going! Two of us!"

Halsey stared. Upon many dire occasions he had been forced to swift decision. He made one now.

"You may go. That is still better. My girls—do your best! All your wits!"

I jumped to my feet. Anita going into this.

"Colonel Halsey, I should think you could do something better than—"

He gripped me by the shoulders. "Gregg Haljan, I take no sugges-

tions from you!" His blazing eyes bored into me. "Don't you realize this means destruction of our three inhabited planets! I'll sacrifice anything—myself, or you, or these girls! Venza, take Anita outside! I'll join you in a moment—give you last instructions. You must take with you a portable audiphone."

"I won't let her go," protested Snap. "This is diabolical!"

Halsey's face softened a little. "I can understand how you feel. But it's necessary. You can't force this Molo. Nor that thing in the cloak, nor the brain in the box. But if these girls can trick Molo, find the course of this thing—"

The girls were moving toward the door of the room. I met Snap's anguished gaze.

"Gregg! Don't let them go!"

"No! No, I won't!"

I made a lunge past Halsey, with Snap after me. Halsey did not move from his place, but one of his rays struck us. With all my senses numbed I felt myself falling.

"Gregg—don't—let them—"

Snap had tumbled half upon me. My senses did not quite fade. I was aware of Anita's and Venza's horrified cries, but Halsey forcibly pushed them to the door. It slid up. I vaguely saw the two girls going out with Halsey after them; and the door coming down, leaving Snap and me lying stricken on the floor.

CHAPTER IV

Death of the Brain

I HAVE no clear idea how long it was before Halsey came back. Ten minutes or half an hour? Snap and I were seated on a low metal bench against the wall. The effect of the accursed paralyzing ray was wearing off. We were tingling all over, clinging to each other on the bench, with our senses still confused; and within me—and I know

that Snap felt the same—was a feeling of terror that the girls had gone upon such a mission, queerly mingled with a sense of shame at our actions in trying to stop them. A sacrifice? A danger for the good of many others, whose lives are as important to them as ours to us? Of course we would risk such a sacrifice, and that Halsey had had to force us was humiliating. Yet the human mind individualizes. The terror menacing the worlds was a vague generality; our love for those two girls was very real.

Halsey stalked in upon us. "So you are recovered?"

Snap stammered, "We—I say, we're sorry as hell we acted like that."

"I know you are." His voice softened. "If I could have done anything else, believe me, I would. But I hope—I don't think harm will come to them. They are clever."

"Are they outside?" I asked. "Did they find a way of meeting the Martian? How long have you been gone?"

HALSEY merely stared at me as though he had no intention of answering. And then, the audiphone on the desk buzzed.

"This is Halsey," he said. "Yes, I have them here. Bring them—did you say bring them?"

We could not hear the answering voice, for Halsey had the muffler in contact.

"No, I would prefer not to come. I'm watching something. I'm at the Red Spark Cafe. Well, I'm going back to my office presently, to wait there."

He turned suddenly into talking code. Like Snap, I had never had occasion to learn it. The words were a strangely sounding staccato gibberish. He ended, "I will send them. Grantline? Very well, I will tell them to locate him. At once, yes."

Halsey closed off the audiphone and swung on us.

"You're all right now?"

"Yes," I said. I stood up, drawing Snap up with me. I was determined now, at least, that we would have the stomach to act like men, and not like frightened moon-struck lovers. I added, "What is wanted of us, Colonel Halsey?"

"That's better, Gregg." He smiled. The flashing anger was gone from him now, but he was still grim. "I wanted you here to wait for this call from the Conclave of Public Safety. It met at midnight. They have ordered you there—you two."

"Where?" asked Snap. "That's a secret meeting, isn't it? There was no report of it over the air tonight."

"Yes, secret. I don't know the location myself. They wanted me also." He smiled his faint smile again. "But I begged off, as you heard."

He was leading us to the door. "They won't need you for more than half an hour. When they finish, come back to my office. You can come openly." He stood with his finger on the door lever. "Good-by, lads. From the service room here—Foley will lead you to it—you are to take a mail cylinder for Postal switch-station 20. They'll reroute you from there to the conclave auditorium—whichever one has been selected."

THE door slid up. "When you disembark," he added, "ask for Johnny Grantline. You are to sit with him."

"Good-by, sir," I said.

He showed us out, and the door slid down upon him. We trudged the corridor, and Snap gripped me.

"For myself," he whispered swiftly, "I'll go to the damnable conclave because I'm ordered. But I won't stay there long. Half an hour, didn't he say? Once we get out of it, if I don't route myself back here to the Red Spark, I'm a motor-oiler."

I agreed with him. It did not seem

so utterly terrifying now. We had a mental picture of Anita and Venza in the Red Spark's public room. Doubtless Orentino had created a way for them to meet Molo. They would sit here in the Red Spark with that drunken party, and in less than an hour we would be back.

But as we passed diagonally across an end of the main room with Foley leading us, we caught a glimpse of Molo's table. The drunken party was still there. But Molo, Anita and Venza were gone!

We had no time to get any information. Foley abruptly left us, and another man took his place. In the service room a passenger cylinder was waiting. Our guide entered it with us. At the switch-station we had our breath knocked out with the bumping, but the cylinder remained sealed. And after another ten minutes in the vacuum tube, we reached our unknown destination.

The cylinder-slide opened. We found ourselves with a lone guard; and through a gloomy arcade opening Johnny Grantline was advancing to greet us.

"Well, so here you are, Gregg. Hell to pay heaven going on here. Come on it; I'll tell you."

"We were sent for," Snap said.

"Yes. They told me to contact with you. But they don't want you yet. Come on in."

HE waved away the guard and led us through a padded arcade into a low, vaulted audience room, windowless and gloomy. Across it, a doorway panel stood ajar. Grantline peered through it. There was the glow of light from the adjoining room and the distant, blended murmur of many voices.

Grantline closed the door. "They don't want you yet. They'll buzz us. Sit down and I'll tell you—"

"Where are we?" I asked. "That damned cylinder routed us unknown."

"The Ninth Conclave Hall."

I knew its location: lower Manhattan, high under the city roof.

Grantline produced little cigarette cylinders.

"Steady your nerves, lads. You'll need it."

He grinned at us. The hand with which he lighted my cylinder was steady as a tower-base; but he was excited, nevertheless. I could see it by the glint in his eyes, and hear it in his voice.

"What's going on?" Snap demanded.

"It's about this invading planet. By the gods, when you hear what's really been learned about it!—"

"Well, what?" I asked.

HE sketched what he had heard this night at the conclave. The mysterious invader was inhabited.

"How do they know that?" Snap put in.

"Don't be a nit-wit. Wait till you hear the rest of it. The accursed thing changes its orbit. It banks and turns like a space-ship! It stopped out in space. It's poised out there now between Mars and Jupiter. A world a fifth or sixth as big as our Moon, and it swims of its own volition! It's inhabited, and the beings on it can control its movements! They've brought it in from interstellar space, into our solar system. Evidently the point they've reached now is as far as they want to come. They've poised out there, getting ready to attack, not only us, but Mars and Venus simultaneously."

Grantline gazed at us through the smoke of his cigarette. He was much like Snap, this Johnny Grantline. Small, wiry, brisk of movement and manner. But he was much older than Snap; his hair was greying at the temples; his voice always carried the authority of one accustomed to commanding men.

"Don't ask me for the technicalities of how they reached these conclusions. I'm no super-astronomer. I'm

only telling you what the discussion had been here for the past hour."

Heaven knows we had no inclination to dispute them. What we had seen and heard at the Red Spark during this hour tallied very well with his words.

He went on swiftly, "The attack, of whatever nature it may be, they seem to feel is impending at once. Not next month, or next week, but now! Lord, Gregg, I don't blame you for staring like that! You don't know what's been going on for the past two days—on Earth, and Venus and Mars. Of course you don't; it's all been suppressed. Neither did I, until I heard it here tonight. The U. S. W.—the Martian Union—the Venus Free State—all of us are preparing for war! Call it governmental panic, if you like. You didn't know, did you, that every government space-flyer on the Earth is being commissioned? We're not going to sit around and wait for invaders to land! The war—if there is to be one—won't be fought on Earth if we can help it."

WE stared. Snap said:

"What makes them think—"

"That a war is coming?" Grantline finished for him. "Plenty. This new planet has sent out space-ships! The planet itself is hovering sixty million miles away from us. About forty million miles from Mars and close to ninety million from Venus. Perhaps its leaders think that's the most strategic spot. At any rate, there it is, and it's poised there.

"Then it sent out space-ships, three of them. One—right now, tonight—is hovering close to Venus. Another is near Mars, and the third is some 200,000 miles off Earth! Several of our interplanetary freighters are overdue; it seems now that they must have encountered these invading ships and been destroyed."

An enemy ship hovering now within 200,000 miles of Earth!

Closer even than our nearby Moon!

Grantline was continuing vehemently.

"Still more, and worse: these three hovering ships have already landed the enemy on Mars and Venus. The reports mention mysterious encounters in Ferrok-Shahn and Grebbar. For three or four days Mars has been in a panic of apprehension, Venus almost as bad. And here on Earth: the enemy has landed here! Not many, perhaps; but one has been captured! A thing—God, it's almost beyond description."

We could well agree with that, since Snap and I had just seen one.

"They've got it here," Grantline was saying. "They've tried to make it talk! They can't, but they're going to try again. Force it, this time! It seems to understand our language; the light in its eyes when they speak to it—"

A shudder was in his voice. He jumped to his feet and went to the door of the room, probed it open a trifle and came back to us.

"They're bringing it in." Upon his face was a look of awed horror, the look which everyone bears when fronted with the gruesome mystery of the unknown. "Come on; let's watch."

We stood crowding the small door-oval. It gave onto a darkened little balcony of the conclave hall. The girders of the city roof were over us. There were a few official spectators sitting up here in the dark on the balcony, but none noticed us.

THE lower floor of the hall was lighted. Around the polished oblong tables perhaps a hundred scientists and high governmental officials of the three worlds were seated. Near the center of the hall was a small dais-platform. On a table there someone had just placed a circular black box, similar to the one we had seen previously.

The hall was hushed and tense. On the dais stood a group of Earth officials. One of them spoke.

"Here it is, gentlemen. And this time, by God, if we can make it speak—"

"The War Secretary from Great-London," Grantline whispered.

I recognized him—Brayley, Commander in Chief of the land, air, water and space armies of the United States of the World. He was gigantic in stature, with a great shock of gray-white hair. A commanding figure, if there ever was one.

Beside him the little Japanese representative in Great-New York—one Nippor—seemed a pigmy. The acoustics of the silent hall carried his soft voice up to us.

"Will we use force? Torture, now—it is vital, necessary."

"Yes, by God! Anything!"

It seemed that everyone in the hall must have been shuddering; I could feel it like an aura pounding up at me. Brayley lifted the box-lid; and with his naked hands reached in and raised the horrible thing; held it up, a two-foot ball of palpitating gray-white membrane. Another living brain! A human thing.

"Now, damn you, you're going to talk to us! Understand that! We're going to make you talk. Get that box out of the way!"

They flung the box to the floor, and Brayley placed the brain on the table. The glare of light from an overhead dome came down full upon it. Beneath the stretched taut membrane the convolutions of the brain showed like tangled purple worms. The blood-vessels seemed distended almost to bursting now, for the thing was terrified. The gruesome face, with popping eyes and that gaping mouth, showed a horrible travesty of terror. From where its ears should have been, a crooked little arm of flabby gray-white flesh came down, one on each side, and braced the table. And I saw now that it had a shriveled body, or at least little legs,

almost crushed under it by its weight.

"Now, damn you"—Brayley stood rubbing off his hands against his coat—"for the last time, will you talk?"

THE goggling eyes held with terrified but baleful gaze upon Brayley's face. Did it understand? The eyes were fronted our way, and suddenly their glance swung up so that I seemed for an instant to see down into them. And it swept me then: this was a thing of greater intelligence—greater knowledge, perhaps—than our own. A human, with brain so developed that through myriad generations the body was shriveled, almost gone, and only this distended brain was left. A mind was housed here, an intelligence—housed in this monstrous brain which itself was unhampered by any bony container of skull.

Were these the beings of the new planet which had come to attack us? But how could this helpless thing—incapable of almost everything, obviously, save thought—do the work of its world? How could this enemy space-ship, hovering now only 200,000 miles away, be built and launched and guided, with only things like this to command it?

Then I recalled again that insulated room of the Red Spark Cafe: the thin, ten-foot hooded shape which was carrying the black box. Was that, perhaps, an opposite type of being? A human, with the brain submerged, dwarfed, and the body paramount? It had called one of these brains "master." Were there, on this mysterious planet, two co-existing types of humans? Each a specialist, one for the physical work and skill, and the other for the mental?

It was an instant rush of thoughts as I stood with Snap and Grantline in that dark balcony doorway, gazing down to where the giant brain stood braced upon its shriveled arms and legs, terrified and yet glaring defiance

of these men of Earth, Mars and Venus who were here under its gaze. And I realized then why we of Earth and Venus and Mars are all cast in the same mould we call human. It is a little family of planets, here in our solar system. For countless eons we have been close neighbors. The same sunlight, the same general conditions of life, the same seed, were strewn here. A man from the Orient is different from an Anglo-Saxon. A man of Mars differs a little more. But basically they are the same.

YET here, confronting us now, was a new type. From realms of interstellar space, far beyond our solar system, this new human had come. What knowledge, what new methods of thought, conceptions of human relations it might hold, who could guess? But that it came as an enemy, intent upon destroying us unless we destroyed it—that much seemed obvious.

"For the last time, will you talk?" cried Brayley.

There was another interval of silence. The eyes of the brain were very watchful. Its gaze roved the hall as though it were seeking for help. It shifted its little arms on the table, seemingly exhausted already from the physical effort of supporting itself.

Brayley's voice came again. "Doubtless you can feel pain. We'll see."

With what effort of will to overcome his revulsion we may only guess, he reached forward and pinched the little arm. The result was electrifying. From the up-ended slit of mouth in that goggling face came a scream. It pierced the heavy tense silence of the hall, a scream ghastly in its timbre; weird, unearthly, like nothing that any of us had ever heard before. And in it was conveyed an agony of physical suffering, as though Brayley had in-

flicted, not a little pinch of that flabby arm, but had thrust a red-hot knife into its vitals.

The brain could feel pain indeed! It crouched with stiffened arms and legs; the membrane of its great head seemed to bulge with greater distension; the knotted blood-vessels were gorged with purple blood. The eyes rolled. Then it closed its mouth. Its gaze steadied upon Brayley's face, so baleful a gaze that as I caught the reflection of its luminous purple glow a shudder of fear and revulsion swept me.

"So you did not like that?" Brayley steadied his voice. "If you don't want more, you had better speak. How did you get here on Earth? What are you trying to do here?"

THERE seemed an interminable interval of silence. Then Nippor, the little Japanese, took a menacing step forward.

"Speak! We will force it from you!" He spread his lean brown fingers before the brain's face. "Shall I stab into you?"

And then it spoke. "Do—not—touch—me—again!"

Indescribable voice! Human, animal or monster no one could say. But the words were clear, precise; and for all their terror, they seemed to hold an infinite command.

A wave of excitement swept the hall, but Brayley's gesture silenced it. He leaped forward and bent low over the palpitating brain.

"So you can talk? You come as an enemy. We have given you every chance today for friendship, and you have refused. You come allied with Martian criminals. You have a ship, quite near us, out in space. What are you trying to do to us?"

It only glared.

"Speak!"

"I will not tell you anything!"

"Oh, yes, you will!"

"No!"

All the men on the platform were crowding close to it now.

"Speak!" ordered Brayley again. "Here in Great-New York the Martian, Molo, has a hiding place. Where is it?"

No answer.

"WHERE is it? You are perhaps a leader of your world. I lead ours—and I'm going to master you now. Where is this hiding place?"

The thing suddenly laughed, a gruesome, eerie cackle. "You will know when it is too late! I think it is too late already!"

"Too late for what?"

"To save your world. Doomed, your three worlds! Don't—touch—me!"

It ended with a scream of apprehension. The exasperated, hot-tempered Japanese had reached for it. His fingers closed on the crooked little arm. He rasped:

"Tell us what to do to save ourselves!"

"No! Let—me—go!"

"Tell us! You damnable—"

"No!" It screamed again. "Let—me—go!"

"Tell us! By the Lord, if you don't—"

Nippor strengthened his squeezing grip. The thing was writhing; the thin ball of membrane palpitating, heaving. And suddenly it burst. Over all its purpled surface, blood came with a gush!

Nippor and Brayley staggered backward. The scream of the brain ended in a choking gurgle. The little legs and tiny body wilted under it. The round ball of membrane sank to the table. It rolled sidewise upon one arm and ear, and in a moment its palpitations ceased. A purple-red mass of blood, it lay deflated and flabby.

It was dead!

CHAPTER V

The Star-Streak

"BUT see here," I said, "did they mention the Martian, Molo, at all? Brayley told that accursed thing out there—"

"They were discussing Molo before you arrived," Grantline told us.

We had drawn back from the doorway. The conference, with the dead thing on the table removed, was proceeding. Snap and I had momentarily forgotten Anita and Venza; but now we were in a panic to get back to the Red Spark.

"But you can't go," said Grantline. "Brayley ordered you here. He'll want to see you in a moment."

"Well, why don't he see us now?" Snap protested. "I'm not going to cool myself off sitting here."

"Oh, yes, you are."

Grantline sent word to Brayley that we were here. In a moment the answer came; we were to wait a short time and then he would want to see us.

We swiftly told Grantline what had happened at the Red Spark, and found that already he knew most of it. Francis had relayed it to the conference. And Halsey now was in constant communication with the officials here.

"Then what is happening?" I demanded. "Where are the girls? Has Halsey heard from them?"

Again Grantline went to a nearby room.

"Anita sent a message," he said when he returned. "They are with Molo. An indefinite message; but Halsey is ordering a squad of men to be ready."

Grantline swiftly sketched for us what had happened in the Red Spark. Anita and Venza, flaunting a simulated drunkenness with a skill for acting which I knew both of them possessed, had joined that drunken

party. Perhaps if Meka had been there, she would have seen through them.

BUT Molo did not. And they have since told me that the Martian was himself far from sober, although he was probably not aware that the drink was affecting him. Whatever his emotions—and in the light of what subsequently occurred I can guess at how he felt toward Venza—he yielded to their demands to leave the restaurant with him. He wanted, as we know, most desperately to leave unobtrusively. And Venza threatened a drunken scene unless she could go.

He took them, leaving openly in a public fare-car. Doubtless he at first intended to de-rail them somewhere and proceed secretly to his lair. But they convinced him that he was not followed. Twice he used his detector, and Anita and Halsey were clever enough to throw off their rays in time to avoid it.

Then Halsey lost connection with the fleeing car, and after that Molo doubtless changed his mind. His association with these two supposedly drunken and wholly attractive young women amounted to an abduction.

These, we can only guess, were his motives for acting as he did. And we know that his sister showed immediate disapproval of his rashness.

"But where are they now?" I demanded of Grantline. "Good God, we can't let them—"

"You," said Grantline sternly, "are out of it. Do you think that Halsey—under Brayley's orders, now—will neglect any chance to find out where Molo is hiding? He and these brains—you saw one of them die just now rather than tell the secret—they're planning something. You heard, from the insulated room of the Red Spark, that shrouded figure say that his master thought it would be tonight. Something is about to happen. This conference is wrestling with it. In Grebbar and Ferrok-Shahn they're

striving to find out what it is. Something impending now! The Martians and Venus people, like us, realize that. The news is pouring in here from Venus and Mars. They're mobilizing their space-flyers, just as we are."

GRANTLINE at last was letting out all his apprehensions upon us, with this burst. "Something nameless, hideous. You've only been touching the surface, like the general public, which must be protected from panic. Halsey didn't tell you that the entire resources of his organization are out upon this thing to-night. Here at the conclave there's a room of information-sorters. That's just where I came from a moment ago. Every country on our Earth is making ready—for what, nobody knows! Halsey and all his force are on the alert—for what? It's ghastly, not knowing what you're fighting. Halsey let that Martian woman and the hooded stranger get away. He thought he could pick them up again, but he hasn't.

"He's had two fragmentary calls from Anita. He has a hundred men ready to rush to their aid, and to capture Molo's lair. He expects another message from Anita any moment. This conference here knows every movement that is being made, within ten or twenty seconds of its making. Perhaps upon Anita and Venza the whole outcome of this thing may hang, and you and Snap rail because you love them and they are in danger!"

We had no answer to that. We could only stare at him.

"But see here," I stammered, "who is this Molo? Halsey didn't tell us."

"He told us nothing," said Snap. "Nothing that he could avoid. You'd think we were damn children."

"You've been acting like it. Molo is an interplanetary pirate. The *Star-Streak*—"

"Good God!"

WE HAD heard of him indeed! For five years past, a mysterious gray space-flyer, with a base supposedly hidden in the Polar deserts of Mars, had been terrorizing interplanetary shipping. Many of the smaller freighters between the worlds had mysteriously vanished, captured and destroyed by the *Star-Streak*, as the pirate ship was called.

"They think," Grantline went on, "that Molo was cruising with his pirate ship. He has, as you know, a band of criminals drawn from all the three worlds; supposedly about fifty of them, commanded by himself and his pirate flyer—last month, probably—encountered the three flyers which this new planet sent out. The *Star-Streak* was captured; perhaps destroyed. And Molo and his band, themselves outlaws, enemies to our three worlds, joined with this new enemy. To save themselves—and because they have been promised greater rewards."

"But why would these brains want them, want their help?" Snap demanded.

"This is all theory, probabilities only. Wouldn't you say it was because, in Ferrok-Shahn, Grebbar, and here in Great-New York, simultaneously to-night, something has to be accomplished? Something the brains themselves could not do. Molo and his band know all three cities. How they landed here in Great-New York nobody knows. The enemy spaceship is 200,000 miles out. Obviously they came from it—landed secretly with some smaller vehicle somewhere on Earth and made their way here. And when whatever it is they're expecting to do is accomplished, they'll try to escape by the same method. But, by the gods, if we have our way—"

A buzzer hissed beside us. A microscopic voice commanded:

"Grantline, bring Gregg Haljan and Daniel Dean to room six at once. Mr. Brayley wants them now."

In room six we stood before the War Secretary, who had arrived there a moment ahead of us.

"Ah Haljan—and Dean. I'm glad to see you."

HE WAS still white and shaken. Beads of perspiration stood upon his forehead. He mopped them off.

"Grantline has no doubt told you some of the things which are upon us to-night?"

"I have," said Grantline.

"Quite so. Disturbing, terrifying things. . . . Haljan, in a word, there is an enemy ship out in space. God knows of what character; we don't. It is at this moment seemingly poised visually not over twelve degrees from the Moon. The observatory at Tokyo-hama reports that they can see it plainly with the solarscope. We have a ship, Haljan, being rushed into commission tonight. You know her—the *Cometara*."

"I know her," I said.

"Quite so. She is taking flight, as soon after dawn as we can make her ready. She will carry about fifty men. The armament and men are in charge of Grantline. You, Dean we want to handle her radio-helio."

"Thank you," said Snap.

"And you, Haljan—we can think of no one better fitted to navigate her."

He waved away my words of appreciation. "Within another day we shall have thirty such ships in space. Mars and Venus also are mobilizing. God know we hope it will prove unnecessary. This first ship may perhaps meet the enemy; conquer it."

BUT there was no conviction in his voice. He stood up. "We feel, Haljan, that if anyone can handle the *Cometara* with skill enough to combat this lurking enemy, it will be you."

"I will do my best, sir."

"We know that. The ship is leaving from the Tappan Interplanetary

Stage as soon after dawn as possible. When have you and Dean last slept?"

Snap and I gazed at each other. "Last night," we both said.

"Quite so. Then you need sleep now. I want you to go at once to the Tappan Interplanetary Fieldhouse. The Commander there will give you a room, supper and make you comfortable. Eat, and sleep if you can. We want you to keep out of this night's activities here in the city. You understand?"

"Yes, sir," I agreed.

"We want you refreshed for what may come upon the *Cometara*. That, more than anything, is vital." An orderly was approaching behind Brayley. "I'm coming back in a moment, Rollins." Brayley smiled wanly. "So much at once—it leaves one confused."

He shook hands with us. "I may not see you again until it's over. Good luck, lads. Grantline, they need you for a moment in the hall; something about electronic space-gun equipment for the *Cometara*. Then you'd better go to Tappan House also, and get some sleep."

We were dismissed. Snap and I regarded each other hesitantly. I said impulsively:

"Mr. Brayley, Detective-Colonel Halsey is using two girls tonight—"

"Yes, we're watching that, Haljan."

"They are the girls we are marrying," I added. "May we communicate with Colonel Halsey?"

"Yes. Call him from here." He smiled his tired smile. "But keep out of it, you lads. Remember, we need you at dawn."

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

He took Grantline with him and left us alone in the little room.

"Well," burst out Snap, "that's that. If I go up to Tappan before Venza and Anita are safe, I'm a motor-oiler."

"Same here. But Snap, we've got to be there by dawn, or soon after."

THE Tappan departure-stage was only a few miles up the Hudson, across the Tappan-Zee from the Westchester residential district. We could get there in half an hour.

It was now nearly trinitight, or half-way between midnight and dawn. There was no audiphone connection in this small room. We did not want to leave it and talk from an audiphone in some other room.

"Not me," said Snap. "When I go out of here, I go with a rush. If we poke our heads out there now somebody'll grab us, route us up to Tappan with a guard. Set up your speaker, Gregg. You can get him."

I had my portable audiphone, to use sound connections only. For local distances about the city it was dependable. In a minute or two Halsey accepted my call.

"You, Gregg?"

"Yes. We're at the conclave. They're through with us. Where is Anita? Oh, Colonel Halsey, please—"

"We've heard from her. Twice. Some time ago, Gregg. Just fragments; it's all I can tell you. I'm expecting—"

We could hear someone interrupting him. Then he came back. "Gregg? I was saying, Molo took them somewhere. He had his detector commissioned; I didn't dare fling after them—Anita warned me not to try it. She had to stop connection herself. God knows how she has been able to whisper to me at all."

HIS voice, like Brayley's, had the ring of a man almost confused, mentally strained to the breaking point. I could appreciate how Halsey must feel. In his youth a man of physical action, forced now almost always to remain at his central desk, with his encircling banks of instruments; holding all the network of his far-flung activities centralized; his voice, his decisions and commands, in a hundred places almost simultane-

ously—while his body sat there inactive at his desk.

"Gregg, it's all I can tell you. I have men strewn about the city. When the clue comes, I'll send them in force. The girls must have arrived at Molo's place by now, watching their chance to communicate. If only they know where they are, so that they can tell me.... Gregg, I must disconnect—"

"Colonel Halsey—Anita's frequency — the wave-combination — give me that! Maybe Snap and I can pick up the message when it comes and not disturb you any more."

He named the oscillating frequency of the instrument Anita was using. Then he disconnected.

"But can you pick up that frequency?" Snap demanded anxiously.

"Yes, I think so."

"Then come on. We'll try it as we go."

"Go where?"

It faced us down. We were long-ing for action. There was no place to go! Nothing we could think of to do!

"The hell; sit here then," said Snap. "Try that frequency. We've got to do something. If she'll only send us a hint!"

The room's door-slide suddenly opened, and an orderly appeared before us.

"Haljan?"

"Get the hell away!" roared Snap. "We've had our orders; we don't want any from you!"

"Greg Haljan and Daniel Dean are paged on the vision," the orderly said mildly.

Someone in the city wanted us; our names were appearing on the various vision-grids, publicly displayed throughout the city in the hope that we would answer.

"That's different," said Snap. "Answer it for us, that's a good fellow. Say we're too damn busy."

"It must be important," the orderly insisted. "The caller registered a fee

at the Search Bureau; that's how they located you here. He paid the highest fee to search you. An impending danger emergency call—"

"That is different," I exclaimed. It was against the law to invoke the services of the Search Bureau unless based upon actual impending danger. Such a call at once enlisted the services of Halsey's organization.

"We'll take it," I told the orderly.

"Come with me, sir." He turned and left swiftly.

WE hastened with him to a corridor cubby. Upon the audiophone there I was at once connected with a voice, and an anxious man's face, with a two-day growth upon it.

"Haljan! Thank God you answer. This is Dud Ardley. Me and Shac are here. Listen, this is the lower cellar corridor, Lateral 3, under Broadway Street. For God's sake don't get it mixed. Me and Shac just have seen your girls down here."

News of Anita and Venza! I could see in the vision-image, behind Dud's head, the outlines of the little public cubby from which he was calling. He and his brother had been traversing this deserted lowest cellar corridor of East Side lower Manhattan, upon some illicit errand of their own. They had seen figures alighting from a fare-car. By instinct, the brothers Ardley were always furtive. They had crouched and watched, and had caught a glimpse of the faces of Venza and Anita. The girls were hooded and cloaked. A hooded man was with them. The fare-car quickly rolled away, and the hooded figures, suddenly becoming invisible within their magnetic cloaks, had vanished.

"S'elp me, we couldn't do nothin'. We ain't armed, Gregg—you know we take no chances with the police by carryin' cylinders. So I paged you in a hurry."

"Dud, that's damn nice of you. Where are you now? Tell me again."

The Ardleys, knowing nothing of the events of this night, supposed that the girls were being abducted, or were perhaps upon some escapade about which Snap and I should be informed.

"Damn right, Dud. We'll come at once. You two wait for us?"

"Sure. If you got instruments, maybe we can track 'em. It wasn't a quarter of a mile from here—toward the river. Plenty of rotten dumps down there."

The cellar tenements of the city, where all the scum of its population gathered! I knew that many criminal Martians and Venus people lived in that disreputable shambles.

"Wait for us, Dud. We'll come in a rush."

I slammed up the audiphone. Snap, beside me, had heard it all. He shoved the astonished orderly out of our way.

"What's the nearest exit-route out of here? Hurry up, you!"

"To the city roof, sir, up this incline, and—"

We dashed up the spiral incline, through a low exit-porte, and were in the starlight of the city roof.

CHAPTER VI

The Screaming Light-Beam

"CONNECT it, Gregg! You can't tell—her message might come over any minute."

I tuned the receiving coils of the little portable audiphone to the seldom used oscillation frequency which Halsey had told us Anita's transmitter was sending.

"Anything, Gregg?"

"No. Dead channel."

The air, in Anita's channel, was so bafflingly silent!

Snap was rushing us, in a small official tram-car, along one of the

south-bound roof-tracks. We had been almost immediately challenged by a roof-guard when we appeared from the upper porte of the Conclave Hall; the city roof was not open to public traffic. But our well-known names, and a glib, half-true story of the recent interview with Brayley, calmed the guard's ire. He let us pass; he even found us a single-seat hand-tram, and started us southward on the deserted shining rails.

It was a cloudless night, with stars like thickly strewn diamonds on purple velvet. The city roof lay glistening in the starlight. In my great-grandfather's time there had been almost no roof here; an open city, exposed to all the inclement weather. But gradually the arcades and overhead viaducts, cross balconies and catwalks which spanned the canyon street between the giant buildings became a roof. It spread, now terraced and sloped to top the lofty buildings, like a great rumpled sheet propped by the knees of sleeping giants. Some of the roof was of opaque alumite—dark patches, alternating with the great glassite panes which in places admitted the daylight.

OUR little single-motor tram sped southward upon the narrow, paralleled rails which wound their way over the terraces. Save for the guards and lookouts in their occasional cubbies, and the air-traffic directors in their towers, we were alone up here. The roof was tangled with air-pipes, line-wire conduits, ether-wave aeri-als—arterial systems of the ventilating and lighting devices. As far as one could see the ventilators stood fronting the night breeze like little listening ears. There were water tanks; great cross-bulkheads and flumes to handle the rain and snow. A few traffic towers maintained order in the overhead air-lanes. Their beacons stood up like swords into the sky when the passing lights

marked the thinly strewn trinitight traffic.

We were stopped at intervals, but in each case were passed promptly.

"Nothing yet, Gregg?"

"No."

Anita's channel remained so horribly silent. It was, I suppose, no more than ten minutes during which we sped south along the grotesque maze of the roof; but to us it was an eternity of horrible imaginings. The girls were down in the shambles of the East Side city cellar. If only some message would come!..

"I'll pull up here."

"Yes," I said.

I gathered up my little audiphone, thrust it under my dark flowing cloak. If only our cloaks were magnetic! But they were not.

We leaped from our car; abandoned it on a siding.

"In a rush, Haljan?" said the guard.

"That's us. Orders from Mr. Brayley."

We left him and plunged into a descending automatic lift. A drop of a thousand feet; we shot downward past all the deserted levels, past the ground-level, the under-surface tramways, the sub-river tubes, the sub-cellar—down to the very bottom of the city.

"Come on, Gregg. Two segments from here."

WE advanced almost at a run. At this hour of the night hardly a pedestrian was in evidence. It was an arched, vaulted corridor, almost a tunnel, dimly blue-lit with short lengths of fluorescent tubes at intervals on the ceiling. For all the vaulted mechanisms of our time, the air here was heavy and fetid. Moisture dripped from the concrete roof. It lay on the metal pavement of the ground; the smell of it was dank, tomb-like.

There were frequent cross-tunnels. We turned eastward into one of them. For a segment there were the lower

entrances to the cellars of the giant buildings overhead. We passed a place where the tunnel-corridor widened into a great underground plaza. The sewerage and wire-pipes lay like tangled pythons on its floor. Half across it, by the glow of temporary lights strung on a cable, a group of repairmen were working. We passed them, headed in to where the tunnel narrowed again and there were now occasional cubby entrances to underground dwellings.

It was a rabbit warren from here to the river. A disreputable shambles, haunted by criminals and by miserable families, many of whom never saw the daylight for weeks at a time. The very air was sodden. The giant voice of the city hardly carried down here, so that an oppressive silence hung upon everything—as though death were silently stalking here, with only our hastening footfalls on the metal grid of the pavement echoing through the stillness. The few pedestrians whom we passed were furtive as ourselves.

"That next crossing, Gregg—they said they'd wait for us. But I don't see them."

Occasional escalators led upward; the overhead traffic—most of it at this hour concerned with the city's incoming food and milk supply—sounded as a vague rumble. In advance of us was a narrow intersection. A giant pipe, one of the main arteries of the vacuum-tube postal-transit system, hung above the corridor intersection. There were a few lights in the bull's-eyes of the subterranean dwelling rooms, but most of them were dark.

"Easy, Snap! Not so fast."

A PREMONITION of evil, of something wrong here, suddenly swept me. I pulled Snap to a walk. We edged over against the tunnel side. We had passed a small, lighted audiphone cubby—evidently the one from which Shac and Dud



had paged us. They should have been here waiting; but there was nothing save the empty, gloomy tunnels. . . .

"Something is coming!" Snap clutched at me. We drew our cloaks around us and waited in a shadowed recess. Down a side incline, a segment behind us, a small automatic food truck came lurching. It pulled up at an arcade entrance—doubtless some food-shop serving the dwellings of this area. Its driver slid the portals, deposited his cases of food, locked the panel after him; and in a moment he and his truck were gone back up the incline.

We heard, in the ensuing silence, a low groan! Some one moaning near at hand. It sent a chill over me. It seemed quite close to us. Then abruptly it stopped. We saw, within twenty feet of us, two dark figures lying on the pavement grid in a black patch of shadow where the mail-tube came down in a curve and disappeared into the tunnel wall.

We bent over the figures of two men. They lay together, one half upon the other—black-garbed figures with white, staring faces. One twitched a little and then lay still.

They were Shac and Dud Ardley!
"Murdered, Gregg! Good Lord!"

BOOTH were dead. But we could see no marks upon either of them. Something had killed them, as they waited here for us.

I found my wits. "Snap! We can't stand like this—wholly visible!"

It seemed suddenly that there must be invisible enemies lurking here.



Things, strange beings, watching us, preparing to strike with hidden death, as they had struck at Shac and Dud.

I pulled Snap away. We darted a few feet. The light of the tunnel intersection was directly over us.

"Not here, Snap. Run!"

A panic was on us. Like animals, terrified at the light, we plunged away, seeking darkness.

Under the curving vacuum tube a little further along we found shelter. Snap murmured:

"The girls were past here. But which way, Gregg? Which way?"

As though I knew!

I felt at that moment, under my shirt against the skin of my chest, the anode of my audiphone receiver tingling! A receiving signal! Anita's channel was not dead. In the gloom I could see Snap's white face as he watched me hastily bringing it out.

"A call, Gregg?"

"Yes, I think so!"

"Hurry, oh hurry!"

We heard a tiny microphonic voice—Anita's voice.

"Colonel Halsey! Yes, I have the location. Lafayette 4—East corridor, lowest level. There was a descending entrance; I don't know the number. Don't you speak again! I've only a minute! Venza safe—but send help! Something we don't understand—a strange mechanism here. Molo is—"

Then Halsey's interrupting voice. "Anita, escape! You and Venza!"

"We can't! They've got us!"

"I'm sending men—they'll be there in ten minutes! If you—"

"Ten minutes! Oh, that will be too late! Molo is—"

It seemed that we heard her scream. The waves blurred and died, but in my horrified ears her microphonic scream was ringing.

THE channel was dead. Had Molo discovered her? Lafayette 4—East corridor, lowest level. A descending entrance....

"Snap, that's here! As near here as we could place it! A descending entrance!"

We stood backed against the great curving side of the postal vacuum tube. Within it I heard the hiss and clank as a mail cylinder flashed past, grinding around the curve. Halsey's orders must be going out now. His men nearest this place would come in a rush. Ten minutes, and they would be here. But Anita said that would be too late!

Snap and I were frantically searching. Somewhere here was a hidden descending entrance, leading to Molo's lair. It seemed in the silence that Anita's scream over that audiphone was still ringing in my head. Had it been entirely from the instrument? Or were we so close that in actuality we had heard its distant echoes?

"Gregg, help me!"

Snap was tugging at what seemed a horizontal door-slide, like a trap in the tunnel floor, partly under the vacuum-tube.

"The damn thing—stuck."

No! It yielded with our efforts. It slid aside. Steps led downward into blackness. We plunged in. Caution was gone from us. The steps went down twenty or thirty feet; we were in another smaller corridor. It was vaguely lighted by a glow from somewhere. Then, as my pupils expanded further, I could see this was a shabby alley street, opening ahead into a winding passage with the slide-porte above us like its back gate. A shambling warren of cubbies was here; a little sequestered segment of disreputable dwellings.

We stood peering, listening.

"Shall I try the eavesdropper, Gregg? Take only a minute to connect."

"Yes. No, wait!"

I thought I heard distant sounds.

"Voices, Snap! Listen!"

More than voices! A thud, footsteps running! A commotion, back

in this metal shambles, within a hundred feet of us.

"This way," I murmured.

WE plunged into a black gash. There was a glow of light—a glassite pane in a house wall nearby. The commotion was louder. And under it now we heard a vague humming: something electrical. It was an indescribably weird sound, like nothing I had ever heard before.

Snap clutched at me. "In here—but where is the accursed door?"

There was a glassite pane, but we could find, at first, no door. In our hands we held small electronic belt-cylinders—short-range weapons—but they were all we had.

The hum and hissing was louder. It seemed to throb within us, as though its tiny ultra-rapid vibration were communicating to every fiber of our bodies.

No door; then we rushed to the glassite pane. Snap drew back his fist as though he would smash his weapon into the glassite.

"You can't break it! Too thick!"

Light was streaming through it now. We glimpsed the interior of a room. The place a few moments before must have been dark. The light now came from a strange mechanism set in the center of the metal cubby. I caught only an instant's glimpse of it—a round thing of coils and wires. The metal floor of the room was cut away, exposing the gray rock of Manhattan Island. And against the rock, in a ten-foot circle, a series of discs were contacted, with wire leading from them to the central coils.

The whole was humming, hissing and glowing with a weird opalescent light. It was dazzling, blinding. Within it the goggled figure of Molo was moving, adjusting the contacts. He stopped. He straightened, drew back from the light.

Only an instant's glimpse; but we saw the girls, crouching with black

bandages on their eyes. Meka, goggled like her brother, was holding them. A tall shape carrying a round black box darted through the light and ran. Molo leaped for the girls. Perhaps he shouted; the hum had mounted to a wild electrical scream. Molo flung his sister and the girls back out of the light.

They all vanished. There was nothing but the light, and the mounting, dynamic scream.

BESIDE me, Snap was pounding on the glassite panel. I joined him. We raged, baffled. But it was all only a moment. I was suddenly aware that my senses were reeling. I was pounding mechanically, in a vague, mechanical, hopeless frenzy. Everything was dream-like, blurring as though unconsciousness were upon me.

Where was Snap? Gone? Then I saw him nearby. He had found a door, but it wouldn't yield. Perhaps he thought he saw another door; his shout was lost in that screaming din, but I saw his arm go up in a gesture to me. He ran.

I found myself running after him, but I stumbled and fell. Then over me the scream burst into a great roar of sound. It seemed so intense, so gigantic a sound that it must ring around the world.

And the light burst with an exploding puff. The black metal cubby walls seemed to melt like phantoms in a dream. A titan's blow torch, the opalescent light shot upward, a circular ten-foot beam, eating its way through all the city levels as though they were paper, up through the city roof.

Molo's cubby was gone. His mechanism was eaten by the light and destroyed. There was only this motionless, upstanding beam, contacted here with the Earth, streaming like an opalescent sword into the starry sky!

CHAPTER VII

Three Swords Crossing in the Sky

I MUST paint now upon a broader canvas to depict the utter chaos of this most memorable night in the history of the Earth, Venus and Mars.

From that point in the bowels of Great-New York, near the southern tip of Manhattan Island, the mysterious light-beam shot up. It screamed with its weird electrical voice for an hour, so penetrating a sound that it was heard with the unaided ears as far away as Philadelphia. A screaming titan voice it was, shrill as if with triumph. There were millions of people awakened by it this night; awakened and struck with a chill of fear at this nameless siren shrilling its note of danger. The sound gradually subsided; it seemed to reach its peak within a few minutes of the appearance of the light, and within an hour it had ceased.

But the light-beam remained. Those who inspected it closely have given a clear description of its aspect. But to this day its real nature has never been determined.

It was a circular beam of about a ten-foot diameter. In color it was vaguely opalescent; rather more brilliant at night than in the daytime, though with the coming of the sun strangely it did not fade, but remained clearly visible, with a spectrum sheen when the sunlight hit it so that it had somewhat the appearance of a titanic, straightened rainbow.

From that contact point with our Earth, the inexplicable beam stood vertically upward. I ate a vertical hole like a chimney up through all the city levels, through the roof, and above that it streamed unimpeded into the sky. It had a tremendous heat, communicable by contact so that it melted the city above it with a

clean round hole. But the heat was non-radiant.

I was found lying within fifty feet of the base of the beam. There had been an explosion, so that Molo's metal room was gone; but I had fallen beyond its destructive area, and from where I lay there was only a warmth to be felt from the light.

Halsey's men found me within half an hour. I was unconscious, but not injured. I think now that the sound and not the light overcame me. I presently recovered consciousness; for another hour I was blind and deaf, but that quickly wore off. They rushed me through the chaos of the city to the Tappan Interplanetary Headquarters. Grantline was there, but not Snap. I sent them back, when once I was fully conscious. They searched all the vicinity at the base of the light. Snap, alive or dead, was not to be found.

A NITA and Venza were gone. Not dead—I could not think that, for I had seen Molo and Meka plunge away with them as the light-beam burst forth. They were gone, and Snap was gone. My emotion at the loss, and my own inability now to do anything about it, was distracted by the rush of events.

There was, by now, a turmoil unprecedented throughout all the metropolitan area. The motionless light-beam itself had done little damage. There was the ten-foot burned hole of its upward passage, but of material damage, nothing more.

But its appearance brought instant chaos. Within a radius of five miles of its base, the city was plunged into darkness. All power was cut off. Lights were out. Every vehicle, tram, tube-train—the aeros passing overhead—the city ventilating systems—all ceased. Audiphones were wrecked; every coil and fuse-wire, the ignition systems of all the myriad devices, were rendered inoperative. Why, no scientist even now can

clearly say. It was not, they claim, any unknown ray-aura from the light. They think now it was the vibrations from the sound. Whatever its physical nature, that sound was like nothing ever heard before on Earth. It subsided within an hour; and after that, lights and motors brought into the darkened area were not affected.

But during that hour, within the stricken area, there must have been scenes most horrible. Grantline and I, up the Hudson in the distant suburban section, sat and listened to the incoming reports of what was transpiring. South Manhattan was in a black panic of death. A multitude of terrified people awakened in the night to find blackness and that screaming sound. The black streets and corridors and traffic levels were jammed with panic-stricken throngs trying to escape, trampling and killing each other in their terror.

THIS was in the stricken area; but everywhere else the panic was spreading. Transportation systems were almost all out of commission. The panic spread until by dawn there was a wild exodus of refugees jamming the bridges and viaducts, streaming from all the city exits into the suburban districts.

This was Great-New York. But it was only one of three cities. Grantline and I, that dawn in Tappan, got only a confused summary of the interplanetary helios. From Venus and Mars came reports of similar chaos. In Grebbar; and in Ferrok-Shahn—doubtless almost simultaneously with Great-New York—similar light-beams appeared.

"But what can it be?" I demanded of Grantline. "Something Molo contacted there? He did it—that was what he was working for—and he accomplished his purpose. But what will the beam do to us?"

"It's doing plenty," said Grantline grimly.

"But he didn't intend that. Something else—"

But what? As yet, no one knew. I had already told the authorities what I had seen of Molo's mechanism. Snap, Venza and Anita were vanished; I was the only eye-witness to Molo's activities; and heaven knows I had but a brief, confused glimpse.

Obviously Molo had come to Earth with these weird beings from the new planet; had come to Great-New York to establish a contact with the Earth and create this light-beam. The mechanism he had planted down there on the naked rock of Manhattan Island brought the beam into being—and destroyed the mechanism.

THE beam remained. It streamed upward from the rock. They thought, this night, that the rock atoms might be disintegrating; that Molo's strange current had set up a disintegration of the atoms, and that electronic particles from them were streaming into space.

The light-beam seemed impervious to attack. Within a few hours the authorities were attacking its base with various vibrations, but without apparent success.

From where Grantline and I sat in an upper balcony doorway of the Tappan Headquarters, we could see the giant beam standing over the city far to the south. It was now just before dawn, a clear, starry, moonless night. The eastern stars were paling. To the south, above the metal ramparts of the giant city, the now silent beam mounted into space. Very strangely, even at this distance, it was as clear as though we were close to it. I tried to follow it with my gaze, into the sky. How far did it extend? It seemed, up there, like a narrow radiance of glowing stardust; the straightened tail of a comet. A million miles, or a hundred million? No one could do more than guess.

The dawn was coming, but the beam-radiance remained unaffected.

"Gregg, look there at Venus!"

To the east of us there was a distant line of metal structures surmounting the mid-Westchester hills. To us, they formed the horizon-line; and above them in the brightening sky of dawn Venus was just rising. Mars had already set at our longitude. Venus, fairly close to the Earth now, was the "Morning Star," visually at a narrow angle from the Sun and rising just before dawn. Telescopically it was a giant narrow crescent; but with the naked eye it was a brilliant blue-white star. It mounted now above that line of metal stages in the distance.

And as Grantline gestured, I saw from Venus the same sword-like beam streaming off almost to cross our own.

Grantline and I, with a mutual thought, ran around the balcony and gazed toward where Mars had set. A narrow radiance was streaming up among the stars off there.

THREE swinging swords of light in the sky! With the rotation of the planets, they swept the firmament. The mysterious enemy had planted them—but why? What was to happen next? Within Grantline and me—and countless millions on Earth, Mars and Venus felt the same—there came an infinite dread, a horror unnamable.

What was coming next?

And as though to answer us, from far to the south, over mid-Jersey, came a new manifestation. We saw a speck rising: a distant mounting speck of something dark, with streamers of tiny radiance flowing from it.

"A space-vehicle, Gregg!"

It seemed so. It came slowly from above the maze of distant structures, gathered speed, and in a moment was in the upper air—then through it like a rocket, and gone to our sight.

But others, better equipped, had observed it. It was a cylindrical projectile, with stream-fluorescence propelling it upward. It was some unusual form of space-vehicle. Telescopically it was seen until well after dawn, speeding out in the direction of the Moon.

Molo and his weird allies escaping! Grantline and I had that thought, and afterward it was proven the truth. With their work done here on Earth, they were escaping into space to rejoin the hovering enemy ship 200,000 miles out.

I stood gripping Grantline on that little balcony and gazed with sinking heart. Were Anita and Venza prisoners on that mounting enemy vehicle? Would I ever see them again? And Snap—had Molo perhaps dashed out from his metal cubby just as the light was bursting and come upon Snap? Was Snap on this rising projectile-cylinder? With all my heart I could only hope that he might be there, uninjured, with the girls, so that he might lend them the protection I had failed to give.

"Haljan and Grantline wanted below."

The voice of a mechanic on the balcony behind us roused us from our thoughts. We went down through the busy building, Grantline steadying me, for I was still shaken from my experience.

THE workshops of the Tappan Interplanetary Headquarters had for hours been ringing with busy activity, which Grantline and I had ignored. The *Cometara* rested upon her departure stage outside, with a score of workmen conditioning her. Grantline and I were to command her; but the efficiency of the organization kept us out of all activity until the start, so that we might rest.

Rest, indeed!

We were plunged now into the actual departure. The *Cometara's* newly installed armament was aboard,

ready to be assembled after the start. The men to handle it were embarked. My half-dozen officers and the ten members of the crew I had already briefly met. They were aboard now, waiting for me.

"On we go, Gregg. Let's wish ourselves luck!"

From grim, silent abstraction, Johnny Grantline had now sprung into his familiar dynamic self—so like Snap!

There was a solemn group of officials and a hundred or so workmen here, gathered to speed us off and wish us luck. No gaily applauded departure, this rising of the *Cometara*! The faces around me were white and haggard.

They stopped their fevered labors now for a moment to see the *Cometara* get away, first of Earth's ships speeding into space to confront this nameless enemy. No one was in the mood for applause. Grantline and I went past them silently, with silent handshakes and murmured good-byes. I saw the towering figure of Brayley. He raised an arm for a farewell gesture to us, and turned away as though overcome by emotion.

WE mounted the incline to the *Cometara*. She rested upon her stage, a great, sleek bronze ship, low and rakish, with pointed ends and a flattened arched turtle-back dome of glassite covering the superstructure and the decks from bow to stern. She lay quiescent, gleaming in the glow of the departure beacons; but there was an aspect of latent power upon her; an eagerness to get away, as though impatiently she waited here for me to come and speed her into action.

My ship! My first command! Upon such a mission I was destined now to take my first command! As we went through the opened porte of the dome-side and I touched foot upon the deck, I prayed that I might justify the faith reposed in me.

Men crowded the narrow covered deck. I saw the electronic space-guns at the deck pressure-portes, partly assembled. My chief officer—a young fellow named Drac Davidson, who with his twin brother had been in the Interplanetary Freight Service—rushed up to me.

"We are ready, sir."

"Very good, Drac."

He hurried me to the turret control room. Grantline instantly had plunged into details of assembling the weapons.

"Her portes are all closed," said Drac. He spoke calmly, but his thin face was pale and his dark eyes glowed with excitement. "The interior pressure is set at 15 pounds. You can ring us up at once."

No formalities to this departure! With pounding heart I entered the small circular turret and mounted its tiny spiral stairs to the upper control room. But as I touched the levers, all the excitement dropped away.

A calmness came to me—an absorption with these familiar tasks at which I was skilled.

I slid a central-hull gravity-plate. It went smoothly, perfectly operated by the magnets. The vessel trembled, lifted; outside the enclosing dome I could see the dawn-light of the sky and the paling floodlights of the stage. Figures of men out there, with silent gestures of farewell, dropping slowly beneath our hull as we lifted.

THE bow gravity-plates slid into the repulsive-force positions. The bow lifted. The *Cometara* responded very smoothly to my will. We went up, poised at a forty-five degree angle. I saw the outer beacons on the stage swing upward with their warning to passing traffic in the lower lanes.

"Light our bow-beacon, Drac."

We lifted through the lower, thou-

CHAPTER VIII

From Behind the Moon

sand and two-thousand-foot lanes. The lights of Tappan were dwindling beneath us. The interior of the *Cometara* was humming with the whirr of its circulators and air-receivers, mingled with the throb of the interior-air pressure pumps. At three thousand feet I started the air-rocket engines. They came on with a gentle purring. The fluorescence from them streamed along our hull and down past the stern, like twin rocket tails.

With gathering speed we slid smoothly upward through all the highest traffic lanes; out of the atmosphere, through the stratosphere and into space.

Leaving the stratosphere, I cut off the air-rocket engines, slid the stern gravity-plates for the Earth's repulsion and the bow plates for the attraction of the Moon and Sun. The firmament swung in a slow arc, and steadied with the Earth behind us and the Sun and Moon in advance of our bow. We were on our course, plunging through space with accelerating velocity toward the unknown enemy ship hovering two hundred thousand miles ahead of us. My orders were to find the ship and maneuver us close to it; and Grantline's orders were to assail it. If only we could have seen ahead a few hours, to what awaited us!

I gazed down at the convex North Atlantic with the reddening coastline of North America spread like a map. Great-New York was down there in the chaos of panic. The safety of three worlds, perhaps, depended upon the outcome of our encounter.

But what was the nature of this strange enemy? That opalescent beam from Great-New York was now so horribly apparent, mounting with its radiance into the domelike star-field! And the one from Venus and the other from Mars seemed crossing overhead amid the stars.

Three swords crossing in the sky! What did they mean?

“**B**UT will you swing east or to the west of the Moon?”

“I don't know. We haven't decided.”

Drac, my first officer, and I were alone in the *Cometara's* control turret.

“But the cursed ship was last seen right where we are now,” Drac persisted. “If it went around the Moon—”

“Or if it's lurking near here, invisible, Drac? We don't know a damned thing about it. The nature of it—what it can do, or cannot.”

We were some ten hours out from Earth. Over such short astronomical distances it was impossible to attain any great velocity. The *Cometara* was equipped with tail-streamers of electronic nature. In the near-vacuum of space they exerted a pressure, useful for sudden curving and turning; but they had only a negligible influence upon the main velocity of the vehicle.

I used the repulsion of Earth upon our negatively charged stern gravity-plates; and with those of the bow electronified to the positive reaction, we were drawn forward by the Sun and the Moon.

For three or four hours I held to this combination. With steady acceleration we attained forty thousand miles an hour. But then I had to retard. In close quarters such as this, the retarding velocity must be calculated with a nicety many hours in advance. Through lack of that caution many an unskilfully handled freighter has overshot its mark and been forced, like a satellite, to circumnavigate the world of its destination until its unwanted velocity was exhausted!

WE HUNG now, very nearly poised, within some forty thousand miles of the surface of the Moon. Bleak and cold—sharply black and white—it hung in a gigantic crescent in advance of our bow. The Sun, whose attraction I had ceased using some hours back, was visible sharply to one side now. Its great gas streams of giant flame licked up into the blackness of the firmament. The sunlight caught the lunar mountains with a white glare, and left the valleys black with shadow. The moonlight and the mingled sunlight painted our bow. And behind our stern the great silver-reddish disk of Earth hung somber and glowing, with the configurations of the Pacific Ocean and the Eastern continents etched in delicate tracery.

And everywhere else was the great black enclosing firmament. Infinite hollow ball of nothingness with its myriad swarms of swimming star-worlds! The stars blazed with a new white glory never seen through the haze of an atmosphere. And like a little world in the vastness of this awesome void, we hung poised.

Grantline came into the turret. "I've got everything ready, Gregg. By the gods, once you can lay telescope upon that accursed enemy ship, I'm ready to hurl our bolts at it!"

"Good," I said.

But the thought of that—of hurling our bolts at this enemy ship—had struck terror into my heart for hours past. What a task was mine, with this, my first ship to command! With all my skill, I was trying to come upon this enemy. But I was convinced that Anita, Venza and possibly Snap—the three who in all the world held my affection—were upon that enemy vessel. Our bolts would stab at them; every resource we had would go toward killing them!

I HAD not voiced such thoughts. Grantline understood them, of

course. But for the safety of the worlds, we must destroy this enemy if we could. What were the lives of two girls and a young man compared to that?

Grantline added, "You brought us here in record time, Gregg—I'll say that for you."

"Thanks."

"Are you going closer in to the Moon?"

"No, I don't think so."

"The ship couldn't be between us and the Moon. I've been in the radio room for an hour past—Waters and I—searching with the electro-telescope there. Nothing doing, Gregg. Not a sign."

"I know. Our instruments here show that."

"They might be invisible," Drac put in. "We were just saying—you can't tell."

"I'll try the Zed-ray," I suggested. "Drac and I have it corrected. But I doubt if it would pick through the sort of invisibility this enemy would use."

Grantline nodded. "Or the Benson curve-light. You think the ship went behind the Moon? Or landed on the Moon?"

"It could have done either. Has Waters still got contact with the Earth? What do they say? Have they seen it?"

"No. Seen nothing. Why in the hell they haven't, I don't know."

"They've been somewhat busy," I suggested.

I made a sudden decision. It would take us two hours at least to make a careful scanning with the Zed-ray, and to take an elaborate series of spectro-photos of the Moon's surface (which might show the enemy vessel if it had landed there) was a laborious process.

I had a sudden conviction that both methods would yield us nothing.

"We'll go to the radio room," I told Grantline. "I'm going to try the Benson curve-light. If that ship is be-

hind the moon, we'll show it up. Drac, move us east. Set for a tangential curve, with an acceleration not to exceed five thousand miles an hour. You can easily make the calculations. I want us on a course to swing the Sun behind us. If they see us coming it will look as though we might be planning a South Pole landing on the Moon. Figure it out, Drac; use your wits."

Grantline and I left the turret, heading along the catwalk under the glassite dome toward the radio cubby, where the rotund, middle-aged Waters was in charge. It made my heart sink to think of the radio room. Little Snap should have been there—eager, dynamic, full of his wild schemes. With him here, I would have had new courage to hope for the girl's safety.

We crossed the transverse catwalk. The superstructure roof was under us. *Farther down, the narrow decks showed with Grantline's men grouped at the firing-ports, where his guns were mounted and ready.

"Ready," said Grantline, following my gaze. "Look at them! Just give us something to attack, Gregg."

A dozen guns, six on each side, were mounted at the deck firing-ports. It was emergency equipment. These portes were installed during

the night just passed at the Tappan headquarters. The guns had an effective range of some fifty miles—an electronic blast which we could only hope would be destructive to our unknown enemy.

Destructive! As I saw those grouped men loitering on the deck, waiting for me to give them something at which to fire, I prayed I could do so; and yet there was the shuddering fear that the first blast from these guns would bring death to Anita. . . .

WATERS met us at the door of his cubby. His face was red; he mopped the perspiration from his bald head.

"I'm so glad you came! Will you want the Benson-light? I say, I've lost connection with the Earth—gone dead, ignoring us, maybe, with the rush of what they've got on their minds. I had the Washington transmitter. I say, five minutes ago they sent me a flash of the Mars and Venus news. Mars and Venus both sent ships—like ours—out to meet this damned enemy."

He gasped for breath; and then added in a rush:

"Both the Mars and Venus ships were destroyed and the enemy escaped!"

*The *Cometara* was designed primarily for passenger traffic. She was cylindrical in shape, some two hundred and fifty feet from stem to stem. The engines and the various mechanical systems for the ship's operation were all in the hull: the pneumatic gravity-plate shifters, the air-renewers and circulators, the compression system, and the batteries for the Erentz oscillating current which circulated within the double-shelled walls of the hull and upper dome, absorbing the vessel's inner air pressure so that the walls would not explode from it, in the vacuum of space.

The hull was lined with the electronified gravity plates, positive for attraction, negative for repulsion. Within their leadenized cases they were inoperative; and shifting rods, operating by compressed air, slid them out of their protecting jackets into combinations desired by the navigator.

The top of the hull—as though a cylinder were sawed lengthwise—was a single deck

over two hundred feet long, and at its broadest point amidship, some fifty feet wide. Upon this was set, near the bow, the smoking room cabin and men's lounge. Beyond that, amidship, was the passenger cabin superstructure, seventy-five feet long and fifteen feet high, and shaped to leave only an eight-foot deck space on each side. And, near the stern, the deck held another cabin structure—small cubbies for the officers.

Over all this was the great enclosing dome of alumite plates and glassite panes. It rose in the center a full fifty feet above the roofs of the three deck structures. Under it were the catwalks connecting the forward observation bridge, the bow control-room, the instrument and radio room, amidship, and the stern observation room further aft.

Upon this fateful voyage when I took command of her, the *Cometara* carried no passengers. Her rooms in the cabin superstructure were used now only by Grantline's fifty men; my few stewards and handling crew were housed in the hull.

Grantline and I gasped with astonished horror.

"Destroyed!" I gasped. "How?"

Waters did not know. The news came, almost immediately after, that the Washington transmitter changed its wave-length and he lost connection.

"But why in heaven's name, man, didn't you ring and tell us?" Grantline demanded. "Destroyed—only that! Just destroyed!"

And we were endeavoring—like those Venus and Martian ships—to find this enemy!

"I was afraid to leave my instruments," Waters defended. "How could I tell—might be able to renew connection with Washington any minute. I thought so, at first; then I gave up. Come on in. Do you want to try the Benson curve-light, Mr. Haljan?"

"Yes," I said, "I do." We entered the dim radio cubby. "See here, Waters, have you any more vital news? The projectile that ascended from Earth last night—did the Washington observatory report what happened to it?"

"No, not a word. They lost it, evidently."

Our electro-telescopes on the *Cometara* had not been able to locate the projectile. The large instruments of Earth had lost it. Was that because, with tremendous velocity, it had sped far into space, and being so small, had gone beyond their range? That was possible. It might not have come to this lurking enemy ship; it might have sped direct for the new planet, out beyond Mars.

Or, with some form of invisibility, it might be close to us now, just as the lurking ship no doubt was somewhere around here.

From the little circular radio cubby, perched here under the dome like an eagle's nest, I could see down all the length of the ship, and out the side portes of the dome to the blazing firmament. The Sun, Moon and Earth

and all the starfield were silently turning as Drac swung us upon our new course.

Waters bent over the projector of the Benson curve-light, making connections. The cubby was silent and dim, with only a tiny spotlight where Waters was working and a glow upon his table where his recent messages from Earth were filed. Grantline and I glanced at them.

Panics in Great-New York, Grebbar and Ferrok-Shahn. . . . The three strange beams which the enemy had planted upon Earth, Venus and Mars still remained unchanged, standing motionless into the sky. I could see them now plainly from the radio cubby windows—great shafts of radiance sweeping the firmament.

Waters straightened from his task.

"That will do it, Mr. Haljan." He met me in the center of the cubby. "When you locate the enemy, don't you rather think they'll destroy us as they did those other ships?"

Grantline laughed grimly. "Maybe so, Waters. Let's hope not."

FAT little Waters was anything but a coward. But being closed up here all these hours with a stream of dire messages from Earth had shaken his nerve.

"What I mean, Mr. Grantline—prudence is sometimes better than reckless valor. The *Cometara* is no vessel of war. If the Earth had sent an interplanetary patrol vessel—"

"None were ready," I said impatiently. "You know that, Waters."

"I know," said Waters. "But I was thinking, if we had more knowledge of what sort of an enemy we're up against . . . and that damn light-beam streaming up here from Great-New York. What's it for? What are they trying to do to us?"

Grantline joined me at the Benson projector. "Can we operate it from here, Gregg, or will you mount it in the bow?"

"From here. When Drac's swing is

finished—the course I gave him—I can throw the Benson-ray through the bow dome-port. Waters, you're all done in—up here alone so long. Go below and sleep awhile."

But he stood his ground. "No, sir; I don't want to sleep. If you two—"

"We've had ours," said Grantline. "We'll call you if anything shows up."

Grantline and I had slept for a few hours soon after leaving Earth, and had eaten twice.

We sent Waters away. Again it struck me—if only Snap were here! . . .

"Ready, Gregg?"

"Yes. Throw that switch; I've got the range."

The coils hummed and heated with the current, and in a moment the Benson curve-beam leaped from the projector.* A narrow, white stream of light, it flung through our paneless cubby window-oval, forward under the dome and through the bow dome-bull's-eye, into space. I saw the men on the deck spring into sudden alertness with the realization that we were using it. The bow lookout on the forward observation bridge crouched at his telescope finder to help us search. From the control turret came an audiophone buzz, and Drac's voice:

"Am I headed right? The swing is almost completed. Shall I straighten now?"

"No," I said. "The swing doesn't bother us. But you do, Drac. Shut up."

I bent over the field-mirror of the Benson projector. On its glowing ten-inch grid the shifting image of my range was visible—a curving, brilliant limb of the Moon, with the sunlight on the jagged mountain peaks; and everywhere else the black firmament and the blazing dots of stars.

Grantline crouched beside me. "I'll work the amplifiers. Going to spread it much, Gregg?"

"Yes. A full-spread first. What the infernal! We're in no mood for a detailed narrow search."

I gradually widened the light. Three feet here at its source, it spread in a great widening arc. With the naked eye we could see its white radiance, fan-shaped as an edge of it fell upon the Moon. And though optically it was not apparent, the elliptical curve of it was rounding the Moon, disclosing the hidden starfield to our instruments.

"Nothing yet?" I murmured.

"No."

"I'll try a narrower spread and less curve."

Grantline was searching the magnified images on the series of amplifier grids.

There was nothing.

For an hour we worked; and as part of my brain and my fingers tried the varying combinations of angle, the background of my mind was flooded with a conflicting web of thoughts. If only we could find the enemy ship, rush for it and destroy it! But what would that do, save kill Anita? Or again, I thought, "The ship is gone. We can't find it. Anita is gone—what can we do to save her?"

"Gregg! Wait! Hold it!"

I tensed, stricken. I held the angle and the spread of light steady.

"East, Gregg! Two seconds of arc, east; try that. The damned thing is shifting!"

He saw it! Something—a dot of black, infinitely tiny. He gripped me. "You look! It's at the western edge of the field; it shifts off—it must be in rapid motion!"

*The Benson curve-light was similar to an ordinary white searchlight beam, except that its path, instead of being straight, could be bent at will into various curves—hyperbola, parabola, and for its extreme curve, the segment of an ellipse, gradually straightening as it left its source. It was effective for police work, with hand-torches for seeing around opaque obstructions. It had also another advantage, especially when used at long range: the enemy, gazing back to its source, would under normal circumstances conceive it to be a straight beam and thus be misled as to the location of its source. Or even realizing it to be curved, had no means of judging the angle of that curve.

THEN I saw it—a mere moving dot of black. But suddenly some observation of the Benson-light was cleared, and it clarified. I saw a dot which I could imagine was a shape with discs along its edge, moving with high velocity, so that Grantline was shifting our field to hold it.

Ten minutes passed; the dot enlarged. We could see the dark shape of a vessel. It was no longer passing sidewise; it held midway of the mirror-image. And now it was rapidly enlarging. From its stern a very faint radiance seemed streaming out, as though that were its method of propulsion.

"Got it, Gregg! By God, that's it! Now we'll see!"

It was still well behind the Moon, disclosed by the curve of our ray. Had it seen us? Did it realize our light was curved? Then presently we saw that from its bow a very faint radiant beam was streaming. That could not be for propulsion. Was it a search beam?

Beside me I heard Grantline gasp, "Gregg, am I crazy? Or is that little bow beacon like the light-beam Miko planted in Great-New York? Opalescent! Can't you see it?"

There did seem to be a similarity, but thought of it was swept from my mind. Our cubby was ringing with signals. It seemed that over all the *Cometara* excitement was spreading. Both the bow and the stern observers saw the enemy ship now with their telescopes gazing directly along our Benson-light. They shouted to the man on the deck. Their signals ran in our helio to tell us. And Drac was calling:

"I've got the measurement of its velocity! Twenty thousand an hour now, but doubling every ten minutes! God, what acceleration!"

I flung off the Benson-light. The enemy ship had come from behind the limb of the Moon; our straight-light telescopes showed it clearly. It was

heading unmistakably in our direction!

Drac was pleading, "Ring us away! We need velocity! Are you coming to the turret?"

"Yes, I'm coming!"

Grantline and I rushed out upon the catwalk. Waters was mounting the spiral ladder from the deck.

"Into your cubby," I shouted. "Call Earth! Keep calling until you get them!"

"And if I get them?"

"Tell them what you see—what's happening! What the enemy looks like, and what it does to us! That's what they want—information—even if we're destroyed—information of the enemy. Stick at it, Waters. Now—right through to the end."

Grantline rushed for the deck. I gained the control turret. Drac, with his thin face white and set, met me at the door.

"An acceleration like that! We need velocity of our own! We've only got five thousand an hour!"

I nodded.

"We'll get more, Drac! Have no fear of that."

I set the gravity-plates for the greatest possible acceleration forward and added the stern rocket engines for narrow-angle maneuvering.

With gathering speed we plunged directly for the oncoming enemy ship!

CHAPTER IX

The Whirling Discs

"BUT there's something wrong, Drac."

"We've got ten thousand an hour velocity, and a grade 5 acceleration. It seems to me—"

Grantline had joined us in the control turret. "How far would you say, at a rough guess, that ship is from us now?"

"Thirty thousand miles. About that." Drac scanned his page of cal-

culations. "Impossible to gage with any exactness; I can't figure how big the damn thing is."

"And they've got a forty thousand velocity. Added to our ten, that's fifty."

"And we're accelerating. In half an hour we'll be within range! Mr. Grantline, do you want us to pass within fifty miles? Mr. Haljan says—"

"But there's something wrong," I persisted.

For ten minutes now I had been aware that the *Cometara* was acting strangely. A sluggish response to the controls—I thought it was that; but when I called Franklin, our engine chief, who was in the main control room of the hull, he had not noticed it. Yet I was certain.

Grantline stared at me. "Something wrong?"

"Yes. I don't know what it is. Drac, try orienting us. I did it ten minutes ago." I shoved at him my equations, giving the angles with the Sun, Earth and Moon which we should now have. "There's our flight-course as it ought to be. Measure how we're heading—actual position. If it's what it ought to be, with the plate-combinations I'm using, then I'm crazy."

"You're not that," said Grantline. "Just naturally apprehensive."

But we were not where we should be! The *Cometara* was off her pre-determined course! And then I realized the factor of error. There was a gravitational force here for which I was not allowing. The error was not within the *Cometara*. She was, as always, responding perfectly. But there was a force upon her, and not that of the Sun, Earth, Moon or the distant starfield. I had calculated all of those. It was something else. Some gravitational pull, so that we were not upon the course of flight we should have been on.*

"But what could be wrong?" Grantline demanded.

It was Drac who guessed it. "That radiance from the enemy's bow?"

It was that, we felt certain. Even at this thirty thousand mile distance, the bow-beacon of the oncoming vessel seemed streaming upon us. We could not see that it illumined the *Cometara*, nor could our instruments measure any added illumination. Our flight-orbit now would, if held, carry us with a swing some ten thousand miles above the South Pole of the Moon. It would cross diagonally in front of the trajectory the enemy vessel was maintaining. But we were off

*The intricacies of space navigation involving the laws of celestial mechanics are not unduly complicated for those trained in the science, but they are difficult to explain to the layman. I want to make clear, however, that a space vessel handles gigantic velocities, and gigantic distances. To one who seldom—or perhaps never—has made a space flight, it is instinctive to visualize the movements of an airplane, or a surface boat on the ocean, for comparison. But such a comparison is incorrect. The maneuvering space ship makes giant sweeps in which a considerable time is involved. We could not stop the *Cometara* with her present velocity in much under half an hour, and that only by plunging at the moon and using the moon's full expulsion. A circular turn, using only the gravity-plate forces, would be on a curve, the segment of a circle with a circumference of certainly twenty or thirty thousand miles!

The *Cometara*, as I have already mentioned, was equipped with rocket-stream engines. In the atmosphere, at very low

speeds so that the vessel had a comparatively slight momentum, the pressure of the rocket streams against the air made her maneuver with rather a similar agility to a large surface liner. A turn could be made in a thousand feet or so.

In space now, we were using electronic rocket streams. The forces upon a space vessel are balanced to a nicety. The friction of the ether is very slight. The force of a rocket stream applied at an angle upon the vessel's stern has the effect of quickly sluing her around. Within a minute, or less, I could turn her sidewise, or run her bow vertically up; or turn her over. Yet all the while she would be speeding upon her almost vertical course.

I hope I make it plain. It was as though, for comparison, I were a canoeist, with a canoe in a broad, placid, but tremendously swift river current. My strokes of the paddle would quickly turn the canoe around—but stern first or sidewise I would still be speeding down the river!

our predetermined course, with a side-drift toward the enemy! That bow-beacon radiance was exerting a force upon us—a strange gravitational pull!

Grantline gasped when we told him. "If it's that now, what will it be when we get closer!"

The minutes were passing. The thirty thousand miles between us and the enemy was cut to ten thousand; to five. The ship was soon plainly visible to the naked eye. Its visual movement—for all this time measurable only as a drift upon the amplified images of our instruments—now was obvious. We could see it plunging forward; could see that probably we would cross its bow. Within fifty miles? We hoped and guessed that would be the result, so that with this first passing we could fire our shots. Fifty miles of distance at combined speeds of some fifty thousand miles an hour! That would be something like three seconds from a collision. Though the danger of a collision—which both ships of course would do anything to avoid—was very negligible. In the immensity of space two objects so small could not strike each other, even with intention, once in a million times.

We could not calculate the passing so closely—but suddenly it seemed that perhaps the enemy could! The bow-beacon radiance, so obviously a miniature of the sword-light light-beams streaming from the Earth, Venus and Mars, now swung away from us and was extinguished. Whatever alteration of our course the enemy had made, they seemed to be satisfied! The passing would be to their liking. Would it be to ours?

Grantline had left the turret. He was down on the deck, ready with his men. The guns were ready.

We had long since advanced beyond the possibility of mathematical calculations keeping pace with our changing position in relation to the enemy, but it seemed that the passing would be within fifty miles. Grant-

line's guns would carry their bolt that far. Would the bolts be effective? What would the enemy do to us?

It was barely two thousand miles away now. Two minutes of time before the passing. I stared at it—a long, low ship of dark metal, red where the moonlight struck upon it. I gaged its size to be about that of the *Cometara*, but it was much more nearly globular. Upon its top, seeming to project from the terraced dome, was an up-pointing funnel, like the smokestack of an old-fashioned surface steam vessel; or like a great black muzzle of an old-fashioned gun. And in a row along the bulging middle of the hull there was a series of little discs.

The vessel was still a tiny blob, but every instant it was enlarging, doubling its visual size.

Drac said tensely, "Fifteen hundred miles! We'll pass in a minute and a half."

I turned the angle of the stern rocket-streams. The firmament slowly began swinging. The enemy ship seemed swaying up over us. I was turning our top to it, so that Grantline might fire with his guns directed upward from both sides almost simultaneously. It might be possible, if I could roll us over at just the proper seconds.

But the enemy anticipated us. As they observed our roll, knowing we must do it for our own advantage, again the bow-beacon flashed on. It visibly struck us; bathed all our length in its spreading opalescent radiance. My heart leaped into my throat. Would that deadly ray annihilate us?

It seemed for an instant to do nothing. Our dome did not crack; there was no shock—but our side-roll slowed. The heavens stopped their swing, and then swung back! We were upon an even keel again. The enemy was level with our bow. Against the force of my turning rocket-streams the pull of this radiance

had righted us! It clung a few seconds more, and again vanished.

Grantline's deck audiphone rang with his startled voice:

"Gregg, roll us over! Quick! I can only fire from one side."

"I can't!"

It was too late now. A few hundred miles of distance! Drac stood clutching me, staring through the porte. And I stared—breathless, waiting the result of these few seconds.

THE ships passed like crossing, speeding meteors. A few seconds of final approach; I saw the enemy vessel as an elongated flattened globe, with a triple-terraced dome and terraced decks beneath it. That queer stack on top! The round discs, like ten-foot eyes, gleamed along the equator of the bulging hull. . . .

One of Grantline's guns fired a silent flash. Still out of range; surely at that second we were a hundred miles apart. The spit of the electrons leaped from our side. The enemy was untouched.

The thought stabbed me: "Anita! Not killed by that one!"

Another shot from Grantline. Fifty miles or less now. . . .

No result. It seemed that I saw the bolt strike. There was a reddening, a flash upon that bulging hull, but nothing more.

I was aware again of the enemy bow-beam swinging upon us. With Grantline's shots they knew they were within range. The beam was pressing us over again so that in a moment we would be hull-bottom to the enemy and Grantline could not fire!

He anticipated it. The ship was broadside to us. In the split second of that passing I saw that it was not fifty miles away—hardly ten! Grantline flung his remaining bolts. The enemy was a streaked blur going by; and all in that second it was past, reddening in the distance! Untouched by our shots! It seemed so. The bow

radiance darted ahead of it. The globular shape, unharmed, dwindled in the distance behind us.

And it had done nothing to us! Attempted nothing! There was a second or so when I had that thought. The control levers were in my hands. I would shift the gravity-plates, and make the quickest turn we could. We would go around the Moon, probably, and come back within an hour or two. Perhaps our adversary would also turn, to encounter us again.

For at that second I had not seen the little discs! But I saw them now. They came sailing in a line, ten-foot, flat, circular discs of a dark metal; but they gleamed reddish where the sunlight painted them. They had been fastened upon the outside of the enemy vessel and in the passing they had been discharged. They sailed now like whirling plates. There seemed perhaps twenty of them, heading in a curve toward us.

GRANTLINE'S voice came again from the deck audiphone. "Missed them, Gregg! I thought so, but at least two of our bolts struck. But it didn't hurt them. Did you think so?"

I lifted the transmitter from the control table. "No, it seemed not. They must have a defensive barrage."

Drac was pulling at me. "Those things out there—those discs—"

Grantline heard him, and demanded, "What in the hell are they?"

We could not tell. It seemed that their curve would take them behind our stern. Grantline was adding:

"Will you turn, Gregg—try going back after that ship?"

"Yes."

But I did not. To the naked eye the enemy ship already had disappeared; with the telescopes we saw that it seemed to be turning. But I did not turn, for in a moment we were afraid of these oncoming discs! They passed within five miles astern of us, but in a great curve they swung

and now seemed heading across our bow! With what tremendous velocity they had been endowed by their firing mechanisms! Their elliptical curve swung them a mile or so ahead of our bow.

They were encircling us like tiny satellites in a narrowing spiral ellipse. Our attraction—the normal gravity of our close bulk—was drawing them to us. They went around again, less than a mile away now. Their group had spread to cover an area of several hundred feet.

The men on the *Cometara's* deck stood gazing, surprised but not yet alarmed. The lookout calls sounded with the routine notification, each time the discs passed across our bow and stern. In the radio cubby, Waters was still trying to raise an Earth station.

GRANTLINE came running to the control turret. "Those cursed things, Gregg! If they should strike us..."

I had set the gravity-plates into new combinations, turning our course downward, trying to swing us under the plane of the discs' orbit. But they swung downward with us. They were no more than two thousand feet away now.

Grantline swung on me. "At the next broadside passing, I'll fire at them."

"Yes. Or wait a round or two until they get closer."

Drac looked up from his calculating instruments. "A circular rotation, horribly swift. But I've caught a photograph. Look!"

He had a still image of one of the discs. It had saw-teeth at its thin, knifelike outer circumference. Whirling at tremendous speed, these saw-toothed metal discs would cut into our dome like a whirling lumber saw cutting into a log of wood!

At the next round, Grantline fired. The discs reddened a little but came on unharmed. From the other side, in

a few moments he fired again. Three of the discs seemed to have been caught full. His bolts, sustained for their fullest ten seconds of duration, and at this close, thousand-foot range, took effect. The three discs seemed to crumble with a puff of queerly radiant vacuum spark-glow. And then the discs were gone. A little hole in the formation showed where they had been.

But the others came closing in!

The *Cometara* rang now with the excitement and alarm of the men. Grantline could not reload quickly enough to fire at every round.

I had a sudden thought. With the rear rockets, I rolled us over. For a moment we were hull-down to the passing discs. From our hull gravity-plates I flung a full repulsion. Would it stave them off? Bend their orbit outward? It did not! Their course was unaltered!

Again Grantline was shouting at me through his audiphone.

"Roll us back! I must fire!"

It has been an error, that rolling; it lost Grantline several shots.

I swung us level. The discs were so close now! They passed within a hundred feet; half a dozen of them were still closer. Gleaming, whirling circles, thin as knife blades. They passed close under our stern, came broadside....

GRANTLINE shot five or six more into nothingness. The others swung at our bow. Would they strike? I held my breath, there beside Drac in the turret, both of us helpless to do anything. On the narrow decks under us, Grantline's men were alert as their guns—on one deck awaiting the next firing, and on the other frantically reloading.

They were tense, horrible seconds. The little group of discs skimmed our bow. One seemed to miss the top of our dome at the bow by inches.

Grantline's volley annihilated four

more. But seven or eight were left. They swung in at our stern.

I was aware of a clattering confusion throughout the *Cometara*. The crew and stewards were running up to the bow quarter-deck from below. My second officer stood there, stricken. The stern lookout screamed his routine, futile warning.

I flung, in those seconds, our stern rocket-streams to the fullest sidewise angle. If only we could turn quickly enough!

Useless! I saw one of the discs strike our stern dome! Then another! Still others! They were silent blows, but it seemed that I could feel them cutting into the dome-plates.

The dome was cracking! Then, after that horrible instant, came the sound: crunch, a rumble; the grind of crushed and breaking metal; then the puff and surge of the outward explosion.

I saw the whole tip of the stern dome cracking, bursting outward, forced by our interior air pressure! And all over the *Cometara* the outgoing air was sucking and whining with a growing rush of wind!

I shouted, "Drac! Close the stern bulkhead!"

I set the word-buttons for the distress siren, and pulled the lever. Its electrical voice screamed over all the uproar.

"Keep forward! *Take the space-suits! Prepare to abandon the ship!*"

CHAPTER X

Wreck of the Cometara

IN THE MIDST of the chaos I was aware that all the remaining discs struck us upon the port-stern quarter. The broken dome of the stern showed a jagged hole blown into space, but the up-sliding cross-bulkhead partially shut it off. Two or three of the crew and the stern lookout were gone behind that closing bulkhead. Their bodies in

a moment would be blown into space!

"It may hold, Drac! Order Waters out of his cubby! Forward!"

I was calling the engine-room. "Order your men up by the bow, not the stern!" But I got no answer from the engine-chief.

I raised Grantline. "Order your men forward! Clear amidships! I want to close the central bulkheads. If the stern one breaks with the pressure—"

"Right, Gregg. Are we lost?"

"God knows! We'll know in a minute or two! Get all your men into their space-suits! Keep in the bow! Prepare to exit-ports there; we may have to abandon the ship."

"Right, Gregg. You coming down?"

"Yes. When I finish." I cut him off. "Drac, get out of here! Did you order Waters forward?"

"He won't leave."

"Why the hell not?"

"He thinks he may be able to get communication with Earth."

"He can't stay where he is! There's no protection up here! When that stern bulkhead goes—"

IT WAS breaking. I could see it bending sternward under the pressure. And at best it was leaking air, so that the decks were a rush of wind. Already Drac and I were gasping with the lowered pressure.

"Drac, you get out of here! Go get Waters; bring him forward. The hell with his transmitter; this is life or death!"

"But you—"

"I'm coming down. From the forward deck audiphone, call the hull control rooms. Order everybody forward and to the deck."

"But the pressure pumps?"

"I can keep them going from here."

I was setting the pressure levers. The pumps down in the hull responded. I speeded them up to full pressure, and speeded up the air renewers. They still were working. Without this outgoing rush of air we

would in minutes have had an interior pressure of nearly two atmospheres. It would hold our pressure for a few minutes longer at least. And I set the circulating system to guide the fresh air forward.

But it was futile against the sucking rush of wind toward the stern. And as the pumps speeded up I saw, with the little added pressure, the great cross panel of the stern bulkhead straining harder. It would go in a moment.

Drac was clinging to me. "Tell me what to do!"

"I have told you what to do!" I shoved him to the catwalk. "Get out of here! Get Waters forward. Get the men out of the hull!"

His young white face, his anguished eyes stared at me; then he turned and ran forward on the catwalk. I saw him forcibly dragging the bold-headed Waters from the radio cubby. It was the last time I ever saw either of them.

A BUZZER was ringing in the turret, and I plunged back for it. The exertion put a band of pain across my chest; a panting constriction—from the lowering pressure.

"This is Haljan. You, Fanning! Get out of here."

Fanning, assistant engineer, was still at the pressure pumps. His voice came up:

"Pumps and renewers working. Will you use the gravity shifters?"

"Hell, no! Get out of there, Fanning. We're smashed! Air going! It's a matter of minutes—abandoning ship! Get forward to the deck!"

I slammed up on him. The stern bulkhead cracked with a great diagonal rift. I waited another moment to give Fanning and any others time to get forward; then I slid all the cross 'midship bulkheads.

It was barely in time. The stern bulkhead went out with a gale of wind, but the barrier amidships stemmed it. Half of the vessel stern-

ward was devoid of air, but here in the bow we could last a little longer. Beneath me I could see Grantline's men—some of them, not all—and a few of the stewards, crew and officers, crowding the deck, donning space-suits. The two side chambers were ready; half a dozen men crowded into each of them. The deck doors slid closed. The outer portes opened. The helmeted, goggled, bloated figures were blown by the outgoing air from the chamber into space. Then the outer slides went closed. The pumps filled up the chambers; the deck doors opened again. Another batch of men rushed in....

I saw Grantline, suited but with his helmet off, dashing from one side of the deck to the other, commanding the abandonment.

The central bulkheads seemed momentarily holding. Then little red lights in the panel board before me showed where in the hull corridors the doors were leaking, cracking, giving away, breaking under the strain. The whole ribbed framework of the vessel was strained and slued. The bulkhead slides no longer set true in the casements. Air was whining everywhere and pulling sternward.

IT WAS the last stand. I could not set the bow bulkheads; they were forward of all our men. Through the glassite panel of the central barrier up here under the dome I could see the wrecked and littered stern. Bodies were lying there on the deck; the stern observation man was still in his nest up in the catwalk, his body slumped over the low railing with his arms dangling, gruesomely swaying with the shuddering ship.

I was aware that the alarm siren had ceased. There was a sudden stillness, with only the shouts of the remaining men at the exit-portes mingling with the whine of the wind and the roaring in my head. I felt suddenly detached, far away. My senses were reeling.

I staggered to the gages of the Erentz system, the system whereby an oscillating current, circulating within the double-shelled walls of hull and dome, absorbed into negative energy much of the interior pressure. The main walls of the vessel were straining outward. The *Cometara* could collapse at any moment. I started for the catwalk door. The electro-telescope stood near it, and I yielded to a vague desire to gaze into the eyepiece. The instrument was still operative. I swept it sternward; picked up in a moment the vanishing enemy ship.

But it had not vanished! By what strange means I cannot say, its velocity had been checked. A few thousand miles from us, it was making a narrow, close-angle turn. Coming back? I thought so.

I suddenly realized my intention of having all the gravity-plates in neutral before abandoning the ship. I seized the controls now. An agony of fear was upon me that the shifting valves would fail; but they did not. The plates slid haltingly, reluctantly.

I RECALL staggering to the catwalk. It seemed that the central bulkhead was breaking. There were fallen figures on the deck beneath me. I stumbled against the body of a man who had tangled himself in the stays of the ladder rail and was hanging there. His thick tongue hung from his gaping mouth.

I think I fell the last ten feet to the deck. The roaring in my ears, the bands tightening about my chest encompassed all the world. I had a moment when I slid into a tortured unconsciousness. Then I was on my feet again, and I stumbled over another body. It was garbed in a space-suit, with the helmet beside it. I stripped it of the suit. I was panting, with all the world whirling in a daze, bursting spots of light before my eyes. Stars! Bursting stars! The end of the world! So this was death.

It took all my will to fight my roaming, drifting thoughts. Not death!—I was fighting for life. Ten feet away down the deck was the opened door of the pressure chamber. A bloated figure came into my dream-like vista, moving for the pressure door. It turned, saw me, came leaping and bent over me. I saw behind its vizor that it was Grantline. His bloated, gloved hands helped me don my suit. He helped me with the helmet.

That blessed air! I drew it in cautiously. The metal tip on Grantline's gloved hand touched the contact-plate on my shoulder. His voice sounded from the tiny audiphone grid within my helmet.

"You, Gregg! Thank God I found you! All right?"

"Yes. All—right."

My head was clearing. This blessed air of life!

"I'm—all right. Waited too long."

"I've got the chamber ready. We're the last, Gregg."

"That—accursed enemy ship—it's turned. Coming back."

He did not answer. He broke contact, pushing me ahead of him. There were many bodies here to stumble over.

I gripped his shoulder. "You're sure there's nobody else to save?"

"No. I've been everywhere I could get. The central bulkheads are almost gone."

He pushed me into the pressure chamber. There was hardly need to close the door after us. I stood gripping him as we opened the small outer slides. The abyss was at our feet. The outgoing wind tore at us like a gale, so that we stood gripping the casements.

"Thank God you've got a power suit, Gregg. So have I—and there weren't many. We must keep together if we can."

"Yes."

I could feel the floor grid of the chamber shuddering beneath my feet.

The *Cometara* was cracking, bursting outward throughout all her length. At any instant she might collapse and we would be crushed in here by falling ribs of the ship.

For a moment we stood poised. Beneath us, here at the brink, were millions upon millions of miles of emptiness. Remote, unfathomable void, here beneath this threshold! Blazing worlds down there in the black darkness!

"Good-by, Gregg. It may be the end for us."

"Good luck, Johnny."

His bloated figure dropped away from me. I waited just an instant, and then I dove into space.

CHAPTER XI

The Struggle in Space

THIS STRANGE plunge into the abyss! For a moment there was a chaos of strangeness, the wrench to my senses of the transition. I had been the inhabitant of a little world—the *Cometara*—with gravity beneath my feet. Now, in a breath, I had no world to inhabit. I was alone in space—no gravity; nothing solid to touch. Emptiness!

I was in a world to myself, and the abnormality of it brought a mental shock. But in a moment the adjustment came. I passed the transition—the sense of falling.

The firmament steadied, and my

*Upon Earth, with the mass of the globe always beneath us, we have become accustomed to the idea of falling whenever we have nothing solid upon which to rest. Earth's gravity, when our body fails of support and falls, draws us to the Earth's surface with an initial velocity of slightly over 16 feet the first second. That velocity is swiftly accelerated.

With my plunge from the *Cometara*, the reverse was true. It was as though I were not falling, but leaping upward from a very small world with a very slight gravity. My velocity immediately retarded, with the mass of the vessel pulling at me so that in a few moments my movement was checked.

Of all the laws of science which man has

senses cleared. My dive from the *Cometara* carried me in a slow arc some three hundred feet away. There had been a sense of falling, but no actual fall. In fact, the reverse. I went like a toy boat in water shoved by a child, quickly slowing, until in a few moments the velocity was gone and I hung poised.*

My forward velocity was checked; for an instant the *Cometara* held me. I saw Grantline's bloated form not over fifty feet from me. He waved an arm at me.

Out here in the void I lay weightless, as though upon an infinitely soft feather bed. I could kick, flounder, but not endow myself with motion. I craned my neck; gazed around through the bulging vizor pane.

The Earth and the Sun hung level with the white star-dots strewn everywhere. I could not see that unknown light-beam from Greater New York; it was shafting out now in the other direction, so that the Earth hid it from me. Venus was visible, to one side of the Sun. The enemy light-stream from Grebbar was apparent; and as I turned my body and bent double to look behind me, I saw Mars and the sword-like ray from Ferrok-Shahn. The beams streamed off like the radiance of the Milky Way, faintly luminous but seemingly visible for an infinite distance.

THE *COMETARA* was obviously falling now for the Moon, drawn irresistibly—and all of us with her—

discovered. I think those of celestial mechanics are most impressive and beautiful. A million million distant worlds were here. Each of them, inversely as the square of its distance from me and directly as its mass, was pulling at me. And I was pulling at them. My moving body shifted the Earth and all the stars just a tiny bit in those moments.

"Thou canst not touch a flower without troubling of a star."

The ancient poet said that. And it is true.

How nicely balanced, these intricate, gigantic forces! The stars pulled at me, and I at them. The Sun, the Earth, the Moon, the *Cometara*, all exerted their differing forces—and in a moment, all reached a balance.

toward the lunar surface. It seemed so close, that black and white, mountainous disc! We were, I suppose, some twenty or thirty thousand miles from it, gathering speed as it pulled at us. But that motion was not apparent now. Distance dwindled all these celestial motions, so that all the firmament seemed stricken when my own velocity was stopped. Everything stricken, frozen into immobility.

But there was some motion. Twenty or more bloated figures—the survivors from the wreck of the *Cometara*—were encircling it in varying orbits. Revolving around it, like tiny satellites! Some were closing in, drawn against it. I saw one plunge against the wrecked dome, and begin crawling, like a fly.

And I found now that the balanced forces of the firmament were molding my orbit also. My outward plunge was checked. I poised for an indeterminate instant, and then I took my orbit. I too was a satellite of the *Cometara*.”*

*Nothing in the Universe can ever be stricken of “absolute motion.” A body is at rest only by comparison with something else momentarily endowed with an identical absolute motion. The *Cometara*, dragging me with it, was falling upon the Moon. The Moon was encircling Earth, and being dragged by Earth around the sun. And the sun itself was speeding somewhere, at some unknown velocity.

All this while I seemed poised—visually posed—because just for that moment my movement directly away from the *Cometara* was stilled. But I had, as a product of all the other velocities showed me, a side-drift, so to speak. When we leap upward a few feet from Earth, that drift is not noticed. The giant bulk of Earth snaps us, apparently, immediately downward.

But my leap from the *Cometara* was very different. I went out at a tangent—the segment of a curve; I poised and began falling back, also upon a curve.

Again there is a beautiful balancing of forces. It is not very complicated and is worthy of explanation here since it involves phenomena we see about us in our everyday life, and perhaps do not understand. Earth goes around the sun, and stays in its predestined path. Why? The Moon goes around Earth. Why does it not sail away, or fall against us?

A balancing of forces. By the law of

I gazed at the wreck of the *Cometara*. My ship! My first command! So smoothly, confidently rising from the Earth only a few hours ago; and she had come to this! She lay askew in the heavens. The dome was cracked throughout all its length and smashed like a flimsy shell at the stern-tip.

My poor *Cometara*! I could see the interior litter beneath the dome—the twisted and strained lines of the hull. A dead ship now—the mechanisms stilled; dead and silent inside, with all the warmth gone. All the air dissipated, so that in every cubby, every dark corridor of that broken hull there was the coldness and silence of interplanetary space.

My first command; and in a few short hours she had come to this!

I suppose these thoughts swept me within a few seconds. I saw myself starting to revolve in my orbit. Perhaps my motion would carry me around indefinitely, or I might be drawn down to the vessel as those other survivors had been drawn. I saw other figures now on the dome,

inertia, a body in motion will remain in motion unless something stops it—and it will go in a straight path. Every curve, by natural law, tends to straighten. It will straighten unless something stops it. But there is no straight path of movement, because something always interferes!

(There was, in the previous, the Twentieth Century, a very great thinker, one Albert Einstein. He found a way of saying all these things differently—so different in fact, that for many years scientists, and himself included no doubt, believed his ideas were different. But now it is known they were not. And so today, the simpler and far more understandable methods of expression evolved by his predecessor, Newton, are largely used.)

The Moon, for instance, if it could be stricken of motion with relation to Earth, would fall upon us. Conversely, if Earth and the Moon by gravity did not pull each other, the Moon would fly off in a straightening path—a tangent.

But the two forces are balanced. The result is a curve. Not a circle; but, almost always in celestial mechanics, it chances to be an ellipse.

A small boy, whirling a toy at the end of a string, may provide an illustration. The string is like the force of gravity holding the moon and earth together. The force of inertia makes the moving toy desire a straight path. It pulls at the string, but it cannot escape, so it takes a curve.

helpless there like flies with plucked wings.*

Grantline, with one of the few power suits, was coming toward me now, with tiny fluorescent streams back along his body from his shoulder blades. I switched on my own mechanism. I moved me toward him, and our own gravity attracted us. We shut off the power when twenty feet apart; drifted together; contacted; bounced apart like rubber balls as our inflated suits struck. Then in a moment we had drifted back and clung.

I TOUCHED the metal plate of his shoulder.

"Working all right?"

"Yes. Thank God for this much, Gregg. I wonder how many are alive."

In the chaos of the abandonment, many of the men's air mechanisms had failed to operate. It is always so in times of disaster! We could see, revolving around the wreck, and motionless against its dome, those horrible flabby deflated suits where the delicate Erentz mechanism had failed; within was only a corpse.

"Too many," I said. "And not more than four or five of us with power. What shall we do first? Round them up? We must all get together—all of us who are alive."

His answering voice was grim. "We can tow them from the wreck. Six or seven of us altogether have power. Do you suppose we can get away, Gregg; get loose from the ship before she falls?"

Only Providence—and trying it—could tell us that. The *Cometara*, and all of us with her, were plunging for the Moon. We would seek out the men who were alive and tow them in a string. If we could break the

gravity pull of the ship, and then struggle upward from the Moon, we could maintain ourselves here in space until perhaps some rescue ship from Earth, Venus or Mars would come and pick us up.

To what slight hope does life cling!

"You take one side, Gregg; I'll take the other. Don't go aboard; she might collapse—you can't tell. Collapse and crush you. Pick up any of the men who are alive and without power. The other with power suits will do the same."

"We'll meet out here, about where we are now?"

"Yes. And hurry, Gregg! Every mile toward the Moon makes it that much harder. We're falling fast."

"Good luck!" I shoved away from him. And within a minute, as he went in an arc toward the *Cometara's* bow and I toward her stern, I suddenly thought of that returning enemy vessel! My last look through the electro-telescope had shown that she was returning, and then I had forgotten it!

MY GAZE swept the firmament now. I had no telescopic instruments within the helmet. With the naked eyes the enemy ship was not in sight. But I knew that meant little. Within a moment she could come in view and be here, if she were passing with any great velocity.

I came to the first drifting figure—a deflated, flabby suit. I reached for the helmet; gazed into the vizzor at the horribly contorted face. The eyes protruded; the puffed tongue choked the gaping mouth. I recognized one of my crew.

I cast him loose and sluggishly

*The purpose of abandoning the *Cometara* was primarily that she was falling to the Moon. And aboard her, there was the immediate danger—which as it happened did not occur—that in a great air-explosion her interior would be strewn with falling girders and collapsing walls.

It had been obvious immediately that the falling air would make inoperative the grav-

ity-plate shifting mechanism. Repulsion to stay her fall would merely turn her over, so that the opposite, attractive plates would pull her with added velocity to the Moon's surface.

At the abandonment, all the plates were set in neutral, and with the falling air, they did not shift, but remained there. It was the safest procedure.

moved on. The body followed after me a little, as though reluctant to have me leave it.

There were on the *Cometara*, at the time of the disaster, some sixty-odd men. Perhaps forty had gotten away. And I could see very soon that not more than ten or fifteen out here were alive. Two with power were ahead of me now, slowly floating past the wrecked dome of the stern. One had picked up two others, found them alive, and was towing them out. They went past me, very slowly moving so that I could see that two were all one of us could tow and attain any velocity at all.

I contacted with the leader. He was one of Grantline's men.

"Two or three hundred feet out," I directed. I gestured. "Grantline told us to meet out there. I'll tow others."

"Yes. Go slow—you can't handle more than two. And so many dead! Around the stern you'll find—God! Haljan, look!"

A MILE from us the enemy ship was in view! Passing—no! Stopping! With what incredible retardation had she plunged into view, was here, and yet had no great forward velocity! She seemed no more rapid than a great air liner winging past—so close that her reddish-tinged bulging hull length showed clearly. The discs were gone. The funnel set on top of her was sloped diagonally toward us as she rolled on her side, so that momentarily I could see down into it. There was some mechanism down there. The bow radiance was a narrow opalescent beam in advance of her bow.

"Slowing, Haljan!"

"Yes! Stopping! Don't try to meet Grantline! Tow your men away! Get away!"

"Or should we board the *Cometara*? Hide, and—"

"No, they've come back to bombard her!"

I kicked at him violently. With

his two drifting figures clinging behind, he swung past me. I headed behind the stern. Upon its torn and dangling framework seven or eight of our men were glued, lying there inert, all deflated—dead. I caught a glimpse of the interior of the stern; the littered deck; men lying there who had been stricken before they had time to get into their suits.

On the outside, forward, I saw Grantline come rounding the bow, towing a figure and heading for another. On the outside of the bow-peak a group of others were perched, gesticulating for help. I started that way; then I saw another, and nearer, figure in a power suit heading for them. I swung back. There were two bloated figures on the outside of the under-hull whom I could more quickly reach. Inverted flies! Their feet were on the keel, their heads pointing downwards. They stooped and waved toward me.

I took a swoop. Passing close down the hull, my rocket-streams struck the hull plates and gave me sudden downward velocity. I shot down, out past the keel. And again I saw the enemy ship. She hung poised, no more than two miles away. And as I looped over, with all the black, star-strewn firmament in a dizzy whirl—the great Moon-disc first above, and then below me—I saw the bow-beam of the enemy swinging. It came to the *Cometara*, and there it clung.

I HAD GONE perhaps fifty feet below the keel with my dive when I righted. I was mounting. I saw the opalescent ten-foot circle of the beam moving along the *Cometara*'s hull. It seemed to do no damage. Then suddenly it darted down and clung to me!

I felt nothing save the impact of a gentle push. Something shoving with a ponderable force against me!

I saw the *Cometara* receding; the heavens swinging as I turned over. The red disc of the distant Earth

swooped. The Moon surface momentarily seemed rotating and lifting above me.

I was helpless, rolling—then whirling end over end. Then again I steadied. The beam was gone from me.

I saw the *Cometara*—a full mile away from me! The enemy ship was again in motion, moving toward me, and between the *Cometara* and the Earth. And the beam was steady upon the *Cometara's* midsection.

The *Cometara* had a new velocity now! I could not miss it. She was dwindling rapidly in visual size; relative to me, she was receding! Falling upon the Moon! More than that, being pushed downward by the repulsive force of the strange enemy beam upon her. I stared, as with all the little dots which were our men around an' upon her, she went down into the void.*

I found myself presently alone up here, with the enemy ship hovering nearby. Its maneuvering to thrust the wrecked *Cometara* toward the Moon had brought it within a mile of me. The bow-beam was still on the *Cometara*; and then abruptly it vanished.

The *Cometara* had almost dwindled beyond the sight of my unaided vision. By chance, undoubtedly, the beam had fallen upon me and thrust me from the wreck. I was alone up here now with the enemy. But they may not have seen me, noticed me—or cared. I found the power mechanism intact. I turned it on; slowly, like a log in water, I began moving away.

A minute; five minutes. The *Cometara* was lost. Grantline, all the men, were lost. With that added downward thrust they could never free themselves from the falling wreck....

I WAS jerked out of my thoughts by the sight of an oncoming red blob. Something coming from the enemy ship—red with the sunlight and earthlight; silvered by the Moon

and the stars. It took form. It was a disc! Another of those cursed whirling discs, sent now to annihilate me!

I thought so. Then, when it was a quarter of a mile away, I saw that it was a disc which was turning slowly. Rocket radiances came from its rotating circumference. It came sailing directly for me, so swiftly that my own little gathered velocity was futile.

Another minute and I was caught. I saw that the disc was some fifteen feet in diameter, and that it bulged, so that within its convex floor and ceiling was a space of several feet.

I cut off my power and with pounding heart lay waiting. The space-suit had no weapons for equipment save a knife, hung in the belt. I drew it out; held it in my gloved fingers.

Futile defense! The disc sailed upon its level, vertical axis. Its rotation slowed. I saw little windows set around its convex middle.

It came up and bumped me with its metal side. I kicked away; shoved off. Shapes were moving in a dim interior light behind the porte-panes. Little hand-beams of radiance darted out. They seemed to seize me—draw me....

I found myself glued helplessly to the convex outer surface of the disc. The rotation gathered speed again; but I looked presently only at the gleaming surface to which I was pinned. Had I been a metal bar upon the horns of an electro-magnet, I could not have been more helpless.

An interval passed. With the contact plate of my fingers against this hull it seemed that I could hear voices within—strange, indistinguishable words. I twisted, but could not see into the porte.

*It was found, when later the warships of the allied Earth, Mars and Venus encountered this beam in its several diversified forms, that at will it could be made either to repulse or attract whatever it fell upon.

Again the rotation was slowing. The near shape of the enemy vessel swung past; and again and again. I saw that we were over it, dropping down into the wide black opening of the funnel-top. It yawned presently like a great black tunnel, into which we fell.

The jar of landing knocked me loose, and no doubt the attraction radiance also released me. I fell another space; bounced up and sank back. I thought that something like a sliding porte-door closed over me.

And then, in the dimness, figures were gripping me. I lashed and struck, but the knife was wrenched away.

I was a prisoner in a pressure-porte of the enemy ship!

CHAPTER XII

The New Existence

IT SEEMED that the small room had a very faint radiance showing through my visor pane. Narrow enclosing walls were visible. It was a triangular-shaped space, fifteen feet or so down on one side and with a concave ceiling overhead. I was lying on the floor. The darkness at first had been impenetrable. The figures which had flung me down and seized my knife were gone. I had not seen them, nor where they went.

For a moment I lay, cushioned by my bloated suit. It seemed then that a very queer gravity was here; and now, when I struggled to my feet, I found that it was queer indeed. I was almost weightless! The movement of getting upright flung me upward as though I were a tossed feather. My helmet struck the metal ceiling so sharp a blow that I feared for an instant I had smashed the helmet. It could have been disastrous, for whether air was here or not with breathable pressure I had no idea.

From the ceiling, with flailing arms and legs, I sank back to the floor-

grid; and in a moment I was able to stand upright with so slight a feeling of weight that I could have been a bit of thistle ready to blow away in the least wind. Unquestionably, the interior gravity force being maintained in the enemy ship was comparable to that found on the Planet Wandl.

There was, as I stood there balancing myself in the dimness of the pressure-room, a queer feeling of triumph in me. A triumphant hope; for, coming down into the ship's capacious funnel—larger than it had seemed from a distance—I had seen what appeared to be a small projectile, resting in some strange landing gear. The disc bearing me had settled upon a stage alongside it. Was that the projectile from Earth? Were Anita and Venza here aboard this ship? And Snap—was he here?

A growing air pressure was around me; the tiny Erentz dials within my helmet had been immovable, but now they were showing outside pressure. I stood waiting. Whatever sounds were here I could not tell. Then presently the dials stopped. They registered seventeen pounds—whatever that might mean here. I loosed the helmet and took it off.

With the first gasping breath my senses reeled. I sank to the floor, and though I tried to replace the helmet, it was too late. My thoughts were fading. A strange chemical odor was in my nostrils. Or was it perfume? Stabs of pain were like fire in my lungs.... This was not air! Something else; something heavy and ponderably fluid. I tried to stop breathing, but could not. I was sucking it in; blowing it out with gasping exhalations. It was like breathing a thin, perfumed water.

The drifting away was pleasant.

TORTURED dreams came with my awakening. I found myself in the same dim room, upon the floor. I could breathe better now. There was the sense of a considerable time

having passed. I was unharmed; breathing with very rapid respiration. All the muscles of my chest were tired, but beyond that I was not distressed. And in a few hours more the strangeness had almost gone.

I found now I was not injured. The rest, sleep—or perhaps this air was drugged—had refreshed me. I was ravenously hungry.

Again, gingerly as before, I stood up, and slid my space-suit from me. And now I was aware of movement and sound. The floor-grid vibrations were apparent. And there was a dim, distant, tiny throbbing; it was much like the interior of the *Cometara* while in flight.

And there were other sounds, indescribably faint, yet strangely clear. I thought they might be distant voices.

I took a cautious step. I could see a dim blank wall nearby, with what seemed a bowl-like article of furniture on the floor against the wall. For all my caution, I sailed upward. But this time I held my balance. And I found that with my negligible weight, I could almost swim in this strange air! I hit the wall and slid slowly down it to the floor again, like a man sinking to the bottom of a tank.

It was a strange exploration I now made of this small triangular room! The light was inherent to the metal of the walls, as though they were glowing from electronified current. But they were cool and sleek to my touch. I swam and bumped about like a clumsy, floundering fish in a tank. It was sometimes difficult to tell up from down—the floor-grid from the ceiling—save that when I

ceased my efforts I sank gently to the bottom.

There seemed no way out of this place. Certainly there was no window. Ventilation was here; I could feel and smell fresh streams of air coming through tiny vents. But the slide-port through which I had fallen, I could not now find.

The vessel was in motion; but headed where? To Wandl, I was convinced. And my captors were content to leave me here; that seemed obvious. It suddenly occurred to me to put my ear against the wall. At once all the sounds became incredibly louder. It was a confusion of sound; the mechanisms of the vessel, some of which I thought I could identify and some not; the strange swish and thump of what might have been people moving; and there were voices.

THE VOICES seemed a mingled babble, coming from everywhere. The timber of the sound was very strange. It held no suggestion of how far away from me the voices might be. There were so many of them I could only think they were scattered about the ship; and yet they all seemed together. After a moment the blend was less confusing. Again, very strangely my hearing seemed able to separate one from the other.* I heard a strange tongue: two types of voices; slow, measured, carefully intoned phrases, and voices of a curiously sepulchral, hollow sound. My mind went back to the Red Spark restaurant room. Were these slow, commanding voices from the brains—the Masters? And these empty, hollow tones—were they from beings simi-

*The atmosphere handled sound vibrations differently from that of Earth. Voices had a muffled tone, as though they were smothered. There was undoubtedly a vibrational distortion; and a sound-wave speed slower than Earth's normal-pressure rate of 1,050 feet a second—perhaps as slow as 700. Yet—and the reason is obscure—sounds remained

audible over longer distances than on Earth.

In this instance now, as I listened with my ear to the wall of the ship, I was hearing all its sounds picked up and carried by the metal. All the metal structure of the vessel was electronified, undoubtedly, for the working of whatever pressure-system it was using. And these walls handled the sounds as I have described.

lar to that ten-foot shrouded shape which had carried the brain in the black box?

And suddenly I realized that amid the babble I was hearing English! A man's voice, talking English. I caught, very clearly, the phrase:

"Master, yes. She means well. Can you not see it?"

Molo's voice! I could not miss it! Then the girls must be here also!

Another voice:

"I am not sure. Perhaps. The Great Intelligence will talk with her when we are arrived." It was the slow, measured voice of one of the brains!

"When will that be? Pretty soon now, won't it, Molo?"

Venza! A great wave of thankfulness swept me. Venza here! And then I heard Anita.

"Your two captives, where are they? You're not going to kill them, are you?"

I had not realized the weight of hopelessness upon me until now that it was lifted. Anita here! Not dead, but here, alive!

"No," said Molo. "Perhaps not. The new one nobody has inspected as yet. The other is being cared for. The Great Intelligence will question him when we arrive."

"We are arriving," said Venza. "That's your world down there, isn't it?"

"Yes. We are dropping fast."

The voice of the brain: "Come, Wyk. The instruments are showing events on our captured worlds. Take me to watch. I am tired of movements."

"Yes, Master."

IT SEEMED that the brain was being carried away, and that Molo

and the two girls were left alone. I had thought at first that they were in the adjacent room to me—some-where nearby. But then it seemed not; they could have been far distant on the ship. They had mentioned two captives. One, obviously, was myself. Was the other Snap?

"Come," Molo was saying, "stand here with me and we will watch this world. Not mine, Venza *chia*, as you just called it. But my adopted world. And it will be yours—until we rule the new Mars."

I heard them moving to gaze through the window-porte. And then came Anita's voice:

"If it's anything like this ship, it will be very strange."

"Strange, indeed, little dove. I was there only once—a month ago—and for a few hours only. The Great Intelligence, as they call him, talked to me, absorbing my knowledge; they call it that. And he was much impressed by me, and made very wonderful promises in exchange for my fidelity. And for my sister, too."*

"You will rule Mars?" Venza was saying. "When this is over, you mean you will really be given Mars to rule?"

That same, childlike voice! Both the girls were acting; all this time they had been wedging their way into the confidence of their captors.

"I would rather live on the Earth," said Anita. "There was a young man there—"

"He will not be there much longer," Molo laughed. "You are very lucky that I fancy you!"

"Lucky indeed," Venza echoed. "No death for me. I'm too young."

"But all those millions—dead. It seems so terrible."

"It is, for them!" Molo was in a

*During this, and upon other, subsequent occasions, how Molo and Meka became identified with the Wandlites was obvious. He was an interplanetary pirate—the Gray *Star-Streak*. Operating from an obscure Martian Polar base, Molo and his ship had been raiding the interplanetary voyage-lanes. Wandl, coming upon a diabolical mission

against Mars, Earth and Venus, had sent three advance ships. One had encountered Molo and captured him and his bandit crew. And, all of them outlaws, wanted by the governments of all the civilized worlds, the pirates, such of them who remained alive after the capture of their vessel, promptly joined the Wandlites.



high humor, pleased with himself and with these girls. "See down there; that blurring is the heavy air. We're almost down into it now."

I HEARD the sound of someone joining them. And then the hollow voice again:

"Molo! Bad tidings come from your accursed world of Mars. One of the Masters was captured there in Ferrok-Shahn. They tortured him as they did the one on Earth. But he did not die unyielding. He spoke, and told our plans!"

"Hah! Did I not advise you to keep those helpless things on Wandl?"

"But it is done now. The worlds know our purpose. They are preparing space-ships. Already some are rising from Ferrok-Shahn, from Grebbar and from Great-New York."

"Let them. We know they were doing that."

"But now they know

our purpose. The Master Intelligence fears that they will come raiding Wandl. Our vessels are being made ready to go out and repel them."

The hollow voice ceased.

"Your purpose discovered?" said Anita. "What does that mean? Won't you tell us now? Twin queens for your future Mars—and you treat us like children!"

"That light-beam he so cleverly planted in Great-New York—" Venza hinted.

"Yes, I will tell you! Without me in Great-New York and my men who went with these Wandlites to Ferrok-Shahn and Grebbar, the vital gravity beams could never successfully have been planted. The apparatus was complicated; you saw it. You saw the labor I had making the contact?"



"But what are the light-beams for?" Anita insisted.

I LISTENED, breathless, as he told them. Strange, diabolical plot! The electronic beam planted in Great-New York could not be destroyed. A disintegration of the rock atoms had been set up. With each rotation of the Earth it was sweeping the sky. And Wandl, from a great control station, was flinging attraction gravity upon that beam, using it as a monstrous lever to stop the rotation of the Earth! With every daily passage now the force was being exerted. The rotation was slowing. In a few days it would stop, with the end of the beam drawn to Wandl and held there.

And the beams from Grebbar and Ferrok-Shahn were the same. Three giant chains! Our three worlds held by chains to this diabolical invading planet! Then Wandl, traveling of its own gravitational volition—by what strange science I later caught glimpses; but no one has ever clearly understood — would withdraw from our solar system! The gravitational chains would pull the Earth, Venus and Mars after it!

Titanic tow-ropes! The destruction, not of our worlds, but of all life upon them! I could envisage that coming of universal death. The storms, earthquakes, tidal waves, volcanic disturbances as the axis changed and the rotation ceased. Then lasting night upon one hemisphere, and steady, blazing day upon the other. The mad sweep of changing climates....

Then the towing outward. Our Sun dwindling; warmth gone. The coldness of interstellar space destroying every living organism. Three dead worlds; Wandl would draw them to her own Sun and then free them—send them, with new orbits, around that distant, blazing star. Three new worlds brought home triumphantly by Wandl to join the lit-

tle family of inhabited planets revolving around this other Sun. Three fair and lovely worlds, warmed back by the other sunlight to be green mansions untenanted, ready to receive the new beings who would come and possess them!

CHAPTER XIII

Wandl, the Weird

"YOU, Snap!"
"Gregg! But how—" "Hush! They might hear us."

"They can do more than that. They can almost hear you think."

"Anita and Venza are here."

"I know it. I was with them for a time. This accursed gravity! I can't walk."

"Careful," I whispered. "You can crack your head on something—the least false step. Are they taking us ashore?"

"I guess so. How did you happen—"

"Tell you later."

They had come for me in that dark pressure-port; taken me without a word along a dim metal corridor of the ship which evidently had landed a few minutes before. Then Snap, with strange figures around him, had been flung at me.

These weird beings! The brains were here, but not many. I saw half a dozen on the ship. They could move easily now. They bounced upon their small arms and legs, hitching with little leaps of a few feet. Close at hand they were gruesome; from a distance they had the aspect of thirty-inch ovoids, bouncing of their own volition. And I saw too that under and towards the back was a shriveled body.

And the other figures were wholly different. They seemed at first ten-foot, upright insects! The two legs were like stilts; the body narrow, but with bulging chest; the neck thin,

holding the small round head—a head about the size of my own.

Such futile words to picture this thing which was a man of Wandl! There was no skin, but instead what seemed to be a glossy, hard brown shell. It was laid in scales; and upon the legs was a brown fuzz of stiff hair. There were many joints, both of the legs and the torso. Clothing was worn which might have been the fabric of a thick membrane—comparable to the hide of some strange animal.

Still I fail of an adequate picture of these, my captors. The fundamentals of human form, yet so much more like gigantic insects! The clothing—a single garment hanging from a wide belt, half-way down the legs—seemed incongruous, fantastically apeing humanity.

This was the worker, equipped by nature for mechanical tasks. There were not two arms, but at least ten. From what could have been called the shoulders, they were tentacles, half the length of an elephant's trunk, with many-fingered hands at the ends. From the waist depended huge, lobster-like pincers; and from the chest and back the arms were smaller, each with a different type of finger-claw.

The head and face were most of all a personal mocking of mankind. Wide, upstanding, listening ears were upon the sides of the head; one on the

forehead and one in the back. The face was mobile, with tiny brown scales small as a fish. A nose orifice, with two protruding brown eyes above it, set outward on stems, and an up-ended slit of mouth. And there was an eye in the back of the head.

A gruesome robot, this insect-like worker! Yet they were not robots, but human, as myself. Men, bred for mechanical tasks.*

Of necessity I have been forced into digression. Snap and I clung together, whispering, as a group of workers pushed us down a descending incline. Snap, back there in Great-New York when Molo's contact light had burst into existence, had fallen, half unconscious. He was aware of running forms; one stumbled over him. They picked him up, carried him away with them. It was Molo's idea to kill this man who had blundered to his lair and seen his escape, but the girls persuaded him to take Snap with them.

"Anita and Venza pretended never having seen me before," Snap whispered to me now. "You take the same line."

"If we get with them."

"We will."

"Snap, how can we get them out of this?"

"We'll work out something. If I couldn't use my strength to mash a hundred of these flimsy people, I'm a

*Over eons of upward development from what was perhaps an original single type, these two specialized forms of humans developed.

Undoubtedly they were bred by selective mating. The "Masters," as now they were known upon Wandl, neglected the body for the brain; and the "Workers," the reverse. We saw a number of them, but they were wholly mechanical—built of inert materials by the scientific skill of the masters, directing the manual skill of the workers.

Biology may not perhaps be suitable to my narrative. I need only state that the masters and the workers were bi-sexual. There was no separate individual for the female. And, as is the case with primitive organisms upon Earth—and somewhat higher life-forms on Mars and Venus—the parent dies in the reproduction of the offspring.

Wasteful arrangement! Yet upon Wandl it

was highly suitable. Many offspring were simultaneously born. Conditions of existence made a fair percentage of them mature. The little planet was crowded now, and it was this which doubtless led them to the capture of our three worlds.

Much that I set down now is speculation, since with our brief stay upon Wandl we caught only snatches. But there were prisoners we subsequently took who were made to talk.

Wandl was only one of a family of several planets revolving around their distant sun. The others, with beings doubtless more suitable to our larger globes, had even a greater need of our worlds. And Earth scientists think now that Wandl, in its own interplanetary family, was wholly subservient to the others—a mere world of work, and now an emissary of war, sent by higher masters to do their bidding.

motor-oiler. It's good to have you with me, Gregg—though for your sake—”

And what a relief to me to be with him! Together we could fight our way out of this—get the girls away—do something to escape.

Futile hope! Logic told me so. But my triumphant heart at finding Anita and Venza—and being again with Snap—ignored logic.

“Watch out, Gregg! By the gods, you tell me I can crack my head and you move like that! Hang on to me; keep together. Shall we jump this? Or slide? Lord, we can't slide; we're not heavy enough!”

It was weird, this landing upon Wandl. We had left the vessel's side-ports and were descending what seemed a narrow, hundred-foot landing incline. We were outdoors, and it was night. Shafts of colored radiance flashed around us. The ship was poised on a disk-like platform, with skeleton legs. It seemed a hundred feet or more down to the ground level, from where the colored lights were darting up. Overhead was a cloudless purple-red sky of blurred, reddish stars. No doubt the curious atmosphere of Wandl gave the sky and stars this abnormal look.

SNAP and I were pushed down the incline, with half a dozen figures in advance of us and others behind us.

The gravity controls by which Wandl traveled in space—itsself no more than a gigantic space-vehicle—were only glimpsed by me. Their nature has been guessed at: a titanic application of the attractive and repulsive rays. These rays undoubtedly also controlled the planet's rotation.

What a multiplicity of obscure wonders we glimpsed upon Wandl! The slowing rotation of the Earth caused climatic changes, volcanic and tidal disturbances—infinite cataclysmic disaster. But Wandl rotated and stopped at will! Undoubtedly she was equipped by nature to withstand the shock. Her internal fires could not break into eruption; she had very little fluid surface. And the nature of her atmosphere was such that it was not easily disturbed into storms. Yet one storm came, as presently we were most disastrously to experience! The care with which ordinarily Wandl's rotation was han-

Yet without difficulty we could have leaped down that hundred feet. Figures were leaping into mid-air from several pressure-ports of the ship. They did not fall, but floated, drifted, down. I saw one of the insect-like workers drop with motionless outstretched arms. Others came mounting up, using their arms and legs with sweeping strokes, as though swimming. Again, as in the pressure-room, I felt that it was like being under water—everything buoyant.

Strange, weird scene! I could not at first encompass it; a confusion, so that my mind only recorded fragments. The vessel wavering above us. The flashing lights; waving beams of radiance. A fantastic structure nearby; it reared itself several hundred feet, with lights on top and outlining its many lateral balconies one above the other. The air was full of the leaping, swimming, insect-like figures. The brains—the masters—were not in evidence. Then I saw one of them being carried, and others, floating down like distended falling balloons, to be caught by the workers in small nets and thus saved from jarring contact.

It was so different a scene from anything on Earth, Venus or Mars that my senses were bewildered.

Snap was suddenly whispering: “That fellow back of us is our guard.

dled, must have been relaxed. An error was made; and the storm came!

Other questions throng me. Earth, Venus and Mars were to be towed into interstellar space. I had, subsequently, a glimpse and a more detailed idea of how that could be accomplished. All life on our worlds would perish in the cold of that stellar journey. Yet Wandl had made the journey. Was her atmosphere inherently by nature such that it did not transmit rays of heat? Our scientists now think that is the answer. I recall that while on Wandl I never felt an added warmth during the brief, sunlit day we experienced. No heat rays seemed to come through the atmosphere from our sun. Conversely, when traversing interstellar space, the heat inherent in the planet, caused no doubt by her intense fires, was preserved in adequate amount until the new and perhaps far greater and different quality of light and warmth of her own sun was reached.

I can feel his ray; some form of attraction. It's pulling at me."

Snap was a little behind me. I turned and saw the faint radiance of a narrow light-beam upon him. It came from an instrument in an upper, shoulder hand of the insect figure following us—no doubt the reverse form of the same ray which the Wandl vessel had used to thrust the wrecked *Cometara* toward the Moon. It was evident why we were made to descend this incline instead of leaping down: they felt doubtless they could more easily control us.

We reached the bottom. I saw now that the group of workers in advance of us were carrying metal cubes, seemingly of considerable weight, and so they also had to use the incline.

We stood presently on a smooth ground surface. We had not seen Anita and Venza, nor Molo and his sister. The insect figure who was our guard came forward.

"You stand here. Molo comes."

"Where is he? I demanded. "I want to see him. And—" I choked it back. I had very nearly mentioned the girls. "And talk with him."

"He comes, in a moment."

"I'm hungry." I gestured to my stomach. "Food. You know what that is?"

The brown, scaly face contorted for a smile—a ghastly grimace!

"Yes. I know what that is. You shall have food and drink."

It seemed that the hollow voice came, not from the neck, but from the shell-like, bulging chest. He stood aside, with the globular weapon of the ray in his pincer-hand.

We waited, standing gingerly together, wavering with our slight weight. A wind would have blown us away. But there was no wind; instead, a heavy, sultry air, warm as a midsummer Earth night—warmer even than the Neo-time of Venus.

Snap and I were dressed much the same. Heavy boots, for which weight we gave thanks! Tight, puttee-like trousers, flaring at the top; and high-

necked white blouses. Both of us were bareheaded. Doubtless we were as fantastic a sight to these Wandlites as they to us. Some of the workers crowded up, reaching out to pluck at us. But Snap waved them away, and our guard dispersed them.

One of the master brains came bouncing up. Upon his little upright body the great head wavered.

"You will wait here." His eyes glowed up at us.

"But listen," Snap began.

"You will wait here for the Martian. He has his orders to take you to the Great Intelligence. There is a meeting—" the little arm from the side of the head had a hand with a finger pointing for a gesture—"a meeting place there. We decide now what to do to destroy the warships of your worlds. I do not like your thoughts. They are black. I will inform the Great Intelligence when he can spare the thought for you."

He added something in the Wandl tongue. A worker came forward; lifted him carefully, held him in the hollow of an encircling tentacle. And with a bound, the worker sailed upward and was gone.

Again we stood through an interval. I noticed now that the towering structure near us, with its storied balconies, was not perpendicular. Its front curved up and back. It was convex, somewhat in the fashion of an irregular globe—a three hundred-foot ball, with a flattened base set here on the ground. The balconies were segments of its front curve. At the top, the roof was as though the ball had been sliced off—the whole like a giant apple with a slice gone for a base, and another for the roof. At the bottom was a huge portal, with a glow of light from within. And at the terraced balcony levels were lighted windows.

"Is that the meeting place?" Snap whispered.

"Probably. And look to the side of it, Snap."

THIS was a city. There was a vista of distance to one side of the great globe structure. Now that our eyes were more accustomed to the queerness of this night upon Wandl, we could ignore the colored light-beams of the landing stage and the disembarking palisade upon which we were standing. Gazing into the distance, the curvature of the surface of this little world was immediately apparent. The reddish firmament of stars came down to meet the sharply curving surface at a horizon line which seemed no more than a mile or so away.

Spread upon this near distance were a variety of structures, with little roads of open space winding between them. Most of the buildings seemed globular in shape. Some were small—little mound-shaped individual dwellings. Others were larger. Some were tiered, like half a dozen apples speared in a row upon a stick and set upright.

I saw a ribbon of what might be a river in the distance, with the reddish starlight glinting upon it. To our left, half a mile away perhaps, a row of buttes and rocks stood like a miniature range of mountains. The city seemed entirely to encompass them; and every little rock-peak had upon its top a globelike dwelling.

Lights were winking everywhere and figures that bounded a hundred feet or more, and sailed in an arc, coming down to the ground to bound again. A row of workers went by overhead. Not swimming, or leaping, but stiffly motionless. Tiny opales-

cent rays went from them to the ground, as though to give them power.

Five minutes of Earth-time might have passed while Snap and I gazed at this busy night-scene in this Wandl city upon the occasion of the landing of their ship, so triumphantly returned from its mission to Earth. As I stood, certainly a helpless captive if ever there was one, nevertheless a strange sense of my own power was within me. And Snap felt the same.

This was so small a world; the people were so flimsy. With a poke of my fist I could kill any one of these master brains. The ten-foot workers seemed mere shells, light and fragile. We had the realization, too, that even the buildings were light and flimsy. The little globe-houses on their sticks seemed to waver, almost like nodding flowers.*

It gave us, with our solid bodies, muscular strength and no gravity to impede us, the physical feeling that if we ran amuck we could smash everything we saw!

WE became aware of Molo approaching us. He came down from overhead in a great leap from somewhere behind us. He landed somewhat awkwardly, half stumbled and almost fell, but gathered himself up and confronted us.

What a solid giant this seven-foot Martian seemed now in the midst of this buoyant, almost weightless city! He was still bareheaded, and wearing his garments of ornamented leather, with his brawny legs bare. Upon his

*It was later established by Earth scientists that the gravity of Wandl was about one thirty-fifth that of Earth. The giant brains weighed perhaps ten pounds on Earth, and only a few ounces on Wandl. The insect-like workers, though ten feet tall, were of a density far less than an Earthman. On Earth, those who were subsequently captured and weighed averaged about thirty-five pounds—and hence had only a pound of weight on their native planet. They were strongly muscled; but it will be recalled that the one I saw in that insulated room of the Red Spark restaurant walked with a very

heavy, dragging tread. One might wonder that he could walk at all, with thirty-five times his normal gravity impeding him. But that is a wrong way of looking at it. On Wandl, he could fly, with very small artificial wings fastened to his arms, which soon I was to see. On Earth, his powerful muscles were impeded by an added burden of thirty-four pounds. An ant can carry a burden similarly great in proportion to its body weight.

But the brains had very little muscular strength. Their ten pounds of Earth-weight crushed the little flabby body under the weight of the head, so that they could not even stand upright.

feet were strange-looking wide-soled shoes. His hands and forearms were thrust into loops of small shields.*

Molo gained his balance and waved our guard aside. His gaze was on me.

"You are the new prisoner, taken from that wrecked Earth-ship?"

"Yes," I said.

"What is your name? You are an Earthman, evidently."

"Yes." I hesitated. I had seen Molo and heard him talk, back there in Great-New York; but he had not seen me, or heard of me, doubtless.

"Gregg Haljan," I added. "My name, Gregg Haljan. I am a skilled navigator; perhaps it was fortunate you saved me."

He flung me a look, and there was a tinge of amusement in it.

"You would save your own skin now?"

"Yes," I said. "Why not? You are a Martian, and this is a war also against Mars."

His look darkened, but then again sardonic amusement struck him.

"We shall see what the Great Master says. There will be a few of our type humans—men and women—wanted when the worlds begin anew. The Great Master said so; he wants to study life on Earth as it was before the great destruction."

"It's not destroyed yet," Snap said.

"No. But soon. You speak with a very warlike tone, little Earthman."

"Nevertheless," said Snap, "as I've already told you on the ship coming here, I'm thankful enough you snatched me out of that destruction."

"We shall see." His glance swept behind us. I turned to see three figures approaching. My heart pounded. They were Anita, Venza, and Molo's sister, Meka. They came slowly, trying to walk, with balancing outstretched arms. Strange-looking creatures, these three girls of our different worlds, here upon this weird new planet. The six-foot Martian girl wore her same leather jacket and flaring leather trousers; Anita and

Venza were bloused and skirted, and still clung to their outer dark cloaks.

With a dozen curious Wandl workers crowding them, they came and joined Molo before us. My heart was pounding; Snap nudged at me. I saw Anita and Venza involuntarily start a little as they recognized me; but I flung them an impersonal stare.

"You are here," said Molo. "Good. We go now." He bent over Snap and me. "I advise you make no effort to leap away, though it may seem easy."

"Not me," said Snap. "Where would I go? Alone in this damn world—I can't very well leap back to Earth, can I?"

"True enough," said Molo. "You have sense, little fellow. But I just warn you: the guard who will watch you always is very sharp of eye. And the weapons here bring swift death."

I could feel Anita's gaze upon me, but I did not dare look her way.

"Start," I said. "You will have no trouble with me."

With Molo leading us and the giant insect-like guard following close behind, we made our slow, awkward way across the esplanade portals of the huge globular building.

And within, we traversed a cylinder-like, padded corridor and came presently upon the strangest interior scene I had ever beheld.

CHAPTER XIV

Like Flies in a Globe

THE room was so large that it seemed almost the entire interior of the building. It was a globular room, a hundred and fifty feet or more in diameter. The inner

*These shields—as one might term them—were constructed of a heart-shaped flexible framework, covered with an opaque membrane. They were about two feet long and half as wide. With a hand and forearm thrust into fabric loops, the shields served as "wings," so that the arms had more thrust against the air. With a swimming stroke, a sustained flight was attained.

surface was crowded with people. It was a huge, hollow interior of a ball; and upon its concave curving surface a throng of the brown-shelled workers were gathered. They sat on low seats at the curved bottom of the room, where we entered, and up the sides and upon the top, like flies in a globe, hanging head downward! There was no up or down here; the slight gravity made little difference.

I gazed up amazed to where, a hundred and fifty feet above me, head downward, the crowd of figures were calmly seated. They were clinging, of course; the pound-weight of each of them would drop them down if they let loose. But it required only a slight effort.

Between the tiers, there were narrow open aisles, bearing glow-lights at intervals. With Molo leading us, we started up the curving incline of one of these aisles.

"Gregg! Good Lord, it's weird!" Snap was gripping me. "Where are we going to sit? Don't speak to the girls; not yet."

"Have you spoken to them, Snap?"

"Yes. A little—on the ship. They're watching an opportunity; got to be cautious. Gregg, I've got so much to tell you—but no chance. The brains can almost hear your thoughts."

We went only a short distance up the incline. There were vacant seats seemingly held ready for us. Our passage created a commotion among the figures. Some leaped up and over us to get a better look. I found that we were clinging to the mound-like convex surface of a small half-globe. It raised us some ten feet above the floor. There were low seats, with arms. I sat, clinging to the arms, against the side-pull of gravity. And I found Anita close beside me. Her hand touched me, but she did not turn her head, or speak.

Molo was on my other side. I chanced to see his feet. They were planted firmly on the floor. He wore wide-soled shoes equipped with suc-

tion pads, which would enable him, like the Wandlites, to walk and stand upon the upper inner surfaces of buildings.

As during those moments when Snap and I stood on the landing esplanade, there was so much of weirdness here that at first I could not encompass it. But now, as we settled down like the rest of this audience, quiet and expectant, I began to grasp other details of the strange scene.

Poised in mid-air, almost exactly in the center of the huge globular room, was a metal globe of some thirty feet diameter. It was held, not by any solid girders, but by six narrow beams of light which mounted to it from widespread points of the convex room.

Upon the entire surface of this thirty-foot globe, a group of the masters were seated, in little cup-like seats upon resilient stems, so that they swayed and nodded with movement. There were instruments here, also. Strange, indescribable devices! There seemed to be glowing wires and grids, and thread-like beams of light carrying current. Light-threads shot from the mechanisms to the heads of the seated brains. All the devices were evidently in operation; and upon this poised central globe the attention of the audience was directed.

MOLO bent over me. "The Great Intelligence soon will see you."

Snap, from the other side of Molo, whispered:

"What are they doing up there?"

It was a local receiving station of events on Earth, Mars and Venus. The interplanetary radios to us are commonplace. Local sound and image audiphones I could understand. But here was a new science. The faint hiss and throb of the devices were audible. I stared, trying to understand. Images, and sounds, invisible and inaudible, were being received

from across the millions of miles of space—and they were being transmuted within the brains themselves. I saw upon the bulging foreheads of the brains that disks were fastened, upon which the tiny light-beams carrying the vibrations impinged.

What a miracle of nature in a human mind! These brains, receiving “ether-waves” of some unknown variety, were, within the mechanism of the brain-cell, transmuting, translating the vibrations into things knowable! They were not seeing, not hearing—but *knowing* what was inspiring across those millions of miles of space!

Inaudible? I thought so, at first. Yet now I realize that the most fleeting reasoning thought of the human mind is a thing incredible beyond human understanding.*

Again Molo bent over me. “They are about to show this audience what is going on across space.”

Upon the thirty-foot globe I saw now a dozen or so balls of about three-foot diameter. They had been dark and I had not noticed them. Now they began glowing, not from wires carrying a current, but from the little hands of the brains touching them.

Weird sight! I stared at the brain nearest me on the curve of the thirty-foot globe. His flabby little arm was extended; his hand touched the image ball; gave it light and color—like a fabled fortune teller of Earth with a crystal before her!

THE crystal ball gleamed with color and form. Even though I was some fifty or sixty feet from it, I could see the moving image clearly. And recognized it! The Tappan Interplanetary Stage. Ships were rising; two of our space-ships mounting.

And all in an instant the scene blurred, took form again. . . . The red-green spires and minarets of Ferrok-Shahn. The Central Canal extended

like a gash across the foreground; the “Mushroom Mountains” were in a line upon the horizon. Three Martian space-flyers slid up in that moment while I watched.

And now Grebbar. The silver forest in all its shining beauty—where Venza was born. The sunlight sparkled on the river. A space-ship was rising in the distant sky over the shining forest.

Beyond Anita, I heard Venza murmuring:

“Home! If only we were there!” And I could feel Anita move to silence her.

Our ships rising to battle! Molo was whispering:

“They come! But we will be ready for them.”

Another image: mid-space. The allied ships gathering, waiting for others to arrive. A group here of about ten of our ships, gathered from the three worlds; poised, waiting.

I was aware that upon the mound-like protuberance of the room-floor where we were sitting, a door was opening. It slid, or melted away. At our feet was an opening downward into the small interior of the mound.

Molo whispered, “The Great Master! Sit quiet! He will talk to us.”

Over us now a barrage was growing. It came with a hiss—a circular curtain of insulation. The huge globular room faded. We were alone on the mound; Snap, Molo, myself, Anita, Venza and Meka upon the end of our bench. Behind us stood our single Wandlite guard, with a weapon in his shoulder-band.

At our feet an opening yawned into the mound-interior. It was a tiny,

*It is obvious that even the prodigious mind-capacity of the Wandlite masters could fail of knowing and understanding even a small fraction of “Universal Knowledge.” Here, obviously, they specialized in what they endeavored to know. It is obvious also that they absorbed knowledge, comparable to us, with extraordinary speed. Thus, by listening upon Mars, Venus and the Earth, they learned the ruling languages of each.

lighted room. In a cup-like seat a brain was perched, just below the level of our feet: the Great Master brain of Wandl. He was alone here. Not attended by retinue; no pomp and ceremony to usher us into his presence; no underlings obsequiously bowing to mark him for a great ruler.

We stared down, and the great brain stared up at us, seemingly equally curious. His head was a full four feet in diameter, gruesomely distended. From this close viewpoint I could see the gorged, knotted blood-vessels pulsating. The little body sat in the cup, with dangling legs. The clothes were ornamented; there was a glowing device on the chest.

HE spoke with a measured rumble, in Martian.

"You are Molo, of Ferrok-Shahn."

It was barely a question; more a statement.

"Yes," said Molo.

"You must say, 'Yes, Great Master.' That is ignorance."

"Yes, Great Master."

"I know you. I understand that we trust you."

The huge round eyes next fastened upon me. Then to Snap, and back to me. The words were English this time.

"Men of Earth, are you decided, like the Martian, to join with us?"

There was a moment when we did not answer. I tried with sudden vehemence to still my thoughts, or to change them so that they lied. Impossible task! Fear surged upon me. Could this vast mechanism of human mind here at my feet interpret the vibrations of my thoughts? Could this Great Master of Wandl see into my mind?

The brain added, "You are confused what to say. You do not want to die?"

"No," we both answered.

"You shall not, unless you attempt

to cause us trouble. Your thoughts are black. Have they ever been read?" He addressed his question to Molo.

"No, Great Master."

"When opportunity comes, have them read." He added to Snap and me:

"I plan to take prisoners. My Supreme Rulers ordered it.* When your worlds are vacant of life, those who command me will want some of you left alive to be studied. Your thoughts are very black, Earthmen. I think when they are carefully read you will prove no great advantage to us."

There was irony in the voice, and upon the monstrous bulging face came the horrible travesty of a grin. If he read our thoughts, doubtless he felt them beneath his attention.

THE grin on the brain's face faded. His interest went again to Molo.

"That is your sister." The eyes swung to Meka and back.

"Yes, Great Master."

"She is caring for this Earth-girl and this girl from Venus?"

"Yes, Great Master. I am fond of them. I have plans—"

"They are in your charge, Martian. I will not interfere with you. But guard them well. I trust you and your sister. You have done well, so far. These others—"

"The Earth and the Venus girl can be of help to me," Molo added.

"How?"

"They knew young men who were in the space-ship Service. They can tell me the armament of men and guns on most of the space-ships which Earth will send against us."

Did Molo really believe that? Probably not, but he wanted the girls with him. Nor did the brain believe

*The reference probably was to the rulers of a neighboring and more powerful planet, which had sent Wandl upon her mission of conquest.

it, for again came that grotesque smile.

"Let them not bother you, Martian. You have work to do. Listen carefully. There will be a battle. Earth, Mars and Venus may perhaps have a hundred vehicles. I cannot bring destruction upon those three worlds in a day. We soon will make contact with the light-beam you placed on Earth. That I will show you. But the rotation cannot be stopped at once. It will take time.

"The enemy ships might dare to come to Wandl. But I shall not wait for that. All my space-ships are very nearly ready. If there is to be a battle, it shall be far from here, in the neighborhood of the enemy worlds. We are at this time about sixty-two million of your miles from the Earth; a third less than that from Mars, and about a third more from Venus.... I understand, Martian, that you are skilled in space warfare."

Well might he be, with his *Star-Streak* plundering for years on interplanetary shipping!

The brain went on.

"I have given you a vessel to command. You will be surprised to know its name. The *Star-Streak*."

Meka gasped, "But you destroyed it!"

"Only wrecked it, Martian girl. It is repaired now. You, Molo—and your sister to help you—who could command it to more advantage? All your own weapons, and ours of Wandl have been added. You may select your crew. Is it to your liking?"

"Master, yes."

"You will be housed in this city, Wor, in the dwelling-globe you occupied before. Keep your prisoners with you, if you like."

"These two Earthmen—" began Molo, but he was interrupted.

"Settle that later; I do not want the annoyance."

I was dimly conscious of a great clanging, coming through the cur-

tain of barrage which was over us.

The brain added hastily, "Keep the guard with you, Wyk, to guard the prisoners; he will also attend your needs. In the battle, Martian, I expect great things of your *Star-Streak*."

"Master, you will not be disappointed."

"And prisoners—but not too many. Bring me a few young specimens, like these, representatives of Venus, Mars and the Earth. I want both of the sexes; an equal number of each."

"Yes, Master."

"The warning signal is coming. You will now see our first contact."

THE light at our feet was fading. It clung last to the gruesome face of the huge brain; the goggling eyes shone green, and as the light in the little mound-room dimmed there was in a moment nothing left but those lurid green pools of the brain's eyes.

Then I was aware that the aperture at our feet had closed. Over us, the barrage curtain was dissipating; sight and sound coming in to us. The great ball-shaped conclave room again became visible, the audience crowding its entire inner surface.

I suddenly felt Anita's fingers twitching at my sleeve.

"Gregg, dear one—"

"Anita—"

"Gregg, can you hear me?"

"Yes. Careful!"

But Molo was gazing up to where, over our heads, the crowd of people were shifting, bending so that they all seemed gazing at their feet. A dim white radiance, seeming to come from down here somewhere near us, lay in a splotch on a segment of the throng overhead. Molo was watching.

I whispered, "All right, Anita. Quick; what is it?"

"The great control station—somewhere not far from here. Venza and

I have been trying to find out where it is. We—”

She stopped, evidently fearful of Meka. Then she added:

“Gregg, we—Gregg, dear, we haven’t been guarded very closely; they’re not suspicious of us. If we can get—”

“Later, Anita! Can’t talk now.”

“No. Watch our chance. Later....”

I turned toward Molo. “What’s that up there?”

“The transparent ray. It is opening the top of the globe to our sight.”

The clanging signal gong had stilled. The audience was hushed and expectant. The white patch of light overhead spread until it encompassed all the top of the globe. The people there, hanging head downward to us, were bent double, gazing expectantly to their feet. The whole area was glowing. The people were white spectral shapes—transparent! And the top of the globe was transparent; I saw the night sky, with the gleaming, reddish stars.

IT was, in a moment, as though we were staring up at a huge square window orifice cut in the top of the room. A broad vista of cloudless sky and stars was visible. Across it, like a shining sword, was a narrow opalescent beam.

“The Earth-beam which I planted,” Molo whispered triumphantly. “Our control station will contact with it now. The first contact!”

The first contact! The Earth was below our angle of vision. The beam from Great-New York, sweeping the sky with the Earth’s rotation, was passing now comparatively close to Wandl. A million miles, possibly—passing with a rapid sweep of movement. I could almost see the movement now.

There was an expectant moment. Then into the sky leaped another ray, narrow, luridly green. It swung up from some Wandl source perhaps not far from us, swung and darted out

into space. The hissing, agonized electrical scream from it as it burst through the Wandl atmosphere was deafening. I saw it strike the Earth-beam, grip it with a blinding burst of radiance up there in the sky, clinging—pulling—using the rigid, opalescent ray from Great-New York as a titanic lever. Pulling, for a moment, against the rotation of the Earth with a lever sixty million miles long.

A moment of screaming sound in the atmosphere around us, and that conflict of light in the sky. Then the current power of the control station seemed to become exhausted. The screaming suddenly stilled. The Wandl beam vanished. The conflict was gone from the sky.

The Earth-beam still swept the heavens like a stiff, upstanding sword. But in that moment when Wandl gripped it, the axis of the Earth had been changed a little; the rotation was slowed; by a few minutes, the day and the night on Earth were lengthened.

What myriad catastrophic consequences! It was the beginning of Earth’s desolation!

CHAPTER XV

The Escape

“BUT when do we eat?” Snap demanded.

“Soon,” said Molo.

“I hope so.”

We were leaving the great room. The spectators were still there. The transparent ray was gone from the roof; attention again was centered upon the thirty-foot receiving globe.

We left as we had come. Walking? I can only call it that, though the word is futile to describe our progress as we made our way to the lighted esplanade, across its side and into what might have been called a street. Globular houses, single, or one set

upon another, or half a dozen swaying on a stick....gardens of vegetation and flowers....I saw what seemed to be a round patch of hundred-foot tree-stalks, like a thick patch of bamboo. It was laced and latticed thick with vines.

"A house!" Snap murmured. "That's a house!"

Another type of dwelling. This flimsy patch of vegetable growth, so flimsy that it was all stirring with the movement of a night breeze, was woven into circular, thatched rooms—bird's nests of little dwellings. Staring up, I seemed to see a hundred of them. Rope-vine ladders; flimsy vine platforms; tiny lights winking up there in the trees.

On a platform twenty feet above us a group of tiny infant brains sat in a gruesome row, goggling down at us.

We passed the tree patch; again the city seemed all a thin, flexible metal. The ground was like a smooth rock surface, alternating with small patches of soil where things were growing.

We walked in a slow, unsteady line. Molo led. Behind Snap and me came the girls, ignoring us; and at the rear, the brown-shelled giant guard stalked after us.

Molo stopped at a globe-dwelling. It was quite large; about fifty feet.

"We rest here. I will go see that our rooms are ready." He gestured to his sister. "Meka, you come with me. Wyk will guard them here for a moment."

WE stood at an oval doorway. A worker had come out, stared at us, and gone back in again. On an upper balcony, a brain was gazing down at us.

I caught Molo's brawny arm. "See here, won't you tell us what's going to happen to us?"

"You will rest here in charge of Wyk."

"What are you going to do?" said Snap.

"I am going to select my men for my ship. We go out, to the battle."

"When?" I demanded.

"In a few hours. By Earth-time, what you would call three or four hours."

"And you're taking us on the ship, Molo? Where is your *Star-Streak*?"

"That I must find out." He gazed at us with a slow, faint smile. "Not far. Nothing is far, on Wandl. I do not know if I will take you on the ship. You might be of help in the navigating—or you might be troublesome. The Great Master wants prisoners, or I would have killed you long ago."

He took his sister and left us. There was a brief moment when Wyk, incuriously standing aside, gave us opportunity for swift whispers.

Again Anita clutched me. "Gregg, we'll be separated now. But with Molo gone, Venza and I can get away from Meka!"

"Gregg, listen! Snap, be quiet!" Venza whirled on us. "If we're ever going to escape, now is the time. You, with this Wyk—get away from him! We'll handle Meka."

"And do what?" Snap demanded.

"The control station! It's near here somewhere. We'll find out where!"

Swift whispers! Anita again:

"We've got to wreck it, Gregg! Whatever else—wreck it—stop those contacts! They'll mean the end of Earth if we don't!"

I protested. "Better try for Molo's vessel. We might be able to navigate it! Escape from this world!"

"The control station first," Anita insisted. "Gregg, we know something about it! You and Snap, with your strength, can demolish it. And then, if we can locate the *Star-Streak*—"

DESPERATE, mad plan! But there seemed nothing better.

The girls insisted now that though they did not know where the control station was located, they knew the details of the interior; its physical layout; its human operators. It would be feasible for us to get into it, and wreck it!

"In an hour," whispered Snap. "Have you got a timer? Is it going?"

The little timers we still had with us were undoubtedly operating differently from on Earth; but they were in agreement.

"An hour by our timers," I whispered. "We'll make the break then. Try and find you inside. Anita, if you get free of Meka, don't come out."

"No! All right!"

We had only a moment to try and plan it. And with our whispers, a desperation swept us; and again came that sense of physical power. Once loose in this flimsy world we could smash and wreck everything we touched. And leap, swim—fly away—free!

Mad, wild plans! There was so much that we could not foresee!

"Anita, in an hour, with Molo gone—"

He came suddenly with a driving leap from the doorway and dropped among us.

"All is ready. Come...."

We ignored the girls. Snap again protested that he was hungry, which indeed, for me at least, was certainly the truth. And I was parched with thirst. For all one's plans—worlds at stake; the desperation of planning that might bring nothing but immediate death—for all that, the needs of the body make their insistent demands. I felt that this vaunted strength of my Earth body would not last long without food and drink.

WE entered the globular interior. There were narrow corridors; triangular rooms; a slatted,

ladder-like incline leading upward to a higher level.

The girls followed Meka up the incline. I recall that last tense and furtive look which Anita cast down at me, as though warning that we try and see where they were taken.

Molo and Wyk herded us into a nearby room.

"You will have your food and drink here. Cause Wyk no trouble and you will be quite safe."

He turned from us, but Snap plucked at him.

"When are you coming back?"

"I do not know. Not too long."

"But, see here—that control station; is that where your ship is located? Is it near?"

I brushed against Snap. Molo could so easily become suspicious of such questions.

"We will cause you no trouble," I said. "But do not leave us here. Take us on the ship."

"I will see."

He murmured to Wyk in Martian, and then left us.

This hour of waiting! It seemed extraordinarily long. Perhaps it was, since our timers might very well be running at half rate.

The small triangular room had no windows and only the single door. Wyk touched a mechanism and it slid closed. The place was a queer apartment, indeed. The floor was convex, curving upward to the walls. The light radiance dimly glowed, as though inherent to the metal ceiling. There was strange metal furniture. A table and chairs, high and large. Bunks of a size evidently for the ten-foot workers....

The door opened, and a worker brought us food and drink. Wyk sat apart and watched us while we consumed the meal. I noticed that he seldom let himself get close to us. He sat stiffly upright, with his jointed legs bent double under him, his many arms and pincers hanging inert, save the one short shoulder-arm with flex-

ible fingers gripping his small weapon. At his waist, and upon several hook-like protuberances of his chest, other weapons and devices were hanging.

SNAP GAZED up from where, on the floor, we were ravenously eating and drinking.

"Aren't you hungry?"

"No. Not now."

"You eat often?"

"No. Not very."

Incurious, taciturn creature, this insect-like being. Snap whispered, "Got to talk to him; make him let us get close! That weapon—"

How the weapon operated we did not know. But that a flash from it would bring instant death we well imagined. Thoughts thronged me. If we could get within reach of Wyk, grip his weapon, we could easily kill him. But then what? Were other workers within sound of us here in this house? Listening, we could hear nothing beyond our room walls. Were we, perhaps, being watched by scientific devices; spied upon? Guards, outside in the corridors? Or was Wyk our only guard? Where were the girls? If we killed Wyk could we get out through this door and find them? How could they get loose from Meka?

And if we freed ourselves, then what? Running amuck on this strange planet! This whole world against us!

Half of that hour of waiting was passed.

I said to Wyk, "You would call this night on your world; the sun obviously is on the other hemisphere. When will it be day?"

His gaze swung on me. His hollow voice, deep from the capacious shell of chest, echoed and blurred in the room.

"I think Wandl has no rotation now. Or almost none."

He was not taciturn, as he had seemed, and presently we had him talking. We learned several things

regarding the gravity-controls of Wandl, by which at will the planet could be rotated on its axis; and by which also it could navigate space. We learned that the great control station contained these gravitational mechanisms, as well as the mechanism by which the Earth light-beam had been attacked. But we could not discover where on Wandl that station was located.

Then, with our meal finished, Snap rose to his feet.

"Those arms of yours, they seem to us very strange. But they must be mighty useful."

Snap had taken a cautious, shoving step. It wafted him directly toward our guard.

The weird, brown-scaled face of Wyk, with its popping eyes upon stems and its up-ended mouth, contorted with surprise.

"Back! Don't come near me!"

HE FLUNG himself back, but struck the wall of the room. All his arms were writhing. Alarm was in his voice. It was the first time either Snap or I had made an unexpected move, and it startled Wyk.

"Back!"

But Snap could not get back. His feet were off the floor. His five pounds of weight drifted him forward. He struck against Wyk.

"Wait! Let me go!" Snap cried.

Wyk's longest arms were around Snap, like the tentacles of an octopus. And Snap was struggling—fighting! We had not intended this, but the opportunity was here!

I scrambled from the floor. This horrible weightlessness! Now, with the need for powerful action, the lack of gravity was a tremendous handicap. I went up with flailing arms into the air. Wyk fired his weapon, but it missed me—a soundless, dimly white bolt. It hissed along the curving wall of the room. The smell of it was a stench in my nostrils.

I hit the concave ceiling, shoved

down, and like a swimmer in water struck against the struggling bodies of Snap and the guard. The waving little shoulder arm with the weapon came at me.

Snap shouted, "Gregg, look out! Let go of me, you! I'll smash you!"

I seized the little arm; it felt like the shell of a huge crab. For a moment we were all three entangled, floundering, unable to find a foothold. Then suddenly I felt Snap pulling me loose.

"We've got him!"

The brown-shelled body of Wyk sank away from us, hit the floor and lay still. I felt the floor under me, and Snap clutching at me.

"Got him! God—this gruesome..."

I followed his gaze. In my hand I was clutching Wyk's little shoulder arm, with the fingers still gripping the weapon. I had jerked it out of his shoulder-socket....

With a shudder I cast the noisome thing away. Whether Wyk was dead or not we did not know. He lay on his back; the hideous face stared upward.

"I — cracked the shell," Snap gasped. "He's dead—or if he isn't yet, what matter? We've got to get out of here. Somebody will have heard the noise. Got to get the girls loose, now."

A PANIC of excitement was upon us. We wasted no further time on the prone figure of Wyk. Snap snatched several of his weapons and mechanical devices. We stowed them hastily in our pockets; one was like another to us; we could only guess at their uses.

"His shoes, Gregg. I can't get the damned things off him!"

"Here are shoes."

A little pile of shoes was in a corner of the room: wide, resilient suction soles, built like sandals. They were very large, but the thongs were so placed that it seemed we could fasten them to our boots.

"But not now, Snap."

We snatched up four pairs of the shoes.

There seemed nothing else to do. Could we get the door open? Snap was already fumbling at it.

"Accursed thing! It won't—"

Then it slid open. The dim corridor was visible. No one—nothing—out there.

"Come on, Gregg! In a rush!"

We went like bouncing rubber figures up the incline ladder.

"Snap, watch out!" He all but cracked his head with an upward leap. Every instant we expected to be set upon. There was a terraced upper hall, black with shadow; dark ovals of doorways led into rooms.

No one here. As yet we were not discovered.

We stood at the intersection of two corridors. One went almost vertically up, like a chimney extending into the dome peak of the globe. Its sides were latticed; we could go up it hand over hand, like monkeys. The other sloped at an angle downward.

"Which way?" Snap whispered. "What do you think? Got to find them."

It still lacked five or ten minutes of our designated time. Caution came to me. It would not do to burst recklessly in upon the girls, perhaps to find Molo and several guards there.

"Let's wait a minute. We'll listen; see if we can't get some idea."

I never finished. We were backed against the corridor wall, almost in darkness. From the dark length of the descending corridor came a thump. The sound of a struggle! And then a muffled scream! Venzal! And we heard her words:

"Anita, look out for her! She's got a knife!"

As though diving into water, Snap and I plunged head-first into the blackness of the corridor.

CHAPTER XVI

The Flight Across Wandl

BUT MEKA, won't you tell us about this world?" Anita asked. "It seems so wonderful."

"That control station," Venza put in, "where is it from here?"

The Martian girl sat watching Anita and Venza at their meal. She had bolted her own food and now sat apart. She was a taciturn, dour sort of person, this Meka. She seldom smiled, seldom spoke. With her six feet of height, her brawny muscular figure, her ornamental leather garments, she was masculine of aspect. Competent, undoubtedly intelligent; capable of doing a man's work. Upon the *Star-Streak*, during those years of its piracy, very probably she played a leading part with Molo.

Venza and Anita were afraid of her. They knew that Meka was suspicious of them. They had won Molo's confidence; since he was a man that was comparatively easy. But the Martian girl was a different problem. Her inscrutable eyes were always on them.

Venza and Anita were in a fever of tense excitement now; but outwardly they strove to appear calm and casual. When they parted from Snap and me, with our desperate plan to break loose within an hour arranged, Meka had taken them to an upper level apartment of the globe room. It was a small room, very much like the one in which Wyk was guarding us downstairs, save that this upper one had both a door and a small window. There was a little catwalk balcony outside the window. It seemed about thirty feet to the ground level. Anita stared out, but Meka came, pushed her away and pulled down a metal blind. Whether she locked it shut or not, they could not determine.

Then a worker brought the food.

Venza and Anita had a moment to snatch whispers when Meka went to the door.

"You think she's got any weapons, Anita?"

"No; it seems not. I can't see any, can you?"

"We'll watch our chance and nip her. She's strong, all right, but with two of us—"

"Hush! She's coming back!"

They waited for the hour to pass, as we downstairs were waiting. They were sorry that we had all determined to wait that hour. Every passing moment might bring some new hazard; but they feared Molo would linger.

WITH THE meal almost eaten, they tried to talk to the taciturn Meka. She sat near them, staring with her somber, thoughtful gaze. If only they could make her talk! There was so much that they did not know—things vital when once we were loose.

"Where is the control station from here?" Venza asked. "What's the matter with you; can't you talk?"

There was no answer.

"Don't you know?" Anita demanded.

"No."

"Your brother said it was just beyond the dark forest. What is the dark forest?"

"A place with trees where no one lives."

"Off that way." Venza gestured. "That's what Molo said. Listen—will it be day soon, or will the night keep on?"

"If they cause Wandl to rotate, it will soon be day." A flicker of irony crossed Meka's face. "Save your breath, for I am in no mood for answering silly questions."

It seemed that Meka had no weapons. If they both leaped on her at once. . . .

"Molo said he was going to his ship," Venza was saying. "Where is

the *Star-Streak*? Near the control station? Or is it here in the city?

"Save your breath."

Venza laughed. "Well, if that's the way you feel about it. For a fact, there's not much air in here."

She shoved herself across the floor toward the closed window.

"Get back!"

"Oh, all right—all right."

Perhaps Meka herself felt that there was not enough air. She stood waveringly upright, and pushed herself with a slow leap for the window. Her back for the moment was to Anita and Venza. Their opportunity had suddenly, unexpectedly come! They shoved from the floor, whirled through the air and were upon her.

It was a brief struggle. With physical violence, in their desperation, a frenzy swept Venza and Anita. They clawed at their antagonist; bit and tore and kicked. And instantly they knew they had lost. The huge Martian was so strong! She whirled and flung them off. Her upflung fist, with a blow like a man's, caught Anita's thigh, knocked her toward the ceiling. She sank in a heap to the floor; saw that Venza had been shoved back, but was standing upright.

ANITA bent double, with her feet braced against a chair, tensed to shove forward again. At the still-unopened window, Meka crouched.

Anita heard Venza's warning outcry.

"Anita, look out for her! She's got a knife!"

Upon this scene, in a moment, Snap and I came with a rush. The closed door was not barred. We slid it down and catapulted through the opening. Meka sailed over us. I swam up at her; seized her. The knife ripped my blouse and slit the flesh of my upper arm with a glancing blow. Then Snap came and struck against us. We sank to the floor.

Meka had fought silently, but now

she was shouting. I twisted her wrist, seized the knife handle and flung the knife away. I was aware of Anita lunging to retrieve it. And over us Venza appeared, waving a metal chair as though it were a huge feather.

Snap gasped, "Shut up, you! Gregg—this accursed uproar! Get your hand over her mouth! Shut her up!"

We had her subdued in a moment. But it seemed almost too late. Outside the opened door a distant shout sounded!

I shoved Meka toward the door. "If you don't do what I say, I'll kill you!" I whispered it into her ear. She thought I meant it; I think myself that I did.

"What shall I do?"

There came another distant shout—closer, now. Someone was coming.

"Call out in Martian. Say no trouble. Nothing wrong. You were arguing with these girls."

She did as I commanded. The voice down the corridor answered, and then subsided.

Snap slid the door upon us. "Hurry! We'll go by the window. Those damn shoes; I dropped them."

ANITA and Venza tore their dark cloaks into strips. We bound and gagged Meka; laid her in a corner of the room. We had dropped the shoes as we came plunging through the door oval. We found that we could all four fasten their thongs to our feet. I put Meka's knife in my belt.

"Hurry, all of you!" Snap was saying. "Got to get out of here; jump by the window!"

"Say, look at these wing-shields!" From a recess in a corner of the room Venza appeared with an armful of the small shields. We thrust our heads and forearms into their loops. The shields extended from a few inches beyond our fingers to the elbow.

Snap had slid the window blind. I

bent over the prone form of Meka. "Don't try to move. You'll be all right. Molo will release you when he comes back."

We gathered on the starlit balcony. The city stretched around us. There was as yet no alarm. No swimming figures near here; but a distance away we saw the towering conclave globe, with its audience just beginning to emerge, like bees coming from a hive!

"Let me go first." I held Anita and Venza at the rail. "Like swimming—I suppose we'll get the way of it pretty quickly."

I balanced on the rail, and then leaped off. With the others after me, we struggled and swam awkwardly upward into the reddish starlight.

This strange flight! But it was not difficult to learn. Indescribably strange—like swimming; yet the thrust of the shield against the air had a less ponderable stroke than the hand and arm in water. It was more like awkward birds struggling to fly.

But we learned it. In a group we mounted upward. The city structures dropped away, showing in a dark blur with winking lights. Over us were the stars and the cloudless night sky. Behind, the flashing little beams of radiance at the landing stage, the figures fluttering the great globe—it all dropped swiftly beneath a sharply curving horizon....

WE HAD passed the city. A thousand feet below us a dark forest stretched. It was beyond this, so the girls understood, the control station was located.

The swimming flight was momentarily less awkward. But it was an effort, a panting effort in this abnormal Wandl air. Snap and Venza were behind me. Anita was leading—a strange, bird-like little figure! White blouse; long parted dark skirt from which her grey-sheathed legs kicked out as she swam, sometimes half upon one side, or with a breast stroke; and

the braids of her dark hair falling forward over her shoulders.

She was tiring; I could not miss it. How far we had gone I had no idea—ten miles, perhaps. There was only a small vista of this little world visible at once, it was so sharply convex.

A line of distant mountains was to our left. We had crossed a river at the forest edge.

I suppose we had been half an hour swimming these ten miles. Was daylight coming? It seemed that the side-line of mountain tops had a little light on them. The opalescent beam from Earth had swept this portion of the sky and was gone below our horizon.

Apparently there was no pursuit from the city. There had been occasional figures in the distance—some with power beams—but none seemed to be coming after us.

Behind me, Venza panted, "Say, I'm about finished up. Can't we—rest?"

With this altitude we could cease our efforts and drift down. It would take several minutes.

WE GATHERED together, falling with a slow drift toward the dark forest under us. The trees seemed huge and spindly—a porous growth, something on the Martian style, with huge leaves and a tangle of matter vines. They came mounting up at us as we fell with slowly gathering speed.

"Shall we go on?" I suggested.

"Yes. I'm all right now." But she was not. Anita, too, was very tired.

"Land in the tree-tops," Snap suggested. "Take a decent rest. I wonder how much farther it is. These weapons—equipment—some of it is flying power, no doubt."

There was so much that we did not know! And suddenly I doubted the wisdom of this escape we had made. We were alone here on a strange planet. The alarm would be out for us presently. They would hunt us

down, kill us instantly, once we were caught. There was no doubt of that now. What a wild idea that we could get to this control station and smash it!

"Look here," I said; "Anita, where is the *Star-Streak*?"

But that the girls did not know.

Anita said, "If we can land in the trees—examine what devices you've got—can't we do it here in the air?"

The girls had carefully watched Molo upon several occasions. They thought they might find we had a hand-globe or two of the repulsive ray. With it we could attain rapid flight without effort.

We sank, fluttering, into a dark and tangled mass of the forest tree-top growth. I recall that I had understood Wandl was crowded with human population. Yet here this dark and silent forest evidently was untenanted. We clung, like flapping awkward birds, to a swaying limb of a tree-top. The trees were close together. A matted growth of air vines, leaves and pods made almost a surface up here on which we could have run. The limb was porous as a banana trunk. The whole tangle was so flimsy that, thrashing in it, we could have wrenched and torn it apart.

The limb swayed and bent under our slight weight. We seemed a full two hundred feet above the ground. Dark forest aisles, thickets and underbrush were vaguely visible down there. But no lights; no roads; no evidence that upon a crowded planet, where space was important, this forest of twenty miles or more was untenanted. I wondered why.

"Let's see what you've got," Venza demanded.

WE HANDED the girls the various little devices we had taken from Wyk. They were most of them the size of my fist; globular metallic projectors like little hand-bombs; ray cylinders; a device with multiple barrels the size of one's finger, set in the

small circumference of a circular grid of wires.

"This," said Anita; "I saw Molo with one of these. He killed an unwilling worker on the ship."

It was a small globe, with a single-barrel muzzle, and a white metal handle. The firing mechanism was almost obvious. It was a bolt from such a weapon as this, doubtless, that had killed Shac and Dud Ardley, in that cellar corridor of Great-New York.

"I'll take a look around," Snap said suddenly. "Suppose we're being followed? Give me that weapon."

There was vegetation partly over us, so that the sky was half obscured. Snap took the weapon, and like a monkey, swaying precariously, he ran and leaped among the upper branches, crashing his way until he could see back toward the horizon beyond which lay the city of Wor.

We heard his voice. "All clear. Nothing in sight. You coming up? Better get started."

"In a minute," I called.

Venza and Anita had the mechanisms spread on the broad limb surface. They identified another by the multiple barrels around the little disc. It was the gravity ray in a very small hand form. The operation seemed less obvious than the other; there were several tiny levers and protuberances.

"We can experiment," I said. There were two of these devices. "One for Snap, one for me. You girls can cling to us."

I put the gravity projectors in my pocket. There was also another of the electronic bolt weapons. Snap had one now in the branches over us. I was examining this second one, when suddenly there came Snap's call.

"Gregg! Come out of there!"

We heard the hiss, and saw the flash of his bolt.

Anita swung at me. "Gregg! Look!"

I followed her gesture. And then

I knew why this forest was untenanted by humans!

CHAPTER XVII

The Things in the Dark Forest

UNTENANTED forest? Why, I saw it alive with living things! Here in the dark they had been crawling upon us. Every leafy branch of this tree-top tangle had something staring at us; the darkness was suddenly glowing with a myriad little green torches which were their eyes! They winked on all in an instant, as though at a signal, or at the sound of Snap's shout and the hiss of his bolt.

Insects! I suppose I should call them that. With my quick look I saw that they were of many sizes and shapes; tiny little things with eyes like lanterns; things of many legs, finger-length, hand-length, and some as long as my forearm. Brown-shelled things, with eyes glowing on stems.... There was one quite near us. A smooth, brown-shelled body; a round head on top, as big as my fist. Tumultuous horror swept me in that second of realization. These things had heads like little distended brains!

What horrible jest of nature was this! Dark forest recesses here, alive with crawling things, embryonically human! Miniatures of the Wandl workers, crawling here, unable to stand erect, groping with little pincers. And miniature brains with naked, shiveled bodies....

It seemed that the eyes of that little brain were fixed on me with a baleful green glare in the darkness. But it was more than that. Suddenly I felt that here was something of infinite horror: little brains with reason gone from them. Minds which might have been human, save that the guiding force which every living thing should have was missing. What tortured little thoughts must be struggling here behind these gleam-

ing green eyes! Crawling things fashioned in miniature in the pattern of this world's humans! But things irrational; not even normal insects! Outlawed! What a grim quirk of nature was this!

IT WAS an instant rush of thoughts. Anita and Venza were floundering to their feet in horror. They all but slipped from the limb. The weapons and devices we had ranged there slid off and went down into the darkness unheeded. From above us came Snap's horrified shouts and the hiss of his bolts.

"Here!" I gasped. "My hand—Anita, jump! Venza—quickly—"

I shoved Anita upward. The little eyes were suddenly all in movement, advancing upon us. Anita floundered, fluttered, got into the air and mounted toward Snap. Again Venza slipped off the limb. I lunged and drew her up. Green eyes nearest us came swooping. I did not dare fire a bolt; it was too close to Venza. I flung the entire weapon at the green eyes, but I missed.

The little thing bit Venza's arm. She screamed. Her flailing hand hit the tiny distended head. Its hideous little scream mingled with hers. It floated downward, mashed and purple-red with gushing blood.

I struggled upward with the inert form of Venza under one arm. Anita was mounting, free. Snap came lunging down.

"Fired every bolt in the damn weapon!" He saw the unconscious Venza. "Good God, Gregg!"

Never have I heard such anguish as in his tone. "Gregg, she isn't—"

"One of them bit her. Help me."

We floundered up with her, a hundred feet above the tree-tops of that horrible forest—two hundred. The little lanterns of eyes down there had all winked out. The open starlight was over us.

Anita came swimming. "Oh, Gregg! Is she—dead?"

Snap and I bore her, swimming with one arm free. Anita clung to Venza's shoulder, murmuring frantically to her. Like swimmers in distress we bore our burden slowly forward over the matted tangle of the grisly forest.

Then Venza stirred. We heard her murmur:

"This is—all right."

SHE HAD fainted with the shock of horror. It seemed nothing more; but I found her upper arm swelling. She tried to bend her body and sit up, but it threw us all out of balance.

"Lie straight," Snap murmured. "Oh, Venza, dear—are you all right now?"

"Yes. Why not?"

And suddenly she laughed. It sent a shuddering chill over me. Good God! That eery sound to her laughter!

"What's the fuss about? I feel fine. Let's get away from here; somebody will be coming."

She was swimming now and we let her loose, but stayed close by her. I did not see Snap's face; he said nothing nor did I. But from the depths of my heart I prayed that Venza would never laugh like that again.

We flew with our swimming stroke another mile—or two miles? Distance could not be judged. The reddish firmament was like an inverted bowl. The curving Wandl surface gave us a narrow little vista—the forest rolling up from the horizon in front. Then we saw where the forest seemed to end. Water was beyond it; a ribbon like a broad river, and beyond that, frowning mountains, terraced and spired with jagged peaks.

Snap and I suddenly recalled the gravity ray projectors. We tried them; found that they would fling little beams of two varieties. Pencil-points of radiance, it seemed with an effective range of no more than a few hundred feet.

I let myself drift downward, experimenting. The tiny beam struck the forest-top. I felt the projector pulling violently downward in my hand. I clung to it. I was being drawn swiftly down by the attractive gravity force of the ray. The forest rose rapidly under me; I was all but flung upon it before I could find the other controls.

Then the ray altered its nature. The projector in my hand pulled me steadily up. But after a few hundred feet, I felt I was mounting only of my own momentum, with gravity and air-friction retarding me.

SNAP HAD tried similar experiments. We rejoined the swimming girls. I stared into Venza's face; it was pale, but she did not seem distressed. She winked at me, with her familiar flippancy.

"How's your arm, Venza?"

"It hurts, but I guess it's all right."

I turned to Snap. "I guess we can work these things. Get Venza to cling to you."

Our progress now was far different, faster and with much less effort than before. Venza clung to Snap's ankles and Anita to mine. We drifted close to the forest. With the repulsing rays directed diagonally downward we had a strong upward and forward thrust. It carried us up about a thousand feet, and forward fully that much, in the arc of a circle. And as we came down, the process was repeated.

In this fashion, lying stiffly in the air, we went forward with great thousand-foot bounds. The forest rolled back under us. We came over the gleaming river. It seemed several miles broad; it extended from left to right; and as, with one of our descending leaps, we were momentarily within a hundred feet of its surface, I saw that it had a swift current.

Snap and Venza were somewhat behind me. It was impossible now for us to keep together. As Anita and

I swung up, with my ray striking down against the river surface, I saw sunlight upon the mountains ahead. The darkness had, for several minutes been paling. The stars were swinging, though with our bounds their movement was not apparent.

Now day suddenly burst upon us. The sun—smaller than on Earth—mounted swiftly up. It was a flattened, distorted, dull-red disk, blurred by the strange Wandl atmosphere.

We were in a dim red daylight. Anita twitched at my ankles.

"Look back of us!"

We were going up. Venza and Snap, behind us, were in a descending arc. Above them, far back in the direction from which we had come, up against the reddish day sky, two blobs were visible.

PURSUIT! It seemed so. The blobs went down, but came up again, traveling with rays, like ourselves.

I shouted at Snap. "Someone after us! Two figures back there! See them?"

His answering voice came. "Gregg! Gregg! Help!"

My gaze had been on the distant figures. I saw now that at the bottom of his arc, and starting upward again, Snap had lost Venza! The impulse of his ray had twitched his ankles from her grasp; or she had let loose. He was hardly a hundred feet above the river; and Venza, with acceleration downward unchecked, was falling into it.

"Gregg, help! Venza, swim up!" His frenzied call reached me as I used the attractive ray and Anita and I whirled over and lunged downward.

"Gregg, help! Venza! Venza, dear, use your arms! Swim!"

She was lying inert, making no effort to keep from falling! Her body turned slowly, end over end. She

struck the swiftly flowing river surface—but did not sink into the water! Instead, she half emerged, came up and lay in a crumpled heap; and with its rapid current, the river carried her away.

It was several minutes before Anita and I could maneuver to reach Venza. Snap was already there, floundering on the water, awkwardly maintaining his balance, bending over Venza. She was unconscious. Snap's white, agonized face stared at us as we dropped down, struck the river surface and scrambled toward him.

"Gregg, she's unconscious! Fainted again! Oh, what's the matter with her?"

The bite of those horrible insects! The thought of it turned me cold.

The river surface was like a very soft rubber mattress. The water clung to us, wet us; we could not kneel or stand erect; but sitting or lying down only a few inches of our bodies were submerged. We floated like corks, so light were we, and so little water did we displace.

"Venza, dear!" Snap raised her up, and I helped. We struggled with her across the yielding, gluey river surface. She had fallen near the further shore. Rocks, crags and strewn boulders were passing as the current swept us along at a speed of about ten miles an hour. She lay so impassive in our arms, with eyes closed, her face pallid but calm. She seemed to breathe normally—rapidly; but that, on Wandl, was normal.

WE landed on the rocky shore. It was still daylight. The blurred sun was swinging across the zenith so swiftly that its movement was visible. Wandl had been suddenly endowed with axial rotation! Even in these few minutes the brief day was past its noon. On the distant mountain-peaks, looming above the nearby horizon, it seemed that the

sheen of coming night was mingled with the red sunlight.

Anita and Snap laid Venza on the rocks. I suddenly remembered the two blobs in the sky behind us, which had seemed to be following. I stood gazing across the river. The red sky there seemed empty.

"She's reviving! Thank God, she's reviving!" Snap called at me, and I joined them. Venza was stirring. Color was coming into her cheeks; her lips were murmuring, as though she were talking in her sleep.

Then she opened her eyes. Her gaze fixed on us, as we bent over her.

A horrible, breathless moment; I think I have never experienced such breathless horror as in that moment while we waited for her to recognize us, and to speak.

"Why, what's the matter? Where are we? I thought we were in the tree-tops. Snap, don't look at me like that, dear! I'm all right—only confused."

She could remember nothing since the horror of the tree-tops when that gruesome thing struck and bit into her arm. But the attack of its poison in her veins seemed definitely over. We sat with her, soothing her, explaining what had happened; and she was wholly rational. Her strength came back; her mind cleared, save for that vacant interval when within her veins there was the fight against the poison.

The brief red day came to its close. The sun plunged below the horizon. The stars winked into being. The red-purple Wandl night again was here. And now we saw that the whole firmament was swinging—the rotation made visible.

The darkness leaped around us. Shadows filled the rock hollows. The caves and recesses of this rocky shore turned black with darkness. And in the sky now we saw another of those familiar opalescent beams. This was the one from Mars; we could identify the red disk of the planet. The light-

beam which Wandl had planted upon it streamed now across our firmament.

And then, from the mountains ahead of us but still below our horizon, the Wandl control station shot its attacking beam upward. Again there was that conflict in the sky. The axis of Mars was being altered; its rotation slowed.

A moment of the conflict passed. We could see now that we were much nearer than before the control station. It seemed perhaps only twenty or thirty miles ahead of us in these mountains. The scream from it was deafening.

The Wandl beam died presently; the electrical scream from the control station was stilled.

The Earth's axis had been altered. Now Mars; and next would be Venus. A few more of these gravitational attacks, and then the helpless planets, with rotation checked, would be towed away by Wandl, out into the deadly cold of interstellar space!

Anita abruptly gave a startled outcry. The four of us, sitting in a group, had no time to rise. From behind a dark crag nearby, two figures appeared. The starlight showed them clearly.

Molo and Wyk! They lunged forward at us!

CHAPTER XVIII

Strange, Weird Combat

WE were unarmed. I had flung my weapon at the thing in the forest; and Snap had exhausted all his bolts firing at the multitude of green eyes. Molo and Wyk came with a dive through the air; two tiny flashes leaped from them to the rocks behind them, and flung them forward.

Snap and I seized Venza and Anita. It was a second of confusion; then I saw we would not be able to rise in time. The diving, oncoming figures

were no more than twenty feet away.

I heard my voice, rising above Snap's confused shouts.

"Protect Venza! Snap, get her behind you!"

A bolt could strike us—that instant, I felt, would be our last. Snap shoved Venza behind him; I got myself in front of Anita. We had almost gained our feet. I tried to thrust Anita and myself violently upward. We rose, but only a few feet; and then we were struck by the oncoming body of Wyk, like a huge, light-shelled three-pound insect lunging in mid-air against us. The two longest tentacle-arms wrapped around us. Anita twisted and kicked. The gruesome, goggling face of Wyk thrust itself almost into mine. The hollow voice panted:

"I—have you—fast."

One of my arms was free and I struck with my fist at the gaping, upended mouth. Ghastly blow! It made my senses real, as though the blow had been at me and not at that brown-shelled face! There was a crack. My fist sank through the shell. A cold, sticky ooze spurted out. Noisome! Horrible!

Wyk screamed. It ended with a rattle in his chest. His encircling arms fell away. The grisly smashed face was white with ooze and pulp where my fist had gone in.

We had sunk back to the rocks. I kicked the dead body of Wyk away.

"Anita! Swim up!"

"No!"

Sinking beside us were the flailing bodies of Molo, Snap and Venza—drifting down; they seemed all intermingled. Snap was shouting:

"No, you don't! Drop that! What you trying—"

I LEAPED for them. Something long and thin and glowing was dangling from Molo's hand. He broke loose from the struggling Snap and Venza; his feet struck the rocks, and he shoved himself backward. My leap

had carried me too high. I went over him by ten feet. I saw that in his hand was a six-foot length of glowing wire. He whirled it. The weight on its end described an arc, and then he flung the handle. The weighted wire struck Venza and Snap just as their repulsive ray shot down against the rocks and shoved them upward. The whirling wire wrapped itself around them together. Its glow vanished. Snap had been shouting, "Gregg, come up! Gregg!" But it died in his throat.

All this while I, in those few seconds, was vaulting over Molo, trying to get back to the ground to leap again. I saw that Anita was crawling on the rocks. My gravity cylinder was at my belt; I had jammed it there to leave my hands free just as Wyk struck us.

I saw that Snap and Venza, wrapped together by the wire, had dropped their gravity projector. Their entwined figures went up forty or fifty feet, stopped, and began drifting down.

Molo was shouting, "You, Gregg Haljan! Now for you!"

I struck the rocks and fell twenty feet beyond him. This strange fighting! It was so new to me, so confusing! I jerked out my gravity projector, but I did not know what I wanted to do with it. And in that second of indecision, I saw that the standing Molo was aiming at me! Directly over my head the inert bound bodies of Venza and Snap were falling.

A flash leaped over the dark rocks from Molo! There was a split-second when I thought it was the end of me. But I was still alive. The bodies of Venza and Snap struck my head and shoulders; knocked me down. I felt Molo's ray upon me. Not death, but only his gravity ray, like a giant hand pulling me. Apparently he did not dare kill us, but wanted us alive. I was scrambling on the rocks, entangled with Venza and Snap. Molo's

radiance clung. All three of us went tumbling forward toward him. I flashed my own ray, but I was rolling end over end, and it went wild. I dropped it; saw Molo's beam vanish; saw his upright standing figure towering above me.

Snap, Venza and I were in a heap at his feet; he leaned down and seized me.

"Now, Gregg Haljan, I will teach you not to try escaping like this!"

NORMALITY again! With the huge, muscular Martian gripping me, his fist striking for my face, but missing and hitting my shoulder—this was a blessed semblance of normality! I could understand fighting like this. I wrapped my legs around him; my fingers reached for his brawny throat as he kicked us into the air free of the entangling bodies of Snap and Venza.

We rose a few feet and sank back, gripping each other, lunging and striking. He was very powerful, this Martian. I caught the round pillar of his throat with my hands. For an instant I shut off his wind, but I could not hold the grip. He struck me a glancing blow in the face, then the heel of his hand was under my chin. It forced back my head; broke my hold on his throat. With returning breath, he gasped an inhalation. And I heard his exulting words: "You—are not strong enough!"

We rolled and bumped over the rocks. I caught a blow from his fist full in my face. It was almost the end. I felt my strength going. He laughed as he struck away my answering swing. I was on my back against the rocks, with his body on top of me. Then beyond and behind his hulking shoulder, silhouetted against the sky, I saw Anita rise up. She was lifting a boulder, a jagged grey mass of stone, full four feet in diameter. She poised it on her hand; then crashed it down on Molo's head! He sank away from me. His arms re-

laxed. The boulder fell beside him.

Strange, weird combat! But it was over now. Wyk was dead; his gruesome body with its smashed face lay near us. Molo was unconscious; breathing heavily, lying motionless, with a wound on the back of his head, the blood welling out, matting his hair.

Anita and I were uninjured. Victorious—but what a hollow victory! On the rocks here, bound together by that strange wire, Snap and Venza lay inert. We bent over them. The wire was cold to the touch now. It resisted our efforts to untwine it. We pulled frantically, and frantically we pleaded!

"Snap, speak to us! Venza, can't you speak?"

THEIR eyes were open. I was aware that there was no starlight above us now, but instead lurid sky of flying clouds, shot with a greenish cast. The darkness here was lurid green. The glow of it struck upon the wide-open staring eyes of Venza and Snap. It seemed that there was intelligence in those eyes!

"Snap! Snap, old man, can't you hear us?"

His eyelids came down and up again. Slowly, as though by a horrible effort.

"Can you understand me, Snap?"

Again he moved the eyelids closed and open. Was it "yes," for his answer?

"Can you move, Snap? Try. See if you can."

His right eyelid moved. Was that his answer: "No."

Anita and I had never felt so horrible a sense of aloneness as that which swept us in those succeeding minutes. Snap and Venza helpless; their bodies here; their minds here—yet with this uncrossable barrier between us.

Alone on this strange, weird planet. A breeze was springing up in the lurid green night. It came from

the mountains; it wafted across the nearby river, rippling the surface, which was now green and sullen. We did not know where to go, what to do.

We found at last that we could untwist the stiffly clinging wire. We laid Venza and Snap on the rocks side by side, thirty or forty feet back from the river. The glowing wire had burned their clothes only a little, as its current was absorbed by the contact with their bodies.

"Snap, are you in pain?"

His eyelid moving, gave the answer. "No."

"Is there anything we can do?"

"No."

His tortured eyes seemed trying so hard to talk to me! Anita rose from Venza and hung on my waist.

"Oh, Gregg, what shall we do? Can't we help them? Take them—carry them?"

BUT where? To what purpose? Wild thoughts thronged me: Wandl's control station, bringing chaos and death upon Earth, Mars and Venus. What was that now to me? I thought of Molo's ship—the *Star-Streak*. If only we knew where it was! I thought perhaps I might be able to understand its operation, be able to navigate it. Alone? I did not dare think how futile such an attempt would be.

"Anita—if we can get to the *Star-Streak*—seize it and escape from this world...."

"Carry Snap and Venza there now? But we don't know where it is! If we did—"

"If we could find it; escape from this world...." Numb, inane repetition! Then I realized that Molo

knew exactly where his vessel was located.

"We can make Molo lead us! Our only way to escape—to use his ship."

But Molo lay unconscious. I could not rouse him. I shook him, gently; then roughly. I pleaded frantically. It was useless.

Anita and I were so alone! We clung together.

"Gregg—this wind! Look at that sky!"

The mounting wind was tugging at us. It whined through the dark mountain defiles; surged out over the river, where the water now was beginning to toss with waves crossing the swift current. The sky was shot with lurid green shafts of radiance. Over us, the lowering leaden clouds were scudding, riding the wind.

Weird, unearthly storm! It burst now upon us. I found suddenly that Anita and I were bracing against it. A puff dislodged us, so that we were blown a dozen feet, bringing up against a crag, as though we were balloons, swept by a gust.

"Anita—this wind—we can't maintain ourselves here. We've—"

HORROR checked me: the thought of Venza and Snap, lying there on the rocks. And abruptly we saw the body of Wyk, like a great dried insect, lifted by the wind, whirled like a brown leaf over and over, and carried away.

Then a little pebble came hurtling and struck me. Then a rain of pebbles, like hailstones pelting at us.*

I shouted above the wind and the clatter of the pebbles.

"Hold to me! We'll have to use the gravity ray; get to Venza and Snap."

Fantastic storm! We found we did

*The storm was probably caused by the axial rotation of Wandl. The light-beam upon Earth had been attacked by the Wandl control station without axial rotation; but to attack the beam from Mars, a manipulation of Wandl was necessary. The planet's rotation was started, and suddenly checked.

It remained night now, here in this hemisphere. Perhaps there were natural storm tendencies here; perhaps the operators of the control station were unduly eager, manipulating the rotation too suddenly. At all events, this wind, unusual, almost unprecedented on Wandl, did considerable damage everywhere.

not dare trust ourselves to the gravity ray. We lay prone, pulling ourselves back toward Venza and Snap. Then it seemed for a moment the gusts were less violent. We reached the stiff, inert forms, where they had blown into a niche between two boulders.

"Can't stay here, Anita."

"No! If it begins again—"

"Over there! A cave!"

It seemed a little cave opening. We got Venza and Snap into it, just as another gust came, with a rain of dirt and loose stones pelting past outside.

I suddenly thought of Molo!

"Anita, you stay here! Got to get Molo!"

"Gregg, no!"

"I must! If we could bring him to consciousness, make him tell us where the *Star-Streak* is—"

I flung off her restraining hold. The wind ceased up. I leaped out into it, swimming. The rocks slid by close under me in a swift sidewise drift. In a moment I would be carried out over the river. It was a chaos of green, windswept darkness. But there was bursting light now overhead and rumbling claps, like thunder.

I SAW Molo's body where the wind held him pinned against the side of a flat ten-foot rock butte; and dove for him, swimming down frantically until I struck against the rock with a blow that almost knocked the breath from me. Molo was still obviously unconscious.

How long it took me to get back to Anita, floundering with Molo's body, I do not know. I managed to keep against the ground; was blown back, and struggled forward again. The wind came with strange puffs. In one of the lulls I hauled Molo through the air and into the cave. I lunged in after him.

"Gregg!" Anita held me, her arms around me. "Gregg, dear, you were gone so long."

I was battered and bruised and breathless. The cave's mouth was like a ten-foot tunnel leading downward into blackness.

"Gregg, I put Venza and Snap here."

They lay side by side, like two dead bodies, here in the greenish darkness. We found Molo, laid him with them. Together we crouched beside them, clinging to each other, listening to the wild sweep of the wind outside. The storm had burst into its full fury now. It would whirl us away like feathers, outside there now. The lightning and thunder hissed and crashed. Stones and boulders were being flung like hailstones.

This flimsy, weightless world! It seemed as though the rocks within on which we were crouching would be shifted and carried away.

"Gregg! Gregg, dear, is this the end of us?"

I thought so. A mass of rock fell at the opening, closing it, so that we were buried here in the darkness.

"Anita, dear—if this is the end—of this life, I will love you always."

Darkness, with her arms around me and a shuddering world outside. But here, only Anita and her soft arms.

"Gregg! Gregg, dear! Gregg!"

Horror was in her voice! Then I saw what she was seeing. It was not just Anita and I buried here in the darkness with the bodies of Snap and Venza and Molo. Something else was here!

From the blackness of the cave, two green, glowing eyes were staring. Their radiance showed me the outlines of a distended head. An insane thing? But it was not another of the forest insects. This seemed to be an animal. The glow of its distended head disclosed a lithe, horizontal body, seemingly solid and muscled.

A chattering, insane animal, here in the dark with us! We heard mouthing, mumbling words, and an

eery, cackling laugh as it came padding forward!

CHAPTER XIX

THE THING in the cave stared at Anita and me as we clung together in the darkness, transfixed for a moment by horror. The distended head, ghastly of face with its green, glowing eyes, wobbled upon a long, spindly neck. The eyes seemed luminous of their own internal light; the radiance from them lighted the black cave very faintly, but enough so that I could see the thing's tawny, hairy body—long and sleek and of the size of an Earth leopard. A muscled body, with ponderable weight! It was moving toward us, padding on the rocks.

I recovered my wits and shoved Anita behind me. I crouched on one knee. There was no escape; nowhere to run. This tunnel was blocked by a fallen rock mass behind us, with the wild storm raging outside. The thing was some twenty feet away, where the tunnel broadened into a black cave of unknown size. Beside me the bodies of the stricken Snap and Venza lay inert, and the still unconscious Molo with them.

I was unharmed. Frenziedly I shouted above the outside surge of the storm; my voice reverberated with a muffled roar in this subterranean darkness.

"Get back! Back! Keep away!"

It stopped. Round ears stood up from the bloated head. Then it laughed again—a horrible, insane, chattering laugh! I felt Anita shoving a rock at my hand—a gray chunk of rock the size of my head.

"Its face, Gregg! Aim for its face!"

But the rock felt like a ball of cork! I flung it and hit the thing on the body. Its laughter suddenly checked. It crouched, as though gathering for a spring.

And then I thought of my gravity

projector. It had a weight which seemed around a pound. If I could hit that head with it...

WITLESS! These strange weapons of Wand! I was so slow of wit in using them! If I flung the weapon, missed the thing's head, I would be unarmed indeed! Instead, I flashed on the repulsive ray to its full intensity.

The tawny body leaped. It came hurtling, but my beam met it in mid-air. For a second I thought that I had been too late. The thing was clawing the air; its momentum carried it forward, against the push of my ray. Its movement was checked before it hit the ground. It was only a few feet in front of where I crouched. I saw the membrane head, knotted and tangled with veins, with a face so gruesomely human in aspect! For an instant it hung, snarling; and then laughed that wild laugh.

The ray forced it back. It receded through the air, back across the blackness of the cave, gathering speed, until in a moment it brought up against the opposite wall some forty feet away. And there it hung pinned. I held the ray upon it. The body had struck the rocky wall; the head was uninjured. It hung there, held by my beam, five feet or so above the cave's floor. It was writhing and twisting; the cave was filled with the reverberations of its screams.

And over the screams, I heard another voice.

"Gregg! Are you here, Gregg?"

Snap! A faint, labored call from Snap! Behind me, Anita was moving sidewise toward where Snap and Venza were lying.

"Gregg! Where are you?"

The thing pinned in my light stopped its screaming, with curiosity perhaps at this new sound.

"Snap! We're here, Snap!"

Then Venza's voice: "It's—letting me talk. We're—better now."

They were recovering. Anita was bending over them.

"Gregg, they're all right now. The shock is wearing off. Thank God, Gregg! Oh, Venza, darling—"

But I did not dare move to them. My light on the snarling thing across the cave held it, but I could not relax my attention.

I called, "Stay with them, Anita." I moved slowly forward, holding the beam steady. The cave floor was littered with loose stones and boulders. Ten feet from the pinned animal I selected a great chunk of rock. It towered in my hand, but the weight of it was only a few pounds.

THE GRAVITY held the animal as though I had it pinned by a pole. From a distance of a few feet I heaved the boulder. The palpitating head mashed against the wall. The body and the pulp of the head and the boulder sank to the floor when I removed the beam....

"Snap, thank God you're recovered! And you, Venza?"

Anita and I sat with them. It may have been that an hour passed. We began telling them what had happened; but they knew it all; they had been fully conscious. Horrible, living death! But they were out of it now, and seemingly none the worse for it.

An hour, while we crouched listening to the storm.

"It's letting up," Venza said, out of a silence.

It seemed that the howl outside was lessening. Anita was sitting over the prone form of Molo. He had stirred and mumbled several times.

"Let's see if we can get out of here," Snap suggested.

We had already searched and found no exit to the cave, save at the short tunnel-mouth where the rocks had fallen and blocked it. But to our strength, even the hugest of the rocks were movable!

"Try it now—shall we, Gregg?"

As though we were elephants, heav-

ing and pushing, we struggled with the litter choking the passage. There was a danger that the whole thing would cave in upon us; but we were careful. The small rocks we tossed aside like pebbles. There was one main mass, in diameter six feet or more. Together we pulled and tugged and shifted it. A little opening was disclosed, large enough for our bodies. The wind puffed in through it. Darkness was still outside.

The girls suddenly called to us. "Gregg! Snap! Come quickly!"

MOLO had regained consciousness. The blow from the rock had stunned him. He had an ugly scalp wound, but beyond that seemed not hurt. We bound his wrists with a portion of his belt, which we cut into strips.

"What is it you do with me? Is Wyk dead?"

"Yes."

He lay silent and sullen. I bent over him.

"Look here, Molo, we're going to get out of this and you're going to help us. If you don't. . . ."

The knife which we had taken from him to cut his belt was in my hand. I drew its blade lightly across his throat.

"Will you talk, freely and truthfully?"

"Yes. I will talk the truth."

"Do you know where the control station is located?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Not far."

"The hell with that!" Snap burst out. "We're in no mood—get it meshed in your mind, Molo—no mood for talk like that. How far is the control station?"

"On Earth you would call it ten miles."

"In these mountains?"

"He told us it was," said Anita. "Underground. An entrance—I'll explain all that to you."

"Do you know where your ship is?" I persisted.

He told us it was some thirty miles in another direction, not in the mountains, but in the outskirts of a city like Wor. It was equipped and ready for flight, all but the assembling of its crew.

Vital information! And now we had weapons! Molo was carrying several of the gravity projectors; two small searchlight beams, little hand torches; and three electronic ray-guns of short-range size.

HOPE filled us. By comparison we realized how desperate and hopeless had been our plight. The storm was abating. We could creep upon the single little control room of the gravity station, where usually but two operators were on duty. The delicate mechanisms there could be wrecked. And then we would seize the *Star-Streak*. No one would be on the lookout for us. Our attack would be wholly without warning. The fact that Molo's prisoners had escaped was as yet unknown. He and Wyk had not dared tell it. Meka was back there, waiting. Our absence from the globe-dwelling might have been discovered; but Meka would say that we were with Molo and Wyk. She was waiting there, hoping that her brother and Wyk would recapture and bring us back. The storm, too, would bring confusion everywhere, aiding our movements.

All this we dragged piecemeal from Molo. Triumph swept us. We were helpless no longer!

Snap and I shared the gravity pro-

jectors and the little electronic guns.

"Let's get started, Gregg. The storm seems finished."

It was. We found the purple-red starry night again outside. The river was lashed white with waves, but they were spent. There was only a mild warm breeze remaining.

Molo's legs were free, but his wrists were lashed behind him. I hooked an arm under his, holding him like a huge, but light, oblong bundle.

Snap called, "Ready, Gregg?"

"Yes."

Snap flashed on his gravity ray and mounted, with the girls clinging to his ankles. Then I followed, with Molo. By great arching swoops, we swung up into the frowning, tumbled mountains.

CHAPTER XX

Wreck of the Gravity Station

"THIS WILL be the place to land, Gregg Haljan."

We were drifting down upon a barren region of naked crags—dark, frowning rock-masses, broken and tumbled, as though by some great cataclysm of nature. Mountains upon the moon could not be more desolate of aspect.*

We landed on the rocks. The heights here had a purple-red sheen from the starlight. We had seen frequent evidence of the storm; and it showed here. Rocks were abnormally piled in drifts; smooth areas showed, where the pebbles, stones and boulders had been swept away by the wind.

*A considerable area of Wandl, like the forest and these mountains, was inhabited by semi-human insects and animals whose reason was unhinged. They were so fearsome, so numerous, that the humans kept away from them. There was also (this I give only as a conjecture, since Molo himself had no definite knowledge of it) an inherent aversion by the humans to killing the demented things. With science they doubtless could have exterminated them, but they did not. Was it because these insane beings

were offspring of themselves? Diseased children? . . .

The Wandl control station was located here, very probably owing to some natural advantage. Electronic contact with these strange grey rocks, possibly. That also, is not known, save that we saw the huge ground-contact discs.

Demented animals roamed these mountain defiles. But they had learned to keep well back—to fear this area where the station was housed, so that the operators were not unduly bothered by them.

Snap and the girls landed beside us. We spoke softly; none of us—not even Molo—had any knowledge of how far sound would carry in this air.

“Where is the place from here?” Snap demanded.

“Off there.”

Molo spoke with docile, guarded softness. He gestured with his head and shoulder. A quarter of a mile away, over these uplands, the broken land went down in a sharp depression.

“It is there. I think that from here we should go on the ground. There is no guard, and I think seldom is anyone on top.”

He seemed trying to help us. He had even bargained with me.

“If I help you now—if we should be able to wreck the gravity controls—then Wandl will be helpless to navigate space, or to interfere with the rotation of Earth, Mars and Venus. The allied worlds might then defeat the Wandl ships in battle. If that happened, perhaps your governments—because of my help here—would forgive what my *Star-Streak* has done.”

“Your piracy?” I said.

“Yes. I am outlawed. I might be reinstated, if you would speak the good words for me.”

“Maybe,” I told him.

“Maybe even they would reward me. You think so, Gregg Haljan?”

He wanted very much to be on the winning side! It suited out plans now.

“Try it and see, Molo. I’ll speak plenty of good words for you.”

“I will try it.”

And now, as we landed on the uplands, he said, “You will do best to free my hands.”

“Not us,” declared Snap.

“But I am a good fighter. Something unexpected might come.”

“Too good a fighter,” I said. “We trust you, because we have to, Molo—but no more than we find necessary.”

There were so many ways in which he could trick us! We could only guard against them by assuring him that any false move would mean his sudden death.

A SMALL recess in the rocks was near us. We put Molo there, with his hands bound, and with Anita and Venza to guard him. Venza held the electronic gun. She knew how to fire it. The girls crouched in a depression twenty feet away. They could see Molo plainly; if he moved, a flash of the bolt would kill him. He understood that; no one, hearing Venza’s grim assurance, could doubt it.

It seemed a safe enough arrangement. Safe! How comparative is everything.

The girls gazed at us as we were ready to start.

“Good-by, Gregg. Good-by, Snap. Good luck.”

“We won’t be long; sit where you are.” Snap touched Venza’s shoulder for his good-by. “Listen, Venza: Molo has already told us enough to enable us to find the ship. If he moves—tries anything—kill him! It might even be easier in the end. Remember that.”

“Right,” she said.

We left them. How casual a parting can be when in the stress of danger—the intentness of a stake greater than one’s own life! But we hardly reasoned it. We were only eager to get to the rim of that cauldron.

A minute or two, cautiously shoving ourselves along the rocks, and we were crouching there. The cauldron was about two hundred feet broad and fifty feet deep: an irregularly circular bowl. The starlight gleamed on it, and there were dots of small artificial light. We saw a group of small metal buildings, very low and squat, like balls mashed down, flattened in a bulging disc-shape; between them were tiny skeleton towers. The towers, two or three times

the height of a man, were spread at regular intervals in a hundred-foot circle, with a group of three or four in the center. There seemed some twenty or thirty of them. Taut wires connected their tops, each tower with every other, so that the wires were a lacework above the little disc-buildings. The bottoms of the towers were grounded with electrical contacts, and every tower had a ground connection with each other by means of cables.

Far to one side, across the bowl from us, was a single globe-dwelling, with lighted windows. From its ground doorway, a narrow metal catwalk extended like a sidewalk on the ground, winding and branching among the towers and discs.

THIS WAS the exterior of the Wandl gravity station. For a moment we stared. It lay silent and dark, save for the starlight and the little lights on the towers. No sign of humans. Then in a moment we saw movement in the globe-dwelling. Men were there; the moving figures showed against the lighted window circles. Then a man came to the doorway, gazed at the sky and went back.

I whispered to Snap, "Where is the best entrance to the underground rooms? Molo didn't say which one."

We saw where, at several points, the winding catwalk terminated in low, dome-like kiosks, giving ingress downward. One was on our slope of the cauldron, not more than fifty feet away.

"That's the one we'll try," Snap murmured. "Wouldn't you think so? Anita said—"

He stopped suddenly. The top of the distant globe-dwelling was glowing. A little round patch there was radiant, like a lighted window. A transparent ray was coming from inside. The operators within this globe were observing the sky; training instruments upon it, no doubt.

And now he saw in the sky the third of those sword-like beams. It had probably been visible there for some time, but we had not noticed it.

"That's Venus," I murmured.

It seemed so. A blurred star, red in this atmosphere, was close above our horizon. The light-beam stood out from it, sweeping up to the zenith. It was clearer overhead, partly because of the atmosphere, and because, as it swept the zenith, it was passing within a few million miles of us.

The gravity station here was about to make contact with the Venus beam! We heard a muffled siren, a signal echoing from the subterranean control rooms. The current went into all these wires and towers and twenty-foot ground discs. The hiss and the throbbing hum of it was audible. The discs and towers were glowing; red at first, then violet; then that milky, opalescent white. The overhead wire-aerials were snapping with a myriad tiny jumping sparks.

I saw now that the top of each tower was a grid of radiant wires—a six-foot circular projector with a mirror reflector close beneath it and a series of prisms and lenses just above. It all glowed opalescent in a moment; a dazzling glare.

Then the tower tops were swinging. The light from them now had reached the intensity of an upflung beam, and the projectors were swinging to focus the beam inward. The focal point seemed about a thousand feet overhead. All the beams merged there; and, guided by the towers directly underneath, a single shaft was standing into the sky.

The entire cauldron depression was now a blinding mass of opalescent light. We could see nothing but the milk-white inferno of glare. It painted the rocks up here on the rim so that we shrank back, shaded our eyes and gazed into the sky. And from the cauldron, the hum and hiss of the current, the snapping of

sparks, were all lost in a wild electrical screaming turmoil.

Overhead, we saw the Wandl beam from Venus.* Again, for a moment of the contact, there was that bursting light in the sky.

The contact with the Venus beam lasted a minute or two. Snap and I, on the cauldron rim, were engulfed

in the blaze of reflected light and the wild scream of sound.

Then presently the turmoil subsided. The contact in the sky was broken. The tow-rope of Venus jerked itself away. But on the next Venus rotation it would be attacked again!

Another few minutes passed. The little circular depression beneath us

*A full analysis of what our Earth scientists now believe were the nature and the operation of the Wandl gravity controls would occupy far more space than I have here available. Yet an understanding of the fundamental principles will be advantageous to readers of this narrative. Gravity is like electricity, like all electronization—what it does is understood; science knows in a measure how to control it—and yet the nature of the thing itself remains inexplicable. It is a force; an energy latent to all material bodies. That it is electrical in character—a force created by the movement of electrons—that much is now generally recognized.

The Wandl control station sent out a beam which I have variously termed the "opalescent beam," the "gravity ray." We met it in several forms, as I have described. They differed in size, from the hand projectors to this giant beam of the control station, but all were fundamentally the same. It was, in effect, electronized light, carrying either a positive gravitational attraction or the negative reverse, repulsion.

But how? Why, over millions of miles, did it exert this force? Why does our Sun, over millions of miles, attract our Earth? Those are questions about which very much has been written but very little is understood. There is, there must be, some intangible connection between, let us say, the Earth and the Sun; something, call it ether if you like, through which the force of gravity operates.

The Wandl beam was a more tangible connection than that. It was, for analogy, like a stream of electrified water, striking a distant object and giving an electrical shock.

This Wandl control station had two functions: the control of the planet's movements—i. e., its axial rotation and its orbital flight—and its ability to apply gravitational force to other celestial bodies.

Wandl controlled her own movements by applying gravity force, attraction and repulsion, to all the celestial star-field; and doubtless also by applying the repulsive beam tangentially against the ether like rocket streams. In this respect the planet was operated not unlike one of our familiar space-ships; in effect it was itself a gigantic globular vehicle. An infinite variety of scientific devices must have come into play to make this practical. Even the crudest of our interplanetary freighters employs scores of mechanical principles in its detailed operation.

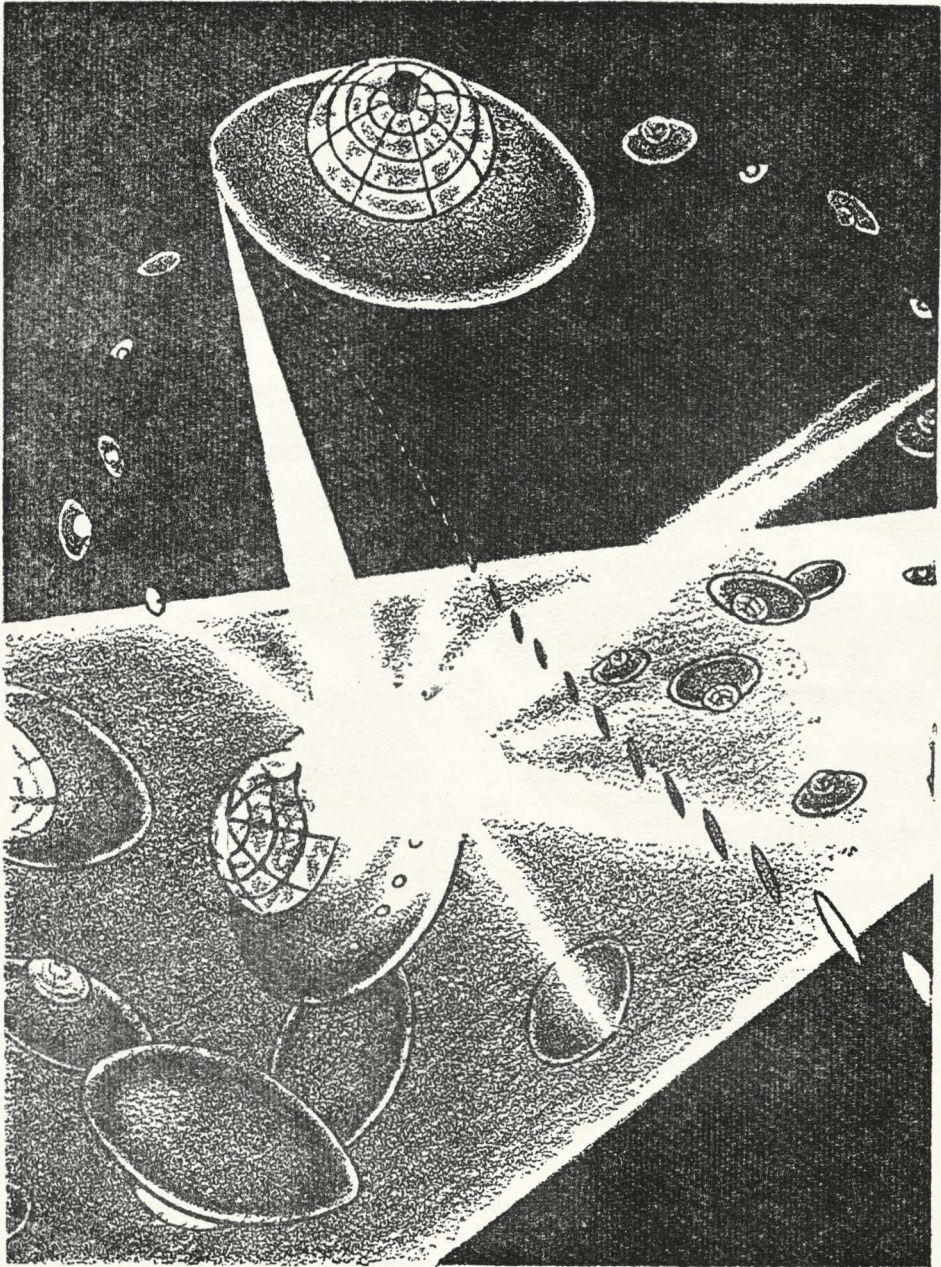
I have touched upon some of Wandl's needs: equalization of surface temperature; avoidance of natural disturbance, etc. And it is thought, also, that Wandl's atmosphere could be highly electronized and de-electronized at will, with a resulting aberration of the natural light-ray reflected from her into space; and this, properly handled, doubtless quickly checked any prolonged winds. (The aberration also caused a blurring of the image of Wandl when viewed telescopically by distant worlds. This, as I have mentioned, was one of the first puzzling things our Earth astronomers noticed when gazing at the mysterious oncoming invader.)

Most interesting to this narrative is Wandl's attempt to tow our Earth, Venus and Mars away with her into interstellar space. The Wandl gravity beam obviously had its limits of effective range. This, apparently, was some ten million miles. Wandl could have approached that close to Earth and applied the beam directly. There were, though we did not know it as we crouched on that cauldron rim, several similar cauldrons in this neighborhood. Each of them was equipped to fling a beam like this; and all were operated from the same control room, which presently we were to see. With a beam directly upon each, and using her other beams for space-movement, Wandl doubtless could have dragged us away.

But she could not get within ten million miles of Earth, Venus and Mars simultaneously! And, with the Earth rotating under her directly applied ray, its applied force would be far less; perhaps, so far as known, insufficient.

So, like a giant lever—and a tow-rope—an electronic light-stream was planted upon Earth, Venus and Mars. For simplicity, I will only consider the Earth. That light-beam, planted in Great-New York, as I have said, was inexplicable in its physical nature. But its use was obvious. As though it were a lever—a fifty-million-mile-long crowbar—Wandl applied her attracting force to its end! The principle of a lever needs no explanation; and an electrified beam of light carrying a gravity current from these contacting rays can readily be conceived.

With the Earth, Venus and Mars not rotating, Wandl would gather the ends of the three tow-ropes together and tow her three giant prizes away, like one vessel towing three others!—keeping them safely apart one from the other by smaller beams directed diagonally upon them!



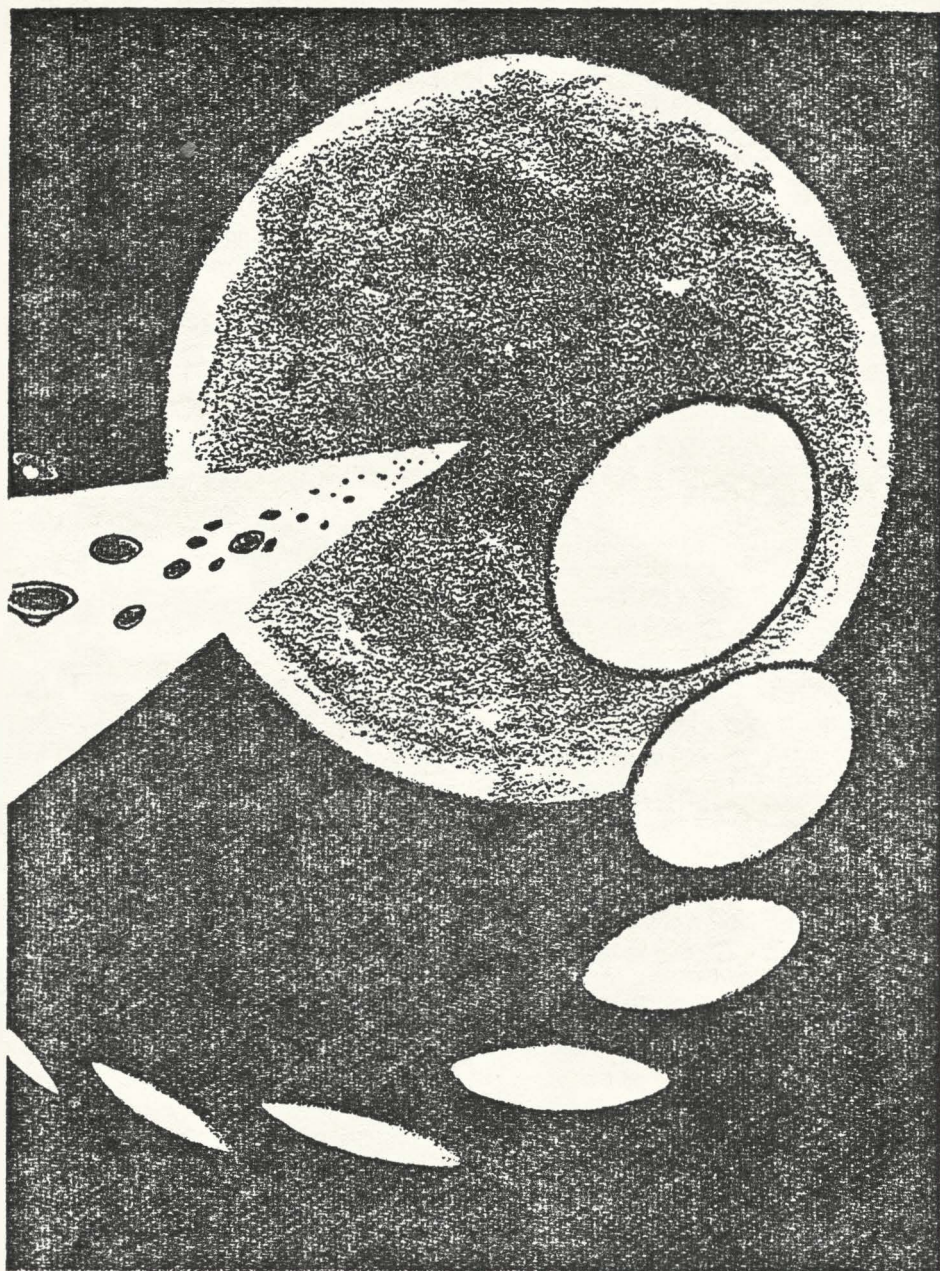
was dim and silent as we had first seen it. Figures were moving within the dwelling structure. From several of the underground entrances figures came up: the ten-foot insect-like shapes of workers. Three or four of the brains came bouncing up, moving along the ground catwalk with little leaps.

All the figures entered the distant main dwelling house. The contact was over.

"Probably hardly anyone left down below," Snap whispered. "Now's our chance."

"If we can get into that opening without being seen...."

"Shadows—down the rocks to the



left. Damnation, Gregg, we can make it in one calculated leap!"

"I'll try it first. I'll get in and wait for you."

"Right."

We each had a gravity cylinder at our belt and a ray-gun in our hand. The slope of the depression was dim here, merely starlit; it was a steep,

broken, and fairly shadowed descent some fifty feet to the little dome-like kiosk which marked the nearest subterranean entrance. I went down it with a swoop, landed in a heap beside the kiosk and ducked into it. Instinct made me fear a guard, but reason told me none would be here; there was

only the danger of encountering someone coming up.

I WAS at the top of a winding, descending passage, a step-ter-raced floor; there were occasional lights in the ceiling. In a moment Snap joined me.

"Got here! I wonder how far down it goes? If we meet anybody—"

I gripped him. "Snap, no matter what happens do it with a rush. Keep with me; and if I shout for us to get out—"

"We go out with a rush!"

"Yes. Get back to the girls. Use your ray-gun and the gravity projector in getting back to them—and get away—without me if I fall."

"Same for you, Gregg."

We went down the deserted passage. We had had experience in movement on Wandl now; we handled ourselves more deftly. We went down several hundred feet. The passage branched, but there always seemed a main tunnel.

It was all deserted. There were distant, dimly lighted, silent rooms. Mechanism rooms? Great factories of the strange forms of electronic gravity currents Wandl used? Some were in operation; a hum issued from them; workers moved about.

We stopped to consult. The girls, and Molo himself, had described what we would find—a main route leading to the control room where the delicate mechanisms which operated all this were centralized: the nerve center of Wandl. It seemed now that we were following that main route.

A worker came with a swimming leap past us. We dropped into a hollowed shadow at a tunnel intersection, and he went swooping by.

"Lord!" Snap murmured. "That was too close for comfort!"

A GAIN we advanced. The tunnel turned sharply. Down a short slope a glowing room was disclosed, with two or three workers moving

within it. The main control room! We could not doubt it. Molo, in his enthusiasm, had once described it clearly to the girls—its great skeins of little thread-like wires spread upon the walls—the myriad tiny opalescent discs contacted with the small gray rock surface under the tangled masses of thread-wire—the levers and dials banked on the circular tables: they were unmistakable features.

"There it is, Snap!" I whispered in his ear. "In that central rack. Those insulated rods; see them? Anita told us they used them to adjust the discs. Watch out for the current."

"But it's off now, Gregg!"

"You'd short-circuit somewhere. Keep your hands off; use the rods."

"The operators—"

He got no further. A figure lunged into us from behind! A giant worker! His largest pincer bit into my shoulder; his hollow shout resounded. The operators of the control room came with leaps at us.

There was a moment of wild confusion. Light, seemingly almost weightless bodies flapped against us; arms gripped us—but they were flimsy. The huge body-shells cracked gruesomely as we struck with our solid fists.

A moment of gruesome turmoil passed. No bolts were fired. The shouts were brief down here in the narrow confines of the tunnel. Panting, bruised more by our lunges against the rocks than by our adversaries, we ceased our wild lunges. We did not look at the scattered, broken and crushed bodies drifting now to the floor.

"Now, Snap! Hurry! Others may come!"

We lunged into the glowing control room; seized from the central rack the long, insulated poles. They had a gratifying feel of weight. I picked one up; jumped with a twenty-foot step to the wall.

The wires came down like cobwebs under my sweeping blows. The lie-

tle discs knocked off as though they were fungus growth. Sparks flew around me; shafts of electronic radiance spat out. The wall was hissing over all its length as I ranged up and down it. The tangled, broken threads of wire writhed like living things on the floor, then crumpled, fused and turned black.

I SWEPT that wall-segment with frantic haste, lunged around and started another way. Across the room I saw Snap doing the same. A turmoil of electrical sound was reverberating around us—deafening, and the glare was blinding me. A belt-shaft shot from the wreckage under my rod. It seared my left arm. My sleeve burned off; the arm hung limp and tingling at my side. I stopped to rub it; in a moment strength came back to its muscles.

Snap was raging like a great heavy bird gone amok. Through the green fumes of electrical gases which were filling the room I saw him lunging at the circular tables, overturning them; they cracked like thin, polished stone as they struck the metal floor.

I finished with the wall. There was a twenty-foot square piece of metal apparatus, ramified and intricate. I heaved it over upon its side. A thousand little mirrors and prisms, dislodged from it, came out in a splintering deluge.

I was aware of Snap fighting with a brown-shelled figure. Then he was free of it; I saw it mashed and broken at his feet as I dove past, swimming in the smoke to lunge the length of a great fluorescent tube which was still dimly glowing. My pole pried it over; it crashed with a brief puff of light and the rush of an implosion as air went into its vacuum.

I found Snap panting beside me, clinging to me in mid-air. The glare was dying around us; the turmoil of sound was lessening. We were choking in the chemical fumes of the released, half burned gases. Turgid

darkness was coming to the wrecked room, with little hissing flares spitting through it.

"Enough, Gregg. Listen! Up overhead—"

A great siren from overhead was screaming into the night.

Snap panted, "Got to get out of here; can't breathe."

Together we lunged for the tunnel by which we had entered. I stood a moment, gazing back upon the strewn and scattered room.

The delicate nerve center of Wandl! Heavy green-black gas fumes swirled in it. Darkness and silence closed down.

CHAPTER XXI

The Fight on the "Star-Streak"

OVER us was turmoil; the screaming siren. Then suddenly it was checked and we heard the thump and swish of what on Earth would have been called running footsteps—and shouts.

Snap shoved me. "Don't stay there, you fool!"

We lunged up the passage. Figures barred it, but they scattered. A bolt hissed at us, but missed. At the kiosk a group of workers and three or four peering little brains leaped away in terror to let us pass.

We gained the open air. With the small gravity rays darting down with repulsion upon the rocks we mounted like rockets out of the cauldron. The upper plateau lay silent in the starlight, but the cauldron behind us was ringing with the alarm, and again the danger siren was blaring.

I changed my way to attraction, swung it to the plateau rocks ahead of me. The arc of my flight was sharply bent as I went hurtling down. Over me, I saw Snap use the same tactics. I tried to aim for where we had left the girls and Molo. I could not see them down there amid the starlit crags; and suddenly a wild

apprehension filled me. How had we dared leave them to Molo's trickery? The intentness of our determination to get into the station had dwarfed everything else; but with that accomplished, fear for the girls' safety was paramount.

Then, ahead and below me, I saw the slight figure of one of the girls, standing on a rock with arms outstretched to signal us. I changed my ray to repulsion barely in time to avoid crashing. The landing flung me in a heap; twenty feet away, Snap came whirling down. We picked ourselves up, saw Anita waving from the rock, and bounded to her.

THE girls were safe. Venza sat intent, with unwavering watchful gaze across the intervening space to where Molo had flattened himself against his rock, not daring to move.

"Still got him!" Venza exulted. "I say, he wasn't willing to take any chances with us. You did it, Snap?"

"I'm a motor-oiler if we didn't. Come on; got to get out of this! They're after us! We wrecked the whole damn place, Venza. Wandl's a normal planet now; no more of this accursed dislocation of Earth."*

I shoved at Snap. "No time to argue. You tow the girls; I'll take Molo. Got to get to the *Star-Streak*."

I lunged over and seized Molo. "We did it! Now for your vessel! It will be ill for you if she's not where you say she is."

He docilely put himself in position for me to hook my forearm under his crossed bound wrists and carry him. Snap rose up past us, towing the girls. Over the nearby cauldron a figure mounted to gaze and see the nature of this strange attacking enemy, and then sank back.

With Molo hanging to me, I mounted with my ray, following Snap and the girls into the starlight, with the turmoil of the cauldron receding until in a moment or so it was gone behind our horizon.

We headed now, not toward Wor, whence we had come, but over at an angle to the side. Our great bounding arcs soon left the mountains behind; we crossed the river, another portion of the forest, and came over undulating lowlands.

It was a flight of under half an hour. The pursuit, if indeed anyone followed us, remained below our little segment of curving horizon. Everywhere there was evidence of the storm; the forest trees were laid flat, strewn like driftwood over one area; the river had in several places lashed over its banks. The lowlands were dotted thick with globe-dwellings. Some were hanging awry on their stems; others were rolled from their place, cracked and piled into a litter.

We kept well aloft. The surface scenes were only glimpses of wreckage, moving lights and people. And there were areas which the crazy wind had seemingly spared.

*Our hope, and assumption, that we had irretrievably wrecked the entire gravity control system of Wandl, afterward was proven to be a fact. Wandl was, in effect, a normal celestial body now. The beams planted in Great-New York, Ferrok-Shahn and Grebbar still streamed across space, but there was no giant beam from Wandl to attack them.

And Wandl now could not move through space of her own volition. Like Earth, and all our other known planets, satellites, comets and asteroids, she was subject now to all the normal natural laws of celestial mechanics.

At the moment we wrecked the gravity station Wandl's position in space was, very roughly, sixty million miles from Earth, forty million from Mars, and ninety million from

Venus. This placed her somewhat outside the orbit of Mars.

She had, doubtless, at this moment when her controls were wrecked, a slow, elliptic orbital movement in the direction of our Sun; and doubtless also a very slight axial rotation. And now all the blended natural forces of the starry universe were upon her. Pulling and thrusting; seeking a balancing out of which would come her natural orbit. But it was no sudden change. No shock; no shuddering and trembling of the planet. The controls were all in neutral when we wrecked them. Wandl was being guided at that moment by natural forces. She continued so; and days, even weeks would be required before celestial path was established. But she was helpless as all the rest of our worlds now to guide herself.

THE confusion from the storm was mingled now with the spreading alarm from the gravity station. The sound of the danger siren there was still audible behind us. As we advanced into what now seemed the outskirts of a city like Wor, with a pile of solid-looking metal structures ranging the horizon ahead, I saw a distant space-ship rise up and wing away. Wandl was proceeding with the dispatching of her space navy to oppose the distantly gathering ships of Earth, Mars and Venus. No doubt with the wrecking of the control station the masters of Wandl immediately recognized the paramount importance of the coming battle in space, and promptly sent more space-forces off, despite the storm and the excitement which the wrecked station must have spread throughout the little world.

The huge, globular, disc-like ship sailed high over us, rotating with the impulse of its rock-streams; in a moment it was lost in the stars. And then another rose and followed it.

There were many human figures in the air around us now. I mounted higher, and Snap, with the girls, followed me. The figures, intent upon their own tumultuous affairs, did not seem to heed us.

Molo's vessel lay alone upon a low metal cradle. No other ship was near it; but half a mile or so away on both sides we could see others resting on their stages. Lights were moving around and upon them; but the *Star-Streak* was dark and neglected.

We poised a thousand feet over her, and to one side. I saw her as a long, low, pointed vessel, dead gray in color; longer than the *Cometara*, and seemingly more narrow, but very similar of aspect.

"Meka and I are supposed to be gathering our crew," said Molo. "No one bothers with my vessel. Will you take me to Wor now, to get Meka?"

"I will not."

Snap was drifting down with the girls. They were near us. His arm waved at me with a gesture. And then came the muffled tone of his voice.

"Shall we drop down, Gregg?"

"Yes, but cautiously. Have your gun ready."

Molo protested, "I would like to take Meka with us, and a few of my crew. You will have trouble handling the *Star-Streak*—just us three men, Gregg Haljan."

"We'll take our chances."

We dropped swiftly down upon the dark and vacant stage-platform. The gray hull of the *Star-Streak* loomed beside us; her dome arched still higher; an inclined catwalk went up to her opened deck-porte.

"I'll go first," I said softly to Snap. "Come quickly after me. Watch out; there might be someone on board."

VENZA still clung to her weapon. Mine was in my hand as I lifted Molo, and, ignoring the incline, bounded the thirty feet for the deck-porte. I landed safely, and stood Molo upon his feet.

"Don't you move," I admonished him sternly.

He stood docilely against the cabin wall of the superstructure. No one here. We had thought there might easily be one or two workmen on board.

Snap and the girls came sailing one after the other and landed on the deck beside me. We stood silent, alert. No one appeared from within the cabin, or from down the lengths of the deck. Venza was watching Molo, with her weapon upon him. Snap and I had planned this boarding: Anita and Venza to stay here and guard Molo. We would hastily search the ship; inspect the controls. We started for the cabin door oval.

"Gregg!"

It was all the warning Snap could

give. I was within the dim cabin, but he, behind me, was still on the deck. I whirled to see a dozen dark forms leaping from the roof of the cabin superstructure. Snap was all but buried by them. There were not men of Wandl, but Molo's pirate crew—Martians, Venus and Earthmen! Snap's ray-gun spat as he went down. One of the men dropped away. I saw Venza turning with startled horror, and the huge figure of Meka leaping down upon her and Anita from the roof.

For an instant, weapon in hand, I paused in the doorway. I could not fire into the turmoil of that struggling group, so instead plunged into it, striking with my fists. Molo was shouting:

"Do not kill them! I was ordered not to kill them!"

These men, so different from the insect-like workers and the brain masters of Wandl, were solid in my grip; but we were all so weightless! I felled one; but others gripped me, pounded me. A struggling mass of bodies, arms and legs, we surged up to the superstructure roof and dropped upon it. My weapon was gone. Half a dozen adversaries had me pinioned.

DOWN on the deck I saw that Venza had lost her weapon. Molo and Meka were clutching her. Snap was fighting with three or four antagonists. Anita was loose. She dove for the group in which Snap was struggling; hit them, kicked and bounded upward, to be seized by two of my own captors.

"Anita! Don't fight! They'll kill you!"

I tried to break loose, but four huge Martians were holding me.

"Oh, Gregg!"

There was horror in Anita's voice. Snap had broken away. At the open deck-port he stood, as though undecided what to do. The deck was al-

most black around him; he was silhouetted against the outside starlight. From almost at his side, in the darkness, a tiny bolt spat upward at his head. His arms went wildly out. He tumbled backward. At the top of the boarding incline his body seemed spasmodically to kick, and the thrust whirled it down into the darkness.

The end of Snap! A pang went through me. Snap, my best friend!

Molo cursed the unknown man of his crew who had fired the shot. But none would admit who did it.

"Get to your posts," Molo roared in Martian. "Enough of you are here. Lash up the prisoners; we're launching away now." He thumped his brawny sister as she passed him. "Well played, Meka!"

These wily Martians! Molo had planned that Meka was to gather the crew and wait here at the ship for him and Wyk. If they returned with us as captives—they would return here. But if by chance things went adversely, Molo reasoned we would act just as we did; and Meka and her men were lurking here in ambush, waiting for us.

All the many various portes swung closed. Anita, Venza and I, with arms and legs bound, were taken by Molo to the forward observation and control room.

The ship was resounding with signals. The interior controls in the hull-base raised the gravity-pull within the vessel to a strength compatible to Earth. Grateful return to normality! Grateful weight and stability to our bodies!

Within a few minutes the *Star-Streak* lifted from the stage. Strange, weird Wandl fell away from us. We slid upward through the atmosphere, following one of the globular Wandl vessels, and headed into space toward where, a few million miles distant, the ships of allied Earth, Venus and Mars were gathering.

CHAPTER XXII

The Advance to Battle

“THEY are visible.” Molo turned from the eyepiece of his electro-telescope. “Do you want to see them, Gregg Haljan?”

We were in the forward control and observation turret of the *Star-Streak*—Molo and his sister, Venza, Anita and myself. Unobtrusively squatting on the floor was a small, gray, rat-faced fellow, put there, weapon in hand, to watch us: a ruffian from the underworld of Grebbar, a member of the *Star-Streak's* pirate crew.

We were some ten hours out from Wandl. A group of four of the globular Wandl ships were with us, strung in a line some ten thousand miles to our left. We had been heading diagonally toward Mars. Some fifteen other Wandl vessels were ahead and others following.

We were no more than fifteen million miles from Mars when Molo sighted the allied ships.

“Will you observe them, Gregg Haljan?”

I moved to take his place at the telescope, with the gaze of Anita and Venza upon me. They sat huddled together on a low bench against the back curve of the circular turret. It was dim here, with little spots of instrument lights, and the radiance coming in the glassite plates of the enclosing dome. The loss of Snap had put a grim look upon the girls. They were dispirited; docile with Meka. They had hardly had a word with me. I think that all of us had about given up hope during those hours. Molo had consulted me several times with his policies of navigation. But I saw no chance to trick him. He was, indeed, far more experienced than I—and more skillful—

in celestial mechanics. I worked with him. One never can quite give up hope. I learned the operation and the handling of the *Star-Streak*, which was not greatly different from the *Cometara* and the *Planetara*. Poor Snap! He and I had planned to capture and navigate this *Star-Streak!* We could have handled her. There were, I gathered, some ten or fifteen men aboard her now, but no more than two or three were engaged at the navigating mechanisms. Even they, for temporary periods, could be dispensed with, for the ship's controls were all automatic, handled directly from the forward turret.

I learned too, something, though not much, of the *Star-Streak's* weapons. They were similar to those of the allied ships, since Molo in equipping his pirate craft had seized upon all the best he could find of the three worlds.

THE *Star-Streak*, during this flight toward Mars, was in close communication with the Wandl craft. There was a giant vessel—Molo called it the *Wor*, and it was off to our left now—which carried the brain master in command of the Wandl forces. Molo took his orders from the *Wor*, but since his equipment and his weapons were so wholly different—and so like his enemy ships—the *Star-Streak* was set apart.

“I can do what I like,” Molo had told me. “With my own judgment I can act. You shall see.”

“You've had plenty of experience, Molo.”

“Have I not! The terror of the starways, your worlds called me.” He chuckled vaingloriously. “I must justify it now.”

“Act, do not talk,” Meka commented sourly. “Children with toys make speeches like that, and then break their toys.”

“Fear not, sister. Never yet has the *Star-Streak* come to grief.”

And now I gazed through the electro-telescope at the waiting allied ships. They were lying some eight million miles off Mars. I gazed and saw the poised little group. There were perhaps fifty of them. The majority were Martian—long, low and very sharp-ended, and dull red in color. The wider Earth and Venus ships were silvery and drab. I could distinguish the several different types of craft in this hastily assembled fleet: many converted commercials, like my ill-starred *Cometara*; a few rakish police ships; and about a dozen of the long, narrow super-modern warships. It was their first voyage into battle. They had only been built these past few years, by peaceful governments that peacefully protested that never again would there be another war!

The little fleet was lying waiting for us; and it was being augmented by occasional others from Mars. They saw us coming now. The radiance of a Benson curve-light enveloped them, with a shaft toward us. The image of them shifted over, a million miles to one side.

Molo laughed when he saw it. "Protecting themselves already! But we are not going to attack them there!"

THE first tactics of the Wandl commanders surprised me. We swung away from the course to Mars and headed diagonally toward Earth and Venus. Earth was the nearer to us, with Venus some forty million miles beyond her. For hours we turned in that sweeping curve. Then, with our Wandl convoy following, we headed for Earth. I could not help admiring the way the *Star-Streak* was handled. She turned more sharply than the Wandl craft; and before our next meal, we were leading them all.

Would the allied ships follow us? It was almost immediately apparent that they were coming. But from

their poised position, hours of attaining an adequate velocity were needed. The other allied vessels approaching from Venus and Earth checked their flight and turned after us. We passed within five or six hundred thousand miles of several of them.

I found now that some twenty other Wandl ships leaving Wandl after us had headed directly for Earth. They arrived almost at the same time as ourselves. We were all together presently—the *Star-Streak* and nearly fifty Wandl ships—gathered close to one side of the Moon. The allies—there was soon a total of about a hundred of them—were strung through space, scattered, with varying velocities and flight direction, but most of them endeavoring to get between the Moon and Earth.

This was the first day. I call it that: a routine of meals which Meka grimly served us in the turret, and a little sleep when she took the girls below and I lay on the turret floor. I wondered who was in command of this allied force, and did not learn until afterward that it was Grantline. The *Cometara* had fallen upon the Moon Apennines, not very far from where my old *Planetara* still lay, near the base of Archimedes. But Grantline and a few of his companions, with their powered suits, had struggled free from the gravity pull of the wreckage; and a few hours later, a ship out from Earth picked them up.

Grantline, on one of the Earth police ships, commanded the fleet now, and he afterward told me in detail how he endeavored to conduct his forces in the battle—thus enabling me to describe it from both viewpoints. He had been cruising toward Mars when he saw us make the turn. He thought a landing upon Earth might be contemplated; and hastened all his ships into the area between the Moon and Earth to cut us off.

BUT that was what Wandl wanted, as presently we were to learn. The Wandl ships, with the *Star-Streak* among them, made a complete slow circuit of the Moon. It took another day. Molo said very little to me in explanation of the Wandl tactics, but I think it was intended to lure Grantline into following. A few of the allied ships did follow us around. But not many; the rest stayed carefully guarding the line between the Moon and Earth.

There had been no encounter yet between the hostile ships.* Wandl seemed unwilling, and Grantline was cautious. He did not know what weapons these strange globular vessels would use; his only experience had been our encounter, on the *Cometara*, with the whirling discs.

Then, at the end of the second day, came the first clash. The *Star-Streak*, and all the Wandl ships, were again clustered on the Earth side of the Moon. They were hovering perhaps twenty thousand miles above its surface. Grantline's force was a hundred thousand miles off, toward Earth. One of the Wandl ships came tentatively forward, and Grantline sent one of the new-style warships to meet it.

They encircled each other. Both were cautious, but there was a passing within fifty miles. The Earth ship fired her bolts. The insulated barrage of the Wandl ship withstood them. There was a shower of ether sparks close to the ship, and a reddening of the hull, but nothing more. It seemed that the electro-barrages of the Wandl and allied ships were very similar in nature—an aura of electromagnetism, enclosing the ship like a curtain fifty feet away, absorbed the electronic stream of the enemy bolt. The Wandl ship flung no bolts! She loosed a score of the whirling discs during the passing. They were of varying sizes, but similar to those which cut and wrecked the *Cometara*. But in this instance the Grantline

ship was able to destroy each of them as it came close.

THIS was the first encounter. The Earth warship went back to its squadron and the Wandl vessel rejoined its fellows. It had fired no bolts! Grantline suspected now what afterward proved to be the fact. These Wandl vessels were not equipped with long-range electronic guns. The Wandl defensive tactics were necessary. They feared a widespread encounter. They were hovering in a compact group, of some five hundred miles' area, over the Moon surface. Their purpose was not yet apparent. But Grantline saw now that one of the Wandl ships was dropping down and landing on the Moon. It skimmed the Apennines and landed not far from Archimedes.

What was that for? Grantline wondered. He noticed that the lowering, closely gathered Wandl fleet tried to mask the landing. And their gravity rays, with repulsive force, darted out to impede the Grantline vessels if they tried to advance. This Earthward hemisphere of the Moon was now largely in shadow. But Grantline's Zed-ray magnifiers showed the vessel on the Moon. Apparatus was being unloaded. It seemed, down there on the rocky Moon plain in the foothills of the Apennines, that some extensive, elaborate base was being prepared.

It was for this the hovering Wandl fleet was waiting—holding off from conflict until this Moon base was ready. When Grantline reached that conclusion, he ordered all his vessels forward to a general attack!

*The huge distances involved in the engagement must always be kept in mind. The gravity rays from the Wandl ships were only a slight disturbing element at long distance. Grantline's Zed-rays and Benson curve-lights were defensive only. For offense, Grantline's electronic guns were of varying range, but all were from ten to two hundred miles. And up to this time none of the opposing vessels came within a thousand miles of each other.

CHAPTER XXIII

The Battle in the Shadow of the Moon

DURING this time, on the *Star-Streak*, as we made with the Wandl fleet that preliminary circuit of the Moon, an incident occurred which changed everything for me—opened up the future from blank despair to tense hope. I had noticed several times as we gathered in the *Star-Streak's* forward turret, that Venza and Anita were eyeing me. Their expressions were very strange, unfathomable, furtive; but I realized that they were trying, for some reason, to attract my attention.

We had no opportunity to speak secretly. Molo or Meka, or that rat-faced Venus guard, were always too near us. And Molo kept me busy with computations of our course. We rounded the Moon. We gathered with the Wandl fleet some twenty thousand miles above the lunar surface, and I watched that ship descend and land. Like Grantline, I wondered what for, but Molo gave me no hint. I saw, through his electro-telescopes, bloated figures in pressure suits unloading mechanisms; then they seemed to be placing huge contact-discs in a circle on the lunar rocks. It was reminiscent of the Wandl gravity station, and the contact-beam which Molo had planted in Great-New York.

Then at last the girls had an opportunity to whisper to me. A swift phrase came from Anita.

"Gregg! Snap is alive! Hiding on board!"

I gaped. Snap alive?

"He's loose! Planning to rescue us—you and he to capture the *Star-Streak!*"

"Anita! Tell me—how—"

"No more now! Our room below—he's near it. He spoke to us."

No more! She moved away from

me. But it was enough! Snap alive! But I had seen him shot—and fall! But I recalled that when he fell beside the ship, no one had bothered to go down after the body, and at that time the hull-ports were open.

Renewed hope! It seemed as though all the world had opened up to us again. After a time Meka took the girls below. I sat with Molo, gazing down at the dark and gloomy surface of the Moon. I had finished the mathematical work Molo had given me. My thoughts were with Anita and Venza, down in their cabin now with Meka. Perhaps even now Snap, with a rush, was joining them.

I hardly heard Molo's low muttered curse as he set his lenses for a slight alteration of our slow circular course among the Wandl fleet.

"That fellow at my gravity-shifts acts like a nit-wit. He has them disarranged."

It snapped me to sudden alertness.

"Something wrong, Molo? Nonsense!"

"These men of my crew answer my controls too slowly. They should jump when my signals come."

THE plates suddenly shifted normally, but there had been an interval of delay. Molo was puzzled and annoyed. My heart pounded as I wondered if he would investigate, but he did not.

"You had better sleep, Haljan. Take advantage now; we shall have action presently. Did you figure our emerging curve?"

I shoved my computations across the little table at him. "There you are."

"You are quick, Haljan."

"We should emerge from the Moon shadow in about two hours with that course."

"But I won't hold it. We're staying close near here with the other vessels. Take your sleep, Haljan."

I stretched on the narrow floor mattress. The turret was silent, save for

the mechanism hum and the interior throb of the vessel. What was Snap doing? Had he already interfered with the *Star-Streak's* mechanisms?

I was aroused from a doze by Molo's activity in the turret. The girls and Meka were still below. The ever-silent Venus man, squatting in the turret corner, still had his gun upon me.

I saw that Grantline's ships, over a wide fan-shaped spread, were advancing.

And presently were engaged in the soundless turmoil of the battle. Not by any chance can I picture more than fragments; chaotic things I saw and experienced, and intermingled, incoherent chaos, out of which the imagination may get an image of the whole giant canvas. Six or eight hours of bursting electronic light and puffs of darkness in that spread of battle area within the Moon-shadow—a strangely silent battle of crossing lights. Ships a thousand miles apart, gathering velocity with great tangential curves; passing each other in a second; sweeping a thousand miles apart again, turning and coming back. A hundred engagements.

The *Star-Streak* was very fast, very mobile, and, unlike all the other Wandl vessels, had the allies' own weapons to use against them. I saw now why they called Molo the terror of the starways!

WE swept into the shadowed battle area. Over all its thousand-mile spread were the radiant Wandl gravity-beams, disturbing and impeding the course of Grantline's ships; the luminous gleam of projectile rockets, like little comets, launched by the Wandl craft, carrying high explosives; the radiance of the rocket-streams which all the vessels were using now for close maneuvering; the glare of Grantline's searchlight bombs and his white search-beams to disclose the deadly whirling discs which the guns of his

vessels must seek out and destroy. A chaos of silent light, stabbed here and there with Grantline's darkness bombs—bombs of limited local range which exploded in space and which, for a few minutes' duration, absorbed all light-rays, giving a temporary effect of darkness.

And then wreckage! Broken, leprous Wandl vessels whose barrage at close range had been smashed by Grantline's guns; torn and littered allied ships, struck by the huge exploding comet-projectiles and the whirling discs; airless hulks, and scattered fragments which no longer resembled a ship at all but only a hull plate, or a torn segment of dome. And little drifting blobs—the survivors in pressure suits who had leaped from the wreckage; little blobs ignored, whirled away or drawn forward as by chance the sweeping gravity-beams fell upon them; tiny derelicts, floating storm-tossed until the Moon's attraction caught and pulled them down, or a whirling disc cut through them, or the distant aura of a bolt shocked them to a merciful death.

It was a three-dimensional, thousand-mile spread of fantasy infernal. Out of it, after an hour or two, a steady sift of every manner of wreckage was drifting down upon the Moon; the scene began to blur. A haze like glowing stardust, or the radiance from a comet's tail, was spreading a weirdly luminous mist, blurring, obscuring the scene—no doubt the released electrons and the dissipating gases of the space guns and exploding projectiles, forming a dust in the ether, which glowed in the mingled starlight and earthlight.

THE *Star-Streak* had plunged, during these six or eight hours, through the battle area. This terror of the starways! Our several encounters were all characterized by the *Star-Streak's* extreme flexibility, her speed, mobility—and Molo's reckless

skill. We came through unscathed. There is a certain advantage for the man who seems not to care for his own life!

But there was an encounter—the last one, as it chanced, just before we emerged downward out of the ether-fog and found ourselves no more than a thousand miles above the Moon's surface—where our adversary was equally reckless and only Molo's skill and perhaps an enormity of luck saved us.

We came upon a Venus police ship. We plunged, as though seeking a collision. And the Venus ship was willing! For a moment of chaos, both barrages held against the exchange of bolts. Then we rolled over and tilted down from the impulse of the stern rockets. The passing must have been within feet—not miles. And in that second, Molo timed a shot to strike at the enemy bottom. It went through their barrage. Behind us, a second later, there was only strewn wreckage of the ship, so finely powdered that it became a silvery radiance, like moonlight shining on a little patch of fog.

"Not too bad?" Molo gazed around for appreciation. "Not bad, Gregg Haljan? Molo is not too unskilful?"

We hung now close above the Moon surface, with the battle area over us. Out of the ether-fog up there came the drifting wreckage; and now the Wandl ships were one by one coming down. Not so many of them, now! No more than ten of them emerged.

Grantline did not follow. His ships withdrew the other way. The fog gradually dispersed. Grantline could now take stock of the battle. And he had been victorious! One might call it that, since his percentage of strength, numerically, was greater now than when the battle began. Ten remaining Wandl ships—and the allies had about twenty-five.

Ghastly, hollow victory indeed; Another hour passed. Grantline's twenty-five ships were gathered in a

close group, ten thousand miles above the Moon surface. Under them, the ten Wandl vessels and the *Star-Streak* seemed ranging in a five hundred-mile circle. Down through it, on the rocks of the Moon, in the foothills of the Apennines, the mechanism established there abruptly sprang into action.

IT was a giant gravity-beam! Of infinitely greater power than any Wandl vessel could generate, it flung out its spreading, conical ray.* The beam had about a hundred-foot diameter at its base on the rocks. It passed upward through the circle of Wandl vessels, and its spread bathed all of Grantline's ships at once! An attractive beam so powerful that the vessels were helpless! Against all their efforts they were pinned and drawn downward. A slight velocity at first, but with a tremendous acceleration. Within an hour they were hurtling, coming together as they speeded down the narrowing cone of the beam. The ten thousand miles—their distance above the Moon—was cut to five thousand. The Wandl ships drew sidewise, keeping well out of range, to let them pass. In another thirty minutes they would crash against the rocks.

I gazed in horror from the *Star-Streak's* turret. We were sidewise to the angle of the beam. Grantline's ships were pulled together now into almost a fifty-mile group. They hung all askew. Helplessly pinned, some broadside, some upended. The movement of their fall was so rapid that even with the naked eye it was apparent.

*This was the ultimate purpose of all the Wandl tactics—to manipulate Grantline into his present position. This gravity-beam, though far smaller, was comparable to the one used by the Wandl control station. A rock contact against a huge mass, i. e., Wandl, and here, the Moon, was necessary to give the ray its power. No ship could generate such a ray. Hence, the Wandlites chose this battleground, where they could establish themselves upon our deserted Moon.

"Got them now!" Molo chuckled. "This is the end for them, Gregg Haljan."

There were only three of us in the turret: Molo and I, and my silent, watchful guard—a huge Martian, now, who sat cross-legged, with a ray-gun pointed at me. Meka and the two girls had been below during all the engagement. It was over now. During this lull Molo had sent the men from the deck-gun portes to their hull quarters. Our decks were empty. The bridges and catwalks up here had momentarily no occupants. The *Star-Streak* had little velocity, save a slow drift downward toward the Moon surface, which now was only a few hundred miles beneath us. The lunar disc was a great dark spread of desolation, with only the sunlight topping the distant horizon limb; and from under us, to the side, the light-point source of the giant gravity-beam. Over us were the watching Wandl vessels—and, still higher, the helpless knot of Grant-line's ships hurtling down.

Silent drama of space!

"Got them now!" Molo repeated. "In another—"

HE NEVER finished. From the open doorway of the turret a figure rose up. Snap! His aspect, even more than his appearance, transfixed me. Snap, with his clothes torn, grimy and spattered with blood; his face pale and gaunt, with blazing hol-

low eyes, and above it the shock of rumpled red hair! In one hand he clutched a ray-gun, and in the other a naked, blood-stained knife!

My Martian guard squatting on the floor half-turned; Snap's bolt met him before he could raise his weapon. He tumbled dead almost at my feet; and mingled with the hiss of the bolt was Snap's shout at the unarmed Molo.

"Into the corner, you! Back up, you damned traitor! Else I'll kill you like I've killed everybody else on this ship!"*

I had leaped and seized the gun, which was still in the hand of the dead Martian guard.

"Snap—the girls—"

"Down below. Free; they've got Meka bound and gagged, locked and sealed in a bunk-room. Gregg, bring them up! I'll hold this accursed traitor; no need to kill him. By the gods, I've killed enough! Gregg! What—"

He suddenly saw for the first time the vast silent drama in the firmament outside the dome windows. "Gregg, for the love of—"

"No time now, Snap! I'll get the girls."

"Watch out; I might have missed somebody down below!"

He had! Three men appeared on the forward deck near the foot of our turret ladder. My bolt spat down upon them; two of them fell. The other ran aft, toward where I saw Venza and Anita appearing from the

*It was not until considerable time afterward that I had opportunity of hearing from Snap what had happened to him. Even then he was reticent about those hours when he crept about the ship, desperately prowling with his dripping knife. But I saw the members of the pirate crew, which he had encountered, one by one in the dim corridors, catwalks and bunk-rooms of the hull. That he had caused no alarm was undoubtedly owing to the turmoil of the battle.

Snap was reticent about all this, but he was characteristically triumphant over the strategy by which he had escaped capture when we boarded the *Star-Streak*. During that fight he had found himself loose, and in the shadows against the rail by the opened deck-porte. His gun was in his hand. He

himself had fired what seemed to us the fatal shot! Aimed it upward past his head, from the darkness down by his leg. So unusual a thing, none of us suspected it! The aura of the bolt all but knocked him senseless; it was not difficult to pretend that gesture of flinging up his arms and tumbling backward. His wits held enough so that he kicked his body sharply downward; and in the outside darkness he shot down beside an opened hull-porte which he had seen as we came aboard. He crept into that porte; hid aboard the ship. It was he who, finding one of the control rooms vacant, had accidentally interfered with the shifting mechanisms and thus caused annoyance from Molo in the turret above. And later he was able to communicate with the girls.

lounge doorway of the cabin superstructure. I fired again, and the running man tumbled forward on his face. He was the last of the pirate crew.

Molo was crouching, half bending forward over his instrument table, with Snap's gun upon him. The girls burst upon us. We armed them. Meka was safely fastened down below. We backed Molo to the floor in the corner, with Venza and Anita watching him.

SNAP and I were in control of the ship. For temporary periods the automatics would handle the gravity-shifters. I could operate them here from the turret. We had a downward velocity toward the Moon; five hundred miles below us, no more, was the base of that diabolical gravity ray which was so swiftly pulling the Grantline ships to their destruction!

I gripped Snap and told him what we must do. "The forward gun on the starboard side—you can aim and fire it, Snap! With a close range; it's almost identical with our Earth guns—the Francine projectors. With a close range you can handle it, and I'll give a close mark! You can handle it."

He dashed for the deck. I set the levers. Gravity-plates with full bow attraction; stern repulsion toward the Earth; and the stern rocket-streams at highest power. The *Star-Streak* responded so smoothly! With acceleration such as only Molo's famous terror of the starways could attain, we dove for the Moon!

Breathless minutes! Those Wandl ships up in the firmament behind our stern would probably do nothing; they would not understand this sudden move of their friendly ship! The brain masters, the insect-like Wandlites down on the Moon rocks operating the mechanism of the gravity-ray, now—hardly a mile from it—diving for the mechanism at its source. Twenty-thousand feet of altitude. . .

I bent our rocket-streams up for the start of our turning. Bow-hull gravity-plates next . . . ten thousand feet . . . five thousand. . .

HOW close we went I never knew. It was seconds now, not minutes. I shifted all the controls. Our bow lifted as we straightened. The whole spreading lunar surface tilted and dipped. Snap fired! I saw the bolt flash at the tilting landscape and a puff of light down there on the rocks. And an instant later, vacant rocks where the little cluster of men and mechanisms had been! And the upflung gravity-beam was gone!

The giant towering cliffs of the mountain of Archimedes seemed to rush at our upturning bow. The great dark crater-mouth slid under our hull. But we cleared it; the maw of blackness slid down and away; the whole lunar world tilted down and dwindled as we mounted again into the starlight.

Minutes passed, while we mounted. Above our upstanding bow was a new drama. The suddenly released Grantline ships, almost level with the ten Wandl vessels when the ray vanished, turned sidewise. Desperately rushing; and the poised Wandl craft, devoid of velocity, could not pick it up to escape. Grantline, for those minutes, ignored the frantically flung discs. A desperate melee, all at close quarters. . . . We saw the spitting, puffing lights and the silent turmoil, hidden presently by the spreading, rolling clouds of ether-smoke.

Then out of it came drifting the wreckage. We plunged through an end of the glowing fog, encountered nothing but two triumphant Venus vessels. With them we mounted into the upper starlight.

This was the end of the battle. The victorious Grantline ships one by one came lunging up: only twelve of them. No Wandl vessels were left. . . .

The great spreading cloud of ether-

smoke drifted down like a shroud to hide the wreckage; drifted and settled to the lunar surface—a great radiant area of fog, gleaming in the earthlight.

CHAPTER XXIV

A Little Pyre in the Sunlight

THERE is very little more, pertinent to this narrative, that I need add of the events on Earth, Venus and Mars during this momentous summer. The main facts are history now: the wild storms, the damage done by outraged nature and the panics among the people—all of it has been detailed as public news. The strange light-beams planted by Wandl in Great-New York, Grebbar and Ferrok-Shahn have not yet burned themselves away; but they are lessening, and scientists say that they will soon be gone.

The changed calendars call this the New Era. The axes of the three worlds were not appreciably altered; the climates are at last restoring to normal. But the axial rotations of all three planets were slowed by that attacking Wandl beam before we wrecked the gravity station. The Earth day has been lengthened, causing the new calendar—the New Era. Our year, formerly of approximately 365¼ days, now contains, the astronomers say, but 358.7 days.

Molo and Meka have been returned to Ferrok-Shahn. They were tried

there for piracy and treason, and are imprisoned.

And Wandl? With her gravity controls wrecked, Wandl became subject to the balancing celestial forces. During those succeeding months of the summer and autumn no other space-vessels appeared from her; nor did our worlds investigate. Her presence here—even a little world one-sixth the size of the Moon—was causing disturbance enough!

Wandl came with slow velocity, like a dallying, strangely sluggish cornet about to round our Sun. What would her final orbit be? By fortunate chance she headed in, far from the Earth and Venus; missed Mercury and Vulcan by a wide margin; went close around the Sun; came out again.

But the pull of the Sun, and Mercury and Vulcan, dragged her back. Her velocity was not great enough.

I recall that late autumn afternoon when, with Anita, Snap and Venza, I sat in the observatory near Washington, gazing at Wandl through the dark glass of the solarscope. Doomed invader! She showed now as a tiny dark dot over the Sun's giant, blazing surface. This was her final plunge! The dot was presently swallowed and gone! It seemed, amid those giant, licking streamers of blazing gas, that there was an extra puff of light.

And some claim now that for a brief time our sunlight was a trifle brighter and a trifle warmer—a little pyre to mark the end of Wandl, the Invader. . . .

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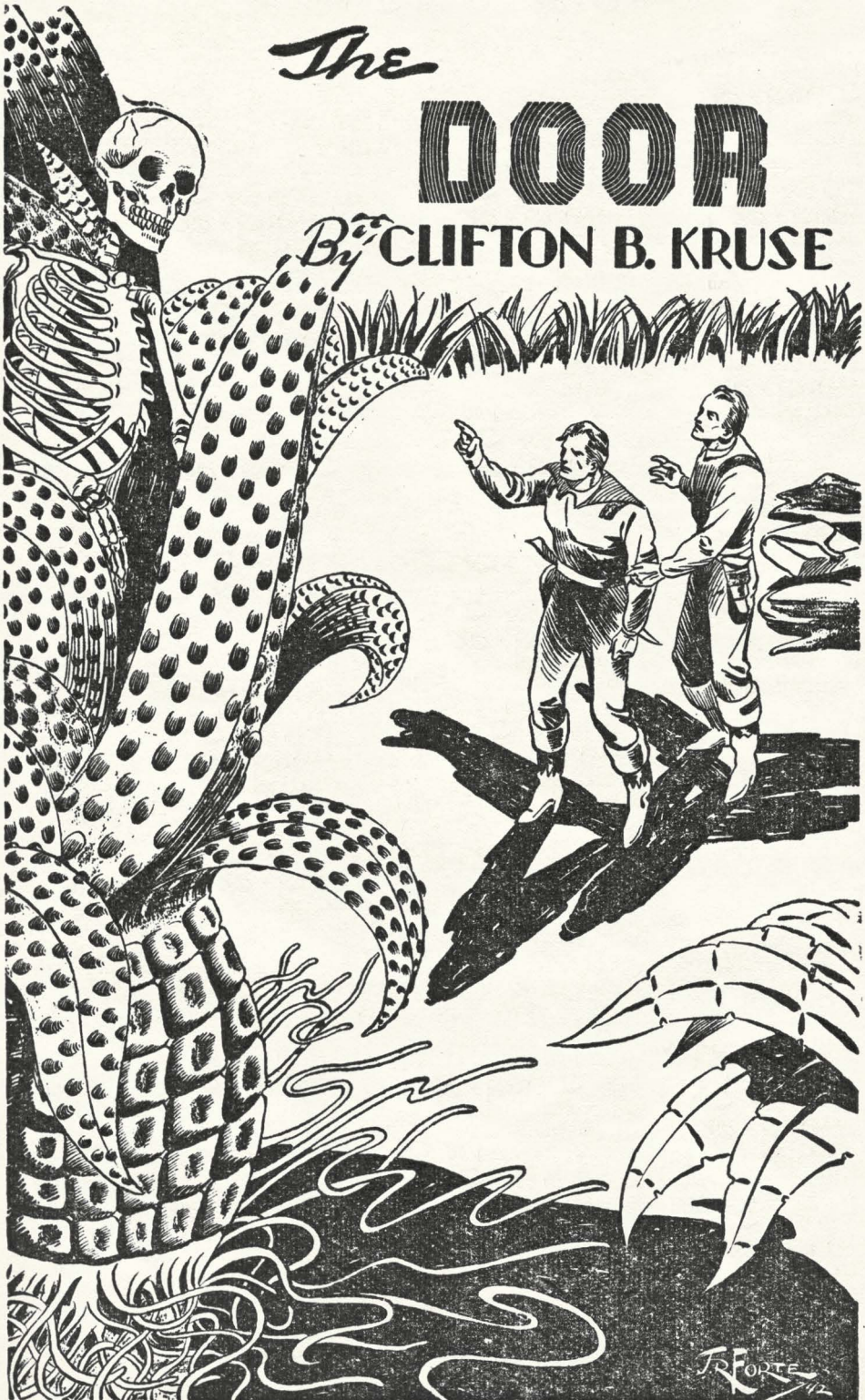
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ON ALL STANDS

The

DOOR

By CLIFTON B. KRUSE



They saw the skeleton drop from the leaves, bare bones, devoid of all flesh!



*Cory's dimensional door was a new
frontier to strange and dangerous lands!*

CORY had extinguished all the lights in the room so that the faint, exquisitely soft radiance of the grid stood out like a sun against the receding depths of space. His tense, quickened breathing rasped the heavy solemnity of darkness as his fingers touched the keyboard.

"Are you ready, McQuay?" he whispered the question.

"Go ahead, Cory."

"It will require only a moment. The light is bending through."

Even as Cory explained, the weirdly glowing grid brightened in intensity. Vivid lines of lightning brilliance flashed into view. Strangely shaped, grotesque patterns of cosmic geometry illumined the room, casting deep russet shadows all about. The faces of the men, strained and white, became ghostly in that ethereal radiance.

McQuay, the younger of the two, moved his lips in soundless protest. There was something awe inspiring about that light. Color was there and yet none which had ever been named by man. Fleetingly he wondered why it was that in this moment while Cory's strange apparatus pulsed in its unearthly activities that they should be able to see light which normally could make no response upon the human retina. Yet there was scant time for thought. Cory had uttered a sharp unintelligible ejaculation.

"We are there! McQuay, do you see?"

"There are three suns," McQuay murmured faintly. "A three-star system. But where—"

"Across the universe. It is thousands of light years away." Cory's voice rose in pitch. "Now McQuay, do you believe?"

But he did not await a reply. Speedily now he was narrowing the field of vision, clarifying that strikingly glorious spectacle which flashed before them upon the hypersensitive grid. John Cory's long, artistic fingers trembled with exultation. This, his own invention, was beyond all doubt a complete success. His apparatus, attuned to the unknown electronic field of the seventh dimension, had reached across the universe and translated into near-normal light impulses a vivid spectacle of suns so unimaginatively far away that the Earth might have been born and lived throughout her span of existence before the light rays might otherwise have reached the watchful eyes of an earth-born scientist.

For an hour or more the two seemed to wander in the expanse of normal space where the three brilliant orbs revolved about their common center of gravity. In the distance other stars wove fantastic constellations never before observed by human eyes.

It was McQuay who first sighted the triple suns' satellite. He uttered a cry of excitement, unconsciously pointing to the faint milk and emerald spot on

the grid as if they were actually within a ship of space grandly moving into this new and distant system.

"It is indeed a world," Cory breathed the words in a scarcely audible murmur. "I'm not sure how near we can approach it."

"We must see it!" McQuay was amazed at his own excitement. "Try to bring it nearer."

"We are near maximum sensitivity already," Cory replied, even as he made certain adjustments which gave the illusion of sailing through space. The tiny globe was directly in the center of the grid now and slowly enlarging in size.

McQUAY leaned forward, his hands gripping the chair arms with fierce intensity. His breath came in sharp gasps and there was a distant tingling to his nerves as if they were actually dropping downward thousands of miles a second toward that alluring, jewel-like sphere. The urge of adventure burned through him. He felt that he must see, must know this far-distant earth-like globe.

It was much larger than the moon now. A mistlike shroud enveloped the opalescent glory of the spectacle, parting here and there to reveal darkened patches which might be land and mirrorlike expanses of some magnificent ocean.

"Air—water," Cory spoke his thoughts aloud. "Why, it is like our own Earth. Who knows, Mac—"

His voice broke into a cry of alarm as the grid suddenly flared with a blinding radiance. A hot blast of seared wood, molten glass and metal scorched their faces. McQuay had leaped to his feet, both hands rubbing at his eyes against the smoldering gases from the exploded apparatus. He heard Cory's chair crash to the floor as his friend jumped up. Cory was calling out something but a strange roar of sound drowned out the words.

Instinctively McQuay backed away. He could open his smarting eyes a little now. Tears streamed down his hot blistered face.

"Cory?" he called. "What happened, fellow? You're not hurt; are you? Cory!"

There was no answer. The room grew still now, and the apparatus, evidently damaged by the severe load which had burned through it, exuded only sufficient radiance to give the place a soft, candlelight illumination. But Cory was nowhere in sight.

For several minutes McQuay stared about wonderingly. The single door at the far side of the room was still closed. McQuay stared at it frowningly. It was still latched and barred from the inside.

McQuay turned back to the apparatus. The grid upon which Cory had ingeniously projected normal light images of the seventh-dimensional electronic vibrations stood out in all that wreckage with maddening blankness. Oddly enough the sudden release of energy which had fused tubes and the innumerable strands of wire had not even so much as cracked the grid.

Feeling a little sick, McQuay went over and picked up Cory's chair. He found the cord which connected with the overhead light in the room and pulled it experimentally. He was not surprised that there was no responding glow of light. No telling, he thought, how much damage this experiment of Cory's had done, although by some miracle the house itself had not caught fire.

But the room was growing darker now. McQuay called out his friend's name again. He felt suddenly alone, more alone than he realized anyone could possibly feel. There was a subtle mocking quality to this silence which bordered on hysteria. He wanted suddenly to see people, to see anyone, to hear voices, to be back among his fellow men. That was the terrifying part of the fear which

gripped him now. He wanted to be back—as if he were now actually somewhere uncountable millions of parsecs removed from all that he had known and loved before.

“CORY!” he screamed the name. “We can’t stay here! Cory, help me—”

He laughed in sudden relief and with no control over his emotions. For there was Cory staring at him. John Cory, his long, sensitive face wonderfully alive with excitement, was saying things to him. Sunlight was streaming in. Sunlight—but McQuay sobered quickly. The hysteria passed. There couldn’t be any sunlight now because it was only minutes past midnight. Nevertheless there stood Cory in all the radiance of noonday brilliance. McQuay rubbed his eyes, stumbled forward. His mind was subdued now. He felt awed, completely bewildered.

For Cory stood there where the grid had been. Indeed, the tall, serious-faced scientist had pushed back the grid much as one might swing in a door. McQuay stared beyond his friend. He saw luxurious, strangely shaped foliage, a pale blue sky and then high overhead, breathlessly beautiful, a fiery triangle of suns.

“The grid-door!” Cory was saying. “It’s a door, Mac—a door into the unknown.”

He stepped through then. Stopped to look closely at Cory and then to pinch himself viciously. His fingernails hurt. He felt perfectly normal and real. No, this was not a dream. It was real, no mistaking that.

Cory was speaking rapidly, his usually calm voice becoming hoarse with excitement. “I don’t know how we made it, Mac. But this is the planet—that planet of the three suns. In some way we broke through—”

McQuay felt his nerves grow taut. His eyes widened at a sight of grotesque plants which were like gigantic leaves of grass reaching a hundred

feet and more toward the gorgeous sky. He breathed in deeply and felt the tang of unfamiliar odors acid-sharp in his mouth and throat. Panic gripped him. He was conscious of a nameless fear which urged his rigid muscles to action. Without a word to Cory he turned back, eagerly groping for the grid, pushing against it with all his strength. He was inside the room again. It looked the same.

He tried to laugh at himself. He was ashamed of his fears. Cory wasn’t afraid, he told himself. He’d have to get over this shock. If Cory wasn’t afraid, why, then there was surely no reason for him to feel this way.

McQuay straightened his shoulders, reached out and touched the grid again. It swung as easily as though upon hinges. When he stepped out into that strange daylight again Cory was still there. McQuay walked across the area of barren sand to where the older man was bending down digging up small handfuls of soil which he examined closely.

“All right, Cory,” he forced his voice to an unnatural steadiness. “I’m over my spell.”

Cory looked up with something like a smile on his lean face. “I understand,” he said softly.

“You mean,” McQuay’s voice lowered significantly, “you mean to say that all along—you knew?”

CORY faced the younger man now, met the defiant gaze without flinching. “Not just that, Mac. I admit that I’ve hoped for this, that I’ve dreamed of it for years. But that is all. I’ve told you how it has been before. I’ve reached across the dimensions, captured light rays hundreds of thousands of years before they could reach earth in their restricted three-dimensional waves. But this time—some impulse—something caused me to strain for maximum power. In that instant I knew! I admit I wasn’t surprised. Mac, it’s—it’s the realization of all my dreams

even though it came unexpectedly. Believe me, I tell you the truth. If I had known before—well, Mac—you'd have come, wouldn't you?"

For several minutes neither man spoke. McQuay's rigidly set face gradually relaxed. For a second his eyes became clouded and then impulsively he stretched out his hand, gripping that of the great, yet relatively obscure scientist, John Cory.

"I'd never have forgiven you, Cory," he muttered thickly. "Never, if you'd gone without me. I—I'm sorry for—"

"Forget it, Mac." Cory reached down, gathering a small handful of soil and let it run through his fingers. "It's rich stuff—and the air, had you noticed?—plenty of oxygen but still—well, it must be the fragrance of those grasses."

McQuay nodded thoughtfully. Now that his fears were gone and he really appreciated the vastness of the step they had taken he was experiencing the first thrill of standing upon a new world. The stately gleam of the triple suns high overhead made a mockery of shadows and seemed to implant a deeper significance to the unusual richness of color. The tree-high grasses were waving slightly now, their long deep green leaves bending curiously as though suddenly attentive to the alien voices of man.

"There's a high point over that way," Cory announced abruptly. "Let's make that our first step in exploration."

"Just so we don't get lost," McQuay added, glancing back toward the grid-door. "That is if—"

Cory laughed pleasantly. "You're right, Mac. We'll need the door again. But wait. There are some things back there in the room we'll need."

McQuay followed the scientist as they reentered the room and to his surprise he noted for the first time that the walls were lined with tight-

ly packed compartments filled with every conceivable bit of equipment. There was clothing, food concentrates, medicines and chests of sundry laboratory supplies.

"Enough to rebuild that apparatus twice over." Cory gestured toward the seared seventh-dimensional trajectory. "But here, there's no telling what we may run into."

McQuay received the pistol and cartridge belt diffidently. Cory had evidently planned for virtually any emergency. He was assembling a small camping outfit, stuffing a packet of coffee and canned meat into the convenient pocket of his jacket. They were going to gain that high place, look over the surrounding countryside and then prepare their meal.

"We can call it breakfast," Cory remarked with all the eagerness of a small boy getting ready for a camping trip. "After a while we'll get straightened out with the local days and night—if there is such a thing as night on this planet."

THE weird, alien shapes and colors of this strangely quiet world were disturbingly unearthly. McQuay found himself shying away from the great clumps of vegetation. All was deathly quiet and the huge plants swayed with almost meaningful stealth in their ponderous movements. Once as they came abreast of a thick mass of growth the thick, warty leaves seemed deliberately to bend away from them as though intending to clear the path for these two from a foreign planet. Cory, who was in the lead, halted abruptly, staring narrowly at the thing. McQuay stood back.

As an animal might cower in fright the massive plant actually bent away from Cory's outstretched hand. The thick, ugly leaves quivered although there was no detectable stir of wind in the heavy, pungent air.

"Don't touch it, Cory!" McQuay

exclaimed involuntarily. "The thing's alive!"

But the scientist had already gripped a stem and was twisting at one of the fantastically quivering leaves. Suddenly the unnatural stillness of the glade changed into a shrill drive of wind-beaten leaves and stems. McQuay whipped around, arms upraised, and saw the clumps of towering grasses threshing as with fury. The sudden slash of a hundred whip-lash blows cut short his screams of terror. The glade had become an inferno of flailing stalks.

"Go back!" Cory was screaming. "Back to the door—get up, Mac."

McQuay's body had been lashed to the ground. Stinging blows cut into his face, beat unmercifully upon his back and arms. He felt Cory yank him up to his feet again. They were running, heads down and with arms bent to protect their faces, crying aloud with the pain of the blows. Again and again they stumbled only to grope to their feet and exert every vestige of human energy in the frantic retreat.

Utterly exhausted and with backs and arms raw and bleeding the two earthmen crawled the few remaining feet to the door. McQuay set his teeth against the pain. He saw that Cory's jacket and shirt had been flayed to rags and were drenched with blood. The scientist's face was deathly pale and ridged with streaked welts. Another hundred yards and both of them would have been lashed into insensibility, he knew.

Cory's foresightedness in providing the room with a plentiful assortment of ointments and bandages proved an early blessing. Wordlessly the two administered to their wounds. McQuay mumbled indistinct thanks for the steaming cup of coffee which Cory pressed into his hands. The tall, gaunt scientist was attempting to smile despite the painful swelling on his face.

"Adventure number one, Mac," he mumbled hoarsely.

IT WAS hours later before either felt capable of stirring from the room. Cory had already begun his task of rebuilding the apparatus but had insisted that they must really know more of the weird plant before attempting a return to earth.

"After all, Mac, we have proof of nothing. The world will think us mad."

"And aren't we?" McQuay grinned. "I'm still plenty stiff and sore."

"We'll try a different route, go heavily padded and keep our hands off," Cory added. "We'll start in the morning. It's dark outside. Starlight but no moon. The three suns rise together, it seems."

"You've been outside?"

"An hour or so ago. You were still snoring."

"I don't snore," McQuay defended.

"And the wind doesn't blow on this planet either but the effect is just as bad. Feel ready for anything?"

The world outside was maddeningly peaceful. Yet now the fantastic vegetation seemed doubly ominous. McQuay shuddered as the great grasses began to sway with their deceptive gentleness; nevertheless Cory seeming like some monster with all the padding beneath his clothes, moved across the rich sandy soil with no slightest indication of fear. They were trekking off into the opposite direction now. McQuay dragged a long sharp pointed knife behind him to mark their trail. A barren strip of ground some fifty yards or more gave way to rows of monstrous plants which seemed to be as regularly spaced and aligned as though planted and cultivated by some alert horticulturist. Save for the wiry stalks and queerly shaped, motley colored leaves the illusion of an earthly orchard was almost complete. The triple suns were already in the sky, pouring down their enriching charges

of light energy to their lone satellite.

"The suns explain the unusual vigor of the vegetation," Cory, ever the scientist, called back to McQuay. "The planet is bombarded with three times the life-giving energy which our earth receives and that might suggest a greater number of plant mutations. Consequently the plant-life would evolve more rapidly and in greater variety."

McQuay merely mumbled his agreement without expending too much thought upon it. His eyes were constantly upon the peculiarly swaying plants. He was testing them now, observing the apparent stillness of those at a distance. Unmistakably the plants were aware of their presence. At a hundred yards the taller grasses would sway although the stockier, broad-leaved monstrosities did not move until the earthmen were nearly upon them.

He was relieved to note that Cory was chary of coming too near although now and again the scientist would pause, sharply scrutinizing a monstrous bushlike thing as it bent far away from him.

Midday camp was established in a clearing surrounded by the swaying growths. High overhead now, the triple sun system glared down upon them. McQuay squirmed uncomfortably beneath his heavy clothing. His body was dripping with perspiration and the rays of the sun seemed to blast their faces. Along the way they had approached what might well have been the edge of a lake or large river and yet so thick had been the growths of maliciously sensitive plants that neither had dared penetrate to the water's edge.

McQuay had protected himself against the sun's rays as best he could by hoisting an outer jacket tentwise upon the swordlike trail-marker. Lying beneath this and munching the cold lunch as best he could he was suddenly aware that Cory had jumped to his feet. He

heard the scientist call out as though to a stranger at a distance.

Squinting against the glare McQuay saw the four creatures emerging rabbitlike from beneath one of the huge shrubs. They were lithe, unclothed and almost human in a grotesque way. All four were staring wide-eyed and open-mouthed at the two earthmen. For the moment McQuay forgot his discomfort.

"They don't fear us," Cory was saying. "That's a good sign. And they're evidently quite wild. Exceedingly primitive in fact."

"Anyway the plants don't bother them," McQuay added. "Maybe we could learn their way of getting about."

CORY was gesturing now, seeking to reassure the small beings that he meant them no harm. The soft murmur of their voices, plaintive cooing sounds rather than definitely enunciated words, were to be heard.

The four stood up, edged nearer the two earthmen. They seemed awed rather than fearful. All were without weapons or any slightest suggestion of adornment. Cory was calling to them again. Yet without evident success. The strange creatures merely stood there and stared in wonderment.

McQuay, suddenly aware that he still clutched a portion of a sandwich, impulsively tossed the food so that it fell at the feet of the natives. Animal-like they pounced upon the bread, tearing at it eagerly and stuffing it into their mouths.

"Good idea, Mac." Cory laughed with excitement and interest. "Let's try something else." Reaching in his pocket he selected three coins, held them up so that the triple sunlight glinted upon them and then tossed them across the clearing.

Again the creatures scrambled for the alluring bait, and clutching the bright metal disks avidly, proceeded

immediately to put them into their mouths.

"Primitive!" Cory exclaimed. "They don't understand why the bread was food and the metal disk not. Wait here, Mac. I'm going to try to approach them."

McQuay watched tensely as Cory moved leisurely and with outstretched arms toward the group. There was, he noted, no indication of concern or distrust. The manlike bipeds merely gaped. Suddenly that alert, protective plant became rigid. Its great leaves began to tremble and sway. Cory was near them now, his voice rising and falling in a placating overture of friendship.

"The plant," McQuay called warningly. "Cory, it's moving. Watch out."

Cory had reached out. His hand touched one of the creature's shoulders. Not one of the four had moved nor seemed in any way fearful of the earth stranger. Then suddenly the great leaves of the plant swirled angrily. Stems stretched with elastic toughness, whipping about the stupid natives. In a second the four had been whisked from sight beneath the hideously vibrant leaves. For a moment Cory stood there, his fists clenched and a frown of bewilderment across his bruised face. The plant had bent back away from him, its quivering leaves unmistakably alert and defensive.

"Come away, Cory," McQuay called apprehensively. "The plant knows you're different."

The scientist backed away, though still eyeing the strange growth. Soon the leaves relaxed.

"The natives are still under there, Mac. If I can get one of them far enough away—"

His voice ended in a gasp. McQuay groaned a curse of wonderment. The ugly foliage once more spread out and its great swaying leaves seemed to caress the four huddling creatures when suddenly it reached

down and gathered one of them up. Now the leaves massed about the being who made no move in his defense. There was some subtly nefarious activity within the plant yet neither earthman could quite understand it. The one creature who had been gathered up was completely lost from view.

"He's in that center mass of leaves," McQuay whispered. "Something queer is going on here. I can't quite make it out. Now, they're unfolding—they've—"

Cory's face became livid. McQuay tensed, feeling his blood beat with resentment. They saw the skeleton drop from the leaves. Bare bones devoid of all flesh! The plant spread itself luxuriously, for all the world like some well filled monster.

MCQUAY could not analyze his own emotions. Horror, anger, fear and something like hysterical madness filled his bewildered brain. Man-eating plants, sentient vegetation and senseless, domesticated manlike things who did not know enough to resent this hideous practice! This was a mad incredible world, he reasoned. It must be destroyed. He would root out those warty-leaved monsters, free the simple bipeds, and give animal life its rightful chance to evolve.

But Cory was holding him back. "Calm yourself, Mac," the scientist was telling him. "We can't do anything now. It's the suns—that triple system—which is primarily responsible. Plantlife has gone so far ahead of animal life that the plants actually control this world. Don't you see it? But come, we'd better start back. Too much of this sunlight—"

"Not yet," McQuay brushed the older man aside. His right hand tightened its grip upon the sharp trailmarkers. "This is our chance, Cory. I can't believe it—I won't until I can capture one of those creatures."

Cory made a move of protest, then seemed to think better of it. "Watch out for the plant. If it strikes, break for the center of the clearing."

Shifting his gaze from the monstrous plant for a moment McQuay regarded the three remaining natives closely. Their blank faces and great, wide staring eyes conveyed no indication of any mental activity. Perhaps they couldn't think, McQuay reasoned, and were only the helpless flesh-bearing victims of a topsy-turvy world whose first great life form, the plants, had developed too intricately to permit any animal type from evolving to a point of serious dominance.

Nevertheless the creatures were not bestial such as he had always fancied primitive earthman as being. In particular one of the beings, a clean limbed youth who stood in the forefront of the group, arrested his attention. For several minutes McQuay stood well away from the greedily hovering plant and directed his attention to the youth. Once he imagined the being's unblinking gaze shot with a flash of intelligence. The lips had moved awkwardly, mimicking the earthman's facial contortions. McQuay groped in his pocket for some trinket. There was his pocket knife. He opened it, taking care that the foremost native could see the ceremony. For a second he dazzled it before the curious eyes before tossing it, blade into the soil, at the feet of the youth.

In a flash the creature glided forward, grasping at the attraction eagerly. McQuay leaped forward, one arm outstretched. Yet he underestimated that hovering plant's awareness of what was going on. Even as the natives moved forward the hideous leaves rasped in a furor of activity. The lash of a leather thong wielded by a giant cut down upon him. Yet McQuay had clasped

the soft body within his arms even as the blow from the plant sent him sprawling in the sand. Tentacular ropes bound him and his struggling burden while a hundred wire-tough thongs unleashed a barrage of cutting blows upon his body.

The entire glade was in a turmoil now. As though battered and strained by the sudden fury of a hurricane, giant grasses and squat flesh-eating shrubs swayed and lashed, stretching their flailing stems in warlike hysteria. McQuay felt his senses reel beneath the constant blows. Beating stems were cutting into the padded clothing while others gripped and twisted. Now a pungent, acid burning liquid poured over him, causing his earthly animal senses to sicken as though tortured by some potent drug.

HIS concern now was for the helpless native. Should the juices touch his flesh he would certainly be consumed even while held in the arms of the struggling earthman. McQuay was clutching and tearing at the whipping leaves as he sought to destroy the leathery monster piece by piece. He was fighting madly, blindly—infuriated by his helplessness. The plant was as strong as a savage beast and more cunning. For every leaf which his frantically clawing fingers shredded ten more lashed in with greater venom to take its place.

Then above the roar of madly beating leaves and stems there rang the deep voiced, vibrant cry of a human fighter. Still struggling, McQuay cried out his relief. Cory was helping him. Cory was somewhere near, fighting that hellish, deep-rooted thing. There came the flash of steel glinting savagely in the rays of the triple suns.

Cory was hacking at the vines with the trailmarker, his feet firmly planted and both hands gripping his weapon as if it were a sword. McQuay

felt the bonds loosen. He inched away, feeling the savage whip lashes cutting with a last effort to kill.

But Cory was pulling him away now. The scientist had a hold beneath each armpit and was dragging him into the clearing. McQuay staggered to his feet as Cory reached again for the improvised sword. The native in McQuay's arms did not stir.

"Run for it," Cory was shouting.

McQuay dashed forward. The horror of the storm-filled area made him forget the sharp agony of his wounds. He knew he was hurt. In a dozen places the lashing vines had cut through the heavy pads. That slimy juice burned like salt in the cuts. But strangely enough he was wondering about the inert captive. Was the native still alive? A fierce exultation gave him the unnatural strength to make that fearsome run to the door.

"The whole world's raging," Cory called warningly. "They sense definitely that we're alien. Hurry, Mac."

They saw the grid door now. McQuay sobbed with eagerness at the welcome sight and gathered all his remaining strength for the last few yards. Behind him was turmoil, a world hideous with storm fury.

Cory had closed the grid in frantic haste and without stopping to get his breath to at once set certain parts of the apparatus in place. While McQuay, his senses swirling, forced himself to keep alert as he placed the native on the floor and began to tend to his scorching wounds. Cory was nervously turning the seventh-dimensional trajectory.

Not until the grid had become dark with the vast blackness of space again did the scientist relax. He turned anxiously to McQuay.

"We were just in time, Mac. Back there I thought I saw great masses moving across the plane like giant tumble weeds. In another few minutes—well, how's our friend?"

"Sleeping," McQuay announced with evident disgust. "Doesn't have

sense enough to know there was a fight."

CORY nodded thoughtfully, staring down at the slim youthful figure. "A good catch, Mac. And who knows, we may be mightily glad we brought him along." Then he turned back wearily to the trajectory.

McQuay, suddenly conscious of the scientist's unusual tension, aroused himself. Before them the grid had become a mad riot of stars.

"It's set for a return to Earth, isn't it, Cory?" he asked huskily.

"It was." John Cory regarded the controls of the marvelous instrument grimly.

"You mean—something's wrong?"

Cory nodded. "The crash when we landed. The finger gauge must have been jolted. Only a millionth of an inch but, Mac, that millionth across the universe means parsecs—perhaps hundreds of them—"

"Then we're lost!"

For a moment the two earth adventurers stared eye to eye. Cory seemed to be scrutinizing the younger man's face anxiously. Then McQuay forced a smile. His eyes were defiant.

"Not lost, Cory," he said softly though with a firm note in his voice. "We've got the whole universe before us!" He laughed softly. "And our fearless friend here too! Don't forget him, Cory. You know, I think I'll call him 'Rabbit.' The name seems fit."

The rigid lines in the face of John Cory, scientist extraordinary, softened. His eyes fired with the finest enthusiasm of his kind—the basic love for adventure, the lure to challenge the illimitable unknown itself.

"Thanks, Mac," he murmured huskily and turned to face the glorious panorama of unnamed stars gleaming there on the grid door like sparkling diamonds upon jet velvet. His voice rose in sudden excitement, "We're off!"

★★★

JAKE

★★★

AND THE FIFTH COLUMNIST

Jake wasn't as bright as most robots; he couldn't stand up to the brilliant erudition of Bill Shuttle's metal-boy, Jupiter. And Jake's owner, Henry Erwin, thought he'd just made a bad investment. But sometimes slow, common sense can make up for a lot.

By Arthur G. Stangland

“YOU said you saw what?” Henry Erwin asked Jake, his robot.

The robot stood silent for a moment. A tiny, singing hum came from his metal body, gleaming brightly in the house lights. A gleam that comes only from unlabelled tin cans. No scintillating pedigree had accompanied Jake from the mail-order house where Erwin had bought him.

Jake turned his head and looked out the door, then swung his luminous photocell eyes back to his owner. He shook his head slowly. Of all the genteel graces that hadn't been trained into him at least he had picked up that gesture from his betters.

“Sorry, boss,” he said. “I can't remember the word.”

Henry Erwin dropped his evening paper impatiently. This much he had learned from a robot. Robots don't think pictures, not having been imbued with the creative spirit. They think in words only—and if they can't think of the key word to the main idea, then the chain is broken and the thought dies.

“Now, listen,” Erwin began in a pedantic manner. “I'm getting tired of this forgetting everything. I'm going to train some memory into you.

Free association, that's how we'll do it.”

“Free association?” Jake repeated in puzzlement. “I thought it already was a free country.”

Henry Erwin shook his head and grumbled. “No, no! The association of ideas. I mention a word and you tell me what that word suggests to you—like foot suggests shoe, or coat suggests hat or suit—you understand all that?”

“Yes, boss, I get you.” Jake nodded his head with a jerky movement. “Go ahead, comma.”

Henry Erwin's faded blue eyes squinted behind their steel rim glasses. “What do you mean—‘comma’? Are you trying to be funny?”

The robot lifted his broad shoulders in a vague way. “I don't know; it's what Butch used to say—Butch de guy—”

Erwin irritably finished the sentence for him. “Yes, yes, you've told me a hundred times—Butch the guy that socialized you at the factory. Forget it, but I don't expect you will; you always remember the things you don't have to, and forget the things you shouldn't. Now, try association of words. What does ‘word’ itself suggest to you?”

Jake communed with himself a mo-

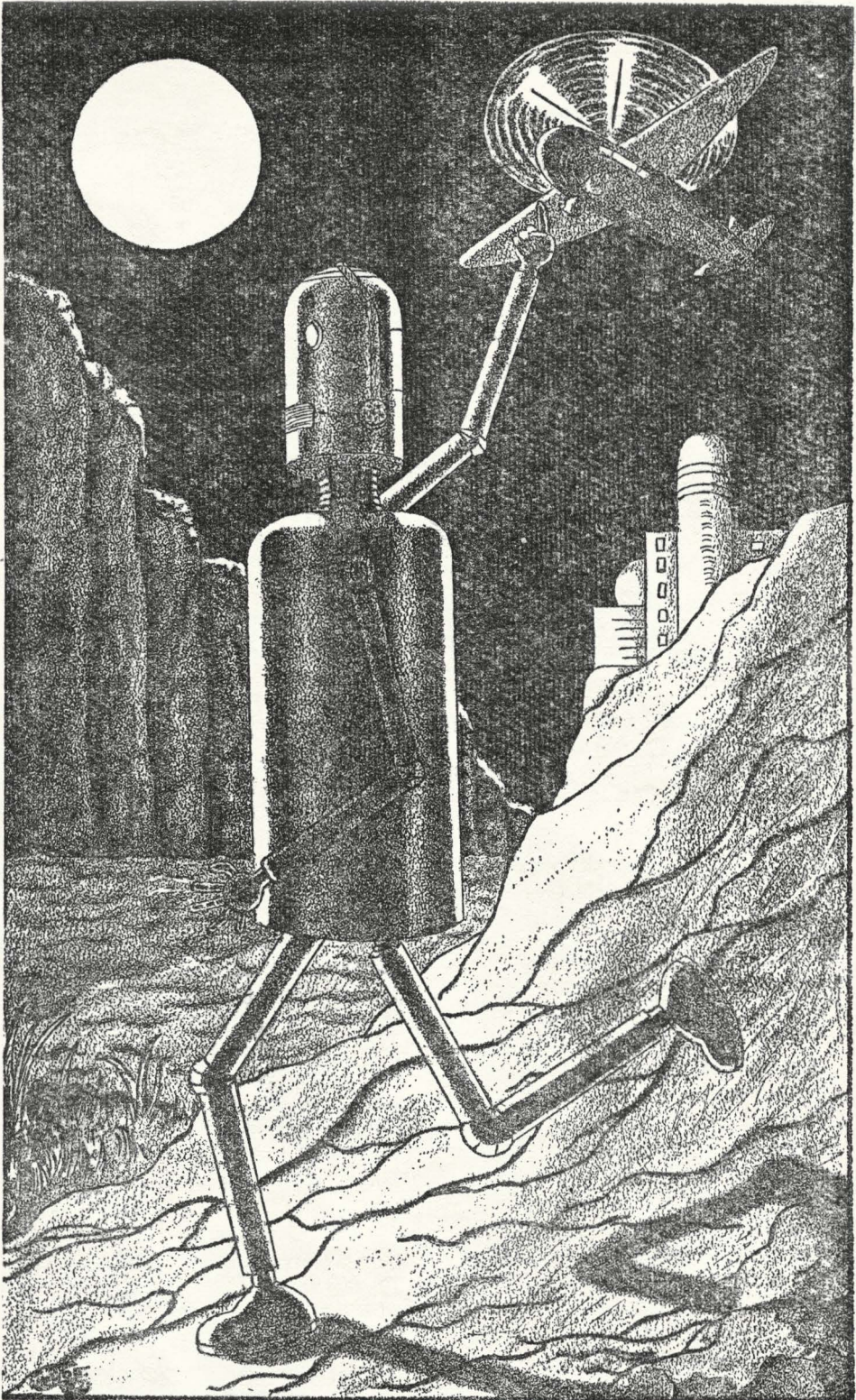


Illustration by Chester Coe



ment, then he came out with: "The Greeks had a word for it, all roads lead to Rome. Greeks, restaurants, food, bellyache, boss, doctor, merchant, lawyer, thief, Butch—" Jake shook his head. "Guess I ain't no good at associatin', boss. I can't think of the word."

"All right," Erwin said in disgust, reaching for his paper again. He looked up at the robot again. "How did this man Butch go about socializing you? Who was Butch and what did he do?"

"He was a mechanic at the factory and in the evenings he took me with him like I was another human being. He said that was the only way I'd learn how to live among humans."

"What did you do?"

The robot gave a shrug. "Everything Butch did—sit in pool halls and play cards and throw dice. We even had a fight one night with a couple of bums. And sometimes—I had to drag Butch home he got so drunk."

Erwin snorted and leaned back in his chair. "So that's what I paid eight hundred dollars for—a pool hall shark that—"

FOOTSTEPS on the porch broke into his paean of woe. He dropped his paper and went slowly to the door, peering out the side windows trying to see who was coming.

A shaft of light spotted an iron-gray-haired man with a square face and small eyes. Neighbor Bill Shuttle and his walking encyclopedia robot he called Jupiter. Beside them he could discern a formless shape in the gloom. Erwin swung the door open. It was a dull day indeed when Shuttle didn't come over with Jupiter to demonstrate something new that he had taught the robot to say.

"Hello, Bill," Henry said, in his best formal tones.

"Eve'n," nodded Shuttle. He gestured to the dark form. "This gentleman wanted to see both of us to-

gether," he explained. "Meet Mr. Jones, Mr. Erwin."

When Jones stepped into the light of the room, Henry felt a mild shock at the whiteness of his skin. He was a chunky sort of man that made the floorboards creak when he walked. He had staring black eyes that Henry thought would bore a hole in him, eyes that had the dead expression of glass eyes.

They all sat down in Erwin's front room, except the robots who remained standing against the wall out of the way, as all good robots should.

Henry Erwin wondered at the stranger. He had ignored Erwin's outstretched hand, and about him there was a strange awkwardness.

"Mr. Erwin, I represent Majestic Robot Company, incorporated," Mr. Jones began. "I'm from the socialization department, and we're studying robots now in use to pick up new ideas. Of course, it takes a little time to do this, and to induce you to give us permission, the company will pay you a thousand dollars. I also will take the trouble to teach the robots any of the latest manual controls that are good standard training."

Erwin took out a pipe and filled it. "A thousand dollars. Hmm. He touched a flaring match to the pipe. Here was a chance to get back his money in a bad investment. He glanced at Shuttle with a question in his eyes. "But what about the job that Jake and Jupiter have up on the hill at Professor Cockerline's laboratory?"

Mr. Jones lifted a deprecating hand. That's the very reason that I want to study your robots. I understand that the Professor is antisocial, hates human beings, so he has hired your robots to do the menial work and a limited amount of simple laboratory work."

Bill Shuttle was quick to interject, "Jupiter does the laboratory work only. Jake does the menial work."

"I can make my observational stud-

ies in the evenings after they return from the laboratory." Jones looked at Erwin.

Erwin finally nodded his head, puffing gently on his pipe. "It is all right with me, then. Where do you do your studying?"

"At the hotel in town." Mr. Jones got up a little stiffly like an old man whose muscles stiffen when he sits down.

In the momentary silence after his words there came the monotonous flat voice of Jake.

"...word, book, encyclopedia, walking book is what boss calls Jupiter, lying..."

"Jake!" Henry Erwin hastened over to the robot to emphasize his anger. "I told you to forget trying to remember that word. You're a one-track railway once you get on something."

BILL SHUTTLE turned to Mr. Jones with a sardonic quirk to his thin mouth and a lift of his brows. "That's what you get when you buy a cheap robot. No brain power to speak of—strong back and weak mind as the saying goes. Now Jupiter—he's a remarkable robot." Shuttle looked at his robot with the bearing of a symphony conductor staring over his musicians. "Jupiter, recite the first law of Newton."

Jupiter assumed the stance of a public speaker before a crowded house. "All bodies in motion continue in a straight line unless acted upon by another force."

Henry Erwin fidgeted with his pipe. It was always like this. Shuttle never lost an opportunity to show off. This time he was prepared. "Jake, tell the gentlemen what the Einstein Theory of Relativity is."

Like an old hollow shell of fifteenth century armor that has been clanked, Jake stood on the alert. Many times he had been coached in this. In grand, surprising style he started out:

"Einstein's Theory of Relativity assumes there is no point from which to measure the absolute speed of a moving body," he repeated from memory. So far so good. But from there on it was all bad. Somewhere along the line something got mixed up. He began to hesitate and stumbled over his words. "Like—if I'm here...an' you're over there—then you ain't there." He stopped to consider a moment. That didn't seem right, because they were still there.

"Go on, you remember it," Erwin coached him. "Time is an imponderable quality..."

"Yeah, that's right, boss, time's got something to do with it like Butch Theory."

At this point Mr. Jones stepped in with, "If you gentlemen don't mind, I'd like to take the two robots to the hotel where we can be alone and I can start my studies of their behavior."

With the prospects of a thousand dollars in the offing, neither Shuttle nor Erwin objected to the suggestion. However, Erwin thought it was necessary to say:

"As soon as you're through at Mr. Jones' hotel, Jake, I want you to remember to come home right away."

A superior, self-satisfied look crossed Shuttle's face. He gave Erwin a patronizing glance.

"You notice I don't have to mention the idea of coming home immediately. Jupiter is circumspect in all his actions."

Henry Irwin did not look at Shuttle but blinked hard and glared out the door.

Dutifully the two robots followed Mr. Jones out to his car and entered the back compartment door that he held open for them. Then Jones got in front and switched on the lights. They shone on the side of Henry Erwin's garage, spotlighting a red-lettered placard that said:

"WARNING! Remember this nation is at war. Report to the provost

marshal in Covington any strange-looking parachutes or single-seater helicopters floating to earth in this vicinity!"

The lights swung around in a wide arc and pointed down the road toward town. Soon even the red twinkling tail lights were lost in the distance.

Bill Shuttle teetered on his feet, with his thumbs hooked into his vest. "Well, Mr. Jones' company will be more than doubly repaid their thousand dollars by studying Jupiter."

"You mean they're throwing money away," Henry said sourly, and turned away to walk back into his house.

AT THE Covington Hotel, Jake carefully walked up the two flights to Mr. Jones' room. Steps were tricky things for him to master, for it seemed to him he was always walking on the edge of the treads. It made the balancing gyro inside him do a couple of back flip-flops.

In the hotel room, Mr. Jones relaxed into a big overstuffed chair of stranded translucent plastic. He waved a negligent hand to other chairs inviting the robots to seat themselves.

"Saves power batteries," he explained.

Jake sat down near the window where he could look down into the street. This was all strange, funny business, but then he didn't question what his master had told him to do. One thing Butch had impressed upon him. "Remember to be loyal to the guy what buys you. He looks after your batteries, oils your joints and takes good care of you like you was his own baby."

Mr. Jones looked at Jupiter and asked: "Tell me the nature of the work you do at the Professor's laboratory."

Used to the center of the stage from the coaching that his master had always given him, Jupiter started to babble:

"Oh, I handle his mortar and pestle

and the retorts and beakers when he is conducting his experiments."

"And you go up there to the laboratory all by yourselves and work for him, eh?" Jones said. "That's wonderful." He made some notes in a book. Then he looked up at Jake. "And what does the Professor have you do?"

Jake worked for the proper answer that wouldn't tell too much. "I work in the laboratory."

"What do you do in the lab?"

"Not much."

Mr. Jones sat forward in his chair. "But I have to know what type of manual control you use, so that I can make a report on you."

In a human being it would have been called stubbornness. But Jake was remembering something of the practical advice that Butch had given him. "When a guy you don't know starts askin' a lot of questions, zip your lip. That way you save a lot of trouble."

Jake said, "I just do anything he asks me."

Mr. Jones ignored Jake from then on. If he considered the robot a dumkin he didn't say so. He turned his pallid face to Jupiter.

"What is it that the Professor is experimenting with?" he asked. "I assume, of course, judging from the excellent sample of your erudition at Mr. Erwin's, that you are in the Professor's confidence. If he is anti-social then he must indulge his confidence in his immediate associate."

THAT WAS right on Jupiter's kilocycle and he rose to the flattering bait. Constructed of dull chrome metal, he was a more imposing figure than Jake who gleamed too much like ten-cent store silverware. He began importantly, "The Professor has said that he has developed a plastic that is stronger than Bransen steel and as light as paper. He told me that it means this country can build rocket planes bigger and strong-

er than the enemies of this country.”

Jake sat in silence. The Professor had warned both of them one day not to repeat anything he said. Now Jupiter was babbling his head off to a stranger. That was one thing about Jupiter he didn't like. He didn't seem to have any sense of loyalty to anyone or anything.

Mr. Jones nodded his head with interest. Then he leaned forward fixing his eyes on Jupiter. “Does the Professor have a notebook in which he jots down all his notes on his experiments?”

“Oh, yes, I've seen him many times writing in a book.”

A queer smile crossed the pallid face of Mr. Jones. Jake had never seen that kid of smile before. A rapid check of all the smiles he had ever seen confirmed that. Now, he began to look upon Mr. Jones with deepening distrust. Jake did not have that indefinable sixth sense of a human being. It was just that anything he did not understand he wanted to avoid.

Mr. Jones said, “I know that this problem I am going to give you is hard but I have confidence you will be able to perform it.” He looked from one robot to the other. “If you both want your masters to get the thousand dollars my company is offering owners for cooperating with us, then you'll do your best.”

Both robots nodded their heads. They did want their masters to get the thousand dollars. Weren't they always complaining that the government was eating up their property with taxes and that they needed more money to pay them?

“All right,” Mr. Jones began in a soft voice, “to test your smoothness, your dexterity of bodily movement without attracting any attention from a human being, I want you to procure that notebook of the Professor's and bring it down to my room here tomorrow night. You are to say nothing to anyone, not even to your masters.

Sometimes robots become too proud of their achievements and give themselves away before final success, which is the culmination of the exercise by bringing the notebook to me.”

RIGHT AWAY Jupiter said, “I can do that easily. Just as we are leaving his laboratory tomorrow night, I can slip it into my pocket slit here. Nothing to it.”

Jake sat without nodding or shaking his head. He didn't know which to do, so he did neither. Taking that notebook had all the earmarks of stealing. And he didn't want to get mixed up in stealing. Yet, his master had trusted Mr. Jones and had told Jake to do what he wanted. That was the complication of the problem. He'd never had to face that situation before. What did human beings do when they were damned if they did and damned if they didn't?

Mr. Jones was saying, “. . .you may go back to your masters now, and I hope you every success.”

The two robots, for all the world like two flesh and blood humans, went down the two flights of hotel stairs and out through the small lobby. Neither said a word until they got outside on the street.

Although Jake had not spoken, he had been intensely busying himself with the problem of how to solve the dilemma he found himself in.

He was the first to speak. Stopping suddenly at the curb, he said, “Jude, you really going to take that notebook of the Professor's?”

Jupiter swung about short, turning his head to his kin with owlsh slowness. “Why not take it? That's supposed to be our exercise in improving ourselves.”

Jake shook his head lugubriously. “But that's stealin' from our employer, too. 'Member our masters told us to be careful at the Professor's laboratory because it was very valuable work the Professor was doing.”

Jupiter said quickly, “But if we

can slip out with the Professor's book without him knowing it, then he'll consider us very smart. Smarter than any robot he knows. We'll prove it by performing an action just as smooth as a human."

Jake stood facing Jupiter, his metal arms hanging awkwardly at his sides. That was one thing he never was able to handle easily, his posture, especially when his complex lobes of wire bundles were concerned with a deep problem. He was trying to think of the word that would provide the key to the statement of his problem.

"No, that ain't it," he protested. "It's something to do with your arms, I think."

"What!" Jupiter shot back. "What's your arms got to do with it?"

"Well, I think it has," Jake said dubiously. "Le's see: boss says to associate free when I remember things. Now what has arms got to do with it? Word, arms, right hand, left hand, right and wrong, morality—" Jake hesitated. "Morality—that's it!"

"Morality?" Jupiter inclined his head at his kin. "What's morality? Never heard of it. I bet you don't know yourself. Explain it."

JAKE STARTED in. "Well, it's like if you had two bucks and I was starvin', it'd be wrong, unmoral if I wanted to borrow it to get a square meal, and you wouldn't open your fist."

Jupiter's chrome metal body whirred faintly as he shifted around to face Jake squarely. "We don't eat human food, Jake. How do you know what it feels like to be starving?"

"Well, anyway, that's the way" Butch explained it to me. Maybe you can do something a dozen different ways but not all of them are right ways."

"But I never see anybody stop and argue about being moral."

"Yeah, well," answered Jake, "that's

what's wrong with the world, Butch says, because most people pick the easy way which ain't always the moral way."

Jupiter started off up the street with, "I'm not stopping to juggle human problems. My master takes care of all those things."

Jake didn't follow him. Instead he stood on the street corner for a long time. People going by stared at him curiously. Unusual for a robot to be out at this time of evening and standing alone on the curb.

Caught between two opposing loyalties, Jake could only thrash the problem out to find peace, which meant the perfect balancing of condensers and circuits in his brain.

After going over the ground many times, he started to tackle the problem from another angle. Butch had said once that in spite of the old saying that "two wrongs don't make a right," there were times when two wrongs could make things right. It was wrong to take the notebook—he was sure of that. But what wrong could he do that would right the first wrong? Now there was a problem. Could association solve it?

"Word," he began, mumbling softly to himself, "word, right, wrong, take notebook, return notebook..."

There! Maybe that was his clue. Return the notebook. But how would he return it without anybody knowing it was gone? And how would he get it away from Mr. Jones?

He was pondering that, when he saw a shabbily dressed man brush by another in the crowd and to his amazement pick a wallet as slick as a needle out of his pocket without the man knowing it. There was the solution to his problem. Get that pick-pocket to snatch the notebook from Mr. Jones. That would satisfy everyone concerned. The Professor would have his notebook back—and why worry about where Mr. Jones stood?

Jake bestirred himself and followed the thief down two blocks and around

the corner into a pool-hall. Unlike most robots Jake knew his way around in this kind of world.

THE SNITCHMAN was in a corner playing a concession called "sky polo." He was a small man dressed in shabby, thin micro-weave with zippers half torn out. His cheekbones were high and his eyes were bright flickering lights above them. Despite the sharp features there was a certain look of good humor around his mouth. Jake had seen his kind before on "socializing" nights out with Butch. "They ain't really bad guys," Butch had explained to him once. "Most of 'em don't pack hot rods. They got professional pride in their fingers, like piano players."

The snitchman was expertly maneuvering the tiny planes by the radio controls to the side of the box and boosting a small floating balloon around the inside of the glass cage. Jake stood watching him a moment, not so much interested in the game as he was in trying to figure out an approach to his quarry. He'd never done this before. How did humans do that cold job of cracking frozen water, let's see—oh, yes, they called it "breaking the ice"?

"There! I did shove it in the basket, see!" the snitchman chortled, looking around at Jake. Then when he really saw Jake his mouth fell open. "Oops. You're a robot an' I thought all the time—"

"Dat's good shootin'," Jake agreed. "Back in Detroit I seen a guy almost as good as dat, but he ain't a smack-erino like you."

The light-fingered gent sharpened his bright eyes on the robot and then started to grin. "So you're from Detroit, eh? Who made you?"

"Butch."

The grin broadened and the little fellow stuck out a long-fingered paw. "I knew you must 'a' been a Butch robot when you said 'smackerino.' No-

body says it quite like him. They ain't a bigger-hearted guy in the town. He's a real artist, that guy. Every robot he makes you'd think was his own kid the way he coddles it." The man shook his head in reminiscence. He looked up again at Jake. "Well, what're you doin' way out here?"

Jake, realizing the ice was cracked in a thousand pieces now, began on the real issue. "I got troubles," he said. Then he went on to the whole problem that had been dogging him. When he had finished, the snitchman who called himself Chipper, pursed his narrow mouth and said slowly, "An' you want me to lift the notebook from this bird Jones, tomorrow night, eh?"

"Dat's the broadside of it."

"What do I do wit' it after I get it?" Chipper asked, fussing with his fingernails.

"Can you manage to slip it into my pocket here?" the robot asked, indicating his right side.

"Can I manage to slip it in there?" repeated Chipper with amused sarcasm. "D'you think I could steal a milk bottle from a baby?"

Satisfied, Jake nodded and left his new human friend to take a surface car home.

THE NEXT afternoon toward quitting time the Professor was in the midst of finishing an experiment. He was a thin, bony man, with a bald head and swelled-knuckled hands. On his high-bridge nose hung low-slung spectacles which he usually preferred to ignore by peering over them near-sightedly.

He looked up now from his retorts and beakers to remark, "Well, it's time you two ironheads started home."

Jupiter looked across the work bench at Jake. This was it. Jake watched the other robot saunter down the length of the bench. The notebook was lying at the end of it, a lit-

the red book. Would they get out with it without fumbling the job? He continued to push on his broom handle, but kept his photocells on Jupiter and the Professor. When Jupiter arrived at the end of the bench, he started to reach out a hand for the notebook without looking back to see what the Professor was doing.

What the Professor was doing was not lost on Jake. The savant lifted his head from his work casually to glance after the robot. Jake stopped his work. Jupiter was going to be caught redhanded at the theft. What would he do? If they didn't deliver that notebook to Mr. Jones tonight their masters would probably not get the thousand dollars. He had to do something. In the split second of meditation he remembered a tele-movie Butch had taken him to. The man had dropped something to distract the villain. What could he drop here? Something that would make a lot of noise anyway. A jar with colorless liquid on the bench attracted his photocells. Reaching out with his broom handle to make it look accidental he brushed the bottle on the floor. It crashed and shattered with a very effective noisy clatter. To Jake's satisfaction the Professor started to swing toward the noise just as Jupiter picked up the notebook.

"Clumsy dolt!" the Professor exclaimed, leaving his work to come toward Jake. He stopped and sniffed the air. "Ammonia!" He rushed to open the windows and the door. Then he turned on Jake. "That finishes you, you dumkopf. Don't you come back to work here any more," he raged, his smarting eyes dripping tears. "I hope you starve to death—" That sounded awkward after he said it. He tried again. "I hope your master beats you within an inch of your life, you mechanical slave!"

BY THAT time Jake was outside following in the footsteps of

Jupiter. They walked on down the wooded slope for some distance. At last Jake asked:

"Did you pick up the book all right?"

Jupiter revolved his head stiffly. Though he had not pliable flesh to convey visual expression, the very action conveyed annoyance with Jake's question.

"Get it?" he repeated. "Of course I got it. But no thanks to you. Your clumsiness almost spoiled everything. It's just as I've told you before; you're a common ironhead from the lower strata of society and you'll never be anything else. Breeding always shows, my master says."

Bobbing along behind the other, Jake mulled over that malign remark. At last he said, "If I hadn't broken that bottle when I did, the Professor would have seen you take the book. About that breedin' you mentioned—Butch tol' me that a real guy takes the vinegar of life straight, but a guy what's got a lot o' breedin', he's got to spread honey on the vinegar to stomach life."

Jupiter turned his head forward and continued to walk on in silence.

That night the four of them, Shuttle and Jupiter and Erwin and Jake went to the hotel in town to see Mr. Jones in his room. This was important stuff. A thousand dollars to each was to change hands.

"Word," mumbled Jake as they rode along into town. "Book, notebook, Jupiter, dumbbell, nitwit, screwball—"

Erwin looked at his robot, a searching, penetrating look in his gray eyes. "What're you saying?" he asked.

Jake ceased his mumbling and said out loud, "Oh, I was trying to think of that word I was trying to tell you about yesterday."

Henry Erwin snorted. "I told you to forget it."

"Yes, boss, but I can't even remember it to forget it."

At the hotel Mr. Jones met them

in the lobby, his pallid face an expressionless mask. One significant thing Jake noticed. As Jupiter walked past him he caught a glimpse of the notebook being passed to Mr. Jones. The notebook had been safely delivered. Mr. Jones would be satisfied. The robots had succeeded in their test.

"Well, Mr. Jones," Bill Shuttle began, "I presume you have tested my Jupiter and found him quite adequate to the test?"

FOR ONCE the beginnings of a smile stirred the pallid features of Mr. Jones. He nodded and said, "I am happy to report that they have both passed the difficult test I imposed upon them. My studies are complete and I am most satisfied with the data I have collected."

In the lobby Jake noticed a small man get up from a chair and come weaving toward their party. Not until he was a few feet from him did he recognize him as Chipper, the snitchman. Before Mr. Jones could step out of the way, Chipper had reeled into him. He was there only a second. Then he tottered back and reeled toward Jake.

Bill Shuttle started to protest. "Say, who in the devil—"

Jake felt him stagger against him, and just before he reeled away he felt something deposited in his right pocket.

"Awful—awful shorry," Chipper muttered in Shuttle's direction.

"Drunken bum," Shuttle grumbled after him as he settled down in one of the big leather chairs out front.

Jake's frozen face did not allow a smile, but he felt a warming electric current flowing through all the circuits of his body as the electrical balance of untroubled peace settled upon him. The notebook was safely back in his possession.

But Jake's peaceful state of bliss did not last five seconds. An agitated bald-headed man rushed in through

the lobby and when he located the two robots he made a beeline for them.

"Stop thief, stop!" he began to shout.

As he came up, Jake saw it was Professor Cockerline, his coat tails flying out behind and his right arm lifted in denunciation. Now why did he have to come barging in just before Mr. Jones handed over the thousand dollars to the boss?

"Stop that robot Jake!" the Professor cried. "He stole my notes, he stole my working notes."

"Now, now, Professor, take it easy. What makes you think Jake took anything?"

Anti-social, the Professor glared at Henry over his spectacles. "Don't stand there and contradict me, Henry Erwin. Your robot is a conscienceless thief!"

While all eyes were focussed on the Professor, no one had seen the drunk come moseying over to the group. Jake, however, became aware of him when he felt a hand in his pocket. Chipper. Then the drunk swayed toward the Professor. As he passed him he bumped him slightly and went on, weaving toward the bar.

Henry Erwin spread his hands out, saying, "Now, wait, Professor. Tell us what color this notebook was. Then to satisfy you we'll search Jake and prove to you he hasn't got it. Jake is as honest as the day is long."

"It's a little red notebook," fumed the Professor.

HENRY ERWIN pointed with a finger. "You mean like that one in your coat breast pocket?"

Professor Cockerline stared down at his outside pocket for an instant. Then his bespectacled eyes came up in dumbfounded surprise. "Why—that is my notebook. Now how do you suppose it got there?"

And then things began happening fast. Mr. Jones stirred out of silence with a sharp, "Say, how in hell—!"

He was glaring at Jupiter. "I thought you—I get it! You tried to pass a phony!"

That started Jake thinking fast. "Word," he began. "Hell, helicopter!" He looked at Henry Erwin, whose face was frowned up in blank surprise at Mr. Jones' words. "That's the word, boss. Helicopter. I seen a helicopter the other night coming down on the hill and when it landed, a short man just like Mr. Jones got out of it!"

All eyes stared at Jones. Finally, Bill Shuttle said, "Fifth columnist!"

Mr. Jones pulled out a gun and pointed it at the Professor. "Hand over that notebook, and be quick."

Jake looked at the fifth columnist. So, that's what the boss had been talking about the other day when he had warned him to report anything suspicious descending from the skies. And now the fifth columnist was going to escape with valuable information, at least that's what the Professor said was in that notebook.

Jake remembered something from the rough and tumble days and nights he had spent with Butch. "If you ever have to face a human being with a gun, hit him low and hard with your shoulder. Remember he can think twice as fast as you can, but if you tackle him like a football player, then you got a chance. He might get you in the back, but if you keep your head low, he'll miss your bean."

Jake gathered himself, dropped his head low and dived at the columnist from the side. Before Jones could swing his gun around, Jake struck him at the knees. A strange thing happened then. Both banged the floor with considerable force and from

them a leg rolled free of their bodies.

"Dad gum the luck, Jake has lost a leg!" Henry Erwin lamented as the three men jumped for the struggling figures.

BUT it wasn't Jake's leg. It was Mr. Jones' and a mechanical leg of aluminum alloy at that. Jake rose to his feet, but the columnist lay a very dead-looking man on the floor, his eyes closed and his pallid flour-white face impassive.

It was the Professor who made the startling discovery. He picked up the leg and examined it closely. With an amazed cry he looked up at the others.

"This is no false limb—it's a robot's leg!"

Mr. Jones in truth was a robot as they found when they all rolled him over and pulled his clothes off. A most ingenious robot that was covered with synthetic flesh and the rudiments of facial muscles to stimulate human expression, something that all usual robots lacked.

"From the looks of the cranial controls," the Professor announced, "the operator sat before a television screen multi-linked with this robot's photocells and by means of ultra-ultra waves he manipulated his robot by going through all the motions required, which were automatically transmitted to the activating solenoids and rod linkages of this robot."

He looked at Jake. "Whenever you want to come back to work again I'll have something for you to do besides pushing a broom, Jake."

"Aw, dat's awright," said Jake. "Weak back and weak brain, dat's me."

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MISSION FROM ARCTURUS

By Robert Abernathy

The beings from distant Arcturus were alien enough — as was to be expected — and their viewpoint was different from that of Earthmen. That, too, was to be expected. Only — their actions didn't make sense!

THE following items are excerpts from the *Daily Oracle* of Marceline, which, you may remember, is the little Missouri town (Pop. 1950, 4216) near which the so-called Arcturian invasion of Earth made its landing in the summer of 1953.

June 22, 1953.—Last night at about 10:00 p. m. a large meteor, or fireball, was seen passing over Marceline in an easterly direction. All who saw it agreed that it was the largest they had ever viewed, and that its flight was accompanied by exceedingly loud whirring or rumbling noise.

E. E. Horner, a farmer whose home is located three miles east of Marceline on County Route Z, reported having seen the meteor, which appeared when passing over his land to be traveling at a very low altitude, probably not more than five hundred feet. "It was going at a slant, not very fast, but I could see it was coming down and was going to hit not far east of my place," stated Horner. "It was big and bright, with a white glare like a searchlight. It made a racket like a whole squadron of bombing planes."

From the observations of Horner and others who saw the phenomenon, Dr. William N. Fitzgibbons of St. Louis, who arrived here early this morning after taking a special plane as far as Brookfield, expects to locate the meteorite within a short time. It is a peculiar fact that the shock of its fall was not felt by anyone in the surrounding areas, as might have been expected with so large a meteor. This, according to Dr. Fitzgibbons, was probably due to the acute angle at which the cosmic missile struck.

INVADERS FROM MARS LAND NEAR MARCELINE (Headline)

June 23, 1953.—It was discovered yesterday evening by Dr. William N. Fitzgibbons and Dr. Stanley Bodine, St. Louis meteorologists,* that the object which descended from the skies two nights ago at a point seven miles east of Marceline is not, as previously supposed, a meteor, but is in reality a space ship, probably from Mars, containing intelligent beings.

Little is known as yet of the vessel and its contents, but every effort is being made by civil and military authorities to prevent possible damage by the potential invaders. Troops are being rushed from Jefferson City and from other points, together with guns and equipment for repelling the Martians; the spot is being patrolled from the air by camera and bombing planes, though no attack has been made on the space ship pending word from Washington. Governor Price is expected to call out the militia.

Drs. Fitzgibbons and Bodine, who arrived here together from St. Louis early yesterday morning to investigate the supposed meteor, started out yesterday noon in company with E. E. Horner, neighboring farmer, who was among those observing the fall of the ship, in an attempt to discover the point at which the then unknown object had crashed into the earth.

Proceeding east in Horner's car on County Route Z, they encountered a Model T Ford driven by Justus Hardkof, Brush Creek bottom farmer, who was able to give them the interesting information that the "meteor" had landed in his south cornfield. After examining the object from a distance, Hardkof informed them further, he had started for town to inquire whether the Government would reimburse him for the corn destroyed by the landing of the vessel.

When they learned that the so-called meteorite was "about six rods long, and high as a one-story house," that it was made of smooth, shiny metal, and had portholes and air-screws on the outside, the interest of the investigators naturally rose to fever heights. They returned to Hardkof's farm with him, and accompanied him to the creek-bottom

*Note.—This is no doubt the copywriter's error; a meteorologist is *not* a scientist devoted to the study of meteors.

cornfield which the Martians had chosen for their landing.

THE object, lying partly buried in the soft plowed earth, proved to be approximately a hundred feet in length, made apparently of some aluminum alloy or similar metal; its sides bore two rows of round port-holes, small and brightly lighted even in the late afternoon, giving irrefutable evidence that there was intelligent life within; its airscrews also were plainly visible at a distance, as were three large searchlights set into the streamlined nose, which evidently produced the white glare described by Horner and other witnesses. The machine had struck the ground with considerable force, throwing up large quantities of earth and flattening the young corn in windrows over a wide area around it.

The two scientists and their companion approached the mysterious ship more closely, Hardkof refusing to accompany them, but remaining at what he considered a safe distance. When they had advanced to within two hundred feet of the space ship, a slight crackle was suddenly audible in the air, and the atmosphere above and about it seemed to shimmer; simultaneously, the corn, weeds, and other green stuff in a narrow circular belt about the ship at a distance of sixty yards suddenly shriveled and fell to the ground in crumpled fragments, appearing, according to Dr. Fitzgibbons' description, as if burnt almost to ashes. The two meteorologists paused instantly; but Horner incautiously made another step forward, and, his hand passing through the zone of deadly influence set up by the Martians, instantly became numb, shriveled, and paralyzed.

"This," declares Dr. Fitzgibbons, "is undoubtedly an indication that the inhabitants of the space ship, if not actively hostile to Earthly life, are at least passively inimical and potentially very dangerous. We must

proceed with great care and watchfulness in this matter."

Horner is now in the Mercy Hospital at Brookfield, awaiting amputation of the affected hand. Doctors there declared that the case was unique, resembling in some measure a very severe case of gangrene.

In theorizing on the possible origin of the cosmic visitor, Dr. Fitzgibbons said, "It seems probable that the space ship is from Mars, since it landed on the night side of the Earth—that is, the side away from the Sun—and Mars, 35,000,000 miles farther from the Sun, is Earth's nearest neighbor on that side. It is barely possible, of course, that the vessel originated on Earth; but this seems very doubtful, in spite of the fact that there is no visible means of propulsion apart from the airscrews. In my brief inspection of the machine it appeared without doubt to be designed for navigating an airless void."

WITH the spreading of news of the invaders' landing, symptoms of panic affected many people in the areas of Westville, Lingo, Wien, Bucklin, and Marceline. Governor Price, in a special message late last night, stated: "In this emergency, it is essential that everyone keep his head and refrain from panicky acts which may endanger others' lives. If the emergency becomes acute, I am confident of the ability of our State and Federal troops to handle it. In the meantime, it will be much better if all civilians will endeavor to cooperate with the Army and Air Force, rather than hindering efforts to bring the situation under control."

EXTRA!

ATTACK ON SPACE SHIP REPELLED

Unknown Weapons Employed by Invaders from Arcturus!

June 24, 1953.—In a furious as-

sault on the mysterious cylinder from the skies which fell near Marceline three nights ago, State troops and police, Federal infantry and artillery men failed to make any impression on the invisible defenses of the space ship. The attack raged throughout yesterday afternoon, and was augmented by aerial bombardment, which likewise proved ineffective. The ship from the stars, manned by unknown beings of diabolical intelligence, was completely unscathed by the furious barrage.

Although the alien invaders made no attempt to fight off the attacks other than by merely passive resistance, there was little doubt in the minds of either civil or military authorities that their next move would be to launch an offensive against the forces hemming them in; and with that in mind, General Lambert Pogue and his staff, in command here since yesterday morning, worked furiously through the night to strengthen the lines of defense about the grounded space flier. Where peaceful creek-bottom farms and woodlands lay only two days ago, entrenchments have been dug, machine guns and cannon placed so as to command all possible zones of fire, and the troops wait grimly for the attack which is anticipated at almost any time.

Until 11:00 a. m. yesterday, the Army and Air Force patrols surrounding the spot had waited for orders from executive centers in Washington; but with the arrival of General Pogue by plane, preparations were commenced for an immediate offensive.

An effort was first made to persuade the invaders to surrender by a show of superior force, with which end in view U. S. A. F. dive bombers dropped several high-explosive bombs near the cylinder; but the beings within the space ship made no response. General Pogue then ordered an actual assault on the machine; but to the consternation of all, mortar

fire failed to produce the slightest effect, the shells exploding high in the air above the alien ship. Heavy guns and bombs were now tried, but with no more result; when the smoke had rolled away, the great cylinder gleamed bright and unharmed, its silvery hull completely unscratched.

THIS was the first inkling that the invisible shield with which the invaders have surrounded their vessel, and which was already known to be lethal to plant and animal life, also nullifies human weapons. From results obtained with machine-gun and shrapnel fire, however, the screen appears to be penetrable to nonexplosive missiles; and solid shot are expected to be used against it as soon as some can be obtained to fit the bore of the guns now in use.

In the meantime, civilians in the battle area are urged to keep cool and cooperate with the military forces to the fullest possible extent. In the event that the situation gets out of hand, Governor Price has assured the people, evacuation measures are being prepared and will immediately be put into use.

Invaders Are From Arcturus

Dr. William N. Fitzgibbons, first scientific investigator to view the space vessel, informed reporters last night that the mysterious cylinder has been proved to have originated on the star Arcturus, which is a white star, larger and hotter than our Sun, at a distance of forty light years, or approximately two hundred and fifty trillion miles, from the Earth. The discovery was the result of a brilliant deduction on the part of Dr. Arthur Liddy, astronomer, of the University of Missouri.

A spectroscope was employed to analyze the light radiating from the portholes of the vessel; inspection of photographs of the color bands displayed that this artificial light was

an almost exact duplication of that of the star Arcturus.

"Naturally, the Arcturians would duplicate their own sun's rays for artificial lighting," said Dr. Fitzgibbons. "That is what Earthly lighting engineers have been endeavoring to do for years with the light of our own Sun, but as yet we have not succeeded in reproducing sunlight artificially with any great degree of exactness.

"This is an evidence of the great scientific advancement of the Arcturians; to say nothing of the marvelous knowledge indicated by the construction of such a remarkable vessel, capable of crossing forty light years of space! Either the Arcturians are remarkably long-lived, or they have discovered means of exceeding the velocity of light, which itself requires forty years to make that tremendous crossing. Gentlemen, when I consider the science necessary to build and operate such a ship, I tremble for the human race; I do not see how we can prevail against the weapons undoubtedly possessed by such formidable adversaries. We can only hope, and do what is humanly possible to avert catastrophe."

EXTRA!

MINE FAILS TO DESTROY SPACE SHIP

All Weapons of No Avail

National Emergency Possibility,
President Says

June 25, 1953.—The firing of a huge subterranean mine of explosives, constructed in record time by U. S. Army Engineers, at 10:00 a. m. yesterday morning shook Marceline and surrounding districts, but failed to harm the apparently invulnerable Arcturian space vessel.

Work on the mine was begun the afternoon of June 23, and progressed thereafter with the utmost haste compatible with secrecy. It was finished

and filled with 100,000 pounds of T. N. T., at a total cost of over \$50,000,000, by nine o'clock yesterday morning, and was fired shortly afterward. The blast, almost directly beneath the invading space ship from Arcturus which had lain in a field beside Brush Creek for four days since its fall from the skies June 21, ripped up through ten feet of earth and hurled the space cylinder, which has remained undamaged through a two-days' storm of shells and bombs, high into the air. Though the shining hull, which has proved impervious to bullets, shell fragments, shrapnel, and solid shot, was apparently unharmed as the object arced upward, a cheer went up from the fortified lines in the woods and fields round about; but then, as the space ship began to fall, still turning end over end, its airscrews whirred suddenly into motion, checking its fall; after which it settled slowly, with thrumming propellers, into the woods on Drummond's Chest, a mile north of its previous location, and only half a mile west of Macon County Road B.

General Lambert Pogue and staff readily admitted their dismay at this turn of events. "The mine was our last and greatest attempt at the invaders' destruction," said General Pogue. "I tell you quite frankly, we have nothing left up our sleeve. All ordinary weapons have failed. It is up to the technical men and research engineers to devise new means of attack; we can do nothing but surround the cylinder and endeavor to prevent its crew from issuing forth."

WHEN the mine was fired, many people in Westville and Marceline, where the shock was most severely felt, believed that the long-anticipated and feared offensive by the Arcturians had begun. Many who had not yet gone with the refugees from these parts have now left their homes. Of the population of Linn County, more than half is believed to

have evacuated to date; and from the neighboring counties, Macon, Charlton, and Randolph, many have fled. Persons have evacuated from points as distant as Carrollton, Moberly, and Chillicothe.

Troops have again taken up positions about the heights on which the cylinder now lies.

Twelve Soldiers Missing

In the execution of this maneuver, twelve men were reported missing, four of them under very extraordinary circumstances.

Squad Four of Lieutenant James P. Nelson's platoon, under command of Corporal Walter Clark, vanished without trace after being sent to ascend the ridge from the further side. Four men ascending Drummond's Crest from the south also vanished, under the very eyes of their comrades. Sergeant Alan Queeny and three men were a little ahead of the rest of his squad, advancing in broken order; suddenly all four whiffed into thin air, in full view of the remaining four just behind, who broke in panic and fled down the hillside. As if satisfied with their performance for the time, however, the Arcturians made no more trouble.

The twelve soldiers have been listed as "Missing—Believed killed" since, in spite of the disappearances, it is impossible to be sure that they are dead. The twelve are:

Sergeant Alan Queeny
Corporal Walter Clark
Private Joseph Mossberger
Private Dan Sewell
Private Murray Irwin. . . .

EXTRA!

SPACE SHIP DESTROYED!

Invading Arcturians Exterminated
in Furious Battle

June 26, 1953.—In a terrific final struggle in which eighty-one men lost their lives, the Arcturian invading expedition which landed near

Marceline five days ago was completely wiped out last night.

The gleaming, hundred-foot cylinder from space, which, with its invisible protective screen (said by Dr. Richard Forbstein, radiologist attached to the U. S. Army Research Corps, to be composed of vibrations which accelerate or induce chemical decomposition to a marked degree, thus causing the disintegration of living plant and animal tissues and detonation of explosive shells) had withstood repeated doses of machine-gun fire, shell-strafig, aerial bombardment, and barrages of solid shot, was completely destroyed after its screen collapsed.

About eleven o'clock last night, with only a desultory fire marking the position of the curving, invisible shield above the cylinder, the Arcturians suddenly—in desperation, as it later appeared—abandoned their policy of passive resistance and took the offensive.

The first warning was when men in the trenches, a few hundred yards from the besieged ship on Drummond's crest, began to drop dead. The symptoms were the same as those produced by the energy screen of the Arcturians—accelerated decay of living flesh. The soldiers attempted to shield themselves behind their earthworks, but to no avail; death continued to strike erratically among the front-line companies, never more than one man falling at a time. This went on until eighty-one men, all told, had been struck down in the trenches; then it ceased abruptly, and was succeeded by a threatening inactivity on the part of the Arcturians, like the calm before the storm.

There were no wounds and no wounded; the men died instantly, without a mark save the shriveling and darkening of the skin over wide areas.

IN SPITE of the panic occasioned by these losses, the officers suc-

ceeded in rallying their troops, who showed real courage and fortitude in the face of this unknown terror. A heavy bombardment of the Arcturian vessel was begun, using guns of the heaviest caliber and the most powerful aerial bombs available; General Headquarters frantically prepared for the attack which it believed imminent. The rain of fire on the shield of vibration was so heavy and continual that the ship was completely hidden under smoke and dust; suddenly, however, an aerial observer noticed that the shells were passing through the zone where until now they had been exploded by the screen, and continuing their trajectories to the ground. The bombardment was at once slackened in order to allow the smoke to clear; and as it lifted the men on the ground saw that the ship from Arcturus was smashed to crumpled wreckage, a lifeless, shattered shell in the midst of widely strewn remains of machinery.

Scientists from all over America were last night preparing to examine the wreck, but anticipated no discoveries of importance, due to the intensity of the shellfire which destroyed the vessel and its occupants. It was hoped that the secret of the alloy of which the hull was composed, which during the three days' battles had repelled bullets, shell splinters, shrapnel, and solid shot, might be discovered; but on close examination of the wreck, the metal of which the ship was constructed was discovered to be almost as soft as lead.

"This is another mystery which will probably never be solved," said W. L. Darcy, metallurgist attached to the Army Research Corps. "It is to be regretted that the Arcturian ship was so completely destroyed. . . . However, the welfare of the human race is the primary consideration."

The dead in today's battle were . . .

EXTRA!
EXTRA!

ARCTURIAN 'INVASION' WAS NOT INVASION!

Survivor of Kidnapped Twelve Tells Amazing Story

Space Ship Could Easily Have Wiped Out Entire Army

Exclusive to the *Marceline Oracle*: Story of Corporal Walter Clark, Made Prisoner by the Arcturians and Admitted Into Their Councils

June 26, 1953.—Early this morning a tourist, George T. Ekman, passing along the detour which during the past days has routed traffic on the road between U. S. 36 and the town of Wien around the scene of battle with the Arcturians, discovered a soldier lying in the ditch, alive and conscious, apparently uninjured, but with both legs paralyzed. This man gave his name as Walter Clark, corporal in the United States Army; but he did not explain how he came to be in that location and condition. Ekman carried him into town, but found that all of Marceline's three doctors had already fled before the anticipated Arcturian attack. Since the *Oracle* office was the only large establishment remaining open and unoccupied by the Army, due to the great demand for news straight from the battlefield, he left Clark there.

WHILE he waited for an Army doctor to arrive, Clark was induced to tell his story, which, transcribed by shorthand and here printed for the first time, is certainly one of the most remarkable narratives ever made known.

"I suppose the Arcturian space ship has been blown up by now?" asked Clark, lying propped up on an improvised couch in the outer office.

"It was destroyed about midnight last night," he was told.

"Well, I'm sorry, in a way," he said

slowly. "Though they've taken the use of my legs from me, they were pretty good scouts after a fashion."

"Corporal Clark," broke in a reporter, "we understand that you were among the men who disappeared without trace during the encirclement of the Arcturian vessel two days ago. Can you tell us what happened to you, and what became of the others?"

"They're dead," said Clark bluntly. "All except me, and I'm three-tenths dead. Exactly. I have the Arcturians' word for it." He smiled almost without bitterness. "Except for a bit of fast talking, I'd be four-tenths dead. But I oughtn't to beat around the bush and build up your curiosity, boys. I'll give you the story straight, snappy, and unembellished, and you can take it for what it's worth."

Day before yesterday afternoon, I think you said it was (proceeded Clark), they fired the big mine underneath the Arcties' ship; and for a moment we all thought it was done for. Then it started buzzing, swooped over us, and headed off into the north. It acted clumsy and heavy in the air, almost like it was damaged, and kept settling until it landed among the trees atop a big hill about a mile away. We could hear the timber splintering like toothpicks.

Well, we sweated through the valleys between us and it at the double, and through the bed of a little gravelly creek and a hickory grove, and started sneaking up the side of the hill. I was in command of the squad leading the advance of Nelson's platoon. Halfway up the ridge we came out of the woods, with nothing in front of us almost all the way to the top but a hillside pasture overgrown with young tree sprouts.

I was just about to give the order to halt—we were advancing in broken formation, keeping to cover, but there wasn't any cover for three hundred yards on up that hillside except young growth that wouldn't hide a

full-grown rabbit, and anyway we were well ahead of the rest—when all at once I felt funnier than I ever felt before and funnier than I ever hope to feel again. I felt like my foot had gone to sleep, only all over—if you get me. And then I went out like a light.

WHEN I woke up, I couldn't see anything for a minute or two but a lot of funny, bright lights that hurt my eyes. Then I realized that I was in a lighted chamber, with a curving ceiling of silvery-gray metal visible from where I lay on my back. I rolled over and sat up, and simultaneously bumped my head and got the big shock of an eventful life.

I was sitting on a sort of metal pedestal about five feet in diameter, underneath a hemisphere of almost invisible glass that was clamped onto this as a base. It was in the midst of a rather biggish room, as rooms in space ships go—Don't ask me how I knew I was in the Arcties' space ship. Maybe it was the sheen of those curving walls, maybe it was the round ship-like portholes and queer tubular girders and beams, or maybe it was the presence of the Arcties themselves, ranged in a triple ring all around me.

The Arcturians were like tall, sheeted ghosts. I don't know what they were really like, because I never saw one unclothed; but from head to foot their tall, thin figures were draped in a single long, white garment that reached the floor. They stood side by side, as immobile as so many statues about to be unveiled; I couldn't even see their eyes, but I know that they each had two, about where a man's are, by the big dark-lensed goggles that stared at me. They must have been much like men, but they were too tall, too narrow, and their figures, what I could tell about them, just weren't proportioned right at all. I knew right away that they were inhuman. I may even have

dimly realized that they were super-human.

Presently, as I just sat and stared back at them, I realized that they were talking—probably about me. Their voices were almost too deep and low for human ears to hear; I guess I just caught the higher notes. They sounded like great bass violins plucked at intervals. Their throbbing filled the chamber; I began to get the impression of an assembly, a conference. The air was charged with a feeling of something imminent. But perhaps it's just that subsonic waves do unreasonable things to a man's mind; and the air here was full of 'em.

All the time, I felt more and more uncomfortable and stared-at. I said to myself, if this Ku Klux Klan convention is going to make an example of me, it won't do it without a fight. I drew back as far as I could in those cramped quarters and rammed my army boot against the inside of that thin glass bubble.

Only it wasn't glass. I came near to spraining my ankle, but the wall of my transparent prison didn't even give. Then I remembered that our Browning fifty-caliber slugs had ricocheted off the unshuttered windows of the Arcturian ship.

I was inside that ship, and somewhere outside was Uncle Sam's Army and Air Force, hammering away at the thing with everything they'd got. Or were they? I didn't hear a sound.

I looked around at the ghostly audience lined up at attention, staring impassively at me, and I saw red. I hammered on the inside of my glass cage and shouted at them, "Let me out of here, you...s!* What the hell's the big idea?"

Then I shut up with my mouth hanging open, as the tallest of the Arcturians slipped out of the ranks and drifted across to my cage. At least that's the impression I got, of motion without movement. He—or it—just glided easily over the padded

floor and came to a stop in front of me.

"Be calm," he said, in a deep, resonant voice way down on the lower edges of deep bass, and with that plucked-string quality about it that made it vibrate queerly in a man's ears. But in *English*, get it? A thing from the stars ten million miles away!

THE spook went on, in slow, measured tones, "We have awakened you, Corporal Clark, to ask your advice on a matter of great moment."

Surprise Number Two! He knew my name—me, Walt Clark, that never could get even a dirty look from the Colonel back at old Fort Wood. What with the atmosphere, it was enough to give a fellow the big jim-mies.

"Y-yes?" I begged him to go on.

"We desire the attendance of one of your race in our council," answered the Arcturian. "You were chosen among the twelve which we seized by teleportation on account of the quality of your intellect."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Let me get this straight. You want me to join your powwow? And how did you say I got here?"

"By teleportation," answered the ghost's deep, booming voice. With a slight shock, I realized that that voice came from where his chest should have been, rather than from his face—if he had a face behind that pillow-slip.

"The word sounds familiar," I said. "But I can't recall it at the moment—"

"That is strange," said the Arcturian, and his voice—which, on its own subterranean scale, was flexible—sounded really puzzled. "We lifted the words which we have used from your own mind. Teleportation

*Military terminology deleted by request of the Ladies' Aid Society of Marceline.

signifies the transportation of material bodies from one point to another, in an immaterial state, by means of short ether waves. That is how we captured you and your comrades, who are still under the anesthetic which we used in order to test your mentalities."

My head was spinning like a gyroscope top. "Then you learned English by telepathy, or what-not?"

The tall draped figure inclined toward me in what I interpreted as a gesture of affirmation. "That is true."

"And what do you want with me? About the intellectual qualities—I never was noted for 'em."

"We chose you not as an exceptional member of your race, but as one approximating the average. Of all the twelve minds tested, yours most closely approached the mathematical mean for the entire group. Therefore you were selected as a representative of your race to sit in our council." By a slight motion he indicated the ranks of supernatural-looking beings ranged motionless around us.

Well, that was a comedown, of course, just about the time I was thinking I was a cinch for Information Please. But it was a relief to know I wasn't subnormal. "What do you want with me?" I asked again.

The creature glided backward until he remained only a couple of feet in front of the line, but enough to show that he was of higher rank than the rest. I gathered that he was the Grand Dragon, or Presiding Elder, or something.

"We are discussing," he said, and his voice was like a great organ going way down the scale on some melancholy hymn, "whether we shall, with the facilities at hand, make resistance against the attacks of the Earthmen, or whether we shall resign ourselves and await death at their hands."

I had a sensation of strangeness. It seemed such a queer question to be

putting. You know that with a human crew there wouldn't have been any discussion. But as I said before—the Arcturians weren't human, but superhuman.

"It seems to me," I couldn't help putting in, "that you've been resisting pretty effectively so far."

"In the nose of this vessel," went on the Dragon, "there is an atomic blast rifle, for the purpose of destroying meteors and small planetoids too small to be worth charting yet large enough to constitute a menace to interstellar shipping. It is capable of burning a hundred milligrams of prepared atomic fuel per second, and, under your atmospheric pressure, of throwing a blast flame a thousand Earthly miles. By its use we could easily destroy your army, or wipe out all life on your planet."

I SAT up like a jack-in-the-box and crowned myself on the inside of my inverted goldfish bowl; but I didn't even feel it.

"Judas Priest!" I said, horrified. "You can't do that!"

It was a little while before the Arcturian answered; when he did, at last, his voice was yet lower than before, almost inaudible; and there was a ceremonial intonation to it that I could not fathom. "We wish to see justice done. Justice is the greatest of all ideals, and that on which civilization is most firmly founded."

It sounded almost like dodging the issue to me. But the triple circle of robed figures swayed slowly forward, and made deep musical sounds of applause, swelling up in a harmonious chorus. It was weird and impressive.

"We are determined that justice shall be served, even at the cost of our own lives," intoned the Dragon. Another ripple of applause from the amen corner.

"Since that is so," proceeded the speaker, "we must make the high principle of justice accord with the

inexorable facts of our case. I will explain to you our reason for landing on your planet, and the reason why we cannot leave."

He went on to explain that, in passing near the Earth, something had gone haywire in their ship's transmission mechanism, or something like that; there was barely enough power in the emergency storage batteries to limp across the few million miles to Earth and make a landing on the helicopters they used for taking off at home.

They couldn't use them to rise off the ground here, though, because their power was too low and the gravity was too much above their norm. They were using the last juice in the batteries to power this screen which protected the ship, and one other defense as well; but it would soon be gone.

"We have calculated," said the chairman, and I swear I couldn't be sure of either regret or sorrow or anger or hope in his bullfrog voice, "that within ten of your long days our stored power will be exhausted. This will be just two days before we can complete repairs on the generator transmission. When it fails, our screen will go down, and at the same moment the tension-maintenance device which keeps up the artificial surface tension of our hull will cease to operate, and it will no longer be impervious to your crude projectiles. Then we will all die."

"I guess you've about called the turn," I admitted. "So what?"

"There is still the atomic blast gun," said the Arcturian, slowly. I turned cold all over. "But we do not wish wholesale destruction. We wish only to see that justice is performed."

I wiped my brow with a shaking hand. "Well, so what?" I demanded fiercely, to cover up the fact that my spine had turned to Jell-O and my heart was knocking against my Adam's apple.

"On our home world, which revolves about the star you call Arc-turus, forty light years distant, the law has always been: A death for a death. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."

I guessed he had got that out of my mind too.

"Obviously, however, the old, simple law cannot be applied between beings of two races so widely divergent as ours and yours. We must consider the relative value of the two." That sounded ugly. "We have, by means of instruments which we believe to be infallible, measured carefully the intelligence of twelve members of your race, and discovered that the average is somewhat less than that of ours. Therefore,—since we believe intellectual scope to be the true measure of a being's value to the universe—a greater number of your race must die in retribution for our deaths.

"Since, though we are acquainted with your mental abilities and attainments, we do not know your concepts of universal law, we have awakened you from anesthetic sleep to inform us whether, in your estimation, this is just."

WELL, it was logic—cold-blooded, perfect, triumphant. And—Lord, it seemed a cheap method of getting rid of creatures with such frightful potentialities. I said I guessed it was, though I wondered if I was signing my own death warrant.

The Dragon soon relieved my mind on that one, after a fashion. "You shall be allowed to live, in order that a record may survive of these proceedings. Perhaps your people may learn something of the lofty ideal of justice from the consideration of this incident. However," he added dispassionately, "we will use you to make up the fractional difference."

That was where I really began to get the creeps. Not just because they

were talking so cold-bloodedly about making a fraction of me, but because they referred so casually to their own total destruction as an "incident." Because they spoke English and wore clothes, they had seemed somewhat human—but now I got a glimpse of just what a wide gulf lay between them and the human.

Or perhaps there wasn't so much difference after all. You know men will die for an ideal—but only if properly keyed up. It was the cold-bloodedness of it that got me.

"Fractional difference?" I asked, with my teeth chattering like dice. "Listen—if you're planning to fractionate me, we Earthmen don't come that way. We live whole or we die all over."

"We number seventy," the Arcturian's deep voice throbbed out. "By simple mathematics, based on the findings of our machines, justice requires that ninety-two and four-tenths Earthmen die to balance the equation."

This mixture of ideology and arithmetic got my goat worse than ever. "Look here," I gulped. "You can't kill four-tenths of a man."

"A light dose of the death ray will produce total and permanent paralysis," boomed the Dragon. "Justice requires that you be paralyzed from the waist down."

I used to think a lot of justice, but now I began to think that if I heard it mentioned again I'd scream. I tried to make my voice steady, seeing I wouldn't get anywhere by cracking up:

"Listen, how about that guy whose hand was amputated because it got in your screen?" I stammered, my words tumbling over one another. "Don't that count?"

There was a faint ripple of attention, and my heart rose; the Arcturians conferred in their subsonic voices. It sounded like the room was full of swarming bees.

From the confabulation, the Drag-

on emerged with the decision in his teeth.

"It shall be so," he thrummed. "The hand, which our study of your civilization has revealed to be of great value, shall count one-tenth of one Earthman. Your legs only shall be paralyzed."

I couldn't think of any more arguments, so I let it stand. After all, I guessed I was a martyr to my country. Three-tenths of a martyr.

"Your eleven captured companions, and eighty-one of the surrounding troops, will be destroyed to make up the tale," went on the chairman, and I thought, strangely, that his voice was half-saddened, half-benign. The Arcturians were, after all, deciding on their own deaths that an ideal might be served. I actually felt—laugh if you like, but it's true—I felt a little cheap to have struggled so against a little matter of partial paralysis for the sake of that same ideal. It was fantastic, monstrous to Earthly psychology. Earthmen would have fought back, wiped out thousands or millions of an alien race to save their own miserable lives. Yet to the Arcturians, the sacrifice was perfect, beautiful logic, logic worth dying for. In that moment, I could understand and—almost—sympathize.

"WHEN that is done," went on the leader, "we shall lower our screens, release the imposed surface tension of our hull, and die."

In spite of my predicament, I found time to shudder and admire.

An Arcturian slipped noiselessly forward, bent beside my glass bubble. A grotesque, oversize hand, wrinkled, black, deformed, slid out of the folds of his white robe; a knobby digit pressed a button on the side of my pedestal. From beneath, invisible gas rushed up into the dome around me; involuntarily I took a sharp breath, and I never felt it when I hit the floor.

But I thought, later on, that I re-

membered being thrust into a humming, vibrating machine, in the midst of blinding glare and darkness, and hearing a chorus of mighty, throbbing voices, like a rhythmic thunder that blended with the crescendo of the machine, exclaiming all together:

"Justice is served!"

But that must have been an anesthetic dream. They wouldn't have spoken in English.

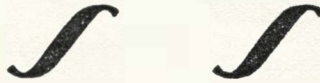
Here I am, anyway; you know the rest. The Arcturians died for the sake of a formula; but they were only what any race must finally become if it worships logic.

"Have you any particular statement to make for the press, Corporal

Clark?" inquired the reporter eagerly.

Clark gazed thoughtfully at the ceiling. "I guess I'll be given a pension, since I'm certainly unfit for further service; but, you know, I don't mind being out of the running as much as I thought I would. Since coming in contact with the philosophy of the Arcturians, I've sort of lost my curiosity about life. . . . No, I haven't been converted. Far from it—but I can watch the rest of humanity scurrying madly around, chasing their desires and beliefs and ideals, without much desire to participate. You see, I know where it's all heading. . . . Well, boys, here's the medico. Thanks for listening."

THE END



STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

Of Science Fiction Quarterly, published quarterly at Holyoke, Mass., for October 1st, 1942.

State of New York
County of New York

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Louis H. Silberkleit, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the business manager of Science Fiction Quarterly and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are:

Publisher, Harold Hammond, 60 Hudson St., New York City; Editor, Robert W. Lowndes, 60 Hudson St., New York City; Managing Editor, Robert W. Lowndes, 60 Hudson St., New York City; Business Manager, Louis H. Silberkleit, 60 Hudson St., New York City.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Columbia Publications, Inc., 60 Hud-

son St., New York City; Harold Hammond, 60 Hudson St., New York City.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of the total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is— (This information is required from daily publications only).

LOUIS H. SILBERKLEIT
(Signature of Business Manager)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 29th day of September, 1942. Maurice Coyne. (My Commission expires March 30, 1944.) [SEAL]

ANNOUNCING



THE MAGAZINE THAT SCIENCE FICTION READERS DEMANDED

DURING the past few months, we have received countless requests from science fiction readers for a magazine exclusively devoted to science fiction stories. These readers felt that fantasy fiction is out of place at the present time, complained that stories of this type cannot compete in interest and mental stimulation with the science fiction story.

WE are heeding these requests, and have changed the title of our magazine from FUTURE FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION to SCIENCE FICTION STORIES. Could any other title be more indicative of the kind of fiction to be found in our pages? Could any other title state more clearly that we are guided by our readers' preferences? We think not.

★ IN THE APRIL 1943 ISSUE ★

VENUS STATION STAR COMRADES

a novelet by
ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

short story by
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MALLORY KENT'S letter in Fall Issue (No. 8) seems to have stirred up something of a controversy. Pvt. Jim Blish, whose stories many of you will remember having read in past issues of SCIENCE FICTION QUARTERLY, and our sister publication, SCIENCE FICTION STORIES, writes the following:

"I was particularly interested in Mallory Kent's letter about Fort and the Fortean Society. As a member of said Society, I should like the opportunity to say something on that subject.

"I am not going to jump down Mr. Kent's throat, or be particularly impassioned about it. Like everything else in this Fortean world, his letter is neither true nor untrue, and nothing that I say will be any more than similarly intermediate. Anyhow I have no desire to scintillate forever in one spot, as Fort humorously suggested might be the fate of people who got translated to the Positive Absolute. What Mr. Kent has to say about Fort seems to me to be quite acceptable; but what he has to say about the Society leads me to believe that either he does not have a very intimate acquaintance with its workings and purposes, or else that his acquaintanceship terminated some years ago.

"He speaks of the Society as one 'devoted to debunking' and says elsewhere that our attempt is to 'organize' or even 'regiment cynicism or criticism.' I am tempted to say 'Not at all,' but instead I will modify that a little and say 'Only fractionally.' I wonder if Mr. Kent has ever seen the codified aims of the Society: To

put the books of Charles Fort into the hands of everybody who can possibly be made to read them; to publish books and pamphlets, to conduct lectures and debates upon Fortean subjects; to preserve the notes and data collected by Fort; to continue the work of gathering such data. These are the primary purposes for which the Fortean Society exists. I am sure that Mr. Kent knows Fort's books well enough to realize what an enormous territory they cover; as John Campbell says, 'They contain the root truths of about four new sciences,' and it was quite impossible for one man, even such a man as Fort, to assemble all the data relating to these fields as is necessary to give us anything like a complete picture, or even properly to correlate what data he did manage to collect. That's our job and it is a herculean one. To take all these inexplicable facts — nearly a hundred thousand in the Society's files now — and make a pattern or patterns out of them—well, you can see that we don't have much time

Wherein you, the readers tell the Editor what's what. Poems of praise or hymns of hate; serious discussion on scientific aspects of our yarns, or whimsy as you like—it all belongs here. Write in to Prime Base and tell us about it. The address is Science Fiction Quarterly, 60 Hudson Street, N. Y. C.

for the game of debunking-for-its-own-sake. Fort's own patterns were, except in a few cases, merely whimsical suggestions. 'I believe nothing; I offer the data,' he said countless times. We continue to collect these data, and sometimes such men as E. F. Russell, C. S. deFord, Alred Barley, Drayson, deHorsey, Marriot, Page, Graydon, Crehore, and Hammett attempt tentative correlations. Mostly such attempts turn out to be useful only in showing us that we haven't yet enough data; or sometimes they work out most spectacularly, as did the theories of Drayson and Graydon. The Fortean Society

offers for sale extended scientific works by all the men whom I listed above.

"Debunk? Sure we debunk. Some people have thick skulls, Mr. Kent; until you show as forcefully as possible the bunk in the system of theory you are trying to replace, your own work, no matter how careful it may be, nor how thoroughly documented by research and experiment and math, will lie dormant and collect dust. Graydon's got a letter from Dr. Clyde Fisher about his own work, approving his math, but not all scientists are so open-minded, as Mr. Kent well knows. Some of them are pretty thoroughly surrounded by bunk, and you have to debunk your way through it to get at them. We aren't trying to be professional cynics! As you say, we'd be as dogmatic as the next man if we were, and it's a mistake we admit even Fort made. But we try not to make it ourselves. We criticize to a purpose.

"Self-appointed judges?" Well, perhaps; but I'm surprised to hear about it, and I think that most of the rest of us would be similarly surprised. We don't judge, we investigate. If we have four hundred records of falls of living things, and two hundred of mysterious disappearances and appearances, we 'judge' that some temporary force may exist, despite disclaimers by other scientists who don't have six hundred records to match ours, or even one hundred. We 'judge' that maybe these scientists may be wrong. This is cautious judgment, and tempered always by our choice of verb—you see, we are still saying 'MAY exist' although our records far top the six hundred figure I selected arbitrarily. This is because our often-published and often-repeated tenet is that of the suspension of final judgment and dogmatic acceptance. 'Temporary acceptance' is the principle of true scientific endeavor all over the world.

"And if we occasionally foam at the mouth and have attacks of debunkiana, I think maybe you can forgive us. We don't enjoy foaming any more than you enjoy watching us foam, and we do it as seldom as pos-

sible, but sometimes—are you human, Mr. Kent—just sometimes, just occasionally, we run out of patience with the logheads who will not listen, and the evaders who squirm away from under our patiently compiled masses of facts without even the politeness to acknowledge our patience with a hearing."

WE TURNED Pvt. Blish's letter over to Mallory Kent, who noted the following:

"Blish's courteous reply to my (apparently none-too-well-founded) attack is appreciated. Yes, my acquaintanceship with Fortean was not very intimate, and occurred several years ago. I think I'd just finished reading Fort's books at that time, and was interested in the very idea of a Fortean Society, whose aims I imagined much as Jim has outlined them. Unfortunately, I came in contact with a clique of dilettantes whose yammerings finally soured me on the idea.

"Am glad to hear that these drools were not representative of the Forteanians.

"By the by, editor old thing, how about seeing if you Pvt. Blish, or some other qualified party, can do some scientific articles for SCIENCE FICTION QUARTERLY along Fortean lines? If not too technical, they ought to be of genuine interest, and not the usual thing one finds floating around."

IF YOU Pvt. Blish, or any other qualified party, cares to send in such types of articles, we're more than happy to consider them, Kent, old thing. Now we dive for our own private bomb shelter, as that doughty fan, Bob Tucker, gives forth with:

"Cheerio, Little Chum. You know, I can just picture in my mind's eye the royal Lowndes method of cutting and editing stories—especially those yarns that went into the No. 9 Quarterly.

"Editor Lowndes squats at his desk. Behind him stands Little Nemo, the office gnome. Lowndes picks up the manuscript for Preston's 'Lunar Sanctuary.' 'Here,' he says to Little

Nemo. 'You take the first ten pages. I'll work on the rest.'

"Little Nemo stares at the ten pages, closes one eye and winks at an invisible pixie. To himself he says: 'Heh! Here's where I go to work on Preston and Lowndes!' And he pounces on the ten pages, ripping and cutting literally to hell. When he finishes, there are 19 paragraphs left—no more, no less. (And these 19 paragraphs subsequently found themselves on pages 114, 115, and at the top of 116 in the No. 9 Quarterly. Did they make sense? No. Were they connected? No. Did they give the slightest hint as to what the rest of the story was about? No. Did they succeed in confusing the reader? Yes! Little Nemo did his work well.

"Meanwhile the great editor himself was busy. But he was not so drastic as his little friend, the urchin, behind him. He merely deleted paragraphs and sentences here and there so that the thing read delightedly choppy. A good day's work done! Aha! The reader is now (1) thoroughly confused; (2) thoroughly disgusted; (3) quite mad. You may consider yourself a finished editor.

"Dear Doc, due either to a poor manuscript in the first place, or perfectly lousy cutting in the second, 'Lunar Sanctuary' emerges as quite the smelliest thing in the Winter Issue. It reads like something by a half-baked fan reprinted from *Martian Tales*; I thrilled, simply thrllllllled, as Wallace explained to sweet, stupid little Rita the fine points of astronomy and the kindred sciences! Oh nuts. And why did you even bother to print those first nineteen paragraphs? They only succeeded in doing nothing.

"Second place on the Stinko list is friend Raymond's 'Hell in the Village.' I don't care if he never buys me another dinner with wine; I refuse to smile and say this is good. Third stinko is Keller's 'Growing Wall.' 'Growing Bore' is a better title, and aptly suitable. Take them away.

"And now, Sir Lowndes, to those that I did like. Burks' 'Far Detour'

unquestionably is the best Burks story in a long time, and head over shoulders the leader in this issue. I suppose you noted, while reading it, that it had a peculiar 'old timer' twang reminiscent of the Tremaine Astounding at its best? At least it struck me in that way; as if it were a good story left over from that era that somehow hadn't found ink until now. Top of the list!

"Number two hit is Gordon's 'Bomb.' What a perfect gem of a short-short-short, which undoubtedly would have been ruined had it been longer. ('Growing Wall' should have been a one-pager, such as this; then it would have amounted to something worth reading.) My hat off to friend Gordon—and he can even have the hat, if he wishes.

"Number three: Lambert's 'Perfect Incinerator.' Is this not the yarn you were working on the day I dropped in on you? Did you not send Lambert a postal commenting on this yarn, on which I added a postscript? (Right! Ed.)

"Fourth place, I'd say, goes to 'Wings Across Time,' altho I was disappointed in the way it was handled, as it seemed to me that a lot more could be made of it—speaking of both quality and quantity of the wordage. The opening and ending were good—as if they had been written first—and the middle filled in as a matter of course.

"Coming up to close the issue, and all winding up in just about an even tie are the other short tales 'Deliverers' and 'Messenger to Infinity.'

"Best liked of the interior illustrations were Knight's monster on pp. 4-5, and Musacchia's wall on 54-55. But Doc, old bean: how in hell . . . or rather, what in hell are those skyscrapers doing in Tokyo? Shame.

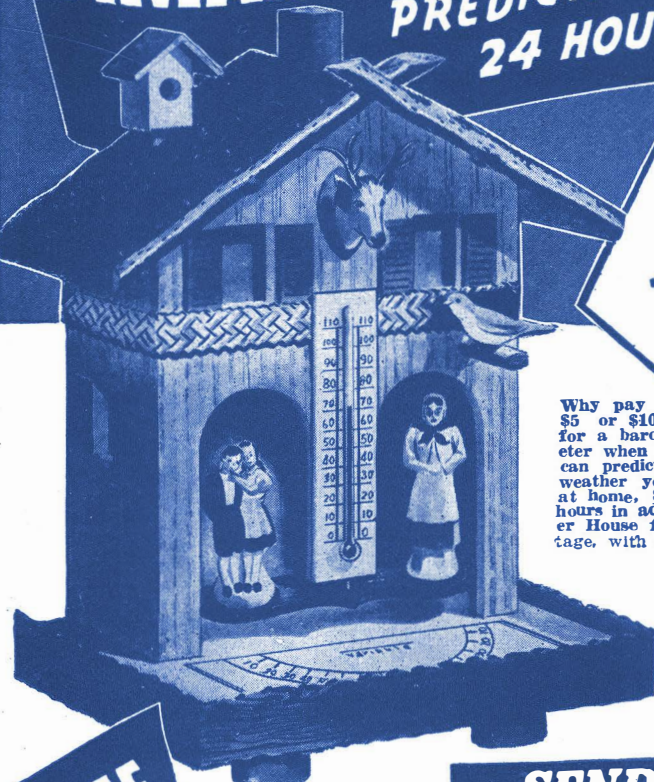
"And there, sir, is your Quarterly, from *False Teeth by Mail* to *Free Slide Rule*. Amen."

HMM, may we come out now? Thanks. Glad you liked "Far Detour." Sorry you didn't care for some of the others; other letter-writers praised the Keller tale. Happier now? Good. Cheerio all! Editor.

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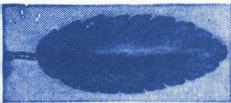
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