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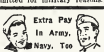
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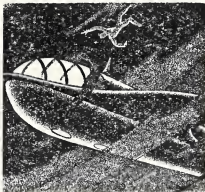
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VOLUME 3

FEBRUARY, 1943

NUMBER 3



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There was so little time . . . to solve the secret of a lost people!
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- STATION X** The Ayes and Noes of Future's Readers 72
Wherein your editor collects the bouquets and tekas it on the chin!

COVER BY MILTON LUROS

(From a scene in "The Second Satellite" by Martin Pearson)
Interior Illustrations by Bok, Forte, Fox, Knight, and Les Tina

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

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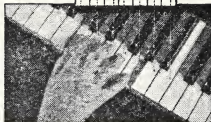
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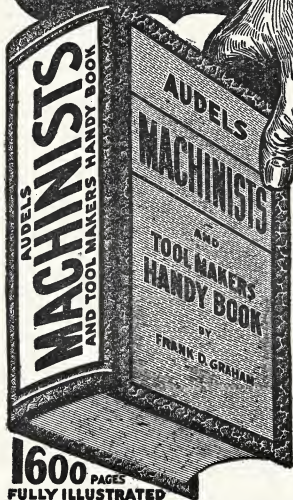
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★ ★ ★ ★ ★ **THE SECOND SATELLITE**

A Powerful Novolet

By **MARTIN PEARSON** ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

A few brief hours and the strange little planetoid caught by great Earth's attraction would plunge to fiery ruin. Was there time for the explorer to solve the secret of the weird runes and strange machinery—the heritage of a forgotten race—before fate tolled the knell of the second satellite?

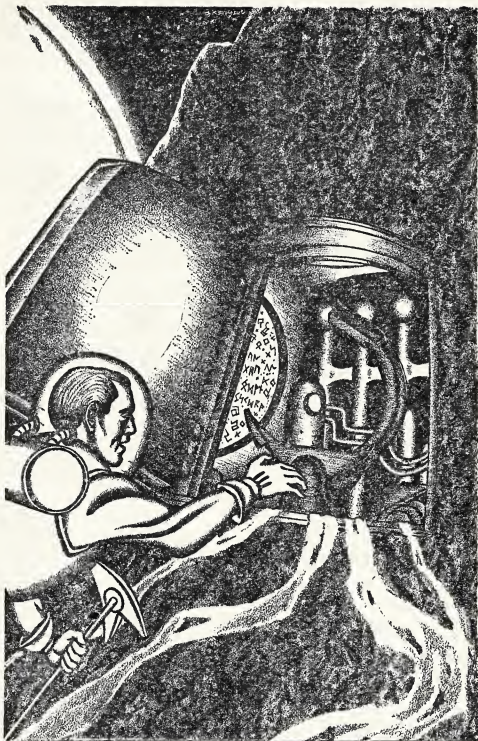
WHEN Cyrus Bennington died early in 1943 and it was found that he had left the bulk of his fortune in a special trust fund to be granted as a prize to the first interplanetary traveller, it was a sensation to shake the international news off the headlines for a day and make

the first seven-day wonder since the World Series.

What made most of the sensation was the fact that the prize amounted to something like twenty million dollars and that it was quite uncontested. People realized that after the reconstruction was over, some-

illustration by damon knight





★ | A door, set flush with the rocky terrain of this world, was now open, and within the cavity Mikkelsen saw . . . | ★

thing was going to be done about the problem of moon-flying and Mars-visiting, no doubt about it. After all—twenty million dollars!

The American Rocket Society gave up the thought of trying for the prize when their special research committee came back with an itemized design for a space ship. The minimum practical cost of a rocket-propelled vessel capable of reaching a velocity of seven miles per second, crossing the two hundred and thirty-nine thousand miles to the moon, carrying a human load, landing, taking off again and returning safely was a little over twenty-four million dollars—research, fuel, construction, etc.

Several scientific organizations dropped the idea when they came to the same conclusion. A man in Milwaukee got into the papers when he said that he could build a ship at a cost of not more than two millions, but a brief glance at his scheme revealed that his knowledge of rockets was limited to the Fourth-of-July type.

Professor Goddard wrote a letter from his testing grounds in New Mexico to the trustees of the Guggenheim Foundation suggesting they build the ship; he maintained they would at least get the cost back. The trustees wrote back that they considered the investment too risky and would the professor please continue his routine experiments as before?

Sanders Mikkelsen was an amateur astronomer who ran a successful garage and auto repair shop in Michigan. He had been impressed by the amount of the prize and had devoted as much time to the problem of a moon ship as anyone else in America. He also had come to agree with the American Rocket Society, of which he was a subscriber.

Nevertheless Sanders Mikkelsen felt that he ought not to abandon the problem so easily. Inevitably some bright fellow was going to win it; Sanders felt that he should be that person. He sent for a copy of the Bennington will and read the bequest over carefully. For several days he pondered the matter while working. Somewhere he felt that there was a clue to this problem.

After a while he took a few days' vacation from his work and went to Chicago. There he visited the libraries and university and spent his time tracking down certain astronomical data. Returning home, he spent another four weeks working out data; Then one night he unlocked the door of

his home-built observatory on a hill he had rented outside of town, unlimbered his hand-ground reflecting telescope and spent a little more than an hour in certain observations.

"GOOD MORNING," said the big brawny blond mechanic to the butler as he opened the door. "My name is Sanders Mikkelsen and I would like to see Mr. Currey. He should have my letter."

The butler raised his eyebrows and signalled to wait. A few minutes later Sanders was shown into the study of the millionaire Currey, meat packer and speculator.

The short businessman leaned back in his chair and reread Mikkelsen's letter. He looked at the machinist a while and pondered.

"What makes you think I have any interest in winning the Bennington prize?" he asked suddenly.

"Because you have often taken financial risks if the profits were big enough. I know that if I can convince you that you can make twenty million for a risk of half a million, you will do it." Sanders was not accustomed to dealing with big business but his Scandinavian level-headedness stood him in good stead.

Currey leaned forward. "The moon is still as far away as it was when the rocket people studied the problem."

Mikkelsen smiled. "But we are not concerned with the moon... or at least with Luna," he corrected himself.

"Bennington's contest concerned the moon," the financier replied.

"Wrong, Mr. Currey," the mechanic shot back. "That is merely the popular conception. Let me read you what his will actually says in the matter."

He riffled through papers in his portfolio and brought out one.

"The salient remark is 'the first person or persons ever to set foot upon the surface of a world other than this earth.' This does not specify the moon or any planet. It may be any body in our solar system, near or far, large or small."

"The moon is the nearest body to the Earth," said Currey "and therefore the most practical for our purposes."

"Wrong," said Mikkelsen. "It is not the nearest body. The Earth has several other satellites besides the moon."

Currey brought himself to attention. "Explain please."

Mikkelsen cleared his throat.

"To begin with, you must surely know that asteroids often come very close to the Earth. Eros, Amor, Anteros, Adonis, and others are examples of tiny planets that come very close to the Earth on occasions. You are also aware that the planet Jupiter is known to have captured asteroids and made them into moons. Her outer moons are generally believed to be such.

"If a planetoid, really nothing more than a mass of rock five or ten miles across, comes within the influence of the Earth, say a distance closer than the moon, and if it is not travelling too fast, it is mathematically probable that it will be captured by this planet. It will revolve around the Earth as a second moon either permanently or temporarily depending on the conditions of its capture. In point of fact, the odds are strongly against any permanent capture but the odds are inevitable that temporary capture may and does occur.

"That is to say: at various times in the past small bodies have revolved about the Earth for periods from a day or so to many years before either flying off again into space or else crashing finally on either our planet or the moon. It is one theory of the creation of Luna's craters that great bodies have crashed into its surface.

"Now if these things are so, science should have records of these other satellites. In that regard remember that astronomy as a proper science has not been conducting any intelligent work for more than perhaps a hundred years. Beyond that there were only isolated misunderstood and misunderstanding men and a great veil of hodge-podge, hokum, and pseudo-scientific nonsense. We have so much to work on that it is not a wonder that science still hasn't brought these second satellites to attention.

"But," and here Mikkelsen picked up several papers and glanced through them, "there have been observations nevertheless of such temporary moons. Or of their tracks such as eclipses, occultations, and so forth. For example, two very capable and sober British astronomers reported seeing in 1879 a round, dark shadow cross the face of Luna. Briefly what they saw was the eclipse of the moon caused by the passage of a smaller inner moon between Luna and the sun. This is only one example of that sort of thing.

THERE have been many other instances of recorded shadows crossing the face of Luna. It is possible to eliminate all explanations of these things other than that of the passage of a body between moon and Earth. There are many recorded instances of totally unexpected eclipses over the Earth when the moon was not involved. Periods of sudden darkness in clear skies, as if bodies were passing between the sun and Earth.

"Again there actually have been many reports of seeing other celestial bodies in the sky similar to small moons or planetoids not recorded. Such examples as the supposed planet Vulcan could easily have been one. Italians saw a moon-like glowing body in the sky in 1870.

"The specific data which gave my search its real point of attack were several instances of eclipses over the Earth which were fortunately recorded well enough to work on. On March 19, 1886, there was an eclipse of some unknown lunar body over the United States. Starting about noon on the West Coast a small belt of darkness crossed the continent from West to East at about the level of Wisconsin. Records can be found in the papers of the communities over which it passed which give pretty accurate data to work on. From this information I was able to work out some tentative date on the size, speed and probable distance of this unknown moon.

"Several other eclipses occurred during other years which gave me further data to bring my facts up to accuracy. In April, 1904, the second moon's shadow passed over England. In December that year it was reported from Tennessee. Again in 1911 the Southern region reported it. Still other years and places remarked on it.

"What I did was to follow out the clues given by these items and track down the inevitable other data. From these I worked out the present day location of this body and proceeded to check it by visual observation."

Currey leaned forward on his desk and put the fingers of his hands together. "You have seen this second moon?"

Mikkelsen nodded. "It is unstable in orbit as these things are. Its orbit is erratic and steadily narrowing. It is losing momentum and coming closer and closer to the Earth's surface. At first its orbit was wide and it swung in and out. Now it is travelling along almost circular and very close to the world. Its size is about ten

miles in diameter. Its distance from the surface of the Earth is about three thousand miles and rapidly coming closer."

The blond mechanic leaned forward himself. "Now what I want to bring to your attention is this. This second moon is not going to last much longer. It will reach the upper fringes of the atmosphere very soon and when it does it will crash and end up as a large burned-out meteor. But we still have time. It is close, close enough so that a simple rocket can be constructed for not more than a half million dollars, probably less, which can carry a man, me, to the surface of this moon."

Currey nodded slowly and still looked quizzically at the mechanic. Mikkelsen laid several sheets before him.

"Here are the basic outlines of the rocket to be constructed. It ignores such expensive items as meteor-proof hull, great quantities of food and fuel, expensive navigating instruments, conditioning apparatus, and so on, that made the moon rockets so expensive. It does not have to reach tremendous speeds nor accelerate for long periods with expensive fuels."

Currey glanced slowly over the diagrams. It looked cheap and practical.

"Fantastic, utterly fantastic. But it ought to work." He murmured half to himself. He rubbed his chin and stared at Sanders a while. Then he picked up the plans and again looked them over.

"Hmmm. We can save five thousand dollars right off the bat. Your estimate of the cost of this material is off. Yes, I'll risk it, Mikkelsen. I think you're crazy and I think I'm going to lose my money, but I'll take that chance."

THREE months later, in response to a telegram, Sanders Mikkelsen again packed his bag, left his garage in charge of an assistant and took a train. This time he did not get off until he reached a certain town in North Dakota. There he got in a car and was driven through rolling farm lands to a fairly deserted section. There an old farmhouse and a huge new barn stood. Mikkelsen got out and shook hands with Currey and several assistants.

Behind the barn rose a long runway like the start of a carnival roller-coaster. Running along the ground a bit, then rising sharply into the air, it ended abruptly pointing straight into the sky. Being rolled onto

the tracks at the level was a long gleaming metal shell.

The rocket-craft was like an airplane with short stubby wings, or like a long racing automobile, or like a small submarine out of water. It resembled all three and yet was none of them. It had four wheels on which it rested. It had short wide wings. It had a glassed-in forward section and a flanged wide multi-barreled rear.

Mikkelsen inspected it and signified his approval. His watch was checked against a chronometer set up in the barn.

An hour later Mikkelsen, togged in flying costume, heavily furred, with an oxygen hood completely covering his head, climbed into the cabin of the thing, closed and sealed the airtight door, buckled himself into the deep, heavily cushioned seat before the controls in the front of the ship. He glanced ahead along the runway, glanced at his dials and at the clock among them.

Then he threw a switch and opened his throttle. There was a roar from behind. Outside observers saw at first a puff of smoke from the tubes behind, then a cataract of blue-green flame roared forth. The rocket leaped forward, shot up the runway and flamed away into the sky with a suddenness and a roar that stunned and amazed everyone.

Sanders was not entirely unfamiliar with airplanes. He knew something of what was to be expected from sudden ascents and rapid acceleration. Still it was all his strong constitution could do to bear up under the terrific strain of this rocket drive. Acceleration was far greater than any motor-driven craft could achieve and the speeds that would be attained would be record-shattering.

Almost from the start the body of the pilot was pressed back under an acceleration that must have equalled at least eight gravities. The weight of his body was tremendous; Mikkelsen found his hand being dragged from the controls. It required a desperate effort of will to keep his hands on the instruments and his eyes open. He felt as if eight men were sitting on him and tearing at him. The muscles and training he had as a hard-working man stood him in good stead.

The speedometer moved rapidly around. Three hundred had been left behind seconds ago and now the needle passed the five-hundred mark. Five hundred miles an hour and still the needle continued its rush ahead.

Behind the pilot gallons and gallons of liquid hydrogen and liquid oxygen flowed steadily into the several blasting chambers and were touched off. A great streamer of roaring flame and energy streamed out from behind. And the terrific push of the craft continued.

Before his eyes only cold blue sky showed. Clouds had been passed and were now far behind. A warmth began to suffuse the ship from the passage of air around it and he felt the trembling of the wings as they strove to cleave the atmosphere piling up before them.

A thousand miles an hour, and still the needle continued its forward rush. The sky was getting dark now, distinctly darker and deeper. Mikkelsen fancied he saw a faint star—some planet shining in the gathering dusk. His eyes strayed to the clock; it was still mid-day.

Onward and onward. For several minutes more this continued. The sky rapidly grew darker; now it was a deep purple and many bright stars were piercing the glow and braving the sun, reduced now from the master of the heavens to a small blinding sphere of white about whose horizons strange columns of red and yellow flame waved.

WHEN the needle passed the three-thousand-five-hundred mark, Mikkelsen cut the throttle and stopped accelerating. The roar of the rocket died down until only a steady hissing and flare swept from behind, just enough to keep the speed constant.

The weight passed away from him and he drew a deep breath again after the many minutes of desperate gasping. Now he had time to determine the condition of his craft.

The fuel was already three-quarters gone. The rest would be used on the remainder of the trip, he might just have enough left over to brake his flight.

The heat of the tubes had reached a dangerous point during the height of the acceleration but the temperature had dropped slightly now that he had leveled off his speed. The tubes wouldn't melt and that had been the pilot's greatest worry. Further, the rest of the ship was in surprisingly good condition. Curry had had a good job done.

Inside the cabin the temperature was still warm. The friction of the extremely thin air outside was still quite sufficient to keep

up heat at that speed. Inside his furs Mikkelsen perspired profusely.

There would be about an hour more of travelling, he knew, and settled himself to the task. He realized that he was getting somewhat confused about "up" and "down." Not a lack of gravity, for that was there, but the same confusion that overcame pilots who cannot tell when they are rightside up or reversed.

He kept his attention desperately focussed on his instruments and knew that he was following the course to perfection. Glances outside revealed that night had almost set in, at least all was dark around him and a profusion of stars were coming into view.

Sanders permitted himself a brief smile as the thought occurred to him as to his real position. He was sitting on a chair atop of a constantly exploding mass of unstable gas. Perched, as it were, atop a column of flame with two thousand miles to drop if it went out. And every second that went past he had crossed another two miles of emptiness.

Now he strained his eyes into the darkness for sight of his objective. Nothing resembling a moon as yet. He stared into the cold blackness examining each glow and discarding them as he recognized stars. One he held for a while until he realized that it was steady-glowing Jupiter, a golden yellow dot millions of miles away. With a start he realized that the four tiny white dots next to it were its Galilean moons, visible to the naked eye now that the envelope of air was gone.

Something bright flashed past and he started. A meteor starting its plunge into the Earth's atmosphere and flaming oblivion. It started a grim chain of thought which he quickly thrust out of his mind.

Now his eye caught another dimly glowing light. A thin new moonish crescent. The moon? But suddenly he realized that the moon was on the other side of the world; it had been a full moon. This, then, was it, his objective.

He was approaching it from below, from the Earth side and the mid-day sun lit the hemisphere turned away from Earth, away from Mikkelsen.

Now he took the manual controls in his grasp for the first time. From here on he steered the ship.

This was no space ship, he reminded himself, whose course would have to be calculated far in advance and whose slightest

deviation was unrectifiable. He could steer his ship, had to steer his ship for he had not escaped the clutch of Earth's gravity at all.

Upwards the ship shot on its column of energy and now the little moon was showing as a half moon. That meant that he was level with it. Mikkelsen pushed the wheel forward and the craft swooped and dipped until it raced along directly at the gleaming half-circle hanging in the darkness before it.

Sanders chased it without dropping speed and saw that he was slowly catching up on it. This was not so good, he thought. He had estimated its speed as somewhat greater; already the deceleration and gradual drop of the tiny satellite was well on its way.

STEADILY now the rocket-plane overhauled the ten-mile-wide rock that circled the Earth. Now it filled his forward control plate and Sanders suddenly felt an odd shifting of balance.

Until then he had still maintained his mental sense of rising away from the Earth, of going *up*. Now suddenly he felt that everything was reversed, suddenly he was going *down*, down in a power dive to the surface of this strange new world below him.

He realized that he was within the slight pull of the gravity of this body. This close and he had already won his trip. He pulled at his controls again, and again leveled off. Now the plane scooted low over the surface of the tiny moon, flew low over the sunlit rocky airless surface of this undiscovered moon.

The speed of the ship had miraculously disappeared. The three thousand miles an hour had vanished as the speed of the ship caught up with and merged with the almost equal speed of the satellite. Now it seemed to go a mere two hundred miles an hour across the surface.

Mikkelsen cut the engines and the plane dropped. He guided it as it swooped lower and then with a little burst of flame came in towards a flat stretch of rock.

There was a grinding crash, the ship rushed along on the stone plain, a sudden upthrust hit at it, the ship spun around and came to a stop.

Curiously Sanders felt the same odd giddiness and loss of tension as when he had cut his initial acceleration. He felt light-headed and a bit nauseous. He realized that the gravity of the little world had still not succumbed to that of its master, the Earth. He actually weighed less than a pound!

Adjusting the oxygen helmet, strapping the tanks on his back which would allow him to breathe for an hour, pulling on his heavy gloves, fastening his furred airtight clothing around him so that no part of his body was exposed, Mikkelsen forced open the door of the rocket-plane's cabin.

A whoosh of air as if from a punctured balloon and he found himself standing on rock holding on to the doorway of the vessel for dear life.

Vertigo assailed him and he felt as one who has been for days on a pitching sea first setting foot on land. The feeling was exaggerated considerably. The falling sensation was everywhere. He could not rid himself of the curious delusion that everything was falling away from him. It was the no-gravity feeling and though he did not know it, his subconscious mind had made a connection. He had often descended in elevators in Chicago and New York skyscrapers. Descent in an elevator is also a lessening of gravity. The subconscious comparison gave his conscious mind the misleading thought of constant falling.

But there he was, nonetheless, on the surface of "a world other than this Earth." This was, he knew, no Columbus' voyage. It might perhaps class as something of a Leif Ericson or better even as the sixth-century voyage of Brendan.

He felt cold and switched on the electric heating unit whose wires, running all over the suit, would keep him warm.

He looked around, still holding onto the doorway.

The ship was standing, its stern jets crushed in, against a small upthrust of rock in the middle of a small flat rocky area. A few hundred feet away were sharp upthrusts of rock, jagged ugly midget mountains. Farther away the vicious peak of a huger mountain thrust itself up over the extremely close horizon. All was cold, hard rock, streaked here and there with black iron veins, and bits of quartz glinting in the white glare of the sun above. There was no air nor hint of air. On the side of one of the upthrusts nearby he saw streaks of brilliant white. Frozen water or frozen air, he wondered.

Reaching back into the cabin he picked out a pronged alpenstock from the material stowed therein. Then, digging it into the rock, he started slowly away from the cabin towards the upthrust where the white patch showed.

He picked his way carefully, digging the stick in and almost drifting over to it. After a little while he developed a curious dream-like glide across the surface, guiding or propelling himself with slight flicks on the staff.

He made good progress and took note further of his surroundings. The rock surface was pitted almost everywhere with tiny holes. Here and there a bigger wide hole showed, almost like a lunar crater. It dawned on him that these were the scars of the steady meteor shower that must have rained on it since the moonlet took up its orbit about the Earth. All big planets are meteor gatherers and their unwilling satellites must take the punishment therefrom.

Rapidly Sanders approached the rocky upthrust. Soon he was at its base. Turning he saw that the horizon had crept up behind him even as he had moved and now his plane hung at the edge of his sight. Overhead the cold stars shone down in the jet black sky and the glaring eye of the sun gazed down.

BEFORE him was the sheer front of rock, a mass looking as if it had been ripped from the bowels of the planet and left there. Untempered by atmosphere, unweathered by water, it may have hung there raw since the tiny body was first ripped from its original parent.

Now he saw the white streaks closely. They were frozen air right enough, great streams of glistening white crystals lying along the escarpment as if having once flowed down like a mountain stream. His eyes followed the twisting paths of the white crystals and saw that they converged. His eyes focussed at the point of their convergence and he gave a sharp cry of astonishment.

The crystallized streams of frozen air had flowed originally from a source which looked like a man-made metal door. A door once set flush in the rocks but now jarred slightly open.

Mikkelsen stared and his mind rapidly built up a picture of air rushing out of an airtight chamber and freezing as it did so into the eternal white stream he had seen. Perhaps some meteor or other had jarred the door open to release the imprisoned gasses. But what was behind the door, who had made it, and why?

He estimated the distance from the floor of the valley to the door in the cliff. It was

not too far. He reached up, sunk his staff in the side and swung himself lightly upwards.

He floated upwards along the slope's side as easily and dreamily as he had across the open plain. Soon he reached the door.

It was heavy solid metal—faintly bluish as if once tempered, now cracked and somewhat crystallized.

It swung open on unseen hinges as he pulled at it. A few bits of rock were dislodged to float uncannily downwards like feathers.

Beyond was only a small chamber. A few feet deep into the surface of the rock it went and no farther. The walls had been hewed out and smoothed flat. There was something that might have been a metal chair if one could fancy a chair that had an arrow head for the seat rather than a flat surface. And there was a niche in the wall at the deep end.

Mikkelsen stepped into the chamber carefully and looked into the niche. It held what might have been some elaborate and delicate apparatus once but was now in vainly a confused mass of cracked metal bars, crystallized chemicals and wiry bits.

On a metal plaque set into the wall were various lines and configurations that might possibly have conveyed something in a language unrelated to anything known to man.

The chamber had other evidence of the intelligences that had created it. Other bits of enigmatic writing on the walls. On the ceiling, Sanders suddenly noticed a large diagram or drawing. After staring at it a while he realized that it conveyed nothing to him. If it was a drawing it was in a style which made cubist-impressionism seem photographic. If it was a diagram, it certainly would take a decade's study to figure out. He noticed oddly that there were certain parts of it curiously blank. The thought occurred to me that perhaps the originators used infra-red or ultra-violet colorings and that might explain the impossibility of his making sense out of it.

He searched the place for other clues but he could find nothing to tell him of the origin of the makers of the chamber nor why nor where they had gone. He fished among the broken bits in the niche and drew out a compact little piece that seemed to be intact. A little bit of dialwork or machinery like a watch. He slipped this in his pocket as a souvenir.

HE FELT cold again and realized that the heat was escaping from his suit faster than it was replaced. He realized that it was being out of the direct sunlight that had caused the change.

There was a slight vibration in the rock. He started and gazed about. The vibration came again and continued now. Things were shaking slightly but steadily. A bit of the ancient machinery dropped into the niche. He realized that some kind of quake had started.

Sanders got to the door. It had, he noticed, swung wider than he had left it. Now he became aware of something else. There was a faint whistling sound in his ears. Very faint but yet it was there. Before there had only been dead silence in the airless void of the satellite. Now there was this whistle.

He looked out and saw that tiny vibrations were shaking the rocks. He gazed at the rocky plain and suddenly noticed faint grey obscurations before his eyes.

Dust! A slight swirl of dust!

And the whistle was the whistle of a thin, very thin wind springing up about him! And there had been no wind, no air, on this world!

The second moon had started its last fatal plunge. It had entered the outer fringes of Earth's envelope of air, entered into the grasp of the world's outermost border, the thin cold air above the stratosphere!

The plunge to the Earth was on. And he had to get back to his ship at once.

Sanders Mikkelsen let go his hold on the doorway and let himself drift downwards. He felt the slight faint fingers of the wind caressing his body. And as he lit he realized that he was still going nearly two miles a second. He was just on what had become now nothing more than a giant meteor plunging down to fiery doom!

Once on the surface, he started to make his way across to his ship. More clouds of fine dust rose and swirled about his head. It suddenly came to him that it may have been billions of years since last dust had been known on this world. And millions of years since the builders of the crypt had left it.

The vibration grew under his feet as he made his way. Suddenly the ground seemed to open up near him and a great crack spread. He glanced back and the side of

the escarpment had fallen in taking the chamber of mystery with it.

Now he tried to speed his trip up but it was tricky and hard. The fingers of the wind were becoming stronger. He felt the drag distinctly now and in his ears the whistle grew.

Another crack appeared in the surface of the plain and still another. There was a rumbling and rolling apparent all about him. He saw the plane sway as he neared it.

Finally he reached it and climbed hastily within. Pulling the door tight against the wind he turned the valve of the airtanks and rapidly the cabin filled with breathable atmosphere.

The ship would never fly again. He knew that and had expected it. But it would make a safe place for a while. He reached into the back and found the parachutes. They had been specially designed for he expected to fall a long way and there might be unusual strains before he had braked his fall sufficiently.

As he adjusted them the ship rocked and rolled. He heard the thunder as rocks crashed from the midget mountains all about. He noticed that the huge peak he had first seen had disappeared. Everything was breaking up before his eyes.

A great gaping abyss had opened up in the field between him and the mass of rocks he had just visited. Had he not come back when he did he might never have escaped; might have ridden the rock to its flaming doom.

He could do nothing now but wait and hope nothing damaged the cabin of the ship.

STEADILY the descent grew swifter and the wind howled wilder. The sky was purple now, not black, and the stars were beginning to disappear. The plane rocked wildly against the bit of upthrust that had stopped it. In the air, stone and rock and dust flew past to vanish into the Earth's atmosphere.

The gap in the plain widened and then the whole world seemed to tear apart. The ship rolled over violently and rolled into the abyss.

Clinging desperately to the seat, Mikkelsen saw the second moon split up. Two halves fell away from each other as he fell between them towards the Earth. Below him, unexpectedly, he caught a glimpse of the bright green and blue surface of the

world looking like a page from some child's geography.

With him fell the miles-wide chunks of rock and iron that had made up the little moon. Gradually he fell free of the hurtling twisting masses and his little broken plane whistled down, down towards that unbelievable speckled surface that was a world of men.

Mile after mile he fell and as the map of the surface opened up and the sky became bluer and the vessel became hotter and hotter from the howling gale outside, he prepared himself to jump.

About him were still the great grey masses of the falling satellite; they fell as he fell. He saw them smoking and flaming in the friction.

Then, at last, he got the door open. The air whipped out of his little cabin and he was ripped after it. Outwards he was flung and then fell free beside his plane.

Now he pulled the cord of his first parachute. There was a tearing noise and a great area of wired and reinforced cloth billowed out behind him. There was a terrific jerk at his shoulders and he almost lost consciousness.

The parachute fought the speed of his fall; it bucked and swayed and struggled in the thin, fast moving air.

Then, at last it held.

Beyond him he saw the rocky masses that had been the little moon move away from him, move off towards the east. As his speed decreased they moved faster and faster away from him and then disappeared entirely far off to the eastern horizon, growing smaller and smaller as they plunged on down towards the surface.

He wondered where they would hit. They would not be consumed in passage. Their size was too great. They would still be formidable masses, cubic miles in dimensions, when they landed. The damage might be considerable if they landed in inhabited territory.

Now he drifted down all alone in the empty blue sky. He cut loose the big heavy parachute that had broken his fall first and ripped open the second one, a regulation stratosphere chute.

FOR several hours he drifted lazily down. He realized that he was not safe yet. Suppose he landed in the middle of an ocean dozens of miles from any land, or perhaps in some trackless water-

less desert? He looked below and was reassured. He was over Asia somewhere near enough to the Pacific to be in inhabited country and far enough away from the water to be safe.

He dropped down towards a small city by a river in central China. Below him he saw tiny figures running and heard sharp reports like guns going off.

The war in China, he thought, and cursed his luck. He would have to land on a battle-field. He wondered whether he was falling onto the Japanese or Allied side of the front. If it was the former it would not go well with him.

As he came closer he could make out the figures and noted with some puzzlement that they did not seem dressed like soldiers. They were clad in bright vivid garments and he could see no sign of guns or helmets. Yet the explosive reports continued.

He fell finally into a field near the city and people rushed out to meet him. Instead of treating him suspiciously they seemed laughing and cheering. They were not soldiers but civilians in holiday garb, bright with Chinese colorings.

Then he saw one of the oncoming Chinese hurl something which went off with a loud bang and he realized that it was a firecracker. He had landed in the midst of a holiday.

He tried to question his welcomers but could get nowhere. Finally he found one in uniform who seemed to know English. He asked the reason for the holiday.

The soldier laughed. Then, to Mikkelsen's surprise, he was told that the war had ended that day. That very morning, a bare three hours before, in fact. Several giant meteors of incredibly vast tonnage had fallen directly on Japan, virtually wiping it out. Every one of its cities and most of the Chinese coastal cities in Japanese hands had been leveled by the terrific blow. Perhaps three-quarters of the population had been snuffed out.

As Mikkelsen made his way into the city to try and reach Currey by radio-phone, he wondered about the other unseen satellites circling the Earth. Lemuria, Atlantis, and now Japan. Another falling moonlet and perhaps America? He shrugged his shoulders and forgot the matter as a cheering Chinese boy threw a cracker under his feet.

THE END



DUSK ON THE MOON

By Hannes Bok



AN ENGRESSING FANTASY NOVELET

Throughout eternities had Yssa waited for some being to break the web of her sleep so that again the glory of her people might flare across the night of space and time!

CHAPTER I

IT WAS bright day in this crater on the moon, but the sky was like the night sky of Terra, blue-black and filled with stars. Needle-pointed crags of barren rock slashed upward from the endless dunes of drifted dust that rolled on and on to the horizon like a sand-table imitation of a tempestuous sea. The pitiful remains of a once satellite-wide atmosphere clung here, yet even so the glare was eye-searing; wherever cliffs and sand were touched by the sun they were incredibly white; shadows were black. Waves of rising heat made the whole scene shimmer—it seemed that rocks and sand were trembling.

A wraith of wind-blown dust wandered across the landscape; it might have been a ghost searching for something lost, idling where the broken pillars of a man-made building once had stood. Perhaps the scarred structure had been a temple. But now its roof had fallen in; most of the columns had toppled over; glacial sand nearly covered those which still stood. Fantastic hieroglyphics had been chiseled on the walls and pillars, but wind-driven sand had filed them into indecipherable blurs. The wisp of dust slipped into the court of the building and sank to rest.

Protected from the wind, sheltered from the sun, a clump of lunar plants were blossoming in a shadowed corner. They were more like earthly cactus than anything else: bulbous grey-green stems equipped with wickedly talon-like thorns, the flowers star-shaped and brilliantly red. Unmindful of the thorns a little spider-being was standing on the tips of all four feet, his pair of short arms with their delicately long digits—two fingers and a thumb—tugging at a bloom's spice-laden stamens. Tearing some of them free, he relaxed balancing on two pairs of crossed legs, and

Illustration by Hannes Bok

crammed the stamens into his short elephant's-trunk of a mouth, his protruding eyes rolling in ecstasy. Satisfied, he scrubbed his fingers meticulously clean with a little sand, then arose and brushed off the bright-green metallic globe of his torso. He scurried out of the enclosure into the sunlight, paused irresolutely a moment and then made his way to a gigantic squared block of stone—the pedestal of a prodigious statue.

There were a multitude of hand-and-foot-holds pitted by blown sand, and he moved easily upward, over the edge of the block, then up the statue—up the folds of a sculptured robe, over carved human arms folded on a sweetly feminine breast. He rested on the statue's right shoulder, screened from the sun by the overhang of the statue's face, and the exaggerated head-dress.

A human face—the countenance of a lovely earth-woman. Though the blasting sand had etched into the statue's lower portion, it had hardly touched the arms, had not cut into the face. The woman's eyes were lifted toward the stars, and they glittered as though alive.

Hooking his sharp toes into folds of the carved robe, the spider-being began to polish its torso, rhythmically rubbing its palms to and fro. He muttered, over and over, his name, in a dry voice like the sound of two bits of wood scrapped together: "Shizek — Shizek — Shizek —" And then he let his hands sink to his sides and stared up at the vast blue disc of Terra in the sky, smiling fatuously with poetic contemplation.

A glint caught his eye: it swept across the sky in a wide arc, brightening. Why, it was enlarging—something was coming out of the sky toward the ground! Shizek

craned forward, eyes bulging. The glittering shape grew into a cylinder of polished grey metal, with curious gleaming spots on it—like eyes. Was it a monster of some kind? Did it eat spiders? Suddenly Shizek turned and scrambled down the statue to the ground; he raced to a small, dark opening in a jumble of fallen pillars. From there, stretching his neck, he could see the intrusive shape sinking lightly to the ground. For a moment the monster lay inert. Then a portion of its side swung slowly outward, and two huge shapes—similar to the statue he had just climbed—stepped out. They were the first humans that Shizek had ever seen. He was fascinated by their voices; they were like the wind-music of the lunar storms, but there would be only a few notes, then silence—a few more notes, then silence.

“AND so here we are, on the moon,” the man said, putting his arms protectively around the girl's back.

She sighed, lifting her hand to her forehead. “But the sun—my eyes—”

“Fine place for us newlyweds to spend a honeymoon,” the man said, squinting as he peered around. “Well—if we come through this all right—and we will, of course—we can take the time off to have a really swell honeymoon, any place you name—how about it? Arenko Gardens, in South America, or that trickle they used to call Niagara Falls—or maybe the Cape Colony on Venus.” He grinned—unconvincingly. “You just name it, Loretta, and it's yours.”

“You seem awfully sure of ourselves,” she said. She put a hand to her mouth, spat delicately. “There's sand in my mouth, already! I still think that Caldwell is following us.”

"Nonsense! How could he!" But Bob's voice lacked its usual sincerity. "How could he possibly guess that we left the space-liner in this little rescue-vessel?"

She shrugged. "I don't care what you say—the captain may have had Caldwell locked in his stateroom when he married us and we made our getaway from the liner—but Caldwell still has his spies. Somebody may have been bribed—oh, I don't know! All that I do know is that I feel uneasy—as if something is going to happen—" She frowned and averted her face from his.

Bob's face softened despite the necessary squint. "Now you're frightened, Loretta—I'm sorry—" he tried to draw her to him. But she pointed:

"Look, darling! Is that a statue?"

His eyes traveled the line marked by her finger; he shaded his eyes. "My gosh, it is! Looks human, too! Shall we go over there and have a look at it?"

"It's terribly hot, even with our cooling units," she demurred; then, noticing his eagerness, amended: "You'd better close the ship's door, don't you think? Even if we don't have to worry about atmosphere, it'll get all sandy inside."

He stepped to the door. "Yes, odd, isn't it how it was thought for so long that the moon had none, even in these craters. . . . But then, these are the only spots. I guess I'd better take the portable communication-set along—just in case." He vanished into the ship, emerging shortly with a pack on his back; he shut the door and they started toward the statue, their steps incredibly long, despite their heavily weighted shoes. The man buckled the straps of his pack as they went.

"How huge it is!" Loretta exclaimed. "It looks like a woman."

They drew closer to the looming shape.

"It is a woman," Bob remarked. "Funny that the moon-explorers never mentioned it in their reports. Probably did the same incomplete job that they did with Mars—ever hear that story? About their overlooking the entire colony of Lanaks?"

She nodded, and they said nothing further until they had reached the sculpture's base and were peering up at the face and the glittering eyes.

"God knows how old it is," the man said. "It looks ancient enough."

They stared in rapt silence, until a swirl of dust threatened sending sand in their eyes, and they turned their backs to it.

"Shall we go back to the ship?" the man asked—and then his eyes caught the glitter of the sun of Shizek's glossy body. The little spider-being ducked into the opening behind him, but too late. "I saw something move, over there," Bob said, taking Loretta's hand. "We'll go back to the ship in a minute—I just want to look over here, first."

The girl allowed him to lead her to the mound of shattered masonry. Bob dropped her hand and stooped to stare into the hole in which Shizek had disappeared.

"It seems to go a long way in," he said. "I think if I tried that I could squeeze in—" He knelt, and put his face to the opening.

"Be careful!" Loretta warned.

Bob's voice rose excitedly. "Say, there's a sort of passageway, leading down! This must have been a door once, and the walls tumbled around it, keeping it open instead of filling it up!" He straightened, glanced over the ruin. "Sure, Loretta, that's it! And it seems to lead down—now, if I could only pull away some of those stones, I think it would be big enough

to worm into—the opening, I mean—I'd like to see what's down there—” He looked at his wife for approval. “Would you mind if I tried? I'll take you back to the ship, first—”

“You'll do nothing of the sort! I'm not going to let myself get a yard away from you, as long as I feel as jumpy as I do! It's hot, but I guess I can stand it if you can—a wife's got to measure up to her husband—” Their eyes met, and they smiled sentimentally. “Besides,” Loretta furthered, “I don't see how you could possibly move those stones without someone to help you—”

They shared grips on a fragment of pillar, and tumbled it to one side.

“Lighter'n you'd think,” Bob observed. “That's because of the difference in gravity—” They heaved more of the structural remnants aside, until the hole had widened. Deep-drifted-with dust, yet kept open by the spider-clan, a stair led down. Bob ducked into the opening, turned. “You'd better wait here,” he said.

She went to him. “What did you think you saw that moved?”

“It looked like a spider—about a foot high.”

She was scandalized. “A spider! Oh, Bob! And a foot high! You don't think I'd go down if there are spiders there! And you can't go either—you stay here where you're safe!”

“I've got this.” He held up his police-gun. “Come on, baby, there's nothing to be afraid of. It isn't very flattering, anyway, to think that I can't cope with an overgrown spider!”

She let him take her hand again. “But I don't like it,” she said, and they went down the stair.

The chamber at the foot of the steps was surprisingly light. There

were no shadows even in the corners farthest from the entrance.

“Phosphorescent stone,” Bob said.

The floor was deep with fine sand that swirled in powdery clouds as they moved about. A squat doorway led to another downward flight—and from the opening through which they had come to this doorway, and down the flight ahead, the dust was deeply furrowed as though the spider which Bob had seen had worn a path.

“Do you mind going down?” Bob asked.

“Not if you don't,” she said. “Only—well, I'd feel safer if I had a gun, too. Isn't there another in the ship?”

“Sure there is,” he answered. “We'll go back and get one—spiders on the moon! The explorers didn't report that either! Maybe there are people down below—” He pointed to the channel in the dust. “Somebody must have made that—”

“WHY can't we just get in our ship and go home to Earth?” she asked, as they turned back to the entrance.

“Our flier isn't strong enough—it's just meant to be a sort of interstellar lifeboat, a kind of space-raft to hold survivors of a wrecked ship until help comes,” he explained. “I thought you knew that.”

“But why don't they build them so that they can really travel through space?” she asked.

“Think of the size they'd be, and the number of them on every liner,” he replied. “There wouldn't be enough room. The liners are so big now that it's a wonder they ever get off the Earth—”

“And so we'll just have to wait until Captain Barkley sends some men for us on the return trip,” she said. “Darling, I'd love to see the look on Caldwell's face when he ar-

rives on Mars and finds we've skipped! He'll be furious! He thought he had us this time—we'd probably no sooner have landed on Mars than his men would have grabbed us—and then he'd be paying us off for our work in smashing his revolution-scheme—" She was silent as they climbed the stairs and emerged into the sunlight. "If he hasn't followed us—" she added.

The man turned, irritated. "You're still worried!" he accused.

"I can't help it! If only our detectors worked the way they're supposed to! Every speck of matter in space as big as a pea scaring us half out of our lives because it sounded the alarm! That detector," she said bitterly, "is about the most useless thing ever invented—" But he was not listening. He was staring at the sky. She grasped his arm. "Bob, what is it? What do you see?"

His hand covered hers tightly, requesting silence. She stared without speaking.

Something was flashing down to the dunes, close to their ship.

"Caldwell," Bob said involuntarily. "Why didn't we think of it?" He groaned. "He probably knew we intended to duck out of the liner and had a shipload of his men following right from the start."

"Have we time to get back to the ship?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No. They're just about to land."

The second space-ship — many times larger than the little flier—settled on the sand.

"Come on, get back down the stairs." The man gently shoved the girl. She obeyed hesitantly.

"What will they do?"

"I don't know. I can see they're aiming their beams at our ship. I suppose they think we're in it—"

She was back at his side, cautiously peering. "Oh, Bob—!"

He was reasoning aloud: "They'll see our tracks in the sand. They'll come here. We'd better get down below. We'll hold them off."

She tugged on his arm. "Come on, then. Come on, Bob! Oh, dear, I don't like this at all! Homicidal fanatics coming from above, and foot-long spiders below. Come on!" The man had not responded to her jerking, and she pulled hard on his arm.

He followed reluctantly. They halted at the bottom of the stair, looking into each other's eyes.

She put her arms around him and pushed her face against his chest. "Do you think they'll come down in here—or will they block the opening up?"

"Thank God we've got our radio—"

She showed her face wryly. "Yes—but this is only the portable set—it hasn't enough power to contact Captain Barkley, and you know it!"

"Maybe it's not Caldwell at all," he said. "Maybe it's some kind of an expedition—"

"Then why didn't Captain Barkley tell us to expect it? He'd have known."

"Oh, hell—!" Bob stood, undecided.

She dipped her head toward the doorway opening on the second flight of steps. "We'd better go down—" she suggested, but the man stood pondering. At last she shook him. "Bob! Didn't you hear me? We'd better start down!"

He cocked his head. "Listen!"

They heard faint voices, loudening as if the speakers were approaching.

"That's Werther's voice—I'd know it anywhere," Loretta whispered, her eyes fascinated on the entrance. "He almost killed me once—that time I

was trying to get the papers out of the shack—"

Bob's arm enfolded her. They slunk toward the descending steps. "You won't get scared, will you, and do anything silly? No, I guess you won't—I know you too well for that. Come on, baby, we're getting down a flight or two. Maybe we'll find something interesting—a pile of gold and jewels, for instance."

"You dope!" she scolded lightly. "Joking—at a time like this!"

They passed under the low doorway, and down the flight. Then another door, and another series of steps. And another—and another, until they had descended seven flights. The luminescent walls enabled them to see. At one side a passageway ran straight ahead for three hundred feet, then it forked.

"We won't try that yet." The man indicated the tunnel. "We'll wait here a bit, here, close to the wall where the steps start." He squeezed the girl reassuringly. "Nervous, baby?"

She laughed shakily, softly. "Who, me? Not while I'm with you—" They were silent, their eyes roving about them, as they listened.

CHAPTER II

IT WAS then that Shizek, the spider-creature, re-appeared. He scuttled from the tunnel, followed by a ragged line of his kind. Loretta gasped, but Bob's hand cautioned her.

"Don't move," he said. "Wait a bit—let's see what they'll do." His fingers tightened on his gun.

Shizek, in the lead, turned and waved his arms; the line of spiders halted, goggling at the two humans. Then Shizek turned to the man and

girl, stood studying them. He took a few steps forward, and stopped, waited. Neither Bob nor Loretta moved. Encouraged, the spider advanced farther, paused timorously, then crept to Bob's feet. His fragile hands gingerly felt the fabric of Bob's trouser-leg; the man flinched; Shizek shot back a few feet, distrustfully. Comforted by the fact that the man did not move again, he returned to Bob's feet, took hold of the cloth, and stroked it appreciatively.

"Doesn't seem to mean any harm," Bob breathed to the girl.

"Wait—give it a chance," Loretta murmured back.

Shizek rubbed his hands together, entranced by their voices. He waited, but they said nothing more. Finally he beckoned, and three of his fellows left the line in the tunnel, approaching the humans. Shizek spoke in his dry whisper of a voice; he pointed at Bob's leg; the spiders timorously felt the cloth.

"Lucky it's thick with insulation, in case they have stingers," Bob murmured to Loretta, who was scrutinizing the spiders carefully.

"They seem almost human!" she said. "They're curious about us—"

The spiders stood on tiptoe, ogling the faces of the man and girl.

"They seem to like the sound of our voices," Loretta observed. "I ought to try singing to them—Good night, we've forgotten all about Caldwell's men!" She put her hand to her mouth in dismay, and at the sudden movement the four spiders scampered back to their companions; the whole line whirled and rushed back into the tunnel and out of sight.

THE men above were trying to descend without sound, but occasionally Bob and Loretta could hear

the slight murmur of their hushed voices. The man crouched tense, his gun ready, his free arm holding Loretta behind him; his mouth had tightened to a slit. It seemed a dreadfully long time while they waited; twice Loretta opened her mouth to whisper something, thought the better of it, and remained silent. But the moments dragged; the voices came a little nearer.

"They're about three flights up, yet," Bob turned to murmur; at the sight of his wife's blanched face he grinned, kissed her casually.

She smiled tautly. "Maybe we'd better get along that tunnel—it might be a way out," she offered.

He considered. "I'll tell you what—you go ahead; I'll stay here and ambush them; after finding no trace of us waiting in six series of steps, they won't be expecting me here. Then, if things get too hot, I'll join you. I can follow your tracks in the dust."

She shook her head determinedly. "Nix—if you're staying, I'm staying."

He held up his hand for silence.

The voices were nearer now; they could not distinguish any words. Loretta recognized them.

"There are four of them," she said. "I heard Werther, and Albert, and Troske—and that little dark fellow whose name I never could remember—" She ceased speaking as Bob crouched a little forward, shifting his gun into his left hand while he wiped the sweat from his palm.

Although the luminous stone walls supplied satisfactory lighting, Werther was carrying a very powerful hand-flash. Its beam swept down the stair, probed the floor, followed the rut in the dust made by the spiders.

"They went along that way," Werther's hoarse bass tones pro-

claimed. "Maybe they don't even know we're coming."

"Should we go on down?" That was Troske's ratty squeak of a voice. Loretta could picture him, standing as he always was—cowering in a huddle, as if every moment expecting a blow, his teeth glinting in an ever-present silly smile that belied the constant shifting of his squinting eyes.

"Yes—and you go first," Werther answered.

The watchers below heard the faint plop of kicked-up dust as Troske came to the head of the stair. He started down, and they could see him, a frightened, bent-over figure. Loretta flattened herself against the wall, holding her breath, her hand creeping in dread to her throat. Bob took careful aim.

"There's nobody down here," Troske quavered over his shoulder to the men beyond. He took a few uncertain steps down—and then, as though pulled by an invisible hand, his head swiveled toward Loretta and Bob—he saw them. Werther's thick-set bulk appeared at the top of the steps.

Troske wanted to shout a warning, but fear choked him; he stood wooden, terror distorting his face. Bob's finger hardened on the trigger of his gun. Troske managed to point; he opened his mouth to shriek; Werther's eyes jerked in the direction of Troske's stare; his gun glittered in his hand.

Bob fired; the entropy ray, as invisible as it was deadly, struck Troske. Werther's own ray spat—harmlessly; as Bob fired at him, he flicked back out of sight into the room above. His voice rumbled:

"They're down there! Get back! They got Troske!" And a confused,

brief babble of muttered consultation.

A terrible thing had happened to Troske. Struck by the ray, in two seconds his body had undergone every change which Time could bring to a human organism: lines of age had run over his face like threads of a spilled liquid; his skin had sagged in loose folds as his bones shrank—and then the skin had fallen away, the bones of the tottering body had crumbled even as they dropped to the floor. All that was left of Troske—a little dust—fell without sound amid the powder that had been his clothing, the loose splinters of metal that had been his weapon.

Sick, Loretta could not repress a faint cry; she threw her hands over her eyes. Bob still crouched, gun ready, eyes alert on the stairway, but his free hand crept back to the girl, patted her soothingly. She lowered her hands, clenched them, and waited....

THE, two, and three! Like lightning-markers of time, charting seconds on an incomprehensible clock, three of the unseen beams hissed into the room, one on the heels of another. They struck the wall above Bob and Loretta—and although they seemed to have no effect on the stone, the two knew that the masonry had become like chalk: a sharp blow would shatter it.

More hisses—the pursuers had found a vantage point and were making the most of it. Bob knelt, dragging Loretta down to the floor. He dipped up suddenly, fired, dropped down again.

"No go," he whispered to Loretta. "But if we can provoke them into firing all their charges, we'll have a better chance—"

"If they aren't simply weighted down with extra guns," she countered.

A rapid succession of the rays sizzled down from above, eating holes in the floor's dust. Then Werther's voice, smugly triumphant:

"All right you two, come on up out of there. You can't get away—we'll catch you if it's the last thing we do." He laughed. "Mr. Caldwell wants to have a talk with you." Loretta and Bob exchanged glances: there was nothing to be said. Werther waited, then furthered: "If you give yourselves up to us you'll live at least a little while longer." And then, "It seems a shame to use the entropy-rays on you—too peaceful a death for rats like you. I wish you'd come up so I could take a poke at you—"

"Talk!" Loretta sneered at Bob. "That coward—he'd run if you lifted a finger at him. Bob, we can't stay here—let's get into that tunnel!"

Her husband reflected. "Guess you're right. We'll run like hell—right! All set?"

She braced herself and nodded. "Now!"

They lifted their weighted feet and took long strides, reached the tunnel-mouth in safety. Then Bob aimed a couple of gun-bursts at the stair; a yelp of dismay reached them. He clutched Loretta's arm, and they rushed down the tunnel.

"I didn't think I'd hit anyone," Bob said. "Sounded like it, though. I just wanted them to think we're still back by the stair—golly, now what?" They had reached the fork in the tunnel: one path led to the left for three hundred feet, then branched off in two corridors; the passage on their right similarly divided into two paths.

"Which?" Bob asked. "Not that

it makes much difference—they'll follow our tracks in the dust."

"Yes, but haven't you noticed?" Loretta was scanning the different hallways irresolutely. "The dust is lots thinner now, and we aren't half so hot down here as we were farther up."

Bob pointed to the groove of the spiders' path, which went to the left. "We must try that," he said. "Maybe there's a way out." They hurried along, goaded by the hiss of Werther's rays far behind them. As before, the tunnel forked; they swerved with the spider-trail, reached another fork. The furrow angled back, took a zigzag course through the branching corridors. Bob hesitated, putting his gun back in its case.

"I don't know," he said, frowning. "We've doubled back and forth so much that I've lost all sense of direction. Have you any idea which way we're heading? We don't want to bump smack into Caldwell's men. This whole damn system of halls is like a maze!"

Loretta shook her head helplessly. "But those spiders seemed intelligent," she said. "If this is a maze, they must know their way through it—"

"Well, we'll follow their path, then," Bob said, and they resumed walking. They reached a turn, a new branching of the tunnel, and he stopped short, drew back, hastily thrusting his palm over the girl's mouth. "Albert—" he whispered, "up ahead." He snatched his gun, raised it—then lowered it, peering intently around the corner. Loretta waited breathlessly, but the man did not move. At last she crept forward.

"What is it?" she breathed.

He motioned for her to look. "Don't say anything—he doesn't see us."

LORETTA inched around the corner. Big blonde Albert was standing against a wall, staring in horrified fascination at several of the spider-beings gathered around his feet. They stood on their four legs, arms reaching toward him almost supplicatingly, short elephants' trunks twitching as they murmured in their scratchy voices. The big man dashed sweat from his forehead; the spiders cowered. One of them, braver than the others, whisked up the man's leg, clung a moment to his breast, staring into Albert's face. Then the spider reached up to touch the man's cheek, and Albert screamed! The hoarse shout echoed down the corridor. He caught the spider in his hand and made as if to cast the creature away, but the spider dug its legs into his hand and would not be thrown loose. Albert screamed again, but not in terror now—with pain! The spider dropped from his hand as he clutched at his chest in anguish; the spiders scurried down the hall away from him.

Albert stood bent over; they could hear his tortured breathing. Then he fell, jerked violently, and was quiet.

"Wait," Bob ordered, and ran to the fallen man. Loretta, trembling, watched her husband bend over the still shape, examine it. Bob hurried back.

"The beasts have stings, after all," he said. "His hand was badly cut. Swollen. It seems to be some kind of poison. His skin was turning black."

"But they wouldn't have hurt him if he hadn't frightened them—they were just curious!" Loretta cried.

He led her onward. "Come along, baby—this labyrinth seems to end, ahead." She averted her face as he drew her past the body. The tun-

nel ended in a cavernous chamber, its vaulted ceiling's lines marked by brighter phosphorescence.

In the center of the chamber was an immense block of dull stone. It was piled high with crystal slag that looked very like clear gelatin. Atop the slag, long milky tentacles hooked around projections, was a gigantic inert thing vaguely like an octopus. It appeared to be carved from translucent white stone; the two humans could look into it, could observe slender filaments of darker color that ran along the tentacles up to the vast dome of the head.

And what a head! It was simply a large globe of the milky substance, but it was thickly studded with knobs of bright color, rimmed with gold. Were they eyes? Mere decoration?

BOB looked anxiously around, but saw no one; he approached the strange sculpture. Loretta followed unwillingly; they were not aware that Shizek, the spider-being, watched from an opening on the far side of the room. The two people began to walk around the great stone pedestal. Bob audibly wondered what the carving was supposed to represent; Loretta shuddered, murmuring, "But it looks almost alive!"

Then—*sssh! Sssh!* Two rays shot across the room, missed them. Werther was on the other side of the pedestal, gunning for them.

Shizek scuttled across the floor, tugged Bob's trouser-leg for attention. The man and girl glanced down at him; his little hands pointed toward the opening through which he had come; he ran a few steps that way, paused, beckoned, ran again.

"It wants us to follow it!" Loretta's eyes signalled to Bob's; he bent an assentive head, and joining hands they dashed after Shizek.

Werther fired after them; the bolt struck a tentacle of the white octopus shape. It stirred! It jerked the tentacle upward: a fragment flicked off and tumbled disintegrating to the floor. The jeweled knobs flared brightly, like colored electric bulbs when a switch is pressed. And the other tentacles moved—feebly at first, as though the creature were being roused from heavy sleep—they twitched, lifted, then swung down, brushing the dust of the floor like brooms....

Loretta and Bob were safe with Shizek in the opening; at the sound of Werther's ray, they wheeled, looked back. The tentacles brushed harmlessly past them. But they heard a guttural exclamation, then an outcry of amazement, of terror! Werther's ray sizzled again—and again—and suddenly they saw him, lifted high in the white thing's grasp, writhing in pain as the tendril contracted around him. He had dropped his gun: if he had another he was too demoralized to reach for it.

The white shape held him aloft, its fiery eyes scanning him. Then it raised him higher—and higher—Werther was close to the head now....

The octopus thrust Werther into its head—as though the jeweled dome were only mist!

And Werther stiffened as he passed into the globe. Rigid, he seemed frozen, and the white around him was like ice....

He began to glow with an unearthly light; little waves of luminosity rippled over him; misted with light, his features blurred, became indistinguishable. In the center of the globe was only a man-sized blotch of radiance; and as the humans and spiders watched, it dulled; the head grew pale and pellucid again, ap-

parently empty of its prey, though the begemmed studs still burned vigilantly. Had it assimilated the man already? What had become of him? Well, no matter—whatever had occurred, Werther was finished. . . .

"Good thing we didn't touch that monster ourselves," Bob commented, as Loretta attempted to regain her composure; she was shaking, her white lips tremulous. "So that's our Minotaur—in a maze—Well, that accounts for three men, anyway; all four of them, if that cry we heard when I fired as we went into the tunnel meant anything. I guess we're pretty safe from pursuit now. Only—are there any men waiting for us at our ship—and how many?"

CHAPTER III

LORETTA pointed to the spider-thing. "He's motioning us to follow him," she murmured.

The corridor was not long: it proved a *cul de sac*. "Just blank wall," Bob observed, when they had reached the end of it. "Wonder what our spider friend is up to?" Both people had considerably revived in spirits—although Loretta's face was still very pale.

The wall was figured with hieroglyphs, but they were carved in the rock and difficult to discern. Shizek swarmed up these, halted six feet from the floor. His tapering fingers pressed; there was a soft sigh as the rock began to slide downward, into the floor. Shizek leaped off it to Bob, clung intimately to the man's arm like a pet monkey. He looked into the man's face, calling his name, "Shizek! Shizek! Shizek!"

"Why, it's tame!" Loretta exclaimed, carefully reaching toward it.

Shizek regarded the hand distrustfully, but did not wince as the girl forced herself to touch him. As her hand rested on his glossy green back, he bent back his head, ran his long mouth over the hand appreciatively; he adjusted his legs so that he could wholly turn, and patted Loretta's fingers with his little ones. "See?" asked Loretta. "He's making friends!"

Bob touched the creature, and Shizek patted his hand, too. Then, smiling foolishly, the spider-thing slipped down to the floor, gesticulated.

Now that the portion of wall had slid out of sight, the people saw that the tunnel ended at the roof of a vast cave. A stair ran down to the right, down into a maze of grotesquely sculptured pillars. The stone was not phosphorescent, but more than ample light streamed from innumerable fiery spheres suspended by no apparent means from points just below the ceiling. The cavern seemed endless. Its floor was obscured by tangled greenery which grew everywhere—unfamiliar foliages, spangled with gaudy blooms. There was hardly a trace of dust on the stair. And the air was moist and sweet with the fragrance of the flowers.

The two humans had no time to marvel; Shizek started ahead, and they followed him in. The stair went down hundreds of steps; matted verdure eventually closed overhead, screening off the door. And still the stair led down. It was dusky, now, because the trees masked most of the light; Bob and his wife went slowly, pausing to inspect the strange textures of the gnarled trunks—some were scaly, others evidently feathered; there were thorny trunks, smoothly gleaming ones, boles pocked

with outlets for sap... Snaky vines swirled from branch to branch; at times prodigious leaves blocked the way, and the people had to force them aside to progress. Once Shizek leaped to a vine, ran along it to a cluster of sparkle-surfaced purple fruits the size of plums. Disengaging one, he hurried back, climbed up Loretta and offered her the fruit.

"Better not — maybe it's poisonous," Bob said.

The girl accepted the fruit, studied it, then gave it back. This displeased Shizek; with his sharp fingers he punctured the oddly faceted skin of the fruit, dug out a pinch of juicy pulp and stuffed it into his mouth. He munched blissfully, his eyes rolling. Swallowing, he pulled out another bit of pulp, held it up to Loretta's mouth.

But Bob took the first bite. Loretta, enthralled by the beauty of the cavern, seemed to have forgotten the dangers of the maze. "I'll bet that Adam did that," she sniffed. "How's it taste?" A needless query, since Bob's face proclaimed that it tasted wonderful. "Here, let me try." She broke off part of Shizek's fruit and sampled it. "Yum, good!" They finished the fruit; Shizek darted away, returned with more.

"Picnic on the stair," said Bob.

THEY started down the steps again, observing that—still very far below them—there were some white structures, most of them tumbled about by the uncultivated growth of the trees; of delicate workmanship, these pearly gleaming structures were of pierced stone, fretwork as delicate as the screens of the Arabs; in shape they resembled stunted Chinese pagodas.

And at last the man, the girl and

the spider-being reached ground. Shizek had experimented with riding on Bob's shoulders; liking the sensation, he finished the last stage of the descent that way, but when the humans left the stair and stood ankle-deep in rust-colored moss, he dropped from his perch and scurried into the underbrush out of sight.

The two humans inspected one of the white pavilions, sliding open the screens which served as doors. It was a room meant for human beings; there were strangely carved chairs, a sagging bed sumptuously covered with golden fabric, a small table or two, and a large looking-glass in a fantastically wrought frame. After a cursory inspection, the man and girl moved on for further exploration. As they crossed the moss from one house to another, Loretta remarked, "It looks as if there were humans on the moon—once."

"We didn't have time to figure out how come that woman's statue up on the surface," Bob agreed. "Wait till they hear about this on Earth. Say—" He cut himself short as they came in sight of a white stone figure emerging from the tangled vegetation. It was a copy of the statue to which he had been referring: a woman, arms folded over her breast, her head lifted.

Neither man nor girl said anything, just looked, and went on. The next house was apparently a store-room; it was piled high with gorgeously wrought metal chests. Bob tugged at the lid of one, expecting it to be heavy; the top flew up, disclosing an incredible treasure of jewels.

"Like a pirate hoard!" Loretta exulted, fingering several priceless necklaces of carved emerald, of cabochon rubies, of flashing diamonds, at once. She fitted them simultane-

ously over her head, arranged them around her throat. "There—now I'm practically a queen."

"You always have been to me," Bob agreed.

They pored over the jewels for quite a time, then went on, coming to a dais almost lost in the jungly growths. There was a glint from behind the boskage that attracted Bob's attention; he pulled low-hanging branches aside, then shouted, "Loretta! Quick!" His wife, who had been preoccupied with fingering her jewels, hurried to him.

MOMENTARILY she was reminded of a small boy at a bakery window, leaning against the glass with all his weight, his nose flattened on the pane as he gloated over the goodies within. Bob was pressed against an invisible barrier, entranced by something beyond it. What was it? It looked like a rectangular metal box with loose cloths hanging in it—like a coffin with a body—

And that was what it was. But surely the figure stretched in the casket could not be called a corpse.

It was a woman—the woman of the statues. She lay with her arms crossed, her wide eyes fixed straight ahead. And she was too perfect in her beauty to be human, as a casual glance might have stated. No—this woman was more than human; her beauty partook of the divine. She was like a goddess.

Her skin had the faint luster of mother-of-pearl; she seemed amazingly slim; her hands were unbelievably long and slender. Her mouth was a small red pout, her long little nose was very straight. But her eyes were like those to be found on the painted walls of an Egyptian tomb—disproportionately large, almost

frighteningly black. And her hair, braided and bound in coils about her ears, was black with the sheen of coal.

The coffin hung in the air without support, and it was unapproachable, inviolate. No matter from which side Bob attempted to reach it, he was cut off by the unseen wall. Nor could the shrubbery pass that obstacle; it pressed against it unavailingly and from the rondure of the growth and Bob's groping hands it was evident that the impenetrable barrier was a sphere of which the coffin was the center. The woman—sleeping or dead—was sealed within an invisible bubble fifteen feet in diameter.

Loretta and Bob stared at the coffin, making guesses as to its purpose, until a thin squeak attracted them. Shizek and a group of his fellows was waiting on a knoll not far away. They went to him; he jerked Bob's leg, pointing to the earth.

"I think he wants you to kneel," Loretta ventured. Bob lowered himself to his knees; Shizek's voice rustled satisfaction; his grin became more foolish than ever. He motioned for the girl to imitate Bob, and she knelt also. Then Shizek, obviously relishing his position—even swaggering, if his rolling four-legged lurch might be called such—beckoned the other spider-creatures closer. They advanced, formed a semi-circle around the kneeling humans, and suddenly leaped a yard in the air, coming down with all four legs crossed, and remaining so. They crossed their arms, and waited.

"I suppose that's what you'd call spider etiquette," Loretta remarked, and unconsciously folded her arms. Shizek waved his hands delightedly, so Bob folded his arms also. Then ensued a strange dialogue; the spiders took turns in speaking; their voices

were more like the sighing of wind in trees than speech, and very soft, as though they were trying to be polite. Loretta ventured a few questions and answers, causing Bob much amusement. The spiders were fascinated by her voice, goggling interestedly at her, and when she sang, they became excited, leaping again and again in the air.

"That's what you'd call acrobatic applause," Loretta broke off her song to remark.

"You mean they can't stand it," Bob retorted. The interview ended with each set of participants completely mystified as to the motives of the other. The spiders scuttled away without previous notice.

But the visit had been fortuitous, because on their way back to the dais, Bob and Loretta took a short-cut through the thicket, and found—a gong. It was a nine-foot disk of green metal, peppered with reprocuse hieroglyphics, hanging from a white stone arch. A long bar of metal lay beneath it. "Hit it with that," Loretta suggested.

Bob lifted the bar, beating the gong. A disappointingly flat and faint sound arose from the disk, and he threw the rod aside in disgust. They returned to the coffin in its unseen bubble. At first they did not observe the change—the woman's hands were at her sides now, and her eyes were closed; then Loretta became aware of it and gasped. As they leaned against the barrier, they saw that the woman was stirring drowsily, as though unwilling to wake. The coffin began to sink to the dais. Suddenly the bubble broke without warning or sound, and deprived of its support, both Bob and his wife lost balance and almost toppled forward.

THE strange woman slowly opened her eyes and looked at them. Langourously she raised herself on an elbow, then sat upright; she arose to her feet, her flimsy draperies fluttering at the slightest motion—

She said nothing, only approached the two. What large eyes she had! They seemed to be growing larger and larger, filling up all the space before Loretta and Bob. Now there was nothing ahead of them, only those two gigantic dark eyes, glittering with reflections from the lights above. Or were they reflections? No—they were pictures, little pictures that grew larger with the eyes, until they were clearly distinguishable. Moving pictures, telling a story...

Was it telepathy? Hypnotism? Before Bob a story unfolded, as upon a cinema screen.

It was long and long ago—somehow he knew that. He was looking at a lunar landscape, verdant with just such plants as grew in the cave. The sharp cliffs looked less naked than he remembered, and the sky was brilliantly blue. Terra was in the sky, and the continents were not the same as now: North and South America were joined to Europe and Africa. There was a dark spot in the Pacific—was that the lost continent of Lemuria? Yes, it was long and long ago...

And up from the greenery, everywhere were slim white towers—or no, they weren't towers. They were statues—and all alike. All of the same woman, this very woman who had been sleeping in the coffin.

She appeared: she was walking along a high terrace that overlooked the scene. But she was troubled, frowning—no human expression. Hers was no human face. Now and then she raised her face to the sky

as if searching for something hidden there. At last she turned and entered the squared doorway of a building which Bob could see only in part. He seemed to drift inside with her. Strange intricate shapes of metal littered the range of Bob's vision; some were on tables, others bulked from the floor. One he thought that he recognized as an astrolabe.

Was Loretta sharing this vision? He spoke to her. "Loretta—do you see what I see?"

"Bob! I didn't know what was happening. What's she doing to us?"

"I don't know; maybe it's her way of telling us something. I seem to be inside a laboratory of some kind, and she's walking around fingering the instruments. Is that what you see?"

"Yes—oh, look, there's another woman."

A girl appeared on the scene, but she was a caricature of the woman; she had the same eyes, hair and skin. But she seemed grotesque. Her bearing was abject; she skulked into sight as though thoroughly ashamed to be alive. In her hands were a roll of paper and a stick of pigment; she handed them to the woman and crept away. The woman unrolled the paper and inspected it; it was an architectural plan for a gigantic structure which was to be—another statue. There were little toiling human figures at the base of the drawing, and compared with the proposed statue they were as ants at the feet of a human.

"If you ask me, she's awfully vain," proclaimed Loretta's voice. "How many copies of herself does she want? Do you suppose she has one made once a year to keep track of her growth?"

"Odd that she doesn't seem to hear our voices," Bob commented.

"Just like at the dreamies," Loretta countered. The "dreamies" were the motion pictures of her day, controlled hallucinations induced by a hypnotic machine.

The strange woman laid the plan aside, and peered into what was plainly a telescope. It was focussed on Terra, and Bob saw that what he had mistaken for a continent in the Pacific was really an irregular dark mass in space...

THE scene changed. Now there was a city of low white thatched-roofed huts, and crowds of people in the narrow streets—people racially similar to the woman of the coffin, yet with her as criterion, they were distorted and abhorrent. All of them were staring at the blur athwart Terra; some of them were pointing. And they were frightened, frightened. There were gnarled old men, strong youths, bent old hags, slim maidens, many sober-eyed children. Even the babies in some of the women's arms stared at the shape in space...

Again there was a shift of scene. Now, under bright sunlight, long lines of naked men were dragging on thick ropes fastened to great blocks of stone. Overseers cracked their whips; the bodies gleamed with perspiration. Men fell and died, and no one paid the slightest heed. When attention strayed from work, it was directed on the sky—on the blot near Terra. And that blot had expanded...

"Like the building of the pyramids," Loretta breathed. "Why are they afraid of that thing in the sky?"

Beyond the workmen hulked a monstrous pile of sand; the stone blocks were being dragged up it, then fitted together—

"It's the statue we saw in the plan," Bob realized.

And now there were other workmen, digging a pit, hauling baskets of earth and rock up to the surface. And those waiting to receive burdens to cart away were standing at the blot in space—much larger now.

The gigantic statue was completed and recognizable as that by which Bob and Loretta's flier had landed. And the strange woman, so like a goddess, was descending into the completed excavation—and it was the seven flights down which they had come, and the labyrinth...and this very cavern...but its garden was newly sown; there were no trees, only bare soil with a green sprout here and there.

And now—night. The blot almost hid Terra now. The sky was constantly streaked with dazzling meteors. People were rioting in the streets.

"I think I understand what's happening," Bob said. "That dark mass is going to hit the moon. Of course it will destroy all these people. That's why she's building the cave—as a sort of ark to shelter her from the heat of the main mass when it falls. As for the statue—well, if it stands, it'll serve to remind future people of what existed before the smash-up."

The rioters were rushing up wide stairs to a white castle, waving torches, hurtling missiles. Then that woman appeared at the palace entrance. Her dilating eyes outgrew her face and pushed across the city, faded away...and the people stood rigid...

"And that is mass hypnotism," Bob said.

"The same that she's doing to us right this minute, Loretta agreed. The woman was still at the palace

portals; the people were dropping their weapons and stealing away...

"A not-too-civilized kingdom," Bob said. "But she's in absolute power. No need for complicated inventions to insure her comfort. Every single one of those people is a slave to her mind."

"Her science is simply an advanced psychology," Loretta hazarded. "Now if it were a material science, she could sail away in a space-flier until the catastrophe is over."

THE woman was in the cavern now, peering into a periscope-contrivance. The image on the mirror-plate was that of the city of fults. The sky was fiery red; meteors combed the sky. Most of the people lay dead in the streets; a few reached pleading hands toward the palace. Then they too were dead. The sky brightened, and the thatched roofs burst into a flame; the bodies contorted strangely, steaming... A fiery rain pelted them, smashing the huts. Then a great burst of fire, and after that nothing but churning redness. The woman turned from the periscope with a pleased smirk. She was alone in the cave.

"The sole survivor," Bob said.

"The conceited wretch!" Loretta cried hotly. "All those people killed—and all she thought of was herself! The egomaniac!"

"But why was she in the coffin?" Bob asked.

They saw the woman laboring in one of the pavilions of white lattice-work. There were jars there filled with colored liquids that bubbled and steamed; the one over which she was bending contained a writhing white thing, a miniature octopus. Its head

was knobbed with microscopic jewels—

"The thing that killed Werther!" Bob breathed.

And now the woman was standing before the fully grown monstrosity on its pedestal in the labyrinth... Had she made it for a guardian or merely for amusement?

Had ages passed? It seemed so. The woman was walking the surface of the moon, frowning at the drifting sand, smiling at the great statue which was still standing. And here she was, back in the cavern, staring anxiously into a mirror and fingering slight lines on her face.

"Oh, she *is* vain!" Loretta derided. "And still—if I were as beautiful as she—I suppose I'd be worried too."

The woman was inspecting the green-metal gong; she rapped her fingers against it, cocking her head as though listening. She nodded approvingly, and went over to the dais where a coffin lay. She stepped into it, lay down, and folded her hands across her breast. The coffin arose slowly into the air and hovered.

"She's put herself into a trance!" Bob cried. "She's lying in suspended animation until somebody rings that gong—!"

Abruptly the vision was over. The man and the girl found themselves staring at the woman, who was smiling, but not very pleasantly.

"And so the cat ate the cream!" Loretta said.

The woman stepped past them off the dais, stared amazingly at the wild verdure, and laughed softly.

"She doesn't seem very curious about us," Bob noted.

Loretta glared at the woman's back. "She had us hypnotized, and she knows she can do it again. Why should she worry about us? Who

are we? Just people from the Earth, that's all."

Bob went to the woman, remarking to Loretta over his shoulder as he walked, "I'm going to try to make her acquaintance." He touched the woman's arm; she turned in annoyance. He tapped his chest. "Bob Rice," he said. "Understand? My name's Bob Rice."

She nodded indifferently, and touched her own breast. "Yssa," she said. "Ya rhamaka Yssa."

"Her name's Yssa," Bob needlessly told Loretta, as the woman turned back to her scrutiny of her surroundings. She started toward the structure housing the stored chests. "Come on," Bob crooked a finger at his wife. "Let's see what she's up to."

CHAPTER IV

IF YSSA was aware that she was being followed, she betrayed no interest in the fact. At the moment Bob and the girl did not exist for her; she was absorbed in problems.

"Bob," Loretta, tagging along, caught the crook of his arm. "Have you stopped to think what it may mean if she goes up to the surface? Even if Werther and the others are out of the running, down here—who will be waiting for us up there?"

"We could stay down here and outwait them," he said. "We've got our radio; we can signal steadily, taking turns at it, until Captain Barkley's escort comes for us."

The girl nodded. "All I hope is that she doesn't take it into her head to go up—we'll have to keep her amused and wanting to stay down here."

"I hope she can control her pet octopus when we start up."

"Can't you use your gun on it?"

"What, and kill it? It may be extremely valuable to our scientists—a form of controlled life! Who knows what secrets might be learned from studying it!"

They passed into the store-room on the heels of the woman, who dipped her hand into the opened chest of jewels, lifted glittering ornaments and studied them critically. Dissatisfied, she dropped them back to the hoard, turned and took the necklaces from Loretta's throat as though the girl were a wax manikin. She did not wear the jewels, merely held them and moved on to another casket; she pulled lengths of metallicly glimmering fabrics from it, draped them over her arm, and dipped into a third coffer for foot-gear.

"You must have been wearing her pet beads," Bob remarked to Loretta. "What's she think she's doing now, outfitting herself?"

Loretta eyed the jewels and textiles, frankly envious. "And wouldn't I like to do the same!" she sighed.

Yssa scanned the girl from top to toe with the air of a fashion expert; Loretta's weighted boots disgusted her, and she half-sneered as she turned to select a fragile pair of sandals evidently meant for hot weather wear; they were a filagree of pierced leather; even the soles were open-work. These she carried.

She brushed past Bob and his wife, stalked across the moss to a brush-hidden structure. The earth-folk followed. Inside was a tiled floor broken by a large depression in the center. Tall brass vases stood around; Yssa unstopped a few, tilted them over the concavity; sparkling red

liquid filled the declivity; a languorously sweet perfume explored the room.

Without any apparent self-consciousness, Yssa began to undress; she handed her discarded clothing—mostly scarves and wrap-around robes—to Loretta, who complained, "She must think I'm a maid. You'd better get along about other business, Bob—this is no place for a man."

He obeyed reluctantly, wandered about the cave until he found a mossy glade, and taking the pack off his back, set up the communication-set, and endeavored—unsuccessfully—to contact Captain Barkley.

MEANWHILE, her bath finished, Yssa arrayed herself in the fresh garments she had chosen, Loretta assisting her; then she went to the pavilion of divan, chairs and mirror; she lost herself in primping at the glass, while Loretta yawned, bored. Three little spider-people—two of them red-bodied, one blue, so that she was able to differentiate them from Shizek, who was green—were spying on them from under the divan. The girl amused herself trying to befriend them. She had just succeeded in shaking hands with the blue one when Yssa noticed it reflected in the glass. She turned, uttering an exclamation of distaste, and hurried to Loretta, brushing her out of the way without any attempt at apology. The spiders scattered from the menace of her approach, but the blue one was not quick enough; Yssa kicked in a most unladylike manner, hurtling the blue spider against the wall; the delicate body dropped motionless to the floor. The two red-bodied spiders hurried outside as Yssa stooped, lifted the dead one, examined it, carefully mov-

ing its limbs as if to ascertain their functions, peering into the huge eyes.

Loretta had cried out, at the kick, "Don't! they're harmless little people—" Now she stood apart, regretfully watching Yssa. Wearied with studying the little corpse, Yssa stepped to the door, tossed it outside, then rubbed her hands fretfully as if to remove an unclean taint. She returned to her preening at the mirror, and Loretta went out to find Bob, who was still fussing with the communication set. "Any luck?" she asked.

He shook his head, motioned for her to sit beside him. And so they were when Yssa appeared at the door of her house; her shout summoned them, and she beckoned for emphasis. As they arose to answer her call, she crossed the moss to the stair leading from the cave and began to climb up.

"She's going outside!" Bob cried. "Hey, you can't do that!" He broke into a run, dashed up to Yssa, caught her arm. "You can't go out—there may be men, waiting—" She gazed at him coolly, then disengaged her arm, and continued upward. "She can't understand me!" Bob sorrowed. "Wait, I'll try pantomime—" He checked the woman again and pointed up. "See? Up there—men, like me, only more." He banged his chest and then raised a handful of fingers. "Enemy men—see?" He made a gruesome face and threatened Yssa with clawed hands. "They'll kill you—" He pointed upward again, made another face, and pretended to strangle the woman, who serenely pushed his hands away, shrugged, and ascended further.

Loretta was not far behind; Bob waited for her. "We'll have to go up, too. I'm going to get ahead of her, though, just in case there're any of Caldwell's men waiting—"

"Have you forgotten her octopus-protegee?" Loretta asked.

"No." He was plainly worried about it.

YSSA waited for them at the entrance of the cave, tall, unbelievably beautiful, slender hands toying with her flashing jewels. Loretta's legs ached from the long climb; she was panting; Bob was as winded as she, despite the fact that although their shoes were weighted, they still weighed much less than on Terra. But Yssa was not at all tired.

The octopus-monster was quiet on its pedestal of black stone and crystalline rondures. Yssa uttered a shrill call, and it stirred, lazily; its tentacles lifted high; the knobbed head was suddenly alive with points of colored fire. Then Yssa faced the girl. Loretta swayed as if struck, cried strangledly, "Bob! What's she doing to us?" before Bob became aware that Yssa was hypnotizing her. He pushed between the two, his hands on Yssa's arms, but too late. Yssa wrested from his grip, and Loretta was walking—toward the octopus—the tendrils swirled down, eagerly—waiting—she was almost within their reach.

Bob flicked his gun from its holster, aimed quickly, fired, and a hissing ray struck the monster on its head; the gemmed lights snapped out, the head disintegrated and fell apart. Loretta awoke to her danger as the tentacles gave one anguished writhe and then fell limp as strings of spaghetti. She whirled, scurried back to Bob, who was standing rigid, his face frozen with horror as Yssa's eyes probed him. Without knowing it, he gave her his gun. At Loretta's touch he tottered and emerged from his trance.

"Bob!" Frightened, wide-eyed, Lo-

retta clung to him a moment. Yssa stared at the remains of her creature, then turned hard-eyed on the two. She raised the gun, pointed it—then shook her head, lowered the gun, and started ahead.

"What'll we do?" Loretta asked. "Follow her?" Bob tightened his lips and nodded. "But—if there are any men outside?"

"She'll probably hypnotize them—like us," Bob said bitterly. They went after the woman. Behind, unnoticed, came Shizek.

Yssa knew the maze well; she made no false turns. The deepening dust on the floor interested her; she bent, caught up a handful, stood and let it rill between her fingers. She crooked her finger to Bob and Loretta and resumed walking. They reached the end of the maze, came to the steps to the pale spots of dust on the darker dust that marked the end of Troske and the little Caldwell henchman whose name Loretta never could remember.

- Up—one flight, two, three—all seven. The air grew hotter; as they emerged into the searing sunlight, it seemed almost too hot to breathe. Yssa stood, eyes closed, hands pressed to her face as though in pain; Bob and Loretta blinked uncomfortably. Then, as their eyes became accustomed to the glare, they looked about them.

Yssa was rapt upon the gigantic statue of herself; she smiled triumphantly, looking back to the two to observe its effect on them. But Bob was intent on the space-flier on the dunes, and on the ship beside it. He could see men at the ports—then more and more, as though watchers had noticed the arrival of the three from underground and were summoning further witnesses. Loretta said nothing; her lips parted with

nervousness. The door of Caldwell's ship swung inward; men poured out, shouting, waving weapons.

Yssa turned their way, awaiting them. The men swarmed over the dunes, raising clouds of dust, to within a hundred yards of the waiting three. Surprised at the lack of resistance, they slowed down, halted. Big Caldwell was among them, a gun gripped in each hand. He bellowed: "So! Our friend, Mr. Rice—and our little sweetheart, Loretta! And who's the lady?"

THERE was no answer. But Yssa, one hand playing with the jewels at her throat, stepped forward. The men ogled her—ogled her and stood wooden. Caldwell dropped his guns. . .

"She's hypnotizing them!" Bob surmised in a whisper. "Quick—let's duck over to that ruin and around to our ship!" He indicated the shattered temple near the statue.

"They'll see us!" Loretta doubted. "No they won't—look at them!"

The girl peered at the men; they reminded her of toy soldiers on a playroom floor. All personality, all feeling, had left their faces. And Yssa was drawing closer to them. Loretta pressed Bob's hand as a signal; the pair dashed for the ruin. The men seemed unaware; if Yssa noticed, she did not betray it. Bob waited at the shelter of the temple for an instant, then took Loretta's hand. They went on to their ship.

Caldwell's men had ransacked it thoroughly; the door was open; a drift of sand had crept in, partly covering the floor.

"Can't shut the door," Bob realized. "Get inside, Loretta, and start bailing that stuff out; I'll work to clear the mess away here, on the outside. Hurry!"

The girl clambered inside the ship, fetched the scoop-shovel included in the store-chamber's supplies, and began to scrape the floor clean. Bob stood with his legs wide apart and cleared sand, dog-fashion. The work was nearly done; they swung the door open and shut. "It'll work now," Loretta said. "Come in." But as Bob started in, he saw that her eyes were staring over his shoulder, beyond him. He wheeled. Yssa was coming to them! She was only a few paces away.

He leaped into the ship, would have closed the door, but Yssa ran forward, caught it. Her strength was surprising. Groaning with dismay, Bob yielded to her force, let the door open. He stepped out, and Loretta, gripped with swift fear, followed. They confronted Yssa.

She pointed to the rocket, then to herself. "Va khoseth yaga," she said. "Intham Yssa yaga."

"She wants to go with us!" Bob mourned. He shook his head, raised a palm in denial. "Sorry Yssa—but you're not exactly the kind of company we want to keep."

Yssa regarded him sombrely. His gun was still in her hand; she lifted it, eyed it speculatively, lowered it. She walked a yard nearer.

Suddenly her eyes—those great, disproportionate black eyes—swelled larger than her face. As before, they leaped upon Bob and Loretta, seemed to blot out the rest of the scene. Then darkness—and the two could feel the vibrations of her will prowling through their memories. Darkness...and silence. Then a picture flashed across their minds...

Yssa was with them, in the fier. They were out in space...Captain Barkley was picking them up. And now—what was happening? Why

were the Captain and the others staring at her so?

She had enslaved them with her psychic powers. But not Bob and his wife—no. There they were, in exaggerated postures of ease, while the Captain himself was waiting on them, pressing food on them, showing them into his own quarters, kneeling to kiss their feet and Yssa's.

AND now—Terra! N'york, with all its endlessness of buildings and people. Yssa standing in a street, with Bob and Loretta beside her. A multitude of people watching wide-eyed—entranced.

Then suddenly — horror. The crowd turned, scattered. Looting. Killing. Rising flames. Gathering hordes—and all dominated by Yssa's power. Futile attempts of police to subdue the carnage; arrested, Yssa put the police to work for her. Flame — explosions — death — horror unspeakable. N'york—only a smouldering ruin, eaten by war. Cringing people running up to Yssa, obeying her commands.

And now Yssa was planning, bending over a table, scratching great sheets of paper with a stylus. Occasionally she would look up to Bob for advice. And the way people eyed Bob! As if he were a god...

Ruined N'york again. Long lines of slaves, tiny by contrast, building gigantic statues of Yssa and Bob—and infrequently, one of Loretta. Statues that seemed to grow as they were watched.

**TAKE A TIP
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COMICS!**

And now N'york was covered with the statues. As far as the eye could travel there was nothing but an army of titanic statues—beautiful, awe-inspiring—and terrible.

The vision faded. Bob and Loretta were standing in the deep sand, looking at the strange woman. She pointed to the flier again—peremptorily. Loretta grasped her husband's arm. "Bob! What was it? What was she trying to tell us?"

"She was promising us—that we saw. She's mad! She couldn't do it! But she's dangerous—we can't take her with us!" Yssa was heading for the door of the flier; he stepped in her way, halting her. Her eyes burned a command in his—

"Oh, Bob!" Loretta cried, as the man withdrew from Yssa's path...

"What can we do? She's stronger!" he muttered.

Loretta looked back at Caldwell and his men. They were still motionless, doll-like. Something small and green glittered in the sun...

Yssa was at the flier's door, signalling them to enter. The green thing sped to her, hesitated, then flashed up her robe. Shizek!

Was he conscious of the peril? Was it in revenge for the death of his little blue friend? Or was it that he wanted to befriend this person in the company of his two acquaintances? Did Yssa's movement frighten him then?

Yssa shrieked and jerked away from the flier's door. And at the sudden motion, Shizek's torso seemed to split, to lift apart as a beetle's back opens when it is ready to spread its wings and fly. Out of the split something long and wickedly green shot—into Yssa's flesh, and remained there an instant. Then Shizek dropped to the ground, scuttled away.

Yssa stared at Bob and the girl, her mouth open as though she were speaking. Then she pressed her hands to her breast, reeling, her face darkening. She fell...and Bob rushed Loretta into the ship. "Now's our chance," he breathed, as he shut the door and reached for the controls. "We'll fly to some spot a couple of hundred miles from here and wait for Captain Barkley."

"Look at them." They were still immobile, like statues...

SHIZEK watched the little flier rise from the sand and sweep across the sky. Yssa was a splotch of shining metal-cloth on the sand's brilliance. Shizek scampered toward the statue, pausing to inspect Caldwell's men. He plucked at a garment, ran up a form, peered into staring eyes. Why didn't these people move? What was wrong with them? He squatted on crossed legs in the sand and pondered.

But he could not remain still for long. He scuttled to the temple to feast on the plants that grew in the courtyard. Then he ran up the statue to rest on its shoulder, screened from the sun by the overhanging head... He could see the motionless men from there.

How still they stood! And the heat was growing stronger. Shizek shifted uncomfortably.

One of the men toppled over, lay rigid on the sand. Then another—and another—all of them fell. A veil of sand, wind-carried, settled over them. They lay like fallen statues...

Shizek suddenly began to clean his hands—fastidiously, scrubbing one against the other. Then he settled into an easier position, and began to mumble his name, over and over:

"Shizek — Shizek — Shizek —"

THE HANDS



★ | **By Venard McLaughlin** | ★

"My brother, this is an odd moment. For this moment you and I are the only beings on Earth. You are the last beast — I am Earth's first Man!" Here is a breath-takingly strange tale by the author of "The Silence."

IN THE night my mother died I awoke to find my brother leaning over me, staring. In the light of the dying fire his eyes were strange and his hands were holding his wrists, in that way of his, and it came to me that the wrists of my brother Kaven had been concealed from us since childhood.

"Our mother," Kaven said, "is dead." He stepped back from my cot.

Illustration by Matt Fox

Across the one-roomed mountain cabin was our mother sitting upright in her chair, dead. Her face was livid from recent strangling death, and I knew *that* death, for my father had died in the same way.

Shuddering I looked at Kaven. Now his arms hung at his sides. His eyes were watching me. "We will bury her now," he said. "It is a good time, for the moon is coming over the peaks."

We buried her beside our father as the moon rose over the peaks and the cold air blew, and my brother laughed softly at my side.

"Little beast," he said to me, "don't try to hide your fear. Do you think you fool Kaven? Do you?" His strange eyes held mine.

"You killed her!" I said. "With your terrible hands you killed her. And now you will kill me!"

My brother laughed again, softly. "I could." He watched the moon rise in the blue sky, blue with mountain cold. "But not now. Come." He led me back to the cabin and threw wood on the fire. "You, brother, say aloud the story of our family."

I shivered and drew close to the orange flames. "We are the last people of Earth," I began. "Father brought us into the peaks for he had once saved the son of Ahriman from death and the god was pleased and saved our father and his family, of whom we are the last, from the waters and the fire and the sickness."

My brother smiled as though listening to sounds deep beneath the Earth or far out into space, but he had heard me for he answered, "Thus were you taught, little beast."

Again he seemed to be listening to unheard things and his hands clasped his wrists, and fear was deep within me. I shivered in fear for now I remembered that the moon was over the peaks, that it was night; yet Kaven my brother was here in the cabin.

Always at night he was gone—always, when the moon rose over the peaks. Always—except the night my father died, and this night at the death of my mother—

"Little beast," he said softly. He was close to me. One of his terrible hands closed on my arm. "Listen, now. Forget that old wives' tale of our fathers. Ahriman knows no gratitude. He brought our family here only that I, Kaven, might be born

while the human race perished beneath our peaks. This is an odd moment of history—" He paused and his glittering eyes gazed into the fire. "...two races of beings face each other. The Man and the beast."

I shrank back until the flames burned my flesh. "But we—we are both human beings, my brother!" Fear was deep in that place, holding me—a cold, deep fear.

Kaven shook his head. "Little fool. You are a beast. Our father was a beast. All the billions of Earth's talking bipeds who for centuries have called themselves Man—they are nothing but speaking beasts. . . . My brother, this is an odd moment. For this moment you and I are the only beings on Earth. You are the last beast—I am Earth's first Man!"

"No!" I cried.

His hand tightened on my arm. "Listen, little beast. Think of the days before Ahriman sent the waters and the fire and the sickness. Remember the animals, the fish, the birds, and the race called by itself Man? Remember the bellies of them all, the lusts of them all, the senses of them all, the brains of them all—all, all alike! No difference except perhaps in degree—"

"No!" I cried. Tears of fear blinded me. A horror of new belief swept over me.

"What difference?" my brother asked softly, "between a king and a rainbow trout, a lawyer and a mountain goat? Degree only. Intelligence? Hardly. In the passions of love, war, hate and greed the beasts calling themselves Man were stupider than the animals of the field, the fish of the sea!" My brother laughed silently.

I was sobbing now in terror. "But the cities! The machines! The beautiful and tremendous things Man has wrought—!"

"Ah!" said my brother.

"The mighty works of the hands of Man!" I cried, "second only to the might of Ahriman!"

MY brother's eyes burned into me. "The hands of man," he repeated softly. He raised his own terrible hands into the light of the fire—dark, muscled, all-powerful hands—and held them before me stretched out from the taut-strained cuffs of his shirt. "Hands! Yes, the human beast, like the ape, had hands. But like the ape his belly and his lusts guided the hands. The ape used hands to gather food.

Has the human beast done more, save in degree?"

"The cities, the machines—"

With a movement of his terrible hands my brother silenced me. "You would have been happier beasts and suffered less had Ahriman cut away your hands. They destroyed you for you were beasts." Once again he raised his terrible hands in the orange light. "Know now the first Man!"

As his words sounded the peaks moved and Earth dust showered up toward the moon. Even my brother paled for in those signs was knowledge that Ahriman was abroad.

"Ahriman—" I whispered.

"Ahriman!" my brother said.

And Ahriman was there in the cabin for the fire was blotted out in liquid blackness and we were blinded and motionless in his presence. The peaks groaned and the shudderings of Earth under the weight of Ahriman were awful.

"Silence," Ahriman said, and there was sudden silence as deep as the blackness. "The time is at hand, sons of Koje. Earth waits bowed before the two beings, the beast and the Man. Which is to rule the finite things of Ahriman?"

"I!" cried my brother. "For I am the first Man. Go with me, O Ahriman, out over the world I have built in the nights—go with me and you will know that I am Man!"

Seized in mortal terror, I waited. The pain of Ahriman's presence bit through flesh and bone and sinew. "Ah!" I cried in agony. "Ah! *Mercy!*"

"Who speaks?" asked Ahriman.

"The last beast," my brother said.

Ahriman laughed. "My human beasts die hard. In him they have their last chance. In you, Kaven son of Koje, Man has his first."

The blackness vanished and I lay on the cabin floor near the ruined fire sick to death. My brother laughed.

"You heard. Now, fool, do you believe?"

In the dim light his eyes glowed. Slowly he came toward me. One of his terrible hands loosened the cuff at the wrist of the other and with a snap the wrist was laid bare and a great feathered wing sprang from his flesh, filling the room. And then the other wrist flashed naked sending forth its wing and in rhythm to the groaning of the peaks the wings beat.

Faster and faster, the wings beat until they sped invisible and the air from them was a blast. And with a great sweeping roar the terrible hands of my brother rushed from the cabin, and the body of my brother fell into my arms, and I laid it on the floor near the ruined fire and covered it with an old sail cloth from the days below of the waters.

"There is but one thing to do," I said at last aloud. "I must follow the hands of my brother. Ahriman has pitted us against each other and if I am a beast and he is Man, I am nevertheless what I am and I will do the best I can to establish myself on this earth."

Packing a knapsack and rekindling the fire so that my brother's body should not die of cold, I set out over the moon-drenched peaks. It was bitter cold and so still that the grind of the peaks was audible like a child's whisper, and I saw far over the eastern horizon the night-world of my brother.

"I will go and study this night-world," I said. "For my world below is yet washed with waters and burned with fire and sick with the sickness, and I too will have to make a world for Ahriman." For a moment the peaks were deathly still, and I knew Ahriman had heard.

I leaped forward, then, and swam through space as the son of Ahriman had taught my father until I came to the turrets of the night-world of Kaven my brother. It was a high, unbelievable world of dark blue and its spires reached far beyond the Golden Cycle where the banished Legion lived and its streets were broad as life and paved with diamonds from the deepest mines and the power of this world was barely a whisper of turbines buried in the living rock, and it was a perfect world for no life was their but the hands of my brother.

SILENT, invisible hands, building and building, rock upon rock, metal upon metal, higher and higher. I sat in the great central garden of this world and gazed in awe. Nothing like it had ever before been dreamed. Minarets and spires, lakes and castles, endless arches of marble and gold, flashing surface craft and silent air cars, spears of rainbow light and soft hidden music—all controlled by vast intricate mechanism subject to the lightest touch of the hands of my brother.

At midnight I grew hungry but I dared not open my knapsack to eat. In that crystal cold air of purity even the presence of my body defiled. To eat was unthinkable. This night-world was too lofty for that. And as midnight passed I grew afraid.

"Kaven!" I called in fear to my brother, but there was only silence, and I thought of the banished Legion and ran to a giant spire of gold stretching beyond the Golden Cycle and leaped into a rocket car to flash alert.

"Someone there," I thought, "will talk to me and save me from the fear of this perfect night-world. Some one of the banished."

I jumped from the car as it flashed into the Golden Cycle and fell stunned until voices sounded about me and an arm raised my head and a liquor was poured down my throat.

"A visitor," said a voice at my side. "But he is neither banished nor total Man—and the beasts are all dead—"

I looked into the dark grave face of a young man and past him at the faces of the banished—all grave, proud people whom Ahriman had never been able to bend to his will. My eyes jumped back to the one who had spoken and widened in amazement.

He smiled. "Son of Koje, do you know me?"

"You—you are Ahriman's son!" I cried. "*Banished!*"

He stood up and lifted me to my feet. The soft glow of the Golden Cycle was all about us and far below was the night-world of my brother, and beyond that was death-ridden Earth.

"Banished by my own choice," he said. "I distrust this new race of total Man. I prefer the Legion to that hideous night-world, or to dead Earth."

I shuddered at the mention of the night-world. Hideous, it was. Beautiful and perfect—but horrible. "They say I am a beast," I said, "that all mankind were beasts and that I alone remain to get back Earth for my kind—"

Ahriman's son stared. "There is one of you left? The son of Koje—a human being—and yet alive?"

"Yes," I said.

With a clap of his hands the god's son brought the Legion together—men and women from all ages, strong and proud. He addressed them.

"My Unconquered, our visitor is the last of the human race. He is pitted against the coming total Man for supreme command of Earth. Are you willing to aid him in the struggle, remembering that my dread father, Ahriman, fights on the other side?"

With one voice they answered Yes. Among them were those of the future whose souls were too strong for the tricks of time. All hated Ahriman, the dread god of darkness, with an everlasting vengeance.

They counselled, and then sent me back to the night-world to speak with the hands of my brother, and back to survey death-ridden Earth.

"Report, then," said the son of Ahriman. "And have courage."

Even in the descending rocket car I felt a change and a menace in the night-world. Ahriman had walked there and the dread of his presence lingered, and as I stole back into the central garden I knew that the hands of my brother were no longer alone.

The air was full of soft rustling—the coming and going of invisible and terrible hands. And now the world was growing before my eyes, rising in unspeakable splendor and magnitude.

"Kaven!" I shouted, "you are not alone. There are others with you! Listen to me."

There was no answer and the blue world mounted higher. In that moment I knew that the new race of Man, of total Man, had come, and that Ahriman favored this race and that I was marked for death.

In fear I stared about me and with a tremendous leap launched myself, swimming, through space, back to death-ridden Earth. Swift-flying hands rushed toward me and then my brother spoke.

"No," my brother said. "Let the last beast live a little longer. Would you have it die so easily?" My brother laughed. Other laughter joined his and all the laughter was like the rush of a million wings.

The peaks of Earth were groaning, for Ahriman waited there. But he did not speak. In the cabin I made ready, strapping on the long knife of my father and wearing the ring of my mother's people, and rekindling the dying fire to preserve the body of my brother.

I won the vast peaks to the dwelling place of Earth I marched and there was no other living moving thing in all the world except the shadows of Ahriman. Across the

Earth they pursued me, often taking the shapes of animals and human beings to attack me.

Europe was a flat, motionless sea; Asia, a desert; and the Atlantic, a bottomless pit over which I flew for days as the son of Ahriman had taught my father. The continents of North and South America had been rounded together in a great smooth ball on the surface of which the imprints of the bodies of two hundred million human beings spread flat in the two dimensions of the sickness.

IN the summit of this ball I drove a stake and although the shadows of Ahriman were near and Earth trembled with the weight and blackness of Ahriman himself I said, "I claim this planet for the

visible hands remained choking out my breath. Blackness came.

"You are dying," I thought, "the last human being tricked by an impulse of mercy, dying on the heap of two dead continents...."

But the air parted with a clean swift rush and the son of Ahriman stood beside me and the hands were gone. "Fool!" he snapped, but his eyes were kind. Together we drove down the stake, and all the shadows of Ahriman withdrew.

"It is war now," said the son of Ahriman. "I have openly defied my father's shadows. There is no time to be lost. Soon your brother's night-world will be transported to Earth and then you and your race are lost forever."

I sobbed in fear.

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human beings. If we are beasts, if we hunger and hate and lust and make war — if we are evil — we are also good. We are better than the mad, terrible hands of my brother — the All-hands of the new Man, the total Man."

A soft cry sounded beside me. I turned to see a child lying bleeding at my feet, lying exhausted as if from a long, dragging journey. Beating the child was a shadow of Ahriman in the guise of a human being.

Seizing up the stake I had just driven I leaped at the shadow. It straightened and tore the stake from my grasp and hit me hard across the eyes. Blindly I drew the knife of my father and whirled it around my head hoping to catch the shadow in its arc. When I could see again the shadow was waiting safely beyond the arc. I stopped the knife-whistling. I set myself and threw the blade with great suddenness. It struck the shadow, pinning it to Earth where it struggled futilely a moment and vanished.

The child whimpered at my feet and kneeling I lifted it in my arms. In that instant I knew my error. Strong, terrible hands closed on my throat for the child was but another shadow. Bitterly we struggled. The child vanished and only terrible, in-

"Silence. You are not alone. With you are the Unconquered of all ages, and I — the son of Ahriman!"

"We must attack, then," I said. "We must destroy the night-world of my brother's hands!"

We counseled and at daybreak, parted. I returned to the cabin and as the sun came over the peaks my brother's hands, soiled and bleeding from the night's labor, swept into the room, and joined his body.

For a moment we looked at each other in silence. I was thinking, "He is my brother. Once we played together. Once we were friends. Now one of us must destroy the other, for one is beast and one is Man."

Turning to the fire I stirred the kettle holding yesterday's broth and dipped a bowlful for my brother. In silence we ate. When we had finished I said, "Kaven, one of us must destroy the other, but we are brothers and we must remain friends. Whoever wins, let us not have any hard feelings."

His strange eyes gazed at me and he was holding his wrists. "Fool!" Going to the window he drew the blind, then swiftly his terrible hands seized me, dragged me to my cot and struck me unconscious.

When reason returned it was night again and the body of my brother sprawled on the floor. Hastily I re-built the fire, covered the body and strapping on my father's knife and wearing the ring of my mother's people I swam through space to the night-world.

There, in the central garden, as we had counselled, were the Legion with the weapons of all ages, and at their head was the son of Ahriman resplendent in armor of light, most hateful of all things to his dread father. Quickly we placed the lancers and archers in front, then the riflemen and the modern artillery, and with a battletory of many tongues and times we attacked the night-world of total Man.

Wings beat toward us and gradually slowed becoming visible. Covering the spires, the minarets, filling the air were millions upon millions of terrible winged hands, and leading them were the dark, almighty ones of Kaven my brother.

THEY came at us in a giant V formation. Our artillery roared, the archers' strings twanged. The air was filled with beatings and screamings and the awful indescribable noise of bleeding, dying hands. For the hands fell before us and we remained unscathed. The hands fell until they piled in heaps all about us, and still they came led and urged on by Kaven.

And then suddenly our guns were stilled and a black silence fell. Ahriman walked. Ghosts of the dead hands flew silently away. The whole night-world misted over and became whole and perfect again.

"It is unfair," Ahriman said. "My new race of total Man is mortal and the human beast is aided by my son and by the Immortals of the Legion. Let mortal fight mortal."

When the mist rolled back I stood alone facing the hundred million winged hands. The Legion was gone and all that remained of the son of Ahriman was the memory of his voice saying, "Courage. I go to the region of the gods to fight there a last battle with my dread father. If I win all will be well for you. Courage." And as he departed he stripped me of memory of space-flying.

The terrible hands closed in upon me, battering, choking, beating, and then the voice of my brother: "Spare the last human beast. We are not ready yet for his death!" And I was bound in golden chains

and placed in the middle of the garden to see the night-world transported to Earth.

Deep beneath me the turbine-hum increased, the blue world rose and swam through space to settle noiselessly over the battered face of Earth. Then the only sound was the last fitful lap of water and the last small spit of fire, and Earth was gone, covered over by the night-world of the new and total Man.

Tears filled my eyes. Never again the sun, the moon, the stars. Never again the cry of hungry children, the laugh of a man, the love of a woman. Nothing human, now, left in all the universe but my approaching human death. Then: Only the hideous, perfect night-world of mechanism and all-wise hands.

With a horror in me I remembered the blade of my father and the ring of my mother's people and with a mad human shout I tore off the chains of gold and stood upright feeling for the last time the valor of my kind. I marched out over that blue perfect world seeking total Man to destroy him, but there was nothing about me but whispering laughter and the beat of un-seen wings.

"Ahriman!" I cried, but he was away in the region of the gods fighting his son.

"Kaven!" I said, but there was only laughter.

"Kill me, then," I cried. "I can't live in this blue night-world of sameness, of Perfection, of no contrast, of neither good nor evil!"

The air was filled with the fluttering of a million hands. The time of total Man had come.

In the central garden of the world I lifted my head. Above me were the spires and minarets of perfection, the hideous sameness of the perfect world. "Son of Ahriman!" I cried out. "If you defeat your dread father and return to champion my race, take away our terrible hands! O, son of Ahriman, give us stupid paws! Give us muffled pads! Let us crawl on our bellies like the wise serpents! But save us from the perfection of our terrible, our all-wise, hands!" Then I knelt weeping, and I waited.

But no answer came from the son of Ahriman, and I waited alone, the last human beast in the perfect world of Man.

THE END



Illustration by *damon knight*

★ PLANET ALONE ★

Earth did not intend that the Venus colony should enjoy its hard-won independence, did not consider the planet lost to Terrestrial interests. Venus was a harsh world, and there were ways of destroying the new regime without sending out Terrestrial ships and troops . . .

By Walter Kubiilus

CHAIRMAN PHILIP of the Venus Council looked up as his secretary entered. "If that's Barton," he said, indicating the call light which had just flashed, "show him in right away." The secretary bowed his way out, and, a moment later, Fred Barton entered, hat in hand and a box under his arm.

"Come in!" Philip welcomed him, standing up. "It's good to see you. I heard

about your escape in the papers; it must have been terrible."

"It was," replied the other. "I was knocked out during the battle and the Taros must have thought me dead.

"You know the story, of course. An entire caravan bound for the free lands ambushed and wiped out. It was only a miracle that I escaped."

The chairman nodded. "I know. I

wanted to speak to you right away, but thought I'd wait until you recovered. There are a few things I want to know."

"That's why I came."

"Did you examine the bodies?"

The other nodded.

Philip grasped the man's shoulder. "What did you find? What weapons are the Taros using?"

Barton shook his head. "The scavengers were too thick. You know how it is in the jungles here; they won't touch anything alive, but once a creature is dead, it's only a matter of minutes. I must have been out for hours.

"But I stumbled across something just the same. Here it is."

He placed the box upon the desk and opened it. Carefully he lifted up the shining thing inside, gave it to the Chairman. Philip blinked, took it in his arms and examined it.

"A Peterson 45 Ray Gun," he whispered.

The other nodded again. "Exactly."

Philip looked up questioningly to Barton's eyes.

"Taro?" he asked.

"What else? No one in our caravan had such a gun. We might have had a chance if the Taros weren't so well armed."

"Perhaps," the Chairman said, "it was taken from another caravan that was attacked. It might even have been stolen from some one in Venusity. There's always that chance."

"Yes, there is the chance. All the weapons we had were taken. But look at this."

He pointed to the small letters on the underside of the barrel.

Philip looked at them and read, "Manufactured, Detroit, Mich., Earth, 2145."

"The gun is only three years old."

"I couldn't have believed it," the Chairman said, slumping in his seat, dejection written upon his face. "Do the records check?"

"Yes. I've been through them all. Not a single carload of Peterson Guns came to Venus since 2140."

"Gun smuggling."

"Nothing else."

"But," added Barton, "isn't it possible that Earth has built another space-ship and that's the one that's being used, not Marvin's?"

"No," Philip said, wearily, "our telescopes, few as they are, have combed the

skies. There are no new ships. Marvin's Venus-Earth transport is the only rocket in space. There are no others. It takes fifteen years to build a ship. And there's twelve years to go before another Earth ship goes off into space.

"Then the guns are being smuggled behind our backs to the Taro by Earth on that single rocket ship!"

"Yes."

"Good God, man! You can't sit by and let this go on! Demand that Earth stop the gun-smuggling! We're at peace. Earth has recognized our independence since the Special War."

"If it were that easy, Barton!" the Chairman smiled bitterly. "But it doesn't work out that way. Earth can get more by selling guns to radium-ore mining Taros than by trading with starving, rebellious colonists on Venus."

"Then what can be done?"

"The transport unloads tonight. Sooner or later there'll be another showdown between Earth and her colony on Venus."

IN the privacy of his office, Preston, Commander of Trade, met his distinguished visitor from Earth.

"Good day, Commander," the Captain of the only remaining space-ship in the skies, said. Marvin was a small fat man smoking a thin Venetian cigarette. A slight sarcastic smile continually played upon his lips.

"Good day to you, Marvin," the Commander said, uneasily. Clever as he was, Marvin was even cleverer. A man who captioned the only rocket ship left was not a man to be trifled with.

Still smiling, Marvin watched the nervous Preston move back and forth. Neither trusted the other. Both needed the other.

Marvin raised quizzical eyebrows.

"What now?" he asked.

"This might be the last shipment," Preston said. "Venusity is becoming suspicious."

"But hopeless."

"Not quite. Suppose something should happen to the space-ship while it is away from Venus? What will happen to us? Sooner or later Venusity will find out that the Taro has been supplied with arms by Earth. Then all of us here, all of us who've been loyal to Earth, will be trapped."

"What would you want?"

"I think I should be allowed to enter Earth," he said, then added after a thought, "I have been of service."

"No," smiled Marvin, "you don't go to Earth yet. You're useful here. Just remember one thing, Preston, there's only one space-ship in the skies, and that belongs to Earth. When the Independent Colonists have been replaced by the more obliging Taro, then we can speak about your return to Earth. Not now."

"Then never mind," Preston said, back in his place. "How much have you brought?"

"Sixty-eight carloads of Peterson Guns. Forty-one carloads of assorted weapons including a new gas specially developed for use on Venus by our scientists."

"Then when the Taro receives these he can strike! The Colonist government will go up like smoke!"

"Yes, Preston, and you'll be sitting pretty. But getting back to plans. What have you ready?"

"Thirty tons of radium ore. The samples are the richest I've seen."

Marvin whistled. "Where is it?" he asked.

"I don't know," Preston replied, frowning. "The Taro chieftain will not inform me until the guns have been delivered."

"If there is a double-cross—"

"There won't be," Preston broke in, shaking his head quickly, "I'll pledge myself on that."

"It's not much," Marvin smiled, "for a transport of arms."

"You unload tonight," Preston continued. "When the wagons enter the jungle and are taken over by the Taro, we will be informed as to where the ore is located. My men will bring them to the transport. By the time of the next shipment the Taro will be ready!"

"Will there be a check-up during the unloading?"

"As usual. Our men will be in all important positions."

"The signed receipts for the Independent Colonists?"

"Yes," Preston smiled, "for 'agricultural machinery.'"

WHEN darkness had settled upon Venusity the unloading of the Earth Venus transport began. From a distance Barton, the Chairman and an old soldier, watched.

Huge cranes, heavy feet solid upon the surface of the planet, grinded as their talon-like fingers reached into the bows of the ship. Grasping the heavy cargo boxes

with their iron hands they lifted them up, carried them over the heads of the laborers and placed them in the waiting wagons.

The work was done quietly and quickly. Only the incessant murmur of the transport's power lines could be heard. Even though the work was swift and sure, an undercurrent of uneasiness ran among the men.

They moved nervously, backing up the wagons to the cranes. Here they waited till the crates were placed within, and then moved slowly off, the hoofs of the deer-horse teams quietly clop-clopping down the road.

The Venusity Chairman, Barton and the old soldier, moved to one of the drivers and stopped him.

"What are you carrying?" he asked.

"Agricultural machinery for the Taro," the driver said, angrily.

"Let's see your papers."

"What's your authority?" he demanded.

"Chairman of Venusity."

"Okay," he said reluctantly and took out a sheaf of papers from under his grimy shirt. He passed them over to Philip. The Chairman took them and read.

"Approved by Earth Council, Captain Marvin and Commander Preston of Venus."

He handed them back to the driver, "They're in order," he said. "You can pass."

"Damn right I can pass," the driver said as he drove on.

The soldier turned angrily to the Chairman.

"You let him go by like that!" he said, "By a dammen galaxy!"

"What could we do?" he asked. "Stop him? There'd be just another incident. That space-ship would come back next month laden with bombs and Venusity would be destroyed. We can take care of the Taro—but when Earth joins in open warfare we're lost."

"It still sounds mighty stupid to me," the soldier said.

"That's politics."

"It's a trap."

"Exactly. Instead of wiping out the Earth colony themselves, they smuggle guns to the Taro so he could do the job. You would think that Earth would help her children instead of destroying them. But there's no friendship when trade in radium ore is at stake. The Taro is immune to poisoning, we're not. That's the hell of it.

We can't mine it and we're useless as far as Earth is concerned."

A sudden crackling sound ripped the stillness of that night. A driver and guide, laboriously leading a team of deer-horses, looked up in sudden fright. A great box was careening crazily in the air above them. Its wooden sides, like match boxes being crushed by a man, were crumbling to the pressure of the chains around it.

The crane engineer shifted his levers in frantic haste. He drew back the arm of the crane, hoping to save the men underneath.

"Look out!" some men began to shout uselessly. The chain snapped without warning. The wooden crate fell straight down upon the two working men underneath. Both driver and guide ran to escape, but both were caught as two tons of metal crushed them.

All unloading ceased immediately. From every corner of the transport and warehouse the working men rushed to the scene of the accident. The huge landing field, in the shadow of the transport, was filled almost immediately with the unloaders and the men and women of the city who had heard the crash.

They stood around the broken box in awed silence. A group of men tore apart the wreckage in search of the bodies.

A HUGE battered square of wood, loosely hanging together by slender strands of wire, was lifted up and carried away. On one side it bore the words "agricultural machinery."

From the rooftop of the warehouse a spotlight was thrown upon the wreckage to aid the searchers. A gasp of astonishment was wrenched from the crowd as they saw before them, not the wreckage of plows and tractors but the mangled piles of Peterson Ray Guns.

Instantly every suspicion of the crowd was corroborated. After the moment of dead silence one single thought rushed through the colonists. Gun smuggling to the Taro! Mother Earth had broken its agreement not to supply guns to the Taros!

The colonists roared in sudden anger and the mobs on the field, like huge wobbly monsters, began to move in the direction of the transport and the warehouse.

Every crate in every corner of the warehouse was seized, ripped open and its contents passed around. Each of them was

labelled "agricultural machinery." Each of them contained the guns that were so rare and precious on Venus.

Marvin, peering through a window of the transport, saw the crowd moving toward it.

"Close doors!" he shouted suddenly, leaning backward and away from view.

Like an animal withdrawing into itself, the giant transport snapped shut all its open doors and windows. The mob, now gigantic and furious in its anger, hammered and shot uselessly against the metal plates of the ship.

From the Council Building Preston could see the landing field become alive with thousands of colonists. He watched for a few minutes, still undecided, but when he saw the spark of the ray guns as they struck the plates of the ship he knew the break had come.

Immediately he turned away to his desk and dialed the visor-number of the transport.

"Give me Marvin," he said.

The space-ship captain's hard cold face came into view.

"It's happened," Preston said. "Have they broken in?"

"No. Our portholes are safely closed. The Ray Guns can't pierce our walls."

"This means war."

"Of course."

"I'll be over in twenty minutes. When I arrive, instruct your men to admit me. I will come under a flag of truce, saving that I demand an explanation. Where I can get there we can shove off."

"Just a moment!" Marvin said as Preston was about to turn off the visor.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Don't waste your time, Preston," he told him coldly. "You're on your own now. My orders are to return immediately to Earth in case of any eventuality. We leave in fifteen minutes."

"Don't be a fool, Marvin!" he said, "I'll never get out alive once they start checking the shipments and find that I've okayed them all! I won't be able to hold out until you come here armed!"

"That's your hard luck," Marvin said. "So long."

Preston watched the television become a blank. Nervously he brushed the sweat from his brow. Already he could hear the angry steps of the infuriated mob in the corridor.

THE occasional flare of a Ray Gun as it struck the sides of the transport lit up the faces of Barton, the Chairman and the old soldier.

"Ray Guns can't do a thing against space ships," the old veteran snorted. "We learned that in the Spacial War."

"You can hear him building up power in the ship. It will sail inside of fifteen minutes," the Chairman said, despondently.

"Is he armed?"

"He may be for all we know. Once he gets up in the air the city is helpless before him."

"What about our weapons? What about our defenses? Haven't we anything?"

"No," the Chairman said, "we haven't anything. We were stripped of arms, our industries wiped out, our defenses useless. Venus may have been a power once, but not now."

"And Venus without a single armed space-ship!"

"Heh! Heh!" laughed the veteran, "Be you thinking of pursuing it and stopping it? That isn't so easy, even when you have space-ships, which you haven't now. We learned that in the last war. Why, the Spacial War...."

The Chairman turned, exasperated, to Barton, "Does he go on and on like that?" The old soldier was hurt. He looked angrily at the Chairman.

"I don't see you doing much here," he snapped.

"There's nothing we can do. We've been so busy fighting back the Taro that we

neglected the possibility of another war with Earth. Now it's coming."

"If it's coming, you big fool, why don't you use the same tactics?"

"What tactics?"

The old veteran smiled. This was the ice in the hole that had long been forgotten.

"You might remember," he drawled lazily, motioning casually with his head toward the transport, "how that ship escaped being destroyed in the Spacial War?"

"No."

"The ships that were destroyed were blown up on the first day of the war. Each side had secretly dynamited the fields of the other! Heh! Heh!"

The Chairman and Barton glanced at each other and then looked at the soldier.

"What are you saying?"

The veteran suddenly stopped his clowning.

"The dynamite is still there."

"Holy Venus!" Barton muttered. "Then this field was secretly prepared for explosion like all the others! Only it never went off—then the dynamite must still be there!"

"No one's ever stolen it, hah! hah!"

"Do you know where it is?" the Chairman asked excitedly.

"Of course!"

"Then lead to it!"

They jostled their way through the crowd, pushing, struggling, shouting.

"Clear the field!" the Chairman ordered, "Clear the field!"



The Vigilantes Ride Tonight!

This is war, stranger, and we're in for the duration. Either we clean out the owlhoots and desperados in this territory, or they'll clean us out. There's someone in this town who's directing them — we'll find that someone and we'll find

"THE GUN-GHOST OF HILL CITY"

By LeRoy C. Davis

WATCH FOR THIS NEW NOVEL IN THE JANUARY ISSUE
DOUBLE ACTION WESTERN

IN A corner of the Council Building, for all the world like a little room in which the waste of a shop was thrown, they found the control room from which radiated the wires to the stored dynamite underneath the field.

The small inconspicuous switch-board was laden with dust. A lever was pulled, the switch-board proved to be false as it slid down showing a small wheel with red and black arrows pointing the direction in which it must turn.

"Is that it?" the Chairman asked, incredulous that such a powerful force should be so carelessly laid away.

"Yes, heh! heh!" the veteran laughed. "This is it! It was built just one year before the War with Earth. Everybody knew it was coming and each side prepared. The idea, heh! heh! was to blow up the enemy's space force on the day of war-beginning, thus paralyzing his strength. But what each one didn't know, heh! heh! was that the other side had the same idea! And so they blew each other's fleets to pieces! This one on Venus got away because the guards were caught by accident the day before war. The location of the room was left to me—I had a hunch it would come in handy some day!"

"And this wheel controls all?"

"Yes. Designed for maximum efficiency—to be ready on a moment's notice. One pull and pooph!"

"It would be a terrible thing," the Chairman said slowly.

"There's a visor here," the soldier said, leading him to the other end of the little room. "You can call Marvin."

"Dial him. Maybe we can compromise somehow."

In a moment Marvin's face came upon the screen. He looked into the Chairman's eyes with humorous suspicion.

"What do you want?" he asked, "Conversation?"

"No," the Chairman said, "We're asking your unconditional surrender."

"Ha!"

"You won't get away with this. The field is still laden with dynamite from the last Spacial War. I'm in the control room now. We demand your immediate surrender."

"You're kidding."

"No."

"It's no use, Chairman, we can see through you. If there was dynamite here our agents would know about it. This field

was never prepared, that's why it escaped. And besides," he laughed, "assuming that there was dynamite under us, you wouldn't dare to blow us up. It would mean a war the likes of you've never seen. In ten years the space-ships Earth is building will be ready. And then?"

"Listen, Marvin," he said, "Venus is our home. We can't allow Earth to ship guns to the Taro to wipe us out. If we allow you to go now you will come back armed to destroy us. We can't take the chance. One minute."

"Don't be a fool," Marvin said quickly. "This is an Earthian ship. If you blow this up, Earth will never forget it. There'll come a time when are space-ships will land on Venus again. And nothing that you may say or do will save you. You'll be wiped out to a man. Let us go and we will intervene on your behalf. As a Captain I promise you that."

"Nothing doing."

"You're in the spot, Chairman," Marvin said, "not I. If this ship goes up Earth will be revenged some years from now. Even though you did come from Earth, we'll never forget the Spacial War."

"He's stalling for time!" Barton whispered fiercely.

"God damn it, Marvin! Surrender!"

"Go to hell! You don't dare and you know it!"

Despairingly, the Chairman nodded his head to the soldier. The latter ran to the back of the room and quickly turned the wheel. An ear-breaking whistle rang out and then a sudden roar. The control room was rocked to its very foundations. Cracks appeared in the walls and one whole side came crashing down into ruins.

Barton and the Chairman shook the dust from themselves and walked out to the open. The old veteran weakly followed them, hand upon his hip.

A huge cavernous hole in the ground stood where the space-ship had been. Slowly one or two people came to the edge of the abyss and stared down into the center where there were scraps of metal, all that remained of the ship.

"There goes out last contact with Earth," the Mayor whispered softly.

High above them the mother planet shone like a bright star. Ten years from now, twenty perhaps, the space-ships of Earth would come to Venus again. And then?

The smoke still rose from the gaping mouth.

Hold on a moment, bud, I'd sort of like to introduce

DOROTHY LES TINA

who's here to tell about the rather peculiar circumstances which followed a certain gentleman upon the purchase of a particular blend of tobacco. It seems that—say, are you listening to me or—oh you would, would you? Well get this, bud

WHEN YOU THINK THAT . . .

★ ★ ★ SMILE! ★ ★ ★

IT BEGAN the night I suddenly looked up from my newspaper and stared accusingly at my wife, Martha. I took my pipe out of my mouth.

"Hey," I said.

She looked up. She had been knitting a sweater—now she knitted her brows.

"What's the idea thinking that about *my* mother?" I snapped. "Yours is no prize, not even at a rummage sale."

"Well!" Martha exploded. "Well, that's nice! I haven't said a word, just sat here inhaling your pipe's b. o., all evening, keeping busy—"

"Your mind's been busy, all right! I know you don't like my mother, but at least you might quit picturing her in your mind as being tied to a stake while you jab her with your knitting needles—"

My wife was speechless. Which was unusual in itself. But the unaccustomed quiet didn't warn me—I only saw with oratorical relish that the wave-length was clear for my continued broadcast.

"And another thing," I went on severely, "I know you're planning on some more pants-pocket-piracy tonight after I'm asleep. So you lost

your allowance at the bridge game yesterday. Why don't you tell me you're broke? Why not be honest about it? And, by the unhappy way, why didn't you mention having scraped the fender of the car today—"

Martha suddenly found her voice. Or maybe it was somebody else's. . . . It didn't sound like hers.

"How do you know all those things?" she asked in an awed whisper.

"Why, I. . . I—" I broke off and looked at her. Yes, how *did* I know about them? She hadn't told me. I hadn't even seen the car—but still I knew what had happened.

"I don't know how I know what I know," I finished lamely. I looked at her and added, "No, I didn't call up the bridge girls to find out if you lost. And my mother hasn't been talking to me about you. And—"

My voice jolted to a halt. Martha's eyes were round and panicky.

"You're saying what I'm *thinking*," she said in a low voice. "You're reading my mind. . . ."

"Nonsense," I told her gruffly.

I knocked the ashes out of my pipe into the tub that held our rubber plant and filled up the bowl again

from my tobacco pouch. The pungent odor of the shredded leaf pleased me. It was good tobacco. A new blend. I liked it. Little, insignificant thoughts like these wheeled around in my brain. Because I didn't want to think the truth. I didn't want to believe what Martha had said.

But I looked at her again, and knew that she was annoyed that I had put my pipe ash in the tub, and also that she was frightened and confused.

"All right," I said slowly, "so I read your mind. Haven't you ever heard that people who live together a long time get—well, in tune mentally, or something like that—and they can guess what the other person is thinking?"

"You didn't guess...you *knew*!" Martha pointed out.

She had me there.

Shades of Houdini, I thought, what's happened to me? I fixed Martha with an eye I tried to keep steady.

"Think of something, anything," I ordered. "As peculiar as you can."

She thought of eating broiled lobster for breakfast. That did it. There was no getting around it, after that. I definitely, uncomfortably, could read her mind.

I told her so, laughing a little shakily. I found I could sense every shade of her thoughts.

I TRIED to imagine what it would be like meeting people. They wouldn't know about me—and no matter how polite they were, no matter how gracious...they wouldn't be able to make their minds polite. The thing had possibilities. But how had it happened? I'm no mystic... the closest I've ever been to a seance is an Ouija-board. I'm no student

of the occult. Or any other cult, for that matter.

"Think of something else," I asked Martha.

She thought of taking me to a psychiatrist.

"None of that," I told her. "You're not going to get me under a microscope. This thing has happened, no matter how, and I'm not going to have somebody poking around in my subconscious."

"In fact," I went on, thoughtfully drawing on my pipe, "the only thing to do is take a philosophical attitude about it. It'll come in mighty handy. Say, wouldn't I make a lawyer, though? Or a detective? I'll have to think that over. I could even go into vaudeville. I wouldn't need any stooge to give me hidden clues..."

I mused a bit. I was bewildered but excited. This was *something* indeed!

"I still can't believe it. Maybe it will go away," Martha said hopefully.

"Why do you want it to go away? I'm not such a tremendously gifted man that I can push a sixth or seventh sense, or whatever this is, in the nose,"

"I wish it hadn't happened!" Martha's voice was brittle. Martha was not pleased.

"If wishes were Holsteins we'd all have cream on our cornflakes," I observed airily. "Hah, you won't be able to keep *anything* from me any more!"

"That's what I mean," she answered. "I won't even be able to *think* in private."

I sucked on my pipe's stem, found it was out, dropped it into my coat pocket, went to the closet and got my hat.

I wriggled my fingers at Martha.

"I'm going out for a while—want to find some new victims," I told her. "Keep your mind out of the gutter...remember, I'm the original know-it-all."

"Yes, you're a know-it-all, all right," she observed. She said it with a strained laugh. But there was fear in her eyes. "I can't understand your taking it so calmly."

"I'm hardly calm," I said. "And you can stop thinking about that new fur coat. We can't afford it—"

With that I went out and shut the door softly behind me, neatly severing in two Martha's outraged voice.

I stabbed the button for the elevator, and rocked back and forth on my heels while I waited. I thought about how nice it was to live in an apartment and have no lawn to cut. After I had exhausted that subject mentally my mind began to pick at the problem again. I mean, *the* problem. How and when had I changed from being an ordinary person into...well, what had I changed into?

I heard the elevator slowly and leisurely drawing itself up to my floor hand over hand. Or, I guess I should say, wheel over pulley.

Sam, the milk-chocolate elevator boy, was sleepy. I caught a glimpse of a toothy yawn as the doors slid open. I stepped into the cube.

"Good evening, Sam," I said warily, "how are you tonight?"

He was my first prospect.

"Fine," he said. He hunched his shoulders and yawned again.

I KNEW he was not fine, I knew he was sleepy, that he was hungry, and that he had lost six dollars in a crap game. The first two I might have guessed—but not the last.

So, when we arrived at the lobby, I smiled innocently and asked, "Why

didn't you get out of the game when you were ten dollars winner, Sam?"

He looked at me dolefully. "That was mah big mistake. Ah bin thinkin' about that—"

He broke off sharply and his chocolate bon-bon eyes showed a white edge.

"How'd you know?" he asked in a furry whisper.

I smiled. I was enormously pleased with myself.

I produced that venerable, creaking saw, that time has mellowed past the point of cleverness.

"Sam," I said, and winked, "a little bird told me."

I left him, then, and stepped confidently out onto the street.

I had walked a block when a beggar stopped me, with that old wheeze about a nickel for a cuppa coffee. Ordinarily I would have given him a coin, now I gimleted him with my eye.

"My good man, you have more money in the bank than I have. Let's see...one thousand, two hundred and thirty-nine dollars, if I'm not wrong. And six cents," I added, as he thought of it.

The sidewalk might have been a magnet and his shoes metal, to judge by the way he stood perfectly still and stared after me as I walked away. I had suspended his animation, temporarily.

I filled up my pipe, saw that my tobacco was gone, and made a mental reservation to get more, if I could find the same little smoke shop. I sauntered along, puffing gently, like a locomotive on an easy grade.

A swinging-hipped girl passed me. Her eyes were quick and bright and her lips were very red.

"Nuh uh," I murmured, and was gratified to see her nose elevate.

Hey, this thought-reading business had its brighter side.

I walked on, amusing myself by dabbling in the minds of the people who, unhappily for them, shared the sidewalk with me. I learned a lot about human nature. Too much. Some of it I didn't like. I hadn't known people thought such things. Well...not in just that way, anyway.

I sighed and shook myself a little. Sometimes it's better not to be too wise. The minds I read, on the whole were not happy ones. Many of them were mean, selfish. Little minds. It was depressing.

I decided to go home. I was weary of the game. I wanted to see Martha. I felt moody, restless.

The apartment was quiet when I unlocked the front door and walked in.

"Hi, Martha," I called, "the master-mind is back!"

NO answer. And for a very good reason. There was no Martha. Instead there was a note pinned to one of the rubber plant's leaves.

I read it twice. And then I sat down and stared at it. But I wasn't seeing it. I was seeing Martha's eyes just before I left. The note was written hastily and to the effect that though I had been a dandy husband in the past...I wasn't such great shakes at present. The gist of the thing was that no woman wants a man knowing what she's thinking.

So there I was—a louse without a spouse. And all because my brain cells had gone on a bender. It wasn't fair. It wasn't my fault. I didn't deliberately short-circuit myself.

She hadn't very original. She had gone home to mother. But I wasn't thinking about that. All I knew was

that I missed her. More than I thought possible. I tried to call her—and got a phone hung up in my ear.

I stood the emptiness of the apartment for about a half-hour and then went out again. I was conveyed down in the elevator as I had been conveyed up, by a respectful Sam.

I made a mental note of his thoughts, but without interest. I didn't care about anything but having Martha come back. And yet, I was certain she wouldn't as long as I stayed the way I was. But, for all I knew, I would never change. I thought of going to a doctor, but somehow I felt that wouldn't help. What could I do, then?

I slouched disconsolately along the street. Every time a person came near I drew back mentally. I didn't want to know what they were thinking about. I had enough thoughts of my own to keep me busy.

I took out my pipe, remembered I was out of tobacco, and put it away. Then I decided to find the smoke shop where I had bought it.

I wandered up one street and down another. What to do? Wryly I decided that I would rather not be a mental giant if wifelessness went with it.

THEN I saw the tobacco shop across the street. I jay-walked and almost found myself in the market for a pair of wings and a second-hand harp. (I hear new harps come high.) The driver missed me, however, and I picked up some brand new certain-type words out of his mind.

The shop was still open. It was a little place, wedged in between two many-storied buildings. It was lit by a single bulb in the ceiling.

I pushed open the door and went inside. From the back hurried the small, wrinkled, Egyptian-looking owner.

"Hello," I said, "remember me? I bought some tobacco in here a couple of days ago. I'd like some more. It was a special blend, you said."

I looked at him with lack-luster eyes. Idly I wondered what went on in the mind of such an odd-looking person. In a minute I would know. But nothing happened. Nothing at all!

My heart took one leap and then settled down to a steady rhumba. I wasn't able to read his mind! I had blown a fuse, or something.

But he was talking fast, not giving me time to more than nod.

"You the man?" he demanded. "You the man who bought that tobacco? That was a terrible thing I did. I made a mistake. That tobacco is very rare—imported from Turkey—and should not be smoked by everyone. Sometimes it affects them strangely. It's unpredictable. A man can smoke it for a while without anything happening...and then,

poof!" He made a motion with his hands. "Are you all right—no effects from it?"

I smiled at him. "No," I said cautiously, "I noticed nothing, only that I liked it. You can see for yourself. Will you sell me some more?"

He looked relieved. Then doubtful. But I relied on the fact that not only does money talk—it gives an oration when there's enough of it.

So it was over. I could explain to Martha. I could prove to her, some way, that the gift was gone. She would be able to tell by my relief, if nothing else.

For myself, I was glad I would be able to look at a person again and take him at his farce value. I didn't want to know right off what he thought—I wanted to find out a little at a time. It was easier on the nerves. And the illusions.

Why, then, did I want more of the stuff? Well, they say it takes a smart man to understand a woman...Any time Martha puzzled me overly...well, there would always be my pipe...and the tobacco....

THE END

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★ TOO PERFECT ★

By Wilbur S. Peacock

"I've been a failure all my life. I want the power to finish anything I start, and further power to do it absolutely perfect!" So insisted Paddy O'Halloran when a boon of his own choice was offered—nor would he listen to advice. So—he got his wish!

CHAPTER I

PADDY O'HALLORAN was drinking beer with the pore-filling ability usually accredited to a sponge. He drank neatly from the mouths of the bottles, placing each empty container exactly in line with its predecessors, uncapping new ones with the facility of four hours' steady imbibing.

And to his eternal shame and confusion he was still sober.

"A failure," he moaned to himself, finally managing to squeeze out a discouraged tear, "a miserable, spineless failure, that's what I am. And now it's got to the point I can't even get drunk!"

That conclusion was the result of thirteen bottles of very potent, concentrated-power home-brew that had flowed gently down his gullet. He had tried to drown his sorrows in malt liquor, and had only succeeded in taking aboard a cargo that listed him to port each time he burped.

It was very discouraging.

Paddy said as much, removing his mouth momentarily from the open orifice at the end of another bottle. He felt a warm, defeatist glow at the words; somehow, he felt that he had gained a moral victory in not being able to get completely soused.

"Hi yo, Silver!" he bellowed on a sudden whim, listened carefully to the acoustics of the cluttered basement.

Damn it, he couldn't even raise a decent echo!

"I'll 'hi yo' you, ye spalpeen, if you don't shut up and let a body get his forty winks!"

Paddy nodded lugubriously to himself, uncapped another bottle of brew, and slumped deeper in the split-bottomed chair.

"Yes," he said dolefully, "I guess you will."

The next moment, there was only the whistle of displaced air to mark Paddy's passing. He went from there with the speed of a passing thought, leaving the bottle hanging open-mouthed in the air, and the chair still tilted back on the two legs.

He stopped only when a malicious stair-step disappeared beneath his questing foot. For seconds he lay supine upon the floor of the upper hall, waiting for the breath he had left three steps behind to catch up with his lungs. Then he rolled to a sitting position, a deep chuckle creeping up his throat.

"Whoosh!" he whooshed, "I thought for a minute old Nick had come to collect his dues."

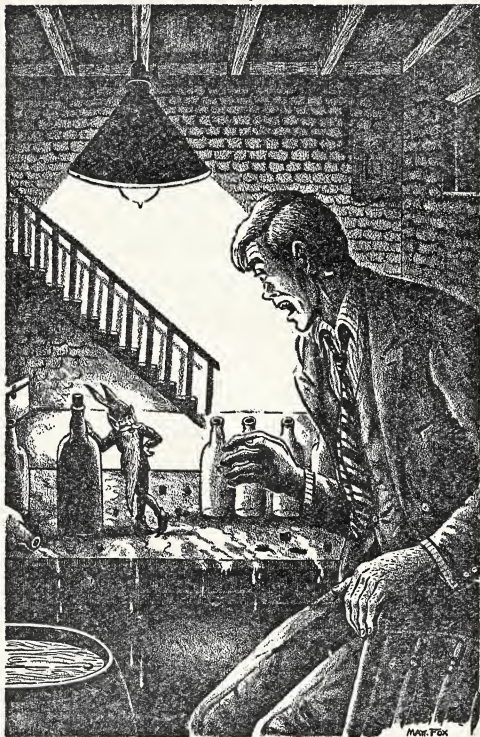
From below came the dim echoes of the chair falling and the bottle breaking.

Paddy scowled ferociously, clambered to his feet. That crash meant that there was but one bottle still full, and he had figured that two were necessary to complete the evening.

He went back down the stairs, his eyes searching every dim corner for the phantom that had warned him in a shrill voice. He breathed a little deeper when he realized that the voice had been but the imaginings of his brain.

He righted the chair, moving it so that the spilled beer would not stain his shoes. His tongue made a clucking noise when an

A Complete Fantasy Novelet



The little man, with the flowing white beard, leaned nonchalantly against the last full bottle . . .

over-ambitious cockroach took a drink and keeled over with a twitching of legs.

With a steady hand, he reached for the last bottle on the table.

Then Paddy O'Halloran showed more backbone than he had shown in years. He went stiffer than a petrified tree, swallowed with an audible gulp, his mouth gasping for more air like the lips of a pouting fish.

"The wee people!" he told himself.

The little man, with the flowing white beard, leaned nonchalantly against the last full bottle, its gleaming cap just reaching the top of his head.

Tiny eyes glittered mischievously in a puckered, oldish face, which was wreathed in a friendly smile. A worn, brown jerkin of leather clothed his upper body, and his nether limbs were clad in a soiled pair of breeches of a mousy brown color. A rakish, "Robin Hood" cap and a floppy pair of pointed-toe shoes completed his attire.

"Oh, shut your mouth, Paddy," the brownie said petulantly, "it makes you look even more stupid than you are."

Paddy lost a bit of his ossified appearance, cautiously allowed his gaze to whisk around the room. He breathed a bit easier when he saw none of the traditional elephants and snakes. Evidently, the full effects of the brew hadn't manifested itself as yet.

"Hello," he said tentatively, "is there something I can do for you?"

THE brownie frowned. "Listen, Paddy," he roared in a miniature voice, "stop acting like a blatherskite! You know me; I'm the O'Halloran brownie."

Courage crept slinking back into Paddy. "Hooley!" he said finally, "You're just an old wives' tale. My Grandpa was supposed to have seen you."

"Sean O'Halloran," the brownie's voice was approvingly reflective. "Now there was a man; he didn't sit around a damp basement bemoaning the fact that he wasn't somebody else. He took my advice and came to America. And by his own brains and muscles cut himself a niche in a new country."

Paddy ran his tongue over dry lips. "You mean you're real?" he said incredulously.

"By the Sacred Beard of Saint Peter," the brownie swore disgustedly, "of course I'm real! I'm Matty O'Halloran, the O'Halloran brownie."

Paddy reached out a hesitant hand, made

certain that the brownie was not lying to him. Satisfied, he leaned back in the chair.

"Okay, Matty," he said fatalistically, "if you're really here, and I'm not enchanted, what do you want?"

The brownie squatted with his legs folded, his eyes twinkling at Paddy. "I couldn't sleep," he said, "because of the noise you were making, so I thought I'd come out and say hello."

Paddy momentarily regretted those last few bottles of beer that were clouding his brain. Somewhere, in the back of his memory, a vague thought struggled for recognition.

"I'm glad to meet you, Matty," he said affably. "If I had known that you lived here, I would have done my drinking elsewhere."

"Oh, that's all right," the brownie assured him magnanimously, "I really didn't mind. Why, for more than a thousand years, I've watched the O'Hallorans drink, living as I do and did in the cellars of each of the oldest sons. But that doesn't explain why you're drinking alone. Wisht, Paddy, our clan doesn't drink alone!"

Paddy's troubles pyramided on his shoulders again. He eyed the last bottle with the frenzied look of a cat peering through a window at night.

"I'm a failure," he stated to the other. "No matter what I do, I do a sloppy job; and if I start something, I never finish it." His chest heaved in a wistful sigh.

"Poof!" The brownie snapped disdainful fingers. "Nobody's perfect; that wouldn't be right. And it wouldn't be right if every thing started was finished. Why, such conditions would ruin mankind."

Paddy snorted. "I don't care about mankind," he declared vehemently, "I'm thinking about myself. I want to be somebody, I want money and clothes and to live."

The wee man fingered his luxurious growth of whiskers, his bright gaze lingering on Paddy's face. Then decision lifted the corners of his mouth.

"All right, Paddy," he said portentously, "I'll give you what you want."

The thought that had lurked in the back of Paddy's mind blossomed into full flower at the brownie's words. Excitement flared in his eyes.

"I remember now," he cried, "what my Grandpa told me. He said that the O'Halloran brownie had the power to grant any

request asked. But only the eldest son could ask, and then only one boon."

The brownie nodded. "Yes," he said, "and Sean asked only that he be happy. Is that what you want, too?"

Paddy went dizzy with the thoughts that sped through his mind. Money, millions of dollars of it! Clothes, enough for twenty men! Business capability, enough to become one of the world's greatest! He went giddy with greed.

"Choose wisely," the brownie warned, "you have but one wish."

Paddy figured swiftly, knowing that the brownie actually had the power to grant any wish. And his cupidity gave him a bad five seconds. He formulated his wish, knew that with its potentialities he could have anything in the world.

"I want the power to finish anything I start, and the further power to do it absolutely perfect," he declared.

The brownie shook his head. "That's a foolish wish," he said. "No man is destined to be perfect. Such power wouldn't do you any good."

Paddy scowled belligerently. "I demand that the wish be granted," he said, "and if what my Grandpa said was true, you have no choice but to do as I wish."

The brownie got to his feet. "All right," he said, "your wish is granted." He paused, smiled a mischievous smile. "But," he continued, "I have the power to place limitations upon your wish. So, your power will last but twenty-four hours, and will stop at exactly midnight tomorrow night. Further, since all good things must balance with the bad, your power must be used wisely or it will cause pain and misery to both you and those with whom you meet for the next twenty-four hours."

The brownie leaped lightly from the table, stood with arms akimbo beside Paddy's chair.

THE brownie leaped lightly from the table, stood with arms akimbo beside Paddy's chair.

"I feel sorry for you, Paddy O'Halloran," he said.

Then he was gone into the shadows, only the scurrying sounds of his feet to mar the silence. Paddy listened intently for awhile, then turned back to the table. He uncapped the last bottle of beer.

"Maybe it was a dream" he said musingly, "and maybe not. But this last bottle

shall be the final proof. I started out to get drunk, but without success. We shall see what we shall see."

And tilting the bottle, he drained it with one monstrous swallow.

And like the mercury cap that explodes a case of dynamite, or like the spark that starts a raging forest fire, that last bottle of beer loosed the torrent of drunkenness that lay within the other bottles of beer consumed.

Paddy was lit like a Christmas tree within seconds, gradually entering that state that, heretofore, had been but a wishful thought in each drunkard's heart. He drifted on fleecy clouds, entered into romantic alliances, gamboled in perfumed gardens. It was a perfect bender.

And his last conscious thought, before he fell asleep, was:

"By golly, it works! For one day I finish everything, and do it perfectly!"

And then, his face as peaceful as that of an innocent cherub, he slept the perfect sleep that was an insomniac's nightmare.

And down below, Matty O'Halloran laughed deeply in his white beard.

CHAPTER II

THE nerve-shattering yodelling of a brazen-voiced chanticleer brought Paddy back to the land of the living early in the morning. He thrust a tousled head from the cocoon of blankets, groped sleepily for the clock. Then he went absolutely rigid with shock.

Ten thousand pointed-hoofed devils were doing a war dance on his brain; the top of his skull vibrated to the monster poundings of a gargantuan drum. Paddy moaned in anguish as his stomach tried to clamber upward through his esophagus. He just made the bathroom in time.

Five minutes later, he swayed unsteadily on the tub edge, striving to focus his eyes on the opposite wall. He had been drunk before, had wakened with a blurry mind and a furry tongue, but never, as far back as he could remember, had he been host to such a perfect hangover.

Perfect hangover!

Paddy groaned, his mind recalling the incredible thing of the night before. The charm was working, and he was powerless to stop it for at least eighteen hours! He burped casually, headed miserably back to the stool.

At last, rid of his liquid cargo, he teetered wearily before the shaving mirror, his blood-shot eyes on the reflection facing him. He winced visibly at the haggard phantom that confronted him. He averted his gaze, turned the cold water tap.

"Man, oh, man," he moaned, "I've got to stop this hangover before it kills me."

He found the aspirin bottle, swallowed a half dozen, chasing them down with a glass of water. Then he poured the soothing liquid over his head. He sighed deliciously, then straightened in surprise.

For the hangover was gone!

Paddy racked the glass, dried his head, went back into the bedroom to do some serious thinking. His hands were steady as he lighted a cigarette.

It was only too evident that the brownie had not underestimated the potency of the enchantment; Paddy had seen what it could do to the unwary. Then Paddy grinned. The drunk and the hangover were in the past; in the coming hours he would take advantage of every opportunity that presented itself. And before the time was up, he would have things that had been denied him before.

He dressed with a speed and exactness that surprised him, then, before fixing his breakfast in the tiny kitchen, made the bed. His lips pursed in a soundless whistle, as the bed seemed to make itself. His hands moved with a surety and cunning that was foreign to his usual bungling efforts.

Breakfast came next, the bacon and eggs and toast taking on all of the appearance and deliciousness of those prepared by a master chef. Paddy ate with complete enjoyment, beginning to appreciate the unknown power that flooded his being.

Breakfast finished, he washed the dishes, went into the tiny living room, seated himself in the one comfortable chair. Definite plans began to evolve in his mind.

The major thing he had to do was to make a fortune, and, since the charm lasted but one day, he had to make the fortune in a hurry. And the logical place for that was the stock market. With the fortune to back his moves, he could go places and do things, in the future, that had been forbidden him before.

Paddy set his hat at a raky angle, locked the apartment behind him. He hesitated a moment before the apartment door down the hall. He had been in the habit of buy-

ing the breakfast for the bushy-haired inventor within, on the assurance that the money would be returned when the final patent came through and manufacturing of the inventor's creation started.

But today, he felt that he couldn't be bothered with anyone.

He went quietly down the rear stairs, across the narrow alley, and pulled open the doors to the single garage. He fished the car keys from his pocket, unlocked the car door. Seeing a particularly bad piece of grime on the hood, he took his dust cloth from a nail, dusted the metal lightly.

"What you need," he said affectionately to the five-year-old sedan, "is a good polish job."

Then Paddy blistered the air with a round of good, Irish oaths. For contrary to his desires, he located the wax and cleaner, and proceeded to polish the car in a manner that it had never been polished before.

For more than an hour he worked, perspiration making him sticky, his face flushed with the determination to finish the job. Finished, he stood back and admired his work. He had to admit that the job was perfect, for, other than the body shape, the sedan looked like a new car.

He put away the cleaning rag and wax and polish, and clambered into the front seat. He started the motor, backed the car into the alley, then headed the car uptown. He drove carefully, perfectly, making signals and handling the wheel with a perfection that brought more than one amazed stare from the motorists along the way.

He parked his car near the small bank that had his savings account. He was a trifle early, so he sat in the car and daydreamed until the door curtains of the bank flipped upward. Locking the car, he walked quickly to the bank's doors.

ONLY a few customers were in the bank, as he made out a withdrawal slip. He walked to the "H to O" window, presented the blue slip of paper to the teller. The teller noted the amount, checked with his card index, then disappeared, with a muttered excuse, toward the rear of the bank.

A moment later, two bank guards, materialized at either side of Paddy, hustled him quietly but effectively toward the rear.

"Hey," Paddy yelled, lunging wildly in

an attempt to escape the clutch of his captors, "what's going on? What's the idea of dragging me along like I was some crook?"

Miraculously, he was free of the guards' hands, his efforts perfectly coordinated. He crouched back against a desk, breathing deeply, his eyes a bit wild as they took in the guns that had sprouted in capable fists.

"Inside the office, Bud," the bigger guard said menacingly, "or I'll start shooting."

Paddy had no choice in the matter; he located the indicated door, dodged through. The guards followed, their bulk forcing him toward a chair beside a polished desk.

Two men were already in the room: the teller, his eyes bright with excitement, and the bank president, who sat coolly aloof behind the massive bulwark of his desk. Paddy's withdrawal slip, and the card he had signed when opening his account lay on the polished mahogany.

"What is this?" Paddy sank resentfully into the chair, at the guards' insistence, his gaze wavering fearfully around the room.

"So," the bank president showed his teeth like a ravening wolf. "You thought you could get away with it!"

"Listen, mister," Paddy said miserably, "all I want to do is withdraw my savings. I guess I got a right to draw it out; I put it in!"

The smaller guard grinned with his lips, tapped the gun he held in his right hand against the palm of his left. He took a step toward Paddy, a momentary gleam brightening the muddiness of his eyes.

"Let me work him over, sir," he begged, "I'll make the dirty thief talk."

Paddy sagged limply against the back of the chair, his Adam's apple bobbing in futile efforts to swallow.

"Just a moment, Edmonds," the president raised a conciliatory hand. "We'll give him the opportunity to confess, first."

"Confess?" Paddy cried, "I haven't done anything to confess about!" He reached out, clutched the edge of the desk. "Look," he finished, "I'm Paddy O'Halloran, I've got money deposited here, and I want to get it out! Is that a crime?"

"He's lying, sir," the teller said triumphantly, "because the signatures don't match!"

The president shoved the slip of paper and the card toward Paddy. "Maybe," he

said coldly, "you can explain the discrepancies in these two signatures?"

Paddy lifted the two bits of pulp, compared the writing on both. Then he went cold with a chill that threatened to freeze his blood. He recognized the signature on the deposit card. But the name and writing on the withdrawal slip were as foreign to him as hieroglyphics.

Each whorl and loop were micrometrically perfect, as different from his usual scrawl as Hitler from the Dove of Peace.

Paddy raised his eyes, looked around the room. He knew that the charm of perfection was double-crossing him again. He saw the belligerent glances of the group, correctly interpreted them.

"Call the police, Edmonds," the president said briefly, "We shall let the law deal with this miscreant."

"Just a minute," Paddy said suddenly, a ray of light streaking his thoughts, "I shall prove to you that I am Paddy O'Halloran, and that I have the perfect right to withdraw my money."

"Don't be ridiculous!" the teller said virtuously, then stopped, his face going utterly blank with astonishment as Paddy began talking.

For Paddy went into action with the skill and aplomb of the politician asked to make an extemporaneous speech about things his party opposed. His words came with persuasive finality; he produced papers from his wallet, and forced the bank president to use the telephone to verify his statements from creditable people.

Five minutes later, a trifle winded, his hand a bit sore from pounding on the desk top, Paddy stopped his line of proof, leaned back in the chair, and solemnly lighted a cigarette.

"Now," he said slowly, "I want my money."

The bank president mopped perspiration from his forehead, glanced helplessly around the room. For minutes he had been held speechless in his chair, some outer force making his will utterly helpless. And he was convinced of the truth of Paddy's assertions, even as the others were.

"I apologize Mr. O'Halloran," he said, turned to the teller, "Well, Wilkins, don't stand there like a fool; get the money."

Paddy puffed smoke contemptuously at the guards. His attitude of tolerant contempt was perfect.

CHAPTER III

THE Blane Investment Company crouched on the fifth floor of the dilapidated Commerce building like a tiger waiting for the unwary lamb to gambol beneath its perch. But unlike the tiger whose prey had to pass the lair with a certain regularity, the Blane Investment Company crouched in vain, the sheep-like investors few and far between.

Obadiah Blane huddled forlornly in the chair behind the scarred desk, wishing miserably that he could have paid the rent so that heat might have made the office a little more comfortable. He glanced up momentarily as the door opened, interest lighting his face for a moment. Then he sank back into his somnolent lethargy.

"Go away," he said shortly, "I don't want magazines, books, brushes or a lottery ticket."

Paddy stood indecisively for a moment, his eyes swivelling around the almost bare office. He wasn't quite certain as to the procedure that was used when preparing to corral a fortune from the wolves of Wall Street.

"I want to," he said, clearing his throat nervously, "to buy some stocks."

Obadiah Blane moved with the ease of long practice, flanking his quarry before the office gave the lie to the words that poured automatically from his tongue. He deftly manhandled Paddy into the customer's chair, sizing up the "chump" in a single glance. Then, seated in his chair behind the desk, he kneeed the buzzer, lifted the disconnected telephone.

"Pardon me?" he said to Paddy, then spoke into the receiver, "Oh, hello, Morgan.—Yes, of course, I'll send those stocks up right away.—No! No! There's no need to thank me; I like to let my friends in on the ground floor.—Eh? Oh, sure, you can tell Rockefeller and DuPont I'll let them know." He hung up the phone.

Paddy gulped audibly, the easy bandying of the great names forcing respect for the Blane Investment Company down his throat. True the man behind the desk needed a shave, and his suit was not pressed. But that was probably an eccentricity of Mr. Blane.

"My name's Paddy O'Halloran," he offered, "I want to buy some stocks."

"Why, of course, Mr. O'Halloran!" Obadiah Blane mentally dry-washed his

hands, his eyes glistening like the cat sneaking up on the twittering bird. "Have you anything special in mind?"

"Whatever will make me rich the fastest," Paddy said naively.

The promoter blinked desperately, his breath catching in his throat. He pinched himself abstractedly, making certain that he was not having a hunger nightmare. The pain reassured him.

"Well, sir," he laughed hollowly. "That's a rather large order." His mind went into gear with the effortless speed of old. "But," he continued enthusiastically, "I have the very thing you want. Shares in the greatest potential diamond mine in the world." He stifled Paddy's few words of objection. "Of course," he finished persuasively, "you know that diamonds are really fool-proof in these days of fluctuating currency? No? Well, let me assure you that they are. And, luckily, I still have a few shares of the Arkansas Diamond Syndicate on hand, and I'll let you have them for practically nothing. Practically nothing!"

"Well," Paddy shifted uncomfortably. "All I've got is one thousand dollars! Will that be enough?"

"Plenty." Obadiah Blane sighed rapturously; he was destined to eat for many moons more. "You see, for one thousand dollars, I can let you have, say, twenty thousand shares. And inasmuch as there are but fifty thousand in existence, you will have absolute control."

Strangely enough, there was an Arkansas Diamond Syndicate, and its stock was registered. But the stock was worth but three cents on the dollar, the diamonds mined being of small and inferior value. Obadiah Blane was taking no more chance with the Federals; he was selling only registered stocks. Of course, the difference in market price and selling price could be classed as commission.

"All right, Mr. Blane," Paddy said, laying a roll of money on the desk, "I'll buy the stock."

"Yes, sir!" Blane's fingers cautiously snatched the money, inserted it in a vest pocket. Then he drew several forms from a drawer, transferred the stock title from himself to Paddy. "There you are, Mr. O'Halloran," he said finally. "Now all that you have to do is register these titles with the stock exchange, and everything is legal and aboveboard."

He went to the squat safe in one corner

of the room, removed a pad of certificates, blew dust from them, handed them to Paddy.

"THESE are the stock certificates," lie explained. "They should make you rich."

"Gee, thanks, Mr. Blane," Paddy said happily, "I'll never forget you for this."

"I shouldn't wonder!" Blane said cryptically, ushered Paddy into the hall. Then, and only then, did he lovingly finger the money.

He knew he had pulled a coup; for although the stock was supposed to be worth three cents a share, there were no buyers.

Paddy caught a taxi to the Exchange Building, got lost several times, finally managed to find the registry clerk and filed his receipt and title of stockholder.

That finished, he settled himself in the visitor's balcony, viewed the incredible scene below with considerable relish. There was something about the hustle and clamor that excited his usually phlegmatic indifference.

An usher tapped him on the shoulder, and he followed the back of the uniform as requested. Two men stood up as he entered a customer's room on the main floor.

"Mr. O'Halloran?"

Paddy nodded, noticing instantly that both of the men were tight with excitement. "Yes," he said, "is there something you want?"

"What do you want for the stock you just bought?" For once, the canniest man on Wall Street did not beat around the bush.

Paddy grinned. This perfect way of making a fortune didn't take much time in going into action.

"What have you got?" he asked.

He ducked involuntarily at the barrage of words that poured at him from the two men. And he felt awfully alone when other men surged through the doorway and packed the room. Dimly, he heard figures that he had heard before only in computing astronomical distance.

He nodded or shook his head as the tone of the words indicated he should. Things went a little too fast for him right then. But suddenly there was a silence, and he found that he was shaking hands with a bulky man. Five minutes later, he walked dazedly from the exchange, a check for five million dollars clutched in his hand.

Obadiah Blane hung up the phone with

shaking fingers. "Took!" he muttered, "Hooked by a smartie who did the job perfectly!" Then Obadiah Blane went, quietly, but thoroughly, insane.

For even as Paddy was filing his title to the stock in the Arkansas Diamond Syndicate, a wire was on the way to the Exchange building, informing certain men that diamonds and blue clay of the quality of the Kimberly mines had been uncovered in the Syndicate's holdings.

But Paddy did not care about the whys and wherefores; he knew only that he had done a perfect job of making his required fortune.

CHAPTER IV

PADDY opened a new account in the largest bank in the city, deposited all but five thousand of the money he had received in the form of a certified check, and had the dubious pleasure of being personally escorted from the bank by the president and seven of the vice-presidents.

Outside, he stood a moment marvelling at the perfection of everything. The money made a thick pad in his coat pocket, and its very bulk seemed to send a warm glow through his entire body.

For a moment he was at a loss at just what to do. A clock boomed the noon hour, and slightly surprised he discovered that he was ravenously hungry. He nailed a taxi, asked to be driven to the Black Cat Club, having heard that it was the most exclusive eating place in town.

He felt a momentary qualm when he discovered that the meter rang up the taxi's approximate value every mile or so, then grinned to himself as his expanding chest felt the pad of bills. Never again would he worry about the price of anything; he belonged to the multi-millionaire class of the country.

He tipped the driver carelessly, raised his eyebrows nonchalantly at the man's gasp. He moved quietly past the doorman General, halted within the spacious confines of the restaurant. He was not conscious of the slight frown the headwaiter bent his way, not knowing that he did not quite fit into the general color scheme of the restaurant.

But a bill worked wonders.

He was immediately seated at a table, supposedly reserved.

A waiter appeared magically at the table,

tendering a menu. Paddy looked at it blankly, the French words dancing mockingly before his eyes. Then he recalled the power that was his.

"I intend," he told the hovering waiter, "to order a perfect dinner."

"But of course, monsieur," the waiter bowed ceremoniously, but there was a twinkle in the back of his gaze; he instantly knew that Paddy's idea of a good meal was ham and eggs.

Then the waiter's eyes glazed a bit with wonder. For Paddy, interpreting the words on the menu with a casual glance, was ordering a meal with the finesse and manner of the true epicure and gourmet. Paddy finished his ordering, chuckled to himself at the alacrity the suddenly obsequious waiter showed in departing for the kitchen.

For the first time in his life, Paddy felt that his soul was his own. . . .

PADDY bought the Deusenburg around two o'clock, paying cash for it, and driving it from the showroom. He looked around the world with a bright gaze, appreciating what he saw. His head swelled a bit at the envious glances he got from the passing crowds. He hummed lightly to himself. His old car he had given to the salesman as a tip.

The brownie's last words came back momentarily, haunting his thoughts. Then, lighting an expensive cigar, he dismissed the memory. He managed to find a parking place near the finest outfitter in town, then strolled into the store.

"I want to be completely outfitted," he told the clerk. "Money is no object; and I want the clothes immediately."

He didn't realize the mistake he had made until after he had purchased the suit and shoes and certain essentials. Satisfied that they were what he wanted, he fumbled for his money.

And then the charm of perfection went into action again.

Paddy was absolutely helpless as his rebellious tongue began ordering more apparel. He bought shoes, socks, ties, shirts, underwear. He moved quickly down the racks, touching suits carelessly, buying them carelessly. He had tuxedos, tails, riding habits, beach clothes, camping clothes, fishing clothes, sport clothes, business suits and play suits. He bought the appropriate jewelry by the handful, in mental agony as the bill piled up. Slowly but surely he

got together the perfect wardrobe for a man.

And the clerk was in his seventh heaven of ecstasy. Never in his life had he met such a customer, never had he sold things without a polite haggling. Why, he was selling things before he could bring them to display. It was the consummation of the dreams he had had for the past five years.

But finally, Paddy slowed to a stop. He wrote a check for the clothes ordered, wincing inwardly at the number of naughts he had to add after the numerals in the right hand corner of the check.

He changed into one complete outfit, escaped from the store. He mentally resolved to watch his tongue for the next few hours. Getting into his new car, he drove toward his home neighborhood. A smile lifted the corner of his mouth, when he thought of the surprise on Jack Anderson's face when he parked the Deusenburg before the small store.

Anderson and he had grown up together, had been pals so long they couldn't remember when it had started. Now, Anderson owned a small grocery store, and was barely making ends meet. Paddy thought cautiously that he might loan him enough to start a better store.

He drove carefully through the crowded streets, parked it a block from his destination. It would be better, he thought, to spring the surprise slowly. He locked the car, walked toward the red fronted store, speaking now and then to acquaintances he passed.

He found the Halloween domino on the walk, where some child had lost it. Mischief danced in his eyes as he picked it up.

There were no customers in the store when Paddy went through the door. He stood quietly for a moment, hearing movement in the back, watching through the front window for possible customers. Then, grinning to himself, he slipped the mask over his eyes, jammed one hand menacingly in a coat pocket.

"What can I do for you?" Anderson appeared from the back room, blinking myopically in the brighter light.

"Dis is a holdup, Anderson," Paddy said gruffly, holding back his laughter with difficulty, "so fork over de dough."

Anderson stood rigidly in the rear doorway, a look of panic stealing over his long face. Then his lips tightened grimly.

"I've got no money," he said slowly, "and even if I had you'd never get it!"

Paddy lowered his voice another notch, as Anderson edged toward the meat cleaver on the wall. "I'm gonna smack you into hamburger, if I don't get the dough," he growled hoarsely, savagely.

He started a grin, then terror of his words tore at him, as Anderson leaped for the cleaver. He tried to duck for cover, but a stronger force than his will sent him hurtling forward.

with too much to spend and nothing to worry about. He resumed his interrupted mopping, stopping only when the young man seated himself on the bar stool.

"Yessir," he said automatically, "what'll it be?"

"Bourbon, straight!" Paddy O'Halloran said tightly.

Terror had etched little white lines in Paddy's face, his hands shook as he reached for the small glass of liquor. He cocked his head a little to one side, straining to

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He caught Anderson before the man could reach the weapon, slammed him against the wall. He cursed wildly, helplessly, as he mercilessly beat at Anderson's face. But there was no stopping of that insane urge.

Anderson struggled futilely for a second, then slumped beneath the savagery of Paddy's smashing fists. He dropped limply, unconscious from the beating. Blood trickled from his cut and battered face.

"Oh, my God!" Paddy stood stupidly over the slack body, tearing the mask from his eyes. He would have given everything he possessed to undo that which he had just done. But now there was but one course to follow—to make his escape.

"I've got to get away," he said, whirled toward the door.

CHAPTER V

THE bartender in the swank "400" Club mopped desultorily at the gleaming bar, yawning a bit sleepily as his gaze travelled over the almost deserted tap-room. He perked up, his head swivelling toward the front, at the sound of brakes squealing and gravel flying.

"A raid," he thought hopefully. "Any-way, some excitement."

Then he scowled disappointedly at the sight of the young man who erupted through the door. Just another rich guy

hear the banshee wailing of sirens that would prove that he had not made a perfect getaway.

He smiled tightly, no amusement in his eyes. Of course he had made a perfect getaway; he had had no choice but to do that. And while he was racing his car down the side streets, his friend, Anderson, lay in a bloody heap in the small store, smashed there by the ruthless consummation of Paddy's careless statement.

Paddy cursed the impulse that had made him demand assistance from the brownie; it was only too evident that the brownie knew that such things were likely to happen. And now, all because of his greed, he had almost murdered the one person he called his friend!

"I've got to forget it ever happened," he told the bartender.

The bartender considered the statement for a moment, then ventured a question. "Yessir," he said, "forget what?"

But in that second a change had come over Paddy. His shoulders straightened, his eyes cleared. He glanced puzzled around the room, seeing only unfamiliar surroundings. He finished his drink absent-mindedly, gasped as the raw liquor seared his throat.

"Where am I?" he asked, ignoring the bartender's question.

The bartender shrugged, gave the information. And from that moment on he

worked his way through life nursing a new philosophy. Never again did he bemoan the fact that he did not have riches; for always before his eyes, ever after, was the pitiful sight of the rich young man whose riches had him walking on the back of his heels.

RUBY TREVOR appeared like something conjured out of sheer nothingness. Paddy was never absolutely certain as to whether he picked her up, or she talked to him first. All that he knew was that he opened his billfold with its thick sheaf of bills—and there she was.

Her hair lay in rich folds, like a silken cap, shading its golden glow into the rich warmth of her complexion. Her eyes were startlingly blue and guileless. While two dimples appeared and disappeared with a fascinating irregularity when her white, tiny teeth flashed in a slow smile.

The only angles she had were in her mind, and since they didn't show, Paddy had not the slightest idea that they were there. All that he could see were more curves than there are on the Pikes Peak highway, and, naturally enough, they were enough for him at the moment.

But Ruby had the surprise of her life in store for her, when she went into her usual routine. For Paddy made a silent resolve, as he ordered drinks within the shadowed booth, and once that resolution was made he followed it through with the unswerving purpose of a Dewey investigation.

Paddy took the initiative with the dash and vivacity of the mythical Latin lover. He worked with a casual speed that shredded Ruby's objections before they were formed. He felt a little frightened when he saw the effects his web of attack was having, tried to slacken his headlong rush.

But Matty O'Halloran's magic was thorough in its application.

Within minutes, Paddy and Ruby were riding gently along the streets in Paddy's new car. And strangely enough, Paddy was beginning to enjoy himself. His line still had the deft touch of the professional heart-breaker, but he was gradually learning to gear its speed to the situation.

They ate dinner at an exclusive club, then attended the latest show uptown. A light snack after the last curtain rang down, and they went riding along the moon-lit silvered river.

It seemed that Paddy's resolve worked

better with the moon overhead, and he took advantage of every opening. Ruby, having met more than her match in the youth she had taken for an unsophisticate, went gracefully, and willingly, into the role of the clinging vine.

It was close to midnight when Paddy kissed her good night at her apartment door, vowing that he would see her often in the next few days. Then, removing most of the lipstick from his cheek, he headed the car back toward his apartment house.

The basement was shadowed because of the dimly glowing bulb, when Paddy paused at the foot of the stairs. He grinned into a far corner, raised his voice cautiously.

"Matty? Matty O'Halloran?"

The brownie emerged from a shadow, blinking sleepily in the light. Recognizing Paddy, he snorted deeply in his whiskers.

"Wisht, Paddy," he said, "what do you want?"

Paddy lit a cigarette, leaned more comfortably against the stair rail.

"I just wanted to thank you," he said slowly. "Your magic made me a fortune, and gave me a taste of life that is sweet to my tongue."

"You're a fool, Paddy O'Halloran," the brownie said, "I was hasty in granting your boon. Perfection is not for the likes of you." He turned back to the corner. "I feel sorry for you, Paddy," he finished.

Paddy laughed shortly, turned back up the stairs. He walked lightly, whistling softly to himself. The day had been perfect, except for a short while in the afternoon which escaped his memory. And tomorrow, with a great fortune at his command, he would start the second phase of his existence, never to return to the life that had been his.

He paused momentarily before the door of the young inventor in the upper hall. A thread of light showed beneath the door. He raised his hand to knock, then shrugged and palmed the knob, swinging the panel open.

He gasped in horror when he saw the gun in the youngster's hand. With an inarticulate cry, he hurled himself forward, smashed the muzzle of the gun away from the youth's forehead.

The gun bucked, its sound deafening in the small room. A slug of lead bored a neat hole in a chair bottom. Then the youth was crying with great, racking sobs, and Paddy was trying to catch his breath.

CHAPTER VI

THE beat officer made rapid marks in his report book, his broad back keeping the curious tenants from entering the room. He wet the pencil point deliberately, shifted his eyes to the crying youth.

"All right," he said briskly, "let's hear the entire thing."

"Let me tell it, officer," Paddy said, "he's too shaken to do so."

"All right, O'Halloran," the officer said shortly, "I'll get his story from him later. Now," he adjusted his pencil over the pad, "just what did happen."

"Well," Paddy leaned over and picked up the gun. "I opened the door without knocking, and saw he was about to kill himself. I dashed forward, knocked the gun from his hand. It—the gun, I mean—went off when I hit it."

"That right, mister?" the cop said to the inventor who had managed to gain some measure of calm.

"Yes sir, that's what happened. I was discouraged, and was about to kill myself," the youngster admitted.

"How were you going to do it, like this?" The cop reached over, took the gun, raised it to his temple.

"Here, I'll show you the exact way he held it." Paddy retrieved the gun, held it awkwardly to his forehead. "He was going to kill himself by shooting himself in the forehead like this."

And then Paddy screamed in terror, as he felt his forefinger tighten slowly, but inevitably, upon the cool metal of the trigger. In that one flashing instant he knew that Matty O'Halloran had been right—no man should have the right to finish everything he started, and to do it perfectly. He was not holding the gun awkwardly, but precisely. The bullet would enter neatly, making a perfect round hole in his brain...

And as the echo of the shot coincided with the chime of the church clock that tolled the first note of midnight, Matty O'Halloran huddled miserably in the basement corner, the slow tears edging from his eyes and stealing slowly down his aged face.

THE END

STOP THIS USELESS KILLING!



The citizens of Constable, scoundrel and honest rancher alike, were too astonished to talk back when mild-looking, bespectacled Hannibal Colts, the town medico, issued that order.

And however much the honest ranchers agreed with Doc Colts' aims, they had to do something about this new range feud which had suddenly sprung up.

He was a healer, bound in sacred vows to his art, but he rebelled at endlessly patching up bullet-torn men, only to have to repeat the job as soon as they were able again to walk. Could one man enforce a new law and order in Constable? Was the medico a fool, out only to find his own lonely Boothill?

**Don't miss Doc Colts Operates by T. W. Ford
in the January issue of COMPLETE COWBOY**



IF ENTHUSIASTIC letters mean anything at all, then the October issue of *Future*—the first to bear the new title and present the new policy—made a hit. We can't thank you enough for writing in at length, as so many of you did this time, but can reply to those of you who tell us to keep up the good work: keep on writing in! As the continuous expansion of the nation's armed forces take more and more of the big-name fans, we are more and more dependent upon the non-fan readers for opinions as to how we're doing. We just love to see long letters, but will be positively content with a postcard listing the stories in order of preference.

Here are the ratings for the October issue:

1. The Inheritors	1.56
2. The Powerful Ones	3.21
3. The Extrapolated Dimwit	3.50
4. Storm Warning	4.27
5. The Collector	4.94

DAMON KNIGHT'S "Devil's Pawn" and J. S. Kilmaris' "Cuse of the Baby Dinosaur" both rate honorable mention, rating 5.05 and 5.41 respectively. Whether our demon artist will be with us again soon, we know not at the moment; he's pretty well occupied, what with illustrating for *Future* and the *Quarterly*, and breaking into some of our rival fantasy and science fiction publications. That's right—you'll see Knight hither and yon in stf mart these days. Makes us feel mighty proud that *Future* gave him his start.

MUCH the same can be said for our new artist, Dorothy Les Tina; in the last issue was her first two bits of science-fiction artwork; here is her first fantastic tale. And she's already been approached by others to grace their pages with her illustrations. And before we leave off this orgy of footnote our horn, we mustn't forget to add that Martin Pearson, Hannes Bok, and Walter Kubilius are "on their way," having made their first splash with us.

THAT BOK COVER

"The cover is a pretty good one," says Bill Stoy, of 140-82 Burden Crescent, Jamaica, New York; "a nice alien scene, plus a Bok human that, for a change, doesn't look as if it were being subjected to some terrifically powerful stresses. But that many an author wishes he could also illustrate his own yarn, particularly because of the way some artists miss the moods and ideas of the stories they

illustrate". Frank Willimczyk, editor of that little fanzine *Paradox*, writes from 3 Lewis St., Westfield, Mass., "If any one thing drove me to writing this letter, it was the cover on the October issue of *Future*. It was exquisite, even though the background was yellow! 'Twas Bok's best cover to date, and the same goes for *Future*. Keep giving us fans covers like that, and we'll be catin' out of your hand (practically)". However, John M. Cunningham of 2059 Gilbert St., Beaumont, Texas, disagrees, but emphatically: "That October cover looked like something from over in Hitler's place, done by one of his agents to aggravate the stfans. Bright yellow, with spudgy blue-red and black also—just ain't human to put such trash out as a cover for *FFS*."

Pauline Booker insists, tho: "The cover is my idea of something unique and finely imaginative." (Miss Booker pens us this from Goldthwaite, Texas.) Joe Fortier of 2222 East 30th St., Oakland, California, declares: "The cover was wonderful, this being one of the finest Boks I've ever seen. As time goes on, I have a suspicion that it will take its place in my heart as my absolute favorite of Bok work. It certainly surpasses any recent work, the last good one being the cover of the December 1941 issue, where the workmanship was swell, but the printing lousy." (Perhaps you got a bad copy, Joe—we've seen some which didn't look very good, but most of them came out quite well. Ed.) And Nan Warner of New Canaan, Conn., adds: "At last Bok has drawn a human figure that looks like a human figure. I hope, tho, that this girl isn't really Hannes' conception of beauty incarnate. The dame is okay as a representation of the gal described in the story, tho—not unattractive in a horsy way. However, the cover is slightly weak in one respect—that jewel is not strong enough for the effect it is supposed to be having on the two figures. The little black thing is superb by the way!" We'll flush off this section by remarking that, while we're not quite sure whether or not this cover is our own personal favorite of Hannes' *Future* frontpieces, we liked it very much. Next, we'll take up the issue of

TITLE, POLICY, LAYOUTS, ARTWORK

Mr. Cunningham, whose comments you've noted above, adds to his remarks on the October cover: "What's the idea of the new makeup and name? Course I read in the August *Future Combined with Science Fiction* that it was to change over to new title with next issue. But I did not interpret it

to mean that contents were gonna be WORSE! I also noted the new layout for the inside illustrations. Doc, I'm really worried over the possibilities of Future Fantasy and Science Fiction carrying on if it continues to sink any lower. So you think you have something there—time will prove how wrong you are. Nowadays fans and s-f readers no longer need feel choosy; they can well afford the other s-f magazines as well as such ad such an one. I wish for you a more speedy recovery of FFS, better than has been, otherwise to the pile of oblivion. For improvement, recommended: closer trimmed edges, slightly—even if but little—better grade of paper that will hold illustrations better and will look half decent." Chester B. Conant, who's been pretty well occupied with his position as tone specialist, says:

"Very fond of the new title; it's much less along the beaten track than the former one. Am absolutely in favor of combining all types of fantasy and science in your one magazine. As for layouts—some are nifty; others stenchify. For examples on the credit side we have the contents page, layout for Gottesman yarn (although it was my idea of wasted effort inasmuch as that illustration made me yawn for blank space), for 'Powerful Ones' (even if the printers did smudge it up), for 'Storm Warning' (simple, very neat, but quite attractive); very attractive ad for the Quarterly, and I enjoyed the layout for the Knight piece. On the other side, I can't say that I cared for the layout on the 'Collector,' or the others at all. With the artwork, Bok is electrifying, Knight showing amazingly rapid improvement, and Forte—well, I'd say he's ideal for your competitors. My main objection to him in Future is that he uses black ink. He should confine himself solely to white here—as invisible ink is rather expensive these days. PS—I understand that Mr. Forte is a hefty fellow around six feet in height; if he reads this, I just left town! Oh yes—may I comment upon one of your old standbys, the foot-itch ad? Without a doubt, the printers should have received a bonus for their excellent work in blurring the photograph just enough to give the appearance of great masses of crawling fungi. Gee, wasn't it disgusting!"

Bill Stoy says: "The new title is even better than the old one (sometimes less awkward, too) and still the best on the market. Bok's pic for 'The Inheritors' is very good—now here's a drawing that captures the feeling of the story quite precisely and manages to convey it perfectly. Forte's work is only fair; Knight's work is, um, a bit too fuzzy." Fran: Wilmiczky writes: "Artwork wasn't so good this issue. Forte's illustration for the Gottesman story looked like a Krupa pic. Bok's for 'The Inheritors' wasn't as good as his better pics, but nevertheless was best pic in this issue. Knight's for the 'Baby Dinosaur' was better than his illustration for the first of the series, but is that what a dinosaur looks like? One good thing, however, the picture was symbolic. Like pictures of that sort. Forte's for 'Wide-Open Ship' for some reason, I disliked. Too bad we can't have more Bok. His pictures would liven up the stories immensely." Doris A. Currier tells us: "FF and SF has everything. Comedy, humor, science, wickedness, evil, horror, gaiety and GOOD STORIES. I have been reading every s-f mag I could get my hands on for six years now. I also have been reading every fantastic mag and Weird, Esoteric, and all sorts of Horror Tales. Your mag includes all the best qualities and fine artists

of them all. Imagine how nice it is to sit down to read with ONE single book that contains everything I enjoy in fiction reading. I absorb a dandy science-fiction tale that whips my brain up and keeps me thinking. Then I cool off, sometimes get chilled, by a nice scary fantasy that starts the goosebumps. Then again more brain work and follow up with Gottesman's 'The Extrapolated Dimwit' and, Mister, you've had some reading pleasure, all for fifteen cents, an open mind and editors who know what an active mind is looking for."

Generalities having been dispensed with, let's hear from

NORMAN L. KNIGHT

Dear Doc: Herewith I am complying with your request that I peruse the October issue of Future and comment thereon. The perusal was completed in short order since it was no task at all, but pure recreation; but writing the comment is something else again. Moreover, up to the present moment my spare hours have been occupied with a door-to-door canvass on behalf of Civilian Defense in our block, which left little time for writing.

This is the first time that I have essayed a written criticism on an SF mag from cover to cover. Chief reason was that I felt that, as a writer of SF, I might tend to be too critical and so would not represent the viewpoint of the average reader, but I was being wrong, since some of the readers are brutally frank—one might even say ruthless—in their expression of opinion, and are rather frequently in direct opposition to each other on any particular topic of discussion. So since you have asked me, here goes.

To begin with, I find that I can't rate the stories in a neat 1-2-3 series, even after grouping them as SF and fantasy. The best I can do is divide both groups into three sub-groups—Best, Good, and Not So Good. There are none which, in my opinion, "stink," as they say in fan-letters. There is a harsh, unkind word which should be reserved for the occasional horrible example of really putrid writing which do somehow get into SF mags. Anyway, here's the grouping. The order within the groups indicates preference; it's merely the order on the table of contents.

BEST: (Science Fiction) "Planet Passage"; (Fantasy) "Storm Warning".

GOOD: (Science Fiction?) Fantasy) "The Inheritors".

NOT SO GOOD: (Science Fiction) "The Extrapolated Dimwit," "The Case of the Baby Dinosaur." (Fantasy) "The Powerful Ones," "The Collector," "When the Earth Shook."

"Planet Passage" is well-written around a novel idea (novel to me, at any rate). It would have been better if Amalgamated War Power, Consolidated Military Might, etc., had been left out. The existence of such sinister outfits as these imply a state of affairs which belongs in the realm of Less Probable Futures. They give the story a tinge of improbability. I have a hunch that space travel will be attained by the all-out effort of a united humanity which doesn't care whether or not the achievement will be communally profitable.

I don't know just how to classify "The Inheritors." Strictly speaking, it's science fiction, but the feel of it is fantasy. One seems to be reading of events in one of the well-known (to SF fans) "parallel universes"—in a world almost, but not quite, like our own. Probably Hannes Bok's illustration has some-

thing to do with this; it strikes an otherworldly note at the very outset of the tale. I can't really convince myself that the human race will hurrp powerr at its disposal—while it is still in the assumed, warning-notions period of its history—capable of concerting the whole atmosphere into a pall of poison gas, of blasting all normal vegetation from the face of the earth, and fusing great areas of the surface into glass. It's an intriguing variation of the Twilight of Humanity theme. It could be, I guess; there's nothing inherently impossible in the idea, perhaps; nevertheless I feel that the picture is that of one of the Less Probable Futures. On the other hand, the Less Probable Futures are probably the more interesting Futures, and therefore better story material. So I end where I began in a quandary.

In the case of "Wide Open Ship" I continue to harp on the same critical string. Would a race which has achieved space-travel still resort to gawdling and similar unimaginative forms of amusement? To me the attainment of space travel implies a complete social and psychological revolution as a background. Perhaps out on the galactic frontiers there would be relatively backward worlds with an old-fashioned Twentieth Century (or Twenty-first Century!) point of view. But on Earth, at the focus of human civilization? I doubt it.

Another comment on "Wide-Open Ship." The ship is said to have been moored in space fifteen miles from the Earth's surface. That ain't the way I heard it; fifteen miles from the Earth's surface is still well within the atmosphere and by no means "in space." Did the original *M.A.* by chance read "fifteen hundred miles." (It probably did; one of those things which got by us. Ed.)

"The Extrapolated Dimwit" scise-cracks its merry course across the galaxy. It is amusing and interesting, but somewhat frothy withal. The writer has the Hollywood touch. And why, in the name of all the planets, is Gaynor represented in the illustration as wearing spurs? Did he arrive at the space-port on horseback, or did I miss something in the story? (Gaynor was such a screwball that, no doubt, Forte felt justified in putting him in that rig. And, while Gottesman didn't explicitly say so, I wouldn't be at all surprised if the guy did arrive at the space-port on horseback. Ed.)

"The Case of the Baby Dinosaur" ends with a good unexpected quirk, and is another amusing, scise-cracking yarn, but as a probable tale, it leaves me quite cold. The baby dinosaur itself is represented as of quite improbable size, even for a full-grown saurian, both in the descriptions and in the illustration. There may have been dinosaurs whose feet were big enough to get stuck in a subway entrance—I'm not prepared to argue that point—but I'm quite sure that there never was a species whose immature offspring were that large. And I'm willing to wager that there never was a dinosaur so huge that its hide would cover an acre, even if spread out flat, and severely stretched. Strictly speaking, we should have listed both this and the Gottesman yarn as stf-whimsy. Probability pretty close to zero, but enjoyable reading nonetheless. Ed.)

Going on to the fantasy group, I have rated "Storm Warning" as Best because of its outstanding quality of authenticity. It reads like someone who's never attempted narrative writing before, but who has been disturbed by an abnormal experience and so has taken his pen in hand and conscientiously set

about recording the whole thing "just as it happened."

"Beauty" and "Devil's Pawn" are on a much higher level than "Storm Warning" as literary productions, but they don't have the disturbing realism of the latter.

The last three fantasy tales are good reading, but they leave me either baffled or irritated.

I'm still rocking my brains trying to explain the two Cro-Magnon skeletons—one tall, the other short—who arrived via airplane at the climax of "The Powerful Ones." Does this story pre-suppose that the reader is familiar with a previous related story—or stories—in past issues of *Future*? (No. "The Powerful Ones" has no direct connection with any other tale in *Future*, or any other fantasy book, to our knowledge. However, we'd say that the implication was that two men of Cro-Magnon race had solved the secret of Death—you recall this—the secrets of Life, Love, and Power had fallen to the three men of our own day—and had thus attained a sort of immortality. What their precise motives were in interiering with the powerful ones of our own day is left to the reader. Ed.)

And in the case of "The Collector" either the author has been too, too subtle or I am too, too dumb. What really happened? My best guess is that this story is a variation of the Faust theme; the Collector was the devil in disguise, and the alleged photograph was a sort of new-model soul-trap. (That's the answer. It seemed rather obvious to us, to tell the truth, even if subtly implied.) The general idea behind the story was that, if there is such a thing as a devil, out to capture souls, it obviously must change its approach as the attitudes and general standards of its prey—humans—change. Also, it's more than likely that such a being will find new forms of dealing with the souls once obtained. Ed.)

"When the Earth Shook" (incidentally, H. Rider Haggard wrote an stf book by that name) (We know. But now and then a title duplication can't be helped—at least it doesn't happen with anywhere near the frequency you'll find such duplications in general fiction. Ed.) would have been better if it were even shorter than it is, and if it did not labor so ardently to be technical and circumstantial. What is "ice-tation 6.6382"? What is "Ascendancy 3.20016"? Neither Funk and Wagnall's unbridged dictionary nor a heretofore trustworthy astronomical atlas shed any light on this mystery. Funk and Wagnall did yield one definition which may have bearing on the matter, to wit: "Ascendant.—(Astr.) Coming to or above the horizon; said of a star or constellation." Could it be that the author was groping for the term "Declination" and "Right Ascension"? (We'll ask Kublikus about that one. Ed.)

So much for the individual stories; we pass on to more general considerations.

The first point for consideration is suggested by the Harry Jenkins letter in Station X, and the editorial parenthesis therein. Quote: "The backgrounds are always chosen for the artists." How come? It would seem that the artist would be the logical man to choose the background color. Yellow is scarcely an appropriate background for the cover illustration of Hannek Bolt's "Beauty." The scene as described is a world of purple dust, smooth gray stone, barren rock, bottomless abysses. Yellow is a buoyant, joyful color. Purple, or bluish-gray, or some other darkish color, rather than yellow, seems to be indicated as a background. And—if I

Station X

may be permitted a backward glance at the August issue—a blue background would have been more appropriate to "Once is a Blue Moon," rather than red. (This is the sort of thing which used to plague us sadly back when our only connection with stf magazines was through letters to the editor, readers' departments, etc. We could do lots better on covers, we would remark, were we editor. However, came the break, and we learned of the abyss of ignorance in which we had been living—in regards to cover designs on popular magazines, for one thing. First and foremost, they have to be display posters, things to attract attention, out of all the other titles on the stands, also presumably doing the same thing. They have to attract attention and hold it long enough to make the looker want to pick up a copy of the magazine. Thus, says our art department, the colors must be bright; the backgrounds must be bright, flat color; any human figures on cover should be large and attractive, and the cover positively must tell a story in itself—or a substantial part of a story. We've managed to get some things by which didn't exactly fit, and, quite frankly, we've regretted it; they just didn't look so hot after being engraved with a three-color process such as we use. And one thing we try to avoid is using the same background color for two issues in a row. Red, yellow, and blue are best—in that order. Which is the why in the case of the cover for your story. Blue would have been best for the sake of the yarn itself, but red is a better color. We'd experimented a bit on the last one, and wanted this one to be on the safe side. Ed.)

I'm not commenting on the illustrations; I take it that the illustrators are doing the best they can, that the editor is just as much aware (perhaps more so) of the shortcomings of his illustrators as the readers are, and that if he could secure the services of better ones, he would.

On reading this over, it seems that I have been slinging a barrage of brick-bats and only a few bouquets. This is not my intention at all. It is easy to point out the flaws when there are so few of them. Also, it is constructive and I have done so only by invitation.

Here's to the future of Future. May all its pessimistic authors be false prophets, and all its optimists vindicated!

To say that we are plesed with a long, detailed criticism such as this would be putting it mildly; we're delighted! We dot on constructive comment, no matter how many faults are found.

In regard to "Planet Passage" and "Wide-Open Ship," the writers in both cases assumed that, in some way, space-travel would be discovered to be a profitable enterprise in the near future—before the warring-nations period of history had passed. Assuming that, then such outfits as Amalgamated War Power and Consolidated Military Might aren't too improbable, nor would be the Wide-Open Ship. Personally, we are inclined to believe that, were it possible to convince anyone that space-travel was a profitable enterprise, we'd have seen the first moon-flight before Pearl Harbor. EDITOR.



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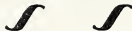




Illustration by Dorothy Les Tina

... DOES NOT IMPLY ...

(dedicated to Carol Grey)

★ **By Wilfred Owen Morley** ★

What was the connection between an unfinished manuscript and the eerie doom that came to three people who read it? Who was the author known as Carol Moore? A strange absorbing tale of something that came out of night and the web of dreams.

HARVEY was piling the rejects into a neat stack when I came out of His Majesty's private office. His Serene Highness, Abner G. Murgatroyd, King of the Comics; Lord of the flaming Westerns; Prince of the Romances, Loves, and Confessions; Chief of the G Men, Detectives, Spy Trails, Gangsters, and Sky Com-

mandos; Grand Master of the Mysteries and Astrologers; Defender of the one-cent minimum, and Emperor of the reprint editions beyond the seas, wanted to know why in hell my fantastic books weren't developing a lot of new writers.

I had explained with due reverence that even such were my intentions, but, alas, few were the pearls to be found in the slush pile, fewer still were the new names coming in via agents, and did not the holy standards of quality come first? At this point, I was weighed in the balance and, happy day, not found wanting.

"What's the story on these?" I asked Harvey without much enthusiasm.

He riffled through the pile. "Three of these are just the same old thing in the same old form. A guy spends a night in a strange house and after a few spooky incidents, wakes up to find that the place burned down, or was blown up, years and years and years ago.

"Then there are two straight mystery yarns, good enough in their own way, but not our type no matter how you look at them. And the rest—just stuff. There is one which I thought you might write a little note about."

"This one?" I asked picking up a particularly neat ms. bearing a city return address.

"Yeah. It's—well, it's very odd to say the least. The writing is quite effective and it's handled nicely so far as it goes. But it doesn't go anywhere. It would be swell as the beginning of a story, but there isn't any real story, as far as she goes."

"She?"

He indicated the delicate signature at the bottom of the brief note accompanying the story. "That's a

feminine hand, and besides the name 'Carol' is much more often feminine than masculine."

I glanced over the first page. "I'll take it home," I said, "and write out a criticism if it hits me at all. Carol Moore. Hmm, I'll bet she's small and very dark. Anything else, Harv?"

He shook his head.

"Then I'll be scrambling. By the way, Harv, you'd better take some sort of tonic or get out into the open more. You look sort of run down."

He nodded. "I know. Been feeling rather strange the last few days. Odd dreams and all that. Maybe I'd better take my vacation now instead of waiting for October. See you tomorrow."

I nodded and left the office with Carol Moore's ms. under my arm.

"THE RETURN of this ms.," I read aloud, "does not imply its lack of merit." Quite right. Harvey had not exaggerated when he'd praised the writing and handling of the matter now reposing in my lap. But, as he'd said, it wasn't a story. The descriptions were beautiful without being esoteric; there was no doubt that my readers would go for them. But still, I didn't have a story here. . . . just a fragment. I sat back in the overstuffed chair, my mind wondering along the lines suggested by the ms., loath to tell Carol Moore that her story wasn't right, wondering how best I could do so.

Dear Miss Moore, I wrote mentally, I cannot tell you how much I enjoyed your little tale because I fear you will not believe me when I say that it isn't any good for my magazine in its present form. You see, it really isn't a story the way you have it now. I do not mean by this that anything you have here needs to be

changed. On the contrary; it is perfect as it stands. But a story must have a plot and a beginning and a climax.

I think, I continued, if you had some character to begin with who could find the creature, or perhaps be found by the creature—that doesn't make too much difference—then incorporate what you have here, it would make a splendid opening. But you would have to go on from there. Because the hardened reader, were you to end at that point, would merely say "so what?"

"I understand," came a soft voice from the doorway. I looked up startled at the intruder, saw there a tallish, almost ethereal-looking woman, her mouth forming an indulgent smile. Her hair was the color of moonlight and pale were her features but her lips were very red.

"You don't have to apologize," she continued, pointing at the ms. in my lap. "I didn't really think it could be published the way it was, but I hoped that you would be interested enough to help me."

"I would be most happy to help you," I replied. "But tell me, how did you come here?"

"You sent for me," she replied.

"What?" I rose from the chair, but when I started floating gracefully toward her, I knew that this was but a dream and awoke with a start.

I DREAMED of Carol Moore again that night, and, strangely enough, it seemed to take up just where we left off when I had wakened in the chair. Gracefully I leaped out of the overstuffed confines of it and floated in a flattish arc toward her, lighting lightly beside her slender form.

"Forgive me for not rising sooner." I said, "but I am not always

polite, and moreover you startled me. What did you mean by what you just said?"

She looked at me with eyes that were partly puzzled and partly sympathetic and answered: "You addressed me in your thoughts, so how could I help but come?"

"Then you can hear thoughts?"

She smiled happily and nodded.

"But—how did you come so quickly?"

Again she looked puzzled. "There are no barriers," she murmured, "when you have sent for me."

After this point, matters began to get somewhat confused. I recall that she was warm and willowy and that she told me much about fantastic lore that I'd not heard previously. And I think that at last a high wind arose and we went leaping over the treetops; she sang a strange song to me and I became very sentimental. We nestled together in a cloud until at last morning awakened me.

I sent back the manuscript with a long letter of constructive criticism, suggestions for finishing the story, and a subtle hint that I'd like to meet Carol Moore.

HARVEY wasn't in the next day; he called around noon to explain that he'd felt too fatigued that morning to think about getting up. "Still having weird dreams?" I asked him.

There was a moment of silence, then a rather strained voice came back over the wire. "Weird isn't the word for them, Dave."

"Dreaming about Carol Moore?"

"Not any more—say, how did you know—?"

"Intuition," I told him. "Harv, do you recall the Moore dreams clearly?"

"Yeah."

"Can you describe them to me?"

He hesitated a moment. "I—I think so. I'll try to tell you what she looks like. You were pretty much right when you said you bet she's small and very dark. That's about it. Black Irish type. She's—well, petite. Very fine-chiseled features, sort of liquid voice, and eyes that almost burn into you, they're that intense. Sort of breathtaking.

"She seems to be both capable and helpless at the same time. As if she can take care of herself so long as I'm around, but lost without me." He laughed weakly. "That sounds funny, but it's just how the dreams go—the most realistic dreams I've ever had.

"Well, that's about the way it was. She was in some kind of trouble, and I was helping her. That particular part of the dream is vague. I can't remember just what it was I was doing for her. But she was awfully grateful, and then things began to happen and there we were in love.

"I don't think I was dreaming about Carol Moore more than three nights, but it was as if several months took place during those nights."

"And you'd wake up feeling all run down?" I interrupted.

"That's right. There doesn't seem to be any reason for it—now and then I get the feeling that something happened in those dreams I don't remember—that it would all be clear if I only could.

"I was thinking of seeing a psychiatrist and find out if there wasn't some way of making me remember....

"But I'm not dreaming of Carol any more, now. Remember the—creature—in her story? I'm dreaming of that now. It doesn't seem to be dangerous, but I'm afraid of

it. I wore myself out last night trying to get away from it, but no matter where I went, I'd always find it there."

"I see," I replied—only of course I didn't see at all. "Better take it easy today, Harv. And don't come in tomorrow unless you feel all right."

I hung up, trying to remember just what the creature in Carol's manuscript was like. I couldn't. It was mostly suggestive, the reader filling out the details himself once the spell of it was on him. The main thing in the story, so far as it had gone, was the impression of utter strangeness imparted, strangeness and a sort of dreamy quality which would not permit the reader to put it down until finished. The only difficulty was once you arrived at the last page, you felt cheated; you knew instinctively that the story should not end there, that it had only begun.

WHEN Harvey came in the next morning, I looked up suddenly, and the two of us stared at each other. You see, we both wanted to tell each other about the preceding night's dream first. But mine could wait, I thought.

"You first," I said to him.

He slumped in a chair. "I can't escape much longer," he began. "The creature—it's stalking me. It comes into every dream and follows me wherever I go, always watching, waiting."

"What is it like, Harv?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. When I wake up, with my heart almost stopping in the sudden terror of it, it's crystal clear. I know just what it is and what it looks like.

"But before I can get out of bed, I feel so drowsy that I go back to sleep again, a heavy sleep without

dreams. And when I finally awaken, I can't remember what it's like. I only remember that once I knew."

"Has it—touched you?"

"Not yet. It comes closer as the dreams go by. It comes out of familiar objects, emerges from familiar scenes. I am dreaming of a beautiful shore, as I often have in the past, and it is there on the sands waiting for me. I dream of a city street, and it is following along behind me as I go about whatever business I do. I dream of flight, in an airplane, and it is crouching in the cockpit behind me; I crash the plane in a mad attempt to destroy it, even if I, too, must die, but we land softly as in eiderdown, and the creature is there, looking at me, waiting..."

He buried his face in his hands. "If I could only remember *what* it is!"

"There's something horrible about this, Harvey," I said. "Yesterday I went up to Northern Avenue, to the address on the ms. No Carol Moore lives there. But the Superintendent recognized the name, said that Carol Moore had paid him to mail the story from that address, and promised to return to pick it up if it came back."

"Did he know anything about—Miss Moore?"

"That's stranger still, Harv. *The Superintendent couldn't remember whether Carol Moore was a man or a woman!* He couldn't remember a thing about her, except the arrangement in regard to the ms. He is positive that no Carol Moore has lived there during the past few years."

"But Carol's a girl!" cried Harvey. "I know she is—she must be. She's small and dark like an Irish fairy queen and her voice is like the tinkle of crystal bells." His voice sort of broke. "And—I love her, Dave."

I decided not to tell him of my dreams the night before. It was clear that he would not understand. Besides, I felt tired....

Carol Moore... belle dame sans merci... last night she loved me, but when the dawn came, she parted from me laughingly and said we would never meet again. I begged her to leave me something for remembrance, why I do not know. Then she smiled wanly, coldly like the moon.

"You need not ask," she whispered. "You will never forget me."

And she walked out of my dreams, her tiny heels clicking on the marble floors of the palace where we had spent the long evening.

I STILL have the letter Harvey sent me the morning he was last seen. I had hoped to find him at the office, because the night before, I had come to realize what Carol Moore meant when she said I would not forget her. For the—creature came to stalk me in my dreams, and I knew the same inchoate terror that Harvey had met a few days before.

"The thing caught me last night," began the note in Harvey's hesitant script, "and the most damnable part is that I still do not know what has happened. There was no pain for all the horror of it. I struggled madly, trying to escape, but couldn't get away."

"You won't see me again, Dave, because I'm going away. I think I'll change my name—I'm not the same person any more, and I couldn't endure going on with the old life after what has happened. This won't mean very much to you, Dave; let us hope it never will. Good-bye, Harvey."

I tossed the letter into my private drawer and turned to regard Julia Hale, our—my—secretary.

I coughed slightly, "Miss Hale, did you return the Carol Moore manuscript?"

"Yes, sir. It—it came back this morning. He finished it."

"He, Miss Hale?"

"Why of course. I know that 'Carol' is usually spelled with two 'r's and two 'l's when a man uses it, but I'm sure—"

"Did you read the manuscript?"

She nodded. "I know it wasn't necessary, but after my eye caught the first paragraph I couldn't lay it down. It was too bad he didn't finish it the first time—I've been waiting for it to come back."

It seemed to me that the room temperature dropped about twenty degrees.

"Miss Hale," I said a bit hoarsely, "please forgive a personal question, but have you had only strange dreams lately?"

She smiled a bit shyly. "Not—strange, sir. Just—well, that's why I'm sure it's *Mr. Carol Moore*."

I TOOK the completed story home with me that night and read it through. It was fully three times as long as the original fragment, and there was an exquisite love-story worked into the eeriness of it. But I had no eye for its weird beauty, for the phrases that the young man whispered to the girl were the love words I had murmured into the delicate ear of a woman, tall and willowy with hair like the moonlight, and mingled with these were endearments which I knew Harvey had said to her, because Harvey used the same line for all his girls. I'd read his love-letters in carbons when we lived together.

But the story was still not quite complete; the girl in it was little

more than a puppet, sadly under-developed in comparison to the hero.

I thought of Julia Hale that night when I awoke in a frenzy of terror at the nearness of the creature which was stalking me in slumber.

MISS HALE'S eyes sparkled when I came in. "Did you read it?" she asked breathlessly. "Is it all right?"

I sank into the chair, trying desperately to think. Julia's voice became concerned. "Aren't you well, Mr. Vane?"

I nodded, tried to smile at her. "Just a bit tired. Didn't sleep well last night. . . . In regard to Carol Moore's story, I'm not quite sure. You read it, didn't you? In this farm, I mean?"

"Yes."

"Well, didn't it strike you that the girl was rather weak—nowhere near as developed as the man?"

She tapped the desk with her pencil. "She wasn't as fully developed—but isn't that the way she was supposed to be? When he met her she was still very naive, but. . . ."

"Exactly, Miss Hale. Too much so. I'm afraid that Carol Moore has not had much experience with women."

"However," I continued, "I want you to write Carol Moore a letter today, inviting her—him, as you prefer—to come in and see me. I'm sure that a personal interview will solve the matter."

Miss Hale smiled. "Wait until he comes in; you'll feel silly for having thought him a woman."

"Or you will, when you see *her*."

But joking wasn't much relief. I was pretty sure, of course, that Carol Moore would not show up. Perhaps she would call for the latter, but she would never come to the office.

I sat there, eyes glued to a manuscript, my mind combing the last night's dreams for a clue. It must be there, the answer to the riddle. What had happened? My dreams had been spent in flight...and, utter flight across the world, around the universe, through the veils of time. Flight from the creature described in Carol Moore's story. But the descriptions had been vague, mostly a telling of the thoughts that ran through the man's mind as he tried to classify the thing, and finally decided that he could not.

In fact, not a single definite quality of the creature had been described. The effect upon the reader was that of formless, lurking fear, imbued with all the horrific undertones allusions to masterpieces of fantastic literature could supply. Yet, as soon as Harvey and I had come upon the creature in our dreams, we knew precisely what it was, only to forget when we awoke.

And something had happened to Harvey....

THE next morning I knew the manuscript must never be published, never presented to a helpless world. Whatever mysteries still lie unsolved behind it, this much is clear: the Carol Moore story is a monstrous trap, one from which the reader cannot escape.

That night, the creature caught me at last, caught and enveloped me. And there was something of the moon-haired woman about it, and something of a small, dark-haired girl, and something of the kind of man who would make Julia Hale's heart flicker. There was no pain, only an envelopment, and a strange caressing, even as it—fed.

When I awoke, I suspected what had happened, suspected even be-

fore I looked into the mirror. But I had to be sure. I went to a doctor in another part of town, had him give me a complete examination, complaining of a general tired and run-down feeling.

He smiled at me rather gently and said: "There is no need to worry, Mr. Vane; nothing is wrong with you. But you must remember that what is happening to you is something that happens to everyone.

"You have taken good care of your body, but now you must realize that you are no longer a *young* man, Mr. Vane."

I hadn't told him that I'd just passed my twenty-fifth birthday and had been pronounced in the pink of condition two weeks before.

I WAS sensitive about my white hair at first, but now that I've changed my name and am living in another part of the city, I find it rather becoming. It is amusing to pass old-time, casual acquaintances and have them stare after me puzzledly—I'm lucky, so far; I haven't met any of the old-time close friends. There's only Harvey now; I'm sure I can find him someday.

No, not only Harvey. Yesterday a woman called on me and I recognized Julia Hale after a moment or so. We three must stay together.

Carol Moore's manuscript is locked in the bottom of a trunk. I had a boy pick it up for me shortly after I resigned. The thing cannot be destroyed—at least, not by any means of which I know.

So, it lies at the bottom of my trunk in an envelope. And I notice that someone had tucked one of the standard printed forms under the paper clip.

"The return of this manuscript does not imply lack of merit...."

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FULL CIRCLE



★ **By Hugh Raymond** ★

Illustration by damon knight

Action begets reaction — When at last the oppressed rise against the Hitlers, and those behind the bloody swastika-thrones, they won't be exactly gentle! A day came when the aristocrats learned the truth of this axiom.

AS THE FINAL notes of the world anthem played crashingly to a still appreciative audience of one hundred thousand citizens gathered in the Dynamo Stadium, the World President rose to his feet, strode unceremoniously to the rostrum and, throwing a swift glance at the group of prisoners standing heavily shackled beside the tall steel needle of Barton's space ship, began ruffling some official papers.

He blew his nose vigorously, adjusted his weather cape with an anxious look at the gathering clouds and nonchalantly turned

full power into the amplifiers. The hundred thousand people gathered in the stadium leaned back in their seats, smiling. This was the piece de resistance of the occasion, the cream topping of the show. All that had gone before they'd heard a hundred times. Two hundred thousand ears in the Dynamo Stadium were sharply peeled and, over the face of the planet, two and a half billion honest and hard-working citizens regarded the viewing plates of their radio receivers with new attention.

Rapidly the bluff, grey-haired President of the World Republic read the text of the official document on the inclined board of the lectern before him. As he spoke he seemed to be addressing no one in particular, directing his bland remarks to the heavens in the manner of a Bishop delivering a particularly pointless sermon. Then, finished, he blew his nose again, stowed his handkerchief into a nearby waste disposal vent and turned to the prisoners. A sudden hum of excitement swelled over the stadium.

"Which means, *sinkers*, that the jig is up." He rubbed his gnarled and toil-worn hands together and smiled a very smug and unctuous smile. "It took us a long time but we did it. The smaller rats we've already disposed of, mainly by the firing squad. You don't blame us, I hope. There were some hundred million or so, but they were garbage and they had to go. Civilization demanded it! What did you expect us to do with them, you buzzards? Feed 'em ice cream and tell 'em they were naughty boys, but we'd forgiven 'em? No!" The old man, trembling with rage, smacked his hand down on the lectern board. "You forced us into war against each other until the planet ran red with our blood, you tortured us until the skies rang with our agonies. You separated child from mother and wife from husband. The human deencies you trampled on and replaced with a law of your own out of the Dark Ages. *Why?* Was it necessary to drown the planet in ashes so that Mr. Johnson could be taxed for a large Navy instead of Herr Johansohn? You didn't like peace. You wanted war, war WAR! Always killing and murder. None of you were happy unless our bones stuck out of our skins.

"You're in bad odor," he continued, more evenly, "and we have our own way of disposing of smelly garbage." He paused again and this time the prisoners looked at

him curiously. Leaning heavily on the lectern, the World President gestured toward the huge steel ship of space.

"Your exit, ladies and gentlemen," all eyes turned on the vessel, "Barton's Space Ship. Ever hear of Charles Barton, Mrs. Skeffington?" he hurled the question at the corpulent figure of an old dowager chained to her still fatter husband, Staunton Skeffington, late of International Steel. "No, I suppose you didn't, but your husband has, I'll be bound. He was an inventor, a valuable man. He invented that space ship. See it? Barton called it the *Finger of God*. He was a good man and he believed everything you old liars told him and do you know what your system did to this loyal and humble servant who sought only to enrich your coffers and maybe bring a little more comfort into our lives? He died at the Battle of Mukden." The President's voice again took on an angry note. "Who killed him? You or a Japanese bullet?" The prisoners shrank suddenly from the awful light in the old man's eyes.

"**W**ELL, the Supreme Council has given you dogs twenty-four hours to get out of the country. Twenty-four hours to get out of the world! We don't want you and for once in your rotten lives you're going to be useful. There are twenty of you—the last monarchs of a dead world—and the ship is designed to hold ten with safety. It's not very new, Mr. Skeffington, and I don't know whether you'll particularly approve of the work your own company did on it. Maybe parts of it are rusty. Maybe. Some of 'em might be missing. The model is old, not as good as the ones we're building for ourselves now. It was built by sickly workers in your own damned factories, so you should have no complaint about it. In any case, the first space flight in history is about to be attempted. And you are going to be the crew. The funny thing about it is—and you masters of grim humor will appreciate this—that we don't give a damn where you go or what happens to you. As far as we are concerned, that ship is just a giant piece of fireworks to celebrate the third anniversary of the founding of the World Republic. We are going to kill a few birds with one stone. Our scientists will keenly observe the antics of this splendid machine

as it ascends into space carrying you with it!"

The World President made a gesture with his hands. Instantly, armed guards on the platform below began shoving the prisoners toward the ladder which led through the circular entrance porte into the space ship. As each of them reached the base of the ladder his or her bonds were removed and disposed of. Then they were gestured up the ladder and into the ship, a flag bearing the swastika shoved unceremoniously after them. Finally the last of them disappeared from view and the door clanged shut. A deep, uneasy silence fell over the vast inclosed space.

The presidium quickly evacuated the rostrum and returned to a row of seats higher up in the stadium. The President took his place at a rigged-up control board and looked at it sharply. Presently, he looked up, gave the ship, the stadium and the sky a succession of glances and, shutting his eyes, pressed the button which closed the circuit setting off the charges inside the engine room of Barton's rocket.

The ground rocked, heaved up and trembled. A vast, roaring noise leaped into the air. For an instant a faint tongue of flame licked the base of the machine, then the tremendously heavy projectile, fully the length of an old-time destroyer and almost as thick in diameter, rose at right angles to the ground and got under way.

Five minutes later, a special labor squad was busy repairing the damage done to the turf. Already tractors were lumbering into position ready to flatten down the large quantities of soil poured into the vast hole by monitor machines. The field must be ready in time for the great soccer game, Iceland versus Madagascar. A half hour later, the damage had been repaired and the Dynamo Stadium was empty of citizens who were returning to clean, healthy and happy homes to walk with dignity in a world at peace at last, dedicated to the four freedoms, and the new ideals of the early 20th century.

A SKINNY HAND reached hesitantly for the gas lever aboard the *Finger of God*. It flopped like a snake along the sloping metal board studded with innumerable switches and levers, fumbled once or twice and then closed clammily on the red plastic handle. The body on the floor sank down, pulling the lever along with it by

sheer weight. Abruptly the terrible roaring in the rear of the *Finger of God*, which had persisted for thirty hours during which time the twenty occupants of the ship had been unconscious, died away. The awful acceleration lessened immediately. Gravity pressure went from one extreme to the other. And the bodies of the former prisoners, unprotected by space nets, began to float and circle the great control room.

Spyrus, chief of what had once been General Communications, relaxed his death-like grip of the gas handle. He opened his bleary eyes and sought the windows, which had never been covered with protective steel plates. Through the thick hazy glass, the blinding sun poured in a flood of brilliant white. Shifting his gaze to the other side of the room, he saw only darkness and the remote steely pinpoint light of stars. Then, painfully, carefully avoiding the flood of objects whirling about the air in the room, he righted himself, got to his feet and clamped a hand about the solid metal bar which held up the control board, the other piece of material in the room held down by bolts.

A body floated past. Its fingers twitched and a moan of pain broke from the fat, puffy lips.

"Mrs. Skeffington!"

Spyrus' voice cracked in horror. The old dowager, well-nigh sacred in her previous haunts, had sustained severe injuries. Her left leg had been badly crushed by the force of the ascent and part of her skull was oozing blood. Something seemed wrong with the way her lips worked. Spyrus guessed her speech centers were gone.

He reached out, grasped the material of her dress and ripping a section away, tied it to the central bracing bar. Then he wiped some of the blood away from her dirty face. A minute later a hand touched him on the shoulder. Turning his head slowly and not stopping his staunching of the wound, he beheld the cold, hard eyes of young Peter Curtis, heir to the Curtis metal millions.

"Leave her alone," said Curtis in a strained voice. He pushed his fingers through his bushy hair waving like grass in a breeze and whimpered slightly. "She's about done for. Let's get to the others."

Spyrus hesitated dumbly for an instant, then nodded. A new universe had been created for them. His crafty brain had immediately discerned the fact that they were

going to have to learn to live again—for as long as they had to live which probably wouldn't be long.

Slowly the two men awakened the rest of the crew and tabulated injuries. Mrs. Skeffington, they knew, was dying. Her husband was dead, his whole body crushed into a pulp from the force of the ascent. Curtis had suffered a fractured right humerus which somehow hung together. Spyrus, though badly shaken up, was unharmed. The other dead numbered three, Adele Taylor, daughter of the great British munitions magnate; Samuel Marx, influential newspaper publisher, and old Margaret Moresby, owner of immense sections of Australia and holder of innumerable patents bought up and suppressed before and during the last war. None of the others were badly injured, though both John Barstow and his wife had had their lungs partially torn and breathed with horrible gasping noises.

Spyrus stopped binding up Curtis's arm with some fragments of his own shirt as Diana Vorbilt, daughter of Pierre Vorbilt, oil tycoon and once undisputed ruler of the economic lives of four million Americans, bent over and rapped him on the arm. She steadied herself with an effort, clutching the pathetic fragments of her dress together as best she might.

"What do we do now?" she asked in a frightened voice.

"Clean this up—clean this all up—and then find out where the hell we're going." He inclined his head toward the others gathered in little knots on the floor, walls and ceilings. "Ask them. I'm not boss of the ship." He turned again to his task. Curtis put out a hand.

"Spyrus, you're the oldest and wisest. Take charge. I'll help. They won't oppose you. They're as frightened as sheep in a bull pen. Anyway, we've got to have control now to prevent panic." He lifted his eyes and regarded the trim, though battered, figure of the young debutante. "Look at her eyes. She'd like to run screaming, but she can't run. Wouldn't you, Diana?" he asked viciously. "No," he continued, "I don't think we'll have trouble if a firm hand takes over now."

SPYRUS looked at him curiously for an instant, then straightened up, smoothed out his torn business suit and nodded.

"If you think best, Peter," he agreed,

pleasantly. Turning slowly, he shouted to the others floating in the rapidly fouling air. "Clean up this mess, *understand?*" Take the bodies down to the kitchen and put them in the refrigerator. Must be one aboard. If it isn't going, start it. Here, you, Barstow, quit that wheezing and start gathering up some of the junk floating around. Tie it down, stick it in corners, *do something with it.* Helen, you help him. You're his wife and you've been a parasite long enough. Now get to work, fellow stinkers!" His voice stopped on a raspy high note. Then, pushing Diana aside roughly he propelled himself to one of the round window ports and looked out. No recognizable parts of the sky presented themselves. The earth was either invisible or else was too far away to be seen. He cast his glance back toward the rear of the rocket and grunted.

"They're watching us like guinea pigs in a wire cage. All right, let 'em watch." He shifted his gaze ahead and his skinny hands tightened as the terrible glare of the sun almost blinded him. Shielding his eyes he crouched down by the porthole and peered out cautiously. Yes, the sun was considerably larger than it had ever appeared to him before. Obviously the vessel was approaching the great luminary, headed toward one of the two inner planets. He cudged his brains, seeking their names. Finally he had to call on Curtis, busy helping Diana trying possible combinations of studs, seeking the controls of the air purifier.

Curtis coughed and clutched a hand hold by the window.

"Venus and Mercury," he said, dredging the knowledge from his early high school days. "One's as large as the earth. I forget which. The other is smaller, very small and very close to the sun." He peered into space, shielding his eyes carefully with his bandaged arm. "No use trying to figure out where we are without instruments. Ants couldn't get from San Francisco to Boston. We're lost."

"Forever?" Spyrus' voice was curiously ironic and devoid of fear.

"Until the air gives out or this damned heat and vomit-smell suffocate us." He sniffed the air. "Get a move on!" he called to the frantically busy crew. Barstow came floating up.

"What'll we do with Mrs. Skeffington?" he gasped, indicating the body floating near

the ceiling of the control room. "We can't put her in the refrigerator. She's not dead."

Spyrus grinned satirically.

"The Patriarch is called upon to solve a tribal problem," he said and grunted. "All right, she's as good as dead. Got a knife, anybody?" Diana searched among the wreckage of her clothes for a moment, then withdrew her hand and passed him a metal stay, pointed on one end.

Fascinated with horror, they watched the "patriarch" approach the floating mass of blubber and muscle. Presently the old man came away. He left the stay behind.

"Put her on ice," he ordered curtly, "next to whatever is left of her husband. She'd like it that way."

The others, shuddering, drew away.

A FEW HOURS later, a semblance of order had been established in the *Finger of God*. Leading a searching party, Curtis, as chief lieutenant to Spyrus, had familiarized himself with the plan of the ship. There was nothing really complicated about it. Half of the vessel was taken up with the motor and fuel chambers. Now silent, the engines had consumed about half of the available fuel. Curtis made a note of this, reading it from a simple metal tab on the tanks. The upper half of the ship consisted of three parts, the control chamber, occupying the center, on top of which was piled the kitchen and lavatories. Sleeping for ten occupied the curving needle prow. Curtis hastened to report.

The air was still foul as he oozed his way into the control room. Spyrus and Barstow were huddled over the board, picking out and pressing various studs, switches and levers. The gas lever was left strictly alone. The patriarch had not an idea as to how the ship might be steered but he guessed the secret lay in the gas level which could be swung in any direction like a universal joint and apparently fired rocket tubes set in the direction of its tilt at any particular time. Curtis later ascertained this.

Some hours later, the secret of the air conditioning was solved, though the machinery promptly broke down and had to be kept in constant repair. Spyrus, reading the ship's specifications written on a steel plate attached to the floating control board, noted with dismay that more than a third of the oxygen had been lost through their failure to operate the air conditioning in time. He put Helen Barstow in charge of

the buttons controlling the air mixtures with Diana Vorbilt as relief.

The Barstow woman died a few minutes after. Gasping for breath, lungs almost smashed by air pressure, her heart, racing under the absence of gravity, burst under the strain. Her husband carried her up to the refrigerator, working in name only, and sealed the body away. Later they did not dare open the hermetically sealed doors after an experimental reopening to deposit the body of her husband who followed her in death about a day later.

"Seven are dead," remarked Curtis bitterly. "Thirteen left. Of those, almost all are more or less incapacitated." He mused for an instant, watching Spyrus hunched over the control board toward the close of the fifth day by the chronometers. "Why go on? Why not open the airlock?"

"I like life," answered Spyrus dryly. "Even this sort." He made an adjustment of the gas lever and the ship suddenly jumped. "Death is a strange thing, as undoubtedly millions of philosophers have said during the history of our race." He paused again and gestured to Diana for a screwdriver she held in her hand. "I am not yet ready to die. As a matter of fact, I think I am afraid to die."

The debutante shivered. Her color, a beet red from her rapidly racing heart, abruptly paled. "Please don't talk about death," she reached pathetically for Curtis' uninjured hand, "I don't like death either."

Curtis sneered. He eyed her battered beauty coldly, appraising her lines and mentally reviewing what he was going to do when the situation became absolutely hopeless and death was inescapable. Noticing his peculiar glance, she winced. He burst out laughing.

"Did you expect heroics?" he jeered. "No, my dear, the end will be painful, but it will be the end. You were born to amuse and you will amuse my final moments. Now that's honesty for you. I'm a brave man, I am. I'll go out in a blaze of glory."

The girl whimpered. Alone, she put her hands to her face and started to cry.

SPYRUS shoved her away and continued working at the board. The impetus of the push brought her close to one of the windows. She laid her hand against the glass and quickly took it away. The trans-

parent crystal was sizzling hot. Breathing heavily in the stinking air, hot and thick as soup, she leaned her head against the relatively cool metal of the ship's skin and looked out into the depths.

The gulf was unchanged. Amid the welter of stars, she wondered which was the Earth. Spyrus had told her her native planet was too small to look like anything more than a point of light. Her gaze shifted slowly toward the rapidly enlarging orb of the sun. Its corona leaped into the blackness in twining ropes of incandescent gas. Abruptly she gasped.

"Down there!" she cried, pointing in the direction of the ship's ceiling and slightly off to one side. "A small disk against the sun!"

The others crowded in, attracted by her cry. Spyrus and Curtis forcing their way toward her, got entangled in a forest of female hair and cursing, dropped down the ship's wall to the next row of ports.

"It's a planet!" shouted the patriarch, and leaned aside for Curtis to see. The other, jamming close against the glass, made out a tiny disk about a twentieth the size of the moon as seen from the earth, outlined darkly against the solar furnace.

"A planet, all right," grunted Curtis. "But which one, Venus or Mercury?"

Spyrus pushed away from the port and regarded the other's florid face.

"Who cares?" he shouted. "It's land, of some sort, solid, round like the earth. We'll land on it."

Curtis laughed. His lips trembled.

"Suppose there is no air, suppose there is no air, suppose there isn't enough fuel in the tanks? You can't chase a rapidly moving astral body around its orbit."

"Who says I can't, you damned fool?" shouted the old man. "And if there isn't air on that globe, at least we'll die with our feet on something solid, not cooped up in this stink-hole. Smell that air?" He jeered and waved an arm, indicating the ship's atmosphere, reeking with the odor of thirteen unwashed bodies. "I'll take a whiff of vacuum in preference, *but on my feet*, not floating around like a duck in a pond with its legs cut off."

He braced his feet against the wall and shot himself toward the control board. Curtis watched him listlessly as he hunched himself over the gas lever for a moment, then was violently sick with the rest of the crew as the old man cunningly manipulated

the lever, cautiously applying power to the rockets in the rear of the ship.

The next two days as measured jerkily by the ship chronometers were sweat-soaked abysses of horror for the occupants of the *Finger of God*. Under the guidance of the old man's cunning fingers, the ship was flung this way and that as he attempted to manipulate its nose in the direction of the planet's disk. Then, after more hours of sickening wrenches, they noticed that the size of the dark circle was visibly increasing. Smiling toothlessly, Spyrus applied full power to the motors. Crushed helplessly against the floor of the control room, the thirteen humans watched with horror-stricken eyes the slow approach of the unknown globe. Hunger-racked, prevented by the terrible pressure from obtaining food or water from the galley, they lay like sacks of meal. The disk of the planet at first but barely perceptible, grew in size until it covered one whole side of the vessel. Through the windows of the other streamed the pitiless glare of the sun. The temperature rose alarmingly. Steam began filling the room as the sweat from their bodies volatilized and condensed on the walls, to again be vaporized and recondensed.

SPYRUS, clinging in an excess of terrible strength to the floating bar of the control board, watched the rapid approach with eyes hawklike and feverishly glowing with a clearly insane light. As the darkness increased and the *Finger of God* passed completely into the planet's shadow, he tremblingly grasped the gas lever and throwing the ship into a last long dive, hurled it into a wide arc with the last ounce of his remaining strength. End first now, its rockets roaring out in a vast braking drive, the ship trembled like a living thing and swooped madly but with constantly decreasing speed toward the surface of that awful globe. Simultaneously, everyone aboard lost consciousness.

Spyrus opened his eyes. Although only a few minutes had passed since he went under, the interval of unconsciousness had seemed like hours. He arched his long, crane-like neck. A faint light filtered in through the windows above. Above? He shuddered as he realized that the word had occurred to him because now there was a definitely perceptible pull at right angles to the ship's course. He staggered weakly to

his feet, rolled down the curving walls, striking recumbent bodies at every surge of the ship and finished belly down, his eyes flat against one of the ports.

A curious twilighted landscape met his gaze. Gigantic mountains thrust their peaks into the sky, seeking with cold fingers for the ship as it hurtled past. He tried to raise his head to peer through the ports above him, but the gravity pulling on his weakened neck muscles refused him motion. Flattened helplessly, this time by the natural pull of an unknown world, he was forced to remain a mute witness to the speedy passage of the *Finger of God* over the crushed, broken and jagged wastes below.

It was then he saw the final horror, and succumbed at last to a gibbering insanity as a gigantic hand, easily twice the size of the ship itself, reached up from the desolate wastes and closing over the vessel, brought it to a jarring stop. In his last moment of life he saw the huge paw twirl the *Finger of God* as a man might leisurely handle a cigar and set it to rest on the rime-covered top of a soaring peak.

THE GIANT humanoid figure who had stopped and caught the vessel gazed at it curiously as it lay cold and quiescent atop the five-thousand-foot peak rising stark and bare in the Twilight Zone of Mercury. Godlike and dispassionately, his powerful mind probed into the depths of the ship and read the feeble brains of its occupants. In the crude pulsations of their brains he read the story of their crimes on the planet Earth, their exile and felt with overwhelming sensitivity their terror as the *Finger of God* hurtled ever faster away from their native world and fell to its doom on the sunwar planet. Abruptly his gaze shifted from the tiny space ship to the figure of his mate sleeping in the shadow of their own space vessel, a gigantic construction thousands upon thousands of feet long, a bulk utterly incomprehensible in size to any mind inferior to his own. Involuntarily his eyes softened. It was a hot and desolate world to which they had been banished from Jupiter, their birthplace, for the crime of rebellion against the status quo of cruel and predatory masters preying upon their helpless subjects. A scientist, loftily in his visions, he had attempted to bring light to his benighted

brothers. And for his pains, their overlords had exiled him and his mate.

It was Curtis who made the discovery of the sleeping giants. With a shout of horror he flung himself back from the window from which he had peered down the mountain to discern the huge head some thousands of feet away, resting on some crushed rock at its base. It took them many minutes to overcome the queasy feeling at the pit of the stomach which overtook them when they gazed at the recumbent mate and its immense body lost in infinite distance. Finally, Curtis ordered them into the space suits stored in the engine room lockers. Two of them, badly injured, had to be left behind as there were only suits for ten. Then, armed with submachine guns they found in a small arsenal beneath the galley, they painfully opened the airlock and stepped out on the surface of Mercury.

The gravity was slight but still strong enough to weary them. Curtis, Diana Vorbilt and Stevens made a visual inspection of the giant as he lay asleep. They discerned no signs of movement in the immense bulk and turned to the others.

Then the ground shook as the giant moved, sat up and finally rose to his full towering height. He leaned over, touched a clump of the peculiarly thick vegetation surrounding the *Finger of God* and idly picked the vessel up.

The humans went mad. Caught in a miniature cyclone as the gigantic hand rushed past, agitating the thin atmosphere of Mercury, they were flung this way and that. With infinite care, the great bulk picked them up and placed them in his palm beside the ship.

Curtis, teeth chattering and lips drooling, raised his weapon and fired point blank at the huge head nodding a few hundred feet above his own. The sound of the chattering machine gun precipitated the others into complete panic and, caught in the grip of a stark fear unknown to any human, they went completely wild. A stream of steel-jacketed bullets sprayed up at the calm humanoid face and down at the still body of the sleeping female.

The giant brushed away the speeding projectiles. Then a look of sudden rage crumpled the godlike features and with an impatient gesture he mashed ship and humans together in one indistinguishable pulp.

"Justice!" he cried in his own tongue and hurled the mass into the sun.



There's somethin' the matter with me, Spike. A fellow oughtn't be able to do a thing like this. . .

illustration by damon knight



PATRIOTISM PLUS



Georgie Peters could create things just by concentrating on them — which was nice — only he couldn't get them right. That man he dreamed up was a pretty weird-looking duck. But Appleton of the War Department had an idea . . .

IN ACCOUNT of what happened to Georgie Peters and me, I'm supposed to be a hero now. The U. S. Army, or the War Department or something, is going to decorate me with a lot of medals, or a citation, or whatever you call it. That's all right with me if they insist.



By Ray Cummings



But maybe it's my conscience that makes me write this. They may read it, but they won't believe it, of course. I wouldn't blame them, but, honestly folks, here's the real dope on what happened.

It began a hot afternoon last summer when I ran into Georgie Peters on Broadway. I hadn't seen him in several months. I'm a fight manager—Spike Hennessey. That is, I used to be; what with the war taking all my likely boys, my business was more theory than anything else. George Peters wasn't in my racket at all. He was a thin, delicate little fellow, with pale blond hair and pale blue eyes—one of those mouse-like, meek chaps who you never would notice at all, but after you got to know him he was mighty likable. I understand he worked in a department store, book-keeper or something. But, queerly enough, Georgie was a rabid fight fan, which is how I happened to meet him in the first place.

"Hello Spike," he greeted me, that afternoon on Broadway. "How are you, Spike? I'm glad to see you." He urged me toward a drug store. "Let's have a malted."

I had a glass of water and sat with him. He looked sick; paler even than usual, and sort of worried. Maybe even frightened.

"There's something the matter with me, Spike," he said when I mentioned it. "I was thinking I ought to see a doctor, but I'm afraid to. I'd like to—to tell you about it, Spike. It's—awful—it's horrible."

He couldn't tell me there at the soda fountain, so I took him to my little office—a back room in an office building off Times Square.

"Now—what is it?" I said. "Don't be frightened, Georgie."

He sat slumped at my desk, with his pale blue eyes—they were bloodshot—staring before him. He smiled sort of weakly. "All right, here goes, Spike. You watch out! You'll be shocked."

I'm not going to go into my own emotions; you'll just have to imagine them. I can only tell you exactly what happened. Georgie sat perfectly still, staring with that far-away look and with his thin hands clasped between his knees.

"I'm thinking of a pack of cigarettes," he murmured. "Thinking hard—a pack of Luckies—would be—all right."

Maybe half a minute went by. I saw Georgie give a sort of twitch, like a little convulsive shudder or something; and all the tenseness oozed out of him and he went

limp in the chair. The thing happened just when he twitched. My desk in front of him was empty; and then suddenly it wasn't empty—a pack of cigarettes was lying there! No hocus-pocus from Georgie. His hands between his knees hadn't come up. The pack of cigarettes didn't materialize slowly. Nothing like that. One second it wasn't there, and the next second it was.

What I said I don't remember. Georgie said, "There—see what I mean, Spike? There's something the matter with me. A fellow oughtn't be able to do a thing like that. He oughtn't, ought he?"

I guess it was a minute or two before I was able to say anything coherent. "You mean," I demanded finally. "You—you just created that pack of cigarettes by thinking about it?"

"Yes," he agreed. "Anything I think about hard enough, I guess. I know I can do a handkerchief, and a penknife. Or maybe anything else—shall I—"

"Wait! Take it easy," I said hastily. "Georgie, w-when did this—this thing start. You haven't always—"

"Oh my heavens no. I first noticed it—just the other night, Spike. Night before last I guess it was. I was just sitting thinking, and there was a penknife in front of me." His hand was shaking as he waved it at me with a gesture. "Something's wrong with me, see what I mean? A fellow hadn't ought to be able—"

"You haven't told anybody about this, Georgie?"

"No, oh my goodness, no. I was thinking I should see a doctor, but he—Spike, will they put me away? Send me to an insane asylum or something?"

I COULDN'T answer that. But he looked so frightened I waved it away. "You're not sick or anything, are you, Georgie?"

"No, I guess not. But I'm pretty scared. A fellow oughtn't be able to—"

"You didn't bump your head? Have any accident?"

"No. I didn't."

Now I'm certainly no scientist. Georgie wasn't either. The thing was much too deep for us. But there was the pack of cigarettes—you couldn't explain them, but they were there. No argument on that.

"Take a look at them," Georgie said. "This thing is even queerer than you think. Open them up."

It gave me a shivery feeling even to

touch that pack of cigarettes. But when I picked it up, it certainly felt solid—just like any other pack of cigarettes.

"Open it up," Georgie urged.

There were twenty cigarettes inside. Everything looked ship-shape. But I could sort of sense now that this package and these cigarettes weren't quite authentic.

"Light one," Georgie said.

That made me feel queer too. I had the feeling that the thing might explode or most anything. It didn't explode, but it didn't exactly light either. It just charred and smelled like decayed punk.

"See what I mean?" Georgie said. "They look like cigarettes, but they're not."

I mashed the thing into an ashtray. I was about to toss the rest of them into the waste basket when an idea occurred to me. "Georgie, can you make things disappear too?"

"I thought of that," he said. "Not—what I didn't think up, I guess not."

"But these cigarettes, for instance?"

"Yes, I guess so. At least, I did with the penknife. But it's harder than creating. It—it makes my head ache awfully." His terror came back. "Oh Spike, I don't like this. I don't like it at all. What am I going to do?"

That was when I thought of Red Johnson. He used to work for me—a tenth-rate fighter, but he was a good sparring partner and handler for my other fighters who were a little better than tenth-rate. I thought of him now because Red wasn't cut out to be a fighter at all. He was nuts on science, psychology and all that sort of thing.

Well, I located Red by phone in a Bar and Grill around the corner from my office, and he came right up. And Georgie gave a demonstration, producing a little bottle of chocolate malted milk tablets. Red was startled and amazed—why wouldn't he be? But he was always a practical fellow, and when he got his breath, he beamed on us.

"Why, that's marvelous, Georgie," he exclaimed. "There's a lot of money in it, a fortune for all of us."

"But how's it work?" I demanded.

"Tell me what's the matter with me," Georgie pleaded. "I don't want to get rich."

"It's some sort of extra-normal ability," Red declared. "Like an extra-perception sense. Like telepathy, for instance. How the devil should I know how it works?" he added. "But a hundred years from now—take my word for it—things like this will

be explainable enough. What difference does it make? It doesn't hurt him to do it. He's not sick. Nothing wrong with him—he's just got a marvelous gift that can make all three of us rich in a hurry."

"**H**OW?" I demanded. "By thinking up bottles of malted milk tablets and selling them? What we didn't tell you, Red—those only look like malted milk tablets. If you'll just taste one—or would they be okay, Georgie?"

"No," Georgie said. "I guess not. The cigarettes weren't. Nor the handkerchief and penknife. Listen, Red, all I want to know is how to get rid of—of this gift—"

"Well, then, why can't he think up money," Red suggested. "Twenty-dollar bills—hundred-dollar bills. You don't have to eat money. If it looks all right—"

"I won't do it," Georgie said. "I'm not a crook. That would be counterfeit money—"

"Well then, we can put him on the stage," Red declared. "Think what a marvelous act—five hundred, a thousand a week maybe—"

"I don't want to go on the stage," Georgie protested. "I just want—"

It was then I had the patriotic idea. Stupendous idea, and it just came like a flash of light. After all, it was obvious that Georgie's gift was too good just to throw away. And the war—all the war bond selling and such—naturally my mind was in a patriotic rut. And the idea came.

"Georgie," I said, "get hold of yourself. You'd like to win the war, wouldn't you? Kick Hitler in the eye, for instance?"

That didn't cheer Georgie up at all. "I sure would," he agreed mournfully. "But they put me in 4F."

I was pretty excited about my idea. Who wouldn't be? "Listen," I said, "Georgie, you can think up anything you want? Something that's alive, for instance?"

"My Gawd," Red gasped.

Somehow I was shuddering too, but I persisted. "Could you, Georgie?"

"Yes," Georgie said. "I guess so. I thought up a fly last night. That was a funny thing—it flew away, but there was so much the matter with it that it hit the wall and I guess killed itself."

Which didn't help my shudder any. But a man ought to be prepared to go through a lot of sacrifice to win the war. Could Georgie think up a lot of things at once?

He could. He demonstrated it. In sixty seconds he had the top of my desk covered with packs of his phony cigarettes—six neat little rows, six packages in a row.

"Swell," Red said. "Spike, what's your idea?"

"Shut up," I said. "Let's get this straight, then I'll tell you."

And I didn't want to take a chance of Georgie getting frightened and causing trouble. We went ahead with the experiments. "Now," I said, "think up a man, Georgie."

"W-what kind of man?"

"Any kind. Listen, can you stand him over there in the corner? Not here on the desk—not close to us—"

"Y-yes, I guess so. But listen, Spike—"

"A soldier!" Red exclaimed. "Say, I begin to get it."

"Right," I agreed. "A soldier, Georgie. A big fellow, all equipped—"

Georgie was holding his head. I guess it did ache pretty bad by now. "Spike, please—this has got me scared—"

"You want to win the war, don't you?" I demanded. To win a war, a man has to be brutal. "And what's more, Georgie, if you try to back out now, we'll slam you over to a doctor—"

"An' you'll wind up in the nut-house," Red added.

GEORGIE had spunk. "You don't need to threaten me," he declared. I'm as patriotic as you are. Only when I think up a man—I remember that fly that must have had a lot of things the matter with it—"

Thinking up that first man was pretty gruesome business. We pulled down all the blinds in my little office, turned on the center lights and locked the door.

"Now listen," I admonished Georgie. "Get this straight now. We don't want any errors. Just one man. Fix him up so he's standing over there in the corner. And listen—when I tell you—then you make him disappear—in a hurry. You—uncreate him, Georgie. Okay?"

"Yes. I g-guess so," Georgie agreed weakly. He sat slumped in his chair, holding his head and staring at the empty room-corner. Red and I stayed handy by the door.

It only took about sixty seconds, and there was the man. I'm not going to try and describe him. I really only took one look. He was pretty awful. A big soldier in uniform and all. At the second he appeared he was standing at attention; that much

was all right. But Georgie must have had some stray thought about movement. Anyway, that Zombie rolled its eyes weirdly, let out some kind of a graveyard voice-sound. And it evidently tried to raise an arm in salute. But a whole lot of things must have gone wrong inside it, because the arm only twitched partly up and then all the body went into convulsion. As though the muscles were trying to work but were hooked up wrong. The thing took a ghastly buckling forward step and then doubled up and fell toward us.

Red let out a yell and tried to get the door open. I remember that I shouted, "Georgie! Uncreate it—get rid of it—"

Georgie did. It seemed an eternity, but I imagine it was only a few seconds before the twitching thing on the floor was gone.

"Well," I gasped, "I guess my scheme's gone floozy. Soldiers like that won't do this war any good. Okay, Georgie, you're through."

It was then that Red had the really brilliant idea of the whole business. I want to give him full credit. Without him, the whole thing would have been a miserable failure.

"I got it!" Red suddenly exclaimed. "He creates what he knows about. What his conscious and his subconscious minds are familiar with. Georgie, how are you on physiology?"

"Well—I don't know, I—"

"And if his subconscious mind even, can absorb knowledge, then it might—just might go into his creations," Red declared. "Anyway, let's try it."

AS IT happened—and don't ask me why because I don't know—Red's theories on how to improve Georgie's synthetic products were undoubtedly a brilliant success. We experimented first with an apple. Georgie didn't like apples; he didn't know much about them. So Red hustled over to the library and came back with a stack of books. I guess they contained about all anybody ever knew about apples. Georgie began looking them over. "You mean," he demanded dubiously, "that I'm supposed to learn all this stuff?"

That wasn't Red's idea at all. This thing was an extra-sense, so to speak. It wasn't exactly mental, it was more psychic. Anyway, Red's scheme worked. We put Georgie's hands on the stack of books and he concentrated. And he sure produced a swell

apple. I took a bite and you could hardly tell it from the real thing.

"That's grand," I said. "Now we're all set. Now here's the scheme. All we have to do is produce good authentic U. S. soldiers, sailors and marines, and flyers—"

"And tanks and guns and planes," Red put in enthusiastically. "And we'll need ships to carry them over in—and destroyers and battleships, why not? Why, my Gawd, all we have to do is create a whole fleet of—"

"Not all at once," Georgie put in plaintively. "I couldn't do it, Red. My head aches fearfully already. You've got no idea how—"

"Not necessarily all at once," I said. "A squad of soldiers, Georgie. Then a regiment—"

"A battleship a day," Red agreed. "Listen, you punk, would you welch on producing a battleship a day for Uncle Sam?"

I was beginning to get the scheme worked out now. "We gotta watch ourselves," I cautioned. "We can't just produce a battleship—down in the bay, for instance. Not willy nilly, because it might appear where a couple of ferryboats happened to be. That would be bad."

"I won't even try it," Georgie declared. "You don't have to," I told him. "We're not going to do anything more—not today. I'm no fool, rushing into a big thing like this. What we've got to do," I declared, "is contact the War Department. Or the Navy or something, down in Washington."

"How?" Red demanded. "They won't believe what you tell them. What I hear, there's so much red tape—"

"Leave it to me," I said. I patted Georgie's head. "You've been swell, Georgie. And don't you worry—you're gonna be the man who won the war. Take him out and give him a swell supper, Red—"

"I just want an aspirin," Georgie said. "And to go home and sleep."

RED took him away, and we arranged to meet in my office at noon the next day. I had an ace in the hole on this contacting the War Department; there was a fellow named Karl Appleton who, I understood, had a close "off the record" connection with the officials at Washington. I went after Appleton right away, and fortunately located him at his hotel, during the evening. We went to my office and I told Appleton the whole story, backed by the

remains of a few of Georgie's products, the cigarettes, fruit and what-not.

Appleton was finally convinced; and his eyes certainly gleamed when I told him how we proposed to create an unlimited number of pretty good soldiers, all well equipped; and tanks, guns, planes, troop transports—and even battleships at the rate of one a day. All that was needed was Georgie's concentrated brain efforts; and some stacks of the proper technical books so that Georgie's subconscious could absorb the necessary details to make his products authentic. And, of course, the proper arrangements for handling the stuff as Georgie created it.

"We'll certainly win this war in a hurry," I told Appleton. "No argument, is there?"

"Surely not," Appleton agreed, with his eyes gleaming. "I shall contact the necessary officials at once and make all the arrangements." He was a big blond fellow, this Appleton, crisp-voiced and very efficient. "You will understand," he told me, "all that we do, at first certainly, the War Department will want absolutely secret."

"Of course," I agreed.

"We will first have to make experiments. A small quantity of men and equipment. Then larger quantities. You understand?"

"My idea exactly."

"I shall contact you by noon tomorrow," Appleton promised.

I was pretty excited that night, what with planning things and all so that I didn't get to sleep till about daybreak. By half-past eleven I was in my office, and almost at once the 'phone rang. It was Georgie.

"What's wrong?" I demanded apprehensively. "You and Red are supposed to be here at twelve o'clock."

Red had told me that he was going to camp on Georgie for the night, just to make sure that Georgie didn't get some idea of quitting us.

"Nothin's wrong with me," Georgie said. "I had an aspirin and a malted and I feel fine now. It's Red. He took me out to breakfast, and then—I'm calling you from General Hospital, Spike."

Red had gone and broken his ankle. He and Georgie had been standing on a curb at Forty-Second and Broadway, and Red had stepped backward and fallen eight inches to the street. If you don't think a man can break an ankle doing that, ask Red. He did it.

So that put Red out of the picture. He

agrees now he's maybe glad of it. I had a lot of luck; he might not have had so much and he might have wound up the way Georgie did.

Anyway, Georgie hustled right down to my office. We waited until about mid-afternoon for Appleton and then at last he showed up.

"Everything is ready," he announced crisply. "I have all the books and they have assigned me the proper place. Tonight we shall begin the job."

I introduced him to Georgie, and almost at once we started for the place which the War Department had assigned to us. It was down near the eastern end of Long Island, about four hours by train. What with the dim-out and all, the little hick village was almost black when we got there. Appleton and his War Department friends had everything ready for us. A big closed car was waiting beside the dark little platform and we were hustled in.

IT WAS one of those dark, humid summer nights, with no stars, no wind and heavy, sullen sort of clouds. Three men in raincoats and caps were in the car besides the driver. We started off in a rush and drove a mile or so through the lonely country. You couldn't see much. It just looked like empty sand dunes with occasional little wooden bridges over inlets. There was the smell of low-tide salt water in the air—that rotten-barnacle smell, if you get what I mean.

From the time we left the station nobody spoke at all. Everything was grim. Georgie got nervous.

"Where we going, Spike?" he whispered.

"I—I don't like this at all."

"Army secrecy," I told him. "Naturally, a big thing like this—with all the saboteurs that might be around—"

Appleton heard us. "You will be prepared to do everything you are told," he said. "Great care must be exercised in the handling of this."

"You're in the Army now," I told Georgie.

Maybe Georgie's nervousness communicated to me. Anyway, empty sand dunes at night with barnacle smells and a car full of grim silent men are depressing. I began to feel jittery myself.

Our car pulled up with a sharp grinding of brakes on the sand by the side of a smelly inlet. Out over the greasy water I could see the open ocean. In the other direction there

was a big spread of open sand dunes, big as a parade ground.

"See?" I whispered to Georgie, "just the place for your creations."

"I—I hope I can do it, Spike," Georgie mumbled as Appleton ordered us out of the car. "My head aches already, honestly it does."

That gave me new jitters. Appleton had evidently gone to a lot of trouble over this thing, and if Georgie fumbled it so that we didn't make good all I'd promised, Appleton wasn't a man you could fool with.

"We are here," he said in the darkness. "This way please."

There were just two glows of light—two windows in a big board shack that stood nearby at the edge of the greasy inlet. Those windows looked like the yellow eyes of some monster squatting there on the sand. They were blinking eyes as men moved inside the shack, passing in front of the interior light. But when we got into the big lamplit room which seemed all there was to the place, the men had gone. They were outside in the darkness. There seemed to be about twenty or thirty of them around here—silent figures in raincoats or oilskins, standing around watching us as we arrived.

The big board room had some broken-down furniture and big fish nets hanging on racks to dry. It smelled like fish. There was a big board table and an old easy chair in front of it for Georgie. I could see at once that Appleton hadn't forgotten anything. There was a glass of water on the table, aspirin and malted milk tablets for Georgie. And about a hundred books, an encyclopaedia, pamphlets and such piled in neat stacks, some on the table and some on the floor so that Georgie could put his feet on them. I noticed that all the books had been freshly covered with brown wrapping paper jackets.

"You see? Everything is ready," Appleton said. "Now you shall demonstrate that you are not lying to me. My friends in Washington would not like that. There has been money spent—these preparations."

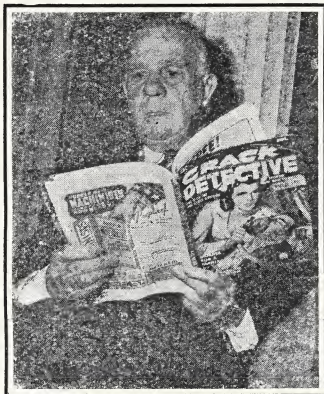
"Have no fear," I retorted. "Georgie'll make good. Won't you, Georgie?"

Appleton was across the room, and as Georgie sat down in the old easy chair I felt him pinch my arm. "Wanna talk to you, Spike," he mumbled.

"Now, a simple demonstration," Appleton said. "A pack of cigarettes first."

(Continued On Page 98)

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(Continued From Page 96)

EFFICIENT fellow, he took a little stack of books from the floor, put them on the table. Quite evidently they had all the dope on cigarettes, the tobacco, its curing processes, the cigarette paper and all; because the cigarettes which Georgie promptly produced were perfectly swell. Appleton and I both lighted one and tried it out.

"Very good," Appleton said, with his eyes gleaming. He had lifted a hand and through the door of the shack I could see that the men outside knew now that we weren't fakirs.

"Now you will make no errors," Appleton said to Georgie. "We want for the first creation, two hundred soldiers. They will be fully equipped for battle. You will place them in four lines, out there on the sand, one hundred feet from this doorway. You understand me?"

"Certainly he does," I said. "I've been all over this with him. He won't make any errors."

"I—I hope not," Georgie agreed.

"You can place them—exactly where you wish?" Appleton said.

"Yes, I guess so. But listen, Mr. Appleton, d-don't rush me. You don't realize how my head aches. I guess I'm just nervous, but that long trip down here—couldn't I—we just rest a while here now. Spike's tired too."

I got it. Georgie wanted to speak to me alone. "I damn sure am," I agreed. "In about half an hour, then we'll—"

"You shall do it now," Appleton said crisply. He began piling books on the table. Once when he was across the room, Georgie had a chance to whisper hurriedly to me.

"Oh my gosh, Spike, didn't you see under his coat? He's got three guns in his belt."

"Why not?" I whispered. "All these men—undercover Government men—"

Don't think I'm dumb, it's just that I couldn't see any sense in frightening Georgie.

Appleton came back to the table. "All ready now," he said. "These are the correct books. I shall watch at the doorway."

Georgie put a hand on each of the stacks of books on the table. I stooped down to the floor to put his feet on top of the two stacks which Appleton had placed there. Down there by the table leg there were some bulging letter files. Appleton shoved them away and stooped to watch me as I arranged Georgie's feet.

Luck was with us; at least, just for that instant it was. From outside, one of the men called in to Appleton.

"There is something offshore—a light—"

Appleton went and took a look with a big pair of high-powered binoculars which he produced from his jacket pocket. It was only a passing steamer, far out, heading for New York. Appleton reassured his men and came back.

But for just that minute Georgie and I were alone.

"I know," I whispered. "Something damn funny about this."

"Oh, Spike, I'm s-scared."

Just sort of intuition and a whole lot of little things that I can't particularly remember. I hastily opened one of those paper-wrapped books that Appleton had placed ready for Georgie's subconscious to absorb what was in them.

Even though somehow I had sensed the worst, that book was a horrible shock. It was MEIN KAMPF!!

"Oh my gosh!" Georgie gasped.

HASTILY we examined the others. This wasn't dope on U. S. soldiers and their equipment—this was all Nazi stuff!

Appleton came back. Georgie and I by that time were numbed, just staring at each other. My mind was pretty busy, but I didn't reach any conclusions except the pretty obvious one that we were in a bad jam. If Georgie went ahead and thought up two hundred soldiers as per these specifications they'd be rabid Nazi soldiers lined up outside on the dunes. Two hundred of them, fully equipped in the best Nazi tradition. And Appleton and his men would be here standing over us with guns, ordering Georgie to think up more. Thousands of Nazi soldiers, embarking from here in transports of Georgie's creation. With tanks and planes and a Nazi fleet offshore. Why, Georgie, if pushed, could keep on thinking up Nazi battle fleets, and millions of Nazi soldiers. The war could be lost right here and now. And if Georgie refused to do it—we wouldn't get shot, that would be too easy. We'd be tortured in efficient Nazi fashion.

It was a bad jam. Georgie wouldn't win the war for Hitler, all in a hurry like this. And if he would, I wouldn't let him; so we'd have to sacrifice our lives for Uncle Sam. That's a grand thing to do, but somehow I was sorry about it.

"Ready now," Appleton said crisply as he came striding back to us.

"W-well y-yes," Georgie mumbled.

Now I don't pretend to know just what Georgie intended to do. For me, I confess I was pretty much rattled. I had some idea of trying to stall with Appleton. But Georgie as it happened, didn't wait for anything like that. He had fallen into that trance-like attitude in the arm-chair. But what with the shaking of his terror and the twitching of the creative thought-process, his hands and arms slipped off the books. His knees twitched up and his feet came off the books too. Maybe he intended it; maybe it was just accidental, but one of his twitching legs jammed his foot sidewise so that it landed on top of that pile of bulging letter files. It landed there and it clamped down, just as he gave that convulsive shudder at the finish of the thought-job.

Appleton, I guess, didn't see any of this, because he was looking expectantly toward the doorway. I had no time to do anything; I was just in mental chaos. Then from outside the shack, for just a second there was an awed cry from Appleton's men as they saw Georgie's creations spring into life, out on the dark dunes a hundred feet away.

Two hundred Nazi soldiers? Not on your life they weren't! Those bulging letter files must have been stolen by Appleton from Washington. They were secret files from the Federal Bureau of Investigation! And outside on the dunes now there were two hundred G-Men! Well equipped, and rarin' to go because quite evidently both Georgie's conscious and subconscious had fully informed them of what was going on hereabouts.

Mr. Hoover's men are noted for action. They don't waste any time, and they are very forceful and direct. And these two hundred were representative of them all. There was about two seconds of silence after they appeared. Then flashlight beams were darting ahead of them as they came charging the shack. That lasted two seconds, and in one second more they were shooting a fusillade that whistled around the shack and thudded into it.

I went down under the table and pulled Georgie with me. Screams sounded outside as the running Nazis tried to get away. Not a chance. I remember gripping Georgie, trying to pull the table down in front of us for a shield. I was just too late on that, and all my life I'll be sorry. A Nazi was trying to come in the doorway; he got drilled and sprawled, but another bullet from outside must have come past him and it hit Georgie. It hit him in the head and he didn't scream or even moan. I'm thankful for that. He just wilted down.

I guess he was dead in a few seconds. And so were all the Nazis; one inside the shack, two or three by the doorway and the rest scattered around outside. It was Appleton's body lying here in the shack. I remember I just took a horrified look down at Georgie. And as he died, from outside there was a sudden silence. The Nazis were all dead, and every one of the G-Men were gone; vanished! Just as though they'd never been here! Everything he'd created went with Georgie!

I don't know what I did for the next few minutes; I guess I just crouched there. And it seems that all the shooting—the flashes of the guns and sound of the shots and yells—carried across the dunes to the nearby town and the local police came in a rush. And of course I was the only one alive here, with about thirty Nazis strewn around. What was the use of me trying to tell them what had really happened? You're right—no use at all.

So Georgie and I got the credit for trailing this bunch of spies and bumping them off. The police were delighted to find a lot of binoculars and German-lens cameras, and it turned out there were some makings of bombs and what-not under the floor-boards of the shack. To say nothing of the stolen files from the F. B. I., and Mein Kampf and all these Nazi books piled around.

Georgie is going to get decorated what they call posthumously. That's swell. And if they insist on pinning medals on me, I can't help it, can I?

THE END

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THE SWIFT PEOPLE

By Basil Wells

A strange people dwelt upon earth, side by side with humanity—but stranger still was the reason why men did not know about them.

Illustration by John R. Forte, Jr.

“I HAVE slept long,” cried Joln Dar, springing up from his worn blanket of thulkskin. “The wild gelts will have moved from their feeding grounds by now.”

Quickly he flung the doubled blan-

ket upon his nervous green-hided *gelt* and clinched it in place with two broad straps of purplish hide from the back of a wild *thulk*. Without a lost motion he flung his lean gray body into the improvised saddle and

swung away at a swift gallop down a steep trail that wound ever downward among the weird lifeless maze of barren rocks and sand toward a dry river-bed.

He breathed out a sigh of relief as he rounded a wind-worn butte and saw the compact little herd of white-feathered *thulks* cropping at the dense bluish growth of edible vegetation — and a short way beyond them the herd of wild gelts he had been trailing for so long.

Here and there across that level flat of bluish sward there lifted the vivid scarlet and orange fans of *ald* trees. Already he could see that the luscious yellow fruit of the trees was maturing, the first frail suggestion of a shell covering its downy, melon-shaped bulk, and he breathed an anxious oath—he must have returned to the tribe of Aryk before the falling of the ripened ald nuts or Yrmo Gand might be freed from her promise and have mated with another.

"When I have rounded up these last dozen gelts," Joln Dar muttered, "I will return to Aryk and give them all to her. She will see that I am the greatest warrior of all the men of Aryk. No other warrior will lay as much wealth in captured gelts and thulkskins at her feet."

Abruptly the coarse gray flesh of his forehead wrinkled into a frown and his eyes flashed fire deep in their purple depths. A stocky man's shape, clad in ragged skin garments and mounted as was he, rode out of the shadows of a wall of lemon-yellow rock.

"Ho there, Joln Dar!" he cried. "Would you help me to pen yonder herd of gelts in the narrow valley just beyond where they feed? I will give to you one-third of them all for your assistance."

"Galmar Oth!" gasped Joln Dar as

the other spoke. This broad smiling lump of a man had been his chief rival for the hand of Yrmo.

"Get you gone!" he shouted. "These are my gelts! For many sleeps have I trailed them across the barren wastelands of the Slow People until I followed them to this natural trap. They are mine."

"Ho!" laughed Galmar. "You terrify me."

Joln leaped from his mount's back and in two bounds was at his rival's side. His hard gray hand clamped about Galmar's wrist and in an instant Galmar sprawled at his feet. Joln stepped back, fists knotted and his eyes narrowed beneath his snowy thatch of feathery hair.

Uttering a hideous roar of anger and hatred Galmar came to his roughly shod feet and launched himself at his lean-bodied challenger. Forgotten were their knives and darts of wood edged with horn and bone—this was a contest between honorable men of the same tribe and not battle to the death...

FOR more than forty-five generations had the Swift People lived on this the third planet circling about Sol. They had come first in the afternoon of a July day in 1942 in a battered space ship from the far-distant world of Aontar, eight exiled wretches doomed never to again see the fertile waterless surface of their home planet.

Forty-five generations had passed for the Swift People, nine hundred years of time as we would measure it; yet but a single night had come and gone on Earth and the sun was but now riding free above the eastern horizon. In the passing of forty-five generations but fifteen hours of Earthly time had been required! In twenty minutes a baby grew from in-

fancy to maturity and within the next forty minutes he grew old and died! Trees and plants brought with them from distant Aontaf grew and died in a period of but half an hour at the most and the grasses flourished for but a few brief seconds before they were gone.

A myriad warring barbaric tribe came into being as the Swift People spread swiftly out across the desolate wastelands of Western America. Only in the desert country could their native vegetation flourish for the world of Aontar had known no water and only the soil's raw elements could support the brilliant scarlet and orange growth of the vast old groves. All the ancient knowledge of Aontar was forgotten in those long fifteen hours by the barbarian descendants of those first exiles.

Yet there was reason for their forgetting. The brittle and inflammable metals of this world had proved to be worse than useless in their early attempts at rebuilding familiar machines and buildings. As the last of the native metals of Aontar were ripped from the ship and forged into knives and needed utensils they had turned to the bones and sinews of the six-legged, monstrous thulk and the green-scaled domesticated beast of burden, the gelt, for their equipment. Generation by generation they slipped backward into savagery until the very history of their arrival from distant Aontar was converted into a profitable legend of other worldly mystery by the tribal priests.

They walked among the Slow People, the Americans, and were never seen. Mysterious cyclones followed their unseen passage and strange footprints appeared before the very eyes of the watchers. Aviators early that July morning told of wavering expanding ranks of vegetation—or

perhaps it was some weird new mirage—that vanished and reappeared in the harshest reaches of the desert.

So it came about that overnight, in the very heart of a continent, a thousand savage tribes came into being and flourished. Undreamed of, unseen, and moving at a terrific rate of speed far beyond any of man's wildest imaginings, the men from distant Aontar spread steadily southward into Central America. They lived in tents of old wood and thulkskin or made permanent homes in hollowed-out domes of Earth's brittle crust. They hunted, and loved—and fought!

BLOOD was dripping monotonously from the nostrils of Galmar Oth, rich brown blood of a fluid chemical composition derived from the waterless protoplasmic structure of all Aontarian life. Joln Dar sat cross-legged on the ground holding his battered head between two uplifted bloody hands. Galmar opened his dark lips and spat out a brown-stained tooth that Joln's fist had smashed loose.

"Nice little fight," he panted.

Joln grinned ruefully. "I'll help you round up the gelts," he proposed, "for half of them."

"Suits me," nodded Galmar peering toward the spot where the gelts had but now been grazing. He started violently.

"Savages!" he cried angrily. "See, they are rounding up our gelts!"

Jolu was but a step behind him as they raced for their own green-hided mounts and rode swiftly down toward the quartet of alien Swift People. Like Joln and Galmar these strangers were gray of skin; their long luxuriant hair was silvery white; their garments brief patches of purplish leather, and their weapons, bows, knives and short lances,

The Swift People

were like those of the Aryks, made of wood, bone and horn. But they were members of a strange tribe—barbarians, savages by that same token.

As they rode they readied their arrows in the quivers and loosened the long slim knives of thulk horn swinging at their hips. In their hard-muscled gray bodies were burned a consuming fire of hatred for these plunderers of what they considered their own spoil.

The strangers somehow were warned of their approach even as they drove the last of the wild gelts into the narrow box canyon. A savage jeer of challenge bellowed up from their throats and then all four of them seized their short lances and came charging toward Joln and Galmar.

Their two bows twanged together and two of the attacking warriors jolted from their blanket-saddles, heavy wooden arrows transfixing their vitals. But the remaining two savages were now within lance hurling range. Like spears they flung their light lances and, without interrupting the flowing stride of their six-legged mounts, they whipped out fresh lances from the boots hanging beside their left knees, and crashed through the scrubby growth, straight at the Aryks.

Joln had been untouched by those hurled lances but brown blood spurted from a long shallow gash along Galmar's gray cheek. Their own lances were out now and levelled. Joln braced himself for the impact when his weapon or that of his opponent would tear deep into living flesh. And then Galmar shrieked a warning and pivoted his gelt around on its four hindlegs.

A racing knot of mounted warriors was charging down upon them from a dense clump of alds where they had been concealed. Ten or eleven of them there must have been and from the distinctive manner in which their twin yellow plumes rose above their heads there could be no doubt that they were tribesmen of the other two.

So it was that Joln and Galmar wheeled away in diverging flight be-

(Continued On Page 104)

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Future Fantasy and Science Fiction

(Continued From Page 103)

fore their savage foes, their lives depending on the fleetness of their own sleek gelts' legs...

JOLN halted his staggering gelt long afterward in the shadow of a spiny crest of brittle red rock beside the snaking white ribbon of a desert road of the Slow People. Long ago he had lost sight of Galmar and his pursuers. He hoped that Galmar had escaped.

Upon the whiteness of the highway he saw a half dozen of the weird vehicles of the Slow People, some of them passenger cars and others gigantic many-wheeled trucks laden with the produce of a rich nation. In these all-but-motionless wheeled machines he saw many of the Slow People. Tall they were as any of his own race but their skins were a sickly white or a muddy tan that made his stomach retch. They were so like his own people and yet so unlike—their metabolism was based upon a foundation of water.

Join found a bit of the edible rock that the sons of Aontar require to keep their own lives intact upon this inhospitable planet of ours. He crunched the life-giving matter between his powerful teeth and as he swallowed the melting morsels of stone new life surged through his body.

His penned herd of gelts, forty of them, were less than two sleeps distant on his backtrail toward the hidden mountain village of Aryk. He had hoped to take twice that many gelts back to Yrmo Gand and present them to her as her wedding gift. But even so forty gelts were more than any of his rivals would be able to round up he decided... All of them, that is, except Galmar. Join Dar hoped that Galmar would not return to Aryk until he had mated with Yrmo Gand.

While he waited for his gelt to regain some of its wasted strength he gave it sparingly of the edible rock and carried bundle after bundle of the grass-like bluish growth that carpeted the waterless stretch of sand in the arroya below the road.

The Swift People

It was on his third trip from the arid gulch with an armload of the bluish vegetation that shadows-circled him about and a score or more of hard hands and fists bore him to the ground. He caught one glimpse of the contorted gray faces of a group of naked men and knew that he had fallen into the hands of one of the beastlike tribes of demented Aontarians long since banished to the more distant hills and plateaus of this weird world. He fought madly to tear free from their foul clutches and then something harsh and unyielding crashed down upon his skull and the daylight was blotted out.

HE AWOKE sometime long afterward to the semi-gloom of an underground cavern. That it was a cavern and not the Great Darkness that had passed more than six generations before he was certain—the Great Darkness would not return again for at least thirty generations the wise men of the tribe had told him—and when he opened his eyes to look about he saw that he was right.

The vast cave had been carved out of the mushy rock of Earth with the crude bone tools of the madmen and with their naked hands. Irregular pillars of rock, shallow shelves and cupboards cut into their broad bases, supported the low roof, and sleeping skins of purple leather lay tumbled in the alcoves cut into the outer walls of the cavern. Narrow slits in the ceiling let a weak mockery of light through to illuminate that ugly warren.

"Waking up are you?" a low voice inquired beside him.

John Dar looked behind him. A slight gray figure clad in tattered garments of hide shared his narrow cage of lashed wooden poles. As his eyes grew more accustomed to the dim light he could see that it was a woman who was imprisoned with him.

"My head is ringing," John groaned.

"The madmen are not too gentle," agreed the girl with a smile. "I am

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Future Fantasy and Science Fiction

(Continued From Page 105)

called Erda Rur. I was captured five sleeps ago by the madmen while the men of Kysor were away hunting. All of the other women and children escaped or were slain but I was captured."

"My mother came from Kysor," volunteered Joln shortly.

"What do they call you?" Erda wanted to know.

"Why should you care," grunted Joln, "since Kysor and Aryk are at war."

"It is better that I know your name," laughed Erda paying no attention to his sulky tone, "than that I should always address you as Man from Aryk."

"Very well," agreed Joln, "I am Joln Dar. I am an orphan without any to mourn my passing save perhaps one. I am a hunter and trapper of wild gels and thulks."

"Would you like to escape?" demanded Erda in a tense whisper.

"Of course!" hissed Joln, warm hope flooding his blood channels.

"So would I," admitted Erda with a sly smile.

"You—you little sister of a skur!" cried Joln angrily. Slowly his grim dark lips straightened and then cracked into a rueful grin. "You little fraud," he finished, laughing.

After that they grew more friendly. Erda told him of life in the nomad tribe of Kysor from which she had been captured and Joln found himself telling of his desire to win Yrmo Gand for his mate. The madmen brought them juicy portions of thulk flesh and ample supplies of the rock that is the water of all Aontarian life. Joln stuffed himself with the food for he had gone often on lean rations for the last few sleeps.

"Do not eat too much," warned Erda, "or they will kill you all the sooner."

"You mean," demanded Joln, "that the madmen are cannibals, that they will eat my flesh?"

"Oh no," exclaimed Erda, "they will not eat your flesh. They will pit you in combat against other captives. When you have all been slain they will give you to the black-hided

The Swift People

skurs in the fattening pits beneath this cave. Then they will kill and eat the skurs. They are not cannibals you see."

"No," agreed Join drily, "they are madmen."

"It is too bad that you are to be killed," Erda said sadly, "you are nicer than any of my brothers. Of course that is because you are so puny and womanlike. They are big and strong. They are afraid of nothing, not even the madmen."

"So I'm weak, am I?" demanded Join. "Afraid of these madmen, eh?" His fist snapped into his open palm. "By all the gods of Aontar, Erda, I will show you that I am a man!"

Erda leaned back against the rough wall of the cage and slitted her eyes as might a playful skur. Join could sense the undercurrent of teasing laughter in her glance and fought back a desire to quell that amusement with the flat of his hand.

"If you are as ready with your fists," she smiled as she crunched a bit of edible rock, "as you are with your temper we may be able to win our way free of these naked creatures' cavern."

"You have a plan?" Join asked. She nodded.

HE PICKED out the slim form of Erda among the leather-hooded captives herded together in the great wooden cage built at one end of the hidden box-canyon below the cavern's entrance. In their section of the cavern he had counted a score of penned prisoners in the four sleeps just passed but here there were at least fifty doomed men. He decided that there must be more than one cavern inhabited by this maniacal tribe of beastmen, or that new captives had been taken just before the ceremony of feeding the tigerlike skurs on the slain bodies of their captives.

Across the uneven surface of the arena he saw another cage where a dozen of the huge black-hided skurs paced hungrily back and forth upon their taloned silent pads and behind them he saw the opening leading back down into the bowels of the cliff



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Future Fantasy and Science Fiction

(Continued From Page 107)

where they were normally penned. Erda was whispering frantically to her neighbors and John followed suit. Several of his listeners agreed eagerly but one man proved intractable.

"We warriors of Snud," he announced proudly, "need no assistance from savages such as you. I and my two comrades will hold ourselves aloof from any attempt to escape these madmen. If we escape it will be by our own efforts alone."

"You're doing the dying," said John. "If you want to become second-hand steak for the Mad Ones that is your business."

Four of the hooded captives were now allowed to emerge from the cage and the dozen grinning guards licked their sagging lips in anticipation of the slaughter to come as they gave them four lances from the pile of weapons behind them.

The four masked warriors walked swiftly across the natural arena and the assembled horde of demented Aontarians howled for their blood. The guards called out for them to halt and give battle. They hurried their pace, breaking into a run straight toward the entrance to the skurs' cage. But two guards stood there for they had not imagined that the captives might attempt a break in this direction.

Nine of the guards before the other cage seized their weapons and hurried across the arena to the assistance of their fellows and in that moment, while all eyes were directed at the scene being enacted before the skurs' pen, the prisoners surged against their barred door and ripped it bodily outward. Weaponless hands clamped around the startled guards' throats and an instant later a compact band of well-armed warriors left their lifeless bodies behind and were closing in upon the dead men's comrades.

But now a shrill demonic whistling arose from the circling walls above, where the assembled tribe watched, and a wave of hideous naked fury came sweeping downward into the arena to destroy these des-

The Swift People

perate hooded warriors. What they were to do must be done quickly.

Lances drove deep into grayish flesh and rich brown blood flowed freely. Guards and their erstwhile captives locked in mortal combat as they rolled upon the ground each of them striving to plunge his knife into the other's vitals. Hoarse yells and coked agonized cries blended.

There were no more guards—and fewer hooded warriors by at least ten.

John and another man were wrenching at the great bars that barred the massive door to the skurs' cage. It swung open and the doomed men were crowded hard behind its meager shelter.

The skurs were bounding out of the cage, then, their starved vitals crying out for the flesh of some living creature. They sensed that there was life close beside them but the sight of the advancing ranks of gray madmen drove all thought of those unmoving creatures nearby from their savage brains.

In great bounds they pounced forward and their mighty six-limbed bodies ripped relentlessly through the frail wall of lances that strove to halt them. Living bodies shattered before the impact of the skurs' flailing clubs of paws and then the insane creatures yet alive took to their heels.

"Into the cage!" gasped John, and as the last of his new allies entered he swung shut the door and fastened it as best he could.

Then he and Erda Rur led the way into the tunnel that opened into the fattening pits beneath the cavern of the madmen. Upward along narrow steps cut into the soft stone of Earth's crust they climbed and emerged at last into the upper cavern.

As they left the cavern of the Mad Ones behind the sounds of conflict and the savage snarling of the great cats drifted up to them from the narrow canyon below. A grim smile touched John's lips and he turned to say something to the man walking beside him. Like himself the war-



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Future Fantasy and Science Fiction

(Continued From Page 109)

rrior had removed his concealing hood and Joln's eyes widened.

"Galmar!" he cried.

ERDA Rur, Galmar and Joln rode together along the wide white trail of the Slow People. Ahead of them a herd of eighty gelts picked their way among the motionless vehicles of the Americans. There were many of the glistening automobiles about them for they were approaching a small city built along a muddy desert river in southern Utah.

"That was a close shave," Galmar said to Joln—but his eyes never shifted from the smiling face of Erda Rur.

Joln scowled at Galmar. "Yrmo Gand will be glad to see you return safely," he said.

Galmar's gray face darkened guiltily.

"Yrmo must be very beautiful," murmured Erda.

"Oh she's... of course she is very attractive!" Joln stuttered. "When Galmar parades his fifty gelts before her father's stone dwelling I am afraid that she will choose him for her own."

Joln did not look very unhappy as he spoke. For a man who two sleeps before had believed his future life depended upon his mating with Yrmo Gand he seemed rather too cheerful as he admitted his defeat.

"But," protested Galmar, "when we rounded up this last herd of twenty gelts I was merely assisting you. I felt sorry for you because ten of your herd had died."

"You saw them first," argued Joln, "and so they are yours. Just because you feel grateful to me for helping you escape from the clutches of the madmen is no reason for throwing away your chances to wed the charming Yrmo."

"No more quarreling for a while," laughed Erda. "I know you are both anxious to look upon Yrmo's fair face and claim her for your own. In fairness I suggest that you take forty gelts apiece and let her choose."

"That is excellent," nodded Joln eagerly. Since he was an orphan

The Swift People

without any kinsmen she would not be likely to choose him as her mate.

"Oh, all right," growled Galmar. He frowned at John. His own father was the brother of Aryk's ruler. John would not have a chance against him.

In silence they rode through the frozen streets of the city of the Slow People. Around the vehicles and pedestrians they made their way and climbed the hill beyond the city's limits. Had they turned to look they would have seen the first spreading crevices in the brick buildings along the street they had ridden upon. They would have seen the walls bulging inward and the vehicles start sliding toward the buildings on either hand...

The story of the freak tornado that struck in Smith City, Utah, and levelled the main business blocks of the city did not hit the newspapers of the United States until two generations had passed among the Swift People, and John's creaking bones barely supported his ancient body...

At the top of the bluff overlooking Smith City Erda told them both good-bye and rode away toward the south where the men of Kysor grazed their herds of tame thulks and gelts. The two men watched her dwindling shape until it merged into a blurry dark dot that was swallowed up by the shadows of looming buttes. Then they wheeled their gelts and rounded up their herd.

"In three sleeps," John thought gloomily, "we will have reached Aryk."

The memory of Yrmo Gand's artfully babyish voice was suddenly hateful in his ears. Instead he strove to recall the clear voice and ready smile of another—a stranger. A wave of generosity swept over him. He would slip away and give Galmar the right of way with Yrmo once they reached Aryk.

"SEE Yrmo anywhere?" asked John as they rode their mounts along the hot street of the Aryk's little village.

Their herd of gelts they had driv-

(Continued On Page 112)

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(Continued From Page 111)

en into paddocks below the hidden village before they rode upward along the trail. The burning drive that had led them to roam so far afield in search of the wild gelt herds now seemed to have deserted them... After all, the friendship of a man for a man is stronger than that of a man for a woman—each hated to take away the beloved one of a comrade!

An old man hobbled out of his narrow stone dwelling. It was old Itom Harb who had been born while the Darkness yet covered Earth.

"Galmar — Joln!" he quavered. "Glad to see you both."

Galmar squared his shoulder and took a deep breath.

"Where is Yrmo Gand?" he asked.

The old man's watery eyes blinked and he seemed to shrivel. He shook his head and a chill of awful premonition swept over Joln and Galmar. She must be dead!

"Yrmo has gone these three sleeps past," he quavered. "She ran away with Isyn Iol, the singer of ballads and ancient love songs, who came to us from the friendly tribe of Ontan. He was a penniless weakling who knew not how to wield a lance or use a horn knife but all the women of Aryk worshipped his mellow voice."

Joln wheeled his gelt around in the street. His eyes were flashing hot sparks of purple fire and he was alive with energy. Galmar pulled his own mount alongside.

"You are going after them?" he asked hopefully. "You will slay this stealer of women and take Yrmo for your mate?"

Joln laughed. He shook his head and sent his gelt racing away.

"The grazing lands of Kysor are beautiful he shouted.

Galmar shook his head to clear it. Sudden anger burned through his brain. He dug his heels into his own mount's weary green ribs.

"Erda!" he muttered savagely. "That is why he was so generous and sacrificing! He wanted me to win Yrmo!"



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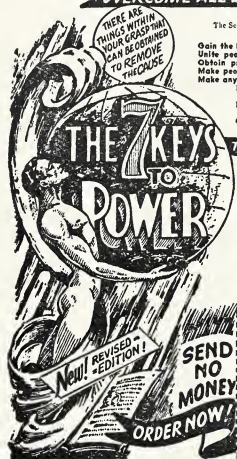
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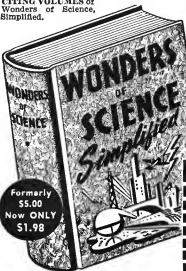
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