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SPACE *stories*

OCTOBER 1952

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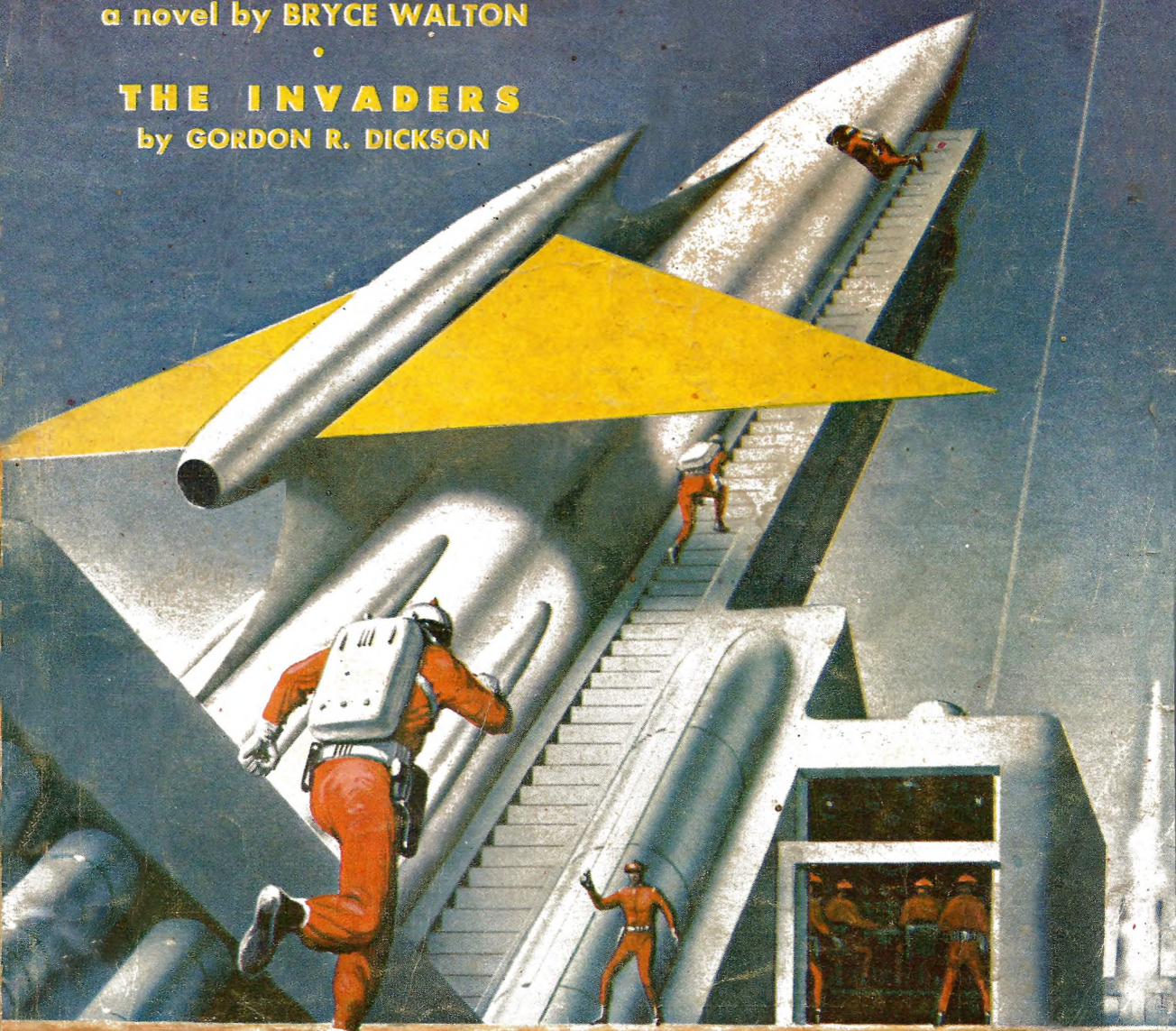
FEATURING

MAN OF TWO WORLDS

a novel by BRYCE WALTON

THE INVADERS

by GORDON R. DICKSON



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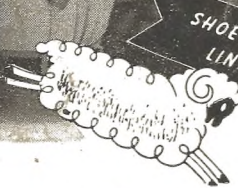
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SPACE *stories*

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A THRILLING PUBLICATION VOL. 1, NO. 1 OCTOBER, 1952

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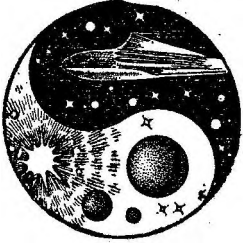
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Perils of Empty Space

The Mysteries of the Regions Beyond Earth



IF ALL popular misconceptions of the illimitable regions beyond Earth's atmosphere, one of the most prevalent is the idea that "all space is empty." Empty of air

certainly, but not empty of terrifying hurtling objects and mysterious forces! Out there in the chill bleak darkness beyond the reach of Man, millions of cosmic "pebbles" flash through space at terrific speeds around 25 miles per second.

Such fantastic velocity is utterly inconceivable to human minds taught to consider the 3000 foot per second velocity of a modern rifle bullet or the 600 mile an hour speed of a jet plane as the ultimate in rapid locomotion. Traveling at such unimaginable speeds, these cosmic pebbles—or meteors—pose a tremendous problem to scientists meticulously planning the rocket ships and space stations of the future. They have estimated that a meteor the size of a pea could punch a hole in inch-thick armor plate, and that a meteor the size of a baseball could destroy a costly rocket ship.

Even more serious than the threat to rocket ships is the danger of meteors penetrating the walls of space stations, permitting vital air to escape. Construction of airtight compartments within an outer metal "skin" or bumper wall offers hope of protection, however. With this form of construction it should be entirely possible to seal off a collision shattered compartment while workmen in rocket-motored, pressurized suits repair the damage.

Scientists are quick to point out that such compartmenting would be effective only in the

case of a "small" collision. Complete and instantaneous annihilation would be the fate of any man-made structure hit head-on by a really large meteor.

The problem is further complicated by the fact that as yet there has been developed no instrument capable of detecting these awesome celestial travelers at long range. Radar, at least in its present form, would be useless as a spotting agent since the merest fraction of a second would be all the warning provided between sighting the streaking object in the skies and the ensuing crash of the collision.

Potentially even more dangerous to space voyagers of the future are the mysterious cosmic rays ceaselessly bombarding Earth's atmosphere from nobody knows where. Protected by this dense air shield, puny Man is safe enough from cosmic rays—but who can say what might happen to him if he ventured out from beneath it? Most scientists believe that the rays would prove injurious to the human organism inasmuch as they are probably identical with harmful rays produced in atomic explosions.

Logically, then, it may be concluded that prolonged exposure to these rays would produce severe or perhaps fatal radiation sickness in Man.

These are only a few of the complex and difficult problems challenging the brilliant men presently engaged in mapping out our future sky adventures. The entire scientific world awaits in tense expectancy the moment when these problems will be solved and the centuries-old dream of space conquest eventually achieved. That most thrilling moment in the history of Man is closer at hand than many of us realize!

—Norman B. Wiltsey

WHAT SECRET POWER DID THIS MAN POSSESS?



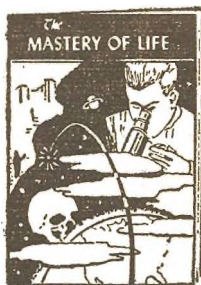
Benjamin Franklin
(A Rosicrucian)

WHY was this man great? How does anyone—man or woman—achieve greatness? Is it not by mastery of the powers within ourselves?

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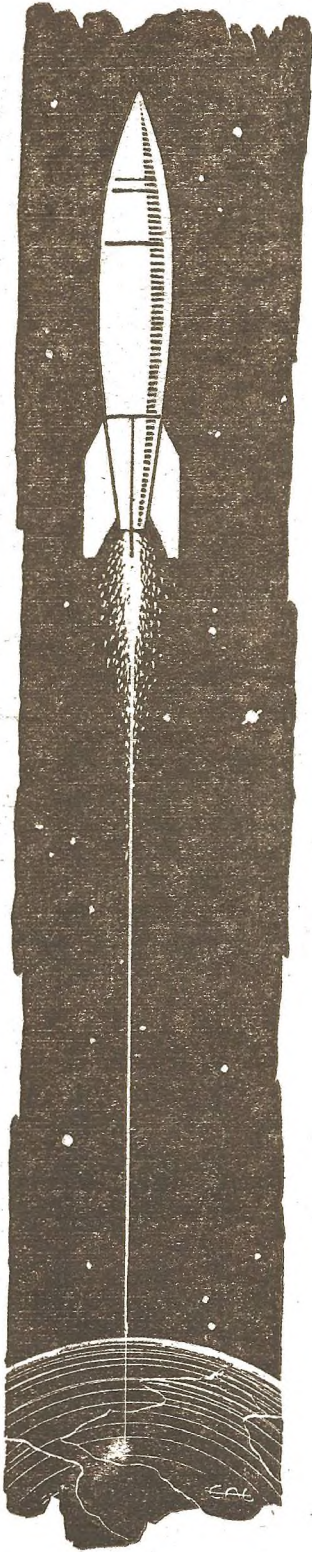
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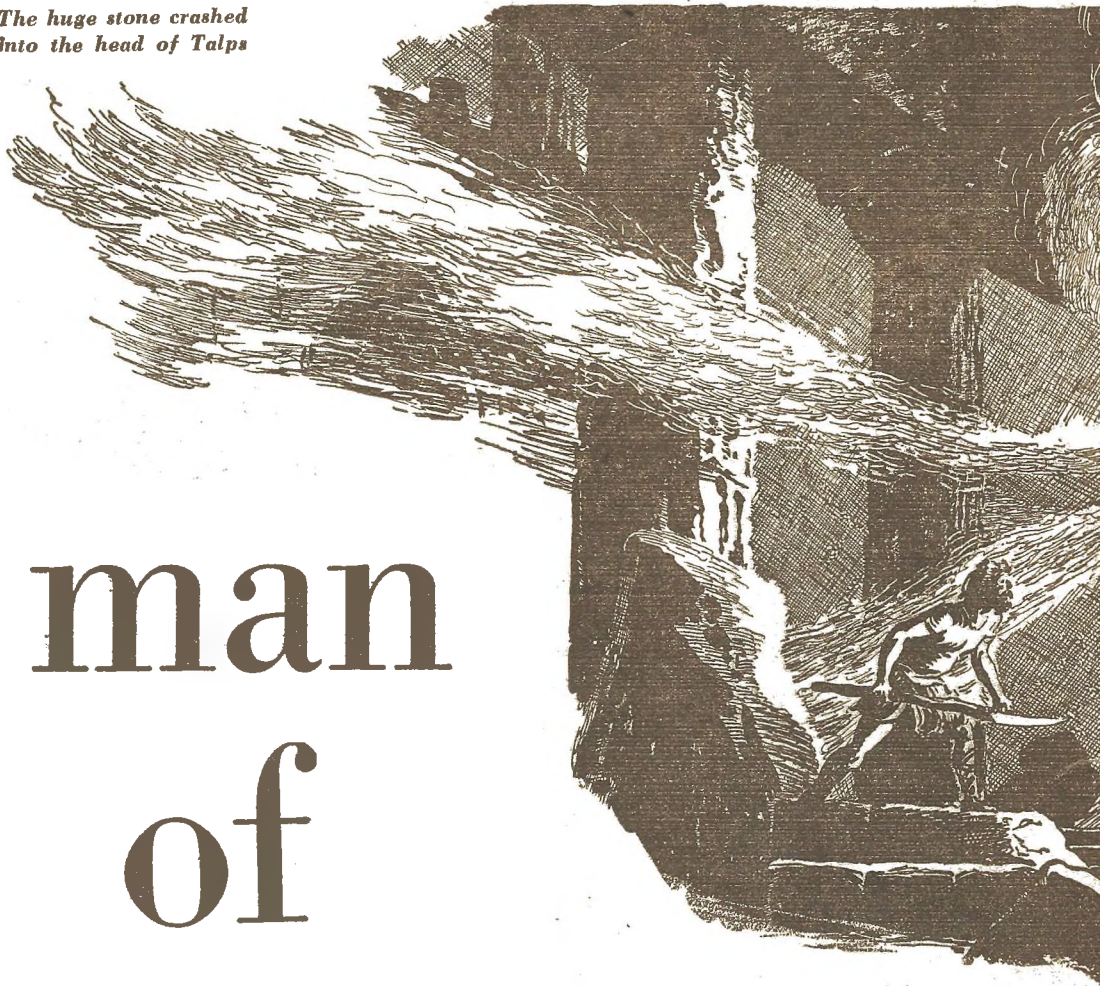
Experience has convinced us there is no single type of science fiction reader, but different types with different standards of entertainment. While **SS**, **TWS** and **FSM** will continue to range the entire field, **SPACE STORIES** will be edited for you who want action and thrills, strange and exotic backgrounds, weird and wonderful adventures—all the gorgeous, colorful miracles which man's imagination may entice from the vast unknown.

The coldly mental story, the complex parable, the tale of social significance is not for us. We offer warmth, excitement, color, action. We build upon science fiction's greatest asset: its imagination-stirring concepts of tremendous distances, colossal speeds, vast empty sweeps of space, unknown, mysterious worlds, unguessable forms of life behind strange, murky atmospheres.

In short, our purpose is to take you out of this world. Coming along?

—THE EDITOR

*The huge stone crashed
into the head of Talps*



man of two worlds

a novel by Bryce Walton

The strange black pyramid and the Cavern of Many Worlds

were Lee Thorsten's passport to another body, another life. . . .



I

LEE THORSTEN came backing out through the towering black basalt pyramid in a half crouch. He pressed the hidden mechanism, and as the ancient block began to close, his big,

light-footed body swung around, flattened itself against the pyramid's base.

His black eyes were wild and staring, and it wasn't the bitter cold of the Martian night that sent cold shivers crawl-

ing in clammy waves over his skin.

As the fearful memories of what he had found in that incredible subterranean chamber registered stronger and stronger in his stunned mind, he lifted his crude sword and bent lower, as though the purple shadows lengthening over the red desert sand were somehow real and dangerous. He stood, shivering and trying to comprehend, crouched against that black basalt wall like an ant that had crawled from a mountainside.

Above him, a silent sentinel of incomputable age, the pyramid towered a thousand feet into the night sky, its shadow a haunted memory over the whispering sands. But the dark ruins of the forgotten city to the South, against the mountains, dwarfed the pyramid.

Confusion was more than a mere disturbance in his mind. Cold sweat trickled down his skin beneath layers of furred *rith*-hide covering his thickly-muscled frame. There had been doors in that vaulted room below. Doors constructed by a time-lost Martian civilization, dead for aeons. Doors that opened into other worlds. And into other times; a doorway that allowed the consciousness, somehow, to move forward or back into time.

That was confusing enough in its incredibility.

But there was a roiling turmoil in his brain, a dull painful throbbing of things unremembered. Amnesia, or paramnesia, perhaps. Things could happen to a man that were so shocking that his conscious mind preferred not to remember, but to bury the memory deep down in the unconscious.

What had happened to him, down in that frightening depth, he didn't know. And he was afraid, for the moment, even to attempt to recall. He remembered opening this secret stone slab into the pyramid, as Lora Saunlon had directed—and, following her further directions, going down into that Labyrinth, and finding the vaulted room, and the doors.

He remembered experimenting and realizing that those doors had been con-

structed by a high scientific process, and that they actually did lead into other worlds, and that one of them was capable, somehow, of forcing the molecular streams of consciousness backward or forward in the time stream.

Now he stood once again, free of that room and the doors, shaken by this undefinable feeling as though—

—as though this all had happened to him before.

A name whispered, stirred, then buried itself in his mind. A name that seemed to have been his, yet wasn't his. The—Thes—not his name. Thes—he shook his head. He slid the crude sword into its scabbard, and pressed his eyes with calloused hands that he could not keep from shaking.

He couldn't call up that name again. Nor could he shake off that feeling of ecstatic terror. That feeling that this had all happened to him before. Perhaps even many times before. That he was a cog in some senseless, nameless cosmic time cycle, turning, over and over and over, forever. . . .

Lora Saunlon possessed racial memory. That was proven now. She went into a trance, some form of auto-hypnosis, and came out of it with information no one could possibly have who did not have racial memory. Lora, somehow, remembered. She'd remembered this secret door opening into this pyramid, and the hidden mechanism to open it. She had known about the intricate passageways and winding corridors that led down to that vaulted room. She had even known about the many doors, and the other worlds.

And she had had no opportunity to know these things, except by racial memory.

She had her own explanations. She had insisted that sometime, incomputable ages before—*she had been a part of a lost Martian civilization.*

She had no memory of what had happened to that civilization. No one had been able to determine that. Great black stone cities deserted and coated with

ferrous oxide dust. No trace of their fate, or even of what they had been.

But Lora Saunlon knew. She remembered.

Lee Thorsten stared at the cold shadows and listened to the high keening of the thin Martian wind, and whispered starkly:

"But do I remember? Do I, too, have racial memory of a Martian existence in some tremendously past age? A memory I now am afraid to recall?

"And if that is true of me, as well as of Lora Saunlon, then—how can we have racial memory of a life we lived on Mars, aeons ago—*when our parents came here to Mars from Earth?*"

Thorsten and Lora Saunlon had been born on Mars. But racial memory, if it existed at all, had to be carried through the germ cells, through the gene patterns of chromosomes where all inherited characteristics were carried.

It didn't make sense. It only made one devil of a headache.

Thorsten forgot the headache then, for a while. Thompson's voice cried shrilly from Thorsten's wrist radio. Cried of a long-threatening fate that had finally struck.

THOMPSON said: "Davis' Guards have finally found our hideout, Thorsten. They've got the ghetto surrounded, and they're attacking with para-guns. No flashguns, so they're going to take us alive if they can, for their damned laboratory probers."

Lora, was all Thorsten thought about then. Being one of the outcasts on Mars' cold loneliness was bad enough, even with a girl like Lora Saunlon to love you and give some slight warmth and meaning to life. But without her—without any of the other small band of outcasts—

"Listen, Thorsten, carefully. Don't lose your head and come charging back here. We haven't a chance in hell against them. Go back along the North Canal, the one that runs parallel to the old Sea Wall. A few of us can get through one

of the secret underground corridors maybe. We can try. We'll try the one that comes out by the faceless statue. If any of us survive, we'll be there in a few minutes. Meet us there if you can. Lora's still with us. Goodluck to you, Thorsten—"

Thorsten started running. That was like Thompson. Goodluck to *me*, when they're the ones who are trapped by those sadistic Guards of Davis, the Colonial Control chief.

He swore at himself as he ran, for leaving Lora, when everyone knew Davis was planning an all-out hunt for the Outcasts. His boots whispered frantically over the sands as he took the ruined road along the North Canal, in the shadow of the ancient, crumbling sea-wall.

Against that wall a great sea had once pounded. A time so long ago no living trace remained. Only a racial memory that Lora Saunlon claimed to have. And now she wouldn't live long enough, he thought, to realize the truth of her dreams. His findings tonight had corroborated her theories of herself—and now she might never know the incredible truth about what was locked within her. Somehow, that seemed awfully important to Thorsten, as he ran.

Phobos had set in the east. Deimos was a low red flash over the distant horizon as Thorsten ran, with the blood hammering past his temples, and slow brooding hate rising and building pressure in his brain.

Davis had found the Outcasts' miserable hiding place finally. Maybe that was a good thing. Hiding had been no good anyway—slipping like ghosts through the ancient ruins, grubbing for scarce food like worms, battling desert beasts with crude swords. It had had to end sometime, and maybe it was best not to prolong such disgrace and hopeless shame and the days and nights of fear.

A corrupted, decaying culture—that was what this second generation of colonists from Earth had made of this Martian settlement. Hard radiation, from unshielded cosmic bombardment during

space-flight here, had started the breakdown. The alien loneliness and futility of Mars, and the inability to return to shattered Earth, had been the psychological factors to complete the social disintegration.

Sadistic tyranny had resulted. A few had tried to resist, and had been driven from the Colonial City, and labeled Outcasts. For a while the Outcasts had been ignored. Then the Colonial City became afraid that the Outcasts might be building and planning to attack the City, and seek control.

So the City Council had established the Guards under Mel Davis. And from that time on, every Outcast was hunted like an animal. According to rumor, what happened to a captured Outcast in the corrupt scientific labs of the City was better imagined than described. Facing capture, several Outcasts had taken their own lives.

Because the Outcasts had resisted the accepted tyrannous order of the City, the City scientists had labeled the Outcasts dangerously "different." Abnormals, possibly mutations due to the effect of unshielded radiation on their parents during the dangerous flight from Earth.

Anyway it was a very good legal excuse for capture, and for torture involving vivisection in the labs.

The Outcasts had suffered most from a psycho-neurosis that was the result of hopelessness, futility, the impossibility of escape. They had no weapons, no future, no reason for existence. Defeatism had obsessed them, was destroying them with as much certainty as Davis' Guards were planning to do.

But now, Thorsten was thinking wildly, that would be changed. They've got to escape now. I've found a way to escape, not only from the City and from Davis—but from Mars itself!

The great room beneath the pyramid. And the vaulted room opening into other worlds, into other times. They would furnish an escape the Colonial Guards would never dream of.

II

SEARCH beams fingered the thin cold air. Thorsten felt the deadly sound touching his ears, the humming of heliocruisers approaching from the City, and the fast sliding of sand-sleds over the terrain, atomurbinic engines whining.

His eyes found routes through the ruins that would obscure his flight as much as possible. Desperately he prayed that some of them would escape Davis' trap. Not a temporary freedom just to crawl and be afraid a while longer, and to shiver in the icy nights and wait an inevitable end—but freedom to try those doors below the pyramid, and to try to find some other world, any world, in which they might be free.

He approached that gigantic faceless statue where the underground cavern emerged from that distant ghetto where the Outcasts had been trapped. He stumbled into the shadows of crumbling monoliths as a lone heliocruiser whirred down so close that he could see the arrogant faces of the Guards at the controls, looking a lambent green in the light of Deimos.

The monoliths surrounded him, brooding like broken dreams over the Canal as he crouched down, and the search-beams' white path licked over him.

He shivered as the desert wind sighed, and from somewhere came the sharp notes of a desert *khrim-dog* yapping at the moons. The heliocruiser wheeled away, its search-beam eating into the towering crags of ruin between the Canal and the mountains, sweeping over the propylon and titan columns that had existed here for no one could guess how long before the Earth colonists came fifty years ago.

Dead ruins. No people, no trace of their living or their dying. No memory, except what was buried in Lora Saunlon's mind—and perhaps soon that would die with her.

The Colonial City accused the Outcasts of being dangerously 'different.' If there was any dangerous mutational dif-



The headless torso pitched against the sea-wall

ference in any of the Outcasts, Thorsten hadn't noticed it. But now he was certain that Lora's racial memory was the result of mutation in small genetic arrangement in chromosomes.

Perhaps the potential for racial memory recall existed dormant in everyone. But that slight alteration in Lora Saunlon's chromosomes had brought racial memory into conscious light. It didn't matter, the reason, so much. Not now.

Hate became an almost intolerable itch in Thorsten, curling his fingers, narrowing his eyes, as a sand-sled slid to a rustling stop, not twenty feet distant.

Four Guards in black, skin-tight resosilk uniforms climbed out of the sled, stood alertly, with weapons in hand. From the insignia on the side, Thorsten recognized it as an Executive vehicle.

And then Thorsten recognized Davis. Fat, arrogant, sadistic, with a voice fat like his body. Another Guard, short and powerfully built, walked around and stood with his back to Thorsten where he was hidden behind crumbling stone.

Beyond them a short way whispered the deadly poisonous Canal water. It swirled with greenish light as the deadly Moonfish flashed yellow teeth in its mur-

ky depths. Ugly and ferocious, they could tear a human body to pieces, clean it to white bones in seconds.

Davis said, "We wait here. Anson spotted two of them coming out of these holes here last week to hunt. They bagged a couple of *khrimis*, then went back into their hole. We'll wait here and take them when they come out, if any get this far. If they don't come out, we'll pump this whole underground labyrinth with para-gas."

Davis' chest lifted, and his pale face lifted too, so that the moon shone full upon it. "We'll round all the rats up this time for sure. And we'll find out everything there is to know about them before they die."

The Guard standing near Thorsten laughed nastily. "Chief," he said. "I understand some of their women have grown up. Some are real lookers, too and—"

Davis growled, "Forget it, Logan. It doesn't matter how they look. Inside, they're different. Too different to play around with. Well—maybe a little experimenting wouldn't hurt anything—"

Thorsten felt his lips stretch tight and his muscles bunch in his shoulders. Any minute now, if any had escaped the trap, they'd be coming out through that hole and right into Davis' guns.

Four Guards with proton and para-guns. Thorsten had only a crude sword to kill *khrimis* with, for food. He couldn't do a damned thing except throw himself into a suicidal glory act.

As he frantically tried to think of how to get the Guards away, Lora Saunlon's white face appeared in the darkness of the opening. Beside her was Thompson's thin ascetic face, framed by bushy hair turning grey.

Thorsten stopped thinking and moved, very fast. The movement motivated a sudden desperate course of continued action.

THORSTEN brought a piece of heavy stone down hard on the near Guard's head. As the Guard folded soundlessly,

Thorsten dragged the proton gun from his belt and slammed its full capacity charge into the wall holding back the canal water. He sprang back deeper into the crumbling stones at the statue's base. At the same time he yelled:

"Back, Lora! Canal water—"

Her face faded away with Thompson's. They'd seen the poisonous canal water running wetly through leaks in the walls, splashing like old blood over the stones. Corrosion and age had thinned the rocks, and that blast from the proton gun had finished time's threat, released the surging deadly tide.

If Thorsten had fired one load, gotten one of the Guards, he would have left himself open to inescapable fire from the other three. This way—

His grin was thin with ecstasy as the Guards' screams rose on the cold air. He saw through a thin crack in the stones, the boiling flood of red and green foam, and the flopping hunger of the Moonfish.

Thorsten crawled back, circled the base of the statue. He peered through again and shivered. Already, two of the Guards had been reduced to shapeless blobs of reddened meat and whitened bones in the foot of water surging toward the sand-sled. Around them squirmed a slimy mass of Moonfish. Davis and the remaining Guard were running toward the sand-sled.

Thorsten dared not raise up to fire again, and anyway they were near to being out of range. He didn't want to waste the proton gun's charge. In the distance other heliocruisers and sand-sleds were approaching, cautiously.

He yelled for Lora and Thompson. They joined him, and the three of them ran.

Lora ran strongly and easily beside him, her long lithe body possessed an effortless smoothness of movement. Thompson was old, but he managed to keep up with them. He carried a neutron rifle, evidently salvaged from a Guard during the battle back at the ghetto. Blood ran down his face.

"We can't go back underground," he shouted. "Para-gas."

"Did any others escape?" Thorsten asked.

Lora answered, her voice dulled with the nearness of memory: "No others, Lee. We're all that's left."

They strained to increase their pace as Guards seemed to converge in a fast-tightening net. A strong drone of approaching heliocruisers and sand-sleds grew heavy. They ran along the canal edge, hard. Blood pumped bitterly.

Lora said dully, "Why do we run now, Lee? What's the use? Let's take the canal water. The Moonfish will give us a quick escape."

"The pyramid, Lora! Your dream was real! I found it, just as you told me. I even found the room, the doors—"

Her stride lengthened as new strength seemed to flow through her. He didn't have to tell her that one of those doorways might afford them an escape. She knew about the doors—knew more perhaps than she had told him, more than she was aware of herself.

They ran in a last burst of hopefulness, like victims in an arena, or small rodents before a pack of howling beasts. Their sides became walls of pain; their throats seemed aflame.

They ran through crumbled avenues, along toppling walls and the broken paving stones of what had once been a great sea-wall. Thorsten's diaphragm contracted to a knot of agony. Breath rasped like files in his throat. But somehow they managed to reach the base of the giant pyramid.

Five sand-sleds curved toward them, behind blinding search-beams.

Thompson dropped to one knee. He fired coolly, calmly, and black shadows erupted in sheets of ripping flame. Thorsten was stunned as shattered bodies and pieces of sand-sled soared, and fell again like metal rain.

Heliocruisers darted down in whirling patterns to escape more such marksmanship. Thorsten fired the proton-gun, then stopped firing it as he realized that

it was a close-range gun and that it was dissipating rapidly into ineffective power with distance.

He touched the hidden mechanism in the pyramid's base and the stone block swung inward. Lora seemed stunned by the material evidence of her dreams. He pushed her inside and backed in after her, calling desperately to Thompson.

Thompson yelled back. "Go on! Unless I hold them clear, they can get inside and onto you before the door can close."

Thorsten started after Thompson, but Lora dragged him back just in time as at least ten heliocruisers swarmed down and the area was suddenly a mass of deadly kinetic energy release. Thompson was still firing as a nova seemed to burst around him. He became white ash and drifted on the boiling wind.

III

SMASHING POWER thundered into the stones around Thorsten. He felt a sudden sick fading of strength as he staggered blindly back into the opening, and felt Lora's hands guiding him into musty coolness. He hung back, stabbed that hidden lever, and heard the creaking of the door beginning slowly to swing shut.

He was temporarily blinded by that awful flash of light, and it was no use thinking about staying there and guarding the opening.

"Hurry, Lee!" She was leading him. They were running, down and down, and gradually his sight returned in streaks of thinning grays. Lora was flashing a beam from his pencil-flashlight ahead of them.

"Some of them got through the opening," she gasped. "But I know the way too well. That will give us an advantage, maybe enough time."

But they'd be able to stay on their trail, Thorsten knew, because of the dust, inches thick on the stone floor of the winding corridor.

He took the light out of her hand, took

the lead, following his own previous footsteps in the dust. Down vertiginous angles beneath a solid world of gigantic masonry. Burrows, crypts, alabaster corridors and pillared halls, subterranean labyrinths, avenues of Titanic propylaea and age-constricted catacombs.

And then their strides faded to awed slow steps as they entered that incredibly vaulted room. It was vast and circular, the roof supported at an invisible height by columns of immensity. Thorsten circled the light-beam slowly, outlining door after door. Silently watching metal eyes waiting to open—into what?

It seemed to Thorsten that he knew. Yet didn't know.

"Yes, yes. I remember, so well now."

Her whisper was a stark wind echoing away through the forest of brooding columns. And then her words became confusing and meaningless to Thorsten.

"King Minos, and the scientist, Daedalus—they built it. They had a great scientific knowledge, Lee, but it was different from ours. I remember so much. It's all coming back, like interwoven clouds, like a book with pages missing.

"The dread Palace of Knossos, and Talos, the Metal Giant. Lee—I remember terrible battles on the high sea-wall. And Lee—you were there—with me! You had another name, a hero's name. . . ."

Thorsten gripped her arm. They stood there together, listening for sounds of pursuit. His mind tried to grasp her meaning. Now the names swam into a kind of distorted focus of meaning. Just the names, familiar names, but way out of any known context.

King Minos. Daedalus. Talos, the Metal Giant.

The Outcasts had taken many books with them when they'd been driven from the Colonial City. History made those names familiar. They were Cretan names, Earthean names. King Minos and Daedalus were Cretan, supposedly part of a very ancient Earth culture on a small island off the coast of Greece.

"I don't understand," he whispered. "Those names—Crete—that was an Earth civilization. You speak of it as though it was here, on Mars, in this past which you say you remember. I don't—"

"Lee, I still can see it clearly, much of it isn't there at all. But suppose that the pre-Homeric world of Cretan rule had a more ancient past—here, on Mars! Remember Earth history, Lee! A greater enigma even than Atlantis and Mu—Crete had an alien, unearthly culture! Minoan writing, it was never deciphered. It was alien. How alien? Maybe alien enough that it might have been Martian before it came to Earth."

Cretan civilization on Earth, thousands of years ago, a product of Martian civilization thousands of centuries older still. Incredible, but not impossible, perhaps not even improbable. But what could be the explanation?

Lora was staring at the doors, many oval metallic doors. She was whispering:

"These ruins were very much alive once, Lee. I was here. So were you. Some part of us that can never die, that is carried through the generations by germ cells, was here. Not reincarnation in the old sense of the word, but inherited racial memory that time can't kill. Mind isn't chained to any one time, I know that now. You were there with me, Lee. A conqueror, a hero. But your name was different. You fought King Minos—and the Minotaur who lived in the Labyrinth. The Minotaur—"

Her voice trembled. Her eyes darkened with dim-remembered fear.

"—the Minotaur. The Dark One. It ate the souls of men— Lee! It makes a difference which door we choose! Most of them are dangerous. They lead into terrible worlds in far galaxies that are too alien for human life. But this door—"

She took a faltering step, pointed. "I don't know the principle that Daedalus the Scientist used. He called this door one that leads into the *Corridors of the Past.*"

She looked at him. He drew her tight against him and wondered if it were all a mad dream.

"This door can take us back through time, Lee. Back to that past we carry in the cells of memory. When Mars had a civilization. A *human* civilization."

SHE GLANCED at another door, her hand reaching instinctively. "And this one," she whispered softly, "goes back to Earth."

Thorsten stared. "Back to—Earth. You remember that too, that one of these doors can take a person across space. . . that it opens onto . . . Earth?"

She nodded slowly. "Too bad we can't escape to Earth. Mother Earth—we've never seen her, except in pictures."

Yes, only pictures told of the pre-atomic beauty of Earth. But no one could return there now. The Colonists had come to Mars to escape Earth's last great atomic war. Earth was nothing now but a radioactive hell, supporting distorted life forms of strange and horrible abnormalities.

"Then," Thorsten asked, "this door is the safest one—and you say it'll take us back into Mars' past. Then in that past, I suppose we are to assume the personalities we had in that civilization that you claim to remember?"

"Maybe I don't know the principle. Daedalus invented this room and the doors for the pleasures of himself and of King Minos."

"But if we do that," Thorsten said, "we'll have memories of our present personalities, and of this time period."

"What's any different about that than living in this time and having memories of a past one? What's schizophrenia but split personality, two minds or more in one body? And might that not be one explanation for a schizoid psychosis? Memory of a past life that becomes conscious?"

Thorsten spun around, leveled the proton gun. "Whatever the principle, we'd better utilize it fast."

She, too, heard the sounds of near pur-

suit. "Or we'll end up in the Colonial vivisection labs. I'll take anything else. . . any door."

Into the far side of that vaulted room poured a stream of black-uniformed guards, with Davis in the lead. Hoarse shouts were a thundering sacrilege in that place where light and sound might have been only a remote legend. Flash beams swathed Thorsten.

Davis' voice: "Give yourselves up, or we'll blast you to ashes."

That would be all right, too, if you meant it, thought Thorsten. Death would be a quick escape from the lab torture. But Davis didn't mean it. His instructions were to bring in all the Outcasts alive, if possible.

As he turned, Lora had opened the door. The one she had said led into that past of Mars she remembered. Parabeamers sliced toward them across the swirling dust.

The opening was more than blackness. More than a mere absence of visible light. A terrific cold moved out over them. The sounds of the Guards diminished. Lora screamed as she entered it, and a black blade seemed to slice down, and cut her from his sight.

Thorsten grinned bitterly, only slightly moved now by fear of the unknown.

Corridors of the Past. Corridors of Death. Either was an escape.

New theories of time-travel had made it more than a fantastic possibility. Past and future, a kind of oneness, not something somehow separate. A temporary fourth-dimensional awareness, in which no three-dimensional time concepts could exist—something like that might allow the instantaneous time-jump to be accomplished. There was no reason that an intelligence living aeons before might not have found the secret.

Time was so variable, with consciousness. Both time and consciousness seemed inter-dependent, and both semantically meaningless. Thorsten had a pragmatic mind. If this black opening was functional, if he could escape through it, then—use it. And to hell

with the theory of how it worked.

Thorsten dived into that black yawning mouth. He felt a kind of meaningless shredding of pain. Consciousness seemed to fade, and mental torture twisted. And there was an ineffable sensation of tattered veils that drifted, drifted, back toward Mars' dark yesterdays.

IN THAT eternal flowing darkness the reforming components of Thorsten's consciousness felt and understood something of the principle of his experience, even as it approached its conclusion.

In this darkness his consciousness had become temporarily fourth-dimensional. With it came awareness of fourth-dimensional reality. In the fourth-dimension no such thing as time could exist as a three-dimensional mind, in its blindness, conceived of time. Everything, he knew, in all dimensions of space-time are interdependent. His fourth-dimensional awareness told him that. A three-dimensional mind saw reality through a peephole in a curtain, saw reality going past that small restricted opening. Now, with fourth-dimensional consciousness, Thorsten's mind had moved through that opening, into the eternal oneness of that higher reality of the fourth level.

Cause and effect had become one. Present and future had merged in his consciousness.

Thorsten's brain and his body floated in darkness. Removed from that body, his fourth-dimensional consciousness surveyed it, incredibly. The body floated stiffly, lifelessly in darkness, its eyes closed, and with no perceptible movement to denote that it was alive.

Only his disassociated consciousness lived. Its consciousness molecules drifting, drifting, to reform. Mind was not restricted to body. The nerve-cells of the brain, the neurones, established patterns of thought via synaptic circuits; and thought impulses were created by repetition over neural paths. Eternal electronic impulses were created. And these impulses, Thorsten knew, were

flowing, reforming in what a three-dimensional consciousness would consider the past of Mars.

But that wasn't the factual situation, not fourth-dimensionally.

A three-dimensional mind could have no comprehension of fourth-dimensional awareness. No two-dimensional being could imagine such a thing as UP. No three-dimensional mind could conceive of past and future as being one.

But Thorsten could temporarily, for this darkness was a temporary fourth-dimensional channel through which the electronic impulse of his consciousness could visualize the past and the future as one. His physical body faded into incredible and distorted distance. And his consciousness, with its fourth-dimensional awareness, swept on through the dark channel of eternity.

His consciousness stopped moving. Somewhere, thousands of years away in three-dimensional space-time, his body floated in a timeless darkness. But his consciousness was somewhere in Mars' past. There was no awareness of Lora Saunlon's presence, physical or otherwise. He lived only as a complex pattern, a labyrinth neural-circuit pattern of tiny electronic impulses. But—he lived.

He could live thusly, so long as that complex electronic pattern remained in the fourth-dimensional channel.

But if he moved out of the channel, he would have to have a three-dimensional body.

A body living in this far, three-dimensional past of Mars—

He would have to have a body.

He saw, as part of an incredible *allness*, a gigantic *oneness*, this far, far past of Mars. A vastly altered Mars from the dead dusty Mars he had known as the physical Thorsten. But it was Mars, he knew, because that was the familiar Phobos far away, dropping down—but not into arid desert now.

Into the sea.

A great sea pounding through the moonlight at a gigantic black basalt sea-

wall. And in the shadows of the sea-wall, a man lay—dying.

FROM his fourth-dimensional point of awareness, Thorsten's consciousness surveyed the body of the dying man. This was the body he must have in order to live again, in this past of Mars.

His consciousness shifted, moved nearer until he felt the dying body of the man, its vague heat that was growing cold. He hovered over the body, seeing it as through a misty veil, as something not quite real, like shadow lines on glass.

Horror gripped Thorsten's consciousness as he hovered there. There was something terribly wrong with the dying man, something beyond the mere fact that he was dying. He was a giant, and—the physical characteristics of him were the same as Thorsten's other body had been. The man dying looked just like Thorsten's other body—

And something—something had taken

its soul, and its mind from it.

The body hadn't been wounded. It lay dying in the shadows by the sea-wall, because its soul and its mind had been sucked out of it, monstrously, and no will left it as a means of survival.

Thorsten's consciousness sent out exploratory feelers. The dying man was just a body, dying fast. Its mind was a blank, and there was nothing of that other intangible will or force called soul. There would be nothing to keep the body alive—unless Thorsten's consciousness moved in and made it live.

The dying man's brain was already practically dead. The neural-connections no longer functioned through the short-circuited synapses.

The man's mind had been drained of its tremendous electronic power, like a battery run down. Its neural paths necessary for surviving thought processes had been ripped and torn as one might rip the wires from a still rotating generator.

[Turn page]

"You don't need glasses...you need Wildroot Cream-Oil hair tonic!"

"Says he's got to save the Wildroot Cream-Oil because it's his hair's best friend!"

"If he's ashamed of having dandruff why doesn't he use Wildroot Cream-Oil hair tonic!"

YOUR HAIR'S BEST FRIEND

AMERICA'S Favorite Hair Tonic!

BEAMER KELLER

His fourth-dimensional awareness gave Thorsten's consciousness the necessary knowledge to move in. It was like a roving field of electrical energy being sucked into a whirling generator, and stored in cells, only a thing of an incredibly vaster complexity, as though there were millions of generators and millions of cells in countless circuits and cross-circuits.

And the dying man's empty cells sucked Thorsten's consciousness out of his fourth-dimensional channel. His own consciousness took over that body, its brain—replaced the neural-connections of that injured brain much as one might rewire the coils of a generator. Thorsten's consciousness established itself in the dying man's brain, established new neural connections in one tremendous flash by projecting the full field of its electronic impulses.

A screaming explosive shock swept over that mind as the transfer and absorption took place. The black channel of fourth-dimensional awareness ceased to exist.

Thorsten lived again, in a new body that was much like the body he would have thousands of years in Mars' future. It was his body now. And it was not dying.

As the shock blotted out awareness, and he lost consciousness, he wondered if Lora had also been successful, if she had found a body, or was still hovering in that unbelievable fourth-dimensional channel of darkness.

It took him a long, long time to regain his senses, able to feel his new body knowing again the will to live that it had almost lost.

He lay there in the damp cold moonlight, his eyes closed, gathering himself together slowly, experimentally. And slowly he became aware of things. Of whom the body had belonged to before it had been sucked dry of its electronic brain stuff. Of why it had been sucked dry. And by *what!*

He remembered his name. Lee Thorsten. He remembered the far future of

Mars—with himself and Lora and the Outcasts fleeing from the Colonial Guards. He remembered Lora Saunlon's directions leading them to the Pyramid and the door into it, and the flying descent into that vaulted room and the doors.

And, incredibly, he remembered something of what had happened to the mind, the ego, the soul, of the man who had had this body before him. Shattered, short-circuited, parts of the dead mind still carried recognizable patterns which Thorsten absorbed. He had established his own dominant electronic impulses into the brain's neural-connections. Yet some of the predecessor's electronic personality-impulse patterns remained.

His name had been *Theseus*.

And he had been thrown into the Labyrinth to the Dark One.

To the Minotaur!

IV

DIMNESS faded out, fast. The Dark One. The Minotaur. Theseus.

His brain leaped with light and feeling. A naked sense of reality moved over him. He'd come back through time to a lost Martian civilization. He had entered into a body that looked like his body had always looked, but it was a different one. And with a different name. *Theseus*.

There was no part of Theseus' consciousness, his neural-connective impulse patterns called memory, remaining. The last of it had died. But before it had died, Thorsten's own dominant consciousness had absorbed its sketchy broken pattern, and had rapidly pieced some of it together, enough to know where he was, why he was here, what had happened to him.

Thorsten sat up. Spray drenched him, and against his back he felt the great sea-wall tremble with the pounding of the surf. Thick shadows protected him from men who would come to slay if they knew he was alive. For it was his body, and the name of his body, that they would want to kill, had already tried to

kill. The fact that his body was now controlled by Lee Thorsten's mind would be incomprehensible to those who would seek him. They had put Theseus in the Labyrinth. And his body had been drained of its life-energy, its electronic life-impulses by the Minotaur.

He looked down at his dimly visible body in the half dark. A silken tunic flattened wetly against the smooth dark swell of muscles as he moved. He felt the strength and skill of this body. Associative conditioning had given it a high degree of physical action skills. A warrior's body. Though Theseus' mind no longer controlled it, its reflex conditioning would still enable it to act as Theseus' body had always acted, instinctively.

Thorsten breathed deep. He had come back to live in a much earlier, much younger Mars. Where the red desert of dead sea bottom would one day stretch, now rolled a cerulean blue ocean. A younger Mars, and he was here. Alive.

But there was a catch to it. On this younger Mars, the name of Thorsten was unknown. This body was labeled—Theseus. And it was supposed to be a lifeless husk. It had been thrown to the Minotaur, and its soul drained out of it. If they found that, somehow, this body had survived the Labyrinth, and that it was still alive—they'd be on him again. He'd be returned to the Labyrinth.

Thorsten sat there, gathering himself together, getting perspective. He knew that he was in great danger. He peered through the shadows. He saw no one near. Lora Saunlon's consciousness might have found a nice convenient body to move into. And then again her consciousness might still be in that timeless fourth-dimensional channel, waiting, searching for a body.

If she had found a body, moved into it, what body was it? What was its name? It might be very hard to find out.

But he—he was Theseus, so far as this younger Mars was concerned, and he'd have to try to survive as Theseus. The conquering hero, who braved the Laby-

rinth of the Minotaur to rescue the people of Crete from that Dreadful Dark One.

But that would be Earth legend thousands of years from now. And this was Mars. He shook his head. It still didn't make sense. It had to get to Earth somehow. But according to the legend that would result, somehow, Theseus was supposed to have descended into the Labyrinth below the Palace of Knossos and defeated the Minotaur.

That hadn't happened. Theseus had been killed by the Minotaur. His body had been dying here, and only a fantastic circumstance had brought it to life with Lee Thorsten's consciousness as its new owner.

He sat up straight on the wet cold stones of the wide sea-way.

I am Thorsten, he thought grimly. Here, I'll be called Theseus, and I'll have to suffer the consequences. Later, somehow, this will all get to Earth, and in legend I'll become a Greek. But I am not a Greek. I am on Mars. Theseus sailed here across a Martian Sea, in a dragon-prowed ship from a distant barbaric island called Cimmeria.

He came here to the Martian capital city of Knossos to trade, ostensibly. In reality, he came to loot, and to prey on rich merchant ships.

Thorsten shook his head in confusion. As Lee Thorsten he had done none of those things; yet before Theseus' neural-connection impulse patterns had died completely, Lee Thorsten's mind had absorbed part of Theseus' memory.

"I didn't do those things," Thorsten thought. "Theseus did. But this is his body. This body did those things. I've got to remember that here I'll be Theseus to everyone, and that I'm so well known I can't disguise that fact."

He decided he'd have to be careful, go slow.

THORSTEN moved back until he was sitting in deeper shadows. He didn't want to start moving until he had collected his scattered self together a little

more. Thorsten concentrated on what he had salvaged from Theseus' dying memories.

Theseus had sailed here to Knossos with a full crew. The crew had been captured by the Etruscan Guards, those deadly mercenaries—warriors of King Minos. They had been fed to the Minotaur. Theseus had escaped, and had remained hiding in Knossos, swearing to avenge the crew. He had stated his intentions to the fear-haunted slaves of this enslaved land. He'd vowed to destroy its ruling tyrants, and save this land from their horror.

Theseus had sworn to kill King Minos, and Daedalus, and the Minotaur—the Dark One of the Labyrinth—and Ariadne the evil Cybele who wore a live serpent around her slim bare waist, and Talos the Metal Giant.

In attempting to seek revenge, Theseus had also been captured and thrown into the Labyrinth, where he had met and had been destroyed by the Minotaur.

There was something of Theseus' terrible hatred for the tyrants of Knossos in Thorsten now. He felt that hatred flaming and growing. Perhaps, he thought, hate and love and revenge are alone immortal, carried in the timeless cells of memory.

Beyond the black basalt sea-wall, many ships were moored, multi-colored square sails glinting in the moonlight, rolling and rocking gently in silver mist. Around him, Thorsten felt the massive mountainous city of brooding masonry, and felt the fearful soul of it. It lived now. But its life was furtive and afraid, and shadows crept through alleyways to some hidden last-chance joy den. Life here was more a temporary indisposition, for no one expected to live tomorrow.

Dark-skinned, giant Mercenaries, the Etruscan Guards, armed with tridons and swirling nets, were always hunting stragglers off the streets. Hunting them for sacrifice.

Sacrifice to the Dark One of the Laby-

rinth, the dreaded Minotaur. King Minos, who ruled this Martian capital city of Knossos and played games with human souls in his Palace of the Dreadful Night, aided by Daedalus and Talos and Ariadne.

Thorsten slid up the wall, his body feeling the difference now, the smooth oily ease of his muscular movement. He felt a rising exuberance and confidence, a mad wine of life that raced through his veins.

The moon flames of Phobos dropped around as he leaned forward to probe the trembling shadows. He felt the long sword clang against wet stone. Danger. Always danger. There was no escape. Neither to other worlds, nor back through time, could a man find release from it.

The similarity of situation hit him. In that far Martian future, he would be escaping from the tyrants of Colonial City and from Davis' Guards, resisting them, fighting them, but finally forced out of the fight.

Here, it was Minos and Daedalus and Ariadne and the Minotaur and Talos the Metal Giant, and the Etruscan Guards, that he would have to fight. He'd have to fight now, even though, as Lee Thorsten, he might not want to fight anymore. Theseus' body had started it. Theseus' body was trapped by its own commitments, regardless of what Lee Thorsten's consciousness now wanted to do about it. Theseus hadn't known, but Thorsten knew that Minos and Daedalus probably ruled by the possession of high scientific knowledge in a world of savage superstitious fears . . . a world of fearful slaves, who looked at Knossos' rulers as masters of supernatural powers. To the rabble, and to Theseus, their power had been supernatural. But Thorsten knew better. Scientifically trained, he recognized, from what he remembered of Theseus' dying thought impulses, that Minos and Daedalus ruled by science. Magic became science when a man could bring it under control and use it.

Thorsten could use it. Thinking of the horror with which Minos and Daedalus ruled, Thorsten straightened.

I could succeed in Theseus' task perhaps, he thought. I could succeed where Theseus, with his great courage, but also with his barbaric ignorance, failed.

Maybe I could defeat, destroy the Minotaur. . . .

THORSTEN watched shadowy forms slip furtively and fearfully through the half dark. He looked out over the sea-wall at the ocean. Cold mist sprayed him. He breathed deep, as does a captain without a crew or a ship.

He remembered again, in greater detail now, the shreds of memory left him by the departed mind of Theseus. . . .

How the Etruscans had captured his entire crew as soon as they had moored below the Knossos sea-wall. How the crew had been taken to feed the Minotaur.

And Theseus, escaping the Etruscans, while his crew was being transported to the Labyrinth.

Later, Theseus had seen his crew—after the Dark One had fed.

Seen them as they marched out of the Labyrinth, out through a great opening in the sea-wall—a long line of horror. Living-dead, husks of men, drained of life-stuff, marching soul-less and mind-less to the sea.

Then lonely Theseus, standing alone atop the high sea-wall beneath the shadows of Knossos, and swearing his revenge. Not only vengeance for the crew, but for the hundreds of citizens who were herded each week into the Labyrinth so that The Dark One could gut its alien belly on human souls.

One man alone, Theseus the Cimmerian, to defeat King Minos, Daedalus The Artificer, Talos the Metal Giant, and Ariadne the evil Cybele, the female harpy who had personally thrown men and women and babies to the Minotaur.

The citizens heard of Theseus' vows. They had laughed, tremblingly, then fled in terror to hide like rats.

Theseus had not been able to fulfill his oath. Captured, dragged before King Minos and Daedalus and Ariadne on their gemmed throne in the Palace of Dreadful Night, then hurled into that terrible dark Labyrinth, and then—

Thorsten stopped thinking about Theseus then.

For then Theseus himself had stopped thinking as the Minotaur moved upon him and sucked him, dry of his ego, his soul, his electronic mental energy. Like the others fed to the Minotaur, Theseus had wandered out and through the city toward the sea.

By the sea-wall he had fallen. There he would have finished dying. But for a miracle.

I am that miracle, thought Thorsten grimly. A miracle for which Minos and his crew will be sorry before this legend is done!

Thorsten lived in Theseus' body. He decided that he might as well try to fulfill Theseus' destiny.

His eyes darted both ways along the stone highway beneath the sea-wall. Wet stones glistened in the light of rushing Deimos. He started warily along the darkly shadowed stones. Across the street were many hidden joy-dens and hostelrys where a man could rest and find out which way the latest death-wind blew in this City of the Night.

A form scuttled from a drainage canal through the wall. Before Thorsten could move, he felt the three sharp needles of a tridon dig into his side. He froze. A cracked dry voice rose shrilly to his ears:

"I've been watching you, Theseus. At first I couldn't believe you really lived—that the Labyrinth hadn't destroyed you. I sent word. Soon the Guards will be here. Before you were taken and sent to the Labyrinth, King Minos offered a talent of precious metal for your capture. Now that you have gone to the Dark One, and have escaped, perhaps he'll give even more. And I am such a poor old woman, brave Theseus. I have dreamed so long of wealth. Of perfume

to make me smell like a queen."

She laughed like a trembling reed. There was awe and fear in her voice, Thorsten knew, at seeing him alive when he had been in the Labyrinth. His skin crawled as he swung his eyes toward the voice.

V

A HUGE six-legged rat scurried into the sea-wall. Thorsten shivered as the cold metal of the tridon dug more deeply into his flesh. Blood flowed in a warm trickle down his thigh. A little wizened creature, sexless and ancient, her face covered with moles, crouched with a bent and rusted tridon. Her hand trembled on the haft.

Thorsten spoke. It was strange, feeling the greater strength of Theseus' body, reacting to his own mental commands. It was stranger still to find himself talking in halting Cretan language. His physical body had acquired the habit pattern over many years, to respond to certain mental impulses with Cretan words. The fact that those impulses now came from Thorsten's mind didn't alter the reflexive response. He spoke as his vocal chords had been conditioned to speak.

It was also long conditioning that enabled him to hold the sword hilt so eagerly, so skilfully gripped. He said, with a dry laugh in his words, "You threaten me, old woman. I—er—Theseus, who would try to save the lands of Knossos from the Dark One? Remember, I have been to the Labyrinth, and escaped."

The hag's laughter rose to a shrill cry. "No human can rid Knossos of the Dark One. Not even Mighty Theseus."

Thorsten thought. "Maybe not. But maybe I can. With luck. According to the legend that will somehow get to Earth thousands of years from tonight, I *have* to."

"Ah, Theseus. From Hyperborea and Cimmeria they sing of your prowess and courage. How you slew the fire-

dragons and led the pigmy armies against the sea-gods! But you're only human, even though you did some way or another get out of the Labyrinth. The Dark One is not of this world, but of the Netherworld—and no human power can destroy it. It demands hundreds of souls each day. Soon it will demand thousands. Soon it will devour this world. You alone perhaps can escape it—but you can never destroy it!"

Thorsten shivered. The hag shuffled nearer, toothless gums wetly gleaming. Her eyes were youthfully bright in the wrinkled husk of her face, shining with greed. A talent of precious metal was a fortune in Knossos.

"You're doomed anyway, lovely boy," she cackled. "So why should not I, Old Visha, live well for the little while I have left? Eh?"

Thorsten thought desperately. He had to get away from this old monstrosity. But one slight move, and she would cripple him at least with that damned tridon. Yet he had to get away fast, because she had said that she had summoned Guards. He felt the sword gripped in his hand, his body between it and the hag. One quick body twist and he could draw the blade free, slice her in two. The thought sickened him. He had Theseus' bodily skill, but not his barbaric mind. Yet he would have to do something. Maybe he could talk her out of it, or talk her into being the victim of some kind of trick. . . .

"Old lady—I've vowed to destroy the tyranny of Minos and his crew. Many might follow me to attack the Palace, if they see that I've escaped the Labyrinth. Have you no memory of loved ones whose souls have been sucked dry by the Minotaur? Would you sell their memory, old one, for a talent of metal?"

The tridon trembled in her leathery fingers. Her eyes blinked. "All those I ever loved have gone to the Dark One. My three daughters were sported with by all the monsters of Minos, while he laughed and watched the play. But I no longer have hope, Theseus. Death and

fear—that is the evil sun that lights the dreadful palace of Knossos. Theseus, when faith and love and life is fading fast, can hope then remain? No, no, Theseus! I'm old. I'll give you over to the Etruscans, and with my one talent reward I'll live my final hour like a queen!"

Many feet pounded around the corner of a nearby building, came in toward them rapidly. The old hag's voice screeched as blazing tapers smoked, and voices echoed near:

"Guards! Guards! Theseus is alive! ALIVE! And I have him. Theseus, you understand. He's escaped the Labyrinth, but Old Visha has him again. . . ."

Thorsten was ringed by the giant, dark-skinned Etruscans before he could move—Etruscan Guards with gleaming tridons and strongly woven nets.

THE guard captain's thick-lipped face stared in awe and disbelief that slowly gave way to triumph as he saw that the body of Theseus actually had survived the Labyrinth, and apparently had escaped without having been soul-eaten by the Minotaur. He swung his hands in a sweeping gesture and lowered his sweating face as at least twenty Guards closed in tighter around Thorsten.

"By Rithno! It's Theseus all right, men. And he looks as much alive as ever he did. Alive and right in our palm."

The hag screamed fearfully. "Take

me to the Palace! To the Palace! One talent reward is mine. I can live like a Queen. Old Visha—"

The Guard leader laughed brutally. "You can die, like the filth-eater you are!" He smashed a balled fist into her face. She screeched and fell clawing at the wet stones. The side of her face oozed blood.

The Guard leader held a tridon at her throat. "A talent among us, men, is still a fortune. Maybe there'll be an alternative of choice rank in the Admiral's Navy!"

The ring of brutish faces cheered. Still holding the tridon over the hag's throat, the Guard said to Thorsten, "Ready to die in the Labyrinth this time, hero?"

So far none of them had put a hand on Thorsten. Softly he said:

"Are you ready to die—here?"

It was the long-conditioned, splendidly moving body of Theseus that acted on Thorsten's impulses then. His sword whipped free like living flame, flared in a blur of motion that lighted up the shadows. A *swisshhh* and a dull thud sent the Guard leader's head rolling down the stones, staining them the darkest red of all.

The headless torso lurched as though to fight, then pitched against the seawall. He heard Visha's mad cackling laughter as he saw the grinning head of the Guard leader staring sightlessly up at him.

[Turn page]


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A stunned silence momentarily paralyzed the rest of the Guards. Then their eager angry shouts rose thunderingly. They closed in.

Bright frothing wine of combat flooded Thorsten's mind as he felt the skill of the body he now controlled, that was now his. The body trained by Theseus' slain consciousness possessed skilled swordsmanship that was legendary through the Cimmerian Seas and beyond. The blade slashed like a great hungry ax. Thorsten's heart soared with the hot blood-surge of battle.

He side-stepped a tridon's thrust, even as he slipped through the strands of a swirling net. His sword sheathed half its length in the guard's belly.

A guard went to his knees with blood spurting from his breast. His lips parted in a crimson grin. His voice bubbled. "Who would regret dying—by such a blade as yours—mighty Theseus—?"

A chill ran down Theseus' backbone as the word whispered around him. Theseus . . . Theseus . . . he felt like the man's ghost. His sword hissed twice, swift as a swirling snake. The two guards fell, quickly. One grinned up from the stones and called out weakly as he died:

"There can be but one Theseus—only a slightly less honor to be his victim—"

Thorsten fought, thrusting, ripping, slashing, blade singing, until red sweat dyed his arms from fingers to neck. Around him, the dead began to form a small wall. The red drip of his sword became a running stream.

Blood rivuleted the stones like red veins in black skin. His sword smashed aside needle-pointed tridons, smashed half way through a guard's chest before the steel stopped. Screams and wild laughter tore the curtains of night as the maniacal, battle-maddened Etruscans leaped in.

Thorsten slipped in the blood of the street. Recovering balance desperately, he found the folds of many nets closing around him. He jabbed through, and a piercing scream died as the eleventh

guard grasped his middle and sank down.

Another Guard reversed his tridon, brought the heavy haft down again and again on Thorsten's skull. Another blow opened his head. He drank the salt blood trickling down his throat. It ran stickily into his eyes, blinding him.

He heard himself babbling, and the blows became a dim drumming on his far-away skull. A sensation drifted over him. He was sinking down and down into a crimson mist. A girl—familiar—who should have been Lora Saunlon—but here she had a different body. And a different name.

The body and the name of Ariadne, the Cybele of Evil!

A live serpent encircled her slim sinuous waist, its red eyes glowing with feverish hunger. Could beautiful sweet Lora have become Ariadne, somehow, as she desperately tried to find a suitable body to allow her to escape the fourth-dimensional channel? Ariadne, that monstrous, blood-drinking harpy!

Visions changed. He was drifting into formless unconsciousness. And his last clear thought before blackness moved in was of—the Dark One.

In the Labyrinth, the Dark One waits me, his fading consciousness thought. And I shall wander soul-less and mind-less. Even as Theseus wandered, and died.

The legend says that I shall go into the Labyrinth and fight and defeat the Minotaur. As Theseus, I am to do it. Theseus failed. How can I expect to succeed? How can Lee Thorsten do what the mighty Theseus could not do?

But it was destiny. The legend would live.

VI

AS THORSTEN'S senses returned through lessening layers of pain, he felt himself being carried effortlessly by the huge Etruscans. Then he opened his eyes on a sight, both horrible and somehow ecstatic—monstrous and abnormal

—and incredibly beautiful. Inhuman symphonies of sound bathed his body and filtered insidiously into his brain.

Dim taper light cast a reddish glow. Pain, like harsh files, seemed to rasp back and forth over his skull. Black-robed priests walked on either side of the Etruscans, carrying halberds.

But drowning out all the inhuman sounds and sights of this dreaded Palace of Knossos, this Palace of the Night, was something else. The slow metallic lumping of giant footfalls behind them, following. A feeling of insufferable fear clutched Thorsten's mind. And he knew that he was reacting as Theseus would react—perhaps as anyone would react here. It was difficult to hold down fear and remain rational.

The hall through which they carried him was vast, supported by massive columns, and the Cyclopean footfalls rang and thundered between the black basalt walls.

Thorsten managed to strain his eyes around and look behind him through strands of imprisoning netting. For one moment, sheer terror gnawed. A deeper terror than that inspired by thought of the Minotaur. This was real, and it was here.

And it lived.

Talos.

Talos the Metal Giant.

The giant of legend whom Minos and Daedalus ruled. Only part of the creature was visible. The rest of it was lost, high up in the densely smoking shadows. Thorsten shut his eyes, fought down panic. Perhaps some dim remaining part of Theseus' dead consciousness remained to fill him with hints of supernatural, non-human fear.

But it lived. Thorsten repeated to himself. It was real, this Talos. Perhaps it was a giant robot constructed by Daedalus in his hidden laboratories. For Daedalus was a scientist, with command of technologies the equal of any science Earth civilization would produce in an inconceivable future.

Regardless of its form, Talos was con-

structed of basic elements and energy and matter, and it could be destroyed.

The fading memory of dying Theseus had left knowledge of Talos in Thorsten's mind. Of how the monster was a common sight, striding through the city streets, his feet stomping the rabble, his metal arms crushing.

And there were yet other things in Minos' Palace of the Night. Things that no one had ever seen, other than the Etruscans, and lived to tell about. Tapers fought weakly against the thick dark. The air was dank and cold. Lizards darted damply through shadows, small and eyeless as though light was alien.

The Guard carried him finally into a canopied chamber. The netting was torn from him and he was flung down at the foot of a dais. He came to his feet, forcing down the nausea of his pain and weakness. He blinked in the tapers' red light. He looked up at the red-stoned dais. Three figures sat there, motionless, deadly. Three figures on a three-seated, heavily jeweled throne.

These were the three who ruled Mars in this ancient past Thorsten had fled back to. King Minos, Daedalus the Artificer. And—Ariadne the evil Cybele.

And Ariadne the murderess had the figure and the face of Lora Saunlon.

For a moment Thorsten closed his eyes; swaying with surging, paralyzing horror and rage. He tried to understand how a lovely, sweet girl like Lora could have carried racial consciousness, racial memory, of Ariadne the hideous.

Had the same thing happened with Lora as with himself? He had found a conveniently dead body to move his conscious thought-impulse patterns into out of the fourth-dimension. Just coincidence that the dying Theseus' body had resembled the body Thorsten's consciousness would occupy in the future, the body he had escaped from, the body that hung suspended in fourth-dimensional timelessness.

Or was it coincidence? Could it be coincidence too that the body of Ariadne

resembled exactly in form and structure the body Laura Saunlon had also left in that fourth-dimensional channel of darkness?

Or was he jumping to completely unwarranted conclusions? The fact that Ariadne and Lora Saunlon's different time bodies were identical didn't mean that Lora Saunlon's consciousness now occupied this body sitting so coldly before Thorsten, looking down upon him.

Perhaps Lora's consciousness had tried to enter this body and failed. Maybe Lora's consciousness still waited in that fourth-dimensional channel, waited hopelessly for a way to escape from it as Thorsten had escaped.

Thorsten had a feeling that some part of this body, at least, was Lora Saunlon. But it was the emotional reaction of seeing a body so identical to hers that might explain such an assumption. Who sat on this throne in this body that looked like Lora Saunlon's? What mind dominated it now—the evil murdering consciousness of Ariadne? Or the kind graciousness and loveliness of Lora Saunlon?

She was unmoving, like something carved from pale alabaster.

He couldn't tell.

Only the serpent encircling her bare waist moved, its lambent scaled coils rustling softly with a horrible, whispering threat.

ON HER right was King Minos. A huge pile of splendidly robed fat, white and formless and sweating. A huge head that was hairless, and beady searching eyes, unblinking in folds of gray putty-like flesh. And Daedalus, small and still in a simple gray robe, his face bony and gaunt, his eyes flaming like deeply-set rubies of blood.

Thorsten looked again on the soft naked flesh of—the body—but what body? Her whisper struck him, flowed around him like delicate thunder.

"You—you are Theseus now—?"

Surging joy at this question hit Thorsten—but was short-lived. There was a

ring of recognition in it. She, or whatever consciousness was in this body, knew that Thorsten was in Theseus' body. But—Thorsten groped for explanation—could Lora have tried to enter Ariadne's body, and something happened to kill Lora's consciousness, leaving Ariadne's consciousness still alive and dominant but retaining memory of the destroyed Lora's mind?

The way Thorsten's consciousness had entered the dying Theseus' body was probably not the only method of escaping from that fourth-dimensional channel.

Thorsten looked directly into the enigmatic eyes in the face of Ariadne.

"I am—Theseus!" He said that for the benefit of Minos and Daedalus. He knew the great advantage of their thinking he was Theseus, of not having any suspicions that the consciousness of a man who understood their science, who was not controlled by superstitious fears, dominated this body. They had sent Theseus into the Labyrinth. Fear, ignorance in the face of super-science, had probably been the factors that had caused him to fail. But now Thorsten would go to the Labyrinth again, and as Thorsten he might stand some chance.

He stared into the female harpy's face. Lora's face, and Ariadne's face. But it had to be one or the other. It couldn't be both. Or could it? Now! Now he could see the gleam of recognition in her eyes. Some part of Lora was here, all right! This was the icy cruel body of Ariadne, but Lora was here too, somehow. How much of Lora, or what her fate had been, he might never know now. Before Minos and Daedalus, she was helpless to act.

Around her slim bare waist, the green and blue serpent coiled. Its flat pointed head darted out. Its jaws unhinged, yawned, and its forked tongue flickered inches from Thorsten's face. He stumbled back, fighting the physical fear of her and this serpent vassal.

They had thrown his sword disdainfully at his feet, and now he grabbed it

up and stood with it crossed before him. His eyes flickered over the coiled energy-guns the three tyrant rulers wore around their waists. Deadly weapons, he knew. They were very much like the flashguns that would be used in that future time he had escaped from. Strange, remembering the future as being something done, past.

He knew those weapons' method of function, and he knew how to discharge one of them. If he could only get one—

MINOS chuckled, and his body trembled. There was a slight note of puzzled alarm in his voice as he stared at Thorsten. *This man had been thrown into the Labyrinth—and lived!*

"You escaped the Minotaur, Theseus! No man has ever escaped before. Your reputation must be justified. But still, you're only human. Tell me—how did you escape?"

Thorsten laughed coldly. "I'll no more tell you that than I'll tell how I'm going to kill the Minotaur. And you, Minos—and you, Daedalus. And—" His voice faded as he looked into *her* face.

Minos' eyes glittered. "Some freak accident allowed you to escape alive, Theseus. There'll be no escape this time. No mortal can escape the Dark One."

Thorsten kept looking at the woman ruler, supposed to be the daughter of King Minos. Legend would say that she would fall in love with Theseus, help to save him from the Labyrinth and the Dark One. Legend would say that Ariadne—

This was Ariadne's body. What name was her soul?

The priests marched away in bowed processional.

The Etruscan Guards ringed Thorsten from behind so that he was helpless to obtain the rulers' power weapons. By the time he fought his way by sword to the dais, he'd be burned to ash.

Fear tinged the sadistic humor of Minos as he talked of the Dark One.

"Theseus, there are so many other ways you might die, here in my great

Palace, than by feeding the Minotaur. The average citizen of Minoa is no good except for soul-fodder to the Dark One. But you, Theseus—you have a great heart, and we could make much sport of you."

"Daedalus has built many play-rooms for me. He constructed for me a room with many doors. Doors into other worlds and times—and these worlds afford me so much pleasure. One world I have just discovered, Theseus—I could have much fun watching you if I sent you there for a while. Ah, but the Dark One below us, in the Labyrinth, is so hungry—and he mustn't be denied . . . again."

Minos turned fearful eyes toward a gigantic bronzed door to his right. "Again you will go into the Labyrinth, to the Dark One. Minotaur is always so hungry. And the more he feeds, the larger he grows. And the larger he grows, the hungrier he gets!"

Minos blinked at the granite-faced Daedalus. "Perhaps he will grow too large, Daedalus!" His voice rose to a trembling cry. "Daedalus! Soon we may have to leave this wonderful Palace you have built for me. Minotaur may grow so large he will have nothing left to feed on!"

Daedalus smiled thinly. "Why worry, my King," he said with stiff irony. "We have traveled galaxies and meta-galaxies. Many worlds have been our abodes. Anyway, I already grow weary of this world. A thousand years is long enough in one place."

Minos nodded, seeming to relax, his eyes once more centering on Thorsten.

"Yes, you are right, Daedalus. If Minotaur grows too large, we can move to another world—go through the doors to a world rich with food and play."

Thorsten said, "Have you forgotten me? Perhaps you would furnish refreshments while I wait?"

Quiet laughter shook Minos' massive bulk. "Only Theseus could face the Dark One with wry humor." He clapped his hands together like ripe sponges. "Re-

freshments for the twice-doomed hero," he roared. "You shall have food and drink, Theseus. It is a good joke. I like certain kinds of funny things. While you eat, I'll try to figure out the mystery here. The mystery of *you*, Theseus!"

He is mad, thought Thorsten grimly. Sometime, on some far world, this creature called Minos, and this other called Daedalus, learned the secrets of time and space, learned to build the doors and the corridors into other worlds and into other times. But they're both mad. Mad, and perhaps not human, except in form. But even their form looks unreal.

Inhuman intellects with concepts born of some distant cosmos.

WHILE Thorsten felt Minos and Daedalus studying him, naked slave girls served him, their skins iridescent and powdered with gold and silver dust. Eggs, broiled fowl, honey cakes, heaped platters of fruit. There was more and more, and Thorsten tried to make his professed hunger and lack of fear look good. He managed to force some of it down. It was even more difficult to make it stay down.

Minos was worried because this man he thought to be Theseus wasn't afraid. Well, let him worry.

Minos said softly. "There is mystery here. Before, you quaked and frothed with fear. Now you have escaped the Labyrinth, and you stand here without fear. Don't you know that you can't escape the Dark One a second time?"

"I know that this time the Dark One will die," Thorsten said.

Minos started. His eyes narrowed.

Daedalus coughed. "You might almost be—someone else—not Theseus at all."

Thorsten shivered.

Minos sighed and sank back, his eyes still probing at Thorsten.

"Perhaps even a crawling human can learn bravery," he said. "Especially Theseus. There is one world I would like to send you to, with a heart like yours. It is populated by strangely constructed giants, partly organic, partly metallic.

I brought Talos from there. I wonder if you could live long in the giant world of Talos?"

Thorsten moved slightly, caressing the hilt of his sword. So that was the answer to the mystery of Talos—for what it was worth now. Its alienness was explained. Minos had brought it through one of those doors from some distant world of giants.

A roar broke from beyond the Minotaur's barrier. But not any familiar kind of sound. It wasn't sound, really, Thorsten thought with a violent shudder of his muscles. It was thought—mental radiation. And it beat upon the mind inconceivably louder and more terribly than any vocal sound.

Minos whispered, "Minotaur—Minotaur—"

Minos' eyes rolled in fear. His massive bulk trembled. Daedalus merely turned, and Ariadne leaned slightly forward. Her bare breasts, tipped with rich red and sprinkled with golden dust, were like two stones. Her lips were compressed to a thin wet line like crushed rose.

Dared he ask her outright if she were Ariadne in soul—or Lora Saunlon? What had he to lose now? He had nothing to lose—but if this were Lora Saunlon's soul, *hiding* in the body of Ariadne, then she would lose a great deal—she too would perhaps feed the Minotaur.

He tried to say farewell with his eyes alone. He dared not lift what might be a protective veil from the one he loved. Her eyes held no answer for him.

That alien blast of mental sound came again, hungry, avidly monstrous.

"Quick!" Minos shriled at the Etruscans. "Through the door with Theseus! The Dark One is hungry, can't you see! Quick! This time you will die, Theseus!"

The Guards were all over him, making even a physical attempt at escape impossible. Many nets whirled, and his sword was useless. They dragged him to the towering metal of the door. Five other Guards strained and the door swung ponderously open. A hideous

odor floated out. Thorsten staggered, drunken with nausea. The smell of death, of fetid alieness, of mountainous hunger, enveloped him.

They hurled him into the blackness. He fell sprawling on moldy stones. He dug his fingers into crumbling mortar to keep from sliding over the brink and down into the waiting dark.

The scream of her voice followed. One long despairing cry. And it wasn't the evil husky tones of Ariadne. It was her body that called after Thorsten—but the voice was Lora Saunlon's:

"Lee! Lee! My darling—my darling—wait for me!"

VII

THORSTEN strained, trying to crawl back up the steep incline, get back to the closing door. He heard Minos' shrill scream from beyond it, in the Council Room:

"Ariadne! What are you doing? Don't go in there . . . we can't open the door again—the Minotaur—"

Daedalus' voice. "That name — she didn't say Theseus! But Lee—Lee! Something's wrong, we've been tricked, my King! Guards, stop her! Stop—!"

Thorsten glimpsed the momentary flash of her white nakedness slipping through the door just before it clanged shut. Then darkness drowned Daedalus' order, and the further sight of her. But he felt her beside him. A fierce joy surged through his veins as he felt her hands on him.

"I should have known it was your consciousness inside Ariadne's body, Lora." He was relieved to find that she no longer wore the serpent girdle.

"And you, too," she said softly through the dark. "I knew you were Lee the moment they brought you in."

"How did you get into Ariadne's body, Lora?" he asked then. She hesitated, and he hastily explained his own experience.

"That's about the way it was with me," she said.

"You mean you found Ariadne, also dying?"

"Yes. And it was the same as with you entering into Theseus' body. Some dying part of her mind remained long enough for me to learn a great deal of Ariadne's life—what she had been and what she thought."

"But how was she dying? If she was injured physically, then how can you—"

Lora Saunlon's voice hesitated in the dark. Then she said softly:

"She was in love with Theseus. Minos and Daedalus didn't know. When Theseus went to his death, Ariadne went insane with grief. She was dying, Lee, not physically, but mentally. Her consciousness was disintegrating, crumbling. That's what enabled my consciousness to move in, much as yours moved into Theseus. It was much harder for me, I think. There was a kind of struggle. But the neural-connections of the brain, Lee, that makes integrated mind—they were shattered in Ariadne's brain. It was like a faulty generator, and a weakened battery. The neural paths of my own consciousness were easily planted, as yours were, after that struggle ended."

"Let's admit it," Thorsten said grimly. "We have but little understanding of what really happened. We can be thankful that we made a successful transfer in time. Or we can be sorry, seeing our present situation. Whatever reaction we take, the fact is that we don't know anything, or very little, about how we made the transfer back into this past of Mars. A three-dimensional consciousness is as helpless trying to understand the fourth-dimensional as a two-dimensional man would be trying to figure out the third."

"I'm glad I'm with you, that's all," she whispered.

Her thick perfumed hair fell dark over Thorsten's sweating skin. The warmth of her body was soft and full and he felt her face against his. He kissed her, and her lips were clinging and wet, and her body quivered in his arms.

"Maybe we don't realize it, not fully," he said hoarsely. "That we're in the Labyrinth of legend, with the Minotaur."

"Maybe we don't realize it fully, but we're here all right," she said. "On Mars. And in a time that must be thousands of years before Minoan culture will go to Earth. Thousands of years B. C. of Earth time. But somehow, this story will get to Earth, Lee, and become a part of Earth legendary history. I have faith, Lee. For in that future history is the fact that two called Theseus and Ariadne do escape the Labyrinth and the Minotaur. We're in their bodies now. So we must escape somehow."

"History can be distorted with retelling, and misinterpretation," Thorsten said. "But we'll soon know the facts."

Fearfully her arms wrapped around him. Her breath exploded in a cry of fear. The narrow support of stone was dropping beneath them into the steep decline. They were sliding helplessly down into darkness.

THEY were spilled out onto the floor of a deeply buried corridor, some, where in the Labyrinthine maze below the Palace of Knossos. It wasn't entirely dark now. A green phosphorescence of light glowed with Luciferin softness from dripping walls. A sense of insufferable alienness and age closed around them. Behind them, the plane of stone that had dropped them down, raised and disappeared into the dark above.

They walked ahead with common accord, to meet whatever waited.

"What is it, actually?" Thorsten asked, his eyes trying to probe the alien dimness. "This—Minotaur?"

The long lacquered nails of her fingers dug into his arm.

He asked, "Can a man fight it with any chance of winning, Lora?"

"According to the legend that will grow from this," she said softly, "Theseus will fight it, and win. But I know very little about the Minotaur, Lee. In fact, I don't know very much about

Minos, or Daedalus, or this city."

"You acquired some of Ariadne's knowledge, the way I did with Theseus, didn't you?"

"Yes. But Ariadne knew very little of this dreadful place, and the Labyrinth. You see, Minos and Daedalus—they aren't really Martians. They came here to Mars from another world. But the other citizens of Knossos—they're natives of Mars. They're human, but they're Martian. And that can mean only one thing, Lee. There are no human beings on Earth now. Earth will be settled by Martian colonists, later. Right now it must be thousands of years before any human life started to record their presence on Earth for future investigators to find."

"Possible," Thorsten said. "Fantastic, and yet anthropologists and archeologists in that future time will be puzzled by the fact that civilized man, whom they will call Cro-Magnon, seemed to have appeared suddenly, without predecessors. This might be the explanation. Earth will originally be settled by Martians; not a new idea in theory. But certainly one in fact."

"Lee. It's hard to get the new perspective. Think of it! From where we are now, in time, Earth has no human life—only non-human, ape-like creatures such as Neanderthal and the like, which future scientists will think are evolutionary stages of man's development. But man is really here, on Mars. And somehow he'll migrate to Earth, taking along all this legendary business about Minos and Knossos, and the Labyrinth and the Minotaur, and Icarus—and Theseus—and Ariadne—"

"Or," Thorsten interrupted, "maybe Minos and Daedalus will go to Earth, too. Because there *will* be an island on Earth off the coast of Greece called Crete and Minoas. And they will have the legends there of the Minotaur and all the rest."

She nodded. "Yes—and I wonder how and why?"

They walked warily. Finally she said,

"Ariadne wasn't really Minos' daughter, Lee. Ariadne was born of a Martian slave girl—she and her brother, Icarus. Minos raised them as his own, trained them to be considered, and to consider themselves as minor god-rulers in Knossos. Minos and Daedalus thought it would be a good idea to have such a connecting link with the people they enslaved. But they taught Ariadne very little about their science and power. She was really just as much of a slave as her much less fortunate slave people."

They walked on a way in fearful silence. Thorsten finally said:

"Well, future Earth legends say Theseus will defeat the Minotaur and escape this Labyrinth—but I say that history could become distorted way out of context, and that we might die here. You say you have no idea what the Minotaur is, nor what chance we have to escape it?"

"Nothing for certain, Lee. The Minotaur is a monster from some far, alien world, and it was brought here to Mars just as Talos was—by Daedalus, who built the vaulted room with the many time and other-world doorways. And they imprisoned it here in this Labyrinth so it couldn't escape and run wild over Mars and feast without control. Wherever Minos and Daedalus came from, Lee, they're masters of a great science."

"We know something of science too," Thorsten said. But somehow that fact didn't give him very much confidence now. "What I want to know is, how will Martian civilization—this culture of Minoa and Crete and the Labyrinth—reach Earth?" —

Lora stared ahead of them, lips slightly parted. Finally she whispered, "There's a hint of that in my mind, but I can't see it clearly. But one thing I know—one of those doors in that vaulted room under the pyramid—it opens onto Earth, Lee. Maybe that's the way—through the door—"

Thorsten said, "We'll find out everything sooner or later—if we live."

DANGER, alien and gigantic, waited ahead of them. Thorsten could feel it in the damp smothering air, smell it, sense it with every straining nerve as they walked.

Lora whispered, "Lee—I know that Minos and Daedalus are no more human than Talos or the Minotaur. They somehow manage to put up an appearance of human form—but it's only surface. Beneath that human facade hide forms and minds alien to anything human. God knows what far world they came from, or what their real form is!"

He thought of that, then said: "We're in a bigger mess than we will be in that far future we came back here to escape from. Davis, and the Control Guards—human beings, at least."

Lora shivered violently. "Yes, we're much worse off now. Vivisection in the Labs of that Colonial City would be preferable to what the Minotaur does—draining a human body of its soul, or whatever it is that makes human beings human. What you tapped from Theseus' dying memory must tell you what Minotaur did to the members of your ship's crew!"

Wrath shook him. "Yes, I know."

"Lee, it's so horrible, horrible! Hundreds of people herded into this Labyrinth. Those who come out are mindless and soul-less. They wander like victims of some awful plague, through the streets. Finally they walk out into the sea to die. And the others, those who don't come out of the Labyrinth—other monsters destroy them. This Labyrinth is full of other things, Lee, that Daedalus and Minos brought through the doors from other worlds."

"Monsters," said Thorsten softly, "Maybe they'll become a part of Earth's legend, too."

They rounded a turn and stood at the edge of a gigantic cathedral-like enclosure. Black walls rose in a great square, up into invisible heights. The floor was ankle deep with a greenish, glowing, slightly undulating slime. Semiorganic tendrils of blood-colored lichen with

and whispered from the walls. The enclosure was so huge that Thorsten seemed to bend beneath the weight of emptiness.

Something rushed without warning from the twilight shadows.

Something monstrously female, with huge teeth like yellow tusks, with brazen claws and snaky hair. Its skin glowed with sulphurous yellow lights that shone about it like a ghastly aura. Its hair writhed with hundreds of pulpy living tentacles.

Thorsten choked back horror as he slid his sword free. The creature's arms were long and writhing and boneless. Feral hate blazed from the hundreds of eyes in the heads of the snakes that coiled and twisted on its head.

Lora screamed. "That's not the Minotaur—"

As Thorsten raised the sword and rushed in to meet the creature, he was thinking in a flash of bursting recognition:

The Medusa! The creature so hideous that it turned people to stone. Medusa . . . whatever world Daedalus brought you from, Earth will still thrill to your horror thousands of years from now.

He manipulated the heavy sword in his hands, half-paralyzed by fear and panic. He felt the keen blade smash through one of the snaking tentacles. The Medusa shrieked as part of the arm fell and flopped in the muck at Thorsten's feet. A yellowish fluid spurted in a steaming cloud.

And what name will I have then? Thorsten was thinking as he rushed in to strike the hideous head. For killing the Minotaur and braving the Labyrinth, they'll call me Theseus. And for this act, will they call me Perseus? Or something turned to stone?

VIII

THORSTEN'S sword blade was still upraised as a tendril of cold leathery flesh closed about his wrist. His arm was

suddenly frozen. His knees caved, and the sword dropped from nerveless fingers. The stone-freezing cold began seeping through his veins.

"... creature so hideous that it turned people to stone..."

The mouth of the Medusa opened as it raised him easily, brought him close to the coiling mass of reptilian hair. A thousand tiny red eyes looked at him with the nameless hunger of something damned and lost to the world of human reason. A breath of sickening air floated over Thorsten's face. He stabbed thoughts frantically toward his muscles and nerves, but there was no reaction. Only that steady, seeping paralysis. And then he saw that his left hand was moving—slowly, with awful pain. And finally that hand was gripping the Medusa's slim writhing neck.

But he knew that it was his last physical movement so long as he remained in contact with the Medusa—the hand frozen like a stone vise around the writhing throat.

A terrible scream ripped from the thing's mouth. The snake-hair darted out in many coils, snapping at his face. Then he heard the clanking of metal, and Lora was lifting the blade to strike.

The blade fell, the bright steel bit deep into the Medusa's body, and the thing's arm uncoiled, released Thorsten. He fell to his knees, trying to force life back into his paralyzed nerves, while Lora's body was a straining arc, trying to pull the sword free from the Medusa's leathery flesh.

Its boneless arms and its ferocious snake-head trembled. Scream after whistling scream tore from its wounded torso. As life came back again to Thorsten, he ripped the sword from Lora's hands. His muscles strained as he brought the blade down in a long and desperate slash.

The Medusa's head fell into the slime. The body fell. It began to crawl, blindly, in erratic circles. The severed head pulled itself along by its snaky tentacles. Slowly, slowly, it died. The serpent hair

uncoiled, and dropped, each separate head sighing, each tiny pair of eyes fading slowly out of life.

Thorsten leaned on the sword, gasping at the foul air. Lora leaned back toward the wall—then shrieked and leaped away as dangerous tentacles of semiorganic lichen slithered softly, whispering after her.

Thorsten held her tight against him. She shivered, and uttered little half-animal noises of fear.

They were standing that way when the gigantic shadow shape moved toward them out of the surrounding vastness of the Labyrinth.

Her whisper barely touched his ears. A sound that came from far away it seemed, like a voice over stagnant water:

"The Dark One—Minotaur—"

It was horror. It moved. It lived. But it was galaxies and meta-galaxies and incomputable light years removed from anything remotely human or Solar in structure or thought.

A breath of wind whispered over Thorsten's sweating body, cooling it like icy breath. Something colossal, of constantly shifting shape, moved nearer. Tendrils of monstrous thought reaching out, exploring, retreating, reaching further. . . .

Something stirred, incredibly, through Thorsten's body. From far down within his mind an awful scream of terror rose and burst from his lips. It was the memory of Theseus' dead consciousness—a mind motivated by superstitious terror. Thorsten's mind pushed it down again, partly buried it as he tried to maintain objectivity.

Hatred and hunger was a breath of engulfing flame. Fear rose and marched over him and over him again, in a gigantic cloud, smothering, compressing. Fear marching and marching back and forth with deadening and formless feet.

He felt his muscles twitching. He held himself tight and rigid against another such convulsion, for he knew that if he gave way now, he would die of fear.

His hair stiffened on his scalp. Somehow, he managed to speak.

"Legend will say I am to kill you now, Dark One. I am not here to feed you, as have thousands upon thousands of others. I am here to see you destroyed. . . ."

Brave words. Thorsten shivered, retreated before smashing waves of palpable lusty rage and hunger. Words were meaningless, thoughts meaningless, to the Minotaur. It understood only that it must feed—

FROM what seemed a great distance he heard Lora Saunlon's voice crying, cracking beneath the weight of fear. Something breathed in Thorsten's mind. Something far greater than mere fear. A loathsome feeling that clawed at his brain, crawled with a million prickly footsteps. Pools of alien menace licked at his mind. Whiplashes of mental torture ripped and slashed.

His eyes blurred as he bent forward, tried to see, understand, find some foundation upon which he might stand to launch an attack, or even resist, the Minotaur.

He could see it, vaguely. A monstrous shadow, like partly erased lines on glass. But it was real. It lived. And its memory would live through the ages to come, powerful enough to jump space and grow with man's racial memory on far-away Earth.

The Minotaur. Distorted by time and retelling, it was something away from the tropisms and taxis of any organic life within the Solar System, the limit of human expansion in space. Something of super prescience, it seemed unreal floating there. It seemed misty and vague. But Thorsten knew that in whatever world Daedalus' science had brought it from, it had been a solid entity.

Here, it fed on life-stuff. In its own far, far world it might not have been life-stuff that it needed to survive. There perhaps it had fed on substance as common as the air and sunlight that gives human organisms life. But here, on

Mars, an alien environment to which Daedalus had brought it for Minos' pleasure, it was starved. And its food, here, was the electrical energy that made man live and breathe and think and dream—the stuff that gave him soul.

And without it, a man became a withered husk, soul-less and mindless, that sought merciful and final extinction in the sea.

Perhaps on its own world it was even of high intelligence; but an alien kind of intelligence that somehow couldn't function with integration here on Mars. Here it was victimized by monstrous hunger, forced to feed unnaturally. It ate to fill an inexhaustibly omnivorous belly, one that needed the life-stuff of a man's nine million brain cells. Not the stuff of one man, but of hundreds, and as it grew, of thousands. And, here on Mars, it must always starve, for its food was unnatural.

The more it fed, the larger it grew and the more it needed to live and grow larger still. And if that were true, Thorsten's reeling mind thought wildly, then its growth might be limited only by the amount of human life-stuff available on Mars!

And then he heard Lora Saunlon's voice cut through to him:

"Lee! Can't you sense it? The Dark One is—afraid!"

Afraid? The Minotaur? Thorsten staggered toward its alien shadow. He felt Lora's fingers dragging at his shoulder. Her words were indistinct, her screams barely touching his mind.

The Minotaur was sucking at his brain. He was weakening, fast.

He fought. He fought with all his power. He fought with all the dominant power of himself as Lee Thorsten, and with all the warrior-skills conditioned to this body through the dead Theseus' long bloody career. The punishment was pitiless. Each attempt to meet the Minotaur's thrust was met by bursts of force that tore his nerves to quivering threads.

His mind screamed. The part of him that was Theseus cowered deeper and

deeper from fear, and buried itself completely in terror. Thorsten was down on his knees in the half-living slime. His hand was frozen around the sword's hilt. Then Lora's voice got through to him, shrilly and frantic with horror.

"The power weapon, Lee! The neutron gun! I have it with me, Lee. Remember? Each of us—the three rulers—carried one! No such power has ever been used against the Dark One—"

Dimly, Thorsten managed to answer: "Fire—fire the gun—"

"I can't—Lee! I can't! You—"

His fingers scrabbled blindly. He felt the weapon suddenly in his grasp, cool and deadly. His fingers found the small slide that would release deadly streams of atom-shattering power. His fingers released the safety lock.

He staggered to one knee. Gigantic fear pulsed around him as he pressed the firing stud. Unveiled force struck upon Thorsten's consciousness. As he fell, the deadly atomic weapon sang with fierce radiating power from his hands. He felt the sudden giving-way before him. He crawled ahead blindly, the gun blasting out its shattering, devouring force.

The atom-shattering streams from the gun drove back the Minotaur. Thorsten got to his feet, lurched forward, continuing to fire.

And suddenly, with a parting burst of malevolent hunger and hate, the Dark One fled, flying in fearsome streamers far away through the miles of its Labyrinthine maze.

THORSTEN lay on his side, gasping, only partly conscious. Lora was a blurred image, swaying over him like something seen through watered glass. Then her eyes seemed to swim suddenly into terribly clarity.

"It's vulnerable to that kind of power, Lee. But it will take a lot more to destroy it. It's gone—but it isn't dead."

He gasped weakly and managed to sit up. The twisted and torn fibers of his being gradually fitted themselves back

together again into a kind of working unity.

He stared into the shadows. His voice was thick in his throat.

He whispered, "Legend will say that a man named Theseus met and defeated the Minotaur in this Labyrinth. But Theseus was dead, and anyway he couldn't have known even how to fire this weapon. An unknown name met and defeated the Minotaur. Lee Thorsten. A name no one will ever know, on Earth. Ironic, isn't it? Fear and ignorance and the Minotaur destroyed Theseus, really. But he'll live forever, because my consciousness gave his body life when it should be dead."

He laughed softly, and shrugged as he struggled to his feet and stood swaying drunkenly. "It's not so easy to be a hero, when another name gets the laurels."

She said, "True heroes aren't interested in laurels. I guess you aren't either really, or you wouldn't have carried on

in Theseus' name. It's the deed that counts, Lee."

"I guess so." He stared, then shook his head slowly. "Anyway I'm glad you finally remembered you had that power weapon strapped around your waist."

She nodded. "I was so shocked for a while, my mind wasn't working at all. And you know how I've always had a neurotic fear of deadly weapons like that anyway, and never would learn how to use one."

He stooped, lifted the severed head of the Medusa. The dead serpent tendrils dripped and fell down around his up-raised arm like fronds of a giant fern.

He said, "I'll take this—in case we can find our way out of this Labyrinth. It'll be proof that we've been in the Labyrinth again, and that its monsters are vulnerable. The idea that I've been here twice, and escaped to tell of it, should give the people confidence in me. My idea is to start a revolution—a people's

[Turn page]



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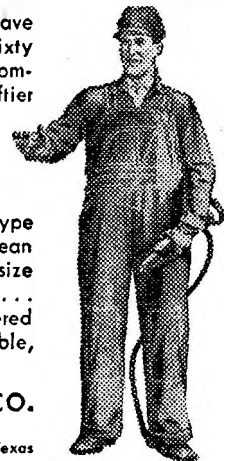


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march on the Palace of Knossos!

"You and I will try to find Daedalus' laboratories, or Daedalus himself. There should be more such power weapons where this one came from. Maybe we can put the necessary power in the people's hands to escape Minos' and Daedalus' tyranny, and destroy them—and the Minotaur."

She repeated his own words:

"If we can find our way out, Lee—"

THEY STARTED walking, striking off into a side corridor. A sulphurous yellow twilight settled about them.

Thorsten said, "There's got to be *some* way out!"

"There's a way out, Lee, if we only had some hint of how to find it. Don't forget the Minotaur's victims; their soul-less bodies find their way out. Something guides them, for they have no reasoning power of their own."

Talk died between them as they walked. Lora's face was pinched and white in the glow from the semi-organic lichens on the corridor walls. Tendrils of pulpy-pale vine slithered softly after them.

Thorsten stopped, suddenly, held up his hand. Something had suddenly registered as his mind sought an answer to the problem of an escape. He felt it—a subtle, almost unnoticeable push of air current—

The gentle push of it was feathery soft, but quietly insistent.

He grabbed her arm. "Lora! That soft wind against our backs!"

She stopped, her hair drifting ever so gently at its tips in that feathery wind. Thorsten turned around several times, and again he noticed that constant push of hidden air current.

She said joyously, "Yes, yes, Lee! You've hit it! We feel it, and having minds, consciousness, we might resist. But the Minotaur's mindless victims wouldn't have any resistance. They would be guided by this slight wind!"

He nodded grimly.

She closed her eyes, her body turning

in that subtle breeze. "Yes," she whispered. "drifting on the wind, like dead, dry leaves."

He gripped her hand and led her after him, in the direction of the Labyrinthine wind that would take them to the sea.

IX

TIME STOPPED having meaning. Meaning stopped, as they wandered with the wind. All meaning stopped because horror drowned out all meaning. As they wandered, they did not wander alone. Not alone in body—but so terribly alone in mind and soul.

For they were joined by lines of walking dead that possessed neither.

Long wavering lines of living-dead bodies that walked with them, trickling in from tangent corridors, all guided to the sea by the quiet wind.

White and wrinkled husks that moved in stiff blindness, with pale unseeing eyes staring ahead, and nerveless fingers reaching, into the future, into the grave they sought for resting. Dead-alive victims of the Dark One's alien hunger.

Women and children—old and young men, crippled and once splendidly strong—dead leaves rustling and floating along the subterranean gutters, shuffling soul-less and mindless to the benevolent sea.

Thorsten, gripping Lora's cold moist hand, thought of old Visha's words:

"Theseus, when faith and love and life itself are fading fast, can hope then remain?"

Lora's whisper seemed a sacrilege among the dead. "What?"

"An old woman, who would have sold me for a talent of silver, said that."

They walked on among the soul-less things who had one hope remaining—the hope for a final rest. It was like some dark delusion of a dream, the spectral wanderers of an unholy night. What strange and nameless spark remained in them that kept them walking, weeping silently for a final sleep, kept them drifting silently toward the desert ocean?

For a moment they seemed symbolic

of all life to Thörsten—a blind longing and groping for peace.

Terrible rage against the inhumanity of Minos and Daedalus, and the foul Minotaur they had brought from some far Sun to Mars, rose and boiled in Thorsten like flame. And the words of a song that would not be written for aeöns yet to come slipped into his mind on padded feet:

“... *this is the festival that fills with light that Palace, in the City of the Night.*”

Thorsten thought of this incredible Labyrinth around him, dense, ancient, intricate. He thought of the black basalt city of Knossos overhead. Black and shining and fantastically turreted, the gigantic reflection of a Titan's dream. And of how, in some way yet unknown, that city and its legends and fears and triumphs, its very human life forms, would be transferred to Earth, and would be studied by future generations of Earth as a small, unique culture on a small Mediterranean island called Crete.

The name of Theseus would live on in those legends. Lee Thorsten, what would happen to that name? Had he come back through time to play a vital role in the intricate cause-and-effect mechanism of time-space movement, only to disappear into the tapestry of eternity?

A cry escaped Lora. She clutched his arm and moved faster with the faster-moving lines of the dead. “There's an exit, Lee! We've made it—out of the Labyrinth!”

THEY FINALLY emerged into night through a cave-like opening debouching from the base of the sea-wall of Knossos onto a rocky beach, a shoreline of black brooding stone beneath the towering wall. Whispering victory sighed from gray lips as the soul-less ones brushed past Thorsten and Lora in a kind of senseless ecstasy, and rushed into the silver breaking waves.

Thorsten breathed deep of the tangy ocean air. Then he turned and stared up

through the bright and brittle moonlight. High above, all along the seawall's top, the faces of Knossos' citizens stared fearfully down at the emitting horror.

Lora stiffened beside Thorsten. Back at them gazed frightened unbelieving eyes as men saw him—alive.

A whisper floated through the night, like the faint beginnings of thunder in a storm-threatening sky:

“*Thescus . . . Theseus . . .*”

Thorsten felt a savage grin, curl his lips back tight on his teeth.

Theseus! Thorsten! What did it matter? If a man lived as a hero, what mattered the name he was given? And after a hero was dead, he would no longer care.

Thorsten straightened with triumph, his heart singing with savage joy, as he lifted high the hideous dripping head of the Medusa.

He leaned far back. His voice carried high and strong through the bright beams of the moon, lifted loudly and brightly.

Thorsten yelled his thirsting revenge to those who gazed awe-strickenly down. Far out behind him, where the soul-less were marching into their ocean tomb, Phobos rode the last pale shine of sun over the distant sea-rim of Mars. The city of fear crawled with desperate life, Thorsten knew. It needed one timely bomb to explode that fear into destructive and sweeping hysteria.

His voice thundered against the sea-wall:

“I am Theseus! I've escaped alive twice from the Labyrinth!”

Theseus—Theseus . . . the echo trembled away over the water.

Thorsten smiled grimly. They had to call him Theseus, and that was good enough. If he told them he was a man called Thorsten, it would be meaningless. Theseus was their hero. Theseus was the name they would follow to hell itself.

“Have you forgotten, slaves of Minos? Have you forgotten that I vowed vengeance? That I would defeat the Mino-

taur, that I would battle the Dark One and come out of the Labyrinth to tell of it? Have you forgotten me, slaves of Knossos?"

The answering cry drifted down, echoed over the lonely sea:

"Ah, Theseus, mighty Theseus! We shall never forget!"

One lone voice followed:

"Are you really alive, O Theseus? We saw you march from the cave with the others who are dead. You have been in the Labyrinth, really? And are still with the living?"

Thorsten threw back his head and laughed. It was a crazy, climbing laugh. He hurled the hideous head of the Medusa. It rose up and up through the moonlight, its dead tendrils spinning. It arced and fell smashing into the mob above. Screams and cries of ecstatic terror greeted it, and then a deathly stillness.

"I have escaped the Labyrinth, and I live! I've survived the monsters of the maze. There is the head of the Medusa. The Minotaur is in flight, hiding. Minos and Daedalus are trembling with fear. Now! Now is the time for revolt. Tonight we march against the Palace of Knossos. Carry the head of the Medusa as a banner before you. Tonight will end your slavery and hell. Tonight we become the men of Knossos!"

Thorsten dragged Lora near him. He gripped her shoulders, bent her back so that her hair and her face were starkly outlined in the silver moonlight.

An incredulous cry, a chorus of fear and surprised triumph broke overhead:

"Ariadne! Ariadne!"

Thorsten whispered in her ear, his lips thinly drawn: "You, too, are to be Ariadne in legend, my dear. As I will be Theseus. Though we are neither."

"*The Cybele!*"

"Yes," shouted Thorsten. "Even the Cybele of Knossos is with us. Now, with her, we have great power equal to the most deadly power Minos and Daedalus and Talos can throw against us. Look! Look men of Knossos!"

THORSTEN raised the deadly neutron gun. He released a small charge of its crushing power against a section of the sea-wall further down. A dreadful heat and a trembling roar echoed over the city. A blinding glare billowed over the area, lighting up fear-shaken faces and bulging eyes. A great section of the wall billowed out. Molten matter spilled hissing and steaming into the sea.

A freeze of silent awe settled over the spectators as Thorsten belted the neutron gun, and with Lora beside him started scaling the deeply indented face of the sea-wall.

Almost at the top, he heard the sudden outbreak of clanking arms, the screams of the suddenly dying. He heard the self-defiant, half-terrified cries of the citizenry, the brutal cursing of the Etruscan Guards.

Thorsten breathed an oath. "Lora! We've almost got them ready to march on the Palace. We can't let their spirit break now . . . we'll never be able to start it again."

"Tonight, Lee!" she whispered fiercely. "It must be tonight."

Together, they leaped up and over the wall. Thorsten whipped his sword free and tossed it to a giant, splendid figure of a man, bronzed and half naked, his torso crossed with scars and long oily black hair shining in the moonlight, a ferocious barbarian from the Outer Islands of Mars.

"Use it well, barbarian," shouted Thorsten. "And you can keep it."

"Aye! I'll use it, Theseus! I'll use it!"

Many citizens were fleeing the slaughter like sheep. But many others were remaining, fighting helplessly, buoyed with the new defiance and courage given them by the presence of Theseus.

Theseus . . . Theseus . . . Ah, Theseus, thy name is legion. . . .

Thorsten laughed above the din of battle. He grabbed up the head of the Medusa. He swept it in a fierce arc, and it splattered into a lunging Etruscan's

face. A bellow of horror choked in him and then the giant, golden-skinned barbarian grasped the Guard's throat with one hand and chopped his skull with the bloody sword.

The tridon fell from the dying Etruscan's hands. Thorsten swept it up, stabbed its three prongs into the Medusa's head. He raised it high. Around him the few score members of the rabble rallied—and before the hideous banner the remaining Etruscans fell back.

"Join us, Etruscans," shouted Thorsten, "or die! We march on the Palace of Knossos tonight! You are mercenaries. You fight for Minos because he pays you well in talents and women. Fight with us, Etruscans, or you'll be paid with death!"

The rabble's voice rose in a stormy thunder:

"Theseus! Theseus has returned from the Labyrinth! Theseus has fought the Dark One. Theseus still lives."

Fighting against inner terror, the Guards pushed forward. Tridons flashed, nets whirled.

They called him Theseus, but it was the scientific mind of Lee Thorsten, who had returned through time to join psychic forces with the body of Theseus, that fired the neutron gun into the advancing body of Etruscans.

Where the Etruscans had been was suddenly a boiling cloud of red destruction. From across the wide sea-wall highway, from the rows of wine-houses of the waterfront, hundreds of newly-inspired enforcements were surging toward Thorsten now. Ragged rabble with faces lighted up with a hope that had scarcely ever been born.

Thorsten leaped back atop the sea-wall and faced them. Below him, the giant barbarian and several other self-appointed disciples of their hero, faced the mob.

Thorsten kicked the barbarian in the back. As the man looked up, Thorsten shouted: "Your name, barbarian? You used the sword well enough. It's yours."

"I thank you, Theseus!" The bar-

barian's face stretched in a fierce grin. "I am Conan the Cimmerian. I came from your land, Theseus. From the wilds of Cimmeria."

LORA was standing beside Thorsten now on the wall. She gave them courage, all right. For a long time the name they had associated with her body, Ariadne the Cybele, had struck terror into their hearts. They had given the blood of their loved ones to the thirsty stones of the Cybele's sacrificial altar. She had thrown them to the Minotaur.

But it was the mind of Lora Saunlon controlling that body now, a fact that would be inconceivable to the people below even if one tried to explain. The names they had brought with them from the future, Thorsten thought, could not live here in the past.

Thorsten raised his hands, and the yammering cries for vengeance died as they stared in awe and then listened, nervously shifting their feet.

"Ariadne and I will go on to the Palace. Her powers will enable us to break down the barrier of wizardry that surrounds Minos and Daedalus and Talos the Metal Giant. We'll prepare the way for your attack on the Palace!

"Go! Spread the word throughout all of Knossos. Send the word on ships over the sea. We march! March tonight against Minos! March tonight against a thousand years of tyranny and blood sacrifice. March tonight against unholy fear!"

Streams of revenge-hungry men surged away in a roiling, tattered river.

A fierce wind began to grow and grow into a whispering thunder through the city of Knossos, and into the Palace of Dreadful Night:

"Theseus. Theseus has returned from the Labyrinth. Theseus has fought the Dark One. Theseus still lives."

Thorsten leaped down from the sea-wall, Lora beside him. He pushed the tridon holding the Medusa's head into the arms of Conan the Cimmerian. A fierce savage joy glowed from the bar-

barian's face as he took and raised the hideous banner.

"Lead them, Conan. When we blast down the Palace Gates, lead them in behind us."

"Aye, Theseus."

"Collect the rabble army, Conan. We'll have the walls of wizardry shattered by the time you can lead them to the Palace."

Conan's huge hand gripped Thorsten's. He said simply:

"You'll be remembered, Theseus. Even should we fail and die tonight, your name will have given us the hearts to die as men."

Conan turned, and the Medusa's head rode above him as he leaped away, and a surging stream swung after him, flowed down the wet dark bed of the street.

Thorsten and Lora ran toward the Palace gates.

X

NO SAVAGE Etruscans challenged them now. Pools of armed men gave before them, drifted back into shadows before the figure of a woman they had learned to call Ariadne, and the giant body of a man they had learned to call Theseus.

The incredible Palace loomed before Thorsten. He stopped and felt dwarfed suddenly by the gigantic pile. It was an alien's dream fitted torturously into a vague semblance of human concept. Brooding black stones rising mountain high, straight from the sea. Endless colonnades and balustrades and turrets from which strange lights, flickered, sometimes limning faces and forms for which no human mind could find a name.

They moved, edging along the base of the wall until they came to a massive gate-chapel, a looming propylon of Titan columns set with dull and sullen gems. No Guards stood before the propylon. It had never needed Guards.

Thorsten raised the power gun. The metal doors melted down. They walked

into a hall. A strange twilight lay over the interior of the Palace. A stranger quiet drifted through the silent halls. They walked.

Thorsten thought of Minos, then, as a magpie. A cosmic magpie that had collected things organic and things inorganic and God knew what else, from other galaxies and suns and worlds and times, and stocked this Palace with his loot.

His collection was here, filling halls and rooms and gigantic amphitheatres. Huge aquariums housed drifting tides of horror and unspeakable beauty. Arenas contained things that fought endlessly and forever, on sand soaked with the bloods of a hundred worlds.

A mighty tapestry of colors rippled and quivered and shook around them. Reeling music, thin and enchanting, rose and fell in tides of sound, swelling to thunderous tone poems, sinking to rippling arpeggios. The sigh of fingered strings whispered, murmuring minor notes in a distant key.

No human concept had built and stocked this Palace of the Night, Thorsten thought. No human mind can appreciate it. A human can only try to destroy it, before it destroys all humanity, all the things man will do through the centuries to come.

Columns around them reached so high that clouds of thickening mists hid their summits; up there strange shapes glided on leathery wings, battening on other flying monsters of different form.

Shrill cries and deep roarings filled the air. Shapes glided in and out of shadows. Countless eyes raced along the walls, and tendrils whispered and murmured from the drying husks of semi-organic growths.

"Wait!" Her voice touched his ears like the sudden sharp touch of ice.

She stood, tense, her hand on his arm. She was listening, eyes wide.

"Lee—I don't know how I know—maybe I'm not sure. But Minos and Daedalus—I don't think they're here now."

"What?"

"They are afraid of us—and have run away, left the Palace. There's only one place they would go to, Lee—the vaulted room beneath the pyramid out on the desert. The room with the doors. They're going to leave Mars, Lee, if they can."

Frustration and rage filled his throat, a terrible anger. "But you don't know that! They've *got* to be here. I'll find them! I'll tear this pile down stone by stone—"

"Lee! When a world grows dangerous or boring to them, they leave. That's the way it's always been with them. For aeons, they've traveled thus, across unknown space and time, from world to world. . . ."

She moved closer, as though for warmth. She looked into his eyes. She whispered:

"That may be the answer, Lee. Remember, I told you that one of those doors Daedalus built leads to Earth. Ariadne heard Minos and Daedalus talking of Earth—of its rich green unsullied beauty. If they escape this world to another, it will be Earth they'll go to. And that's the answer—if they do escape, Lee! That's how all this legend of the Minotaur and of Theseus and all the rest will get to Earth, and grow with its history! Perhaps Minos and Daedalus will settle on that small island off the coast of Greece, and call it Minos, after this land. And build a city, like this one, and call it Knossos, after this city. . . ."

She hesitated, swayed as though intoxicated by the concept—"But the Minotaur, and all the people of this land—will they too be transferred through the door to Earth? How? Why? Lee—I know there are no humans on Earth now! All this legend of Crete—and human civilization itself—will go to Earth from Mars—"

She crumbled away from him as a gigantic breath like a hurricane shattered the air! A terrible cry ripped from her. Thorsten felt himself hurled away to smash into the wall. Blood flowed into

his eyes as he groped through a misty curtain of pain.

An incredible voice boomed out across that great vaulted room. A thunder like the hammering of a Titan's cymbals.

A monster bent down over Thorsten. It was Talos.

Talos the Giant of Metal.

THORSTEN tried to raise his arm, to fire and destroy. But the hand was empty. Talos had taken the gun and was now standing high, holding it like a small glinting splinter in his hand. Without the gun, Thorsten and the people of Knossos were again helpless before the powers of Minos and Daedalus.

Thorsten could hear the tattered rabble streaming into the Palace, shouting joyfully, shouting for revenge.

Theseus . . . Theseus. . . .

Thorsten squirmed back against the wall, helpless, bitter. Regardless of what name they called him, he had failed them. Talos would smash and stomp them into bloody rubble. And Minos and Daedalus, if they hadn't already fled, would come back to the Palace and—

How far away they sounded now, those of Knossos whom he had promised freedom. A thousand cheering cries that lost themselves in that Titanic Palace like microbes whispering in a city square. Cries for him. And he had failed—

Thorsten sobbed, bitter retching sobs of futile pain. Lora crawled toward him. Blood trickled down the side of her face where the giant's metal fingers had brushed.

Above her, Talos' hand fondled the weapon like a child's toy. Whether by accident or intent, Thorsten didn't know, the energy gun released a heavy charge. Talos stopped firing then as the thunderous explosion rocked the Palace. Columns crumbled. Others threatened to collapse as massive stones slid outward to hang suspended at hundreds-of-feet altitudes. Clouds of dust swirled and settled through the leaning pillars.

Talos' brazen throat emitted thun-

ders of clanging laughter. Then he spoke—words that were hollow and like the slamming of colossal doors:

"They have left us. They are gone. Minos and Daedalus have left this world to us. To Talos and the Dark One."

Thorsten got to his feet, staggered weakly to meet Lora. He lifted her up. Beauty had vanished from her face. Her eyes were sick with fear and pain.

Talos laughed.

Smothering futility clouded Thorsten's brain. Sweat stung his wounds. His eyes fled round and round the walls.

Talos laughed again.

"We have this world all to ourselves now. The Dark One and Talos. Talos' world to smash and grind. What remains then, the Dark One can devour."

The metal giant bent over them, raised again in a monstrous bow.

"WHAT REMAINS, THE DARK ONE WILL DEVOUR!"

XI

BLINKING through a veil of blood and sweat, Thorsten looked up then, up past the metal mask of the giant and saw—the human fly.

High above Thorsten, Talos towered, leaning against a massive column, his shining eyes of streaming golden fire flashing down. And above Talos' head, Thorsten saw the human fly—a man far up on the stone column, like a fly crawling round a pole.

Now the man stopped crawling. He was using a tridon handle for a lever. The column's huge blocks had been loosened in crumbling mortar, and the man was prying a gigantic stone block a little further from its moorings. If it fell, tons of solid masonry would crash into the head of Talos.

Even at that great height, Thorsten recognized the man and knew what had happened. Leading the others into the Palace, the man had seen the giant holding Thorsten and Lora helpless at its feet. The rabble were now very quiet, far away in the shadows, waiting—while

their leader had somehow climbed up that sagging column.

Conan the Cimmerian. . . .

His great bronzed body was a yellow blazing torch, gleaming and sweating as it strained with the tridon. Clouds of mist floated past. He might be Atlas, Thorsten thought, at some last Herculean task.

Thorsten's throat was dry, his breath filled his lungs as he watched. He heard the small sharp gasp of Lora beside him, as they both saw that now Conan was standing on the edge of the block he was prying free. He would fall with that block . . . but evidently it was the only way he could gain the necessary leverage.

As Lora cried out, the huge stone came free.

For one prolonged moment, man and basalt block were one, hanging suspended above the head of Talos. Conan the Cimmerian raised the tridon high then as the block began slowly to twist and fall.

And on the pronged end of the tridon, that awful banner of the Medusa's head still unfurled its hideous dead tendrils.

Sensing something wrong, the metal giant tried to move—too late.

Conan's echoing yell bounded down between the far walls of the room as from the sides of mountains:

"For Cimmeria! For Theseus! For all who would be free!"

And then Conan laughed as the great block turned and his figure fell from it, twisting over and over slowly. His laugh was loud and strong, an everlasting laugh, the kind a skull might turn forever to the sky after a lost battle.

The huge missile crashed into the head of Talos as he tried to move aside. The head smashed down into the gargantuan shoulders, sank deeper. The upper part of Talos was suddenly a battered blob, spurting streams of molten fluid. Clouds of white-hot vapor rolled. The blinded monster caved down, crumbled, fell like a building falls. He fell with a thundering crash, and his

metallic ruins wormed and twisted among the shivering pillars as he died.

Thorsten said softly, "You'll be remembered, too, Conan of Cimmeria."

THORSTEN was holding Lora tightly to him as the streams of cheering mob poured toward them. They stood like pygmies along the length of slain giant. Others gathered around Lora. Thorsten moved away from them, retrieved the gun from Talos' hand, came back to Lora's side. Evidently the gun had not been injured.

The cries of the Knossians shattered cheers and defiance against the aged, alien stones:

"Theseus . . . Ariadne . . . Conan of Cimmeria . . . Yah, yah, yah-yah!"

He whispered to Lora, "Don't tell them that the Minotaur still lives. Nor that Minos and Daedalus are not here, and that we don't know whether they're still a threat or not. Let them enjoy the feel of freedom and victory."

She nodded weakly, her face pale from blood loss.

They had sworn to destroy all the tyrants of Knossos. Only Talos had died.

A few Knossians remained near Thorsten and Lora, but the majority ran away to plunder the priceless riches selected by Minos from the nameless corners of the cosmos. Their savage yells reverberated through the Palace.

Thorsten started to move away.

"Where now, Lee?" Lora asked wearily. "What now?"

"You stay here. Rest—have one of the women take care of you until I come back. I'm going to the pyramid on the desert, to try to stop Minos and Daedalus before they escape to Earth. If they haven't already."

"Wait! I've got to go with you, Lee. We can be a part of a legend, but we can't change it. And I know I must stay with you to the end, Lee."

Her voice became a tight whisper. "Before we go to the pyramid, there's something we must do, and see. Ariadne's dying mind told me. There's a

tower on top of the Palace roof, Lee. He's still up there, imprisoned, wanting to be free. It was Ariadne's memory—so now I remember, too. He was Ariadne's brother. We've got to go up there and set him free! Minos and Daedalus left him there to die in that roof tower."

"Who?"

"Icarus. Remember, Lee—he must fly into the sun."

Icarus. . . .

CRIES and the sounds of awed discovery still echoed through the palace below them, and throughout the blazing town of Knossos, as Thorsten and Lora Saunlon walked across the great flat plain of the Palace roof.

The roof's surface was broken only by the cone-shaped tower that had no windows. Silence lay dead and heavy in the moonshot dark. Deimos rode deep in the blue-black sky of Mars. Around Thorsten the monster city crouched like a black beast under the stars. And beyond the Palace, the other way, Phobos tinged the heaving ocean with red.

Lora seemed aware only of that cone-shaped tower that reached up and up as though to impale the moon. They circled the tower. There was a large door. Lora dropped trembling fingers on the latch, a mechanism that could open the door only from the outside. She hesitated.

"Icarus was Ariadne's brother. There was one world Minos wanted to explore, but was afraid to explore himself. He sent Icarus there, against his will, and then brought him back through one of the doors. Sent him there to test that far alien world of strange radiation, millions of light years beyond any sun we know. He brought Icarus back from that world. He was alive—alive but—so changed!"

From inside the tower came a vague silken rustling.

"He wasn't human at all when he came back." Lora went on. "Minos had him put inside this tower so he couldn't escape."

A voice came out of the shadows: "Yes, yes, I kept him here. Like a gloriously resplendent bird in a cage. Of all the things I collected from the infinite worlds, Icarus was the most beautiful."

It was the voice of King Minos.

Thorsten spun, and leveled the power gun. Lora cried out softly. Minos' gross bulk waddled out of the shadows and stared at them, his face a greenish-gray mask in the moonlight.

Lora's hand pulled outward, and the tower door opened as she stared at King Minos, God-King of Knossos. His bulk hovered there like a bloated shadow, and he too held a power gun in his hand, pointing it at Lora and at Thorsten.

He waddled nearer until Thorsten could see the mad light in his inhuman eyes. They darted from Thorsten to Lora and back again. His pseudo-flesh trembled and shivered softly over his bulk. His alien, synthetically human voice, said:

"I'm going to kill both of you. I might be with Daedalus beneath the pyramid, preparing to go to a better greener and younger world than this—to Earth—but instead I am here. I had to see Icarus. *I had to see Icarus, the most beautiful thing the cosmos will ever know.*"

Thorsten's laugh was hungry. His fingers tightened on the energy weapon in his hand. "You will kill us, Minos? I can fire as quickly as you. Maybe we will all die together."

"Perhaps," Minos murmured. "Even my life must end. Either here and now, or on some far world, some other time. It does not matter. My soul is glutted with experience, my senses jaded and blunted with things seen and acts done. So it does not matter. But I must see Icarus first."

He gazed at them, listening to the sounds of the freed men shouting and thronging through the streets far below.

"You've broken my playhouse," he said to Thorsten. "I suspected that you were—somehow—not Theseus, when

you escaped the first time from the Labyrinth.

"Theseus was brave, but he quailed the first time before the gate of the Minotaur. And he would have the second time. And anyway, Theseus could never have escaped the Dark One. You are not Theseus. And you—you aren't Ariadne, either. Your knowledge of how to use that weapon neither Theseus or Ariadne could have found out, simple as it is. Who are the two of you? *What* are you?"

Lora explained as much as was possible to explain in the language of Crete. How Lee Thorsten and Lora Saunlon would one day thousands of years in the future find that room and the doors below the pyramid, and through one of them enter the fourth-dimension, and return through time to the age of Minoan Crete in Mars' past. And how they had re-entered the dying bodies of Theseus and Ariadne.

Minos nodded. He seemed to understand. He was not surprised.

Thorsten said, "So I guess we all die together, if we both fire, Minos. Daedalus escapes to Earth. The Minotaur remains."

MINOS chuckled fearfully. "Humans are safe from the Minotaur, unless they go underground into its Labyrinth. The Minotaur hasn't escaped from the Labyrinth for the simple reason that any direct sunlight or cosmic rays are deadly to it. The subterranean world I brought it from, and to which it was adjusted, made it completely vulnerable to such rays."

Minos shuffled nearer, one eye roving toward the doorway in the tower. The silken rustling within grew louder.

Minos peered at Thorsten. "It must be confusing to you—playing a part that isn't really your own. Racial memory—yes—sometimes carried in the undying spirit—"

Thorsten edged around until he could face both Minos and the opening of the Tower. The darkness inside the cone was

changing now. Little fingers of crepuscular light wavered out to them.

Lora called softly:

"Icarus, are you there? Icarus, you're free. The door is opened."

The strange rustling grew. Suddenly the dark was shot with blinding brilliance. Something came out. Something seemed to float outward, and drift to the roof's edge.

Minos fell to his knees with a scream of ecstasy.

A blinding and mighty tapestry of color rippled and shook. Opal and blood-ruby and amethyst-blue. It began to unfold into a fine gauze web, brilliant as the heart of flame. Out and out and up and up the web unfurled until it filled the sky.

Thorsten choked and groped blindly. He was helpless in that bath of light that filled the sky. He could see nothing but the glaring, all-encompassing colors spinning and shivering into his brain.

If the sight did not blind Minos too, then at any moment Thorsten would be blasted to dust, for he was helpless now. He could not see Minos.

But bathed in the shimmering god-fire of Icarus; it seemed unimportant, whether or not he died.

Shielding his eyes, Thorsten tried to find some pattern of recognition in the shattering light around him. Something lived, and from it was unfurling countless folds of finest silken gauze that trembled with a million shifting lights, and it became gigantic wings—

Wings that spread wider and wider higher and broader, and wider still, until their area seemed to diminish with distance, and blend far far into the star-shot dark, like smoke fading into the horizon.

And then, as though impelled by moonbeams, Icarus floated effortlessly into the sky. Up and up on its incredible wings, until it dwindled and faded into the stars.

THORSTEN fought shock and blindness. He had to see. "Lora! Can you

see—can you?"

"No—"

Thorsten prayed for his sight, while he waited for a blast from Minos' energy gun. And gradually his sight returned, and still Minos was motionless, and did not fire.

Thorsten had shielded his eyes some—perhaps that had made the difference. Minos was too entranced to care about anything else but to fill his eyes and his alien sensualistic soul with the beautiful.

Thorsten stumbled forward. Minos lay on his back, staring blindly at the stars. His hands lay outstretched, and in one of them the energy gun lay loose and uncaring.

Minos whispered, "Farewell, my jewel of eternity. With your wings so broad and light that the invisible rays of space are carrying you between the worlds like some beautiful colored ship of the void. They freed you to die, for you cannot live up there in the coldness of space."

Thorsten leveled the power gun at the body of Minos.

"You are ready to pay for your evil, Minos," he said harshly.

"Pay? Pay? I care nothing for evil, for death, for foolish space-time labels that are meaningless. I have seen Icarus fly to the stars. Kill me now if I am to die, while the image of his flight remains."

"Very well," Thorsten whispered. "Maybe I couldn't if you were human. But I know you're not human, Minos, but a thing of monstrous evil."

"Kill me now," whispered Minos, "while his image remains. Farewell—farewell, Icarus. I came from a world so far away that no mind could compute the distance. And all my travels and experimenting were only a search for the true meaning of the beautiful. And I found it. Farewell, my jewel of jewels—so beautiful you must fly into the brightness of the sun, to die."

Lora screamed as Thorsten fired.

Her screams rose to a shrill hysteria as a grisly metamorphosis began. After the one small charge to bring death,

Thorsten stopped firing, stepped back, staring at the thing on the roof top.

The human body was a facade, a fat shielding of colloidal semi-organic substance resembling flesh. It fell away into formless putty beneath the brief flash of power. A cloud of stinking steam drifted away across the roof. A palely luminescent sphere, sentient with fading life, rolled weakly toward Thorsten.

Thorsten fired again, and the bluish-glowing sphere that was the real living body of the alien Minos exploded in a single brief burst of pale vapor.

Thorsten stumbled away across the roof, holding Lora's hand. Below them, torches and fires blazed in the streets. Lights danced on ships far out on the Knossos harbor. Maddened revelry rose in a continuous roar.

They walked down through the pillaged Palace and into the streets.

Hurriedly, they left the city of Knossos. They ran across the desert plain to the North of the city, toward the great black Pyramid that marked the subterranean expanse concealing the Room—and the Doors. There was still Daedalus.

Daedalus. And the Minotaur.

XII

COLD BRITTLE moonlight reigned on the desert of Mars. A pack of hungry *khrim*-dogs howled as they stalked prey in the foothills to the North.

"They will outlast human life—they will live anyway—" said Thorsten grimly as they ran. The *khrim*s."

"Yes."

His brain was filled with memory—not of the past, but of a far future when he would hunt those *khrim*s with a crude iron sword. When as Thorsten alone, with only a slight conscious memory of ever being a part of Theseus, he would be one of the Outcasts and forced to grub in the ruins of this city they fled from tonight. A far future, when these great walls and structures would be forgotten ruins, and the sea would be dead, and the canals crumbling and running

with poisonous green slime.

A time when the second generation of Earth colonists would have developed a tyrannous, murderous social order, and driven dissenters into the desert to be hunted like beasts.

A time when they would be trapped and killed, and only he and Lora would escape. Escape as they were escaping tonight, to the Pyramid and the room beneath it, and the doors that opened into other worlds, and traversed time.

Thousands of years would pass before that distant future would arrive again. History would march, inexorably. Somehow, Martian civilization would move to Earth, forget its Martian heritage. Science would rise, and the terrible power of the atom would be explored and conquered, and bring doom to man by his own hand. A few would escape to go back to Mars.

Thorsten staggered. The thing was a monstrous cycle. Time could be a grisly jester. Round and round, and round—and where, then, was the ending?

Deimos loomed up out of the East to meet Phobos. Now the night was like a strange daylight softened by mists.

Thorsten touched the hidden mechanism in the side of the great pyramid's black basalt base. The stone swung inward. They went through. The familiar pattern closed around them. An odd and horrible cold chilled him.

They traveled down vertiginous angles and passageways beneath that gigantic world of masonry. Burrows, crypts, alabaster corridors and pillared halls. The same ones they would travel downward again, centuries and aeons from tonight.

As they emerged into that room with the many metal doors, two impressions struck Thorsten's mind. The visual image of Daedalus in the act of opening one of the doors—the door leading to Earth, the door that somehow bridged space-time instantaneously; and a mental image of the Dark One crouching hungrily far back in the darkness.

Thorsten said, "Daedalus! You waited

too long. *Die!*"

He fired without taking time to aim—for that door was opening. The power beam from the weapon struck the flat wall beside the door just as Daedalus disappeared into the opening and was gone.

Thorsten felt the awful weakening sense of failure as he stumbled toward the door. The door to Earth. He stared into the opening, but there was no sign of Daedalus. Only a vast forest of rich velvety green, and beyond that majestic mountains clothed in purple mist.

"Earth," he breathed harshly, his heart expanding with intolerable longing. "Sweet Earth—oh—God—"

Everything else was gone from his mind for that bitter interlude. Lora, the Minotaur, his own failure—all faded; and nothing remained for him but that doorway, framing the rich unsullied beauty of young Earth as a living picture of paradise.

"The green hills of Earth," he whispered. He sank down sobbing to his knees. He closed his eyes. "A child of Earth—but I shall never live upon it. I'll be born on this planet, this dead rusted ball of Mars aeons from tonight. On Mars, an Outcast of the future. A thing hunted over the sands like a beast. And on Earth—I will live as a memory, a name. As Theseus. But Lee Thorsten—what of that name? Lost—forgotten—by the worlds forgotten—"

He stumbled, half blinded, to his feet. His hand groped, found Lora's hand.

"Lora—" he whispered starkly—"I feel that I'm going to die here—to-night—"

"Lee—the Dark One! Now I remember. A corridor from the Labyrinth leads into here!"

HE STUMBLED forward. He cried out hoarsely as that gigantic formless shadow of nightmare shifted toward him out of the darkness. It moved nearer. It seemed more solid now, the Minotaur. Maybe it was blind and insensate in its hunger. Perhaps it knew that it couldn't live long now that its food sup-

ply would be cut off. There was no one now to offer it sacrifice. And it couldn't go into the sunlight.

But now—now it could feed, one last time.

The alien entity stopped. It hovered in a shapeless mass, like vague shadow chalk lines on glass held up to a wintry light.

Behind him, then, Thorsten heard the voices. His heart seemed to shrivel within him. Cold sweat broke over his face, ran into his eyes. Soft bated whispering voices behind him. And the wary, fearful tread of questioning footsteps. He half turned.

"God, Lora! The fools—the Knossos citizens—they've followed us. Hundreds of them—"

They hadn't closed the door up above in the Pyramid's base.

The people of Knossos had followed their heroes across the sands . . . and below. . . .

Lora was pulling him toward one of the doors. He struggled. He screamed, "God—I've led them straight to the Minotaur."

The approaching shadows of human faces felt it too—the Dark One. But now they weren't afraid. Even above the bitter self-denunciation, Thorsten felt the joy of realization surge through him. The realization that he had given them courage in the place of terror, bravery instead of crawling fear. *He* had given them that. Down here, face to face with the Dark One, they weren't running. No! They were walking forward. They trusted *him!* Yes—they would follow him into hell!

And then their whispering chorus touched his ears, and he staggered back as though from a physical blow.

"Theseus . . . Theseus . . . Theseus . . ."

He heaved himself free from Lora's clinging arms. He raised his clenched fists in sudden futile rage.

Not Theseus, fools! Theseus could never have used the power weapon! He would never have had the bravery to face the Minotaur!

It was I—I who did it! Theseus was part of me—but I did it!

He yelled hoarsely. I did it. Remember MY name too—remember me! Me! ME! Do you hear? THOR—”

The remainder of the name he shouted was drowned in a roaring of voices. A confused, fearful sensing of his words. The one syllable drifted through the thickening dark. Not Thorsten. They hadn't gotten the full name, even now. . . .

He turned toward the Minotaur, a bitter smile frozen across his mouth. The syllable followed after him as he advanced on the Dark One, the power gun reaching before him—

“Thor . . . Thor . . . THOR!”

They would carry the name of Theseus, if they didn't die with the memory. And they would carry the name of Thor.

Thor the Norse God of Thunder.

But his own name would be lost, unknown. Lee Thorsten. But it did not matter to him anymore. Perhaps it had never really mattered, except for one brief moment.

He walked on to meet the Minotaur. Now the power gun seemed so pitifully inadequate in his hand. He felt the hunger of the Minotaur enveloping him, a hot malevolent hunger that sapped both his energy and his soul.

But the mystery was clear now, of how Martian civilization would abandon Mars and start again on Earth. And why.

Even while he fought the Minotaur, this long line of Knossians must go through the door Daedalus had taken. They would have to be led, but they would act on his command.

He called back:

“Lora—the door to Earth. Lead them through the door! Some of them will get through. Men of Knossos! Follow her! That doorway will lead you to safety. FOLLOW HER!”

Behind him then, as he ran in toward that monstrous shape, he heard Lora's last fading cry.

HE FIRED steadily as he advanced behind the full streaming load of the power beam. He ran straight for the heart of the Minotaur. This time it wasn't retreating—it was standing, resisting. Now it was moving to meet him, against the terrible eating power of the force beam. Shrinking as it advanced. Dying. But moving in to meet him.

He stumbled to his knees. A reeling black dizziness wrapped around him. With it he felt the insensate lust of the Minotaur. With a last fading facet of consciousness, he turned his head.

Lora was gone. Gone through the door, gone to Earth. A stream of screaming, pushing, milling Knossians were jammed in the doorway, spilling through.

Green hills, lazily winding rivers below purple mountains. . . .

I will never see you, never breathe your air like wine, or feel the springy joy of your breast beneath my running feet.

Earth . . . Earth, do not forget me.

He sank down on his stomach. His eyes closed. He felt the Minotaur sinking too in its dying effort as the power gun discharged its last terrific load.

His hands crawled blindly over the dusty stones, then stopped moving as consciousness began to fade.

Humanity was going through that door to Earth. They would start over again there, a new civilization. Maybe Daedalus would start a new form of tyranny, maintaining the legend of Minos and of Ariadne and of Talos and the Dark One for his own ends. Perhaps, by his science, he would bring other monsters in from distant worlds to occupy the Island on Earth which men would call Crete, and give them the familiar names of the Legend.

Thorsten would never know the real answer. Maybe Daedalus would not even stay on Earth, but would go on to some other world. Maybe the Knossians would build another City of Knossos on Crete, and carry the memory of Minos and Daedalus, of Talos, and Ariadne and

Icarus and—Theseus—as a kind of religion, with black-robed priests to carry it on and on by tyranny. And Minos would be the name of every ruling King. And a mythical, fear-inspiring but non-existent entity, the Minotaur would be employed by priests to frighten the rabble into submission.

A creature, half human, half bull.

What a pitiful fragment of reality it would become as man forgot the real Minotaur, the entity Daedalus brought from a nameless galaxy, to give Minos a moment or so of sensual joy.

Yes. The thing would live on, rise and become distorted with Earth's growth. But the names would live and grow with it. All the names. Theseus. Thor. All the others. But not Lee Thorsten.

Lee Thorsten was dying tonight.

His consciousness faded into nothingness, and beyond. A cold dry black wrapped around him. He felt that kind of shredding pain . . . a sensation of tattered veils of indigo that drifted, drifted along a timeless river. . . .

Racked with pain, Thorsten felt himself again in that flowing darkness of the fourth-dimensional channel. Somehow, without benefit of that time-door, his consciousness molecules had rent the fourth-dimensional veil, had escaped his dying body, the body of Theseus he had occupied for a while, and had returned once again into that timeless river. . . .

Again he was a timeless disembodied spirit as the electronic impulse of his consciousness became a part of fourth-dimensional perspective.

He knew that his consciousness was swimming, swimming into the future he had escaped from.

He had no will of his own in that river. He was part of its motion, and its inevitability.

In the fourth-dimension there was no past or future or "now." It was one and the same.

Slowly, from incredible distances, it swam into view. His body. The body he had left—the body he had left, or would leave—

There was no comprehension of it. Though being carried in a fourth-dimensional flow, his consciousness remained primarily three-dimensional, incapable of understanding.

And as he approached his real body, the body of Lee Thorsten, his consciousness began to forget, or rather his experiences in the body of Theseus began to fade.

His consciousness looked, felt the familiarity of his own body where it floated in darkness, stiffly, lifelessly, its eyes closed, and with no perceptible movement to denote that it was alive.

Thorsten's consciousness writhed in an agony of fading memory, of Lethan forgetfulness. He knew that he must again occupy this body he had abandoned and that the body would go out through that door that led into this fourth-dimensional time-channel.

And as his electronic impulse pattern moved in and rewired itself within his own brain, in his own body, his complete consciousness blacked out, suddenly, entirely, as though sliced through by a gigantic black blade of icy metal.

And as the black blade fell, his consciousness knew one thing.

There had been a distortion of himself. There was a cog missing. There was something missing in the three-dimensional pattern that could never be replaced, a warp that could never be fitted back into its normal matrix.

XIII

LEE THORSTEN came backing out through the towering black basalt pyramid in a half crouch. He pressed the hidden mechanism, and as the ancient block began to close, his big, light-footed body swung around, flattened itself against the pyramid's base.

His black eyes were wild and staring, and it wasn't the bitter cold of the Martian night that sent cold shivers crawling over his skin.

As the fearful memories of what he had found in that incredible subterranean

ean chamber registered stronger and stronger in his stunned mind, he lifted his crude sword and bent lower, as though the purple shadows lengthening over the red desert sand were somehow real and dangerous. He stood, shivering and trying to comprehend, crouched against that black basalt wall like an ant that had crawled from a mountain.

Above him, a silent sentinel of incomputable age, the pyramid towered a thousand feet into the night sky, its shadow a haunted memory over the whispering sands. But the dark ruins of the forgotten city to the south, against the mountains, dwarfed the pyramid.

Confusion was more than a mere disturbance in his mind. Cold sweat trickled down his skin beneath the layers of rith-hide covering his thickly muscled frame. There had been doors in that vaulted room below. Doors constructed by a time-lost Martian civilization, dead for aeons. Doors that opened into other worlds. And into other times, a doorway that allowed the consciousness, somehow, to move forward, or back into time.

That was confusing enough in its incredibility.

But there was a roiling turmoil in his brain, a dull painful throbbing of things unremembered. Amnesia, or paramnesia, perhaps. Things could happen to a man that were so shocking that his conscious mind preferred not to remember, but to bury the memory deep down in the unconscious.

What had happened to him, down in that frightening depth, he didn't know. And he was afraid, for the moment, even to attempt to recall. He remembered opening this secret stone slab into the pyramid, as Lora Saunlon had directed. And, following her further directions, going down into the Labyrinth, and finding the vaulted room, and the doors.

He remembered experimenting and realizing that those doors had been constructed by a high scientific process, and that they actually did lead into other worlds, and that one of them was capable, somehow, of forcing the molecular streams of consciousness backward or forward in the time stream.

Now he stood once again, free of that room and the doors, shaken by this undefinable feeling as though—

—as though this all had happened to him before.

A name whispered, stirred, then buried itself in his mind. A name that seemed to have been his, yet wasn't his. The—Thes—not his name. Thes—he shook his head. He slid the crude sword from its scabbard, and pressed his eyes with calloused hands that he could not keep from shaking.

He couldn't call up that name again. Nor could he shake off that feeling of ecstatic terror. The feeling that this had all happened to him before. Perhaps even many times before. That he was a cog in some senseless, nameless cosmic time cycle, turning over and over and over, forever. . . .

It was a fantastic prison world . . . where slave-creatures of a hundred spheres dreamed and plotted escape!

PLANET OF THE DAMNED

A Novel of Forgotten Men

By JACK VANCE

FEATURED NEXT ISSUE!

By MARGARET
ST. CLAIR



I started choking him'

Continued Story

*Somewhere an alien
intelligence hated him—
but*

WHO ?

WHERE ?

WHY ?

THE Martian invader was still following him. Its slender, fantastically lacy outline had whisked back into the shadow of the garbage can on the corner only a minute before.

Milton Delisle drew a shuddering breath. The invader made him feel such intense, nervous apprehension that he wanted to scream or break into tears. But it stood to reason that the thing wouldn't try to follow him into the police station—it seemed to be shy about anyone seeing it except him and Marilyn—and its broadcasts could reach only so

far. And after he'd confessed he'd be safe because they'd put him in a cell. The cell would be nice and quiet. He hesitated a moment longer on the steps of the station. Then he went in.

The desk sergeant was a young, thick-set man who loved criminology and privately thought his job the most fascinating in the world. He would rather have died than admit to anything but boredom in connection with it. He had a romantic temperament. When Milton entered, he put down the copy of *Psychiatry and the Criminal* he had been reading, and yawned cavernously. "Yeah?" he said.

"I want to give myself up."

The sergeant was instantly irascible. "Go on, get out," he said. "Who the hell do you think you're fooling? Get out."

"No, but listen. It's not a rib. I've been in here before. You can ask Fred Deeder in plainclothes—he knows me. He picked me up last year for petty theft. And I've really done something this time."

"Recidivist, eh?"

"Re—I guess so. Anyhow, I want to give myself up."

Deeder's name—a very sound man, interested in psychology—had soothed the sergeant. He said, "Well, what did you do?"

"I pilked three boxes of—toys, I guess you'd call them—from the toy shop in the seven hundred block on Fulton Street. Saturday night."

This time the sergeant really was angry. He got up from behind the desk. "What's the matter with you?" he demanded. "Get out before I throw you out. There's no toy shop in the seven hundred block on Fulton. I know. I live near there. Whatsa matter, you a masochist?"

Milt Delisle had begun to sweat. He pulled the neatly folded blue handkerchief with the corded border from his breast pocket and swabbed at his forehead with it. "Yeah, but *listen*," he said pleadingly. "I know there's no toy shop there now. Marylin and I went back

there on Monday and looked up and down both sides of the street for it, and we couldn't find it. But there was one there on Saturday night. There really was."

"Hunh. You must be junked."

"That's one thing I don't do and never did," Milt said virtuously. "You ask Deeder. He knows about me. Listen, why don't you just listen while I tell you about it? And then you can book me for theft." He looked over his shoulder nervously, toward the outside of the station. The Martian invader was neither broadcasting nor in sight.

"Pretty eager to get booked, aren't you?" the sergeant commented. But he sat down again.

MILTON coughed and cleared his throat. "The toy store, the way it was on Saturday night, was a great big place," he said. "It was two or maybe three store fronts wide, and it was nothing but glass on the outside. Inside it was soft pink and pale blue and lavender lights, and lots of mirrors. Marylin said—"

"Who's Marylin?" the sergeant interrupted. "Dame ya shacked up with?"

"No," Delisle replied with a touch of coldness. "We're married, since last year. Seven bucks the license cost me."

"Oh. Sorry."

"Think nothing of it," Milt returned magnanimously. "We all make mistakes. That's why they got ink erasers. Well, as I was saying, Marylin said she didn't see how a swell-looking store like that could do enough business in the part of town where it was to keep going, and I said I thought so too. We looked in the window a while—there were all sorts of big dolls dressed in shiny stuff and stuffed animals as big as life, nearly, in funny colors, and sets of gold and blue building blocks—and then Marylin suggested we go in. She said some of the wire toys we couldn't figure out the way they worked looked interesting, and she thought there might be some good kits inside. Marylin loves kits."

"Mee-ows?" the sergeant asked.

"Naw, kits. You know, building kits. Last year we made a model airplane—it flies good—and before we were married she made copper trays and leathercraft. That kind of kits.

"So we went in. The place was about three times as big inside as it looked from the outside. It was as big as a couple of barns. There was so much stuff we couldn't take it all in. But there was only one clerk.

"He was an ugly little sawed off guy with a big head, big pale eyes, and little bitty ears. He was dressed in a skinny green suit without any buttons. I don't know how he got in and out of it.

"Marylin and me sort of stopped when we saw him, because he was so funny looking. When he saw us, he smiled with his mouth tight. He didn't come up and start waiting on us, though—I guess he saw we wanted to look around. We liked that.

"You never saw so many kinds of different toys. A kid would just have gone crazy in there. There were building toys where you could make a whole funny big city in ten minutes, and toys to ride in with water around like submarines, and toys where you pressed a button and it made a lot of different shows—you could change the color and lighting and people by pressing other buttons—and toys so funny it made your head hurt to try to figure them out. In a way, all the toys were funny. I've got an idea about that stuff in the toy shop."

"What?" the sergeant demanded.

"Tell you later. When I get to it. Anyhow, there were all sorts of toys. The prices they wanted for the stuff were terrific, though. Off at the left there were three or four tables, big ones, with nothing but kits."

Milton ran his finger around the inside of his collar. "Now, I know I promised Deeder I wouldn't. I hated to break my promise. But you got to consider the prices they wanted for the stuff. Why, it was just robbery. Two or three hundred dollars for just a kit in a box. I knew I'd never be able to afford that kind

of thing. Too rich for my blood."

"So you pinched the toys instead?" the sergeant asked sarcastically.

"Well—yes. I didn't feel too bad over it. With prices like that, they ought to be taught a lesson. And I knew the wife would get a bang out of the kits. I waited until she was over in a corner, looking at some puzzles made of glass, and the clerk was looking the other way. Then I lifted them.

"I knew Marylin would raise the roof if she thought I'd pilked. So I went and stood near the clerk for a while, like I might be buying something. Then I told her I'd picked out some stuff for us, for a surprise, and we could go. There wasn't any trouble. The clerk wasn't even looking at us."

"What did ya take?" the sergeant asked. "Some of the puzzles made of glass?"

DELISLE shook his head. "No, they looked too hard. I pilked three kits I thought we could work. The first was just for Marylin. It was a box of make-up things, with maybe twenty-five or thirty packages and jars of make-up stuff inside and a made-up face on the cover. It was—it was a pretty face. But—" Milton ran his finger around his collar twice and swallowed. "I dunno. Even then it sort of scared me. I thought the kit was make-up for theatricals, and I thought Marylin would get a kick out of it, because she likes cosmetics and make-up stuff. But I dunno. I don't know who that kit could ever have been made for.

"The second kit was for a model—well, not exactly a model, more like a cast—of a scene on the moon. There was a package of powder in the kit and some heavy-looking stuff, like fixatif, to mix it with. There weren't any directions in the box, just the picture on the cover and the words 'Self-Setting Lunar Experience,' but I didn't think we'd get into any trouble with it. It looked easy to do."

"Lunar *experience*?" questioned the

sergeant. Not landscape?"

"Yeah, that's right. It was spelled funny, but that's what it said.

"That kit was for me, because I've always been interested in the moon, but I thought Marylin would enjoy it too. The third one, the robot, was for both of us.

"It was a box with pieces inside like an erector set, only spindly and thinner, like black steel lace, and there was a diagram with numbers on the inside of the cover to show you how to put it together. When you got it done it was a robot. You know, a tin man. Only it was taller and lacier than robots usually are." Milt glanced back toward the street and licked his lips uneasily.

"You mean a rowbow," the sergeant corrected. "It's French. In French, you never say the last part of the words."

"Oh. Rowbow, then. When we got home we looked at our kits. Marylin was just crazy about her make-up box. She said she wanted to save it until Sunday, when she'd have plenty of time to fool around with it. So we decided to do the moon kit that night.

"Marylin got a mixing bowl and a pie plate from the cupboard—we got a room with a kitchenette—and I started to mix the powder with the liquid in the kit. It was as hard as pulling teeth to mix.

"The powder was a brownish putty colored stuff, full of lumps. The liquid was heavy and piled up on the powder and didn't want to get smooth. I had to stir so hard to mix it that the spatula that was in the kit got bent. But finally I got it done and we poured it out in the pie plate. Then we had to wait.

"For ten minutes or so nothing happened. Marylin got bored. She gave a couple of sighs. And then, all of a sudden, it began to set.

"It was a little like watching mush boiling. There were holes in it—craters—and splotches and rays going out from the craters. They changed while you watched for a while. Pretty soon the surface got hard and shiny and we thought that was going to be all. It looked like one of those big photographs

of the moon, only close up.

"Marylin said, 'Gee, that was fun, Milt. You picked a swell surprise,' and I said, 'Glad you liked it, baby. We'll do—' And then I didn't say anything more, because I was down there on the moon."

"What do you mean, you were down there on the moon?" the desk sergeant demanded. "You mean you were up on the moon in the sky? Or you were down there in the pie dish? Which?"

"Both," Delisle said. "I mean, I was up on the moon in the sky—there wasn't any air and the sky was black and the light coming off the rocks and ground made my eyes hurt—and at the same time I knew it was the moon in the pie dish. Both."

"Well, go on."

I WAS wearing one of those space suits. I could breathe pretty well, but the air smelled like metal. When I walked, I made big duck leaps. I didn't seem to weigh much. And when I landed, my feet went down six or eight inches in the soft gray dust.

"I was scared. As soon as I knew I was on the moon, I got scared. Not because I was there, you understand—that might have been fun, in a way. It was other things. I knew somebody I couldn't see was watching me."

"From where?"

"From over my head. That was bad enough. But I knew that somebody else than that, somebody who was really there, was after me."

"There were two of them?" the sergeant asked.

"I guess so. One was the invisible one, who was just watching, curious and cold. The other was a man in a space suit, somebody who was down on the moon with me, and he was after my hide. I didn't know who he was or what he had against me, but I was sure of it. It was like I'd been on the moon a long time. And then a bullet—a red flash of light, really—went past my ear. I wasn't just imagining it.

"I reached down by the side of my suit and found I had a gun myself, a sort of pistol with a flaring mouth, in a holster. I got it out and fired at where I thought the red flash had come from. A piece of rock broke off. It took a long time to fall. And then another flash went past the side of my head.

"I dodged around behind a big gray rock and fired again. I couldn't see him at all. It was terrible. I've pilked stuff sometimes, sure, but I never hurt anybody, and I never did anything that would make anybody want to hurt me. And now this fellow I couldn't see was trying to kill me!" Milt shook his head sadly.

"We went on that way, dodging in and out among the rocks and shooting, for what seemed like hours. Now and then I'd hear somebody laugh. It was a nasty noise.

"I was getting tired, and my suit didn't have enough air. I knew if he ever hit the suit I'd die because the air would leave it. I thought he must be getting tired, too, though, and that cheered me up. Then I noticed that the light was leaving the rocks and I was having trouble seeing. And it came to me with an awful shock: it was getting dark.

"I'd thought I'd been scared before, but I hadn't. I was so scared my knees shook. I didn't see how I could stand being on the moon all night, with not enough air in my suit and another man in a suit trying to kill me. The worst of it was I had no idea how long the night would last. It might be only a few hours, or it might be a couple of weeks, or it might be a month. I just didn't know how night on the moon worked. But I was afraid it would last a month.

"Like I said, I didn't see how I could stand it. So I came out from behind the rock—it was still a little bit light—and started after him."

"Hunh?"

"I was too scared to do anything else," Milt said simply. "I went hopping along toward him, taking as big jumps as I could, and he fired at me a couple of

times. I don't know how he happened to miss. Then I was right on top of him and he fired once more. This time he got me in the right arm.

"I could feel the air leaving. I didn't care, so long as I could get rid of him. I got him by the neck—he was bigger than I was—and started choking. I could see spots and gray patches in front of my eyes, but I held on.

"The next thing I knew, Marilyn was shaking me by the arms and saying, 'Wake up honey, do wake up.' over and over again. She sounded scared. I opened my eyes and there I was in my chair, just the same as I'd been before I got down there on the moon.

"I looked at Marilyn. She really was scared. I never saw her so white. She said I'd been sitting there for about ten minutes, my eyes fixed on the pie plate, like I was in a kind of a trance. She hadn't been able to get me to speak to her or anything.

"I asked her to get us some soda out of the ice box. We drank it, and I told her what had been happening. She didn't seem much surprised—she said she knew something was mighty queer. We threw the pie plate with the landscape in it in the garbage, and we decided we'd take the other two kits back to the toy store on Monday. She said we could get our money back. I told her I didn't care about that.

SUNDAY she kept opening her make-up kit and looking at it and putting it away again. It fascinated her, I guess. It really was an awfully interesting looking thing with all those little pots and boxes. Anyhow, on Monday we went back to Fulton where the store had been, and we couldn't find it. We looked up and down on both sides of the street for about three blocks. It just wasn't there. There was a package goods store and a fruit stand where it had been.

"We took the kits on back home. We passed a couple of trash cans on the way. Marilyn said, 'We ought to throw those kits away right now,' and I said, 'Yeah.

we ought.' But we didn't. Neither of us even slowed up. We just walked on past. I don't know why we didn't throw those kits away, when we knew we should."

"People don't always do what they ought to," the desk sergeant said sagely. "They got masochistic drives."

"I guess. Or maybe something wouldn't let us.

"When we got home Marilyn got us some supper. All the time we were eating she seemed restless. I turned on the radio, but she made me shut it off. Pretty soon she said, 'Milt. I'm going to make up my face with some of the things in the kit.'

"I said, 'Honey, do you think you'd better? It might be dangerous, like the moon. How about my helping you with the dishes? And then we'll go take in a movie.'

"She gave me the darndest look. She never looked like that at me before, in all the time I've known her. 'You never want me to have anything I want, do you?' she answered. Her voice was bitter and hard. 'You're always against me. You grudge me every little thing.'

"I didn't say anything more. There wasn't anything I could say. I got the paper and sat there trying to read while she opened boxes and tubes and jars in the make-up kit. After a while—fixing her face the way she wanted it took her a long, long time—I got a bottle of whiskey from the cupboard and had myself a drink.

"I couldn't even taste it. It might just as well have been water. And I couldn't make myself pretend to read the paper any longer. I felt too tense. I folded up the paper and put it on the table and set the whiskey bottle down beside it. And I watched Marilyn.

"She was sitting with her back to me, at the dressing table. I couldn't see her face except in the mirror, but she'd put on a cosmetic, lipstick or eyeshadow or something, look at it a minute, and then wipe it off again. With all the pains she was taking, she ought to have been as pretty as a picture, but she wasn't. I

could only see her in the mirror, but I thought that each new thing she did to herself made her look—well—worse.

"The longer I waited for her, the more I got the jitters. Pretty soon I began to get the feeling I'd had when I was down on the moon, the feeling that somebody I couldn't see was watching us. I told myself that I was imagining it, that all there was in the room was me and Marilyn, putting a lot of funny cosmetics on her face. It didn't help. I still felt it. That being watched by somebody you can't see is a nasty feeling to get.

"Finally, when I felt I'd go crazy if I had to wait any longer, Marilyn turned round. 'Take a good look, Milt,' she said.

"The first thing that struck me was how *bright* her face was. It glittered all over as if she'd dipped it in diamond dust. From under her eyes there was a reddish sparkle, and her cheeks were a shiny fine pale green, but the rest of her face, including her lips, was a dead, dazzling blue-white. It was like she was wearing a mask set with hundreds of diamonds. Only here eyebrows were a flat, solid black.

"I sat there staring at her. She was horrible. She made me feel frozen right down to my feet. And yet I was crazy about her too. She was wonderful."

"Crazy?" the sergeant asked incredulously. "When she looked like that?"

"Yes. I didn't want her, I didn't like her, she wasn't Marilyn. And yet there was a kind of lure coming out from her, a lure I just couldn't resist. If she'd told me to do anything, I'd have had to do it. If she'd said, 'Go over to the window and throw yourself out,' I'd have done it. I hated the way she made me feel. It was like being in love with a fish."

"Well, go on."

"We looked at each other for a minute. She was smiling a little. Then she laughed.

IT WAS a perfectly normal laugh, just the way she always laughed, and yet it gave me the creeps almost worse than her face did or the way her face made

me feel. There was something extra unnatural about her pretty, light laugh coming out of a face like that.

"She knew I was crazy about her, and hated her. She sat there smiling. She enjoyed it. In a smooth, soft voice she said, 'Milt, lie down on the floor.'

"I got down. I could hear my knees creaking—I got stiff joints—and the floor was draughty and hard. From where my head was I could see some rolls of dust under the studio bed. I was surprised that they were there. Marylin's a pretty good housekeeper.

"I heard her get up and walk over to the cupboard and open a drawer. She rummaged around in it. I knew she was getting out a knife. And I knew the person who was watching was getting real interested, almost excited. He was getting a bang out of this.

"It was worse than it had been on the moon. Lots worse. Because this was in my and Marylin's little apartment, and it was Marylin who was going to kill me as soon as she found a knife she liked the looks of. It was all going to be bad, but the moment I dreaded most would be when she stood over me wondering where to begin stabbing. I didn't think she'd do a good, quick job. And I wouldn't be able to do a thing to stop her as long as she was wearing the make-up mask.

"I was so scared I wondered my heart didn't stop beating. Looking up, I could see the edge of the table with the folded paper and the bottle of whiskey. It didn't mean anything for a minute. Then it gave me an idea.

"I raised up, trying to be quiet, and reached up for the bottle. She was clattering around in the drawer; I wondered which knife she'd pick. Then I lay down with the bottle in one hand. My fingers were so stiff I had trouble uncapping it.

"She came back. Her face was brighter than ever. She was holding one of the steak knives.

"When I looked at her, I didn't see how I could do it. She knelt down beside me, smiling with her dazzling blue-white

mouth. I guess it was because I was so scared that I *could* do it. Anyhow, I raised my hand and threw the whiskey in her face.

"She gave a sort of whimper. I asked her afterwards, and she said it wasn't because the whiskey got in her eyes and stung. It was because wherever it hit her face it hurt and burned. Anyhow, her make-up began to drip and flow and run. It dripped down in big bright glittering drops on the front of her dress. She dropped the knife on the floor with a clatter. Her face puckered up. I could see her skin, pink, and irritated-looking, coming out from under the diamond-dust layer. She began to cry.

"I got up from the floor and put my arm around her. Now that her make-up was gone, I wasn't afraid of her, and she was crying. She was Marylin again. She'd tried to kill me, of course, but she hadn't really wanted to. I didn't hold it against her. I felt awfully sorry for her. She hung on to me and bawled and bawled.

"She was trembling all over. For a long time she couldn't stop crying. She'd say, 'Milt— Oh, Milt—' and gulp and shudder and begin bawling again. Finally she let go my shoulders and went in the bathroom and washed her face. When she came back her eyes were red and swollen, but her face was clean, and she'd combed her hair.

"We sat down on the studio couch. She didn't seem to want to talk about what had happened. Once she said, 'When I put that stuff on my face, it changed me all around. Like a mirror in a circus sideshow.' And I said, 'Yeah. Don't think about it any more, kid.' We sat there for quite a long time with my arm around her. Then—"

"Just a minute," the desk sergeant interrupted. "Was the invisible watcher looking at you all this time?"

MILT shook his head. "I don't think so. I think he stopped looking at us just about the time Marylin dropped the knife and began crying. He wasn't in-

terested in us after that, you see. The story was over for him."

"Story?"

"Yeah. I'll tell you about that later. Anyhow, we sat there on the couch for quite a long time. Then, without saying a word about it to each other, we got up at the same time and began working on the rowbow kit."

"Hunh?"

"I know it was a crazy thing to do. Marylin and I both knew she'd tried to kill me, and had come within an inch of doing it. There was no reason to think the rowbow wouldn't be as bad as the moon scene and the make-up kit had been. But we didn't even discuss it. We just got out the screwdriver and started working on it."

"Neurotic compulsion."

"Yeah. Somebody was making us.

"It went together fast. It must have been about nine when we started, and it was quite a bit before ten when the rowbow was done. We stood there holding hands and looking at it. My fingers were on Marylin's wrist, and I could feel that her heart was beating hard and fast.

"The rowbow was almost six feet tall. Neither Marylin or I is very tall, and it towered up over us. It was thin, though, and cobwebby, like black lace. Its face was pretty sketchy—just eyes and a little mouth. It didn't have any nose or ears.

"For a minute or two nothing happened. Then the robot—rowbow—said, in a high, twangy voice, 'I am an invader from Mars.' It walked over to the side of the room, where there was a straight chair, and sat down in it.

"Marylin giggled. It was a nervous giggle, I guess, and yet the invader had been funny. There was something about the stiff way it sat down that made you want to laugh.

"We waited. The invader just sat there, not even blinking. Finally Marylin said, 'I guess that's all. It's done its little trick. I'm hungry, Milt. Let's have something to eat.

"I looked at the clock. It was after

ten, and I felt as hollow as a drum inside. So I said—"

"Wait a minute," the sergeant broke in. "I got a couple of questions. Do you think it *was* an invader from Mars? And did you feel at this time that somebody was watching you?"

"Naw, it wasn't a real invader. That was just the name of the kit. About somebody watching me, that was about ten minutes later—"

"Like I was saying, it was late, and we'd been through a lot. I said, 'I'm hungry too, kiddo. How about some fried egg sandwiches?' I and she both like fried eggs.

"She went to the cupboard and got eggs and bread and butter. While the eggs were frying, she broke off a little piece of bread and buttered it and ate it. She was bending over getting out some lettuce while she chewed. And I thought—I've never thought anything like this before, in all the time I've known her—I thought, 'If she keeps on eating all the time like that, she's going to be as fat as a hog in a couple of years.'

"Do you get what I mean?" Delisle looked at the sergeant earnestly. "It wasn't like me to have an idea like that."

"That's nothing. Lots of married men think the same thing."

"Yeah, but she's not fat. Just a little plump. On her, it's cute.

"It was just about then that I got the idea that somebody was watching me.

"I went on thinking while the eggs were frying. I thought, 'She's getting too fat. And she's bossy. What ailed me to marry a woman like that? In a couple of years I won't be able to call my soul my own. There must be some way of getting rid of her.' I looked over at the window. It was open. And it seemed to me it would be duck soup to call her over, pretending there was something I wanted to show her, and push her out."

"And did you?" the sergeant asked. "Try to push her out, I mean."

NO, of course not. But I was scared. I looked at the rowbow. It wasn't

doing anything, just sitting. But I was sure it was responsible for my thinking those thoughts. I could feel a—a sort of force, like a broadcast, coming toward me out of its head. And I had that nasty feeling of being watched.

"Now, I don't suppose I ought to have done it." Milton licked his lips. "Run out on her like that, I mean. I'll bet she was worried all night. But I knew she'd tried to kill me. And I knew that if the invader really put the heat on me, I wouldn't have a chance. I'd try to kill her.

"I couldn't think for a minute. I was so mad at myself for having helped make the invader that I wanted to go beat my head against the wall.

"I remembered there was a bunch of wires on the back of the thing, and I thought if I could get hold of those wires and rip them loose the invader wouldn't be able to broadcast any more. It was a good idea, but I just couldn't do it. I couldn't move a finger in the direction of the chair where the thing was sitting. It was like being paralyzed. I stood there sweating and trying to move, and I couldn't. They wouldn't let me end the story that way."

"Just a minute," the sergeant said. "That's the second time you've said something about a story. And before that you spoke about having an idea about the toys in the toy shop. Do you have some general theory about all this?"

"Well, yes." Milton Delisle shifted his weight from one foot to the other, and sighed. His arches were hurting him. "The things in the shop—they were pretty and bright colored and so on, but they weren't really nice. Do you know what I mean? The dolls had nice shiny dresses, but they had hateful expressions. The stuffed animals were nice and big, but they looked hard and lumpy. I don't know that they would have, but they looked like if a kid tried to play with them they'd give him an electric shock. The things in the shop, unh, looked like they were made by peo-

ple who couldn't stop being mean and hateful even when they wanted to be nice and give a present. The shop was all like that."

"The toys were made by sadistic people. Um. You got any more ideas?"

"Well, I think the shop was from some other time, maybe the future, when everybody's going to be hateful and mean. And I think its being there on Saturday night was a sort of a trap."

"How? For whom?"

"For me and Marylin. I don't mean for us specially—I mean for anybody who came in the shop. I think that shop sometimes leaves its own time and comes into ours, to trap people. So there'll be a story for the people of that time to watch."

The sergeant looked baffled. "I don't get it," he said. "You've said a lot of funny things already, but they sort of hung together until now."

"Well, this hangs together too," Milt said with a flash of spirit. "What is a story, anyhow? It's getting the hero in a hole and then watching to see how he gets out, or maybe doesn't get out. I think the clerk in the store saw me pilking those kits and let me have them anyhow, because he knew they'd get me and Marylin in a jam. That's what the people we couldn't see were watching—how we'd act and what we'd do when we were in a bad jam.

"In a story, though, you want the hero to win, and these people didn't. They were just interested in seeing how we'd act when we were in trouble, threatened and scared."

"Sadistic interest," observed the sergeant. "Well, go on."

"Where was I? Oh, I was trying to get near the invader to rip the wires loose, and I couldn't.

"I stood there trying to think. I could smell the eggs frying, and they smelled good. I was hungry. But I didn't dare stay there for fear I'd do something to Marylin. So I just walked out."

"Without saying anything to your wife?"

"Oh, I called something like, 'Good-bye, kid, I'll be back.' I didn't have time to say much. She looked awfully surprised.

"You see, my idea was this. The invader was interested in me, not in Marilyn. If I walked out, it would probably come after me. She wouldn't be bothered. And I might be able to think of a way of getting rid of it."

"And did it? Come after you, I mean."

YEAH. When I was about half-way down the second flight of stairs I heard it coming. It sort of rustles when it walks. I was almost running when I got to the foot of the stairs.

"It followed me all night, suggesting things. It doesn't want anybody to see it—whenever I got near people, it would hide. I didn't dare to go to a hotel, though, for fear it would come up in the elevator after me, or maybe climb up the side of the wall. I didn't think I could stand seeing its little black head coming up over the window sill. Or maybe it would get in the room with me, between me and the door. I'd have walked as long as my feet would hold up rather than be shut in a room with it."

"Claustrophobia," said the desk sergeant.

"I guess. Anyhow, I walked around all night. I went to the park, and down to the waterfront, and once I hired a taxi and had the man drive out beyond Twin Peaks. It didn't do any good—when I got out and paid him, there it was. It must have hung on to the car.

"It kept suggesting things. As it got later at night, the things got worse. I never had such ideas before in my life. It may not sound it, but having those ideas in my head was worse than having Marilyn try to kill me, or being down on the moon with a man who was shooting at me. It was worse because it was in my *mind*."

"What were the things it suggested?"

"They were terrible."

"Yeah, but can't you give me an example?"

"When I passed a drinking fountain it suggested—listen, I'm not going to tell you. I got a right to some privacy. Just take it from me, they were terrible."

"Repressed scatological desires rising into consciousness," the sergeant said, as one who makes a long overdue diagnosis.

"I wish you'd stop talking like that," Milt answered irritably. "Why don't you talk English? I can't tell what you're driving at."

"Never mind. What happened after that?"

"Pretty soon it began to get light. I never was so glad to see anything in my life as I was to see the sun coming up. I was hungry and dead tired and I'd spent almost all my money on the taxi. I thought maybe when it was light the invader would stop following me. It didn't, but it stayed farther away from me, for fear people would see it, and its broadcasts weren't so bad. I sat down on a bench and rested, and I bought myself a hamburger.

"The trouble was, I didn't have any idea how to get rid of it. Then about ten o'clock I thought, maybe if I could go to jail—you see, there're always people hanging around a police station. It wouldn't follow me inside. And I'm hoping that after I've been in jail a few days it'll get tired of waiting for me and go away."

Delisle halted. He mopped his face with his handkerchief and gave a deep sigh.

"Go on," said the sergeant after a minute.

"That's all. There isn't anything more."

"Oh. Is the what you call it—invader—following you now?"

"It's outside, hiding behind a garbage can."

"Do you have that feeling of being watched at present?"

"Not since I came in the station."

"Pretty obvious," the sergeant commented. "Now that you're under the eye

of a real representative of parental authority, the haunting, floating feeling of being watched has left you. Well, what do you want me to do?"

"Put me in jail. Like I said, I pilked the toys."

The sergeant deliberated, chewing his fleshy lower lip. He looked Delisle over slowly, frowning, while Milt, grown nervous, once more mopped at his face.

"I won't do it," the sergeant said abruptly.

"Hunh?"

"No, I won't. Lunar molds, diamond masks, Martian invaders! Why, I never heard of such rubbitch in my life! Here." The sergeant drew a glass inkwell toward him, dipped a pen, and began to write. When he had done, he extended the note toward Milt.

"I've written a note to Dr. Zimberg, at city clinic," he explained to Delisle. "He's a very sound man, good Freudian, none of this Adler stuff. I want you to take the note to him and let him look you over. For my book you need a thorough analysis, before something worse happens, but of course Dr. Zimberg will have to be the judge. Don't be ashamed to tell him *anything*. Here." He shook the note at Milt. "Come back in a couple of months and tell me how you're getting along."

At the sergeant's first refusal Milt had turned pale. He had listened with sagging hopes while he had spoken of Dr. Zimberg. But when he heard that he wasn't supposed to come back to the station for two months—two months of having the invader following him, rustling, suggesting—*two whole months*—he felt a shuddering panic. For a moment he stood gasping. Then his brain gave a decisive click. He picked up the inkwell and hurled it straight in the sergeant's face. . . .

THE sergeant went off duty at five. Much scrubbing and Boraxo had got the ink stains off his face and neck, but his gray shirt front and the breast of his uniform still bore big blue-black

spots. There was a large lump over his right eye where the inkwell had struck him. His head ached.

He walked downhill toward his street-car, thinking. Now that Delisle was behind the bars, charged with assault, he felt a certain compunction. Of course the little punk—a pathological masochist, if the sergeant ever saw one—had dared him to do it, and a lot of officers wouldn't have been able to resist the temptation to sock him one, or at least give him a kick. But he, the sergeant, understood psychology, and he ought to have known better. No, he hadn't behaved any too well. He resolved that tomorrow he'd get Delisle to the clinic for Zimberg to look at if it took two hospital orderlies and an ambulance.

His car came. He swung aboard it and sat down in the back. It had been a bad day, but in police work you got bad days. And when he got home, Leona would have supper waiting for him. Baked ham, he'd said this morning, and apple pie. Leona was a darned good cook.

She was putting on weight, of course. Women always seemed to, after they were married. It wasn't becoming to her. But she still wasn't bad looking, and he was certainly fond of her. He considered that they'd adjusted to each other very satisfactorily.

His corner drew near. He pressed the button and got off the car. He had three blocks to walk, and then he'd be home.

It was too bad Leona was such a poor housekeeper. There were always rings in the bathtub, lint and hair on the carpet, dirty dishes in the sink—Nothing was ever put away or cared for properly. And it was just laziness, since they hadn't any kids.

She was lazy about her personal appearance, too. Her nose hadn't known the touch of powder for the last two years, her hair was dusty with dandruff, greasy and lank. What did she do all day while he was gone, lay on the couch and eat candy? And her temper was bad. She was always nagging. She was a shrew, a slut.

Her temper, her laziness, her dirt moved in his brain kaleidoscopically. He felt his mind contract in a paroxysm of disgusted hate. He loathed her, she sickened him. What in God's name had made him tie himself to a woman like that? And how in God's name could he get rid of her? There must be some way. He had a sudden, sharp, bright, voluptuous picture of his fingers fastening around her greasy throat.

He could, he would do it. That way or another. He— There was a rustle behind him. Startled, he turned.

Between him and the twilight skyline

there stood a tall, fantastically slender shape of black steel lace.

Oh, no. Surely not. He wouldn't believe it. Delisle had been lying. Or were delusions catching? He looked around him wildly, hoping for relief, for escape. As a flood of hateful ideas poured in upon him, he clutched at his collar and licked his lips.

No, no, no. It mustn't. He wouldn't. He wouldn't be the next installment of the story.

It wasn't true. No.

From the vacancy above his head there came a high, pleased laugh.

WHEN DID IT HAPPEN?

A Quiz by Joseph C. Stacey

LISTED below (in jumbled fashion) are 10 memorable scientific events, and the dates on which they occurred. Can you match up at least 7 correctly for a passing grade? 8-9 is excellent; 10, perfect.

- | | |
|---|-----------------------|
| 1. First self-maintaining nuclear chain reaction initiated in an uranium-graphite pile at Stagg Field, Chicago. | (a) OCTOBER 14, 1947 |
| 2. Asaph Hall discovers first satellite of Mars. | (b) 1905 |
| 3. Marconi hears first transatlantic radio signal. (Marconi in Newfoundland hears the letter "S" sent from Cornwall, receiving through a kite aerial.) | (c) 1687 |
| 4. First accurate measurement of planet Pluto (diameter: 3600 mi., mass: 1/10 the earth's) made by Prof. Kuiper with 200-inch telescope of the Mt. Palomar Observatory. | (d) JULY 16, 1945 |
| 5. First atomic explosion created by man blasts New Mexico desert near Los Alamos. | (e) AUGUST 11, 1877 |
| 6. U. S. Army hits the moon with radar impulses. | (f) JUNE 2, 1950 |
| 7. Isaac Newton sees apple fall, comes up with "law of gravity." | (g) 1898 |
| 8. Albert Einstein enunciates "theory of relativity." | (h) DECEMBER 12, 1901 |
| 9. The Curies discover radium. | (i) JANUARY 10, 1946 |
| 10. Capt. Charles Yeager, U. S. Airforce, crashes "supersonic wall" in rocket-powered research plane—and becomes first man to travel faster than the speed of sound. | (j) AUGUST 6, 1945 |

(Answers on Page 127)

Belarski had erred, and was dead. Now the ship would stop . . .

♦ ♦ ♦ and Return

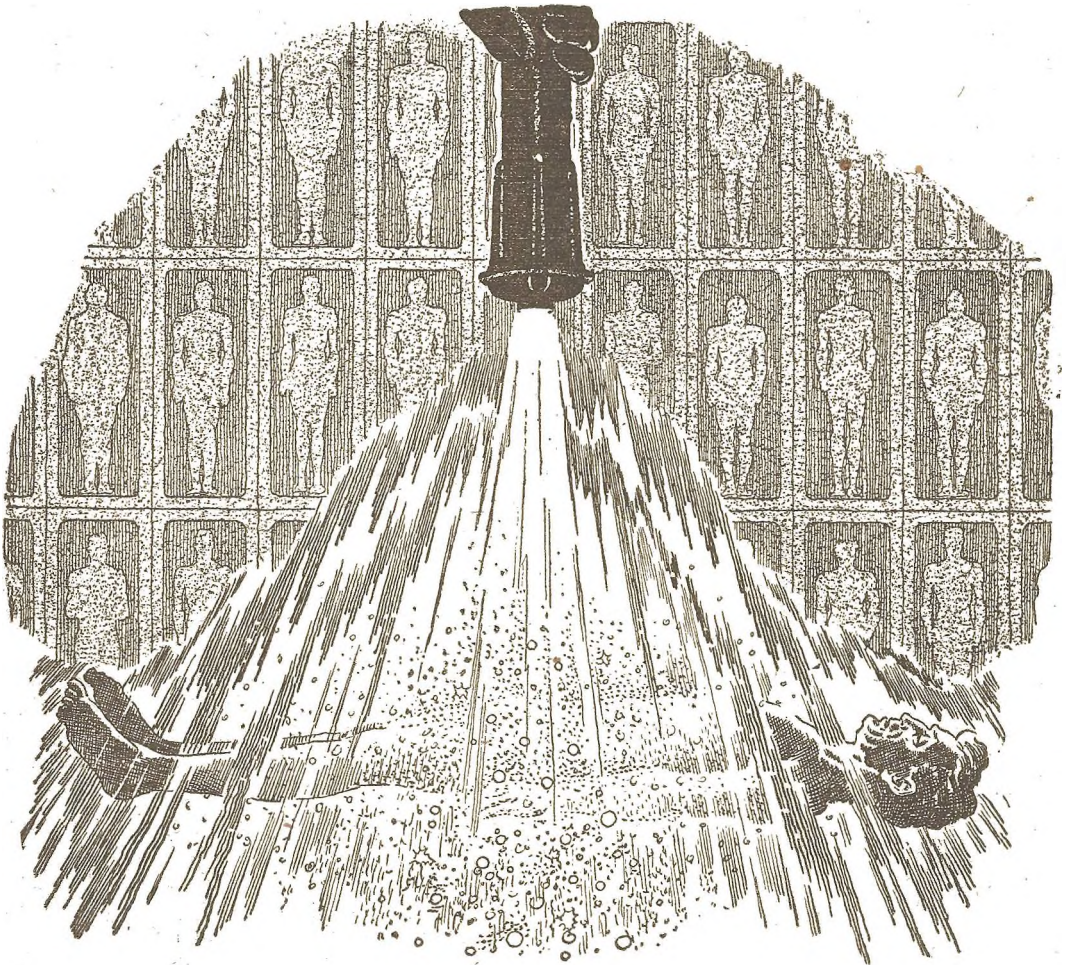
By HENRY HASSE

THE MEREST moment longer, he thought.

Ralph lay quiescent as his mental self surged up from the depths of non-entity. It was somehow pleasant and caressing, this groping out of darkness. He stirred

once, lifted his arms heavily and let them fall. And gradually, in a way that transcended all remembering, he came to know that a long time had passed—a very long time.

And now he knew that his eyes were



A radiant beam leaped, spread outward

open. He lay in a pit of utter blackness but could sense the walls around him, ponderous and far-reaching and endless. How had he come here? Was there—*Wait*, the message pounded deep inside him; *a moment longer*, silence whispered in the enfolding silence.

Was there danger? He lay there listening. The darkness seemed to sussurate, and gradually the sound reached him from afar, a steady deep-throated monody as of a thousand thunders eternally sustained. It struck a note in him, a flash of memory that was gone before he could grasp it. He surged to his feet. There was something he must do! Something important.

Then he gave up trying to think of it. Memory would come later. Just now it was good to stand erect, flexing his arms, enjoying to the utmost his resurg-ing strength after so long a time. . . .

So long a time. Again that knowing. He paced forward through enfolding darkness, hands reaching out. Ten steps—the door was there, as he knew it would be, heavy and smooth and metallic. It swung open to his touch, lightly, gently, like a machine superbly balanced.

He stepped through.

Dim light struck his eyes. Walls sprang vastly away from his vision, curving into a great, shadow-clustered roof that swelled up and outward with the pregnancy of distance. A huge corridor lay before him, radites interspersed along its length, giving off an obscurant greenish glow. He paced forward, staring at them. There came an impression that he had traversed this route before. Yes, it had been so long ago. But he remembered the radites.

There was more that he should remember. It was coming slowly, now. His brain had been synthesized, and Dr. Belarski had said it would take some little time—

Belarski! He halted abruptly, a hammering at his heart. Why should he feel this vague unease—almost fear—at remembrance of the man? For a long moment he stood peering along the corri-

dor, fighting the fear and the memory.

With sudden resolve he hurried forward. More corridors bisected his route, and there were rows of metal doors and once a wide stairway leading up. He scarcely glanced at any of these, for he knew his destination now—the great door which loomed just ahead! A calm settled upon him, a resoluteness divorced from all feeling; he knew it had to do with his brain, and what Dr. Belarski had done to his brain, and the things Belarski had told him . . . he was remembering. . . .

He reached the far door. He paused, surveyed it under the dim glow, and saw no mechanism.

Without hesitation he pushed the door open and stepped through.

He stood alone, alone in all immensity. Black unending reaches of outer space lay before him. The vision of the void leaped forward to smash against his eyes, hungry infinity and beseeching stars!

RALPH stared at the universe that lay around him, so near and so far, profound and engulfing. He was a tiny mote adrift in that immensity but there was no terror; he stood gaunt and silent, unperceiving of the golden power of those stars piercing the black solitudes. His perception lay within.

Now he remembered it all. There was much to be done, that's why Belarski had entrusted him—

Their orbit! Ralph leaped across the control-room to the astro-chart.

It still functioned. He bent anxiously, peering at the course being traced beneath the crystyte panel.

There had been no deviation. The *Colossus* still held to its eternal orbit just beyond the Solar System.

To make doubly sure, he spot-checked back through the endless spools of feeder-tape. He inspected the relay Impulsors. With a glow of pride he hurried forward to the automatic pilot. Of course their orbit was safe. How could it be otherwise? The pilot was a thing

of beauty and perfection, its twelve-foot transparent tube pulsing palely violet, its mass of free electrons held in abeyance through converse magnetic fields linked with relays in eternally sustained precision.

Ralph pondered. How long had they pursued the orbit? He and Belarski, and those hundreds of other select ones, who lay somewhere in the bowels of the ship waiting to be wakened from the deathless sleep. Years must have passed—many years. Belarski had planned well. It didn't matter now. They must all be wakened. But first he wanted to see. . . .

He hurried to the etheroscope. Swiftly he adjusted the dials and manipulated the magni-lens, bringing the planets into stark view across the towering screen. First the outer planets, then Mars, Earth—yes, there was Earth, swimming blue and serene.

He stared long. After so great a time, would there be life on Earth now? Immediately he knew the answer, and felt neither emotion nor concern. They must have destroyed each other long ago in their war. Belarski, far-seeing, had known it would happen and now he was destined to be savior of a race that could have become extinct.

Ralph could not forget those last waking hours with Belarski, the fanatic gleam of the man's eyes, the sonorous roll of his voice:

"We need only time. I have provided that. We'll return to Earth, never fear, and by then the war and hate and killing will have run its course. The new race that I envision will be the supremely intellectual and physical—an evolution so detached from all emotional and irrational influence as to make war a thing impossible. We'll build and we'll grow and we'll set out to the stars again. I've selected my subjects well. . . ."

And so he had. It had been a tremendous undertaking encompassing years, but with the combined effort of select scientists the *Colossus* had been built and equipped in secret and launched outward from Earth.

FLICKING off the etheroscope, Ralph found himself back at the electronic relay, gazing with pride and caressing its smooth violet-glowing length. He felt a surge of confidence. He could change their course now. He knew the adjustments necessary to guide this colossus safely back to Earth.

A cloud came over his thoughts, and then bitterness touched with a vague fear. No. He must waken Belarski now. It was his duty. And all those hundreds who were to be the genesis of the new race—Belarski must take them back, it must be his triumph.

But still he didn't stir. Something new and livening came aglow in him, such a feeling as he'd never experienced. *Not yet*, the feeling cried aloud. What did a few more hours matter, or a few days? Ralph had awakened first. He alone was alive and moving aboard this miniature world. For the moment he held destiny in his hands, and the moment must be prolonged!

He paced back through the long corridors, savoring this new feeling. He liked it. He must hold it! But through the liking came a disturbance he couldn't comprehend, except that it had to do with Belarski, and as always, a vague fear was mixed in it. Impatiently he thrust it away and hurried to explore the interior of the ship where huge generators pounded out their perpetual power.

At sight of them he felt a resurgent strength, an aura of destiny. He knew the ship's basic principles, but after all he'd had little time to view all the wonders here. He viewed them now alone, the huge endless rooms containing laboratories and libraries and shops. Yes, they had done well. Aboard the *Colossus* was encompassed all that Earth could provide in the physical and engineering sciences, and other fields as well. He knew for example that tremendous strides had been made in the realm of brain-thalamics, Belarski's special project, most necessary for the deathless sleep.

He paced on, keenly alert to the po-

tentials about him. Once he paused to touch a thin tubular instrument that appeared to be a weapon—or was it merely a tool—arrayed with power-packs and graduated lenses. He examined it briefly and hurried on. Some of the mechanical marvels he recognized, while others he grasped with swift comprehension. Generators, power-drives, electronic shields and detectors, banks of adaptor-tubes and flame scalpellers and endless racks of varied tools.

The sight of it all brought equations bubbling anew in his brain, vibrantly alive in a way he had never remembered. Yes, it was all here—the endless technology, the material means, the way for the new race on New Earth. . . .

It was hours later when it began to pall on him at last, and his mind turned away. Some inner spark reminded him of his ultimate duty. He had gloried in his moment of aloneness but now they must return to Earth. That must not fail. He must waken Belarski and the others.

Somewhere in the depths of his mind came a restless unease that took root and grew and blossomed into turbulence.

He paused. Must they return?

They? Why they?

IT WAS then he realized his footsteps had taken him toward the huge central chamber on the upper levels. He hurried forward and entered. He found the studs that set the wall-radites aglow. And through the soft greenish haze he saw them.

Row upon row, by the hundreds, they lay motionless in the cubicles, eyes closed, limbs relaxed, complacent in the deathless sleep. Complacent! He gazed almost scornfully at those who had placed faith in Belarski. Now their fate lay in his hands, Ralph's hands!

He shook his head annoyedly. He must hold to his duty. Waken Belarski first, and the Master Scientist would take care of the rest. Slowly he paced the rows, gazing upon the marmoreal flesh that held a cold whiteness of death that was not death.

Then he found Belarski.

He stood quite still, gazing down at the man. Years ago—or was it aeons? Anyway he could never forget the scientist: the coal-black hair, the stolid countenance which always engendered respect, the purposeful set of the mouth that was evident even now.

Something struggled at the edge of Ralph's consciousness. Despite the queasy fear engendered by the man, he had almost liked Belarski, and at times he had felt it was reciprocal. There was no denying the scientist had granted him special favor. Again he was remembering those final words, the instructions ingrained so deeply:

"Beyond all doubt," Belarski had said, "you will be the first to awaken. I have arranged it so, and for good reason! Your first duty will be to see to the safe course of the ship. Be sure that the relays still function. Then you will waken me. Do you understand?"

For days upon days Belarski had ingrained it in him, beyond any possibility of error.

"It's because you, alone, are adaptable. I cannot trust any of the others, not even myself! The ordinary brain is delicate and unpredictable. In the shock of abrupt awakening and re-orientation, the ship must not be placed in peril. There is certainly that danger — of brains going awry—but I have highly synthesized your thalamic coördinates to avoid this. You will remember. It's an important duty!"

YES, he remembered now, as he gazed down into the features of Belarski. Very well! He had carried out the assignment, the ship was safe—but beyond that he could not obey!

He realized now what had happened.

Somewhere in the alchemy of his brain Belarski had erred!

The synthesis had gone far beyond all expectations. In all those interminable years he, Ralph, had not been completely under the sleep. Somehow he had broken the controls. There had been endless time to think—to plan.

Ambition had crept in, together with a subtle knowledge, and a power. . . .

He felt it pyramiding now, great and burning, almost telepathic, a tremendous potential that was limitless—limitless. And if Belarski awakened now, he would know. He might even—

This man must not live.

Ralph was suddenly aware that he clutched something in his hand. It was the slender tube with the powerpacks and lenses, the one which he'd thought to be a weapon or a tool. And now he realized why he had kept it with him.

He aimed it. A radiant beam leaped, spread outward under his touch, and in seconds Belarski's body was reduced to tiny whorls of sparkling dust.

Exulting, he whirled upon the others, the endless rows. Then he paused. No! Their bodies could die later if necessary, but he must retain the dormant brains. He felt sure they could be newly embodied. Were not the laws of cyclic evolution fixed and immutable? Did not

life-trends follow a precise pattern, protozoic to animal, animal to thinking man, thence to the inevitable?

His mind exulted. These—these and all their stupid kind had proved their unfitness to survive by the very act of not surviving. But there would be a new race—he would build! All that he needed was here, the dormant brains and the machines and the technology. He was sure that on Earth was much more he could use. Metals, certainly.

He looked forward to setting foot on Earth for the first time. Ralph! Belarski had named him well. He would retain that name. With his long multiple-jointed stride he stalked back to the control-room. A score of tapering, flexible fingers moved with swift accuracy across the controls.

Slowly the *Colossus* swung inward from the orbit, and R-Alpha—robot the first — thalamic coordinates resurgent with plans, charted his course for New Earth. ●●●

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THE INVADERS

By GORDON R. DICKSON



A Novelet of
Pioneer Planets

I

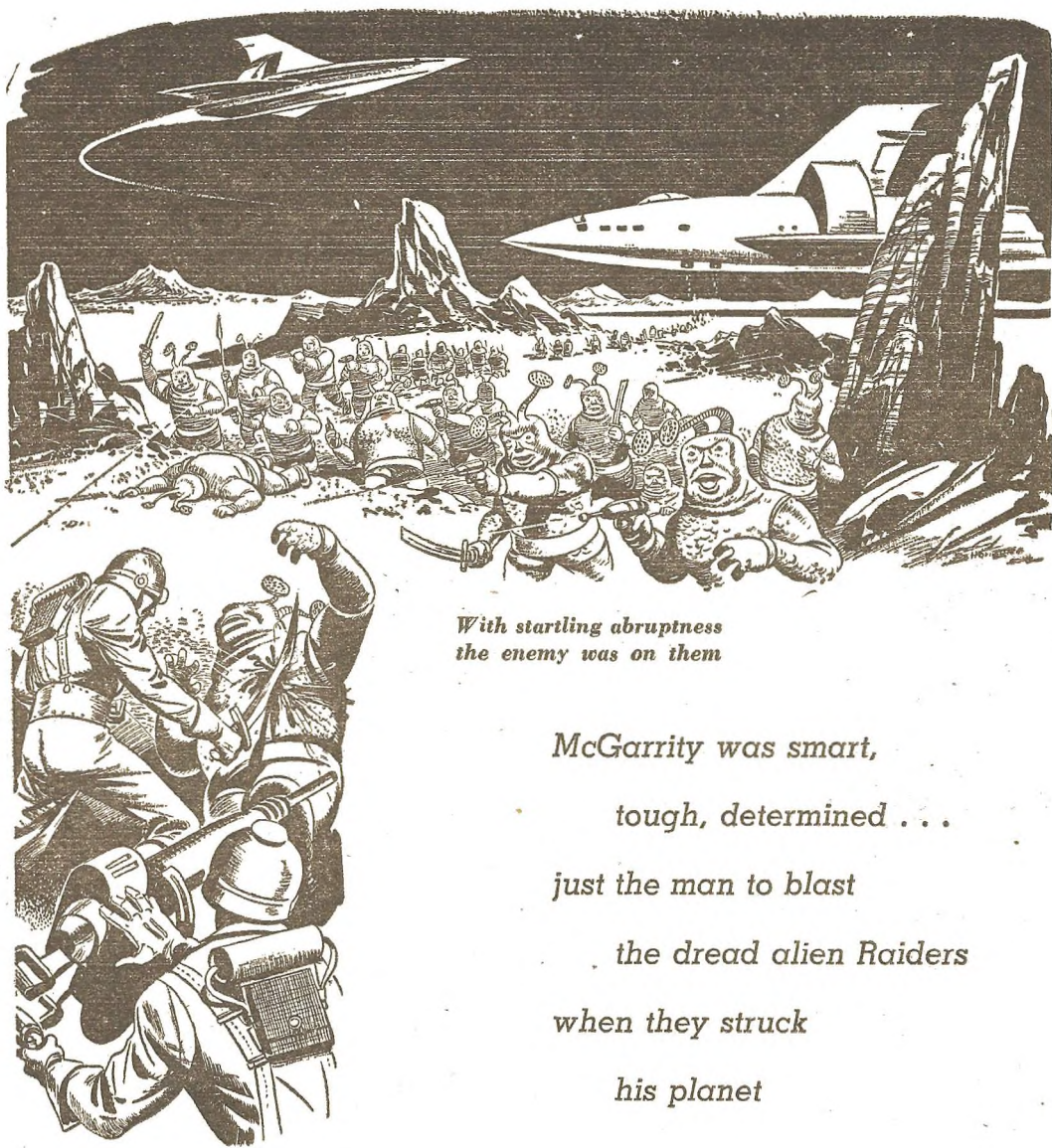
HECTOR MCGARRITY looked at Tica and assumed his sternest expression.

"You realize," Hector said, "if you intend to play the part of my assistant on Lamia, you'll have to take orders like everybody else." From the easy chair in which she was sitting, Tica turned her face up to him. It was a fine

boned, perfectly controlled face that would have been pretty had there been a little more warmth of expression on it.

"Of course," she said.

He considered her dispassionately. Tica Smith, a junior planetary representative at twenty-four and a political enemy of the branch of Central Head-



*With startling abruptness
the enemy was on them*

*McGarrity was smart,
tough, determined . . .
just the man to blast
the dread alien Raiders
when they struck
his planet*

quarters under which he worked; a frighteningly precocious child dedicated to the abstract virtues in a universe of concrete vices. For the past five days he had made a number of efforts to soften her shell of theories before it should be cruelly shattered by the reality that awaited them both on Lamia. They had been absolutely without success. She considered herself his enemy and had wangled the right to come with

him to the threatened world solely to acquire ammunition for her battle to destroy him and the system of Assigned Defense Commanders of which he was the working unit. She disbelieved or discounted anything he said.

He permitted a small corner of annoyance to touch his mind. It was almost the ultimate in emotion that training and time had left him. This annoyance was followed almost immediately

by a wisp of ironic humor. Though she did not know it, he was being gentle with her. It was the first time in fifteen years he had been gentle with anyone.

"I'll see you again when it's time to land," he said, abruptly, and, turning on his heel, opened the door of her stateroom and stepped out into the long central corridor of the liner. He closed it behind him. Turning to the left, he went forward toward the control room.

He strode along the echoing steel corridor, a heavy-shouldered still-faced giant of a man, moving lithely with the ease of the strict physical conditioning that was required of him. His highly trained body was remote from the cold center of his mind. And it needed to be. For his decisions meant life or death to the people of the far flung colonies he defended, from time to time, when raiding alien groups broke through the Frontier Guard. It was as if his body housed two brains—one, the director of the bone-and-muscle fighting machine that walked the corridor—the other, the remote thinker that meditated on the present situation.

BRIEFLY, the matter was simple. A spearhead of the Spindle ships had penetrated the defending stations of the Beltane quadrant. These swift, voracious aliens, by far the most common and the trickiest of the unknown races that made attempted raids on the little human space-area, would try a hit-and-run plundering of any one of a number of Colony planets in the vicinity. Hector, among other Assigned Defense Commanders, had been sent out to one of the threatened colonies to take charge of matters there and direct the colonists in case they should be the target of the invaders' attack.

So much for that. It was a job Hector was trained to do, and had done a dozen times in the past fifteen years. What complicated the situation was the presence of Tica. She headed a Government Committee that was probing the Defense Commander setup with the hope of destroying it. Their motives in

doing so were almost unselfish and badly mistaken.

Theoretically, their claim that the unlimited powers accorded to a Defense Commander on assignment were a danger to Colony freedom, was sound. In practice, it had been proved that Colonies were almost never capable of supplying the proper sort of trained leadership in such a crisis. Still, people sitting at far away government desks and luncheon tables would argue the fact. Therefore Tica's presence. Therefore, loomed a very real danger that she would disagree with some of Hector's actions on Lamia and, by revealing her own position, create a dangerous division of authority.

Colonists at odds with Hector might appeal to Tica, as visiting junior representative, to override his decisions. She would have no legal right to do so, but—Hector's face went a little grim—it might come to killing. Again, theoretically he would be within his rights, but he had no illusions as to what would happen in practice to the Assigned Defense Commander who shot down a visiting elected representative of a populated planet.

HE HAD reached the control room door. Now he shut the problem from his mind, and pushed it open, stepping inside. A young second officer sat at the navigator's board. Hector went directly to him, ignoring the captain who stood across the room, and looked over the gold-braided shoulder.

"How soon before we land?" Hector asked.

From across the room, the captain turned an angry face toward Hector. The *Mariana* was a passenger liner. She had been hauled off her regular route under peremptory government orders to deliver Hector and Tica Smith to Lamia. The passengers aboard were nervous and the captain had been bearing the brunt of their complaints. To be ignored in his own control room was a further annoyance.

"It's customary to knock, Mr. Me-

Garrity," he said, "when a passenger comes into the control room." Hector ignored him.

"How long?" he repeated to the second officer.

The young officer flushed, but did not turn his head or reply. He was feeling a natural sympathy for his captain, whose rebuke to Hector had emboldened him. He picked up a hand calculator.

Inside himself, Hector sighed softly. He put one large hand on the back of the chair and spun it around so that the boy faced him. While the white face stared, he drew the gun that he wore quite openly in the holster at his side.

"Sonny," he said, quietly, hefting the heavy weapon casually in his hand, "do you realize that I could smash your face in with the butt of this and be strictly within my rights?"

The blood drained from the young officer's face and neck. For a moment his nerve held, then it broke.

"About an hour," he said. Hector nodded and turned away. As he walked out through the door, the second's eyes went in hurt amazement to the captain. The captain avoided his gaze, turning his head away.

It was always the same, thought Hector, wearily, walking in the direction of the passenger lounge. There was always the position to uphold. He remembered the motto of the training halls, during his five grueling years of preparation for the job. "To be wrong is to be dead." It was literally true during the last stages of the training. When you take over an unfamiliar people in a situation that requires unthinking obedience on a few days notice, there must be no doubt in their minds that you are all-powerful, that you can do no wrong. Now he had a further chore to do. The second's defiance and the captain's hostility were an index of the attitudes of the passengers. If their resentment should be in any way communicated to the colonists during the brief landing, there would be trouble. He turned into the lounge.

There was a good handful of people

there, some at the bar, most seated at tables, drinking. Frightened and angry glances rested on him as he came in, and a low mutter of talk broke out.

Hector ignored them. Paying no attention to the bartender he went behind the bar and picked up a bottle at random. Without offering to pay, he took a glass and carried both to an empty table. He sat down, poured the glass full and drank.

He sat there, with grim amusement, while the tension grew. The muttered voices rose and fragments of wrathful speech came clearly to his ears. Finally one man jumped to his feet and strode over to Hector's table. He put both hands on the edge and leaned forward.

"Listen!" he said tightly. "We've been talking it over. It's not fair to the passengers of this ship to run the risk of landing on Lamia. There's no reason you and Representative Smith can't take a lifeboat down."

Hector refilled his glass.

"Damn it!" shouted the man who was tall and slim, with a touch of the first gray hair of middle age, and an air of authority about him. "Listen to me when I talk to you." And he reached out to grab the arm that was raising Hector's glass to his lips.

LIKE A flash Hector's other hand moved in a swift blur of motion, and there was an odd, crunching sound as it closed over the grabbing hand. Then he let go, and the man stood staring in shocked disbelief at fingers that stood at odd angles to his palm with the white bone showing through.

"You broke it," he said stupidly.

Hector drank.

"You broke it!" repeated the man. It was almost a wail. With a sudden, choked sound, he turned and ran out through the door of the lounge, holding his injured hand in the other one.

For a long second, the stillness of death held the lounge; then swiftly passengers began to leave. Hector's job was done. There was no resentment now among the passengers to communicate

to the colonists. Only fear.

A little bitterly, Hector drank.

Forty minutes later, the alarm bell sounded. Hector braced himself in the chair for the slight shock of the landing, then rose to his feet. He made his way to the open port and found Tica Smith there, waiting. Beneath her dark hair, her face was as calm as ever, but her brown eyes were chill.

"You might be interested to know," she said. "I heard about what you just did." He nodded briefly, abstractedly, dismissing the matter.

"Follow me down," he told her, "and don't say anything unless one of the welcoming committee speaks to you."

"Very well," she said coldly, picking up her luggage case, and followed him down the steps to the landing field, and the people who waited there.

There were five of them: a thin, ineffectual looking man in his sixties; a thickset man of middle age and better than average height; a strange-looking individual in rough clothes with a knife at his side and long brown hair and beard framing a narrow nose and keen brown eyes; and a nondescript young man with a portable pickup transmitter slung from his shoulders.

It was to him that Hector walked immediately, ignoring the others. He had been talking down into the pickup in easy conversational tones. Now, seeing Hector, he hurried what he had to say.

"—and here he is now, folks. Commander Hector McGarrity, whom you—"

Hector pushed him away from the portable set, cutting off the flow of words. He stood squarely in front of the pickup, knowing that throughout the city behind him, his words and appearance would be filling the screens of any set now working.

"Listen to me," he said briefly. "I want your attention. This planet is now under martial law. You will all go home, and stay home, unless your job is essential to city operation. Inside the next two hours, I will come on the air again to give you detailed directions as to

what you must do. Until then, stay off the streets and make sure you can easily be located. That's all."

He turned away from the pickup and started away across the field. Tica and the rest followed him, all except the young man with the pickup, who stood where he was, following them out of sight with the scanning unit of the pickup.

"Where's the car?" said Hector, abruptly. The thickset man pointed toward a ground vehicle, parked some distance off to their right. Hector changed direction.

"Let me introduce myself," panted the thickset man, hurrying to keep pace with Hector's long strides, "I'm Governor Gideon Stern. This is Mayor Hemple—"

"Save it!" said Hector, curtly. "When we get to the governor's house, we can talk. Right now, I want a look at the city."

He strode on.

II

AT TOP speed, they drove through Lamia City. Hector rode in front with the governor, who was driving, and kept up a steady barrage of questions. What was their water supply? Did they have a militia? Sewage-disposal? Which of the buildings had reinforced walls?

"But surely," protested Gideon Stern, his ruddy face paling, "you won't let it come to street fighting?"

"Maybe," said Hector laconically; and took up his questions, again.

The car was crowded. In the back seat, wedged in between the brown-bearded man and the thin city mayor, Tica held her luggage case on her knees and strove to maintain her customary coolness. The two who shared the seat with her showed no inclination to talk to each other, which puzzled her. The bearded man was quietly abstract, the mayor clearly in a state bordering on nervous collapse. She could feel the slight trembling in the bony arm that pressed against her side. He aroused her



Every nerve in his body screamed as he lifted the tube

sympathy, even as the other's unconcern irritated her. Before she could stop to remember what Hector had told her, she spoke to him.

"I imagine you're terribly worried," she began, "facing the threat of an invasion so suddenly this way." He turned a grateful glance toward her and the words came spilling out.

"You don't know the half of it!" he began. "We've been waiting—"

"Quiet back there!"

It was Hector's voice, coolly authoritative from the front seat, and it sliced off the mayor's flow of words abruptly. He stiffened and sat in silence. Tica bit her lip angrily.

The back seat rode in silence until they reached the governor's house.

They went immediately to the office, where they took chairs in a rough circle, all except Hector who stood facing them, and the bearded man who seemed to prefer to remain standing.

"All right," said Hector, crisply. "Now the introductions." He pointed in turn to the Governor and the Mayor. "You're Stern, and he's Hemple. You?" He stabbed a finger at the brown-bearded man.

"J. J.," came the prompt answer.

"He's one of the bush-runners," interposed Stern, hastily. "Sort of a representative of the hunters and trappers. He—they—sent him in to see if there was anything they could do to help."

"All right." Hector nodded. He turned to Tica. "Tica Smith, my assistant." he said briefly.

"Just a minute!" Tica had been boiling inside ever since Hector had summarily cut short her conversation in the car. "When I agreed to be known as your assistant, I didn't intend the truth to be kept from the local authorities." She sent a challenging stare at Hector.

"Very well," he answered evenly. She could not tell from his face whether he was angry or not. "This is Miss Tica Smith, Junior Representative from the planet Arco, who has come along as a government observer."

"How do you do," said Stern brightening. "I'm glad the government has seen fit to send Miss Smith along."

"Yes, yes, indeed!" echoed Hemple. The bush-runner said nothing, and Tica, looking at him, was prodded into further action.

"And one more thing," she said. "Since this is a government matter, I think we should dispense with pet names or abbreviations." She turned squarely toward the bushrunner. "What's your full name?"

"J. J.," he answered, bending his bright eyes on her.

HER temper snapped. "Don't be ridiculous," she said. "You must have a full name." The hint of a thin smile touched the man's lips, half-hidden beneath the beard.

"I guess," he said, coolly, "you never learned your manners, Miss." The words took her breath away.

"Why—" she began furiously, when she could speak again. But Hector interrupted.

"That's enough," he said, crisply. "For the information of all of you, Miss Smith is an observer only. She has nothing to do with the action I take; and no authority." Tica choked back her rage. He was speaking no more than the truth. "Now, we'll get down to business. I understand your one piece of heavy armament is a late-model K-four rock-anchored space rifle, ten miles from the city. You also have some two thousand portables and hand-guns arsenaled in the K-four's dome. Is that right?"

"Yes," bleated Hemple. "But—"

"That's right, that's right," interrupted Stern, quickly.

"You have gun assistants for the K-four who have been trained in its use?"

"Yes," said Stern.

"But no militia?"

"Well, no," answered the perspiring governor, "but the bushrunners—"

"Are the bushrunners," interrupted J. J., suddenly with a snap. "Just so you get things straight, Commander, the boys aren't worried about themselves. We could fade off into the bush and those raiders'd never find us. We'll still help, but we aren't doing all the work for these fat citizens. So you and these two figure things out and tell us what you want. If we like it, we'll do it. If we don't, you can whistle for all the help you'll get." Hector looked at him.

"We'll see," he said noncommittally. He turned back to the two officials.

"Can you think of anything we haven't discussed that concerns the defensive effort the city might put up?"

"No," said Stern, and the mayor nodded by way of agreement.

"All right," said Hector. "Then hook me up with the local station, and I'll make my broadcast."

What he said was brief and to the point:

"All able-bodied men over sixteen and the single able-bodied women over the same age will remain in the city, in their own homes as much as possible, and

await further orders. All others will prepare for evacuation, taking warm clothing, bedding, and food for two weeks. Nothing else. I repeat, nothing else. This city is under martial law and any attempt to smuggle valuables out will be regarded as looting and punished as such. As soon as each evacuee is ready, he or she is to notify the mayor's office. By tomorrow morning at the latest you will be moved out back into the bush. All sales of liquor are hereby discontinued, and all other business establishments are closed except for the sale of food and clothing. Stay in your homes; stay close to your receivers; and wait further orders."

HE CLICKED off the pickup into which he had been talking; and turned back to the four occupants of the room.

"Miss Smith and I will stay here," he said to Stern. "You'll arrange to have rooms fixed for us."

"Of course," said the Governor.

"Very well," said Hector. He moved over to the desk and picked up a stylus in one large hand, and drew a sheet of paper toward him. "You, J. J., can arrange for guides to take the evacuees back into the bush?" The bushrunner nodded.

"We'll do that," he said.

"And you, Stern," the stylus in Hector's hand raced over the paper, "this is an official order authorizing you to withdraw the portables and handguns from the K-four housing and distribute them to the able-bodied men and women in the city. Take ten men out to the space rifle and—"

"I knew it! I knew it!" The anguished tones of the mayor brought all eyes toward him. He ignored them, concentrating on Stern. "I told you, Gideon. I told you he'd want those before we could get that beast out of the gun-housing—"

"Shut up, you fool!" answered the governor, roughly. "I never expected to use them, anyway." He turned calmly enough to meet Hector's demanding stare. "The truth of it is, Commander,

that you aren't going to be able to defend Lamia with the weapons and people here. One of our local species of animal that has the uncomfortable power of—er—shocking people, has taken up its residence in the housing and can't be gotten out. And no one can get in while it's there." Hector felt a little white flame of anger flare coldly in the back of his mind.

"You deliberately let me broadcast without knowing this?" he said.

"Frankly, yes," said Stern. His face was smooth now. "You see, I've heard about Miss Smith's committee. I've even listened in on some of the broadcast meetings over the ultrawave. And I agree with her. There's no reason why untrained men and women should have to risk their lives and possessions when we have a Space Fleet to do the job for them. Now, in this case, all the weapons are in the space rifle housing and the housing can't be entered. The only thing you can do, Commander, is to broadcast for a Fleet defense unit to be stationed here at the planet until the emergency is past." He smiled, a little smugly.

Hector smiled a wintry smile in his direction.

"How much do you know about Fleet movements, Stern?" he asked. The governor shrugged.

"Nothing, naturally," he answered. "I've got nothing to do with military matters."

"Then I'll tell you something," said Hector. "All available Fleet units are waiting at base right now for the first news of a planetary raid. When they hear, they'll move to gather in the raiders and force them back beyond the Frontier. Until then, they'll stay where they are."

"But you can call them!" cried the governor.

"Only in an emergency," said Hector.

"But my God!" said Stern. "If this isn't an emergency, what is?"

"It's an emergency for Lamia," said Hector, "and Lamia is only of secondary importance." He got up from the desk and strode around it to stand facing

Stern. The smaller man drew back. "You fat little idiot!" he said "You and your handful of people are in the front line. Back on the Inner Worlds, there are six quadrillions of men and women and children with no protection at all. If the Raiders aren't trapped out here and killed off or forced back, they have no fleet nor weapons. Should I weaken the line that hopes to hold them? No! If we can't get at the weapons, that's our tough luck. And if you're responsible for the creature being there, then you've cut all our throats and I'll take pleasure in seeing you before a firing squad. This is no game, Stern!"

A STUNNED silence in the big office followed his words. Stern was shaken. Hemple on the point of collapse. Tica stared at Hector, white-faced, overwhelmed by the change from the taciturn, quiet man she had faced with confidence on the liner trip in to the planet. Only J. J. whistled softly to himself and rubbed the butt of his knife with one brown thumb.

"You know, Commander," he said, "I like the way you talk. I don't guess me and the boys will have any disagreement with anything you want to do." Hector glanced at him, and half-smiled.

"Thanks," he said.

"Nothing," said J. J. He shrugged his shoulders, turning swiftly on the paralyzed governor. "What's in there, Stern? A land-squid? A digger?" The governor shook his head, dizzily, as if coming out of a trance.

"A smuglet," he said, "I—we saw smuglet tracks leading up to the ventilator. The bars were chewed off." Hector looked at J. J.

"That sounds right," the bushrunner answered his unspoken question. "A smuglet can chew through thin steel if you give him time and you know those ventilator gratings. None of the other shockers could."

"Shockers?" demanded Hector.

"You'll see," answered J. J. "A bunch of the native animals here have some way of tickling up your nerves when you

get too close. A smuglet can knock you over at fifteen yards. We better get out there and take a look-see."

III

THEY rode out in two cars. J. J., the Governor, and the mayor in the first, and Hector with Tica following in the second. It was the first time they had been alone together since leaving the ship and he could feel her sitting stiffly beside him as he handled the controls, betraying fear and anger. Finally she spoke.

"You could have called for help," she said. He shook his head.

"No," he replied briefly. She persisted.

"If you *had* called," she said, "they would have come, wouldn't they?" He looked at her out of the corner of his eyes.

"No," he repeated. Her temper flared.

"I think you're a glory-hunter!" she snapped. He shrugged, keeping his eyes on the road. They were out of the clean wide streets of the city now and the track they followed was rutted and hemmed with brush. Odd purple trees arced over their heads at long intervals.

"What you don't realize," he said, suddenly, impelled by the same obscure urge to justify himself that had led him to talk to her on the liner, "is the size of the human living area. As I said back in the office, there's some six quadrillion of us, settled in a number of planetary systems in an area of space roughly sixty thousand light years in diameter. One planet, one colony, a few thousand inhabitants are like one bug on the surface of the pond when the fish come in to feed. The flash of one dark shape, a ripple, and it's gone. Expendable. But if the fish can be turned back, by any sacrifice, that is the important thing.

"You sit in your Committee Room back on Earth and speak of the brave colonists, the women, the children. And you allow yourself the luxury of pity for them, thinking them somehow different, because of their position, than you. I tell you there is no difference. The

human race has grown big enough to attract the attention of other space-going races and you, as well as these, the colonists, may live to see your birth-place flame into nothingness and the ancient mountains of Earth flowing in lava to the sea. We are a long way, maybe a million years yet, from peace and security; and maybe we'll never have it."

She looked at him oddly, reluctant to believe that he should think so deeply. His words were too much at odds with her preconceived ideas of him and the service to which he belonged. Finally she took refuge in mockery.

"My, you're a pessimist," she said with superficial banality.

He shrugged in angry disgust and drove on in silence.

The space rifle was a great dome shielding a thick muzzle—like the head of some gigantic cobra rising from the brush and purple trees. For a space of forty meters around it, the ground had been cleared. The two cars pulled up and parked.

They got out.

Two men—by their uniforms, members of the local police—were standing by the dome. They turned and hurried up to Stern as the group approached.

"Still in there, sir," said the taller one, saluting. "Jerry tried to crawl up to the door, but the smuglet must have felt him coming, and knocked him out just as he got there. We dragged him off and sent him back to headquarters."

"Oh, yes," said Stern worriedly, "This is Commander McGarrity, boys. You'll take your orders from him."

"Yes, sir," said the one he spoke to. Hector reached out and caught his shoulder with one big hand, turning him toward the dome.

"Where's the ventilator?" he asked.

"Halfway around the dome," the policeman said, pointing. Hector, following the line of his finger, saw a square opening some five feet off the ground, with some ragged ends of grating twisting out. He moved in that direction, followed by J. J.

WHEN he got close, he could see that part of the grating had been bent and broken as well as chewed. He pointed it out to the bushrunner.

"Pretty strong," he said.

"Hefty," admitted J. J. "They weigh between ninety and a hundred and fifty pounds, grown. Feed off the bush, though; and don't do any harm, except with that shocking trick of theirs."

"What is it?" asked Hector. "Like the charge from an electric eel back on Earth?" J. J., shrugged.

"Don't know," he answered. "I don't think anyone does. Not much like the eel, though. More like the skunk. You don't have to do anything but get close, and it's strictly defensive. Walk up close and you'll get a tingle."

Hector turned and approached the building. He was barely three meters from it when a strange twitchiness seemed to run all over the surface of his skin. He stopped.

"Feel it?" said the bushrunner. "Now take one more step." Hector took his customary long stride forward and immediately the twitching jumped to unbearable proportions. His teeth chattered and his scalp seemed to crawl and his head began to swim dizzily. He took a hurried step backward, and the twitching dropped. He went two more steps to the rear, and it was gone.

"Does it keep that up all the time?" he said, rejoining J. J.

"Until it's dead," answered the bushrunner. Hector stood a minute, thinking. Then he turned and strode back to Stern.

"I take it the door to the housing's locked?" he said.

"Yes," answered the governor, unhappily. "I don't suppose there's any way you could fire through it, and—"

"Not through *that* shielding," said Hector, waving his hand at the dome. "Also, it would wreck the rifle controls inside."

"Maybe if we rushed it," suggested Stern. J. J., shook his head.

"Take you too long to unlock the door," he said.

"Do you have any exterminator in the city, with gas equipment?" said Hector. Stern's face lit up.

"Of course," he answered.

"Get them out here," said Hector. "And bring the fire department, too." Stern nodded and hurried off to the two-way communicator in his car.

The fire department was the first to arrive. Hector had them well-tap with power equipment to the first water level and hook the pump up. Then he directed two volunteers to run the nozzle of the hose as close to the dome as possible and direct a steady stream of water into the torn ventilator. The pump whirred, the two volunteers braced themselves, and a jet of silver water hammered into the opening.

The opening drank it up.

After half an hour, Hector called a halt. He walked close enough to the dome to satisfy himself that the smuglet was still alive and broadcasting. Then turned and came back.

"I can understand," he said to J. J., "that the animal might be undrownable. But where's the water going to?"

There was a diffident noise at the side and one of the policeman spoke up.

"Excuse me, Commander—" he said. Hector turned.

"What?" he said.

"Excuse me," the man went on. "But I've been inside the housing before, and there's a drain in there—"

"Drain!" echoed Hector, exasperatedly. He whirled on one heel and shouted. "Stern!"

The governor came running up. Hector's voice was hard.

"You don't happen deliberately to be sabotaging the defense of this colony, do you?" he said, grimly. "Why didn't you tell me there was a drain in there?" The governor's jaw fell in surprise.

"A drain!" he said. "Why that's right, there is a drain in there. I'd forgotten all about it." Hector's lips thinned, and he turned away.

"All right!" he called to the fire department crew. "Get that out of there. Where's that exterminator outfit?"

FOOTSTEPS sounded at Hector's elbow. "Right here, Commander." It was a lank old man with a leathery face. "We just arrived."

"Good," said Hector. "Have they told you about what we're trying to do here?"

"Yep," answered the oldster.

"Think you can get close enough to pump gas into that ventilator?"

"Why, sure," said the exterminator. "Jerry here'll just walk right up to that hole and put the tube in," he indicated a large, lumpish youth not much smaller than Hector. "Jerry's m'boy. Strong as a truck." Jerry grinned and picked up a bulky section of the gas generator to show how strong he was.

"Hmm," said Hector. "Well, tie a rope around him, just to make sure."

"I don't need no rope," protested Jerry. Hector looked at him. "Yes, sir, Commander," he mumbled.

A rope was tied around Jerry's ample waist, the gas generator hooked up and Jerry picked up one end of the tube.

"Do you think it'll work?" said Tica, looking up at Hector as the boy started for the ventilator. Hector shook his head.

"There's that open drain," he said, "and no one can stay up there long enough to plug the ventilator. But we may get enough—" he was watching the boy Jerry approach the ventilator. He had just slowed as if he had run into a waist-high river of invisible molasses. He was not giving up easily, however, for he continued to shuffle on, head down. He slogged his way to the opening, leaned for a moment against the dome, and slid down the smooth metal in an ungraceful faint.

"Haul him back," ordered Hector.

They pulled the large, unconscious body in hand over hand. Hector was already taking off his jacket. Tica looked at Hector with a new emotion.

"You aren't going in there?" she said, incredulously.

"Do you see anybody else offering to go?" He inquired sourly. J. J. drifted over with a word of advice.

"Don't try to run in, Commander," he drawled. "It hits you like an ax in the

neck when you come into close range sudden." Hector nodded; and, taking the rope that had been disengaged from Jerry, tied it around his own broad chest, under the shoulders. He picked up the tube that Jerry had dropped, and started to walk in, letting it slide through his fingers as he approached the fallen end by the dome.

"Just hope his heart's in good shape," said J. J., with a malicious glance at Tica.

"His heart!" she echoed, spinning on him.

"Kills fellers like him, sometimes," said J. J., snapping his fingers. She turned away, controlling herself. Of course Hector's heart would be—would have to be, for the job he did—in perfect shape. Her breath came a little faster as she watched.

Hector had started for the dome with slow easy strides. When the first warning tingle touched him, he stopped and forced himself to breathe deeply. Then he stepped forward.

It was like stepping down a steep shelving beach into very cold water. With the first step the twitching tore at him, seeming to choke off his breathing. With the next, it became unbearable. His skin crawled, his throat contracted, and the dome began to spin dizzily before his eyes. A feeling of utter panic began to rise within him. He lurched forward toward the haze of the dome and the bobbing black splotch that was the ventilator hole. He was no longer conscious of the ground beneath his feet or the rope around his chest. Only a dim recognition of the tube he held in his hands stayed with him.

He took one more step and felt the wall of the dome hit him, and the end of the tube pull up from the ground and almost slip through his fingers. Every nerve in his body was screaming, leaping in protest against the outrage of the feeling that tore at him. He set his teeth in his lower lip, feeling for a second the small, sharp pain distract him from the unknown thing tearing at him. He lifted the tube, fumbled it into the opening.

His arms felt like lead, but he pushed once, fighting back the black waves of unconsciousness that rose nauseatingly within him. He pushed again, and the tube slid farther into the hole. And then the black waves rose at last, fighting down the end of his resistance, and buried him deep.

IV

SEVERAL hours later Hector awoke to a dark room and the eerie shadows cast by a strange moon hurtling close and swift along the horizon. Fighting back the dragging weakness that lay like a heavy blanket on his limbs, he struggled to a sitting position.

"Hey!" he called hoarsely.

A door opened suddenly, and a shaft of brilliant light cut across him, dazzling him. He blinked in the sudden glare, hearing the light taps of a woman's heels approaching him. He recognized Tica.

"You mustn't get up," she said. He growled something unintelligible even to himself. Grasping her arm, he hauled himself upright with as little ceremony as if she had been a post. She staggered under his weight, but stood. When he had regained his feet, she put one slim arm around his waist by way of support.

She helped him into the next room. It was the office of the governor's house, back in the city and Stern, Hemple and J. J. were standing in it, looking at him curiously. He paid them no attention, but staggered across the room to the desk and sunk in a chair that was pulled up to it. The smooth plastic was cool against his legs. He glanced down.

"Get me some clothes!" he croaked. J. J. chuckled. Tica turned and went back into the bedroom. Hector's gaze swept the room and settled on Stern.

"Did I get the tube in?" he demanded.

"Oh, yes," said the Governor, nervously. "Yes, it's in. The gas is going."

"Any luck yet?"

"No." Hector let his eyes shift to the two other men.

"What are you all doing back here?" he asked. Tica came back in with his

tunic and breeches. He pushed himself up from the chair and reached for them, but from sheer weakness was not able to avoid the help she offered him in putting them on.

"Well—" said Hemple. J. J. laughed.

"You don't know it, Commander," he said, "but you got a rebellion on your hands."

"What?" growled Hector.

"These two fat sheep," said J. J., jerking his thumb at Stern and Hemple, "heard a rumor on the ultra-wave that the raiders had been spotted less than twenty-four hours from here. Instead of keeping the news to themselves, they let it out and the whole town has gone wild. The citizens know, now, that the smuglet is keeping them from the weapons. Half are heading for the hills; and the other half are trying to contact the raiders on the ultra-wave and surrender."

"Surrender!" Hector turned on Stern and Hemple, steadying himself with one hand on a corner of the desk. "You damn fools! You don't surrender to the Spindle Ships, any more than you surrender to a tiger. Both simply take it as an invitation to eat you up."

"Not me—not me!" bleated Hemple. "I didn't want to surrender. But Gideon—" Stern made a little despairing jerk with his hand and the thin man's voice stopped.

"Yes," Stern said, in a low voice, "I said they should try it." The strength seemed to have gone out of him, yet at the same time a certain frankness and honesty had returned to replace it. "As you say, Commander, I'm a fool. I knew it, but I didn't want to admit it. Now I've just made a mess of things." He sat down on a chair, burying his face in his hands. "I was a fool to buy the governorship in the first place."

"Buy the governorship!" It was Tica's voice, high and shocked. J. J. chuckled maliciously in the corner; but Hector nodded.

"That explains a lot of things," he said; and his voice was somewhat kinder. He turned to Tica. "It's not unusual

in some outer colonies where the governorship is more of a paper title than anything else, for men to buy up a few votes to make themselves feel good and perhaps add a little prestige to whatever business they happen to be in. Why didn't you tell me?" he went on to Stern. "It would have saved us both a lot of trouble."

THE GIRL stared at him, astonished. "But he *is* the governor, isn't he?" asked Tica.

"He might as well be the dogcatcher for all the good he can do me," said Hector grimly. "His election was a farce; and in the eyes of the colonists, he's a farce. And Hemple?"

"My cousin," said Stern, ashamedly. He went on lamely, "We figured Lamia was growing. I would be the first governor. He would be the first mayor—"

"Forget it now," said Hector. "You can both go home—no, wait; I may have some use for you after all. J. J. said they're trying to make contact with the raiders. That means a group of them are at the ultra-wave station. Is there any way I could get there without attracting attention?"

"There's a power-tunnel there from this building," answered Stern. "But you'd never make it. They'll—"

"We'll make it," interrupted J. J. He stepped over to the window and pressed the button that rolled the wide transparent sheet back into its casing. He whistled twice into the darkness.

There was a stir outside. A leg came over the sill, followed by an arm, and big, bald-headed man climbed into the room, followed by a boy in his teens who grinned embarrassedly at Tica and turned a bright red under her gaze.

"This is Bonny," said J. J., slapping the boy on the shoulder, "and the other one's Crocus. They can go ahead to take care of any guards at the other end of the tunnel."

"But he's just a child," said Tica, fascinatedly. Bonny turned his head away. J. J.'s, thin lips twisted a trifle sourly.

"As I said when I first saw you," he answered, "you evidently never learned manners. Bonny's more of a man than most you'll ever meet." He turned to Hector. "Let's go."

Stern and Hemple led them downstairs to the mouth of the power tunnel connecting with the station, but, at Hector's order, stayed there. The others got into the two little plastic shells that floated there between the upper and lower rails of the tunnel, Bonny and Crocus in the first one—and the frail craft pillowed on its magnetic fields, rocked dangerously as the bald-headed man climbed aboard—and J. J., Hector and Tica in the second.

"Shove off," said J. J. In the car ahead, Bonny lifted the magnetic grapple that anchored his craft to a standstill and it rocketed off into the dimness of the tunnel. "One—two—three—four—five—" counted J. J., and lifted his own grapple. The three of them were slammed back into the seat as the shell leaped forward.

It was like dropping down an endless well. Their speed between the close walls that they almost, but never quite touched, was so terrific that it made Tica dizzy and she clutched automatically at Hector, closing her eyes. He felt the small, tense pressure of her hands and turned his head to look down at her dark hair, whipping free in the air that got past the visor of the shell. And he looked away again, feeling an unaccustomed uneasiness stir within him, but holding the arm she held, very still.

It was a trip measured in seconds. Nevertheless when they got to their destination, the life-and-death struggle that preceeded them was already over. Three men in the uniform of the city police were dead or dying, and Bonny was straightening up from another still figure in civilian clothes, the knife in his hand running red. Again his eyes met Tica's and again he blushed. A sudden surge of pity and horror shook her so that she, this time, turned her head away.

"Upstairs!" snapped J. J. He slid back

the doors of the levitator and held them while the rest stepped into the rising pressure of the beams and were borne upward past fleeting white doors to the top of the shaft. Here, J. J. pulled back the final door and they tumbled out into the broadcast room at the top of the station.

"Hold it!" snapped the bearded bush-runner. The men around the controls, froze, seeing the guns in the hands of the three men. Hector, who had not bothered to draw his own weapon, strode over to the control board and brushed the man there roughly out of the way.

"Made contact?" he demanded, harshly.

"N-no," stuttered the technician, his fear naked in his eyes.

"Good!" growled Hector. He turned away. Walking over to the transparent dome that covered the broadcast room, he looked out.

A SEA of faces were upturned toward him. He marked the limits of the crowd and estimated that most of the people in the city must be grouped around below, waiting. He turned away and went back to the pickup in the middle of the room.

"Switch me onto the outside screen," he said. The man he had shoved from the controls turned slowly back to them and made some adjustments. "Am I on?"

"You're on," said J. J., from his position next to the dome. "I can just see the top of the screen from here."

From the crowd outside came a distant, muted, swelling roar to echo and verify his words. Facing the pickup, Hector held up his hand for silence; and, as the roar faded, those in the broadcast room heard the thunder of his voice from the annunciators outside the building.

"Listen to me!" he said. "You know me. All of you know me. I have spoken to you twice so far. You know what my job is here. It is to defend you from the attack of the alien. But it is more. It is also to take command of this colony and

this planet and not to relinquish command until my job is done. I have, therefore, just put a halt to your attempt to surrender to the Spindle Ships.

"I will tell you why. This alien race which has just broken through the Frontier Guard and threatens you now, does not understand the concept of surrender. They have never surrendered themselves and they cannot conceive what humans mean when they attempt to surrender to them. Your surrender to them would have meant only an invitation to butchery and looting.

"Furthermore, there is no need to surrender. By the time they reach Lamia, the housing of the K-four will be open and we will be armed to repulse them. You may have heard that all attempts to remove the smuglet have been failures. This is not true. I promise you that I will open the K-four housing before noon tomorrow. As guarantee that this will happen, I furthermore give you my word that if the housing is not open, I will then make no further opposition to your attempts to call the alien and surrender. Until then, however, this building will be evacuated and remain sealed.

"That is all."

He stepped back from the pickup and signaled the man at the control board to cut the screen.

"It's off," said J. J., from the dome. He added, after a moment's pause, "And they're leaving."

"All right," said Hector. "Everybody downstairs. I'm going to seal this, and then I'll be right with you."

They turned and went, herding the men who had been attempting contact before them, crowded back into the levitator and dropped to the lofty entrance hall on the ground floor. In a few minutes, Hector rejoined them.

"We'll go out the front way," he said. "I want to seal that, too." He turned to the men who had been working in the broadcast room. "You understand that none of you are to come back here?"

They muttered a sullen assent.

"Good," said Hector, and they went through the high front doors into the

cool night, the stationmen fading away in the darkness, the others watching curiously as, with his handgun, Hector melted the edges of the two metal doors together.

"Now," he said, turning away. "Back to the governor's house."

STERN was still waiting for them when they returned, but Hemple had gone back to his home and wife, perhaps feeling the need for the presence of familiar things now that his world was crumpling. Stern, the somewhat stronger man of the two, and a bachelor, was sticking it out, but his face was wan as he greeted them.

"Stern," said Horace, without preliminaries, "You'd better show Miss Smith her room, and turn in yourself. It doesn't look like we can do anything until morning." Tica looked up at the hard lines of his face.

"How about you?" she asked.

"I'm going to talk some things over with J. J." His features were drawn and tired as he answered.

"I'm not tired," she said, "I'll stay up, too."

"You'll go to bed!" his voice was harsh.

"But if there's talking to be done, I want to hear it," she cried. "Remember, I'm here as an observer."

"And let me remind you," his voice boomed angrily in the echoing hallway of the governor's house, "that I am in command and you are strictly under my orders. Go to bed!" And, turning on his heel, he strode off into the office. J. J. turned and followed him. The door slammed, leaving her sick and angry.

"Miss Smith!" It was Stern's voice at her elbow, soft, almost humble. She turned toward him. "This way, Miss Smith."

As in a dream, she followed him down the hall and off a branching corridor to a wide dim room, lit by the swiftly moving moon.

"The light—"

"Never mind the lights," she said, numbly. "I can see well enough, and I

think I'll go right to sleep." He nodded, and went out.

"Good night, Miss Smith." The door closed behind him.

"Good night," she murmured automatically to the closed door. She walked across the shadowed room and sank tiredly onto the softness of the wide bed. It would be dawn in a few short hours. She leaned forward, pressing her slim fingers against her temples as if to drive back the memories of the day. The mob, Hector collapsing against the dome, the boy Bonny with his dripping knife. She lay back, head against the yielding pillow, taking her hands from her face. She was conscious of a deep dragging exhaustion and a longing to be gone, away from the harsh incomprehensible standards of this unfamiliar world. She felt as if the whole fabric of her logic had been ripped away; as if she had been staked out naked to the universe, mute and helpless. She groped for something to cling to and realized suddenly that it was Hector, and Hector alone who bridged the gap between the present situation and all the other situations she had ever known.

She tossed on the bed.

She had come out here as an observer—supposedly. Actually, she admitted to herself, she had been nothing more than a prejudiced gatherer of facts favorable to her own cause. It had been her belief that the Colonists were abused by the Assigned Defense Commanders, that the military organization robbed them of personal freedoms. She laughed, a little bitterly. Freedom? Freedom to buy offices? Freedom to cut throats? Those were their freedoms. Starkly, to herself, in the darkness she faced the fact that she had not known what she was talking about. She realized now that the committee she headed were a pack of fools who read statistics from sheets of paper and thought themselves qualified to make decisions. She would resign. She would report that, after looking over the situation, she felt herself unqualified to judge the matter. And she would tell Hector of this decision right away.

THE notion was so attractive that she rose to her feet. Almost happily, she walked across the room and out the door into the hall. Here she paused. She had paid little attention to which way she had come to her bedroom in this big house and now she was uncertain of the way back to the office. She hesitated. Then it occurred to her that Stern's room must be close.

"Mr. Stern," she called softly. When there was no answer, she tried again, more loudly, "Mr. Stern!"

Still there was no answer. Asleep, she thought. She moved to the nearest door on the hallway and knocked. There was no answer and she opened it up. It was in perfect order and empty. She stepped back, shut the door and tried the next one.

It was behind the fourth door that she found Stern's bedroom. It was unmistakably his, for among the disorder of the bed and closet she saw the discarded clothes he had been wearing that day. Other clothing from racks and drawers had been yanked out and strewn around. A half-packed luggage case sat open on the bed and a window curtain fluttered in the breeze from the garden beyond. Stern was gone.

Tica went cold.

She had no idea of the time that she had been lying on her bed; but it could not have been more than half an hour. And in that short time Stern had either left or been making hurried preparations to do so—preparations which had been suddenly interrupted. Her overstrained nerves leaped suddenly under a spasmodic thrust of fear. What the condition of the governor's room could mean, she did not know, but on this wild, panic-ridden planet she could not do otherwise than expect the worst. The fat governor had deserted. Hector must be told.

V

FILLED with this idea, Tica turned back into the corridor and ran blindly along it, hunting instinctively for the

office where she had left the other tow men. She blundered by open doors and around corners until eventually she stumbled on the big entrance hallway again and recognized the double doors of the office in its right hand wall. She pressed the button and they flew apart as she thrust into the room.

"Commander!" she cried.

Tica brought herself to a sudden halt. The office, too, was empty.

The calm light of the ceiling shed its even glow on the deep chairs, the desk, with its litter of papers, and the wide open window. She froze, feeling the beat of her heart step up to the frantic rhythm of a fear-crazed animal. The heartbeats shook her, standing there in silence and alone.

Then, there was the faint murmur of voices from outside. She moved swiftly to the window, telling herself that she was foolish. It was possible that they were only in the garden. Still, some instinct of caution caused her to stand to one side of the airy gap, looking out obliquely, but hiding herself from view.

Down and beyond the garden, on the road that led from the governor's house to the hills, she saw two men standing in the light of a street globe, one with the giant frame of Hector and the other with the flowing hair and beard of J.J. They had halted and were staring back, irresolute, at the house. Tica realized, suddenly, that they must have heard her call Hector's name. A tag end of their conversation came faint but clearly to her ears.

"—you think?" J.J. was saying. "We could play safe."

"No," Hector's voice was more distinct, the ring of command audible in it even at this distance, "There's no time. Let's go."

They turned away, their figures following their long shadows up the street and dwindling away toward the hills and the brush beyond. That way led to concealment and safety when the Raiders arrived; but only if enough unsuspecting people remained in town to appease their savage desires. There was

no longer any doubt in Tica's mind that she and the colonists were being deliberately deserted first by their governor, and now by the bushrunners and the Commander who should have been the core of their defense. That was why she had been shunted off to a bedroom—so that her accusing voice would be among those to be silenced by the alien. That was why Stern, wiser than she in the meanness and cowardliness of men's minds, had fled, leaving his clothing half-packed behind him.

With this abrupt realization, the last of her courage washed suddenly out of her, and she crumpled on her knees by the window, sobbing.

For a long time she let the grief flow from her, unchecked. Then, gradually, as the torment of emotions within her subsided, she rose unsteadily to her feet and blew her nose. Then she walked across the room to the liquor cabinet set in one wall of the office and poured herself a strong drink of Earth brandy. She lifted the glass in cold fingers and drank.

The brandy flowed down, turning to liquid fire inside her, shocking her out of the numbness that fear had left. She gasped, and set the glass down, looking around her.

Her strength was returning, and with it, a touch of the sureness that had dictated her actions all her life and won her the planetary junior representativeship on Arco at twenty-three. The situation might or might not be hopeless for her and the unprotected city-people. There were some things still that could be done.

SHE stepped to the desk and the directory that lay there. She punched for the section marked CITY OFFICES, and the directory flipped open before her. The list she wanted was pitifully small—the small column of call numbers for the Fire Department Chief, Lighting Department Chief, Heating and Power Unit Chief, and a handful of others. But Tica did not hesitate. She dialed their numbers on the Communicator and sent

out her calls as quickly as possible.

Two hours later, as the first brightness of dawn streaked Lamia's sky, they were all gathered in the office, a group of worried uncertain men. She faced them with the assurance taught her by political campaigning. She had profited by the short period of time before they gathered in obedience to her summons, to change her clothes and take some benzedrine. Crisply erect, and clear-eyed, she faced them.

"I'll come straight to the point," she said. "I am Tica Smith, Junior Planetary Representative from Arco to Central Headquarters, Earth, and here are my credentials." From the desk beside her she picked up a couple of papers and handed them to the nearest man, who glanced at them, gave a short exclamation of surprise and passed them on to his neighbor. They went around the room.

Tica continued: "I came here incognito to observe the workings of the Assigned Defense Commanders System for a Committee investigating this System—a committee which I happen to head. You may have read about it, or heard some of my speeches." She paused and there were a few murmurs of assent from around the room.

"However," she went on, "the situation here has forced me to come out into the open." She paused for them to assimilate the implications of this statement, but they looked back at her, politely uncomprehending. She stiffened her resolution.

"I have been forced to take over the reins of authority here," she said. "Because the ones who should have done the job of organizing your defense have betrayed you. Your governor, Defense Commander McGarrity and the bush-runners have left you to save yourselves in whatever way you can. They've left you—run off into the bush."

Still there was no reaction from them—only the polite, dumb silence. Anger flamed up within her.

"Don't you realize what I'm saying?" she cried. "You've been abandoned.

Doesn't any one of you have anything to say?" She stabbed out with her forefinger at random, pointing out the heavy, aging man who was the city Heating and Power Unit Chief. "Don't *you* have anything to say?" The man looked embarrassed.

"Well, miss," he cleared his throat, "you've got to admit it does sound kind of thin."

"Thin?" she echoed, bewildered. He cleared his throat.

"It was just a few hours ago," he said, "that the Commander promised he'd open up the rifle dome before noon."

"But he was lying!" she protested.

Her words echoed away into the silence of the room. Looking around she saw the polite disbelief written on each face.

"Are you all insane?" she said. "It was just those same few hours ago that you and the rest of the city were going against McGarrity's orders in trying to surrender to the alien."

"Oh, sure," said the Fire Department Chief. "But the governor said to surrender."

"The governor!" echoed Tica. "Stern? The man who bought his votes to get into office? Don't tell me you had any faith in him!"

"I guess not," said the Fire Chief, stubbornly, "but somebody's gotta take charge. Anyway, it's none of my business." And, rising, he turned toward the door.

IN A FLASH she saw it, the key to these incomprehensible colonists of the Outer Planets. They were a little people, bewildered and scared. They expected to be led. They wanted to be led. For no one of them had the courage and belief in his own ability to take control of the rest. Seeing it, a sudden weight lifted off her. Now the situation had become clear and simple again, and she knew what to do.

"Stop," she said crisply; and the Fire Chief halted. "I am in charge here now. All of you are under my orders. I intend to notify the nearest Military

Headquarters of the defection of the Defense Commander and demand protection for Lamia. I will take the responsibility for the unsealing of the ultra-wave station; and the rest of you will supply me with the men to operate it."

Swiftly she issued her directions. . . .

The morning sun was high in the sky before they had torched through the outer doors of the ultra-wave station. The doors had been of heavy metal and the commercial cutters were weak compared to the ravening fury of the weapon McGarrity had used to seal them together. Stony-faced, Tica had watched her little band of men work desperately, casting sidelong glances at the rest of the city populace, which, under the pressure of a sheep-like herd instinct and a pressing fear, were drifting off toward the rifle dome to await the fulfillment of Hector's promise. More than once, Tica had been tempted to turn to the local broadcast station in a nearby building and announce to all the people what she had cautioned the utility officers to keep to themselves; but she hesitated to withdraw the straw of hope from the despairing populace. However, after she had talked to the nearest Military Headquarters, she would have another to offer in its place.

The tall doors swung inward.

Tica's little group went across the threshold with a brush. They clustered around the levitator doors, eagerness thinly veiled with restraint that Tica's presence imposed as she pushed through them and entered the levitator first, herself. They crowded in behind her.

As she rose on the pressure beams, her heart lightened for the first time since her landing, for—and she faced the fact squarely—she was like the men behind her; she had no particular wish to be responsible for the people of Lamia. Now she was scant seconds away from shifting that responsibility to the shoulders of the nearest military unit. The door of the broadcast room sank level with her and she swung it open. She had time for one lingering touch of

regret that Hector had run out the way he had; for, in spite of her opinions, he had reached through to her and touched her, and she had almost begun to admire him.

Then the doors swung open and the regret was lost in horror. For Hector had sealed the station well. He had turned his handgun loose on the delicate wiring of its controls; and the place was a shambles.

Like beasts to high ground, when the spring flood freshens and spreads, the people of the city, the colonists, had been drifting all morning to the high mound of the rifle dome, towering above the brush. They had ringed it with a packed and desperate crowd, children and men and women alike. And so they waited, clinging to the hope that was beyond all reason, for some had been close to the dome and had felt the smuglet, and knew it was still alive.

It was to and through this crowd that Tica came, backed by the man who had helped to open the ultra-wave station for her. She pushed between their packed bodies to the open space that surrounded the dome and held up her hand to get their attention. It seemed to her now that there was only one thing left to be done and that was to tell them how they had been betrayed. They must be informed that Hector had never intended them to use the ultra-wave—that it was destroyed. They could do nothing now but scatter into the bush, each one taking what chance might bring him.

THE crowd watched her. She mounted a small collapsible stand that the men with her had brought and took a portable annunciator in her hand.

"Listen to me," she said.

They looked at her, waiting.

"I am Tica Smith," she said, "Junior Representative from Arco. These men with me have looked at my credentials. They know I am the person I say I am. They will vouch for the fact that what I say is true. You have been betrayed by Commander McGarrity—"

"No!" It was a shrill cry of protest, almost a shriek from the edge of the crowd, and a short, stout man began to force his way through it toward the platform. For a moment he was lost in the eddy and swirl of the taller heads around him and then he burst out on the inside of the packed ring of staring people and ran toward Tica.

"Governor Stern!" she gasped.

He jerked the annunciator from her hand.

"Don't listen to her!" he shouted into it. "She doesn't know what's going on. She—" The men by Tica rolled over him in a wave, smothering him, tearing the annunciator from his hand.

"Let him talk!" said Tica, icily.

Wondering, the men who had been with her at the breaking in of the ultra-wave plant doors, released him. He staggered to his feet, snatching back the annunciator.

"Last night," he panted, "before he sealed the ultra-wave station, Commander McGarrity called the Military Headquarters of this space sector. The aliens are coming. Detector tracers showed them heading in this direction. And the Fleet is behind them, five hours behind them. And the alien'll be here by noon. We've got to hold them off until the Fleet comes—"

There was a low moan from the crowd.

"The station will be opened," Stern went on. "Commander McGarrity has promised it!"

"Commander McGarrity has promised it!" echoed Tica scornfully, snatching the annunciator from his hand. "Let me tell you people about Commander McGarrity and his promises. Last night he promised that if the station was not open by noon, he would let you try to surrender to the Spindle Ships. But he made sure that you would not be able to do so. I and these men with me have just cut our way into the station. Would you like to know what we found there? The ultra-wave equipment was smashed beyond repair!"

Sound swelled up once more from

the crowd. And this time there was a note of hysterical fear in it, and the packed bodies swayed menacingly toward Stern. Tica waved them back.

"What do you say to that?" she demanded, handing the annunciator back to him.

"He says that the dome will be opened as promised!" interrupted the thunderous voice of another annunciator from beyond the far edge of the crowd.

VI

QUICKLY they turned. Emerging from the bush at the edge of the cleared area was the tall figure of Hector, his clothing torn and tattered, carrying the tightly roped and squirming figure of an animal in his arms. Following him was J.J., and a swarm of the bushrunners. J.J.'s voice came clear to Tica, without the annunciator, raised in a shrill yelp of delight.

"Out of our way, you sheep, you fat sheep, or we'll carve a way through you!"

The crowd split wide and through the gap came Hector and the bushrunners. The men around Tica melted away from her as Hector came up; but he did no more than glance at her.

"Put that thing away," he said curtly, nodding at the annunciator she held in her hand. Numbly, like someone waking from a dream she set it down. He turned away, setting the bound animal in his arms on the ground. Her eyes went past him to the now unfriendly, accusing eyes of the crowd. Sick inside, she turned away.

"Don't you worry none, miss." It was barely a whisper in her ear. She turned to see the boy Bonny facing her and smiling sympathetically. A surge of gratitude swept through her and she reached impulsively for his hand, but he drew away shyly.

Hector was now squatting by the squirming beast he had carried in, and cutting some of the cords that bound it. As they fell away, the shape of it was

disclosed more clearly. It had a long, weasel-like snout and body of about a hundred pounds in weight. It had six short legs, and a bushy, sinuous tail with a barb in the end which lashed angrily right and left as they freed it. Its eyes were small and yellow and malevolent, not any bit afraid, but brimful of hate and viciousness. It looked at Hector with hungry longing.

When the animal remained held only by the cords that shackled its feet and jaws, Hector rose again to his feet, lifting the annunciator to his lips.

He spoke to the crowd.

"This is what I promised you," he said. "We tried every means we could think of to drive the smuglet out of the rifle-dome. When everything failed, this was left." He gestured to the animal at his feet. "Every species has its own natural enemy; and this, we believe, is the smuglet's." His lips smiled, a trifle grimly. "Nobody seems to know its proper name, but J.J., tells me that among his men it's known as the bush-killer."

THE bush-killer stared up at him with its yellow, hate-filled eyes.

"Now we'll put it into the ventilator," he concluded, and set the annunciator down.

It took three men to pick up the squirming fury now that most of its bindings had been removed. They carried it to the edge of the smuglet's influence and set it down.

"Sticks!" called J.J. The bushrunners clustered around with long poles, sharp-pointed on the end, with which they hemmed in the bush-killer, back against the dome. "Bonny!"

The boy slipped away from Tica, to and through the pole-men and stood poised on the edge, knife in hand.

"Now!" said J.J.

With one fluid motion, Bonny leaped to the side of the bound animal. His knife flashed and in the same split second he was back behind the barrier of the encircling men. A hair's breadth behind him, the body of the now cut free

bush-killer landed fair on the sharp points, then flung itself screaming away again.

For a second it crouched there, radiating hate. Then, as if it had suddenly forgotten the people around it, it stood up on its last two legs and sniffed the air daintily. Its sharp muzzle turned slowly clockwise and halted on a line with the torn ventilator opening.

Inside the dome the smuglet cried out for the first time—a lonely frightened sound.

Disinterestedly, the bush-killer dropped back to the ground. Suddenly three of the pole-men went backward under the impact of its leaping body. But the pole-points bore it back. Yowling with anger it paced the narrow area.

"Close in," said J.J.

The half-circle narrowed. On its two ends, the men could not get within two meters of the building, but their long sharp poles bridged the gap and slowly the bush-killer was driven back. For a moment it stood at bay. Then, with scarcely an appearance of effort, it turned and leaped, vanishing into the black and ragged hole in the ventilator screen.

There was a moment of silence. Hector shoved through the line of pole-men opposite the door and stood waiting, pressing against the outer tingle of the smuglet's power. Then suddenly a high and dreadful screaming burst from the inside of the building and the tingling vanished.

Hector leaped to the door, unlocked it and flung it wide.

The smuglet crawled from the opening, like some great gray mouse, it dragged itself on crippled forepaws, its paralyzed hindquarters furrowing the dust behind it. Ripped, torn, and streaked with blackish blood, it pulled itself from them away from the predator that followed, tearing at it, leaping high in feline play upon it. It shrank toward Hector and the humans, hoping, perhaps, for the blessing of a quick death.

"*Ub. ubbu. ubu. bu. bu—*" it choked,

rising again to a shriek as the worrying shape that followed flung itself after the smuglet. The scream was cut mercifully short by the snap of Hector's handgun.

Then the bushkiller was away. Moving like a tawny streak of light, it darted down the path that was opened before it by the crowd. It had won clear and was racing for the edge of the bush when Hector, under the compulsion of a pity he had not believed himself capable of feeling, lifted his gun and sent a thin yellow bolt racing after it.

The bushkiller crumpled in mid-leap, with half of its body burned away. Even so, it turned and came thrashing, back before a second shot finished it. Silence again settled in the clearing and a great sigh went up from the watching people.

Hector, his face set in a still mask, reholstered his gun; and lifted the annunciator to his lips.

"All able-bodied men form a line," he said, "and we'll hand out weapons as long as they last."

IT WAS two hours later. Inside the dome, the rifle crew were at their posts, tensely waiting. In front of the master control scanner and firing trips, Rector stood, Tica at his side.

She had not dared speak to him since he first came striding out of the bush. Now she put out a hand timidly to touch his arm.

"What?" he said, turning to look down at her.

"Do you—" she hesitated. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry?"

"For what I did," she answered. "Thinking you'd run off. Calling those men together. Breaking into the ultrawave station." He shrugged, somewhat embarrassed.

"I don't blame you," he said. "You couldn't know what I didn't tell you. I suppose you had a right to expect the worst."

"But why?" she demanded. "Why didn't you tell me? Didn't you trust me?" He sighed; for the truth in this

matter was something that it was very hard for him to admit.

"I thought you'd be safer if you didn't know," he said in a low voice. "I thought that you'd sleep through until this morning and by that time—it doesn't make sense, does it?"

She wondered at him.

"No," she said, truthfully. "It doesn't seem like you. Why should my safety concern you?"

He made a gesture of impatience with his big hands.

"You don't belong here," he said half angrily. "You don't know what you let yourself in for. I do." He checked himself, suddenly. "That's not quite straight. The truth is—hunting up the bushkiller in the hope that it could do what we couldn't, was a gamble. A gamble with the odds on our side, but still a gamble. Several things could have gone wrong, such as not being able to find a bushkiller in time, or the beast's killing itself on the poles, instead of letting itself be forced into the ventilator. It was the sort of thing that would have given your committee a Roman holiday if it hadn't succeeded. I couldn't risk that."

"You were against me," she murmured.

"What?" he said.

"Nothing." She lifted her face to him, shaking her hair back over her shoulders. "What would you have done if the bushkiller idea hadn't worked?" He smiled wryly.

"Shoved a homemade time bomb in through the ventilator," he said. "And hoped there'd be enough handguns left in working order to fight it out on the ground." She shivered. Before she could say anything further, one of the gun crew spoke up, looking over from the scanner in front of him.

"Enemy at two-thirty-four; culmination arc, one sixteen. Six ships."

Hector's big hands moved swiftly and easily over the controls in front of him and the outlines of six pencil-shaped objects swam into the master screen before him.

"Check," he said. He spoke over his

shoulder to Tica. "Stay inside the dome. And don't get in the way."

"All right." Her answer was barely pitched above a whisper, but Hector was not listening, wholly absorbed now by the controls in front of him.

"Range two by two by eight," he said.

"Range two by two by eight—check," the answer came from across the room.

"Check all stations."

"Check" — "Check" — "Check" — "Check"—the word ran around the interior of the dome as the crew spoke up from their several posts.

TICA turned away from him and moved over to the screen that showed the area outside the station. The clearing was deserted and the brush hid the armed men. The sky above looked peaceful, empty.

"Correction two by two by seven." Hector's voice went on behind her, the crew voices answering.

"Correction, two by two, by seven—check."

"On target."

"Fire."

There was no sound, no vibration in the big dome, no indication of the destroying beam that for a moment reached out thousands of miles into space. The quiet voices went on around her with the calm emotionlessness of bookkeepers checking accounts.

"Hit one."

"Target—check."

"Dispersal tactics, two thirty-three, by north eight-seven. Check two."

"Two-check."

"Fire."

"Correction—"

The voices went on, steadily, monotonously. The hours slipped by. In the dome, Tica, and in the bush, the colonists, waited.

The bright sun of Lamia passed its zenith and sank westward. At the screen, listening to the voices behind her, Tica was vaguely aware that the titanic, silent duel between the station and the alien had accounted for two ships. Abruptly there was a cessation

of the action in the dome. She turned, surprised, to Hecor.

"What happened?" she said. "Did you get them all?"

He looked at her wearily. She remembered suddenly that this man had not slept or eaten since they had landed on the planet some twenty-four hours before.

"They've ducked behind the planet to hide," he said. Hope rose in her.

"Maybe they're going away."

He shook his head.

"No," he said. "They'll be back. Two will cover from the air and two will land crews to see if they can't take the station by hand-to-hand attack." He lifted his voice to the rifle crew. "Take it easy, but watch both hemispheres."

He turned stiffly from the master screen and snapped on a pickup that connected with the men on the bush.

"Get me J.J." he said.

"Right here, Commander." The bearded slim figure took form on the pickup's screen.

"Get your men on their toes," ordered Hector. "There'll be a landing within the next thirty minutes. Remember, you fight these aliens by moving. Each man by himself. Shoot and run. A spindle-shipper is stronger than a human at close grips; but they don't understand knives, so your bushrunners may have a chance that way. If they do come close enough for knife-work, strike for the bottom of the trunk. The breathing sac is down there and once you puncture that, it paralyzes them."

"Right," answered J.J. laconically. "We'll be ready. Anything else?"

"That's all," said Hector, and broke the connection.

VII

WITH startling abruptness, the enemy was upon them.

The office-silence of the rifle dome was disrupted by the horrifying bedlam of war, as two ships, having crept up behind the low overcast, went roaring through the air above the station, belch-

ing names. The riven air screamed before them and the dome rocked under the impact of their weapons, rocked on the pounded soil like a child's boat rocks on a rippled pool. Tica felt herself flung back into the chair that faced the outside screen. She clung there, frightened and desperate, while before her eyes giant hands dealt out carnage. The ground around the station was one raging red inferno. Behind her the shouted commands of Rector rang against bedlam as he traded blow for blow with the covering ships and fenced off the horizon-hopping pair that would have landed.

"Twenty-three—six—oh! Release! Fire! Release! Fire!" The master control trips jumped in his hands as he switched suddenly from the computed aiming of the crew at the high ships to the point-blank range of the hedge-hopping pair. He tasted blood from his upper lip, split when the first concussion had hurled him against his control panel. A savage joy filled him as he fired.

The high ships were dropping as they blasted. Outside the dome glowed, and the tough stubborn metal softened and ran in reluctant drops as its outer shell melted before the direct touch of the alien beams. Inside the refrigerating unit shrieked at full capacity as its heat pump channeled the outside temperatures deep into the earth where the anchoring rock fused and bubbled under the abnormal temperatures forced upon them. Recklessly, Hector ignored the overhead attack, fighting back the would-be landing party and luring the top attackers down until suddenly he caught them in line, one behind the other. Then suddenly abandoning all his ground defense, he threw full power on the lead ship.

It glowed, shone, and suddenly, like a black mouth opening, a dark hole melted in its armor. Unchecked, the sudden beam raved through it; and like a crippled crazy thing, it flung itself floundering backward and its own weapons broke a path for the rifle beam through the defenses of its sister ship.

For a second they hung like two flaring comets in Hector's screen, then swung together. The heavens vanished in a sudden, silent wash of white and brilliant light.

These two space craft were gone. But the other two had landed.

Hector turned and flung himself at the pickup. But it was dead. He turned again, thrusting Tica roughly from the outside screen and looked through it.

The bush no longer hid the city from the dome. Now one large cinderous area surrounded the rifle, wide enough to leave the dome in plain sight. In the tangled area beyond, the two remaining ships were hidden and even now the barrel-bodied, stumpy-armed alien would be pouring out of them for their march to take the dome and thus disarm the city.

Hector jiggled once more with the pickup, then, discarding it, threw the switches that broke free and opened the half-melted dome door. It swung back, and, motioning the rifle crew to stay where they were, he hurdled the blistering sill and ran for the bush, his side-arm held loosely in one big hand.

Behind him a wave of heat from the half-cooked metal of the outer shell washed back into the dome and the rifle crew hurriedly closed the door and took their posts for the last defense of the dome that might come if Hector and J.J., with the riflemen, could not stop the alien fighters. And in front of the outside screen, Tica waited, and watched.

HECTOR ran easily, at a loping dog-trot. The only haste was his urge to reach J.J., as soon as possible. For speed was no defense. If any of the alien had already managed to reach the fringe of bush on the edge of the burnt area, Hector was a sitting duck. He could only hope that the humans had held them.

But no guns winked, and no alien beams whispered their pale yellow death at him. He reached the bush in safety.

Now his tactics changed. He went

warily forward, his handgun at the ready, slipping from one piece of cover to the other, for to come suddenly on his own men might be easily as bad as coming so upon the alien.

He moved like a shadow through the bush, in the general direction of where he knew J.J.'s men should be. And as he went a murmur rose on the soft air, a murmur that as he approached it, grew in volume until the separate sounds that made it up could be faintly distinguished. From a long distance they came and he knew them well. The sounds of the fighting mad, the wounded and the dying.

He came to where J.J.'s command post should have been. But the trampled clearing was empty, except for one dead man, his head half burnt away. The corpse lay beside the pickup that should have answered Hector's call from the dome. Battle had been joined not far from here, it seemed, and then swung westward. Hector leaned down, took the dead man's knife and pushed on toward the sound.

The first encounter came without warning, a slight breath of air, the hint of a color half-seen for a flash with the corner of an eye, and the swish and fall of one of the purple trees beam-cut through at his side.

He dropped; and rolled. A second later the pale yellow beam sliced the earth where he had lain. Grimly, his gun before him, he wriggled a circuitous route toward its source.

When he had reached a point of safety, he raised his head cautiously behind the screen of a bush's many narrow leaves and looked. For a moment he saw nothing. Then there was a slight stir among the foliage twenty yards away and a spindle-shipper stepped into view. He stopped, and stood there, a heavy gun cradled in his short round arm, his stocky body upright and stolid-looking except for the erectile flaps of his sense-organs that waved gently to all quarters of the compass. Hector lifted his gun, sighted and squeezed. The alien went down, thrashing, half

burnt in two, but still alive with the astounding vitality of his race.

Hector turned and ran. The sound of the dying alien would draw others of his own race to him. Since the spindle-shippers were between him and the humans, this might create a gap in their line through which he could reach J.J. and his men.

He ran, shouting his name to warn the humans to hold their fire. For a long moment he had no answer; and he had time to think that possibly he had made a mistake and that the humans were not where he thought they might be. Then a shrill whoop answered him and he stumbled over a small bushy hillock to sprawl panting among a roughly-dressed group of bush-runners.

He rolled over on his back and struggled for breath. A dry chuckle made him turn his head and discover J.J. The bearded bushrunner was squatting not ten feet from him, one eye cocked in the direction that Hector had come, a gun in his hands.

"You sure sounded like your pants were on fire, Commander," he said. "I—" He interrupted himself suddenly, whipped the gun to his shoulder and fired. "Got him," he continued calmly. "I figured there'd be at least one following you up."

He rose and strolled over to stand looking down at Hector, who, somewhat recovered, pushed himself up to a sitting position.

"I couldn't get you on the pickup," he said. "The man on your end's killed. What's the situation here?" J.J. frowned.

"So Cary's dead," he said. "He always was kind of careless. Well, I'll tell you, Commander. We aren't holding them. Not by a damn sight. You want to know why?"

"Of course," answered Hector. J.J. grinned without humor.

"Those city-sheep have been plain ungrateful," he said. "They just didn't appreciate those shiny new guns you handed out at all. Just about all of them have sneaked off and cut for the hills."

"Didn't you stop them?" demanded Hector sharply.

"The boys have been kind of busy with these here walking barrels," he said, dryly, "if you've noticed."

IN SILENCE Hector accepted the rebuke. The bush-runners were his only ground force, and he needed them.

"How do things stand now?" he asked. J.J., hunkered down beside him and, picking up a stick, began to draw in the soft loose earth with it.

"The ships are here and here," he said, diagramming. "When they first landed, we tried to surround them, but they broke through right off and started to spread toward the rifle dome. I figured they might head straight for the city, but—"

"They won't," interrupted Hector. "It won't be safe for them to take off as long as the rifle is operating. They'll have to destroy it first before they try any looting."

J.J. nodded.

"Anyway," he went on, "they pushed us back. Now this circle here is the open space around the rifle. This is their line at right angles to it, and this is ours. They keep trying to swing us in against it and we keep fading away in front of them, so the whole fight is sort of spiraling in on it. In half—maybe three quarters of an hour—we're going to be up on the edge, both them and us. What happens then, I don't know."

"I do," said Hector. "I've fought them before. They'll try to rush the dome under covering fire, and hold position there long enough to mine it. They don't worry about loss of life. Once at the dome, they'll try to hold half the edge of the clearing. Then we won't be able to fire into them from the opposite side. It'll end up as a hand-to-hand around the dome. Have you got some good men for that?"

"Commander," drawled the bushrunner, "they're all good men for that."

"All right," said Hector. "Let's get going."

They fell back, firing as they went.

In the rifle dome, Tica waited.

It was deathly still in there. The rifle crew had dogged down the sealing door over the ventilator and they were running on compressed air from the storage tanks. The anchor beams that held them solid to the great field of igneous rock two miles beneath the surface of the earth, were locked in place and the main door was fused tight. There was nothing left but the waiting.

Seated in front of the outside scanner, Tica watched. It was as if she sat, disembodied, on the high muzzle of the rifle itself and looked out over the wasted area and the brush beyond. Of the fight proper, nothing was visible to her. Only occasionally she caught the momentary shimmer of beams like cloud-trapped rays of sudden sunshine in a room; and the audio brought the hoarse murmur of the battle sounds distantly to her ear.

But that was enough. Little by little, by these signs and tokens, she could see the battle drawing steadily closer to the blasted clearing and the dome. She watched in helpless fascination as this approached until, at last, both sides were there, the aliens in one rough half-circle hidden in the brush to the north. The humans in an identical half-circle to the south.

Then the yellow beams began to play across the four-mile distance of open ground. The dome, caught in the cross-fire, glowed momentarily red where a beam would hit, then faded quickly back to the massy gray of its normal color. For several long minutes the gun battle went on. Then suddenly, from the alien side of the clearing, a horde of the stumpy creatures burst, charging on the dome.

They were not fast—not nearly so fast as men might be—but their advance had a pounding inexorability about it. They moved within a screen of their own living flesh, an outer ring tight-packed about those in the center to catch the impact of the beams from the human side of the natural arena. An

inner group fired over the lumpy shoulders of the others, and moved swiftly to take the place of those in the outer ring that fell.

They left their dead behind them to mark their path, gray writhing bodies or still corpses, against the cindered black, like the flaky shedding of some monster snake. But they came on.

NOW the firing redoubled on the human side. Soon from the tattered bush there sprung a loose wave of humans—smaller, more scattered, but swifter than the alien. Scattered, not bunched, they raced across the blasted ground toward the dome and the gray approaching horde, their shrill yells echoing on the afternoon air.

Dodging, shifting, leaping, like leaves in an autumn wind, they ran. And like leaves they fell to the alien guns beaming from the far side of the clearing. But speed was with them and the open pattern of their charging. They had started later than the alien group, but they were gaining. They had gained. By the time they were three quarters of the way to the dome, the lost ground had been made up.

Now they were close. Now the dome shielded nearly all of them from opposing fire. Now they had reached it, just as the alien came up from the other side and the area around the silent muzzle of the space rifle became a straining, struggling mass of white and gray bodies.

So the end came. Neither side could now fire into the stabbing, close locked bodies around the dome. The time for guns was over. The time for hand to hand combat was here. From both sides, the embattled groups streamed forth onto the field and dust rose as they closed together. Beneath it, man to alien, alien to man, in single combat they locked and swayed.

Above, like an invisible spirit, Tica twisted the controls of the scanner, searching through the dust and haze for the tall figure of Hector. As if she had been a silent ghost drifting through the

carnage, the combat unreeled before her, from the close-packed dogfight around the dome to the scattered battle farther out. Faces, bodies, half-glimpsed, came and went—a bushrunner with his left arm torn away, sinking the knife held in his right hand to its handle in the enemy who had dismembered him. A boy of Bonny's age, his mouth stretched open in a scream as the thick arms of an alien bent him back until his spine cracked and he dangled like a broken doll. Then at last she found Hector.

He was one of a group with J.J., and some others who were grimly hacking their way toward the dome. He towered, berserk, taller than the aliens, taller than the humans that surrounded him. The long bushrunner's knife in his hand flashed as he sliced his way through the pack of gray bodies to the dome. Like furious, leaping rats they flung themselves upon him. He shook them off, his knifeblade slick with the sheen of the oily oozings from the alien gashed bodies. Savagely he fought his way to the dome, to the dome's very door. And then the press of combat cut him off from the men behind him and he went down beneath a wave of aliens, that rolled over him and hid him at last from view.

He did not rise again.

VIII

CHILLED and weak with a strange, numb sickness, Tica turned from the screen and walked unsteadily across to a dark corner of the dome. The up-curving metal wall stopped her and she put her hands against it, leaning her hot forehead against the smooth metal. She did not cry. She did not faint. She merely stood there, at last beyond all feeling. And the dome, the crew, the battle passed away from her like a forgotten dream, so that she walked alone in the hell that she had made herself and lay in the grave that she herself had dug. For a long time she suffered silently, until she was aware of a voice speaking from a great distance and a hand on

her shoulder. Whose she did not know.

Slowly, she came back to the world of the living. The voice was the voice of one of the gun crew. It was his hand on her shoulder, gently insistent.

"Miss," he was saying, "Miss, it's all over."

Dumbly, she nodded and turned from the wall. The heavy door was once more broken open and stood wide. Fresh dusty air eddied in through the wide opening and the clearing beyond was silent. She walked toward it.

She stepped over the sill and onto the ground. From bush line to ragged, blackened line of bush, the bodies lay, in groups, in pairs and singly. For a long moment she looked, and then, as if driven by a terrible compulsion, she turned toward the mound of bodies where she had seen Hector fall. She walked toward them. Reaching down, she felt for the first time the touch of alien flesh as her small hands closed about a thick gray arm, and she tugged.

Slowly the body came loose and tumbled from the pile. Straining, she seized the next and was aware of hands helping her. The crewman had followed her out and was pulling with her.

Together they lifted the bodies off until there were no more to lift. They stood, looking down at Hector.

"I'm sorry, Miss," said the crewman, awkwardly.

She knelt, and with the corner of her tunic, wiped the dust gently from the silent face.

And the lips moved. A whisper of breath husked from the dry throat.

"He's alive!" cried the crewman.

"Alive?" she echoed stupidly. The words had no meaning for her. "Alive?"

"He's alive!" repeated the crewman. He straightened suddenly, turning swiftly to the two great silver ships with their Frontier Guard insignia blazing in the sun halfway on the open space now between dome and city. "I'll go get help."

He ran off. Tica continued to kneel by Hector, without understanding.

The crewman came back with four

men in black Guard uniforms and a power litter. She watched them load Hector carefully on it and saw it shoot swiftly into the air on its way to the spaceship. But still she felt nothing. The spaceships, the litter, nothing was real. Reality had stopped for her with the sight of Hector going down under the smother of gray bodies.

She turned away.

"Better stop her," the voice of one of the uniformed men came dimly to her ears. "She's in a bad state of shock."

But no one had time. There were too many wounded to be attended.

She wandered among the dead, not understanding. Something heavy and cold within her drove her on. Twilight was darkening the field when she came at last to J.J., squatted beside a figure on the ground.

The bearded bushrunner looked up at her for the first time with no mockery in his eyes.

"You and me both," he said simply; and pointed down. "Look."

THE still figure was Bonny. Tica knelt on the other side of him. The boy was breathing shallowly, but his eyes were closed and there was a trickle of blood from one corner of his mouth. Tica reached down automatically to wipe it away.

"Leave be," said J.J., holding her hand back. "It's no use. He's been crushed." She took her hand back and he looked at her with sad bitterness.

"You didn't know, did you?" he said. "He's my kid." His eyes lifted and strayed around the field.

"Him—and these others," he said. "All were good boys I knew. All gone. And down there's the city, not even touched. And back there in the hills are those shopkeeping cowards—all safe and whole."

Distantly across the field came a shout.

"J.J.! Come here. We need you!"

The bushrunner rose to his feet, looking down.

"I guess I got to go," he said. "Stick

with him, will you? It won't be for long."

But he lingered still for a moment, looking down at the dying boy, and the woman kneeling beside him.

"Tell me," he said, with sudden abrupt bitterness. "What good are cities?"

"J.J.!" cried the voice again, imperatively. He turned and went.

Tica stayed.

The boy's breathing continued shallowly. Numbly, Tica knelt, watching. Finally there was a slight choke in his throat. A new little trickle of blood flowed out, and Bonny opened his eyes. His eyes focused with effort on the face above him.

"Miss?" he whispered wonderingly. "Miss?"

"Sh-h," she answered automatically. "Don't talk." He made a feeble effort to raise his head, but could not.

"They kind of got me, Miss," he said.

"No," she said. "No." But the lie stuck in her throat. He shook his head feebly, a fraction of an inch.

"Yes," he said, huskily. "I can tell." There was a second's pause during which he fought for breath.

"Listen," he said, urgently. "I got a couple of things I'd like to tell you."

"You mustn't talk."

"Listen!" he said, and his voice was stronger now. "That's something you got to get over—this telling people what to do. I got to talk. And I'm short of time. I listened, and I heard about you from what the Commander and J.J. said. So I know. And I got something to pass on to you my grandpa said once. When a woman starts going by how she thinks instead of how she feels, she goes all wrong. That's how-come you've been so mixed up. From now on you let the Commander do the thinking and you do the feeling."

He stopped. His words echoed bleakly in her mind. Feel? How could she feel? The feeling part of her had died with the dead around her. She was cold

and empty inside. She could not even feel glad that Hector was alive. She had not been able to summon up a tear when she had thought him dead. I have seen things to tell humanity about when I go back, she thought, things they should know. But I cannot speak because I have thought too long. I cannot feel.

"Miss?" the husky whisper brought her back to the boy in front of her.

"Yes?" she said.

"There was something else—"

"Go on," she said, dully. He hesitated, avoiding her eye.

"I—" his whisper was desperate, urgent, weakening. "Can I whisper it in your ear?"

FOR a second the cold emptiness inside her was touched.

"Of course," she said, and leaned her head down to his lips. Through the curtain of her hair the faint warmth of his breath touched her ear.

"I love you," he whispered.

Like the sweet warmth of the spring rain on the frozen ground, the words beat down on the icy cold within her, the dam crumbled and the floodtide of her emotions swept forth to bring her back once more to the world of the living. Her heart broke in a sudden wash of tears and she kissed him, hugging the bright tangled head close to her breast.

"Oh Bonny, Bonny baby," she choked, "I love you too."

Beneath her, the boy choked suddenly and stiffened. A final rush of blood rushed from his mouth to stain her tunic, but she paid it no attention. For, when she looked down at his face, she saw that he had heard her at the last, for he was smiling. Still, even still in death, he was smiling.

In anguish, but without restraint, like someone who has bought back life at a great price, but counts the cost worth while, Tica wept upon the cindered plain.

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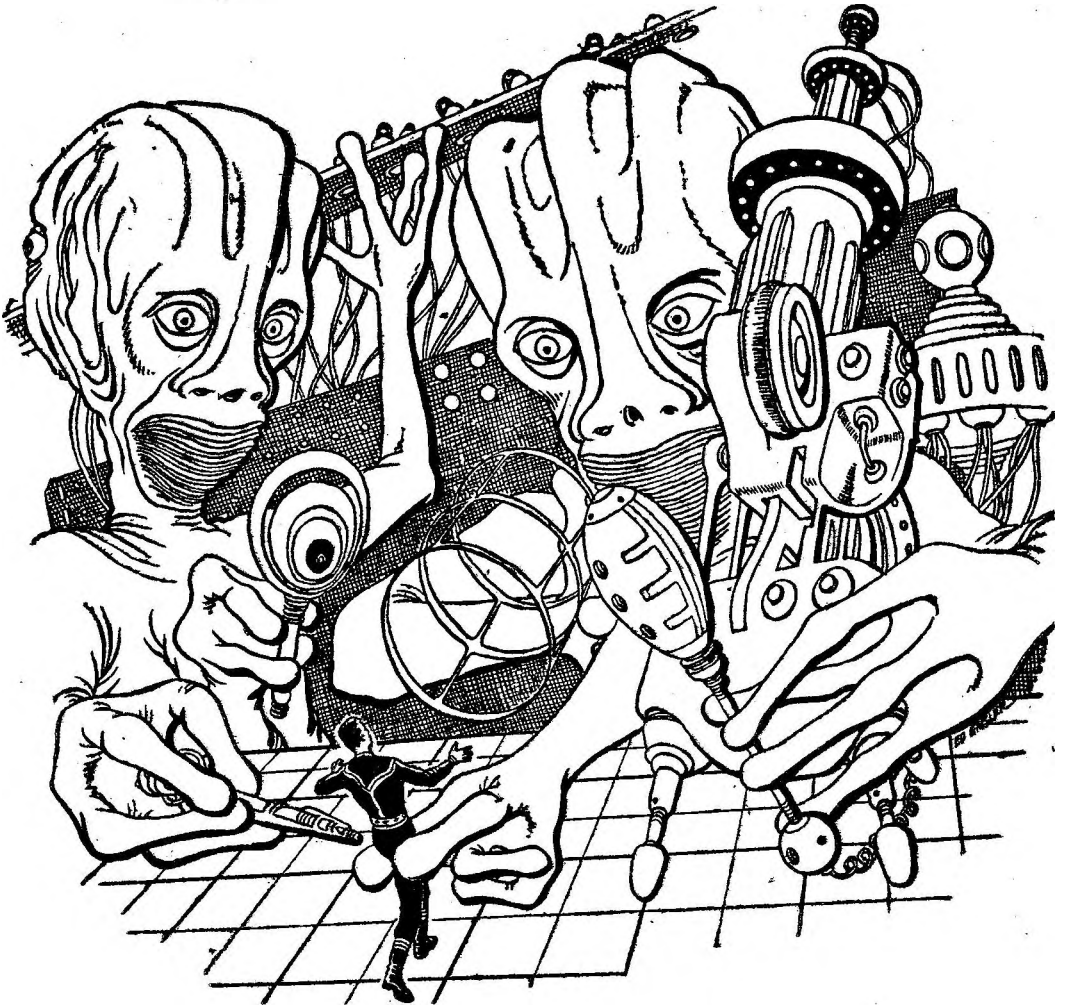
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The Whatsits

By MIRIAM ALLEN de FORD

When you capture a creature from outer space . . . what's the human thing to do?

I AM Jkerl, Farmer Grade HB No. 78946. Bkad, our local wiseman, has asked me to tell the recording machine what happened.

It is the Season of Water, and I am

very busy helping to get the year's supply into our tanks. I woke early today and all my housemates were still sleeping, I decided to go to the river to start working until they should join me. I

filled the wagon with containers and went down.

I was working as hard as a man can with only three hands, when my back eyes caught a glimpse of something peculiar in the sky behind me. I turned, because front eyes always see better, and there was a funny, little ship in the air almost as long as the wagon. While I watched, it landed in a field away from me, and a lot of tiny creatures poured out of it. I ran over to see them. They were about as high as the ankle of my center leg.

They made a piping noise which was too soft for me to hear. They seemed to have some sort of covering on their bodies, all but their hands and faces, and also on their heads, but this did not seem to be of the same material. I stooped down to look and they were deformed—they had only two legs and two arms apiece, and eyes only in front.

I decided this was something Bkad should know about as soon as possible. As a precaution, to keep them from getting away again, I put their boat in the wagon to take back to the house. It seemed like a miniature rocket ship of a very old variety, such as we have in our museums.

I am sorry that in hurrying, I stepped on two of the creatures and crushed them. I did not do it on purpose, but they were clustered all around me, making that piping noise, and it confused me.

I pushed the button at the house and got Bkad and told him. He said he would come at once. He told me to wake one of my housemates and get him to help me, and to tell him not to say anything yet to anyone about it, in case it might be something which the government wants kept secret. He told me to take along a net, the kind we use to snare the flying animals, and to herd the creatures together under it until he got there.

When I returned, they were all around the two I had accidentally crushed. They had a little instrument, and they were making a hole in the

ground and putting the dead ones in it. I could not make them understand that the soil is sacred and nothing dead must go in it. It didn't matter, because when Bkad had taken them away I could just dig up the dead ones and disintegrate them.

Bkad got there very soon. He was very much interested. We had had a hard time—Mpep, the housemate I awoke, and I—getting the little creatures netted. They fought very hard for such puny mites and kept making that piping noise.

Bkad said the thing to do was to take them to the city, to the big Central Laboratory, so the wisemen could study them, each in his own specialty. He asked me to go with him in his glider, to hold them down when they struggled. I did, and now I am telling about it to the recording machine.

This is all I know. Now I have to get back to the farm to help with the water and disintegrate those dead ones. Bkad says I can borrow his glider. He is going to stay here for a while to study the things.

This is Jkerl, signing off.

THIS is Bkad, Wiseman Grade FC No. 87623. I shall keep a record on the machine as the other wisemen and I study these strange animals.

We put them in a large cage outside of the Central Laboratory where we could watch them at all times. They are not like any other animals any of us has ever seen. They are tool-users, as Farmer Jkerl noticed, and the material on their bodies is clothing and comes off, but not the soft fuzzy material on their heads. Parts of their bodies have this soft, fuzzy material also when you take their clothing off, and there is a little of it on their faces too.

They seem to have some kind of weapons suited to their size and strength. When we shook them out of the net into the cage, one of them pointed a little metal object at me and there was a minute flash and I felt a pin-prick in my foot. I thought it wiser after that to

take away everything they had that was separable from their bodies and to store it where it could be studied at leisure. I ordered Jkerl to send their ship also.

They appear to have difficulty in breathing. We pumped oxygen into the cage, and that relieved them somewhat. Wxur took a specimen out temporarily and X-rayed it, and he says it is no wonder they cannot breathe well. The creature had only one heart, and its lungs were inside the body instead of in a flesh-covered flap outside, as is, of course, the case with human beings.

The first difficulty was to find something they could eat, in order to keep them alive while we do our research. There is probably food in their ship but we haven't got to that yet. I caught a very small flying creature and swallowed it before them to show them it was food. Then I released several more in the cage, but they just let the animals fly around without trying to eat them. Fgorg suggested that maybe they do not eat their food alive, though this seems a strange aberration which I have never heard of in any other animal. However, when I killed a flying animal and threw it in the cage, they did not eat that either.

Then Xsar made a very sensible suggestion. He said the creatures were about the size of a week-old baby, so why not try them on what babies eat—umpwel and klin? We sent for some and pretended to eat a bit to show them, and this time they did try it and seemed to like it. So that problem is settled. They drink a good deal of water for their size. We put a panful in the cage, and they all took turns lapping it up.

Wxur took one specimen away to kill it and dissect it. They all seem more or less alike, and I want to keep as many of them as possible alive to study them. Counting the two Jkerl killed, accidentally, and the one Wxur took, there were originally forty-two of them in all. As far as I can make out, they are all males. They may reproduce by fission or sporulation, instead of sexually like human beings.

They sleep, however, when exhausted, just as men do. They also excrete like men. And, as I said, they breathe, though with difficulty, because of their deformed condition. How creatures can function with only two eyes, legs, and arms, and one heart, is hard to imagine, but nature is marvellously adaptable.

Since my field is psychology and anthropology, my immediate problem is to establish some means of communication. They must have, at least, a rudimentary intelligence, or they could not have constructed artifacts. I had their piping noise amplified, and it is definitely a language, with ascertainable words.

For obvious reasons, it will be much easier for me to learn their language than to try to teach them ours. I shall proceed as we do with children, pointing to objects and asking their name, and going on from that to abstract ideas. With children, naturally, one tells the name instead of asking it; but the method is the same and should work, if they have the intelligence of a human baby.

It has worked very well. This is two days later, and already we are able to converse in a rudimentary way. Pretty soon I hope to be able to do some real research on them. I noticed that one of them seemed to be their leader, and so I have been concentrating on him, though the others chime in occasionally. I asked him what he was called, and he said something that sounded like Samith. I don't know whether that is his own name or the generic name for their kind. He did not give a number, or define his rank and grade, so probably it is not a personal name.

However, when I call "Sa-mith," he responds and the others do not. I have to talk to them almost in a whisper; normal tones seem merely to stun them. Of course, I keep the amplifier on them all the time I am listening to them.

One of them seems to have died and has been removed. That leaves thirty-eight at the present count. Wxur says his dissection revealed a number of interesting anomalies which he will add to the record later. But he says in com-

parison with any known animal, they are more like us ourselves than like any other species.

By now I can speak Sa-mith's language with fair accuracy, so from this point on, I can report definite questions and answers. That does seem to be his personal name, by the way; apparently they don't have numbers. It is a very simple and elementary language and not at all hard to learn once I had the initial clues.

When I asked Sa-mith what kind of animal he and his companions were, he said they were men! I had to laugh: a very dwarfed and abnormal variety of men they would be!

"No," I said, "I am a man, so how can you be?"

He said: "You are a giant."

I know what a giant is; there are the bones of extinct ones in the museums. Well, I suppose that relatively to them, we human beings could be called giants. But that does not account for their strikingly abnormal and defective anatomy.

I call them the Whatsits. It is as good a name for them as any.

Nevertheless, I feel impelled to speak of Sa-mith and all of them as "he" and not as "it."

I asked him about females, and he said certainly they had them. "I wish I had one here now," he added, with the first display of any emotion except anger and fear that I have noted in them. He says the company in his ship was just an all-male expedition, planning not to stay, but to return home.

THIS is the most amazing revelation about the Whatsits to date—their claim to have come from an inhabited planet outside of our solar system.

Everybody with any education at all knows that science has long ago disproved the possibility of any sun other than ours having a habitable satellite, at least anywhere in this galaxy. That is one reason we stopped bothering with rocket ships; after we had thoroughly explored our own solar system and made

extensive surveys of the nearer suns outside it, the great Hgras, as his monumental achievement, proved mathematically that ours is the only planet in the galaxy capable of supporting sentient life, and in all probability the only one in the cosmos.

Yet Sa-mith and his companions insist that they come from a planet around a dwarf red star in the constellation Hsuxxa, which they call Lyra.

This is manifestly ridiculous. Yet the question remains, where *do* they come from? Certainly not from our solar system, which is known to us in its entirety. It may be necessary to modify somewhat the conclusions of Hgras.

Wherever their place of origin is, the Whatsits desire very strongly to return to it. That is a problem we shall have to settle. If we let them go, will they not return in perhaps overwhelming numbers? They could well become a minor pest, and perhaps even upset the balance of nature. On the other hand, if we do not let them go, will not others, sooner or later, inevitably follow the same path and arrive here? These specimens, at least, would be enlightened and indoctrinated, and might warn off their kind from other attempts at invasion.

I am in favor of freeing them, after we have completed our study of them and of their ship and equipment, but with the proviso that we have inspired them with sufficient fear of us to make them discourage their race from further expeditions.

One reason I take this attitude is that Sa-mith assures me they had no intention of invading our earth specifically. They were, so to speak, merely scouting around for what they could find; and they found us. I shall discuss the whole question with our Governing Council and see what they think. The creatures will only die on our hands, sooner or later, and nobody wants to be purposelessly cruel.

The amusing thing is that they call their place of residence the Earth, just as they call themselves human beings.

I have a hard time convincing Sa-mith that since *this* is the Earth and *we* are men, no other place or creatures can rightfully claim those names.

We have put their little private belongings back in the cage with them, and placed their ship outside, as Fgadir requested, for his convenience in studying it. They are very funny—whenever he is at work they crowd around the inner wire walls of the cage and watch him intently. They seem to be afraid he will take parts of the ship away, so I told Sa-mith to reassure them—that, at least, until their disposition was decided on by the Council, it would be left intact.

I also warned him sharply not to let any of the Whatsits get near the outer cage wall, as it is wired to disintegrate any living thing that comes in contact with it. He answered very sensibly that they had the same arrangement in what he called "concentration camps"—whatever they are—on his planet (which again he spoke of quaintly as "the Earth"); and that in any case they would never be able to scale the inner wall, which is closely woven and high enough to keep out a human being, let alone a Whatsit.

Since the whole cage is outside the laboratory proper, it occurred to me that they might be more comfortable if we put a floor over part of it, so that they would not have to sleep out-of-doors on the ground. Until it is decided whether we are to keep the Whatsits here, it is not worth-while to build permanent quarters for them, and in the Season of Water, the days and nights of course are always pleasantly warm.

Sa-mith thanked me for being so thoughtful, but said they enjoyed "camping in the forest." This puzzled me, until I realized that the short grass growing on the ground of the cage must seem like trees to them!

I told him also that we hold the soil, from which all human beings ultimately sprang, as sacred. I warned him that no unclean or dead thing must ever be placed in it. He said that though they

did not share this belief, they would respect it scrupulously.

Then he asked anxiously what had happened to their two companions, accidentally killed by Jkerl and buried by the others. I had to tell him that they had been dug up and disintegrated. When he communicated this news to the rest it seemed to upset them, but Sa-mith calmed them. He then said to me that he understood, and that when in Rome, one must do as the Romans do—which I confess made absolutely no sense to me. Anyway, we had removed immediately the one Whatsit who died in the cage, and would, of course, do the same if any more of them should die.

WE HAVE had a Council meeting, and I was overruled. Wxur's view was that since we keep "living museums" of strange animals, which we have taken from their original homes high in the mountains, or in caves under the earth, revealed during the Season of No Water, why not add these creatures to the collection? Their close resemblance to us humans, he thought, made them more, rather than less, interesting; and if their life-span is as short as we anticipate, the longer we have them on hand to study, the better.

I opposed this reasoning, not only with the arguments I have given previously in this record, but also on the ground that keeping the Whatsits—my private name for them has caught on, and everybody is using it—is an expensive process, what with the necessity of providing them with a constant supply of oxygen and with a constant diet of umpwel and klin.

We could not find anything in their ship which seemed to us to be in the nature of food; the only objects, whose use we could guess, were some thimble-size cylinders of tin, and it seemed impossible that they could eat these, so I did not even ask Sa-mith about them. In any case, they would not have lasted long when distributed among thirty-eight specimens—I almost said thirty-eight persons.

But I was outvoted, and it was definitely decided that we keep the Whatsits here. An order was given to have a suitable cage with indoor living quarters, erected in the Main Museum of Living Animals, and they are to be transferred as soon as it is ready. We have about completed our intensive study; the creatures have been measured, photographed, examined, X-rayed, and, in one instance, dissected; and I can conduct my psychological research just as well in their new abode as here in the laboratory, where they take up room needed for other experiments.

I had the unpleasant task of breaking the news to Sa-mith. I have actually grown fond of this little being, almost as if he were another human, and I knew this would be a bitter disappointment to him. I confess I was surprised by his reaction and that of the others, and it has made me feel that perhaps some of my work on their mental processes was on the wrong track and will have to be revised.

Instead of showing grief, despair, or even rage, as I had expected, they took it with a quiet indifference amounting to apathy. Sa-mith shrugged his little shoulders—how funny a shrug looks with only two shoulders engaged!—and said, “Well, that’s that. How soon do you move us?”

I told him I didn’t know, but that I would notify him a day or two ahead of time, to enable them to pack up their little private belongings. They evidently set great store by these trifles; they are constantly passing around objects and apparently admiring them. Some of them seem to be written documents of some kind, but as I have not yet learned their written language—that must be one of my next tasks—I am not able as yet to say of what their contents consist. However, they also have and display tiny photographs, and these do interest me extremely, since they show the females and young of the species.

So far as I can tell, the females greatly resemble the males, except that they have more of the soft fuzzy growth on

their heads, and none at all on their faces or on what can be seen of their bodies. The young are merely smaller editions of their elders (resembling the females rather than the males in the above particulars), from which I deduce that the Whatsits do indeed reproduce just as we do. Yet they do not undergo any metamorphosis or any chrysalis stage, as do some of the creatures on earth.

One other interesting object they possess is an apparatus which Sa-mith solemnly assured me was a wire-recorder! I had to smile at the thought of these wee creatures, transcribing their little voices on this primitive midget machine. However, Sa-mith demonstrated its use, with an equally tiny emitter, and with my amplifier on, I was able to hear the transcription fairly well. For my amusement, I presume, what he recorded was a repetition of my instructions as to the sacredness of the soil, and their promise to observe my injunction.

* * * * *

This is Jkerl again. I am here at the Central Laboratory with Mpep. We have been given the honor (since I was the first person to notify Bkad and Mpep helped me) of transporting the strange creatures to the Main Museum of Living Animals. There will be a big crowd gathered to view the creatures, and it is a great distinction for humble Grade HB farmers like ourselves.

The trip is to be taken tomorrow morning, with the Whatsits, which is what they call them here, in a wagon, and I am to steer it. Their ship will follow in another wagon, steered by Mpep. As a further honor, Bkad has allowed me to make this statement into the machine, so that it will be part of the final record. But not Mpep, because he did not have so important a part in the creatures’ capture as I had, and because he is not educated as well as I am, and does not know how to speak smoothly into the recording machine.

THIS is Bkad once more. Arrangements are now completed for the

transfer. Sa-mith seems to have become really attached to me. I told him that this did not mean he would not see me again, for even after I return to my duties as local wiseman, I shall visit the museum often and keep up my study of the Whatsits. Nevertheless, he insisted on bidding me a formal farewell, since after today, he will no longer be directly in my charge. He and all thirty-seven of the others filed by, and I think they wanted to shake my hand, which seems to be one of their gestures of amity; but of course, even though I stooped down so they could reach my center hand, they were unable to do more than touch it with their tiny paws, and I was afraid to shake these in turn lest I injure their delicate flesh.

At the end of the ceremony I felt quite touched, and when Sa-mith made a little speech, saying that they were grateful for my consideration of them and my generous though fruitless efforts for their release, I actually felt tears come into my eyes. (My front eyes, of course; a recent monograph by Tlek has finally given definite proof that only front eyes really secrete tears; the moisture sometimes felt in human back eyes is really only a lubricating fluid, not true tears.)

I am bringing my female, Rguld, and both our young, to see the affair tomorrow.

She has been away ever since the Whatsits arrived, on her regular tour as a Judge of Disputes (Grade FD), and our offspring, a male and a female, have, of course, been in the School for Intellectual Pursuits. But Rguld returned yesterday, and we thought this was an event of sufficient scientific interest to secure a leave of absence for the children, who should fly in before dark this evening.

I apologize for mentioning these personal matters in an official record, but I intend to append a complete list of all those concerned in the examination, transfer, and care of the Whatsits, and I might as well include Rguld and the children here as later

This is Rguld, Judge of Disputes Grade FD, No. 64982. I hereby attest that on my oath as a human being and to my certain knowledge, my male, Bkad, Wiseman Grade FC, No. 87623, had no information of or part in the unfortunate event of this morning. I am trained to detect truth from falsehood, and complicity or guilty knowledge could not have been concealed from me. I formally protest the Council's vote to degrade him from FC to GJ, and I serve notice that we shall appeal the decision to the Ultimate Board. I make this statement in due legal form as part of the record of the activities in this case of my male, Bkad, Wiseman Grade FC, No. 87623, and I hereby ordain, as a Judge of Disputes Grade FD No. 64982, that this complete record, with anything which may be added to it hereafter, be made a constituent portion of said writ of appeal. This is Rguld signing off.

* * * * *

This is Bkad. As a part of the appeal attested to just previously in this record by my female, Rguld, Judge of Disputes Grade FD, No. 64982, I report the developments of this morning, with the further asservation that they were as complete a surprise to me as to anyone else. If I have erred, it was through open-mindedness and good faith, and not through deliberation or intent. And I wish to say also that I resent Wxur's calling me, publicly, a gullible idiot, and I charge that such language by one wiseman to another is an indictable slander.

WE MET at the laboratory three hours after dawn. When everything was ready, our delegation—Wxur, Fgadir, Xsar, Fgorg, and I—proceeded to the cage, to open the door, and let the creatures out and around the corner to the runway leading to the wagon. I had taken every precaution against their escape, with guards lining both sides of the runway. My own advice, since the Whatsits were going to be on permanent exhibit at the Main Museum of Living Animals, had been to transfer them quietly and without fuss, at night. It was

Fgadir, always eager to curry favor and play up to Wxur's love of publicity, who had put over the idea of the ceremonious transfer. So the public address systems had proclaimed the details, and the road all the way to the Museum was crowded with spectators—with doubtless throngs of others watching on their telescreens.

Wxur, hurrying forward to display his authority, opened the door of the cage.

It was empty.

The Whatsits, one and all, had vanished, and their belongings with them. So had their ship, from its place outside the walls.

The only thing left in the cage—balanced conspicuously on the tips of three blades of grass in the center of the space—was the emitting apparatus of their little wire-recorder.

I am willing to take my share of the blame. Perhaps I was too soft and easy-going, and too credulous. But why should I be degraded, and not Fgadir? It was he, who had insisted on having the ship parked right by the wall, so that if necessary, he could question the Whatsits, through me, concerning it. And it was he who has master-minded this whole public fiasco, and made fools of all of us.

Whether the Council likes it or not, by law, I have a right to say whatever I please in this record. And I say here, and challenge the Ultimate Board to deny it, that if Fgadir were not Wxur's

female's brother, the Council would never have excused him and put the whole blame on me. Wxur is my superior in office and has more seniority than I have; he has taken all the credit for what was after all my discovery—because it was I whom the farmer called in when he found the creatures—and I suppose he was expecting to be upgraded for it. So he is taking his chagrin out on me.

"You wanted to let them go in the first place, Bkad," he said sneeringly. "You learned to speak their language, and you've made yourself ridiculous, treating them practically as if they were human like ourselves. I'll never believe you weren't in on the whole thing.

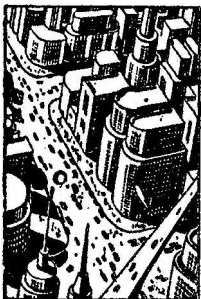
"I accuse you of deliberately letting the creatures escape, in defiance of Council orders, and in disservice to the government and the progress of science, and I hereby degrade you to Grade GJ."

Then he glared at me with both his front eyes, and in front of the others ordered me to turn on the Whatsits' emitter and amplify what he rudely called "your friends' farewell message."

It was really too bad of Sa-mith. I had fancied he liked me as much as I had grown to like him.

All the recording said was: "We remembered your soil was sacred, Bkad. Every night before we started digging the tunnel farther, we carefully cleaned the shovels."

FOR TODAY'S SCIENCE FICTION — TOMORROW'S FACT



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BIG-TOP

The fate of the whole interplanetary

circus rested on a kid, a dinosaur,

and the Earth's prehistoric past. . . .



on JUPITER

A Novelet of the Future

By **NOEL LOOMIS**

I

BENNIE SMITH'S father had hopefully made a pitch a little distance from the Outer World freak-show. None of the shows on the Midway liked competition, but the spieler at the freak-show was an oldtimer and had known Bennie's father back in the 2060's. He respected the bugmen as members of an ancient order which once had been highly honored, and so he was kind to Bennie's father and kept his eyes turned the other way.

There was no question that Bennie's father needed a break, for he had played the entire morning performance and sold fewer than a dozen baby horned toads.

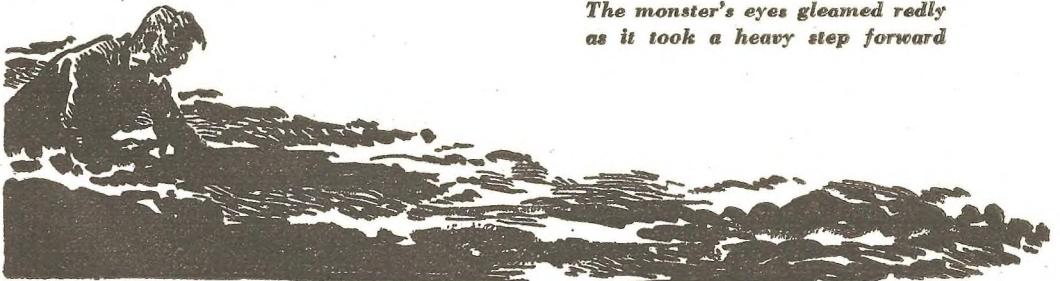
"Why don't you try baby turtles?" Bennie asked his father helpfully, for in an old family of bugmen the problems of business were very real even to a ten-year-old. He added, "They went swell on Mars."

His father, trying to size up the crowd, shook his head. "They're too much like Saturnians—and here on Jupiter there are a lot of Saturnians."

He talked absently, watching the many different entities in the crowd—huge Flying Frogs from Venus listening to the freak-show spiel with unblinking eyes; a pair of strutting Peacocks from Callisto, talking ostentatiously together while Bennie thought they looked self-conscious as if they were on a honeymoon; three towering, saturnine Bat-Men from Neptune; a six-foot black Uranian Spider, watching suspiciously from his many eyes. But there were more Earth-Men than all the others put together, with here and there huge Clams, the serving class on Jupiter, moving through the crowd, bearing on their backs indestructible bell-jars containing tiny Butterflies, Jupiter's ruling race. Bennie saw the calculating glance of a Spider at these, and shuddered.

His father waited for the freak-show to end and the line to form, then he began the sing-song that Bennie loved. Maybe it was a trifle raucous, but it always thrilled Bennie because it was strong and carried far.

*The monster's eyes gleamed redly
as it took a heavy step forward*



"Official souvenirs of the Nine Worlds' Exposition," his father intoned, stretching out the last two syllables in a slightly nasal rhythm, like the announcer at the Invictor City Spaceport on Jupiter. "Get your baby horned toads here. Only fifty cents in interplanetary coin while they last."

Bennie worried. When his father started calling the price, that meant business was bad. So he stood by his father's side, giving him support while the stream of entities poured by with hardly a glance at his father's horned toads. Bennie felt bad when discouragement began to creep into his father's voice.

A MAN-HIGH Saturnian Turtle, walking upright, came by, blinking a little as if the crowds confused him. He looked at Bennie's father and his eyes lighted up. He came over. "Hi, Smith." His voice sounded queer through the transformer. "How's it going?"

"Not so good, Scarapento," said Bennie's father. He pointed to his card while Bennie watched with his mouth open, because Scarapento the Saturnian was the greatest aerialist in the nine worlds, and he was talking to Bennie's father.

"I shouldn't have come to Jupiter," Bennie's father admitted, and the starkness of it made Bennie feel a sudden rush of sympathy. "I made enough at the Tri-Planetary Fair on Mars so we could have bought a little farm back in Iowa and retired, but instead I spent it all on passage to Jupiter. It's in the blood, I guess."

"Your family has been in the circus a long time, hasn't it?" Scarapento asked.

Bennie's father nodded. In his eyes was a quiet sort of pride. "Three hundred years. We started back in the 1900's when a bugman was a sort of gyp or pest. But it was a Smith who suggested showing a gorilla and saved the circus as an institution in the 1930's. Later in the 2050's, when it seemed the circus could never stand up to the attraction of interplanetary travel, it was a Smith who first developed the idea of

producing controlled freaks by radiation. That saved the circus again, and it was then that the Bugmen's Guild was formed and bugmen were given an honored place in the entertainment world."

"Then what happened?" asked Scarapento.

"The bugmen were at the top of the circus aristocracy, like aerialists, for a hundred years, but gradually they lost the touch. They couldn't produce sensational attractions." Bennie's father was glum. "Since then the Guild has lost its eminence. We're just hangers-on again."

"What made them lose the touch?"

"I don't know." Bennie's father brightened as a Flying Frog stopped, eyeing the tiny horned toads. Bennie's father sold him one and gave him change. "Just feed him fruit and sugared water," he said. "Thank you." He turned back to Scarapento, thoughtful. "My father used to talk about it. He said he had all the knowledge handed down, but that the radiation didn't have the effect it had had once. Nobody could figure out why—and some of the bugmen were pretty fair scientists. My father had a degree in genetics.

"You see, here's what happened. The bugmen were on top of the world, and they turned from science to economics. A lot of them went into selling and mass production. Then the scientific branch had its big setback. All of a sudden things didn't work as they had previously. They came up against their biggest obstacle right at the time when they were the most poorly prepared for it."

Bennie's father sighed regretfully. "I myself never had cared much for the scientific end. I had the old books and the knowledge that had been handed down, but it was over my head." He looked away. "Funny how fast things change. Within ten years we were back to chameleons and baby alligators and turtles and horned toads. One year we even had goldfish, but they were too messy."

"You had chameleons at the Tri-Planetary last year, didn't you?" asked Scarapento.

Bennie's father sighed. "Yes, they always go well with mixed crowds. But they couldn't stand the high accelerations of the hyperbolic orbit—and by the time they'd reach Jupiter on a freighter, the Exposition of 2200 would be over."

SCARAPENTO looked thoughtful. "Maybe somebody will figure out something." Then he looked straight at Bennie. "Bright boy you've got there."

Bennie squirmed with happiness, especially when Scarapento touched him lightly with his big claw. Bennie was something of a mental prodigy, but it was always like walking with fairies and giants to be within the sound of the fabulous Turtle's voice.

"Very good boy," said Bennie's father proudly.

"Going to make a bugman out of him, I suppose."

Bennie's father shook his head. "I'm going to see that Bennie gets into something better. He'd waste his time selling bugs. He has the scientific turn of mind. He's always in the laboratory, experimenting. He can tell you more about radiation than a lot of fellows who write books about it." There was melancholy in his voice. "When he's twelve he's going to U. S. Tech—but they won't take him now no matter what his I. Q. is." He added sadly, "I guess the Smiths will have to leave the Bugmen's Guild."

"Tomorrow's another day," Scarapento observed as he moved away, walking upright. He looked so awkward, thought Bennie, that it was hard to see how he could swing on a trapeze.

Bennie's father said, "You better run home. I'm going inside now."

"Look, dad," said Bennie brightly. "Do you really want chameleons?"

"Chameleons always sell to a mixed crowd," his father said.

"I'll tell you a secret, then." He pulled his father into the tiny alley-way between the Mandeel from Oberon with its radioactive hide and the Snake-Girl from the Stars, which Bennie knew to be a clever fake done with lucite tubes and parabolic mirrors. The tents cut off a

little of the raucous voices of the spellers, and Bennie said, "I've got some chameleons, dad."

His father looked at him and frowned. "What did you say?"

"You had a batch of eggs around the house, and I was experimenting with radiation," Bennie confessed, "just before we left Earth. After we got here on Jupiter and the other eggs wouldn't hatch, you threw these away, but I saved this batch and radiated them some more and they hatched, and I turned them loose in that underground marsh next to my laboratory. It's warm there, and I rigged up an infra-light to keep them from wandering. There must be thousands of them now."

His father stared at him. "Chameleons, you said?"

"Yes," said Bennie. "I was reading all about controlled freaks in grandfather's books, and I did the experiments, and then I worked on these chameleon-eggs."

"You mean," said Bennie's father, "you actually—" His eyes took on a bright glow. "You might be the one," he said softly. "Maybe you are the one who can re-establish the Bugmen's Guild." He seemed greatly relieved, Bennie thought, all of a sudden. "Maybe it isn't all over yet." Then he looked anew at Bennie, and this time Bennie recognized the all-business sign. "Chameleons! I could clean up with those. No other bugman has any." He turned thoughtful. Hope nobody makes trouble over them."

"What could anybody do?" Bennie asked innocently. "They're ours."

"There are lots of newcomers in the Bugmen's Guild—people who don't understand our history and who think a bugman is just a grifter. With that kind of person there's bound to be envy. And envy might lead to trouble."

But Bennie was not interested in philosophy. "May I stay and watch Scarapento jump this afternoon?" he asked hopefully.

But his father shook his head. "People complain enough as it is. They say the vendors get in the way. No, you go home."

II

DISAPPOINTED, Bennie left his father at the entrance to the big-top and slipped behind the Martian freak-show tent, and Joe the circus gate-keeper smiled at him as Bennie ducked under the canvas and headed for home. He could have gone out through the gate, but it was more fun going under the canvas. The kids gathered outside always stared enviously at him. They didn't know that old Maximilian, the owner of the circus, was so soft-hearted he had a permanent order that all kids on the outside by the beginning of the second act were to be organized by one of the midgets and led under the tent to a special place reserved in the bleachers.

So Bennie went home and armed his twelve brothers and sisters with butterfly nets and got them out in the marsh to catch chameleons. That is, he had nine of them, really, for the youngest set of triplets was only four years old. Bennie watched over the children pretty carefully and warned them to stay close to the laboratory. The marsh was the abandoned stable of a Jovian waterhorse, and fairly big.

At supper-time he waited patiently for his father to ask him about the chameleons, but his father seemed abstracted. Presently Bennie, who had eaten his spaghetti and his meat-ball and was still hungry, said, "Mother, may I have another meat-ball?"

His mother looked up and said, "There isn't any more, Benjamin." His mother always called him Benjamin because he was the oldest. There were little wrinkles of concern around her eyes now. "There was only one apiece." She looked at Bennie's father, who was staring at him because they weren't supposed to ask for more food until it was offered. She said quickly, "He was out in the marsh all afternoon, chasing chameleons."

"Oh," said his father. "Give him my other meat-ball. I'm not very hungry tonight." He avoided her eyes and turned to Bennie. "How did you do?"

"We got two hundred and twelve," Bennie said proudly, "and there are plenty more."

His father brightened. "Good. I'll take some for the night show."

Bennie was very pleased to see his father's eyes lose their cloudiness. After supper he put the chameleons in little boxes with magnifying glassine tops that made them look a little bigger—just a little bigger—and fastened a hundred of them to a new card.

His father took them with him and went to the night show. Bennie and his brothers and sisters went to bed.

THE next morning at breakfast his father was cheerful. "They started slow," he said, but I sold out the card before the show was over. That's fifty dollars." He jingled a pocket heavy with silver.

Bennie and his twelve brothers and sisters ate their pancakes. Bennie's father took his fresh card of chameleons and went early. Benny went to his radiation laboratory pieced together from old video sets and a discarded atomic projector and a Mylan condenser and a couple of second-hand Distal tubes. He worked there for a while and then went out into the marsh. He came back in an hour and got his brothers and sisters together and they went hunting chameleons.

Presently Bennie heard his mother calling and he got them all together and took them in. His mother said happily, "Your father has almost sold out. He wants you to bring another card. He's on the fourth balcony. And he said raise the price to a dollar. They're a good number, he said."

"Swell," said Bennie. The children were putting their chameleons into a big tub with a special rim so they couldn't get out. There were several hundred. Bennie got the oldest set of triplets to help him put chameleons in boxes, and in a few minutes a new card was ready.

He started out. His mother said, "Be careful, Benjamin," and Bennie said, "I

will," and then he added thoughtfully, "Why don't you just put one extra meat-ball in the spaghetti, mom, so we'll have something to hope for? Sort of a prize, you know."

His mother looked at him. "That is for your father to say, Benjamin."

Bennie sighed to himself as he left. The truth was that he was getting bored with spaghetti every night. He didn't say so because he knew that spaghetti was cheap, and somewhere back in the family line there had been a Raviotti, but just the same—well, more meat-balls would help a lot.

Joe let him through the gate, and Bennie, holding the card close against his stomach to protect it, darted in among the thousands of assorted solar beings to the main entrance of the big-top. Bennie had been with his father all his life, and they had covered a lot of shows in some strange places, but never one as big and as spectacular as the Exposition of the Nine Worlds, or the Exposition of 2200, as it was called on the video.

It was the first truly solar fair, and it was held on Jupiter because Jupiter was the biggest planet, and gravitational units were by no means as well developed as anti-gravity units. The Jovian hemispheric government had donated land a few miles from Invictor City, capital of the Southern Hemisphere, and the Inter-World Council built an exposition metropolis for several million beings.

They contracted with Maximilian for a circus, and indeed Maximilian's, the Greatest Show Under the Sun, was about the only show big enough to take on the exposition, for an enormous tent had to be constructed, with a section properly equipped with gravity, atmosphere, temperature, and so on, for each of the many social-minded entities in the System. Obviously the program to be presented had to be interplanetary in character also, and this presented special difficulties.

But Maximilian's had done it; after

eight months of the exposition's scheduled two years, Maximilian's was still filled with paying customers at every show.

NOW Bennie, going across the green sawdust on the ground floor, saw the twelve enormous balconies filling rapidly. Eyeing the sections occupied by many different entities from far-distant worlds, Bennie circled the great five-ring arena and almost ran into Scarapento, who was studying the trapeze rings a hundred and ten meters from the ground with eyes that looked very gentle and very wise.

Scarapento saw his card and said, "I thought you couldn't get chameleons."

"I radiated them," Bennie said proudly. He was eager to explain, for it wasn't often that a great aerialist like Scarapento would ask serious questions of a ten-year-old boy. "You see, it's a biogenetic law that every live thing goes through all the phases of its ancestral life in embryo."

Scarapento gulped with obvious vigor. "Pretty big words for a ten-year-old."

"I read lots," said Bennie, "in my grandfather's books."

Scarapento looked thoughtful. "I guess you do. So what about the chameleons?"

Bennie ducked out of the way as a gang of Uranian Spider workmen came dragging out the final section of the tank for the water-horse act. "I waited until the chameleon eggs reached a certain stage, then I put them in suspended animation, so they weren't affected by acceleration. When they got here, I kind of woke them up and they went on developing."

"And they came out chameleons anyway?"

"Chameleons haven't changed much," said Bennie. "You have to be careful, though. Some animals that had big dinosaurs, like, in their ancestry—if I stopped them at the wrong stage, then when they went ahead to develop they might grow up to be dinosaurs if I didn't do it just right."

He hated to leave Scarapento, but he backed away and almost fell into the Venusian swamp, where the clumps of imitation sleep-grass were covered with Flying Frogs who had paid their entrance fee and now sat, with big eyes unblinking, waiting for the show.

Bennie found his father on the fourth balcony just outside of the Martian desert section. A big-shouldered man was talking to his father, and Bennie recognized Glenn Burkhalt, secretary of the Bugmen's Guild. Bennie went closer until he stood behind his father and watched Burkhalt.

"Some of the boys are complaining," said Burkhalt cautiously.

Bennie's father sounded abruptly belligerent. "I want to get my family back to Earth," he said.

Burkhalt looked thoughtful. "I'm a newcomer to the Guild myself," he admitted, "and I don't know all the angles, but the boys are saying it's traditional that nobody should try to get a monopoly. They say your own father—"

But Bennie's father looked stubborn. His dark eyes were challenging, as if he felt himself backed in a corner. "A hundred years ago that was true—even fifty years ago. But times have changed. The Bugmen's Guild is no longer a society of geneticists but a group of men making a living the best way they can—and that isn't too good."

His manner changed. He started to talk more friendly. "I've got a wife and thirteen children here on Jupiter, and it's been getting me down, wondering how I'm going to get them home again. Earth is a long way off. It cost me over five thousand dollars to bring them out here, and in eight months I haven't gotten a nickel ahead. Suppose they decide to close the fair at the end of the year? Where would I be then?"

I SEE how you feel—but what about the other bugmen?"

Bennie's father said, "I'm sorry for them—but look at it this way. My boy Bennie figured out a way to raise chameleons here on Jupiter. He can probably

furnish enough for me and maybe I can get ahead. But suppose I divide up and give the others a start." He gestured around the big-top. "A week—two weeks—a month from now every bugman blossoms out with chameleons. Suppose the customers all of a sudden decide they don't want chameleons because they're too common. It's happened before.

"I played Maximilian's on a guarantee when he went out to Saturn for the Outer World Exhibition in 2195. Baby alligators went swell till all of a sudden the big side-show crocodile died, and after that you couldn't give away alligators." He shook his head dismally. "If it hadn't been for the guarantee I'd still be there."

Burkhalt looked uncomfortable. "I'd like to keep from having trouble," he said, "but there's a lot of talk. We've got some young fellows, you know, and they see that they are getting stuck unless something happens to pull them out. It's not easy to keep them quiet when they see one man making a killing. Remember, they have families here too."

But Bennie's father shook his head, and Burkhalt looked defeated. "I hope there's no violence," he said as he left.

Bennie gave his father the new card, and his father gave him the old card, but his father was preoccupied and forgot to send Bennie home. He hardly knew Bennie was there. Bennie saw that he had made the price a dollar and a quarter, and he listened to his father's strong, rhythmic voice sing out:

"Get your official souvenirs of the exposition," drawing out the last two syllables. "Color-changing chameleons straight from the jungles of Earth."

Bennie listened with great pride, although there were some inaccuracies in his father's spiel. Those chameleons' parents had not been born on Earth but on Jupiter; their ancestors had come not from the jungle but from Louisiana; they didn't change color as vividly as most persons expected; and they weren't chameleons. But they made nice sou-

venirs, and the spiel made by his father was quite in accord with the traditions of the Bugmen's Guild. They were going swell, too, and Bennie's father's pockets were getting heavy with silver as the Martian Giant Beetles bought chameleons to take home. "Feed them oranges and bananas and fruit-juices," Bennie's father assured them, and Bennie knew that chameleons much preferred flies, and that they'd never get to Mars alive anyway, but he prudently kept still, for after all most of the customers knew it too.

They moved on, with Bennie keeping one eye on the acts below. The Neptunian Giraffe act caught his eye, and he liked it, but he kept very quiet. Maybe his father would keep on forgetting he was there and he could watch Scarapento make his chilling Spiral Nebula Twisting Corkscrew and Quadruple Aerial Somersault, a hundred and ten meters high without a net.

But he heard the peculiar metallic whir of a single-winged Mercurian Tin-feathered Road-runner. The bird, sleek and streamlined, landed on the balcony and ran up to his father with a note in its beak. His father read the note and frowned. He nodded to the bird, then turned to Bennie.

"You run home now. I've got to go see Maximilian."

"They've closed the doors," Bennie pointed out, and added hopefully, "Scarapento is about ready to climb up in the top."

His father didn't realize what Bennie was working for. He said gruffly, "Well, come along," just as the lights began to dim for Scarapento's entry on the floor of the center ring. Bennie went along reluctantly. Scarapento was half-way up when they went outside to the ramp.

III

MAXIMILIAN, old and grizzled but with eyes that still had force and vigor in them, sat behind the flat-topped desk in his private office and said to

Bennie's father, wonderingly:

"What's the argument between you and Burkhalt?"

Bennie's father told him about it, and Maximilian nodded. "You are right, of course. You've got to look out for yourself first."

"If it were just myself," said Bennie's father, "it would be a lot different. But a family—"

"It's risky, making a long trip like this," Maximilian agreed.

The door opened. Scarapento walked in, and Bennie sighed. Scarapento had already made his jump. But Scarapento's usually placid eyes were disturbed. "They are telling me I've got to quit jumping unless Mr. Smith here divides up his chameleons with the others," he said indignantly to Maximilian. "What's it all about?"

Burkhalt came in behind him. "Sir," he said to Maximilian, "that is not an act of the Guild, but rather of a faction led by a young fellow named Whitsett who is something of a hothead." He shrugged. "I can't control their actions. I'm only secretary of the Guild. All I can do is try to make peace."

There was a commotion outside, and three men pushed their way in. The leader was a slim, dark-haired young man with fiery eyes. "I'm Whitsett," he announced to Maximilian.

Maximilian glared at him. "You're a trouble-maker. I cancel your contract."

Whitsett glared back. "You can't cancel it. I belong to the Guild."

"I'll have you expelled," Maximilian said ominously. "Then I'll get rid of you."

"I came out here in good faith," said Whitsett. "I sold my popcorn stand on Coney Island because a man from the circus said you needed bugmen on Jupiter and I could make a lot of money quick. So I spent a thousand dollars for passage and now they soak me eight dollars a day for a room in the City. Bacon and eggs are imported from Earth, they tell me, and so they charge four dollars and fifty cents for a plain

breakfast." His dark eyes flashed. "Well, I'm not taking it, see? I always heard the Bugmen's Guild was for the members. All right, I get my share of the chameleons or I stop the whole show."

Maximilian exploded. His words were hardly distinguishable. Bennie, pretending not to hear, thought Maximilian must have been listening to the elephant-drivers trying to pull the cat-wagons out of the knee-deep mud in the ammonia swamp between Invictor City and the exposition.

But Whitsett said stubbornly, "Okay. If Smith doesn't divide, then Scarapento better not jump."

Scarapento's beak snapped. "You haven't asked *me*. I've got a contract for three jumps a day. People come here to see Scarapento jump. Scarapento jumps."

Whitsett stared at him. "Have you ever thought what would happen to you if you should fall a hundred and ten meters to the ground?" he asked insinuatingly.

Maximilian roared. "Get out and stay out."

Whitsett left.

Scarapento said, looking at Bennie, "I believe enterprise should have its reward. I don't intend to be bullied."

"We'll throw a heavy guard around the trapeze," said Maximilian. "I don't doubt that he would try something if he thought he could get by with it."

Burkhalt said, "I don't like that look in his eyes. He doesn't understand the traditions of the Bugmen's Guild. All he knows is that he has all of his money in this trip to Jupiter and he's afraid he's going to lose it. And when a man thinks that, he's dangerous."

BENNIE went home with his father. It was an hour before supper, and Bennie hurried into his laboratory. Whitsett had threatened to make Scarapento fall, and Bennie went to work furiously on an anti-gravity projection gadget that had been in his mind for some time. If he could get it finished,

maybe his father would carry it with him to protect Scarapento if he should fall. Also, Bennie looked over his horned toads. He had experimented with some radiation on them, and he was interested in the results.

His father looked worried. He didn't talk much during supper, and Bennie, with his mind full of the gadget, was quiet.

After supper his father went out, and came back an hour later with two eyes turning black.

"I went up to see Maximilian," he told Bennie's mother, "to offer to divide the chameleons, because I don't want to make trouble. But Maximilian is a stubborn old cuss. He said he'd cancel my contract if I gave in. Then Whitsett and two of his friends caught me coming out. We got in an argument." He dabbed merthiolate on a cut under one eye. "I'm afraid for Scarapento," he said.

FOR the next few days Bennie's father said little, but continued to sell chameleons until Bennie began to wonder if he would have enough. On Martian Day at the circus his father sold over eight hundred bugs. Scarapento continued to make three jumps a day, while Bennie finished his gadget and satisfied himself that it would work. Then he tried to figure out some way to use it to guard Scarapento.

His father was worried. He reported one night to Bennie's mother while Bennie listened from the laboratory:

"Whitsett still threatens to stop the show. Tradition doesn't mean a thing to him. And that of course can't be helped. The bugmen have no right to respect for their past. What we need is somebody who can command respect for his achievements *now*."

"Is Whitsett just trying to make trouble?" asked Bennie's mother.

"No, I don't think so. I feel sorry for him, in a way. He was never outside of New York before, and he's scared to death he'll be stranded on another planet. But if he monkeys with the show

we'll all be stranded."

"Could he really stop the show by interfering with Scarapento's act? I should think Maximilian would have a substitute."

"He has. Lots of them. I personally know that Maximilian has spent a hundred thousand dollars a year trying to develop another attraction that will pack them in. But Scarapento is sensational, and sensations are not made to order. Maximilian has spent a lot of money, for instance, trying to produce a mutated freak to resemble a dinosaur, but the geneticists don't have any luck because mutations don't generally reproduce themselves. So there is not one single attraction in the nine worlds that could take Scarapento's place, and circus business is so high-pressured that you can pack them in tonight and have an empty house tomorrow."

"If we should be stranded," Bennie's mother said, "you could borrow, couldn't you?"

His father shook his head. "Everybody's in the same boat. It's been a lousy season for bugs. Even the shows haven't done too well, and the wheels haven't had a good day since the first week. The rides have made some money, I guess, but if it were not for Scarapento I don't believe any of us would even be here now."

His father grew more worried. He dropped the chameleons one day and tried horned toads again, but he didn't sell even a full card. Some of the bug-men were putting in applications for passage-work back to Earth.

IV

THE DAY came when Bennie's father was almost run over by an atomic sportster on the way to the circus grounds. If Scarapento hadn't been right behind him and knocked him out of the way—

The bad angle was that Whitsett had come along and had seen Bennie's father with his card of chameleons and had

gotten angry and said to Scarapento:

"If we don't get chameleons by the night performance, you'd better not jump."

Scarapento looked at him steadily and said, "You'd better jump—now."

Whitsett had swung a fist at him, but Scarapento had turned it aside on his carapace.

When Bennie heard that, he went into his laboratory and tried out his gadget a last time and then put it inside of his shirt. He was afraid of the wild look in Whitsett's eyes.

When his father left for the night performance, Bennie went into the laboratory and filled a card with chameleons. Then when he figured the show was half over, he came out and said to his mother, "I have to take these to dad." It wasn't altogether true, but it was a little bit true.

He found his father up on the eighth balcony in the Neptunian Bat-man section. He knew from the quietness settling down over the big-top that he had timed his trip well. He stopped half-way down the aisle as the lights changed. He looked up.

On a tiny platform in the very top of the circus-dome, stood Scarapento. The great aerialist watched the many swinging trapeze bars before him from heavily lidded eyes. A hundred and ten kilometers above the green sawdust on the circus floor, with no net under him, Scarapento stood more calmly than did Bennie down on the eighth balcony. More calmly, perhaps, than anyone else in the big-top.

Six hundred thousand assorted entities came three times a day to see Scarapento jump. Maximilian's presented a truly interplanetary show, and it was the best in the system, but in the final analysis those six hundred thousand came to see Scarapento make his unbelievable defiance of gravity, for they knew that Scarapento jumped without tricks or gadgets.

Bennie sucked in his breath and clenched the anti-gravity projection gadget more tightly in his short fingers.

He wondered with dread if they would actually dare to make Scarapento fall.

Even Bennie's father, the oldest bug-man with Maximilian's, had stopped in the aisle, and that was unusual, for Bennie's father had seen Scarapento make the leap hundreds of times. Bennie knew now, from the tautness of his father's shoulders, that his father was fearful too.

Up on the tiny platform, the weirdly gyrating ultraviolet spots were on Scarapento. The house was hushed and still for the first time during the three-hour show. The monocycle-riding Singing Eels from Venus had finished their star act in the second ring, had taken their bow and slithered away. The peerless Armadillos from Mars had made their last dizzy spiral whirls on the bounding trampoline and had wobbled along after the Eels. The fourth and fifth rings already had been torn down by workmen. The six stages had gone long before. There was left only the Great Scarapento and his jump through space.

The big generators down in the sub-basement, deep in the beryllium-impregnated earth of Jupiter, turned faster and faster. The sound of their r.p.m.'s went up and up into a high-pitched whine that tautened an Earthman's nerves, as they poured power into the Healey anti-gravity units that fought the mass of Jupiter while Scarapento waited motionless for the gravity to get down to Saturnian sea-level.

SCARAPENTO'S carapace, like a shallow bathtub on his back, was motionless. His double-lidded eyes were unblinking as he waited for the gong. He seemed confident in spite of his apparent clumsiness, thought Bennie—but he was terribly high. He was so high he could not have been seen plainly except for the magnifying glass dome that covered the entire ring and made Scarapento appear life-size to every entity in the tent, from the Fish-Men and Flying Frogs and the Sea-Anemones that looked like purple chrysanthemums, in the

Venusian swamp on the ground floor, to the Jovian Butterflies and the Ganymedean Beavers and Callistan Peacocks on the twelfth balcony, level with Scarapento himself.

Bennie held his breath. There was a great roll of drums through the speaker. The walls of the tent—actually a gas- and pressure-proof elastic dome—vibrated in sympathy with the bass notes. Down in the basement, the whine of the generators had become an almost intolerably high whistle. The gong sounded. Up in the apex of the dome a green light winked twice. The Spiders in the opposite section of the eighth balcony were tense on their big feathery legs, with their multiple eyes fixed on Scarapento.

The drums reached a crashing climax. Scarapento looked around once and made his little bow. Through the magnifier Bennie could see Scarapento's eyes, calm, unhurried, gentle, as he looked out over the tremendous audience. *Then Scarapento leaped.* He swung out on the first trapeze.

The snare-drums rolled in a sustained monotone. Scarapento left the first bar and went into the second, working up those great swings and that enormous velocity that would carry him, finally, up and up through space to the spot where he could catch the fluttering steel ribbon with his hard beak at the end of four twisting somersaults after he left the last trapeze.

Bennie felt a quick surge in his throat, and his eyes popped wider. Scarapento had seemed a fraction of an instant slow on the second bar. He barely caught it with the tips of his claws.

Scarapento himself seemed to realize something was wrong. He almost hesitated for an instant, then he clung to the bar and took an extra swing.

For a moment Bennie thought Scarapento was going back to start over. But Scarapento never did anything unnecessarily spectacular. "The act itself is danger enough," he used to say simply.

He was taking an extra swing on the second bar. Few of the entities under

the big-top would know that, of course. Only people like Bennie and his father, who had seen it many times, would realize it meant that Scarapento was in trouble.

The drums were still rolling. Scarapento shot at high speed through the air to catch the third swinging bar. He looked troubled. He took two extra swings on the third bar, and he put all of his weight into them. He came down in a great glide. The swing started up. It neared its peak and Scarapento leaped in that awful twisting spiral through sixty feet of space outward and upward.

The bass drums crashed. Scarapento had turned over once. Bennie clenched his jaws. He thought Scarapento was turning more slowly than usual.

The drums crashed again. Scarapento had turned over twice. Bennie gritted his teeth. Scarapento was definitely slowing. It was only then that Bennie became aware that the generators had slowed down, and Bennie knew. The Healeys weren't holding Saturnian gravity. The enormous mass of Jupiter was pulling Scarapento down.

The drums crashed again. Scarapento had turned over the third time. The rolling of the snare-drums stopped. The great tent was soundless.

For an instant Bennie closed his eyes to shut it out. Scarapento did not complete the fourth turn. His momentum gave out before he was half-way over and he started to drop.

Bennie screamed. What he did then was reflective. He snatched out the anti-g projector and pointed it at Scarapento and pulled the button and held it on the aerialist all of the terrible distance to the green sawdust.

It was only a hand-projector made out of an old Distal tube and scraps of paramagnetic material and some coils of copper wire, and it was working against Jupiter gravity, but it helped.

Scarapento's drop slowed. He seemed to waver in the long fall to the ground. But he hit, and it was hard. He landed on his back with what sounded like an awful thud.

Before he hit, even, the golden Maximilian ambulance swerved into the arena on two wheels, its siren screaming. Bennie felt sick. His father took his hand and said in a strange, husky voice: "Let's go home, Bennie."

V

THEY WENT home. Bennie's father and mother went to the kitchen and shut the door. Bennie went to his laboratory. He sat up on the high stool and wondered how Scarapento was. He knew the anti-g gadget had helped a lot, but it was hard to estimate how much, because he didn't know how much of Jupiter's gravity had been acting in the ring. And then he would see in his mind that terrible drop with Scarapento, helpless, turning over and over. If it hadn't been for the gadget, Scarapento's carapace would have been crushed. Bennie shuddered.

Finally he got down and carefully laid the gadget away. He still had some horned toads that hadn't sold, and he found some of their eggs and began to run them through his radiation gadgets, but he kept one eye on the kitchen, and he was near the door when his father came out with a determined look on his face and got his hat and left the house.

Bennie, hoping that Scarapento wasn't dead or dying, went back to his laboratory. He'd been experimenting on these horned toads ever since his father had decided they weren't salable.

He was still up when he heard his father stumble up the steps. Bennie got to the door before his mother did, but he stood back aghast when he saw his father, helped by Maximilian, stumble through the door, bloody and beaten.

They got him into a chair, and Bennie's mother ran for hot water. "I've seen Scarapento," Bennie's father said between harsh breaths. "His carapace is strained and his front leg broken, but they say some miracle saved his life."

Bennie's mother looked suddenly at him. Sometimes he wished she wouldn't have those flashes of intuition. But she

said nothing to either of them.

"A gang tried to beat up your husband on the way home from the hospital," said Maximilian. "I ran them off and brought him home."

"Did you find out what made Scarapento fall?" Bennie's father asked.

"Somebody sneaked in and cut down the speed of the generators while the Healey operator was watching Scarapento in the screen as he is required to do. By the time the operator realized the speed was dropping, Scarapento was in the air and the operator couldn't make the correction quickly enough to save a fall."

"Did he see the one who did it?"

"No," said Maximilian. "He got away clean—and that's attempted murder."

"How would anyone know what to do?" asked Bennie's mother.

"A Healey counter-gravity unit is pretty well known in these days, Mrs. Smith," said Maximilian. "Any man with the usual acquaintance with mechanics would know what to do, I think. Ours is a standard installation as far as the Healey unit is concerned."

"It's a shame somebody didn't think of that," said Bennie's father.

"It's criminal," said Maximilian. "There I was watching the trapeze when the most obvious method was right in front of my eyes. And now I don't know how to fasten it on anybody."

Bennie was still for a moment. Then he said, "I know how to tell who did it."

His father looked at him. His mother was coming from the bathroom with a role of antiseptic tape. Bennie's father looked at him from one good eye. The other was closed.

"How?" he asked ominously, and Bennie shivered.

"The Healeys make a kind of nueleonic radiation that doesn't hurt anybody, but if a man gets close it goes into his body, and it stays for about twelve hours and you can detect it with the right instrument."

"Do you have that kind of instrument?" asked Bennie's father.

"Yes," said Bennie. "It's pretty big,

but it works. We could try it."

But Maximilian said, "It wouldn't do any good. How could we get anybody to come here to be tested?"

"You could offer to give them the chameleons," Bennie suggested.

But his father shook his head stubbornly. "No. Scarapento almost died because he wouldn't give in—and it was on account of me in the first place. No, I won't give them anything. But I wish," he said more reflectively, "that I had something different for a while. Something that would do better than horned toads."

BENNIE went to the laboratory. He came back with a small box. He opened it and showed his father. "Would that be a good item to sell?" he asked.

His father looked. His one good eye widened. "'Say, that is a good item. That's a dandy.'" He took it out gingerly and held it in his hand. It was about an inch high and was something like a baby horned toad, only it stood upright and its hind legs and tail were bigger than the rest of it.

"What is it?" asked Bennie's father.

"I don't exactly know," said Bennie, "except it's some ancestor of horned toads. Probably related to the extinct iguanodons. I stopped the development of a horned toad embryo at the right point and this was born. I kept it small, but they grew pretty big when they actually lived."

"That one is alive," said Maximilian, interested.

"Sure. I used some medicine to stunt its growth."

His father looked at him. "Not bad," he said in a way that made Bennie feel very good. "Maybe the science of the bugmen hasn't died out after all." A fondness came into his face.

Bennie waited a moment to savor this approbation, then he said modestly, "I've got two thousand of these little dinosaurs. You couldn't—"

But his father was thinking about something else. "How did you do it?" he asked. "It was my understanding

that most people thought that animals as species acquired immunity to hard radiation. Some insects, you know, can adapt themselves to almost anything in a half dozen generations, and I was taught that probably animals had learned the same thing, only it took them a little longer."

"There are lots of different kinds of radiation," Bennie said. "These were produced by using the radiation from nucleonic converters like the Healey anti-gravity units. It's a by-product of the super-magnetism that holds protons together. It's a funny thing. That kind of radiation doesn't affect warm-blooded creatures, but it works swell on anything like a lizard. And anyway, it isn't mutation at all. It's just stopping them at the right place."

His father looked at him with an interest that Bennie had not seen before and that made Bennie suddenly feel that he was growing up. "I'll sell some of these at the evening show," his father said decisively. "Maybe Whitsett and his friends will cool off."

Bennie started for the laboratory. The doorbell tinkled, and Bennie's mother went to answer it. Bennie's eyes popped open when Scarapento limped in. One of his front legs was in a cast. He spoke to them all, and shook hands with Bennie and said, "Thanks for saving my life."

Bennie glowed, and his father sat up straighter and said, "Is that it? Did Bennie furnish the miracle?"

"He did," said Scarapento.

Bennie's father looked at him and took a deep breath, and Bennie was almost overwhelmed by the proud light in his eyes.

SCARAPENTO sat down and said to Maximilian, "I thought we'd better hold a council."

"Yes," said Maximilian. "What's your condition?"

Scarapento shrugged his carapace. "I'm not permanently injured, but this leg is broken and I can't jump again for six months."

Maximilian's face was glum. "I'm glad you'll live," he said. "But as far as the circus is concerned—we may as well close up. People won't pay big prices to see Eels and Armadillos do second-ring stuff."

"Maybe they will," Bennie's father said hopefully.

Maximilian shook his head. "They won't. Usually by this time of day every seat has been sold for the night performance, but you know how we stand at this minute? It's a half hour till opening time and you could put every ticket-holder so far in one balcony!" He shook his head. "It's that way in the circus business. You have to have something spectacular to get the house. You lose your main attraction and you can lose your neck between shows."

"The truth is that it's Scarapento who has made Maximilian's the Greatest Show Under the Sun. I've spent millions of dollars trying to build up an act that could take his place but there's only one Scarapento, and everybody in the nine worlds knows it."

"Maybe," Bennie began doubtfully, "I could—"

The doorbell tinkled again, and Bennie's mother admitted Whitsett and four others. The four took off their hats and looked a little sheepish, but Whitsett, with his dark hair unruly and his black eyes defiant, said, "We've been talking it over and we're tired of being stalled. We want our share of the chameleons. We'll pay an honest price but we want them."

Maximilian spluttered. "Do you realize what you're doing?"

Scarapento said, "This is brigandage."

But Whitsett, even when the four others shrank a little farther from him, did not give ground. "We've all got everything we had in this show. We're entitled to a break. It isn't right for one man to have it all."

Bennie's father said sharply, "You tried to kill Scarapento."

Whitsett looked away for an instant, and it was as good as a confession.

Maximilian's eyes, set in his grizzled face, were on Whitsett. "You've ruined the show. You may have ruined all of us."

Whitsett looked uncertain for an instant, then he said defiantly, "I don't know anything about big business, and I didn't come to talk. Where are the chameleons?"

Maximilian said to Bennie's father, "You might as well let him have them. He's killed the show anyway."

Bennie's father looked stubborn. "My boy Bennie," he said, and Bennie detected the note of pride, "developed those chameleons. It wouldn't be fair to him—"

"I always heard," said Whitsett, "that in the Bugmen's Guild it was all for one and one for all."

That was in the old days," said Bennie's father, "when a bugman was a scientist."

Whitsett's eyes turned sharply on Bennie's father. "That's a new one on me. I never heard of a baby-turtle peddler being a scientist. But what about the chamelons?"

"You can—"

Bennie did something he hadn't done for months. He interrupted his father. "There are thousands of them in the marsh," he said to Whitsett, and added cheerfully, "But you'll have to catch them."

Whitsett jerked his head toward the open laboratory door. "Come on, men. This is what we're here for."

Bennie's father started up, but Scarapento laid a friendly claw on his shoulder. Bennie's father took a deep breath and sank back. Then he looked at his hand. He still had the tiny dinosaur. He set it on the table. It stood upright, balancing itself on its comparatively heavy tail.

The wrinkles deepened around Maximilian's eyes. He looked more closely. Then he took a pair of old-fashioned eye-glasses from his coat-pocket and put them on. He scrutinized the little dinosaur, and wonderment grew on his face. "What is it?" he asked.

I CALL it Phrynosoma," said Bennie. "I don't know exactly what it is, except it's some ancestor of horned toads."

The sounds of stamping in the laboratory had died, and instead from the direction of the laboratory came faint suggestions of passage through water and mucky ground.

Maximilian said speculatively, "If a fellow could get something that looked as fierce as that, only about thirty feet high, we could build an attraction that would hold us together."

"Just one animal?" asked Scarapento.

"Sure. Three hundred years ago it was the gorilla. That one animal probably saved the circus industry. This one would do it here, because there aren't any dinosaurs left on any of the planets, and a fellow like this, real flesh and blood, in full size, would be a top drawing-card. 'Gigantic Prehistoric Saurian from a Hundred Million Years Ago,'" he said musingly, and Bennie knew he was thinking of advertisements.

"Would a big one be worth some money?" Bennie asked.

Maximilian smiled. "Half a million cash and a percentage, I'd say offhand." He smiled. "Think you could produce one, sonny?"

Before Bennie could answer, there was an awful gurgling yell, faint as if from far beyond the laboratory. Bennie's eyes popped open and he shot to the laboratory door. Bennie's father and Maximilian and Scarapento came behind him. Bennie threw a switch and snatched up a flashlight.

Four men were pouring out of the marsh, fleeing back through the laboratory. "It's a monster!" one screamed.

Maximilian and Bennie's father followed Bennie on a run to the wide double doors that led out onto the marsh. Bennie shot the light out into the marsh in a half-circle. Bennie's father gulped and Maximilian gasped.

An enormous reptile, the duplicate of the baby dinosaur on the table, was in

the marsh up to its knees. It stood erect, with water dripping from its scaly back, as if it had just paused, and it was all of thirty-five feet high. Its eyes gleamed redly in the light, far over their heads, and ahead of it a man was plowing frantically through the muck, yelling for help. The man was Whitsett.

The monster took a ponderous step forward. Bennie pressed a button on his flash. No change was visible in the light, but the fire went out of the beast's eyes, the stiffness went out of its mighty muscles. It stopped moving forward. It got down slowly on its stomach. Bennie started in a circle, moving the light. The dinosaur lumbered after him.

"I've got an ultra-violet projector on the light," Bennie explained. "It calms him."

He got the big dinosaur into its nest, back in a far corner of the marsh. He got it quieted and left it. Then he went back to the laboratory. Whitsett was there. His face was still white but he was defiant. "I don't know what it is," he said, and now he talked directly to Bennie, "but you can't scare me off. I came for chameleons."

Bennie's father wasn't listening to Whitsett. He looked shaken but he said slowly and wonderingly, "Son, you have all the genius that your grandfather had. You're picking up where he left off. If you can do all of these things you'll be the savior of an ancient craft."

Now Whitsett began to look as if he was interested in something beside chameleons. "Yeah," he said, and there was a touch of awe in his voice, "I guess there is some science behind it, at that. And I thought the bugmen were just a bunch of grifters."

Maximilian had gotten his breath. Now he asked incredulously, "Is that thing yours, Bennie—that monster?"

Bennie nodded, and said to Whitsett at the door, "Will you come over here?"

Whitsett did, and when he was in about the middle of the room there was a tiny flash of light and a short buzz. Whitsett jumped, wide-eyed, but Ben-

[Turn page]

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nie said, "It's all right. It won't hurt you. It's just recording the fact that you have in your body some radiation from a Healey anti-g unit." He reached over the bench and carefully opened the switch. "It took a picture at the same time," he said.

Scarapento began to look intent. "You mean Whitsett was the one who made me fall?"

Bennie said, "Unless he can explain what other business he had around the Healeys."

Old Maximilian growled. "Nobody has any business around the Healeys except the operator."

Whitsett's lips were tightly pressed. He looked trapped. "I didn't mean to kill anybody," he said slowly. "I just wanted a break."

"You'll get it," Maximilian said ominously. "You'll get a free trip back to Earth with the Space Patrol."

And Scarapento started forward.

Whitsett opened his mouth. Then he dashed for the door. Bennie's father started after him, but Maximilian stopped him. "He can't get far in Jupiter gravity. Exposition City is the only place he can live without a complete space-outfit to protect him from gravity and pressure and the methane gas. Anyway, there's no reason for us to get killed stopping him. The IBI has plenty of men around the circus."

BENNIE carefully shut the doors to the marsh. When he got into the living-room, old Maximilian was studying the baby dinosaur again, and a little fire was beginning to burn in his shrewd old eyes.

"Where did you get the big one?" he asked Bennie.

"I raised it," Bennie explained, "from an egg. I fed it some gland extracts and used radiation on it and kept it out in the marsh where there's lots of grass and stuff. It's been growing like everything, especially during the last few months."

"You knew it was there all the time," said Scarapento thoughtfully.

Bennie was watching his father from the corner of his eye as he said, "Yes."

"Could you lead it around a circus ring?" Maximilian said intently.

"I can lead it anywhere with that special flashlight," said Bennie.

The fire in Maximilian's eyes exploded into a small nova. "Son," he said, "you've created the greatest sensation since Scarapento. I'll buy him from you and give you a contract to handle him for us."

"Buy him? You mean buy Bennie's dinosaur?" asked Bennie's father, incredulous.

"Sure." Maximilian was rubbing his hands together, his eyes alight. "We'll pack them in again. Give me till tomorrow. Wait'll I put this horned toad on the video. What did you say its name was—*Phrysonoma*? I'll have them write *Phrysonoma* all over the sky tonight in luminous letters a mile high. I'll have them draw a picture of *Phrysonoma ten* miles high. We'll pack the big-top to the dome. You'll see."

Bennie's father looked happy but he shook his head.

"I won't be here to see. We'll sell you the thing, all right, and I'm glad if it'll save the circus, but—"

"Listen," said Scarapento. "You could make these little ones, and if they're alive and duplicates of the big one, do you realize you could get two dollars apiece for them when they can see the big one?"

"Yes. I probably could sell a couple of thousand of these a day. But that's the same old story, neglecting the scientific end to make money. That's what got us in trouble in the first place." He shook his head firmly. "Bennie has dragged the bugmen out of a rut. I'm going to give him a break now. I want him to go ahead with good equipment, with new books and all. I'm going back to Iowa. We'll buy a farm—a big farm, so the children will have lots of room. Bennie will have a laboratory, and he can raise phrysonomas all he wants to—small ones, that is—and maybe he can even try to develop some new ones. But

me, I'm going to raise bullfrogs. They're safer."

He pulled Bennie to him.

Bennie felt his father's strong arm squeeze his shoulders. It made Bennie very happy. And it made him more happy when he looked up at the glow in his father's eyes. Bennie looked at Maximilian, who was grinning, and at Scarapento, who was smiling softly. Then Bennie looked back at his father. "Do you think," he asked hopefully, "that we could have two meat-balls apiece for supper tonight?"

ANSWERS To Quiz on Page 66

1-d, 2-a, 3-h, 4-f, 5-j, 6-i, 7-e, 8-b, 9-g, 10-a.



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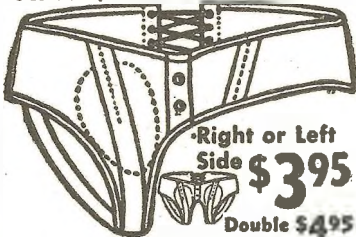
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SCIENCE FICTION

BOOK CORNER

WINSTON'S shelf of science fiction books for teen-agers is well under way with the publication of the first five in the list. Done by good names in the field—Raymond Jones, Milt Lesser, Lester del Rey and so on, they are another demonstration of our thesis that science fiction can be all things to all men. Here are five novels admittedly aimed at teen-agers, skirting such complexities as van Vogt's semantics for example, yet designed to do a two-fold job—provide a good adventure story and give something of a background on space travel, astronomy and related subjects.

In a way the job is tougher than writing fiction for adults, for in the adult field liberties are freely taken with fact and fantasy. But in writing for teen-agers, it behooves the author to be careful of his facts and pay some attention to authenticity.

On the whole these books stack up very well, and as has already been noted in the case of a Heinlein juvenile, do not seem seriously inferior to much stuff being published for adults, except for the definite boyish slant.

EARTHBOUND by Milton Lesser, The John C. Winston Co., Philadelphia, 205 pages and a glossary of space lingo, \$2.00, handsome end papers by Alex Schomburg and a dust jacket by Peter Poulton. The story of Peter Hodges, Space Cadet, who tangled with interplanetary racketeers and was the goat for a mission his superiors knew was doomed before it started. Fast, and well written.

SON OF THE STARS by Raymond F. Jones, the John C. Winston Co., Philadelphia, 208 pages and glossary, \$2.00, same end papers as above, plus dust jacket by Schomburg. A flying saucer cracks up on earth and out of it comes a non-human alien named Clonar. Clonar offered earth friendship, but a jumpy military chose to tag him alien and enemy and its own mistakes precipitate a crisis which threatened earth with disaster. Clonar's only friend was Ron Barron, the boy who found him staggering out of the wreck of his space ship and the only one the unhappy man from space could trust. Builds to a good climax.

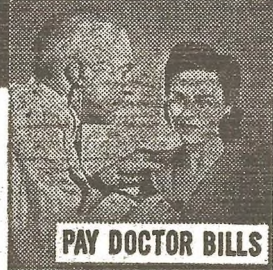
FIVE AGAINST VENUS by Philip Latham, John C. Winston Co., Philadelphia, 215 pages,



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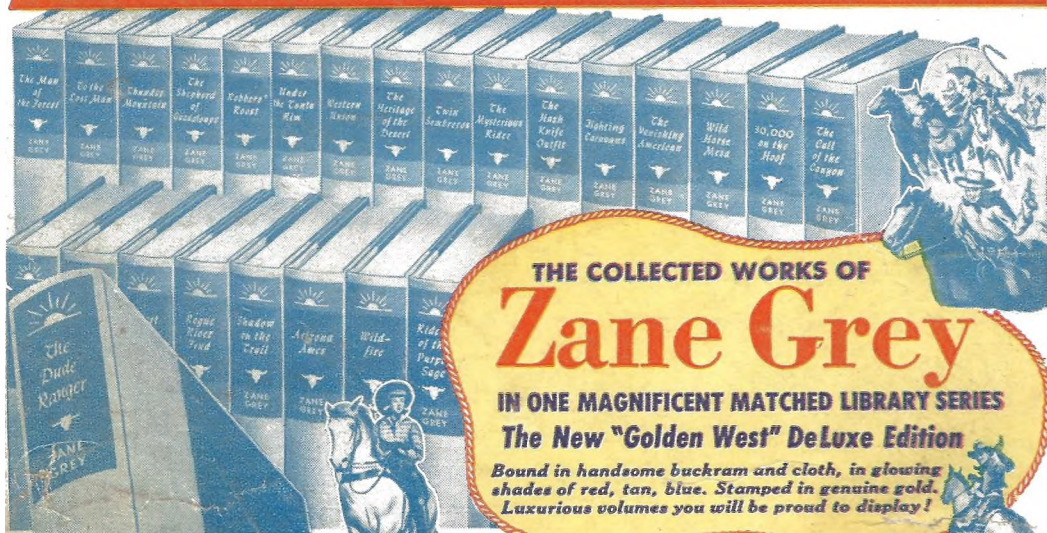
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