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STORIES

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A NOVELETTE OF THE STAR-FOLK
by **ROSS ROCKLYNNE**

TAA THE TERRIBLE
by **MALCOLM JAMESON**
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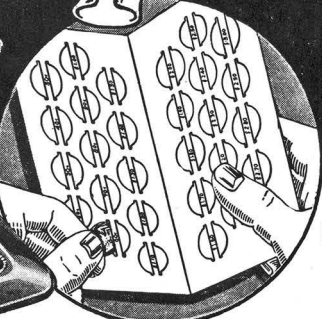
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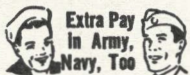
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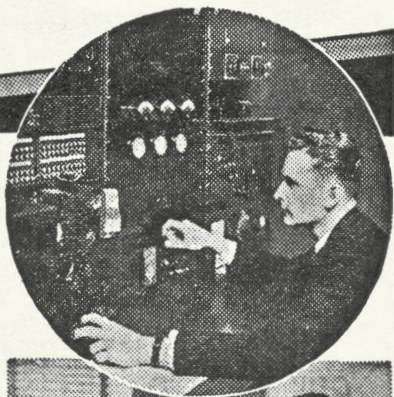
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DECEMBER 2ND

VOL. 4

DECEMBER, 1942

NO. 2

COMPLETE FANTASY NOVEL

NIGHT OF GODS.....by Paul Edmonds 11

The Tuatha Dé—the Sleeping Giants of Ire, men called them, and made black legends of their memory. And yet—there came the fateful day when they returned to wreak dreadful vengeance on a world that had cast them out!

NOVELETTES

TAA THE TERRIBLE.....by Malcolm Jameson 32

The great pale men from Earth brought horror to peaceful Arania, enslaving its people, looting it of its beauty. But the slave-people, patient though they were, had one ally—the awful power of Taa the Terrible, who could destroy a world—and did!

OUR DIRECTOR MEETS TROUBLE.....by John E. Harry 63

Listen to the sad saga of Our Director, whose business it was to grow food in water—and whose greatest problem was to keep from drowning himself in the hydroponics tanks!

ABYSS OF DARKNESS.....by Ross Rocklyne 86

"The years are wasted, and I have grown. Eons will remember my name. But—I have been alone, and I have never escaped. Was it for this that I roamed the eternal galaxies—for this that I am dying?"

SHORT STORIES

DESTINATION UNKNOWN.....by Frank Belknap Long 48

Most were less than men, a few were more than gods, on that ship wallowing starward to its doom. But the burning day had come when, beast-men and god-men alike, they must learn to work together—or die!

MIMIC.....by Martin Pearson 58

He walked alone in the dawn and the dusk, and no one knew his name. But the day he perished and the way he perished—a world will never forget!

SPECIAL FEATURES

VIEWPOINTS 6

News items from all the fantasy field.

THE MAIL BAG..... 8

The editor takes cover, as the readers cast their votes on Astonishing.

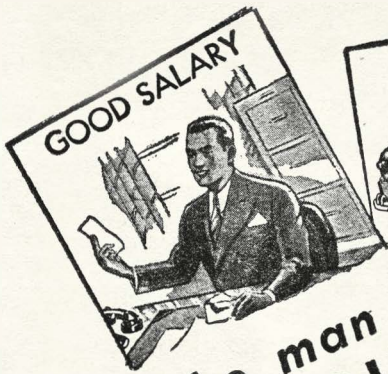
FAN MAGS..... 56

Reviewing the latest output of fandom's prolific amateur publishers.

FANTASY CIRCLE..... 81

An excursion to the borderline of scientific knowledge—and beyond!

Cover by Stephen Lawrence, illustrating "Taa the Terrible"
Inside illustrations by Dolgov, Lawrence, Morey and Paul.



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If you're that man, here's something that will interest you.

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VIEWPOINTS



Editor's Note: It is the intention of this department to publish news and information about fans and their activities, plus interesting sidelights about the professionals who write, edit or draw for the science fiction magazines. Viewpoints will be open to, and serve as the voice of, all readers and fans who care to make use of it. All items should be addressed to **ASTONISHING STORIES**, Fictioneers, Inc., 210 East 43 Street, New York City.

SCIENCE-FICTION fans in English-speaking countries overseas are cut off from receiving the American magazines which always formed the bulk of their fantasy fare nowadays. Trade restrictions have been imposed by the various governments in an effort to conserve their foreign credits for the more vital things necessary to the prosecution of the war.

Various are the means by which British, Canadian and Aussie fans contrive to get their favorite form of literature in spite of wartime restrictions. Several British and Australian fans have exacted pledges from their American correspondents that in the event of the latter's being drafted and sent overseas, they will bring a duffel bag full of the latest science fiction with them. One British group is reported trying to work out a method of photographing the magazines small-size, and having them dispatched regularly by air mail, but the price of such an arrangement seems much too high.

Most fan magazines are donating free subscriptions to American fans in the armed services, and a few have extended the offer to include Britons as well.

Science Fiction War Relief, a one-man organization operated by a Beaumont,

Texas, fan and financed largely by himself, with some contributions from other fans, is sending free copies of all the current professional mags to American and British fans on other continents. Forrest J. Ackerman, of Los Angeles, has been doing the same for most of his peace-time correspondents—but since he has just been drafted, this work will undoubtedly come to an end. Copies of certain professional magazines, including this one, are being sent regularly by their publishers to the officers of fan clubs and editors of fan magazines abroad.

Canadian fans are in a rather fortunate position, compared with their compatriots of the rest of the British Empire. There is no shipping problem between Canada and the U. S. A., and the only obstacle is the impossibility of sending money from Canada to this country. However, the fortunate Canadian fans have seen the birth of several fantasy magazines of their own since the outbreak of the war. And, science-fiction fans being the inveterate collectors they are, almost any Canadian fan desirous of doing so can find an American who will gladly send him copies of all the American magazines in return for Canadian ones!

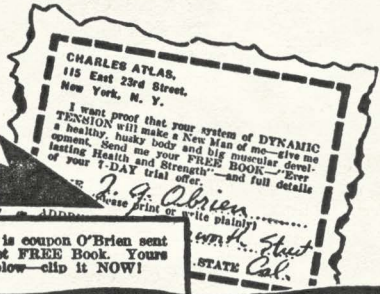
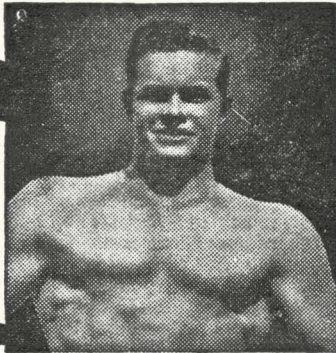
(Continued on page 112)

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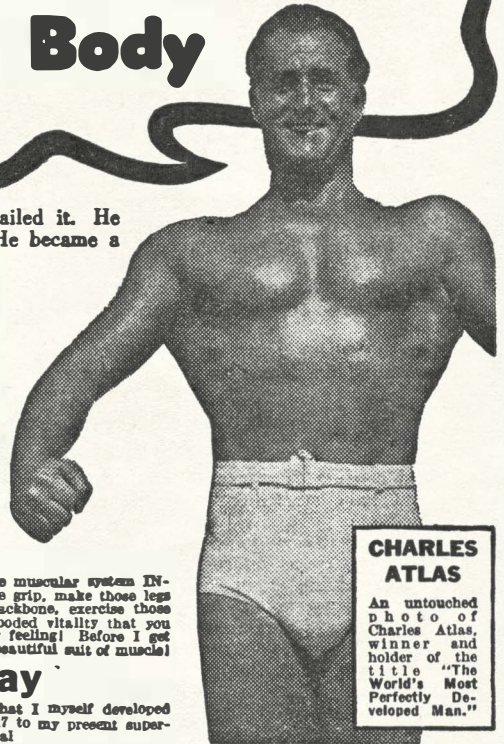
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THE MAIL BAG

Who said we didn't like girls?

Dear Editor:

The other day I was at the drug store looking for something good to read when I spied an *Astonishing Stories* tucked away in a dark corner. I picked it up and looked at it. Imagine my surprise when I discovered it was only 10c—one thin dime! I never had seen any stf mag that sold at that incredible price before. The first thing I looked at was "The Mail Bag," because I like to see just what the fans think of the mag. Then I discovered something—there wasn't a single word that expressed a woman's viewpoint. I know there must be some others besides me who read this mag, so why don't you have at least one letter from the girl fans every issue?

I'm just fifteen, but I can comment on your mag as well as anybody, so here goes:

1. "Doomsday on Ajjat." Good. Wish we could have more of Jones' stories, but since he joined the Army I guess we will just have to make out 'till he comes back.

2. "Thunder in the Void." Now there's a story. It was exciting. Why couldn't the ending have been better? Get this—the hero's sweetheart gets killed, then the hero saves the whole world by getting killed himself. How about a better ending next time, Kuttner?

3. "The Eternal Quest." Something different from what I have been reading, but I enjoyed it.

4. "The Vortex Blaster Makes War." W-e-l-l! It could have been better, much better. The plot was terrible.

These three tied for fifth place:

5. "Remember Me, Kama" was—shall we say—terrible.

"Nothing." Okay.

"Miracle." Pul-lease, no more time travel stories by Cummings.

I enjoyed reading "Fantasy Circle," and, incidentally, I have started collecting stf mags myself.

"Viewpoints" was very good. Keep it up.

"The Mail Bag" was interesting and, please, let's have a feminine viewpoint next time.

Oh yeah! How about a correspondence corner? You know, where fans put their names and other fans write to them.

I am looking forward to the December issue of *Astonishing*.

A new and loyal fan,
Frances Weddle,
Norman, Oklahoma

P. S. The cover was supposed to illustrate "Thunder in the Void", wasn't it? Well, I read it over twice but I didn't find a place where that cover picture illustrates the story. Tell Morey to illustrate the story next time!

Lawrence did the E. E. Smith illustration, Mr. Eich.

Editor, *Astonishing Stories*:

There is something very appealing about the

scene on the cover of *Astonishing* for October, but I wish one of your other artists had drawn it. I've seen several covers by this Morey fellow before, and think that he should stick to Westerns or whatever kind it is he usually draws. Matter of fact, if I hadn't already been attracted to your magazine from reading the issue before (and that August *Super Science*), I doubt that I'd have bothered to pick it up at all. Of course, this cover may be just what attracts most of *Astonishing's* followers; I wouldn't know about that. All I can give is one individual's viewpoint.

Speaking of viewpoints, it seems to me that that department title would go better over the readers' letters than over a general gossip column about the authors. Not that the column you now have under "Viewpoints" title isn't interesting and well done. . . .

The drawings by Leydenfrost this time are lovely. That beautiful ship he drew for the Kuttner story is sheerly breathtaking. It alone is worth my dime, so you could have ten Morey covers for all I cared, as long as you had a drawing like this inside. And his drawing for the E. E. Smith yarn is almost as good. It's swell having an artist who not only has a wonderful imagination and a sort of sixth sense for just what makes a fantastic illustration look incredibly real, but can also draw people who look like human beings and unhuman creatures that don't. What happened to his signature, I wonder? Hope he isn't shy.

The artist who did the illustration for the Gilbert story doesn't seem to be quite as good as Leydenfrost, but he has a charming and distinctive style just the same. (Gee, what's gotten into me? Here I am rambling about art work just like a dyed-in-the-wool letter writer for your magazines. But that's what really gripping pictures of this kind do to bugs like me.) The picture by John Giunta is good, too, though I can't get enthusiastic over the ones by Morey or Musacchia. I've seen worse, but since you have artists who can do heaps better, why?

As for the stories themselves: two of the shorter ones take the prize this time for me. "Remember Me, Kama" and "The Eternal Quest" both have something . . . that ethereal something about toponotch yarns of this type . . . that set me dreaming and yet seem very real. Lots of this type of story are just stories—good enough and all that, interesting, but nothing more. But these two are the real McCoy. "Thunder in the Void" and "The Vortex Blaster Makes War" are both very good reading, but lacked that certain touch which the two shorter ones had. "Nothing" is a quietly satisfying little bit which makes me ask: how about some longer stories by Pearson? And "Miracle" has its points. I've seen lots of nasty comments about Cummings in the "Mail Bag" Department, so wondered if this would be something I didn't care to finish. It wasn't. The story was nothing to jump for joy about, but it wasn't horrible either. Rather I'd transfer those remarks about

(Continued on page 78)

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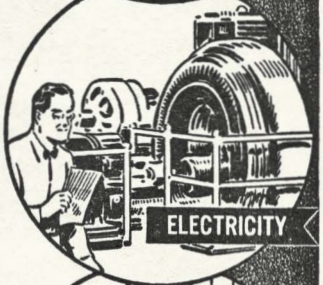


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It is a duty you owe your country, yourself, and your family. You should know more and more about your job. You should be prepared to advance and to accept the responsibilities of the men ahead of you so that they in turn may climb and, climbing take you with them. No matter what your present job, you should learn to do it better or learn how to do the job of the man ahead of you. You need to know both theory and practice to make our tremendous war plants more productive. Yes, indeed, you are needed and needed badly right now.

Use Spare Time, Learn At Home

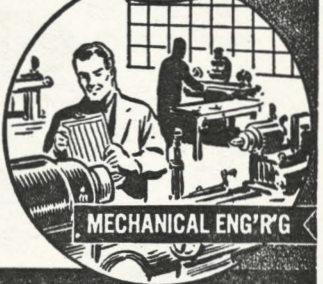
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NIGHT OF GODS

By
Paul Edmonds

Illustrated by
Lawrence

The Tuatha Dé—the Sleeping Giants of Eire, men called them, and made black legends of their memory. Until the fateful day when they returned—to unlock the gate of dreadful reckoning!

CHAPTER ONE

March of the Titans

GLENN looked at me sidewise, his haggard young face tense with exhaustion, his hands automatically reaching toward the plane's dual controls.

I didn't recognize my voice when I said, "Lay off. You can't fly this crate any farther than I can."

He lit a cigarette and stuck it in my mouth.

"You're crazy, Sean. You've got to sleep sometime."

I grinned, nodding to the bullet-marred shield where gray fog was torn to pieces by the props as we thundered eastward, somewhere over the Pacific. "Bird-walking weather. Maybe we land up in Tokyo. God knows. Anyhow, we can't try for a landing. What's down there?"

Glenn followed my gesture. He made a wry grimace.

"Water, and lots of it—I know. But you've got to have relief, man!"

Relief! There wasn't any. And I couldn't tell Glenn why I didn't dare let him take the controls—he'd think I'd blown my top. How could I say I was getting a message from—nowhere?

I was doped to the eyes. The Japs had been savagely strafing our island base for weeks, knocking down our planes one by one. We kept going up, of course, hoping for relief from Australia or the Pacific fleet. So few flyers! It got so I was dead on my feet, waiting for the signal to warm up and take off to meet the overwhelming air attacks. Thiamin helped, as well as other stimulants. I even tried a native drug, betel or something, to keep me going. My nerves were wire-edged. Physically exhausted, and mentally attuned to razor keenness.

That attack yesterday—

I cursed under my breath. Had the Japs taken the base? The radio had stopped, while we were up there in the fog, and then, suddenly, there was nothing in all the world except gray emptiness. The dogfight had carried us north. I tried to get back, but I missed the island, and we were alone, trying to pick signals out of the air, trying to find a landing place before the fuel was gone.

And the Japs jammed the air waves.

So we cruised around, feeling desperately hopeless, getting ready to die. There was a zero ceiling. I settled back into an alert sort of relaxation, my mind going blank for the first time in days. Physically I was tired. Mentally, stimulant drugs had, I think, done something to my mind.

I heard the—summons.

It came out of the fog and the darkness. It was wordless, inaudible, and alien to anything I had ever before experienced. There were no terms to describe the—the message.

Wordless, it called. As the magnetic pole draws a compass needle, with invisible lines of force, so my mind swung toward the south.

Like the fabulous lodestone mountain that draws iron ships to destruction on its rocky shores, so the call drew me southward.

Thrice before in my life I had heard it. But never so strong—never so compelling!

Once in the Florida Everglades, sick and racked with fever, nerves raw and jolting, I had heard it. And then once in the Andes, snowbound, my body filled with the tingling exhilaration of immense altitudes. It came from the east, or so I thought at the time.

A year ago the message had come while I was on a binge in a little port somewhere on the Burma coast. I was crazy drunk, on the way to delirium tremens. But the—summons—had been unmistakable.

Now, for the fourth time, that silent, incredible tocsin came ringing out of nowhere, finding a responsive chord deep in my brain, bringing forth a response that was almost intoxicating in its surge and pulse through my mind. It ebbed and mounted like a tide. My soul and body leaped up in answer to it.

It—called!

It called—me!

I thought of the lyre of Orpheus, that

drew even the dead back from their tombs to listen. But this was not music; I did not even hear it.

Deep within me, some unknown sense hearkened to that summons—and was drunken with delight as it hearkened. Madness or sanity, dream or reality, I scarcely cared. My body was dead with exhaustion. I handled the plane's controls automatically, by reflex action. Before me the instruments glowed in their panel. Gray tatters of fog flashed by the cowling. At my side Glenn Kirk smoked one cigarette after another, casting uneasy glances at the fuel gauge. There was enough and to spare; we still had the reserve tank to call on if necessary. But our destination was unknown.

Somewhere—out there in the fog—something called. What?

Something that had called me thrice before—and I had not answered. Now—“Sean.”

My tongue felt stiff. “Yeah?”

“Been trying the radio. Nothing. All wave-lengths jammed tight. I've lost my bearings completely.”

“Have a drink and forget it,” I said. “There's brandy in my jacket.”

FROM the corner of my eye I watched Glenn lift the flask to his lips. In the last few months I'd come to know the boy as well as two men, facing death together, could know one another. He'd saved my life more than once, and I'd reciprocated.

Flying together forges a certain bond. I'd come to know a good deal about Glenn, the little Illinois village where he had lived, the mansion where the Kirks had been reared for generations, the college where Glenn had studied medicine. He had more to lose than I, who had knocked around the world from early youth. I had no kin. But I could understand what that village and the people in it meant to Glenn—a future in a place he

knew and loved. He'd told me about it. Hunting trips in the autumn woods, firelight in warm cabins, with snow piling against the windows, all that sort of thing—out of my line, I suppose. Just the same—

“After this is over, you're coming back with me,” Glenn had said. “You'll like the folks and they'll like you. Thanksgiving—you've never had turkey dressing the way Mom cooks it. And I want you to meet Paula, too.”

Thanksgiving. I'd celebrated it—yeah. In various ways. Fried monkey in the Amazon country, up the Orinoco. Steer steak on the pampas. Once, roasted dog in the Mexican mountains, where I was glad enough to get it. And lonely dinners in New York, London, Port Said . . . the hell with it. I could have landed on my feet; I'd inherited some money, and plenty of jobs were open. But a job wasn't what I wanted. Wanderlust is one name for it. A restless longing for something that couldn't be expressed, a blind, drunken searching for an unknown goal. . . .

My ancestors had wandered through the fens and mists of Ireland, in days long forgotten, before the kings of Tara rose to power—when men were fighters and minstrels both, their hands equally ready to reach for harp or sword. In me, Sean O'Mara, the old blood seemed to burn like fire. I could not rest. I—could not rest.

And now a soundless call beat out of the darkness—speaking to me, and to me alone.

Well—I grinned crookedly—I was answering that call. There was nothing else to do. Unless I cared to circle blindly in the fog, hoping it would lift. Sometimes these unexpected palls of cloud lasted for days. No, the O'Maras had always been gamblers, and, somehow, I trusted that summons.

But I could not tell Glenn. He was asleep now, looking impossibly young

with his tired face relaxed in slumber. Dreaming, maybe, about the village in Illinois. And Paula, who wore the ring he'd given her and waited anxiously for news from our Pacific base.

My lips tightened. By this time, that base might have been blown to hell! I had friends there—

The prop bit furiously into the air, hurling the plane forward like a bullet. The sun rose swiftly, suddenly, as it does near the equator.

The fog cleared. Some freak thermal made a funnel of clear air. Beneath us I saw an islet.

There were no signs of human habitation. A low peak stood up sharply, and there were palms and a sprawling hook of a barrier reef.

Now!

Here!

In my mind the cry beat wordlessly, imperative. I banked and slid down the slopes of air, heading for the broad beach. Here, at any rate, we would be safe. We could rest, conserving our fuel, till Japs had stopped jamming the ether and we could get our bearings.

Glenn awoke as I made a good landing. He blinked around, puzzled, and then turned to stare at me. His red-rimmed eyes were questioning.

"Don't ask me," I said. "We had a break, that's all. We hit the jackpot. Unless this is Crusoe's island."

"Natives? Mm-m." Glenn slid a fresh clip into his gun. He yawned mightily. "Lord, I'm tired. I'm going to find a nice, friendly palm tree, lie down under it, and sleep for a week."

I was already out of the plane, taking stock of the damage Jap bullets had done. Nothing serious, luckily. We were shot to hell, but I'd flown crates in far worse shape—and flown them into dogfights and out again. Yes, we could get back to a base, or some carrier, after we got our bearings.

Only—that message was still whispering inside my head.

Waves murmured quietly up the beach and receded in foam and blueness. Walls of fog banked us in, but diffused sunlight came down the shaft of clear air above the island—a thermal, caused by the release of heat the ground had absorbed during the day. The lagoon looked inviting. I thought of sharks and shrugged. We could take turns.

We did, one of us on guard with a gun while the other bathed in the cool water. Never in my life had I enjoyed the sensuous feel of water so much. My aching, exhausted muscles were soothed and rested. When I emerged on the sand, physical exhaustion hit me like a blow. I took a stinging gulp of brandy to clear my head.

"What now?" Glenn asked. "Never mind—I'm going to take a nap."

"Get dressed first," I told him, pulling on my trousers. "In case there should be natives here, we don't want to be caught without guns. We may have to take off in a hurry. Some of the black fellows in these islands are tough customers."

"Black fellows? Are we—"

"We may be closer to Australia than Suva," I said grimly. "In fact, only God knows where we are. Get some sleep. I'll stand guard."

"Toss you for it."

"Okay." I took a shilling out of my pocket and tossed. "Heads." That particular lucky piece had tails on both sides. I let Glenn see which way she'd fallen on my palm and waved him away. "Pleasant dreams. I'll wake you in a few hours and get some sleep myself."

"You're as dead tired as I am—more. You've been flying—"

"Oh, shut up," I said, and tripped him, so that he fell sprawling on the sand. "If you get up, I'll knock you down again. Get some sleep, dope."

"Well—okay." He was asleep in a moment.

I WENT back to the plane and tried the radio. No luck. I pulled Mary Lou out of the cabin and buckled her around my waist. She was a handy little weapon I'd picked up a while before—a blade about as long as a machete, but slimmer, with a razor edge and a set of brass knuckles set into the hilt. Very convenient. In close quarters, especially. If the slash missed, the brass knuckles would follow through with a nice backhand motion. I'd ruined a Jap's face with that six weeks ago, when he'd come charging at me with his gun blazing and my automatic jammed. In hand-to-hand fighting, I'd back Mary Lou against the field.

I went back to where I'd left Glenn and put my back against a palm. I was more exhausted than I'd realized. But I still thought I could keep awake—

Which was the damndest mistake I'd ever made. Because the O'Mara went out like a light in about two minutes flat. At

that, it wasn't entirely physical fatigue. Maybe hypnotism had something to do with it.

I was—dreaming.

That soundless call had come back. Relaxation of my mind left an opening. I still thought, with some distant part of me, that I was on the beach, sitting against the palm, but at the same time I saw things.

What I saw—

There was a great darkness. Through the cloudy murk vast figures strode, thunder-footed, towering to the skies. I sensed danger, the perilous danger of Abaddon itself.

The Titans marched on, converging on a—a—

There was no word. Something, a glowing, writhing, flaming spot of light glared far off against the dark curtain. I saw a temple, or its equivalent—a massive structure mighty as Valhalla Hall,

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where the mighty Aesir feast eternally.

To it the giants marched!

I went, without volition, in their train. Dimly, from far away, I heard a cry, my own name, in a voice I knew. Glenn—

Who was Glenn? I did not remember. . . .

Faster thundered those racing feet! Hordes of colossi, hurrying to follow a call, a summons.

"Sean! Sean O'Mara!"

Is it Sean O'Mara who stumbles through the jungle, up the lava slopes, among the volcanic fissures where shadows crouch in deeper darkness? O'Mara? Not I!

I was one with the Titans!

They drew me on, carried me with them. Past fallen blocks of masonry, eroded and broken, past ruined, vine-sheathed things that once were monoliths, past the Road—

The Road?

Time had wrecked it; centuries had smashed and crumbled what had once been great. But I saw the shadows of the past, the towers and plinths that had once risen here. Shadowy but real as the titans that strode onward along the Road!

"Sean!"

This was the door. Yet it, too, had been eaten by Kronos, the time god who will some day eat up the world and the universe as well. There was no door. There was only a slit of blackness, half-hidden by rubble, at the base of a cliff. . . .

I lifted a great boulder and put it aside. The way was clear. The giants thundered past me, along the road, through the door—and I was one with them.

The tocsin sang within my brain. It drew me. Drew me into the darkness—

Light filtered through the gap in the wall, faint but strong enough to reveal my surroundings. I was in a cave. The walls and roof and floor shone bright silver.

Before me in emptiness a globe hung,

dull and tarnished, larger than my arms might span—and old—*old!*

From it the summons sang. And *had* been singing for a thousand thousand years, since the day when tall monoliths had guarded this road. I felt the incredible antiquity of the sphere, as though, half-sentient, nearly alive, its intolerable weariness had come surging out to meet me.

A machine—yet half alive. It had been waiting. Waiting for someone to walk the Road once more?

Suddenly it flashed into blazing light. I felt that tremendous pulse of power rush through me. I felt a hand grip my shoulder, was swung around, off balance, to stare into the amazed face of Glenn Kirk. He had no time to speak.

Again the tide of power thundered silently out from the sphere. And this time it brought darkness in its wake. The oblivion of eternity itself!

CHAPTER TWO

Feast with the Gods

WHERE were the Titans?

It was a dream, nothing more. My head throbbing, I sat up, staring around. Those nightmare visions had been phantoms, I knew. And yet—

Part of the dream had been real.

I was in a room with walls and roof and floor of silver. A few feet away in midair hung the sphere, dull now and lifeless. There was a cleft in one wall, and through it blue light came softly.

Beside me Glenn lay, breathing stertorously, the lines of fatigue almost gone from his face. I realized that I was no longer tired. How long had we slept? I was ravenously hungry. But the fatigue toxins were gone from my body, washed away by healing sleep. How long—

Many hours, at least. I turned to examine the globe. It was quiescent, with-

out that strange air of half life. What unknown hands had built it? Or the city that lay in ruins outside? Perhaps those ruins, too, were like the giant figures, part of my dream.

Glenn stirred, muttering something. He flung out his hand questingly. I gripped his shoulder, shook him. He woke with a start.

"Sean! What the devil—" He was suddenly on his feet, staring around. "Holy sizzling cats, what happened?"

"I dunno. I was asleep," I said wryly. "Dreaming, too."

He looked at me. "I followed you. I yelled, but you didn't hear. You went straight as a homing pigeon through the jungle and up toward the mountain. When I saw those ruins, I nearly shot my cakes."

The ruins had been real, then. I asked, "Did you see any—figures?"

"No. Not a soul. Let's get out of here. I've got the jitters. That gadget gives me the creeps. What is it, anyway?"

I couldn't answer that. "A machine of some kind, I suppose."

"To make artificial lightning, eh? Let's get back to the plane. The fog should be gone by now. Wish I had my camera—I'd like to have a snapshot of that ball when we turn in our report."

The fog should be gone. But that bluish light filtering in didn't look like sunshine. I felt an uneasy qualm.

Glenn went to the cleft and squeezed out. I heard him gasp. I followed.

This was not . . . Earth.

We felt that from the first, I think. For there was no sky. There was an immense shining vault of lambent blue, cloudless and sunless. It was not the blue of Earth's sky. The air about us partook of that faint, soft azure, as though we walked beneath tropical water.

Cliffs colored like flame walled us in. We stood on a little knoll, staring. Those towering crags rose all around like a

prison. Only in one place, directly ahead, were the perpendicular surfaces broken by a narrow slit—the mouth of a gorge, perhaps a quarter of a mile distant. The canyon twisted sharply, so we could see for only a little way into it.

My hand crept to my belt. Mary Lou was still there. The sword's rough hilt felt good against my palm. I had my gun, too, and so did Glenn, I saw.

His mouth was open. He turned slowly, and I followed his example.

We had emerged from a dome-shaped building, about twenty feet high, built atop the knoll. It was featureless, of a uniform dark tint. It blocked our vision.

I said shortly, "Come on," and started to circle the structure. As I had hoped, the cliffs were not continuous on this side either. To left and to right they extended until they ended abruptly at the edge of a gorge, some distance away. A bridge spanned the gorge. Beyond, a low line of grayish hills stretched into the distance.

Glenn licked dry lips. "Am I crazy, too? This isn't—"

"We don't know what it is, or where." I pulled out my flask. "Have a shot. It's good for nightmares."

He took a stiff drink, and I did the same. The liquor strengthened us. We stood staring at that incredible vista, knowing that we were on the edge of the unknown.

"No welcoming committee," Glenn said at last.

"Yeah. That sphere—I wonder. A spaceship?"

"I'll lay my bets on teleportation. Etheric transmission of solids. It's just a theory—but we're certainly not in the South Pacific."

"We may be in another time," I said. "I've read yarns about such things. It's crazy. Sure. Only here we are. Well, no use standing here and starving to death. We didn't blaze a back trail, so let's go hunt up some grub."

Glenn managed a shaky grin. "Wonder what the folks back home would say about this?"

"Send 'em a wire," I suggested sardonically. "Come along." I started down the slope, walking carefully. The mossy surface underfoot looked treacherous. I felt better when we had reached level ground.

We couldn't see the gorge now, but the cliffs told us the right direction.

We kept walking. The silence was complete. There was no insect or bird life, only a distant murmuring I could not analyze. It sounded more like flame than water.

We neared the gorge. The bridge was narrow, no wider than a man's height, and was made of some dead black substance that felt rough underfoot. It seemed neither metal nor stone. What it was I did not know.

The abyss—

Glenn gave a choked cry and lurched back, flinging his arm before his face. He looked at me, and I saw that his cheeks and forehead were a blistered, angry crimson. "My God!" he whispered. "Don't get too close. That—that's the pit of hell, for my money!"

"Hurt, kid?"

"N-no. But it was close. Take it easy!" He gripped my wrist. I said, "Okay," and edged forward, till I could peer down into the gulf.

Far down I caught a glimpse of light that was supernally brilliant—more vivid than light could be. It moved in trickling currents, like water. A blast of searing energy sent me back, coughing and choking. Glenn said, "I told you to be careful, you damn fool."

"Yeah. I'm okay. It's some radiation—"

"Deadly. Plenty deadly. We're stymied."

I said, "No," and nodded toward the bridge. "I was out on that a few steps

and didn't get hurt. It's probably made of some substance that blocks the rays, or whatever they are."

"Radiant energy. Or something."

Before Glenn could stop me, I walked out on the bridge. I felt nothing unpleasant. But to left and to right the air shook with silent, terrible motion as the radiations from below rushed upward. The dim whispering grew louder. Curious, I thought, that the voice of death should be so soft.

Glenn followed me. "You crazy nut! How'd you know this bridge is safe?"

"I tried it. Besides, nobody'd build a bridge unless they intended to use it. Let's see what's at the other end."

It was a dizzying walk, for the span was at least three hundred feet long, but we made it finally. We sat down for a moment or two on the soft moss of the farther bank, a little weak with reaction. The unchanging, unearthly blueness hung over us like an immense canopy of filtered light.

"No," I said. "This isn't the South Pacific, Glenn. Unfortunately. If it was, we might dig up some breadfruit. And I'm thirsty."

"We can't drink *that*, anyhow." He shivered and looked back toward the gorge. "I've got the leaping creepies. Maybe we're dead, huh?"

"But not buried. I'm hungry—food and water is the first thing on the program."

SO WE went over the low ridge, and there, spread before us, was a rolling, forested countryside that vanished in hazy distances. A well-worn path lay ahead. I looked for signs of feet, but there were winds in this world, and I could find no prints in the grayish dust.

And we went on, though not for long. Presently the forest thinned, and we stood on the edge of a clearing. A castle was there, built of stone or metal—I could not make out which—and the style of archi-

ecture struck a half-familiar note. It was neither Grecian nor Roman nor Norman, but the principle of the arch was known to the builders, I saw. A castle, without the harsh crudity of Earthly fortresses, molded and refined till the basic grimness had been altered into something lovely and deceptively fragile.

"This is it, I guess," Glenn said. "Do we send in our cards?"

I patted my automatic. "Here's our reference. Maybe nobody's home; there's no sign of life."

We walked across the clearing to where gates yawned ajar in the castle's wall. We entered, finding ourselves in a courtyard, bare and deserted. Then a—a man came out of a door somewhere, and he was not—human.

We stopped dead. The creature was man-shaped, but his skin—he wore a loin-cloth, nothing more—was a dull grayish hue, and his head and body were totally hairless. He had two pairs of arms, and his legs ended in pads, like an elephant's. His face was—well, inhuman. The features were regular enough, but his eyes had no soul behind them.

He saw us, ignored us. I felt a chill crawl through me. The—being—walked past us and vanished into an archway.

Glenn said in a sick voice, "We'll need our references."

I didn't answer. I followed the creature, Glenn at my heels. We went through a short corridor, brushed aside a curtain, and came out in a hall. I had an impression of intricately patterned walls, of a bluish, ghostly dimness, and of two figures seated at a table in the distance.

Two figures—human! A man and a woman. They saw us and sprang up, staring.

Man and woman—no. God and goddess!

The man was a giant, taller than I, his hair a bright silver mane above a beautiful, strong, leonine face. He wore a form-



fitting garment of some bright fabric. His eyes were blue flames, blazing now with incredulous delight.

The woman—

I cannot, now, bring myself to describe Aedis. She was supernally lovely. She was dark. Her glance was the striking of a lance. She wore a garment molded of the night, and she was a goddess.

I felt the world stop around me, in that moment when I first saw Aedis of Dy-an. . . .

She gave the man a swift glance and looked again at us—ragged, grimy, stained with the dark red of dried blood from our scratches. In the background the inhuman, gray-skinned being moved, placing a covered dish on the table before the two.

The man said something in a low voice, and the creature slipped noiselessly away.

I heard Glenn's soft whisper, "I'll follow your lead. The dame—she looks like trouble."

"You're crazy," I said. I took a pace forward, hand lifted in the peace gesture. The man came around the table and

walked toward me. Swinging from his belt, I saw, was a great hammer, its head red as blood.

He, too, lifted his hand and paused, eyes searching mine. He asked a question in a tongue not entirely alien. I searched my memory. Then I had it. Erse—ancient Erse, though with a difference in accent and pronunciation that made the words unrecognizable.

Well, the O'Mara knew his forefathers' tongue! I spoke slowly, carefully, giving him greeting.

He swung back toward the woman, roaring a phrase I could not catch. There was triumph in his tone. Then back to me—

He flung me questions, staccato, so fast I could not understand. I shook my head and he spoke more slowly, piecing out the words with gestures. After a moment he gripped my arm and drew me to the table, forcing me down on a bench beside the woman. I beckoned to Glenn, and he came to join us.

There was food on the board—unfamiliar, but recognizable. I pointed to it, asked a question. The man seized a haunch of meat and forced it into my hands. "Eat!" he said—and I understood. "Eat!"

WE ATE like wolves. The man kept talking, and gradually his tricks of dialect became clearer to me. He spoke Erse, or an Erse-root, and once I had mastered the difference in accent, it was much easier to follow him. Satiated at last, I leaned back, draining a cup of hot, spicy liquor.

I sought for words. "It is hard to speak. The old tongue is—changed."

"It is still spoken in Lleu-Atlan?"

He repeated it before I understood. "Lleu-Atlan?"

The woman said, "Let him tell his story. It has been long and long. Empires fall. Only in Dyan is there no change."

Most of the words I could make out. The others I guessed. But the old phrases came back to me with increasing ease. Glenn watched wonderingly. I nodded at him, said, "Take it easy. I'm finding out—"

"Tell me," the man said. "I am Lar, guardian. This woman is Aedis. She also guards. Now who are you, and how did you come to Dyan?"

I told him. He interrupted from time to time, questioning me carefully, giving me words when I could find none. When I had finished, he thrust a filled cup toward me.

"Drink! I drink with you! Aedis—"

She lifted her goblet. "So. But—he? This man called Glenn? He is not of the old blood."

Lar looked at me. "He does not speak our tongue? He did not hear the summons? Well—he came with you, and is safe. So drink."

And we drank together, for the first and the last time. Over the rim of the cup Aedis's eyes sought mine.

Aedis—Aedis of Dyan! Goddess indeed! I dare not think of you now. I dare not remember. But—I loved you from the first moment I saw you in that dim blue-lit hall, wearing the night like a gown, guarding a gateway that you thought would never open.

Lar rose, laughing down at me. "Tell him, Aedis. I have no time. In Lleu-Dyan the people prepare to march to the Cleft, and I must tell them that this time there will be no return. Yet—" He bent toward me, staring. "Take him to the Cleft when the storm bursts from the rock. His powers are still latent. Let him stand in that which gives life—"

"I do not understand," I said.

"Aedis will explain. Look you, now—" His giant figure flashed away so swiftly I could not follow him with my eyes. I heard Glenn gasp in amazed wonder. Before I could turn, Lar was back, gripping

a stone block between his great hands.

"Look you, now—"

He crumbled the stone between his fingers! Trickle of dust slipped to the floor; shards of rock flew. Glenn said, "Sean! The guy's doing that with his hands!" He knelt suddenly and picked up a fragment, tested it, and gulped. "It's no fake, either."

Lar laughed. "When you have stood in the Cleft's storm, you, too, will awake. As yet you stir in your sleep—but later, you will have such power as I have. And Aedis! And all those who dwell in Dyan!"

Aedis said, "The other?" She nodded toward Glenn.

Lar sobered. "He is not of our blood. He may not visit the Cleft."

The giant turned to me again, his grip clamping like iron on my shoulder. "We shall meet again, brother."

A titan—he strode from the hall, silver head arrogantly lifted.

CHAPTER THREE

Cauldron of Hell

AFTER that there was nothing to do but wait. Within a certain period of time, Aedis said, Lar would return.

It was impossible for me to understand the time system of this strange world. There was no sun. The unchanging blue haze above, never darkened into night. There were, Aedis explained, certain temporal cycles or pulses which she could sense, but which I could not. There was so much that I did not understand!

One thing I came to know, and soon. There was antipathy between Aedis and Glenn. He feared and hated her, I think, and she felt for him a sort of scorn. Later I realized why.

"She isn't human," Glenn said, when we were alone. "Neither is the man. There's something wrong about them both, Sean."

"I don't see it."

He shivered. "Don't you? You remind me of them a bit yourself, rather—but you're a human being! They aren't."

"Well, they're treating us all right," I said practically, sitting down on a mound of cushions. "A private suite that looks swankier than the Astor. Got a cigarette? I'm out."

Glenn extended a crumpled pack. "Hope they have tobacco here. Where are we, anyway? Did they say?"

"No—at least, I don't remember enough Erse to get all Aedis said. We're in a place called Dyan, I gathered, and Lar went off to the main city—Lleu-Dyan."

"How come they speak Erse?"

"I don't know." Smoke trickled slowly between my lips. "We may be anywhere in time or space. I'll find out—give me a chance to talk to Aedis."

"You can have her," Glenn said, nervously tugging at his chin. "I don't like this place or the people in it. The sooner we get out, the better."

"If we *can* get out."

"Maybe Aedis will tell you how. God, I'm sleepy. That drink was doped."

It might have been, but I doubted it. We were still fagged out. It wasn't long before we were asleep. . . .

I was aroused by a light hand on my brow. I looked up to see Aedis kneeling beside me. She held a finger to her lips, nodded toward Glenn, and beckoned me to the door. I got up quietly, conscious of a queer, heightening excitement.

She led me up a stairway to the roof of a tower, where cushions were heaped. A gray-skinned being like a man stood

there waiting. Aedis spoke a word or two, and the creature hurried off.

"Your companion sleeps," she said, relaxing on the cushions. "That is well. He need not intrude. Sit beside me, and we will talk. Of my world and yours, and certain mysteries that should be made clear to you."

Beneath us the rolling, forested country stretched away into misty horizons. In one direction great cliffs towered; I could make out the gulf, and a thin band that was the bridge spanning it.

"First, Sean O'Mara, first we must drink together. Here is the Ghar with wine."

The gray-skinned being had returned, bearing an ewer and cups. He poured honey-colored liquor. I felt my spine crawl as I looked at him—it.

"The Ghar? What manner of creature is this—Ghar?"

Aedis sipped the wine, leaning back amid the cushions. Her unbound hair lay like clouds of midnight about her.

"A slave, a servant. They were made."
"Made?"

"Aye. For a long time we have known how to mold living flesh to our needs. The—the basic stuff of flesh—"

"Protoplasm?" Aedis did not know the word. I tried to explain.

"Yes, that is it. We shape the flesh as it grows. We know the mysteries of life—and *have* known them since the days of Lleu-Atlan."

"Where was that? And When?"

She shrugged. "Oh, very long ago. It is written in the records. Our forefathers came from Lleu-Atlan, in your own world. It was an island continent in a sea—"

Atlantis, I thought. The Hesperides, the Isles of the Blessed, far westward from the Irish cliffs. Atlantis!

"It was long ago—that I know. But we ruled then. We were very great and very wise. You see—" She hesitated. "I do not know if I can explain this—but

there are two kinds of men. The Dojin—who are only a little better than the Ghar—and the people of my race, like Lar. Your companion is a Dojin."

Resentment stirred within me. "Glenn probably has a better mind than I have."

Aedis laughed at that, very sweetly. "He is Dojin. And so were all the men of Earth, once on a time. Then there were mutations. Yes. A new race sprang into being. Giants—but sleeping giants."

I remembered Irish legends of the Great Ones who slept in the hills . . . the Tuatha Dé.

A EDIS went on. "These men had in them certain powers. But these powers were latent, like a sword in its sheath. Now in Lleu-Atlan was a sacred cavern where a god dwelt, so the legend went. In truth there was no god. There was only a force of nature for which I have no name. Lar spoke of the storm in the Cleft. You will see that storm, stand in it, and it is the same power that once burst forth in Lleu-Atlan. Power that unlocked the gate and drew the sword of life from its sheath!"

What truth lay behind the tale of Excalibur, the sheathed sword that, drawn from the anvil, gave light to the world?

"These men, these sleeping giants, found the power. They stood in the storm. And they came forth gods indeed. Like Lar, like me, like all our race. Time passed. The Dojin, the weak ones, died out, to be replaced by us. In time all the world was peopled by us, and Lleu-Atlan was the greatest empire that had ever existed. Until—well, the dream ended. Something happened without precedent. A Dojin was born to one of our race.

"A Dojin. As though a woman should give birth to an ape. That was the beginning. Others were born. . . .

"Our wise men sought the reason, but it is forgotten now. There is a story that the Earth passed through a cloud in space,

a barrier that blocked certain necessary rays. And darkness and cold came to the world that Lleu-Atlan had once ruled."

The ice age? Cosmic rays? But—

"And so we fled. A gateway was opened to Dyan, and in Dyan our race could live in peace. Here exist those rays which allow us to remain as we are. Here in Dyan our children are as their sires and dams, not deformed Dojin. Yet even here it is necessary that we stand in the Cleft's storm as often as the storm breaks forth. It does that regularly, but not often—no! It is due soon now."

"Much of that I do not understand," I said. "But tell me this—where is Dylan?"

"We have never known," Aedis said quietly. "There is no way. The wise men, long ago, opened a gateway and searched for a land where we could be safe. They found Dylan. But they did not know whether Dylan is in a different space or a different time—or in an unknowable place."

"What lies beyond there?" I pointed to the horizon.

"The mists thicken eventually—we do not know. Far as we may travel, there is always land and mist beyond. But it does not matter. The wise men said this: On Earth our race would die out. The Dojin would rule again, until the planet had passed through the cloud in space. After that, evolution would begin once more. Not at once, no; the road is long and steep. But eventually the cycle would repeat itself, and one of our race would be born to a Dojin, as had happened in the past. That would be the beginning. Until at last, Earth would once more be peopled with men and women like us. . . .

"So, when we had passed through the gateway to Dyan, we left a sign. Our wise men made the gateway half alive. It sent out a message—a summons. A

message that no Dojin could hear. But if one of our race heard, he would come, and pass through the gateway to Dyan. That was necessary, for our people were scattered all over the Earth. We could not find them all. The gateway was made, and sent out its call, and soon our race came trickling in, two by two, family by family, tribe by tribe. It took long, but finally no more came. Earth held only the Dojin. And we—we were here, in Dyan!"

"The gateway—a globe? A dull metal globe that shone with lightnings?"

"Yes. It exists in two worlds, Earth and Dyan. Those who enter the temple are taken across space to the other world."

"Then we can get back?"

She nodded. "Yes. You will go back with us."

I stared at her.

"This is not our world," Aedis said. "We are Earth-born, and belong there. Always there have been two guardians placed here, ready to welcome those who might hear the summons and come to Dyan. We knew that, some day, our race would live again on Earth. So Lar and I dwell here, for that purpose and another."

"What?"

Her face darkened. "We had thought that perhaps, eventually, enemies might come through the gateway. Powerful enemies. Now we are strong indeed, but there are stronger beings—perhaps. If ever such an enemy should come to Dyan, the bridge would be destroyed."

"Couldn't it be built again?" I asked.

"No. From that gorge comes a breath that destroys. It blasts solid matter into nothingness. A rock, flung across the abyss, will melt in midair."

"What about the bridge?"

"It was here when we came. A civilized race already held Dyan. They had built the bridge—how, no one knows now."

I FELT my throat go dry. "What happened to that race, Aedis?"

She laughed at me mockingly. "Are we demons, then? Do you think we ate them alive? We are not cruel, Sean O'Mara. We dwelt here peaceably with that race—we allotted them reservations where they could do as they chose—and, after a while, they died."

"Their children?"

"There were none. We saw to that. We are not killers—but continuance of that race was unnecessary."

"And you—plan on invading Earth?"

"Invasion? We plan to *return*. We are not ruthless. You are the first mutation of the old blood to appear. Well, we will hasten that process. Those who bear in them the seeds of us, will survive. The others, who would give birth to nothing but Dojin—will not give birth. That is all."

"The Dojin have weapons," I said grimly.

"You do not yet know our power, Sean O'Mara. You will learn. You will be one of us."

"This storm in the Cleft—you need that periodically?"

"Yes. Else we lose our power."

"You won't find it on Earth," I said. "That cavern in Lleu-Atlan—it's been under the ocean for thousands of years. Lleu-Atlan is forgotten."

"We can find it again," she said serenely. "Or, if not, we can pass through the gateway to stand in the storm. You do not know what we are capable of doing. You saw Lar crush the stone?"

"Mere physical strength."

"More than that. We are strong, yes, and we move fast as racing water when we choose. But our minds—Sean O'Mara, if that Dojin companion of yours saw Lleu-Dyan, he would be struck blind! Our science is based on more than the five senses of the Dojin. We are—gods!"

And I believed her. Some hint of the

truth came to me then. I questioned Aedis.

I was right. Endocrinology was the root of the secret. I made a note to ask Glenn later. He was, I remembered, studying medicine.

"You must stand in the storm before your powers will be unleashed," Aedis said. "They are latent as yet. The sword rests in its sheath. But when you have become like us—you will be changed! Changed indeed!"

She looked at me thoughtfully. "I think I shall show you a little. Thus—" Aedis gestured. A Ghar—I could not tell them apart—came to stand before us on its stumpy feet, the four arms dangling, the blank eyes glazed.

"Will it to die," Aedis said.

"Eh? I'm no murderer, even if—"

"But these things are scarcely alive. They have no consciousness of self. We make them as we need them, to obey. But since you will not—"

Aedis lifted her hand. The Ghar seemed to shiver and shrink into itself. It grew smaller, losing all semblance of humanity. Within a few seconds, only a pulpy, shapeless lump of flesh lay there at our feet.

"It can be used again," Aedis told me. "Shaped into new forms. Now it must be cast into the reservoir. I will show you our crucible, beneath the castle."

As she turned, a strand of her dark hair blew against my cheek. I caught my breath, my throat suddenly tight and dry. Aedis stood motionless.

She swung back to face me, slowly. Her eyes met mine. They were aflame with little points of light, as if the power that had destroyed the Ghar still lingered within her.

"After you have faced the storm in the Cleft—" she said. "I have guarded the gateway for a long time, Sean O'Mara. Even Lar grows stale to me. In Dyan men have not the—"

"What?"

"I do not know. Something about you, Sean O'Mara, makes you unlike the men of Dyan. When you have become one of us, you will be very great. And I think you have searched for me, man of the old blood."

"I searched for you," I said hoarsely. "Without knowing it."

"Your heritage burned within you. Never among the Dojin could you find that which you sought. But now you are among your people. I am of your blood."

Her lips were bitter-sweet and aflame with madness. Her body, slim as a sword, yielded to my embrace. I had known women before—yes. But never a goddess!

Aedis! Aedis of Dyan! I would we had died together then, when our lips first met!

And—

"Sorry, Sean," Glenn's voice said quietly. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

HE WAS standing at the head of the staircase that led down into the tower, his face white, a curious look of abhorrence stamped on it.

Aedis tore herself from my arms, whirled toward Glenn. She cried, "Dojin! I shall slay you now—"

Glenn's glance didn't waver. "I don't know what she's saying, but she's bad medicine, Sean, in case you don't know it. She isn't at all human. I think she's a devil—but it's your own business."

"Right," I said. But I gripped Aedis's wrist and turned her away from Glenn.

"Let me go. Your power is still latent, remember. I can slay you if I choose."

"Can you?"

Her eyes dropped. "Well, I shall not try. But that Dojin—I cannot endure the creatures. They are less than human."

"Glenn is my friend."

"You say that now. After you have faced the storm. . . . I had promised to show you the crucible. Come."

She started down the staircase. I

gripped Glenn's elbow and urged him along. Aedis sent up an angry, flashing glance.

"Not the Dojin."

"He goes where I go," I said.



She did not answer that, but continued her descent. We followed. I gave Glenn a sidelong glance.

"Well?"

"None of my business," he mumbled. "Only—can't you see that she's—different? Like Lar? They both give me the shivers."

"I don't feel it."

"No. You're like them, somehow, but not—horrible."

What did Glenn see about Aedis and Lar that I could not? Did he feel toward them as an animal felt toward man? A Dojin—

Hell! Endocrines couldn't make all that difference. Glenn was jittery, that was all. Yet I sensed that Aedis looked on Glenn as she might have looked on a snake, and she resented my protecting him against her anger.

We went down and down, beneath the castle. Aedis showed us the crucible, as she had promised. Glenn could not bear it, and I felt sick qualms, though I managed to stick it out. The reservoir was the worst—a great basin filled with fleshy, palpitating, grayish stuff like protoplasm. Out of this the Ghar were molded—in any shape desired. Molded by the power of thought alone.

It was horrible.

I stood motionless, staring at that hideous reservoir. The gray stuff pulsed faintly beneath my gaze.

It was like clay. Living clay. To be molded—

From my mind a—something—reached out questingly. I felt Aedis's eyes on me. She had not spoken, but she was urging me to do—

To do what?

In the center of the reservoir a lump of protoplasm heaved itself up. It took shape—the shape of a man, crude, unformed but unmistakable. I stepped forward, my hand instinctively lifting in a gesture of command as the thing shaped itself in obedience to my thought.

"Yes! Yes!" Aedis whispered. "That is it! Force the flesh to bind itself to form!"

The grotesque caricature of a man heaved itself up, mouth open in a soundless shriek.

Like a damned soul in hell!

Hard hands gripped my shoulders, swung me around. Glenn's horrified face was before me. He recoiled.

To me he looked no more human than the thing in the reservoir. But his voice pierced through the mists that fogged my brain.

"Sean! For God's sake, what are you doing?"

And the cry of Aedis—triumphant as a trumpet blast.

"You have the power! You are one of us—you have the power!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Destiny to Shatter

NOW I must be brief. There were three of us in the castle, aside from the inhuman Ghar, and I judge that by Earthly standards about a fortnight passed before the affair reached its tragic climax. During those two weeks, unmarked by sun or calendar, much happened. But no superficial eye could have guessed that.

Two weeks with Aedis—

Aedis, goddess of Dyan. I tasted a rapture such as no man had ever known. Nor can I forget it until my body is dust, and even then, I think, the dust will remember.

I had come into my heritage—

Glenn hated her and feared her. Him she treated with casual contempt. He was an annoyance to her, but, because of me, she tolerated him—and that was all.

I told Glenn what I had learned. He was surprisingly credulous.

"Endocrinology's pretty mysterious, Sean. Medical science is just beginning to find out what makes the glands tick. The thyroid, the thalamus, the pineal—they're the gadgets that make us human. And when they go out of kilter our minds and bodies don't work right."

"Yeah? Then—"

"You know what a hypo of thiamin chloride will do—tone you up and get rid of toxins. And that's just B₁. Normally the ductless glands do the job of keeping the human organism functioning perfectly. It's entirely possible that they're capable of a lot more than we know. Aedis may be right—when the Earth entered that cloud in space, lack of radiation may have inhibited the secretions of certain vital glands. Those particular secretions may mean the difference between man and superman. Hell, nobody knows the function of the pineal. Apparently it hasn't got any, but maybe its function—" he hesitated—"means the difference between Aedis and me."

"I wish you'd try and get over these screwy feelings of yours," I said abruptly. "She's no monster. How would you like it if I felt that way about Paula?"

He turned away his head, his body suddenly tense. "She's human; I know where I'm at with Paula. Some day we'll get married and buy a house and raise kids. I'll be an M.D. She'll cook the things I like, and I'll get her the things she wants. We'll have fun together. Going to shows, hiking in the snow, swimming—normal, ordinary things. I wish to God I was back in—"

"Illinois?"

He grinned tightly. "Well, not yet. There's a little matter of a war to be finished first. Remember?"

"If Aedis's people come to Earth, they'll end the war."

"Sure. But how?"

"They're not killers."

"They kill the future," he said somberly. "Paula and I both want kids. That's part of marriage—our sort of marriage. Weeding out the—the Dojin and subjecting them to sterilization radiations—the devil with that!"

"The Earth was theirs once," I said.

"And they left it; took a powder. Our race has won the Earth now, Sean, and

fought damned hard to do it. If Aedis's people had stayed, stuck it out, they'd eventually have regained what they lost. Evolution means struggle. Sure, there are plenty of set-backs—but you can't simply step outside when there's trouble, and try to get back in stride after the trouble's passed. That's what these super-endocrines are trying to do. But the Earth is ours—for our race and our children."

I looked at him, feeling Aedis's kisses still hot on my lips. "Your race, Glenn."

"Yours, too."

"No—I'm finding that out."

Glenn grimaced. "You'll change your mind."

"The Dojin," I said deliberately, "are done. Washed up. They've had their chance and made a mess of it. They'll be allowed to die out. They deserve to. The people of Dyan are not evil and they have grown intellectually and morally as well as physically. Crime, war, slums, hatred, misery—that's what the Dojin have accomplished. None of that exists among what you call the super-endocrines."

"Just the same, Aedis gives me the creeps," Glenn said. "And you're beginning to affect me the same way."

I turned angrily toward the door. A hand fell on my shoulder.

"Hold on," Glenn said contritely. "I didn't mean that, you dope. You're still Sean O'Mara, in spite of that she-tiger. But, look, don't change. Please don't. You're coming back to Illinois with me, remember? After the scrap's over? Remember that turkey dressing?"

I laughed, pushing my fist against Glenn's jaw. "Okay, kid. I'll go back to your hick town with you—and cut you out with Paula."

He looked happier than I'd seen him look for days. But as I went out, I caught sight of a Ghar shuffling along the corridor, and suddenly my heart was very heavy. It was like being caught in a net

—fighting the inevitable, and knowing that struggle only prolonged the ultimate, changeless end.

For there was Aedis—and there was the blood within me, the blood that had come down from Lleu-Atlan, stirring and quickening now into lusty life. Already I had changed. The Earth, the Dojin! Not of my breed! Here in Dyan was my heritage, here were my people.

And here—Aedis!

I FOUND her on the tower. A taut, breathless excitement was in her manner.

"I would have sought you soon, Sean, had you not come. Look there!" She pointed into the distant haze.

"What? I see nothing."

"You are blind, but soon your eyes will be opened. No, you cannot see as far as I, yet, but I tell you this: Lar returns! And the people of Lleu-Dyan are behind him. They bear weapons and other things. For they march to the gateway. To the Earth their ancestors left long ago!"

"Yes," I said heavily. "I wish they had not come. I wish we could have gone on like this forever."

"It will not end. It will not end, for us, Sean."

"I think it will end," I said, not knowing why I spoke thus. "I think it will end in flame and death and much sorrow. We have known happiness for a little while, but all ends now."

She was in my arms, her mouth stopping mine. "You cannot read the future. Do not say such things! Even we of Dyan cannot brush aside the veil that hides tomorrow. Sean, you will forget this foolishness when you have faced the storm—and it comes now! Now!"

"Yes?"

"Look! Beyond the abyss, beyond the temple of the gateway—that light. See? The storm in the Cleft, that gives life and

power to the gods, begins once more. That which comes from the rock sends out its beacon. Once you stand in the storm, Sean, you will be as an unsheathed sword! All you sense but faintly now, will be as flaming madness in your veins—as it is in mine. The bonds of the flesh still hold you. Come, before Lar reaches the castle. We shall go to the Cleft and bathe ourselves in the power that makes the gods!"

Her high excitement caught me in its mounting tide. Laughing, I lifted her, kissed her lips, moved to the staircase. Then down it, to the courtyard—

Glenn stood there waiting.

"What now?" he asked sardonically. Aedis flashed him a contemptuous glance.

"Sean is done with you," she said. "When you see him next, he will no longer bear the taint of the Dojin."

Glenn licked his lips. "Are you going to—"

"Yes," I said.

He hesitated. "All right. I'm coming along. Just in case."

"What does he say?" Aedis murmured. "He cannot come."

"Where I go, he goes," I told her, prompted, perhaps, by the sick, hurt look in Glenn's eyes. I felt somehow that I was betraying him. But that was folly—stupid folly!

Aedis shrugged. We moved toward the open gate, through it, and started along the path that led to the range of low hills. Glenn thrust something into my hand.

"Hadn't time to get the guns," he said. "I grabbed Mary Lou, though. Thought she might come in handy."

"You're crazy."

"Sean. Do me a favor—"

To please him, I buckled the wicked machetelike sword to my belt. Not that I'd need it. After I had faced the storm in the Cleft, I would have powers that

needed no weapon of iron or steel.

From the top of the ridge, looking back, I could make out a great horde of marching men—women too, no doubt—half hidden by the mist. They were still far away. It was impossible to distinguish Lar at this distance.

Aedis's excitement grew. She led the way, racing toward the bridge that spanned the abyss. We followed. I caught something of her exhilaration, sensing the incredible thing that lay hidden before us.

We crossed the black span. The air shook around us with deadly radiation.

We skirted the knoll where the gateway waited—the half-living spherical machine that had brought us to Dyan.

The flame-colored cliffs hemmed us in. We went toward their narrowest point, where a gorge split the walls—stone ramparts of flame.

"The Cleft," Aedis whispered. "Now—"

The narrow canyon twisted sharply. It widened. The walls were perhaps fifty feet apart for a space of a hundred yards. Beyond that, the gorge widened once more, and I caught a glimpse of forest—trees bearing golden fruit, and green foliage.

"Here," Aedis said, her voice shaking.

That hundred-yard stretch was bare of soil, uncarpeted by moss. Like the crags that walled it, it was of flame-colored rock.

"It comes. It comes. The storm that gives life. It comes!"

I heard a faint whispering, dim and far away. It grew louder. It mounted to a deep, powerful roaring—a wordless bellow that shouted like the drums of all the gods.

Higher it rose—and louder. Louder still! We were shaken with the clamor of its fury.

From the wall of rock burst—the storm!
That which comes from the rock!

SHAKING the crags with its tumult, the torrent poured out, spanning the gorge, a wall of shaking, pallid flames that barred our path. It was like a river, I thought. It gushed from the rock face, drove across the Cleft, and was swallowed up by the further rampart.

But it was no river—I realized that. It was like a snowstorm. Now I could make out the myriad individual particles that made up the torrent. They were shaped like snowflakes, but in a hundred, a thousand variations. They sparkled with star-points of light.

They *were* light.

They were—*life!*

"Now!" Aedis's cry rose about the beating thunder. She drew me toward the swirling, flashing madness.

Instinctively I drew back. Aedis gave me a quick glance, turned, and gripped Glenn's hand. The intoxication of that incredible storm of energy beat like surging tides in our veins. I saw Glenn take a step forward—

"Aedis!"

"He, too!" she shrieked. Her free hand found mine. Together, the three of us went into the heart of that tremendous fury.

Momentarily I was blind. Then I saw again, heard the thunder trumpets bellowing like crashing worlds. Against my body the sparkling flakes were driven, as by gusting winds.

Yet I felt no wind.

Beside me, Aedis and Glenn. The star-points drove against them, melting into their flesh as they melted into the rock wall behind us. I felt cold fires eat into the center of my being.

Freeing! Unleashing!

Unsheathing the sword! Giving me back my lost heritage!

And—I was as a god. . . .

Through the driving, flaming veils I saw Aedis, laughing, her eyes brighter

than the stars' glints, her hair floating in the torrent. Beyond her, Glenn—

Glenn—his face strained with agony.

His eyes accusing, terror in their depths. His body shrinking and shriveling as I watched. Glenn—dying there. Dying!

I lurched toward him, shouting uselessly amid the roaring. As though at a signal, the storm died, the thunder faded to a faint murmuring. A few last flakes of light drifted toward the rock and were absorbed. The whispering died to utter silence.

Glenn lay at my feet, dying.

I stared at Aedis. She was still drunk-en with the power that had surged through her. She looked like a goddess indeed.

Her voice rang loud in the stillness.

"He hated me, Sean. And he was a Dojin—"

I said, "You knew it would kill him."

She did not answer. I dropped to my knees beside Glenn. His face was ravaged and shrunken. But he looked up at me, trying to smile.

"You're a god now," he said, very faintly. "You won't be wanting that turkey dinner—I guess—"

I thought he had gone. But the fading life flared up once more.

"Don't let them scare Paula," he said. "She's just a kid in a—" he gasped for breath, and my middle went cold—"a hick town—not used to gods, so—"

That was all.

I stood up. Yes—I was a god. A super-endocrine. I possessed powers such as no man outside of Dyan had ever possessed for a million years.

Now we are come to our kingdom. . . .

"Sean," Aedis said.

I looked at her.

"Sorry, Aedis," I said slowly. "It's ended. The gateway's going to be smashed."

"You cannot. That is impossible. Sean! You—love me!"

"Yeah," I said. "I love you."

I turned around and went back toward the abyss. I moved fast. I moved faster than any normal human could have moved, because I was superhuman now. I was a god—*yeah!*

They had begun to cross the black bridge that spanned the gulf. Lar was in the lead.

In single file the others followed him—men like gods.

I raised my hand. "Lar, the gateway is closed. Go back."

He stopped, staring. "Sean O'Mara. You have been in the storm."

"Go back."

He said thoughtfully, "You are not mad—no. But you must realize that we will not retrace our steps—not now. We go to Earth, to regain our heritage."

"You lost your heritage a million years ago, when you came to Dyan. Earth belongs to another race now; a race that will some day be as great as you of Dyan."

He walked forward, making a gesture that held the others back. "Sean O'Mara, you cannot stop us."

I took out the sword at my belt. "All right."

Cat-footed, agile, graceful as a tiger, he approached. The scarlet hammer was in his hand. Huge as it was, he wielded it easily.

But he did not use it—not then. He tried that other power he had—the weapon of his eyes. An hour ago, that glance would have destroyed me. As it was, I matched him stare for stare—and he nodded at last.

Then he sprang.

He moved faster than I would have imagined possible. But I had faced the storm in the Cleft. I, too, was fast.

The hammer screamed past my head, my sword whined shrilly by Lar's breast.

And, after that, we fought—like gods. Or, perhaps, like devils. In the end, I killed him. . . .

APANG of sorrow touched me as he fell, his proud, leonine face ruined by my weapon, his blood spurting on the black bridge. He carried my sword with him, in his heart. But Lar's hammer clashed down, and I caught it quickly, ready to fight again.

From the crimson hammer, white lightning flew—driving the black substance of the bridge as chalk crumbles to a blow.

Something Aedis had said came back to me. "We are the guardians. If an enemy should come to Dyan, the bridge across the abyss would be destroyed."

Lar—guardian. Lar—who could break the span when the need came. Break it with the great hammer I held now!

I sprang back and brought the weapon crashing down on the bridge. A cry went up from the people of Dyan, across the gulf. Men came running toward me, weapons bared, perilously risking that narrow path. One fell and went plunging down. He made no outcry.

I wielded the hammer—lightning blazed from it. The booming thunder of my work went echoing up to the hazy blueness above. No man could have broken that span, even with the hammer of Lar. But I had faced the storm in the Cleft.

The bridge swayed. It broke away. Abruptly it wrenched itself free and, torn from its supports, swung down.

And from the people of Dyan, isolated forever beyond the gulf, rose a wailing, desolate cry, the mourning of the damned. It was not only the gateway to Earth that was closed to them now.

They were barred from the radiant torrent in the Cleft that kept them gods. Without it, they would lose their power—as the Aesir grew old and weak when the golden apples of Iduna were stolen from Asgard.

Gods no more!

I turned. At the base of the knoll where the temple stood, Aedis was visible, watching me. I walked toward her.

Past her. I went into the Cleft and came out carrying Glenn's body.

I climbed the slope. At the door of the temple, Aedis was waiting for me.

"Sean—" she said. "Sean!"

I did not answer.

"Sean, if you go back to Earth you will lose your power after a while. There is no Cleft in your world now. It is sunk with Lleu-Atlan."

I waited.

"You have destroyed your people, Sean. But—we are left. We can dwell here, in the forest beyond the Cleft. We—"

I looked at her, and, after a moment, she stepped aside.

I went into the temple. Glenn was heavy in my arms. The leaden sphere seemed to tremble as I waited.

Then the pulse of lightning beat out from it. I heard Aedis cry my name—and heard no more. . . .

When I awoke, I was no longer in Dyan. Outside the temple cavern lay the ruined city of an uncharted islet in the South Pacific. And, on the beach, the plane waited. The sun blazed in a cloudless blue sky. The radio was working.

I flew back to the base with Glenn's body. But I told no one the truth of what had happened. There were few questions, and those were easily answered.

It was dreamlike, after a while.

So—the fight goes on. And I, a dead man who was once a god, battle in the skies, refusing to remember a horror and a loveliness in a world whose name I never knew, hidden somewhere in a space and time where blue light filtered down eternally from a changeless sky, and mists hid the horizon. It is forgotten.

But—Aedis of Dyan! Do not forget me, goddess of a lost world. Some day you will draw me back to you, for, as long as I live, I shall remember the bitter-sweetness of your kisses—kisses that meant betrayal! If I live, Aedis—if I live—I will come back to you!

TAA THE TERRIBLE

The great pale men from Earth brought horror to peaceful Arania—enslaving its people, looting it of its beauty. But the slave-people, patient though they were, had one great power on their side—the power of Taa the Terrible, who could destroy a world—and did!

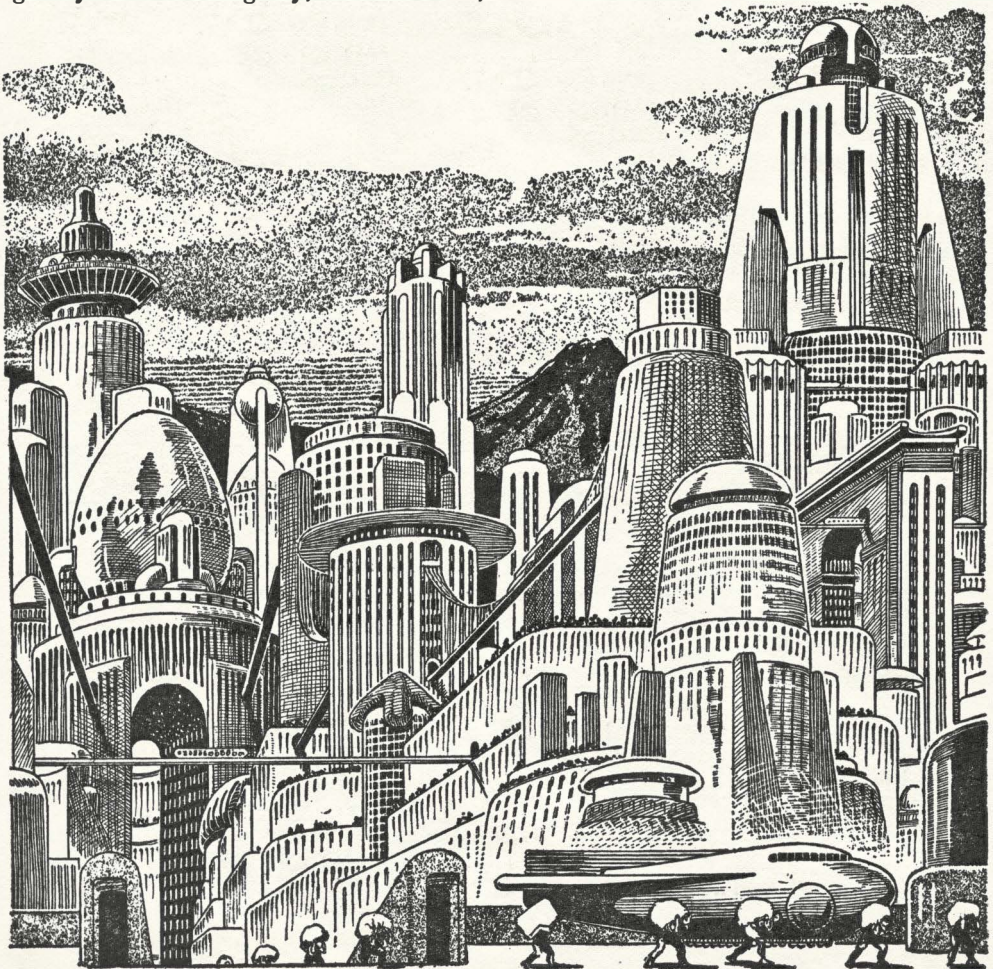
CHAPTER ONE

Arania—World of the Tyrant!

ALL the way down from the spaceport Larry Frazer kept telling himself that he had picked exactly the right planet for his vacation. For Arania was the most Earthlike of any in the galaxy and its one big city, Nova Atlantis,

was a riot of sub-tropical color and vivid contrasts. He reclined easily in the luxurious litter provided by the hotel where he had booked accommodations, and looked about him while the eight sturdy natives jogged doggedly along bearing him to his destination.

The road wound through groves of



By
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brightly flowering trees, and here and there he could glimpse a villa half hidden in the greenery. The houses, he observed, were all of rose or jade green or creamy alabaster; everywhere his glance roamed it fell upon new beauties. The only jarring contrast was the presence of the native slaves — beetle-browed, brutish-looking men of a curious olive-green complexion. It was true they wore gorgeous liveries, but Frazer quickly found it made him uncomfortable to look into faces. There was a dull apathy there, despairing resignation that somehow went to the heart.

The scene changed. The houses were closer together, and grew ever closer until they ran into solid blocks. He was in the city now, and the stream of traffic about him became ever thicker. Something new caught his eye, something new and different. A richly lacquered palanquin borne by native lackeys in pale blue silks swung out of a court and began bobbing alongside him, now forging ahead, now dropping to the rear according to the pressure of the traffic. It was what was in the palanquin that snapped Frazer out of his languorous day dreams. The passenger in the companion vehicle was a girl of rare beauty. He was not at all sure whether she had smiled at him or at something beyond him, but of one thing he was very sure—before his stay on Arania was over he would know.

SUDDENLY there was a commotion ahead, and the hurrying rows of litters began to slow. Then, abruptly, without an order from him or any word of explanation, Frazer's bearers set his litter down, crawled out of their harness and fell face down on the pavement, bumping their foreheads against the stones and uttering curious little cries. At the same moment the girl's palanquin was grounded beside him, to the obvious annoyance of its occupant.

Apparently few of the slave-borne aris-

tocrats liked the behavior of their bearers, for a chorus of growls went up all around. Frazer was curious as to what it was all about, but when he saw the apparent cause of it he was more curious still. For it was not a brass-helmeted gendarme who had halted the traffic, or some passing nobleman of high rank. It was a gaunt and incredibly old patriarch hobbling across the road.

Except for a loincloth of twisted grasses and the white beard and silvery mane that covered his shoulders he wore nothing. The astounding feature of the spectacle was that the man took no notice whatever of the homage being rendered by the kowtowing slaves, or of the growls and epithets hurled at him by the aristocrats . . . yet he was a native!

"Who is the old galoot in the Father Time rig?" asked Frazer, leaning out and addressing the girl who had been brought to a stop beside him. "And why all the doings in his honor?"

She looked him full in the face for a moment, and then her quick expression of indignant annoyance softened. "Oh, you are a stranger. The man is Ghandar, chief holy man of these superstitious—"

Her words were cut off by an interruption from the rear. A man sprang from another palanquin stopped just behind them and dashed forward angrily. He wore the gold helmet of the highest rank and the scarlet cape of a magistrate. He flourished a quirt in his hand.

"What is this?" he cried harshly, pushing ahead and laying about him with his whip as he passed the grovelling bearers. Then he saw the man Ghandar, who had almost crossed the road and in another second or so would be gone. The angry nobleman gave a howl of rage and started after him, but as he did even the impatient aristocrats gasped anxiously. Apparently the high priest of the Aranians was untouchable—even by the gold-helmeted overlords.

"Oh, don't, Hugh! Please don't," screamed the girl of the palanquin, standing up and wringing her hands. "Remember your promise—"

THE man stopped and turned, and Frazer saw that he wore a sapphire in his helmet and carried a dagger at his belt, prerogatives of only the loftiest few. The fellow's dark, thin face was contorted with anger, but he seemed to sense the tension about him and abandoned his intention of flogging the holy man. Instead he marched straight back to the litters, whose bearers were now getting to their feet and back into their harness. He gave the girl only a brief, venomous glance and muttered, "I'll talk to you later in private, Nelda. Who is this man?" He jerked his shoulder contemptuously toward Frazer. Nelda shrugged without answering. The nobleman whirled on Frazer.

"Who are you?" he demanded, savagely, glaring down at him with furious eyes.

"Larry Frazer, if it's any of your business. I don't think it is." Frazer's own steely gaze was returning the hostile stare with compound interest. He did not like the evil face above him, or the snarl into which the thick lips were curled. For two cents—

"Everything that happens on Arenia is my business," snapped the gold hat. "Especially the conduct of fools. On Arania one does not accost ladies of rank on the highways. Do I make myself clear?"

"When Larry Frazer addresses a lady and she answers him politely," said Frazer, with exasperating calmness, "that is their affair. Do I make myself clear?"

"You impudent—" began the man called Hugh, cutting down viciously with his quirt. But the whip never landed. Frazer's idle right arm lashed upward like a battering ram, and his hard fist caught the other on the chin. The gold helmet

flew off and clattered to the ground, while its wearer stumbled backward groping dazedly at his battered jaw.

"I am afraid, Mr. Frazer," said the girl Nelda, her violet eyes wide with alarm, "that you have made a deadly enemy. Hugh Zero is a powerful man."

"Oh, I've survived other deadly enemies," grinned Frazer, examining his scuffed knuckles. "I'll manage."

"Arania," she remarked, "is run differently from most planets."

Traffic was moving again, and the discomfited Hugh Zero had vanished. Slaves were picking up their litters and starting forward, while the passengers stared at the serene Frazer with expressions of respect. The pampered son of the viceroy was no favorite on Arania, but it was unthinkable that anyone would be so rash as to strike him in a public place. Some of the departing aristocrats shook their heads soberly. Trouble was bound to ensue.

The palanquin moved away and Frazer caught sight of a tiny flutter of a farewell wave of the hand as it went around a corner.

By the time Frazer's litter got there, it was out of sight. So he lay back and let his trudging slaves take him on to his hotel.

THE week that followed was blissfully peaceful. Though Frazer noted that many of his fellow guests at the resort on the flank of Holy Hill took care to avoid him, he heard no more of the incident. He learned only that Zero was an ardent wooer of Nelda Sutherland—so far without encouragement.

But Frazer went about his sightseeing with a light heart. After all, wasn't he himself a wearer of the silver helmet of the first patrician order, embellished with a ruby? Being an Earthly rank, it was hardly inferior to the gold of a provincial.

He was surprised to find that Arania's

surface was mostly water. Only the large island on which Nova Atlantis stood was habitable for, though many chains of volcanic peaks rose above the sea, those mountains were in almost continuous eruption. Men dared not approach within hundreds of miles of them, and the tidal waves they set up made navigation a great hazard.

But the land about Atlantis was a paradise, though legend had it that four prior Earth colonies had been wiped out by cataclysms so vast that there had been no survivors to tell the tale. The natives, who somehow seemed to live through them, all said mysteriously that the invaders had been extinguished by the act of the fiery god Taa, their protector. Taa would come again, they threatened, and obliterate the newest oppressors.

Frazer listened to these fairy tales with mild interest. He had come to Arania for rest, not to delve into mythology. The natives could believe in their dread god Taa for all he cared.

He could hear nightly the throb of the great drums beating in the swamps beyond the mountain and occasionally saw the glow of fires they built upon their altars, but it was not a thing that concerned him in any way. He had sojourned on many far planets and had seen all manner of queer religions. Whatever the cult of Taa signified, it was the affair of the Aranians, not his.

Holy Hill, he learned a little later, was a mocking title bestowed by Earthmen upon the natives' sacred mountain. In earlier time it had been the abode of high priests, and only the devout were permitted to ascend it to witness the ceremonies periodically held in the great temple on the summit. But the vandal Earth colonists had changed all that. The forested slopes of the beautiful mountain, overlooking as they did the spires and domes of Nova Atlantis on the plain, were tempting sites for country villas, gambling

houses and other resorts of pleasure such as the one Frazer lived in. The newcomers invaded the mountain, an act of vile desecration in the natives' eyes, and built their palaces.

In time they found the chantings of the priests and the pounding of the drums annoying, and forbade the further use of the temple above. Now it stood, a crumbling ruin of antiquity, its once perpetual altar fires dead, moss growing upon its sacred stones.

ONE day Frazer climbed to the summit and looked at it. The structure was not unlike a *teocalli* of the Aztecs, except that it was of conical shape instead of being pyramidal. He worked his way up the flights of ancient steps until he came to the sacrificial platform at the top. It was acres big, but the scale was dwarfed, for in the middle of it was a colossal figure of Taa, the God of Fire, of Creation, Destruction and Vengeance. In common with many images of pagan gods, this one was hideous. It was seated, a demoniac figure of greenish stone, but its diabolical eyes were closed and the enormous bat wings folded behind its shoulders. The hands lay idly in the lap, but the lax curved talons held a monstrous brazen offering bowl. Frazer stood gazing on the terrible idol for many long minutes, and was hardly aware that the sun was down and the daylight fading into dusk. And then an almost imperceptible swish behind him told him he was not alone. He wheeled—and found himself facing the man Ghandar, high priest of Taa.

"You have come to learn—not scoff like the others," said the priest in measured tones. Frazer saw then that the ancient could be erect and majestic in bearing when he chose. This expression was that of a man accustomed to command. "Ghandar knows all things. Though his back was to it, he knows that the wretch Hugh Zero would have laid his whip upon

him. He knows, too, that you smote him as he deserved. Ghandar does not forget. Ghandar will help."

"I fear you did not get the story altogether straight," laughed Frazer. "I walloped Zero for purely personal reasons. As for needing help, I thank you, but I can handle that whelp."

Ghandar shook his head gravely. The stars were out then, and starlight on Arania is as brilliant as full moonlight on Earth.

"You do not know the tremendous peril you are in. It is twofold. Tomorrow workmen come to demolish this place—the mighty temple of Taa. It is the last possible defilement, and the most intolerable. Taa sleeps now, but he will awake, and when Taa awakes he is terrible. After he has thundered, there will be no more Atlantis or the accursed breed of Earthmen who have ground us down, spat upon us, and made us miserable slaves. And only Taa, through me, can save you."

"With all due respect to Taa," said Frazer, "his fight is not my fight. It may be as you say, but in a few more days I go back to Earth—"

"No!" thundered Ghandar. "You intend to, but you will not. At this very hour soldiers are on the way to your quarters to pick you up. They hope you will resist, for then they can kill you at once. Failing that, they will do so on the trip back to prison, saying that you tried to escape. It is the viceroy's order. Not ten minutes ago I was informed of it."

"How do you know these things?" asked Frazer quickly. He had expected a reprimand for brawling in the streets, possibly, but it was a serious matter to put one of the silver badge under arrest.

"Ghandar knows everything. He sees and hears through the eyes and ears of every slave on this planet. This afternoon the elder Zero died. The son, Hugh, became viceroy. He is an impetuous, foolish youth, and full of blind hate. He hates

you, he hates me and my people, he hates even mighty Taa. His folly will bring his own destruction, and shortly. But his wickedness will bring yours first. Come, my son, and let my people hide you. Only in our hidden caverns can you be safe from the madman in power."

"Thanks, old man," said Frazer, marveling that a man of such obvious personal power should be so steeped in superstition that he actually believed the stuff he handed out to his people. "But I can't do it. A Frazer of the silver badge does not run away from things. Frazer's fight."

"You will run away within an hour," prophesied Ghandar solemnly. "There is another trying to save you, and that one will prevail."

Before Frazer could answer the holy man was gone, stepping into a shadow and vanishing without a sound. It was puzzling. Just what did all this talk about Taa mean, anyhow? Taa, of course, was a myth, but did the threat of his coming mean that a slave rebellion was imminent? Perhaps. Such things were often masked that way. Frazer turned away, putting the colossal stone idol behind him, and slowly descended the long stairs.

CHAPTER TWO

"Our Harvest Is—Madness!"

FRAZER paused at the foot of the staircase to drink in the night scene.

Across the valley to the north lay the shimmering bed of iridescent lights that was the city of Nova Atlantis. To the right and left lay the dark swamps where countless slaves toiled; below twinkled the lights of the many villas that dotted the flanks of Holy Hill. But above, the pure stars shone brilliantly.

Frazer sought the dark patch that would take him back to his room. He had gone but a few paces when suddenly he went tense as a cloaked figure darted out into

his path. It was a woman. She spoke.

"Larry! I came to warn you. I am Nelda, the girl who—"

"I remember," he said.

"Shh," she whispered. "Death waits for you down the hill. Come with me."

"But—"

She gripped him by the arms. "The soldiers are already in your apartment. Others are ambushed along the path. They will kill you—I know, for this morning I quarreled with Hugh. He taunted me with the details of what he planned to do with you. I hurried here—"

"But wait," he objected. "I don't like to do things this way. I'm not guilty of any crimes. Even if I were, there is no reason why you should go out on a limb to shield me."

She clutched him more tightly. "Larry Frazer, I have lived the empty, silly life of this degenerate planet too long. I am fed up on fops. I have seen Hugh lash them across the face time and time again when he was in one of his tantrums. Not one ever struck back; the worms cringe, or try to laugh it off. I never knew the meaning of the word *man*, Larry, until the other day. Now do you see?"

"I am beginning to," he said, slowly, drawing her to him. But she pushed him away.

"Not now," she cried, "they may get impatient and come on up. Quickly, follow me!"

She broke into a run and he followed. She led the way around the sprawling base of the temple to where a small sky-cycle was parked. Its lights were out, but she fumbled at the door and instantly had it open. Then he was inside and she was twiddling with the starter.

"Toss your silver helmet behind the seat," she ordered. "Put on the bronze one you find there, and the brown jacket of a plantation foreman. I am taking you to an island—it belongs to a friend of mine. Stay there—play the part of a

planter. I'll communicate with you later."

He complied silently. It was a new and incredible situation for him, and he was at a loss what to do. But he was content to let Fate run its course.

IT WAS but a moment until they were well clear of the sacred mountain and zooming out over a misty valley. As Frazer's eyes became better adjusted to the gloom, he could see that they were soaring over what looked to be a vast inland sea, ringed by tumultuous mountain ranges, studded with circular islands of uniform size and equal spacing.

On some of them could be seen the flickering fires of altars where natives clustered, exhorting their demoniac god. Frazer could make out faintly the throbbing boom of ceremonial drums. And then he knew his flight was drawing to its close, for Nelda was pointing the nose down toward one of the islets. In seconds more the machine grounded gently in the semi-dark, and she nodded to him to get out.

"You will find the foreman's hut over there," she said, pointing. "The slaves live in grass treehouses, but there are probably none here. This is one of the things you will have to watch; they steal away at nightfall to go to the orgies in their temples. Tomorrow your supervisor will come over to instruct you. Tell him nothing about it and follow his orders. Good-by."

She slammed the door and soared instantly up into the night. He stood there for a time, a little dazed by the swiftness of developments of the last hour.

It was almost incredible that he—Larry Frazer, well-to-do, well-connected, guilty of nothing more than a simple act of self-defense—should be standing ankle deep in the soft, yielding, damp soil of a dark island. And in the disguise of a common foreman—the lowest of all the ranks of freemen. He shook his head perplexedly. His vacation had turned out strangely.

He walked across the muddy field to the small grove that stood in the center of the island. The hut she indicated was white and stood out clearly in the starlight. As he neared it he saw the basket houses of the natives, clinging to the towering trees like cocoons to a bush. Rope ladders dangled from them, and from that he judged that her surmise was correct—the inhabitants had gone away.

He went on into his own small house and made a light. The place was plain and without any comforts, but all the essentials for solitary living were there. Food and the means of cooking it, water and a cot.

Frazer doused the light and lay down.

HE WAS up at dawn. The supervisor was already there, standing at the foot of his bed and looking at him. The man was tall and thin and burned by the sun to a rich walnut tan. He wore a sour, woe-begone expression that told clearly that he was a man who looked on the worst side of everything, and disliked what he saw.

"Where are your workers?" he demanded, skipping over the matter of mutual introductions.

"I don't know," said Frazer, quite truthfully. "There were none here when I arrived."

"That fellow Bjorks left before you got here, I suppose," growled the super. "It would be like him. Naturally they'd run away the moment they were left alone. They spent the night bumping their heads and caterwauling, no doubt, in one of the temples in the hills. Oh, they'll be back—they always come back. But they will have no life in them. They'll be fagged out and groggy. You'll have to drive them with the lash today."

There was a commotion outside, a sound of splashing and guttural voices. Both men went outside the hut. Scores of natives were climbing the edge of the

island, wet from their long swim, but the moment they saw the Earthmen they stopped their chatter, spread out and hastily went to work plucking the weeds that grew in clumps all over the isle.

"This harvest must be in within ten days," said the super, curtly. "Then you will prepare the island for another planting. I want results, not excuses."

He strode away, climbed into a battered old skycycle and was off. Frazer watched him climb a little way, then dive onto another of the islands to inspect it and give more orders. Frazer strolled over to where the constantly arriving natives were turning to at their work. He had only a nebulous idea of what his duties were to be, for Nelda had not told him, or the vinegar-faced supervisor. But it appeared to be something in the way of agriculture. He hoped to learn more about it from the miserable creatures he was supposed to drive.

By nightfall he was able to deduce some facts from his exploration of the islet. He understood then the reason for the uniformity of it with the others, and the mathematical exactness of their placing. They were artificial. They were rimmed by low retaining walls made of heavy vines woven about stakes driven into the lake bottom. The rich soil behind the basket-like barriers must have been dredged up from the waters beyond.

The permanent nucleus of the island was the central grove which housed the workers and was ringed by a garden sufficient to grow the stuffs which they ate. All else was given over to the money crop. He plucked a bundle of the weeds and sniffed them. Then he knew what they were—*lollem*, the curse of the universe, from whose juices and oils a multitude of insidious and deadly drugs could be brewed. On Earth those extracts were sometimes sold illegally at thousands of dollars the ounce. Small wonder the aristocrats of Arania bore themselves haughti-

ly! Their collective wealth must be enormous enough to buy themselves immunity for outrageous offenses.

Frazer would not have employed the wicked-looking lash that hung in his hut under any circumstances, but it turned out that there was no occasion for using it. The slaves worked steadily and without rest, going about their task with the same stolid apathy he had observed in the better treated domestic slaves of the city. When dark fell they had piled up an astonishing heap of the dirty weeds, neatly baled and ready for shipment to the refineries.

Frazer marveled at the smooth precision with which they went from one step to the next without a word of direction. He supposed that was because they had never done anything else.

The dour supervisor dropped in again three days later. He wanted to know how the crop was coming.

"It's in, ready to go," said Frazer, pointing to the mountain of smelly bales. The super grunted, exhibited neither pleasure nor displeasure, and then went off.

His parting words were, "Be ready to plant in two weeks!"

FRAZIER had no idea what that meant, but he asked no questions.

He was relying on the automatic behavior of the slaves. In the morning, he found out more about the growing of *lollen*. His gang had turned to at a new occupation. They were stripping the island of its topsoil and dumping it in the lake. They would scoop the dirt up in their hands and dump it into baskets. Then they would wade far out into the lake—which was hardly more than breast deep—and drop it there. On the way back they would come by another way, where they would dive repeatedly, bringing up handfuls of muck from the lake bottom to pack into their baskets. This they brought ashore

to use as replacement for the worn-out soil they had dumped. Apparently the lake waters restored the vital elements that the greedy *lollen* weeds sucked out of the ground.

Frazer watched the operation with steadily mounting disgust for Aranian agricultural methods. The bottom ooze stank to high heaven, and it was all that he could do to refrain from retching whenever the breeze wafted the smell of it his way. Indeed, the slaves themselves seemed not to have got used to it, for at times one or more of them would be seized with nausea and lie miserably for a time in the vile mud. Frazer saw that time was being lost, but uttered not a word, though he knew that a proper Aranian foreman would have driven the men back to work with his cruel lash. Not one of the glistening bodies toiling in the foul lake but was striped with the scars of old whippings.

Frazer noticed another thing about his gang. It appeared to have its own subforeman who gave directions so unobtrusively that it took Frazer several days to notice it being done. The man was a native, of course, and a slave. But on closer scrutiny Frazer saw that his face showed far more intelligence than the common run. His bearing, despite the sordid labor he did, was that of a free man—yet his back also bore the indelible marks of the whip. Frazer's mouth set in a grim line as he looked on the angry scars.

What fools these Aranian slave drivers are to treat willing men so, he thought, bitterly. If they let these workers alone they'd accomplish a lot more!

In that, however, Larry Frazer was not altogether correct. He didn't know that at midnight every night the quiet native strawboss met in whispered conference with a mysterious messenger who would emerge dripping from the water, talk briefly, then swim off again.

That visitor was the messenger of Ghandar, bringing instructions to the local men

to carry out faithfully Frazer's orders and to guard him well.

Frazer learned about that in the middle of the tenth night after his arrival—and then the silent sub-foreman told him of it in person. He scratched at the hut's door, and asked to come in. It was important—and with him was the messenger, still wet and glistening from his long swim and panting violently.

"I am the priest Prang Ben," said the slave-leader. "I was assigned by the holy Ghandar to be your guardian. He sends word that what he feared has happened—Zero has learned of your whereabouts and is on the way here to seize you!"

It was too late—

The hum of a descending skycycle was growing louder outside. It plumped down close to the hut, splashing the soft new island mud against the window of the house. Larry Frazer was outside at once. He saw that the stubby nose of the craft flaunted the insignia of the viceroy.

CHAPTER THREE

The Awakening of Taa

"NELDA!"
"Oh, Larry, I got here in time!"

The momentary, rapturous embrace came about as naturally as if they had known each other for years.

"I beat him to it," she explained breathlessly. "A house servant told me your supervisor sold you out. Hugh has gone mad, I think—in his fury at you and in his persecution of the natives. I ran to the palace. This car was parked at the door, waiting. I jumped in."

"Where will we go?" frowned Frazer. Tomorrow the air would be filled with police craft; there would be no safety anywhere. And now, he knew, Nelda would be hunted equally with him.

"I lead the way, master," said Prang

Ben, appearing suddenly at his elbow. "It is always safe in the caverns of Taa, not only from the accursed Earthmen who afflict us, but the great god himself. There is no other place to go, for Taa comes soon—and Taa is terrible. Men who hear him speak die; the sight of men who see him is seared; his touch is extinction. Come—I show."

"There must be something to that," said Nelda, softly, touching Larry on the arm. "The natives of my household have been saying those very words for days, and lately they have been stealing away. The natives are vanishing everywhere, but where they go to nobody knows."

"Very well," said Frazer. "Let's go."

A moment later they shot upward and over an adjacent island. A police car swooped past, then dipped in respectful salute. It evidently took it for granted the viceroy was in his car, bearing his prisoner away. At Prang Ben's direction, Nelda piloted them on a little farther, then abruptly changed the course. They flew past Holy Hill, but miles to the south, and on to the great barren range that formed the west barrier wall of the island. Harsh mountains, those, unclothed by forests and rising steeply from the barren plain. Their ocean faces were precipitous cliffs against which the turbulent sea forever beat. The luxury-loving aristocrats of Nova Atlantis seldom visited the region. The priest pointed out a flat area in a cleft between two peaks.

"Land there," he said. "It is close by the brink of the cliff overhanging the ocean. We three can tip this car over it so that when day comes there will be no trace of where we landed."

The work was quickly done. Then Prang Ben performed a peculiar ululation from the depths of his throat.

"Open," he commanded, "in the name of Taa, whose servant demands it!"

Frazer, who was staring at the flat granite mountain wall that faced him, was

amazed to see it appear to crack open. Then a square slab of stone swung inward, revealing a black hole. Prang Ben at once sprang into it, calling upon the others to follow. After they had passed, the door swung to without a sound. For an instant all was black as the tomb. Then dull red glowing lights came on, spots of evenly spaced ruddy lights to show the way.

They walked along thousands of feet of tunnel, hewn out of the living rock. The digging of it must have taken millions of hours of labor. They descended spiral ramps to great depths, until Frazer knew they must be well down in the bowels of the mountain. Then they came to a door in the side of the passage.

THE sight that met their gaze was startling. It was like looking into the maw of hell. For the doorway pierced the wall of a vast cavern—so vast that its farther walls or roof could not be seen. It was filled with fire and smoke. The three stood still just within the threshold until their eyes became accustomed to the smoky glare. Then they knew they were in the great secret temple that age-old rumor credited the natives with maintaining underground. Thousands of them lay prostrated on the floor, their faces down, but with their heads toward a giant figure of the devil-god Taa that towered near the far end of the hall.

Much of the flame came from rows of braziers ringing the worshipping multitude, but the most vivid light sprang from the massive offering bowl which the colossus held between his hands. That seemed to be filled with molten rock or metal, which leaped upward from time to time, filling the air with spouts of sparkling brilliance and causing reverberations that shook the cavern's massive walls. Frazer thought he could discern the triple cylinders of huge electrodes which furnished the intense heat, but the idol was far away and the intervening space too smoky for

him to be certain of that. But whatever priest of ancient days had rigged the temple had been a mechanical genius.

For though the idol appeared to be a duplicate of the one atop the sacred mountain—being depicted with closed eyes and folded wings—every time the cauldron boiled up and spattered its face with the flaming ejected matter, the statue's eyes would roll open and fix themselves greedily on the seething incandescent rock below, and its wings would outspread and flutter feverishly, as if in ecstasy.

Frazer was positive that the effect was achieved mechanically, for each successive movement was exactly like the last—like the ones of a walking doll. It was evident, though, that the natives did not share his skepticism. At every such demonstration, they would howl in unison.

A priest began to chant.

"Oh, great is Taa, the Maker and Destroyer, the Avenger who chastens the conqueror but spares his own. The time nears, O Taa. Prepare thy wrath; for the need of it is great and it must not be kept leashed longer. Now you sleep. Soon we sleep, too, the long sleep. Then must you awake, as often before in the past. For it is foretold that when Taa walks abroad in the land men must sleep or die; and that when Taa sleeps, man may awake and live. Rise, O Taa, and scourge our enemies!"

The coruscating fires died down and the bubbling cauldron subsided. The chanting ceased abruptly; the ceremony was at an end. The natives picked themselves up off the floor and trooped out through portals at the side. Prang Ben indicated to Frazer and Nelda that they were to follow, and led the way. Outside the great nave of the temple, roomy corridors ranged deep into the mountain. The throng was fast melting away through side doors that gave entrance to subsidiary caverns.

"Those are the fast freezing rooms," explained the priest. "My people now go

into the long sleep. We do that out of terror of Taa, for when he roams the land in wrath no thing that can feel, see or hear can survive. Only in these catacombs is it possible to bear his thunders and live. We call it the Sleep of Ten Thousand Years, though no one knows how long the time really is."

Farther on they came upon other natives trundling carts on which were stacked the bodies of those already "asleep". Frazer stopped one to examine the condition of the bodies upon it. The figures were inert and without perceptible heartbeat or pulse, nor did they breathe. They were cold to the touch, and it was clear that by some means their metabolic rate had been reduced to nothing. Then Frazer noticed that in the caves to the right and left similar bodies were being slung in hammock-like bags to be left dangling in long rows like so many bats.

"You, too, will join these," said Prang Ben, pointing. "There is no other way."

“YOU have erred, Prang Ben, in bringing these Earthmen into the mountain," said the high priest when the two were before him. Now he sat on a throne of sorts, and though he was still the emaciated patriarch of unguessable age, he looked most commanding in his robes of flame-colored silks. There was a gleam of anger in his eyes as he stared at Frazer and the girl.

"They would have been killed, Holiness," said Prang Ben.

Ghandar shrugged, "They must die in any event. Had you left them to that chance, they might perhaps have stolen a spaceship and escaped the planet. It is too late for that now. Already Taa stirs in his bed; in a few hours he will be awake. We cannot subject these to the Sleep like our own people. In other eras our fathers tried to save selected Earthlings from the anger of Taa—but the freezing kills them always. We want no corpses within the

mountain to pollute the air during the long sleep. Take them back to the upper portal—and turn them out!"

"Hey!" yelled Frazer, angrily. "What's all this mumbo-jumbo about? Why did you butt into my affairs in the first place if it was only to give me the grand run-around?"

"Patience, son," said Ghandar, gravely. "You do not understand. I had a very real and worthy purpose in trying to protect you from the man Zero. I was hopeful that you would be the one to overthrow the present tyranny, and thus avert the coming of Taa. But I learned too late that you were merely a transient tourist, without power. Then events began to move so swiftly that I could wait no longer. Nothing can save you or our oppressors now—for I have already summoned Taa. Feel!"

A deep rumbling drowned out all sound for a moment as the mountain shuddered.

"An earthquake," cried Nelda, paling.

"But the beginning," said Ghandar. "Since there is still a little time left and you feel aggrieved at your treatment, let me tell you something of the history of this planet and our race. Then you will understand better about Taa, and the many lost Atlantises.

"My race, I am sorry to have to say, is a primitive one as compared to those of your own planet. Yet many thousands of years ago we established a civilization. We were happy in it, even if your own early explorers called it barbaric. They laughed at our fire-adoring religion, ridiculed the mighty Taa. They were followed by others who were better armed than we, greedy and cunning. They reduced us to slavery, a state no better than that of beasts. Our priests were patient and long suffering, for it is no light matter to call in Taa. But call him they did and Taa came and smote the invaders. *Your* people never knew what happened to that first Atlantis—or to the second or the third, or fourth. But I,

high priest of Taa, know. They were destroyed just as the Nova Atlantis of today is about to be—in the identical manner and for the same reason.

“Had we hope any longer that the tyranny would be relaxed, we would have waited. But it became a race for survival. Zero was having our temples pulled down, and in the past two days has massacred many of our most faithful priests. I could not wait; I summoned my people to the mountain. Today you will not find one still outside. The gendarmes of Zero are combing the hills and forests looking for them, but they will not find any. They are all here, being put to sleep. Then, after the last one of us is safely in his hammock, Taa will awake!”

THE discourse was not enlightening—it was too laden with mystic phrases. Taa the terrible! Terrible twaddle!

Frazer could not deal with that which had no meaning. Let them put him out where he could handle his own affairs, out where things were tangible and not wrapped in superstitious disguises.

Then a messenger came and spoke rapidly for a couple of minutes with Ghandar.

Not even Nelda could make out the meaning of the message, for no Earthman ever unraveled the intricacies of the Aranian tongue. In that weird language no sound need necessarily ever be employed twice in the same sense; a word meant what it did only by taking into consideration the tone of voice, the pitch context, subject matter, accompanying gestures and other factors. But Frazer noticed that when the talking was concluded that there was a look of grim satisfaction on Ghandar's face.

“You have a bare chance of escaping,” said the holy man, turning to Frazer and Nelda. “I learn that the man Zero, who is worried about the abrupt disappearance of my race, is preparing a sneak getaway.

He has moved the seat of government to the top of our sacred mountain, known to you as Holy Hill, and has further desecrated the temple of Taa there by setting a space ship upon its broken altar. Soldiers guard the flanks of the hill, so that if there is an uprising, they can hold the people off long enough for him to escape into space. If you could steal that ship you could turn the tables on him!”

“If!” laughed Frazer scornfully. “Holy Hill is more than a hundred miles from here and we have neither arms nor transportation—”

“You shall have both,” said Ghandar, and called Prang Ben to him. “Take them to Taa's Mount by the seat tunnel. Do it swiftly—for there is little time left before the fire god awakes!”

CHAPTER FOUR

The Anger of Taa

THEY went down by an elevator. It was a crude elevator, operated by hand and opposed by counterweights. But it served, for they must have descended several thousands of feet. At the bottom they emerged into a lower cavern that was dank and moldy and smelled of the sea. It was dark down there, but Prang Ben produced torches and handed them to them. Then they saw that it was a tunnel rather than a cavern they were in—one of nearly circular cross-section, perhaps fifty feet in diameter, and apparently endless in the land direction. The seaward end was closed by a vast metallic sheet, around the edges of which water seeped.

Prang Ben found a small wheeled vehicle and rolled it out. It had pedals like a bicycle and could be driven by foot by two riders in tandem.

“This is the ocean gate,” said the priest, waving toward the iron door. “In a while water will be let in. I cannot go with you

—it would be impossible to come back. But at the other end of the tunnel is Mount Taa, where you will find another elevator such as this. It will take you into the substructure of the temple on the summit, above where Taa still sleeps. Go swiftly, for the time grows ever shorter.”

Prang Ben was gone. Frazer and Nelda exchanged glances.

“Spooky place, this,” commented Frazer, looking about. “Must be a good way below sea level. Wonder what they dug it out for? It’s much too large for an ordinary subterranean passage. And I wonder what else they are going to spring on us.”

“Let’s get going,” she said. “If there’s more, we’ll find it out.”

The little machine was speedier than they thought it would be from its appearance, and as the tunnel had a slight downward slope, they soon found themselves racing along at a goodly clip. Indeed, they took their feet off the pedals and let it coast, for it was making all of fifty miles an hour.

That enabled Frazer to pay less attention to handling the locomotion and more to study of the curious tunnel. Every ten miles or so he found that it was fitted with what appeared to be flap valves, sheets of ribbed metal so shaped and hinged as to be forced tightly shut and held there by any strong current of air or water flowing toward the sea, but of such a nature as not to impede motion inward.

He noted also that pockets of salt appeared here and there, showing that there had been times when sea water had flowed in abundance—and been dried up. That was a feature that was hard to understand, for there was no dearth of water anywhere on Atlantis, and he could not see for what possible purpose this deep subterranean salt water flume could have been built.

As they proceeded, the dampness of the walls disappeared. No longer was the atmosphere here cool and dank. It first turned warm and humid, then to a hot

dry heat that felt as if the tunnel air was fresh out of a furnace. Soon it became so oppressive that Frazer began to have serious misgivings about going on. If it became much hotter, he felt they would surely perish. But just as he was applying the brakes to check their headlong speed, he found other reasons for bringing the queer little scooter car to a halt. They apparently were about to arrive at their destination.

He managed to bring it to a stop at exactly the right spot, for if the car had gone on another fifty yards it would have plunged straight down into incredible depths. For at this point the tunnel abruptly changed course—from the horizontal to the vertical. It angled sharply down toward the interior of the planet, and then narrowed into a funnel just before it turned sheer downward. A metal catwalk led out over the pit and to a small door.

“This must be the way out,” said Frazer, abandoning the car where it was, and leading Nelda over the flimsy bridge. They went through the door, after glimpsing what appeared to be monstrous machines in the depths below, and on the other side of it they came upon a surprising sight.

THE room they were in was circular, and at one side was the open elevator shaft, as Prang Ben had foretold. But the feature of the place was a painting on the rough stone wall of the demon-god Taa, this time depicted as wide awake and bathed in fiery flame. His taloned claws were outstretched and threatening, his bat-wings were outspread as if ready for flight, and there was an expression of fiendish glee on the demoniac countenance. The most curious exhibit of the room, however, was the sign that was inscribed below the picture. It was in standard Earth language, not in the cabalistic characters of Aranian.

It said, "Here sleeps Taa the Terrible. Behold him, but heed well that ye wake him not." There was an arrow pointing to a pedestal topped by a curious lens. Frazer went to it and put his eye to it.

He gasped, for after the first puzzled instant he recognized what it was he was looking at. The lens revealed a metallic tube of unguessable length and material, going straight down into the bowels of the planet. A mile or more below it glowed a ruby red; below that there was the dazzling white of rock hot enough to be incandescent.

Frazer could not figure out by what optical means the view was obtained, but there it was—the fiery magma of Arania, kept solid only by the tremendous pressure of the cooler rocks that overlay it. And then suddenly, Frazer understood everything.

"Come," he said hurriedly, grasping Nelda's hand and fairly dragging her to the elevator. "Taa is real. I have seen him, and he is terrible. We have no time—"

He jerked frantically at the elevator ropes, and she helped him. At length they came to the top of the shaft, which they found to be in a tiny chamber in the upper portion of the great cone that supported the Temple of Taa. A small winding stair took them up under the altar itself, and they found themselves in a place where light came through chinks in the stones. Day must have broken over Atlantis. They approached the lighted crevices cautiously and looked out. They knew then exactly where they were, for the substructure of the altar was supported by stonework richly ornamented with carved symbolic figures. It was through the eyeholes of a pair of mythological monsters that they did their peeping.

Not thirty feet away lay a small, smart spaceship—the two-seater variety, but capable of sustained interplanetary flight. Zero was standing beside its portal, and

a stream of soldiers was passing in, each burdened with a bag or chest of valuables. If and when Zero made his get-away, he would be well-heeled!

"The thieving scoundrel," exclaimed Nelda, recognizing the chest. "He must have looted the Central Bank and the Viceregal Treasury!"

"Shh," hissed Frazer. "We've got to find a way to get out there."

IN A moment they found it—a panel of stone so set that it could be slid back from the inside. By the time they were out, the last of the soldiers had left the ship and was starting back down the hill. Zero stood at the edge of the platform watching them descend.

Frazer said quietly, "Turn around, Zero."

Zero whirled about to see the muzzle of Frazer's blaster trained unswervingly on him.

"Toss your guns away," ordered Frazer crisply.

He watched the man throw the weapons over the parapet. Then he holstered his own.

"Zero," said Frazer, advancing slowly upon him, "in a very few minutes you are going to die—but not at my hands. There are those who have more grievances against you than I—Ghandar, and the followers of Taa. You have scoffed at Taa and slaughtered his priests and violated his temples. You did wrong. Taa is very real, and he is on his way—but he will deal with you in his own fashion!"

"Hop in, let's go," shouted Frazer, and he was pushing Nelda into the ship ahead of him. He sprang into the control seat and jabbed the starting stud. The machine roared upward amid the pinging of bullets fired at them by the soldiery, aroused by Zero's frantic yells for help.

Frazer took just one downward look before he set his course. The altar platform had dwindled to a small rectangle,

and at the foot of the temple structure lay the toppled image of Taa. Its wings had been broken off, its nose chipped, and it had been otherwise mutilated. To Frazer it was a grim threat.

He stood westward, and took care to be high. In a few seconds they were over the hollowed-out mountain range in which the race of Arania now were swinging in their Sleep of Ten Thousand Years.

It was a short wait. Presently he saw the sign he was looking for. He showed it excitedly to Nelda and began to explain. First there appeared an eddy in the ocean, not far offshore. It developed into a whirlpool, expanding into an everwidening maelstrom. Frazer tried to visualize what was happening as those millions of tons of cool sea water tumbled through the intake gate and rushed through the sea tunnel they had just traversed. He could see the torrent pushing the valves open all the way, until it came to the end of the tube under the sacred mountain. And there it would plunge down, be seized by Ghandar's engines—probably injectors of some sort—and forced on to the terrible depths where Taa, the hot, lay asleep. There would be steam—vast clouds of it at fantastic pressure.

It would find itself penned in by millions of tons of rock and try to go back the way it came—but the valvular doors and the intruding water would check that. Then it would have no choice but to—

“**L**OOK!” yelled Frazer, bringing the ship around and heading it warily back toward Nova Atlantis. Nelda looked, and her eyes widened in awe and her mouth dropped open. Holy Hill exploded, sending a mighty column of mingled steam and fire miles into the air. Boulders and chunks of the shattered mountain were flung about like pebbles, raining on the city and the skyport. Frazer beheld one such stone, large as a fair-sized house, fall squarely on the

Earth cruiser due to soar that day with a passenger list of wealthy tourists. The cruiser was smashed like an eggshell.

Other things were happening. The ground surface was undulating in waves, opening here and there in deep crevasses. The towers of Atlantis were toppling; crowds of screaming Earthmen could be seen scrambling for the nearby hills and what they hoped was safety.

“Great heavens!” whispered Nelda as she looked on. At that moment fiery fissures showed in the side of the now glowing mountain. Then the mountain split and the sparkling lava flowed out and down, engulfing all that lay below it.

There was another explosion, and this time a plume of poisonous green gas was flung upward, fattening into a thick and threatening column. When it attained the altitude of several miles, the wild volcanic engendered winds spread it out across the sky like a cape. Added puffs from the fiery crater below added body to the central column. It seemed to swell out, to take the horrid form of a demoniac figure.

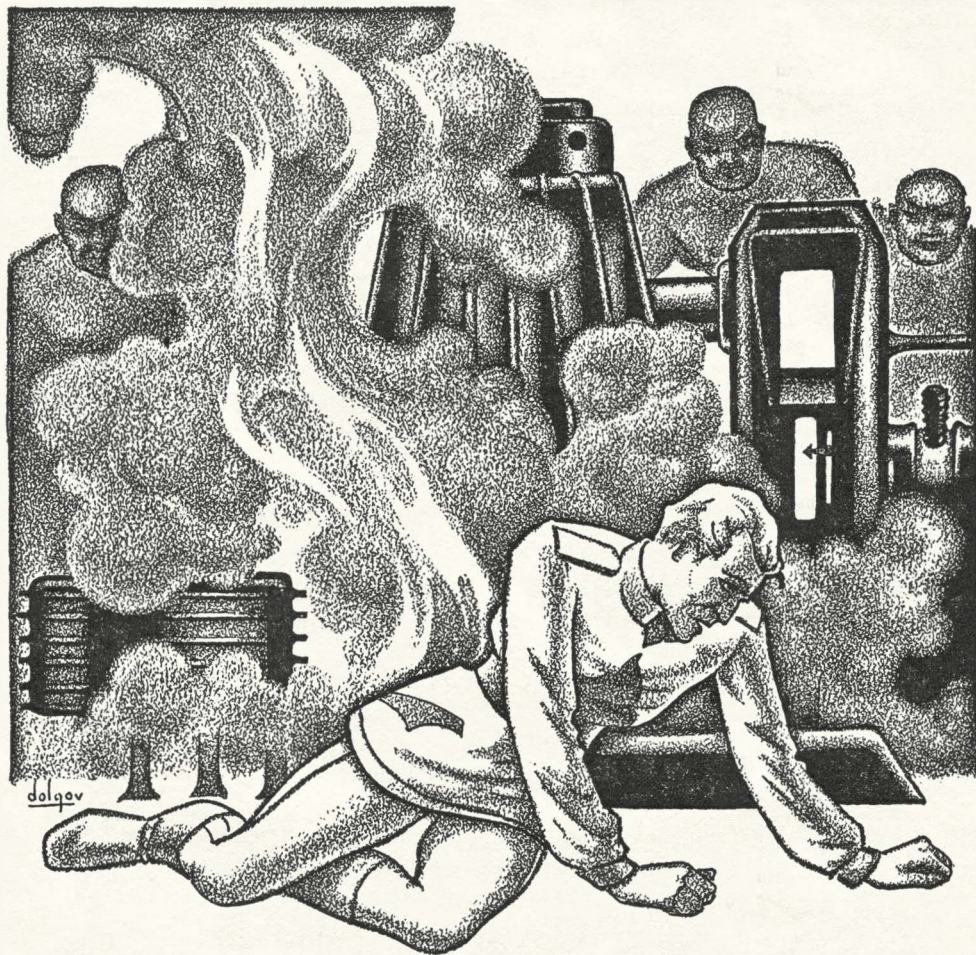
The grotesque apparition seemed to spread batlike wings as if to cover the whole island; its taloned hands clutched feverishly at the torrid air; the creature even appeared to have features—a wicked, fanged, malevolent face, gloating fiercely over the destruction it was wreaking. It grew and grew, now wavering, now more clearly distinct. Frazer's skin crawled.

“It is marvelous what faith, coupled with ingenuity, can do,” he muttered, setting the automatic pilot to take over on an Earthbound course. Until that moment Nelda had not looked back at the mountain, but was staring over the side down at the frenzied mobs fleeing from the now blazing city. It was a spectacle sufficient to upset the strongest set of nerves. And then she took one backward glance.

“Taa!” she screamed, and fainted.

“Yes, Taa,” said Frazer, softly, taking her into his arms. “Taa the terrible!”

DESTINATION UNKNOWN



By **FRANK BELKNAP LONG**

Most were less than men, a few were more than gods, on that ship wallowing spaceward toward its doom. But the burning day was to come when they would learn to work together—or die!

RAYNOR knew that the men in the rocket room hoped the fumes would kill him. They were primitive and surly brutes, and they stood with their faces pressed to the transparent bulkhead which had been his sole protection against

them for sixteen long, unending years.

Bitterly he told himself that they hated him because he was an officer and a gentleman. They hated him because he had a woman to talk to, and was not as lonely as they were. They hated him because compassion filled his eyes when his gaze locked with theirs. They did not want to be pitied by a man who was luckier than they were. Above all, they hated him because month after month, year after year, they had watched him moving about the control room, grimly intent on his job.

He took things easy while they sweated out their guts and lived cheek by jowl in cramped quarters, their lungs choked by seepage fumes. He was separated from them by a partition. He wasn't their friend, couldn't be. They hated him.

Raynor suspected that the scheme had been germinating in their thick skulls for years. It was as ingenious as it was simple and had been executed with cold-blooded malice. They had simply drilled a hole in the bulkhead, and allowed fumes from the rocket room to contaminate the air he was breathing.

It had taken them a long time to drill that hole. It had cost them blood and sweat; it had—yes, *debased* them. Primitive as they were, they had been sustained by a sense of solidarity in misfortune, a grim devotion to duty which had kept them from becoming jungle killers.

But now the bars were down, and they were staring at him through the bulkhead with red-rimmed savage eyes, their lips snagged by their teeth. Raynor knew that the lantern-jawed Neanderthals had built up a resistance to the noxious gases in the rocket room by inhaling them continuously for sixteen years.

He also knew that, having built up no resistance, he'd be down on the desk in another quarter hour, dragging himself toward the translucent bulkhead with insane babblings. He'd be seeing the hairy apes as in a glass, darkly, and cursing them.

Even now his mind kept carrying him back across the years. The board would glow sharply for an instant and he'd be alone in the control room. Then his vision would come unhinged and his father's leonine head, and broad, straight shoulders would loom above the panel and he'd find himself shrinking.

His long legs would shorten, his chief officer's uniform turn into a soiled, kid's jerkin, and he'd find himself sitting by the old man's side, drinking in the old man's words.

It was happening now—*had* happened. He had been a gawky kid with a sallow complexion, and eyes too big for his face. A kid who couldn't remember his mother, and only dimly the face of the woman who had cared for him in a distant part of the ship, and brought him to the pilot room at the age of six.

He had bunked with the other kids until his tenth year, with kids who were officers now, or rocket-room apes. Dimly he remembered the fathers of the surly brutes beyond the bulkhead—could conjure up a picture of them moving sullenly about opposite the old man, their faces streaked with damp.

Those earlier hairy apes had not only taught the kids he had bunked with how to handle the big blast tubes and keep the mercury drums from running too much of a temperature, but had instilled in them a grim devotion to duty which had kept them sweating for a generation.

He was running his eyes over the old man's face now, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down. "Why, Dad?" he could hear himself asking. "Why were they taught to take over, just as I was taught to take over when—"

He started to say, "When you die," but just in time caught himself up, his heart skipping a beat.

"You'll know some day, Jim, lad," was the old man's reply, his deepset eyes filming.

Even as Raynor stiffened in bewilderment the control board grew sharp and luminous again, and a misty glimmering blotted out the old man's head and shoulders.

Blotted out as well the small boy with his anxious face. It was as though a window of memory in the depths of Raynor's mind had fluttered shut, locking him up in a harsh prison of reality.

He was alone in the control room and had been for sixteen years. He was thirty-two now, and the old man hadn't been around since his sixteenth birthday. "Hadn't been around" implied no irreverence. "Death" was one of three words the old man had forbidden him to use.

"Jimmy, when I stop breathing, wrap me in a tarpaulin, and open the star door wide. If you feel I deserve it, just say: 'Good-by, Dad, and thanks for everything'."

The other two words he had been forbidden to use were "Earth", and "loneliness".

"You must never look back now, Jimmy. And don't ever get to feeling sorry for yourself. You can ride out rage, fear and boredom, but self-pity will tip the scales against you sooner or later, no matter how strong you feel yourself to be."

RAYNOR hadn't left the control room for twenty-one years. Whether he could have done so or not he did not know. There was a door in the bulkhead directly opposite the control panel which opened on a passageway down which he had walked twice daily from his sixth to his tenth year, passing from the control room to the bunks where the kids were, and back again for mind-torturing afternoon session with the *Astrogator's Manual*.

But the door was rusted over now, and a heavy bar had been placed across it. The old man had lowered the bar into place on Raynor's sixteenth birthday, with

an admonition which Raynor had steadfastly refused to disobey.

"Your job is your life, Jimmy," the old man said, perhaps realizing that the sands of his own life were running low. "If you stay in the control room the old Adam in you will remain bottled up. It will remain bottled up in your fellow officers, and the crew. When a man isn't standing within range of your fists you can carry on a conversation with him on a civilized plane. Believe me, Jimmy, I know."

What never ceased to bewilder Raynor was how the gorillas in the rocket room could remain cheek by jowl for sixteen years without crippling or killing one another.

If the old man had been right about human nature—well, perhaps he had the answer now. They had saved up all their savage resentment for him. They couldn't get out of the rocket room because the compartment had been sealed from the outside by their own fathers sixteen years ago.

The earlier rocket-room apes had stepped out of the picture at that time, leaving their kids locked up in there. No wonder that cruelly imprisoned bunch of sixteen-year-old Neanderthals had become middle-aged killers now, glary-eyed, their idealism shot to hell. Sixteen years of it, living on wormy concentrates, hating the spruce, young commanding officer in the compartment next to them.

If only he could have gotten his side of it across to them—the years of loneliness, the fact that mental toil could wear a man down too. All right, he had a woman to talk to, her face to look at when his nerves started shrieking that he couldn't absorb any more punishment.

A woman's face, a woman's voice to soothe and quiet him. But God, it wasn't a sufficient solace. It wasn't, when sheer boredom had time and again almost crumpled him to his knees.

The fumes were becoming worse now,

unmistakably more acrid. His lungs seemed on fire, and he was down on the floor, babbling. He was reciting, of all things—poetry. Stanzas from a forgotten Earth poet who had lived centuries ago, and died from an overdose of laudanum. Baud—yes, Baudelaire.

He had found the poem in a slim volume the old man had given him once.

*"In murky depths within our minds
there crouch
A thousand beasts, sharp-fanged, and
angry-eyed:
Great hulking shapes that glare and
spit and snarl
And taint the darkness with their
reeking hides.*

*But with the panthers, jackals, with
the lice,
With the monsters of all shapes,
In this menagerie that breeds all vice
There's one the ugliest, wickedest of
all—
'Tis Boredom! Lost in some wild
dream or other,
He hides his face, and makes but little
pothor:
But well you know that cursed mon-
ster, thou,
Hypocrite reader, fellow man, my
brother."*

Yes, yes, well he knew. Those hairy hypocrites beyond the bulkhead knew too.

*How about it, you beetle-browed sons
of apes? he thought. Boredom is bad, eh?
Boredom can kill? Not self-pity, but just
living alone with yourself, looking down
over the same pair of knees month after
month, using the same hands to manipu-
late the same controls, rolling the same
curses out over your tongue.*

*Hell, why should you want to kill me?
We've worked and sweated together,
haven't we? Haven't we? All these years
together—*

He was dragging himself over the star door now, his breath coming in choking gasps.

The portal in the deck seemed to be yawning again—yawning on the abyss of emptiness which had swallowed up the old man. His mind kept see-sawing, going back and forth in time. With a sob he averted his face while a tarpaulin-wrapped lump of unstirring clay seemed to go sliding past him—sliding down and out.

"Good-by, Dad, and—thanks for everything."

"Jimmy, self-pity will tip the scales against you sooner or later, no matter how strong you feel yourself to be."

Raynor's lips tightened and his head came up. The star door was bolted down fast and had been for sixteen years.

His skull a vast, dull ache, his lungs bursting, he arose from the deck and reeled to the inter-ship audiovisidisk at the base of the control board. While slit-eyes watched him from beyond the bulkhead, he clicked the instrument on, and stared down into it.

Her face seemed to float up toward him out of a misty sea of radiance.

"Darling," he whispered.

ANNE HOLLISTER was no longer a very young woman. He had known her all the years of his life, and with each passing year her beauty had waned just a little. She was thirty-one, but she was beautiful still, and he loved her now as he had never loved her in her youth. Every cell of his flesh ached when he thought about her, and he had lain awake night after night, wishing that he might caress her.

She was staring up at him now with alarmed eyes, her lashes throwing long shadows.

"What is the matter, dear?" she asked.

"The brutes have revolted," he choked, his features twitching. "They've drilled a hole in the bulkhead, they've—"

A spasm of coughing doubled him up. He heard the rustle of her clothes as he straightened, knew that a convulsive shudder had taken hold of her. In all the years he had known her he had never once taken her into his arms. Never once—God, not ever.

"Jim, it's the food," came from the audiovisidisk. "The concentrate they've been getting is rotten clean through. Jim, I warned you—"

He drew himself up, his lips livid. "And I said I wouldn't; I refused to. I'm still in command, remember."

"You refused to treat them like human beings. Jim, how stupid do you think they are? Rotten concentrates for them, vacuum-sealed rations for the officers. Oh, I know—psychological considerations impelled you to—"

"It is a mistake to assume that exceptional men can endure exceptional privations," he heard himself reciting. "High-grade men are perfectionists. Disgust or thwart them in any way, and they'll sulk till the sands run out. A single fly will spoil the ointment for them, along with the proud idealistic picture of themselves they've built up in their minds.

"When once you've impaired the integrity of your officers they'll be sure to ask why they should exert themselves at all. The assumption that creative minds thrive on obstacles is a tragic fallacy. Genius has to have smooth sailing, or it functions, at best, on a mediocre plane. Jim, lad, remember that as long as you live. The best for the officers, because they are superior men, and must be pampered."

"Your father said that? Jim, you're delirious! You're reciting by rote something your father said, and *it just isn't true.*"

"It is true, Anne. You're just a silly little girl in pigtails, saucer-eyed because

your mother keeps saying it isn't true."

"My mother is dead, Jim," she said. "She went out through the star door seventeen years ago. But I am proud to be standing where she stood, clear-eyed, sane. Seepage fumes are not making *me* rave."

"Fumes—darling, how did—"

"How did I know? I'm not a high-grade girl, but I have plenty of imagination. If I were in their shoes, I'd drill a hole in the bulkhead too. I'm not as important as you are, I'm not in command. I'm just a ration-room stewardess, and all I do is shuttle concentrates through vacuum tubes to your fine, high-grade officers, and to a crew you've felt superior to all your snobbish life."

"Darling, I—"

"Wait, let me finish. Those poor devils in the rocket room are as human as you are." She brought her clenched fist against her breast. "I've got to speak now while there is still time. You just now thought I was a little girl again, didn't you? Perhaps you won't understand, but I've got to try to make you realize what you've done to them."

Her words seemed to sober him, so that he was surprised by the clarity of his thoughts, unable to understand how he could stand calmly listening to her while the sands of his life were running low.

"Dearest," she said. "There isn't so much difference between human beings. They all live, suffer and die. And that's about all they do. My mother told me that the human brain is just an accidental by-product of evolution, brought into being by the use our ancestors made of their hands when they swung from tree to tree, long ago on Earth.

"Clinging fingers and flexible thumbs developed a mass of gray jelly in our skulls which isn't important, really. It's the heritage we share together that matters. Don't think an idiot can't suffer. Don't ever allow yourself to think that.

"An idiot and a man of genius are

brothers under the skin. I am a woman, and I know."

"Darling, what do you want me to do?" he choked. "Melt down the bulkhead and invite them in? Shall I tell them the truth, that our sealed concentrates are nearly gone, that I've been on short rations for a month? Shall I tell them I'm not fit to live because I refused to demoralize my commmand?"

"Jim, it should be share and share alike. Half the remaining supply of sealed rations should go to them, immediately."

A bitter grimace distorted Raynor's face. "Aren't you forgetting that a dead man can't issue orders?"

She shook her head. "No, Jim. But if you die I'll seal up their share, and see that it reaches them. Then I'll lie down with a will, and open the star door wide."

Raynor turned deathly pale. "What do you want me to do?"

"You said something about—about melting down the partition. Could you?"

He nodded. "I could, but—"

"Then do it, Jim. Get through to them, talk to them!"

"That *would* be asking for it," he blurted savagely. "I couldn't survive ten sec-

onds in the rocket room. The fumes would kill me before they could calm down sufficiently to gouge out my eyes."

Even as he flung the words at her he knew that he didn't mean them. Her plea had germinated the instant she had planted it between the turbulent furrows of his mind, sending out tendrils in all directions. It was the answer he'd been groping for, the one way he could get his side across to them before he died.

They were malicious brutes, but he'd not give them the satisfaction of thinking they'd exacted vengeance for an intolerable wrong. He hadn't wronged them, and they'd get no satisfaction out of killing him when they knew the truth. He did not doubt that they'd bear him to the deck notwithstanding, but, being an officer and a gentleman, he couldn't bear the thought of the brutes plotting his destruction with self-righteous snarls.

He felt light-headed, but his thoughts no longer seasawed. He'd show them that he did not fear death. He'd show them that when brutes kill men unjustly, a brand will sear them till they die. He was a little uncertain as to where the brand would come from or how it would

THE MUMMY WALKS—



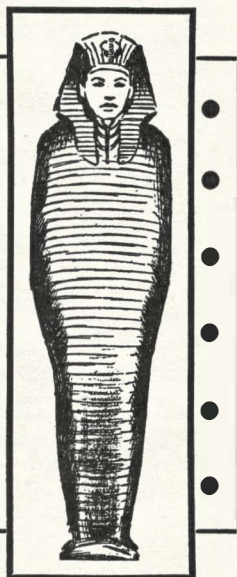
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sear them. But the old man had said that when—

“Jim, get through to them, talk to them.”

He didn't answer her, simply clicked off the audiovisidisk and turned from the board. He wanted to say, “Good-by, darling,” but he couldn't trust himself to speak.

RAYNOR knew that what he intended to do would not be difficult. He'd simply turn on the incandescent jets at the base of the bulkhead, and spray the entire surface of the partition with a weaving curtain of gas fire.

When tension bubbles developed in the translucent plastic, the action of the jets was usually sufficient to clear them.

“Keep the regulator caps screwed down tight, Jimmy,” he could hear the old man saying. “You can safely warm the bulkhead until a faint boiling is visible, but not an instant longer. Remember that dissolving impurities form slag. If you cloud the bulkhead you'll never get it clear again, and the rocket room will be gone forever.”

The old man had been speaking figuratively, of course. The rocket room would still be there, but the old man had meant that what you can't see might just as well not be. Almost savagely he told himself that he had no intention of clouding the bulkhead. He was going to melt it down so fast it wouldn't have time to cloud.

He'd keep the gas fire on until there wasn't any rocket room or any control room. Just one huge, merged compartment filled with reeking fumes and bestial shapes.

The eyes of the brutes were upon him as he stumbled across the control room, and fell to his knees beside the row of incandescent jets. They were watching his every movement, hoping he would die. He could feel their savage hate seeping

through the thick bulkhead into him.

Well, it wouldn't stop him. Nothing could stop him now. Nothing—

Removing the regulator caps from the entire row of jets with fingers that felt like fungus growths sprouting from his palm, he turned on the gas and depressed the ignition bar with a downward sweep of his hand.

The blast that ensued was like nothing he had ever known. It rocked the control room, blackening his face, and hurling him back against the opposite bulkhead with such violence that he groaned and collapsed, wilting to the deck like a man whose knees had turned to jelly.

He must have lost consciousness for an instant, for when next he knew anything, a weaving curtain of gas fire had blotted out the wolfish eyes of the beasts in the rocket room.

His eyebrows had been singed off, and there was a salty taste on his tongue. Groaning, he spat out blood and thumped his smoldering uniform. If his back had been broken, it didn't matter. He still had strength enough left to drag himself over the gas fire jets, and shame them with his dying breath.

“I'll starve myself, but not my officers. Demoralization starts at the top, and spreads like metal rot. You hear? Like metal rot. You hear—”

The heat was sweeping toward him now in suffocating waves, flowing over him, making his eyeballs crawl. A flame curtain a yard from his face, and beyond it, bestial shapes crouching.

Well, he'd show them. “I've stuck to my code, I've stuck—”

He was tearing at his eyeballs, gurgling like a maniac. The heat was like a volcano turned inside out, but he would go on dragging himself forward through the flames until—

“Mike!” a hoarse voice bellowed. “Put those jets out, and turn on the ventilators! That's it—that's it. Now—give me a

hand with him. That's it, easy does it. The poor guy! Oh, the poor guy!"

Although blinding lights were flashing in Raynor's skull he remembered struggling for an instant, clenching his fists and refusing to be lifted. He remembered opening his parched mouth wide, and trying to spew forth sounds.

After that, he remembered nothing at all.

IT was the worst kind of foolishness. He was weeping. Tears were running down his face and he was sitting in a corner of a big, merged compartment staring up at twelve grinning rocket room apes.

He shouldn't be doing that, he knew. He was supposed to be master of the ship, a strong, silent man—an officer and a gentleman.

Some time had passed, but he couldn't tell how much. His thoughts were still a little confused, but he understood enough to know that the rocket room apes were stout fellows, and—*loyal clean through!*

The one who had dragged him from the jets had a strong and powerful neck set on massive shoulders, and a flow of muscles in his arms that reminded Raynor of ripples on molten bronze.

"Buddy," he was saying, his craggy face split in a grin, "your dad knew they'd be two generations of us would have to stay on the job and do our bit. But an officer is sort of sensitive about what goes on inside his head. He has to keep admiring himself, sort of, and your dad figured it would be better if he didn't tell you too much, and let you think you was running the ship.

"Hell, buddy, officers don't run ships. You had to pilot the ship, sure. But you're just a chief officer. You don't *run* the ship. We run the ship. Always have, always will."

"I know that now," Raynor said, very gratefully.

"Buddy, you're a good guy. Always have been, always will be. Natchrally you went off the handle when we drilled that hole in the bulkhead. But hell, buddy, we had to do that. You was feeding us wormy grub."

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize—"

"Aw, forget it, buddy. It's all for the best. Now we're all together, and we can talk to *her*. We sorta figured you'd burn the bulkhead down and get through to us. We figured if we could talk to the judy in the ration room, see her like you do, we could maybe stand the grub. We don't know how long this here voyage is gonna last, or where we're headed, but I gotta hunch it won't be long now. Your dad told my old man the grub would hold out till we got there."

"I rather think it will," Raynor said. "Miss Hollister sent you notes with the concentrates, didn't she?"

The big ape nodded. "She did, on account of she admires us. We run the ship—but don't get to feeling you're not one of us, buddy. My old man used to say that the guy who commands a ship is just as important as the lads in the rocket room. From rocket room monkeys right down to chief officers we all gotta stand together, and get the hell out of our own little corners. Y'see what I mean, buddy?"

James Raynor nodded, swallowing a lump. "You bet I do, old-timer. You mean there's something in each of us that doesn't like barriers."

"Huh? Doesn't like—say, what do you know, Karnovowitch here was saying the same thing, right before we drilled the hole through. I used to think he was ticky in the coco, but now I'm not so sure. You dress up what you know, and it sounds more like something you've been wanting to hear. Maybe Karnovowitch is what you would call a poet. Maybe he—say, maybe you could loan him a book to read something, eh?"

"Maybe I could," Raynor gulped.

FAN MAGS

(In every issue we will review as many of the current crop of science fiction fan magazines as space allows. All magazines for review should be addressed to ASTONISHING STORIES, Fictioneers, Inc., 210 E. 43rd St., N. Y., N. Y.)

CALIFORNIA MERCURY: Published by Joe Fortier, 1836 39th Avenue, Oakland, California. Five cents a copy. A little hard to read because it's mimeographed in red on glaring yellow paper, this is still a worthwhile fan periodical. Its news is generally recent, and presented without too much rambling about the point. Among its latest scoops was the news that, by vote of the active members of the sponsoring organization, the Pacific Coast Convention, scheduled to be held in Los Angeles, has been called off.

THE FANTASITE: Published by Phil Bronson, 224 West 6th Street, Hastings, Minnesota. Ten cents a copy. Louis C. Smith, a hitherto silent fan, takes the rostrum in the latest issue and tells the world how he, as an unknown fan who has been reading science fiction for more years than most of the "top fans" of today, reacts to the personalities and happenings in science fiction, and also revives some fond memories of old-time stories and books. Forrest J. Ackerman contributes a humorous piece entitled "Exclusion Act #2!", and a lengthy reader's column, presenting letters from many leading fans and authors, rounds out the issue. All in all, a very good job, though the pages and pages of solid small type, unrelieved by illustrations, are not too easy on the reader's eyes.

FANTASY FICTION FIELD: Published by Julius Unger, 1702 Dahill Road, Brooklyn, New York. Five cents a copy. The latest exploit of this lively sheet is to commence the publication of a complete bibliography of all science fiction books ever published—in any language! This is

strictly for the most rabid fans and collectors, since it consists only of page after page of lists of titles and authors, without even a short description of the plot of the individual stories. But the casual fan who is interested in what's going on in the science fiction world will find plenty of other items worthy of his attention. The news coverage of this publication is excellent, taking in the professional magazines, the fan clubs and magazines, and every other aspect of the field.

NEBULA: Published by Robert A. Madle, 333 East Belgrade Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Five cents a copy. The standard of excellence in fan newspapers has risen so high in the past few years that it is hard to find new adjectives for them. After a fairly poor start, *Nebula* is now ranking with the leaders in the field. Still a newcomer, it may become even better unless—as is rumored—the Army beckons its editor.

NOVA: Published by Al Ashley, 86 Upton Avenue, Battle Creek, Michigan. Ten cents a copy. The covers on this magazine never fail to please. They are abstract, fantastic drawings, beautifully reproduced in color. And the contents of the latest issue includes articles by John W. Campbell, Jr., Charles R. Tanner, Ross Rocklynne and Donn Brazier—a line-up of which many a professional magazine could feel proud.

PARADOX: Published by Frank Wilimczyk, Jr., 3 Lewis Street, Westfield, Massachusetts. Ten cents a copy. This is the first issue of this new venture, and it has all the faults one might expect to find in a newcomer to the fan-publishing field

—a poor hektographing job, many typing errors, and so forth. However, some of the best of today's leading fan magazines rose from equally humble beginnings. Let's hope *Paradox* will follow suit!

THE SCREWBALL: Published by R. E. Montgomery, Jr., 156 South University Street, Blackfoot, Idaho. Free. That carbon-copied, aptly-named "Alpha Centaurian" publication is in again, with a new batch of purely imaginary news stories about equally imaginary people. Absurd—but entertaining.

SHANGRI-L'AFFAIRES: Published by A. L. Joquel, Jr., 1055 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, California. Free (by exchange with other fan magazines.) Latest issue of this contains excerpts from the minutes of the Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society for the past couple of years, along with samples of the type of humorous dialogue that's passed around at the meetings. Excellent reading, frequently very funny.

SPACE TALES: Published by Tom Ludowitz, 2310 Virginia, Everett, Wash-

ington. Ten cents a copy. An impressively large magazine, the contents of it fall below expectations. However, an article by Harry Warner, Jr., on "The Perils of Completeness," is a good and well-written warning to the fan-collector to refrain from trying to make his collection complete. That way, says Warner, lies madness; there's no way of telling where science fiction stops and ordinary fiction begins!

SUN SPOTS: Published by Gerry de la Ree, Jr., 31 Bogert Place, Westwood, New Jersey. Ten cents a copy. In its new printed format, this magazine has become one of the best looking now being published. And a column by Louis Russell Chauvenet, entitled "The .007 Review," does a lot toward bringing up the level of the articles. .

LE ZOMBIE: Published by Bob Tucker, P.O. Box 260, Bloomington, Illinois. Five cents a copy. This magazine is nearing its fiftieth issue, which is not far from a record in a field distinguished by the shortness of the average magazine's life. Definitely worthwhile.



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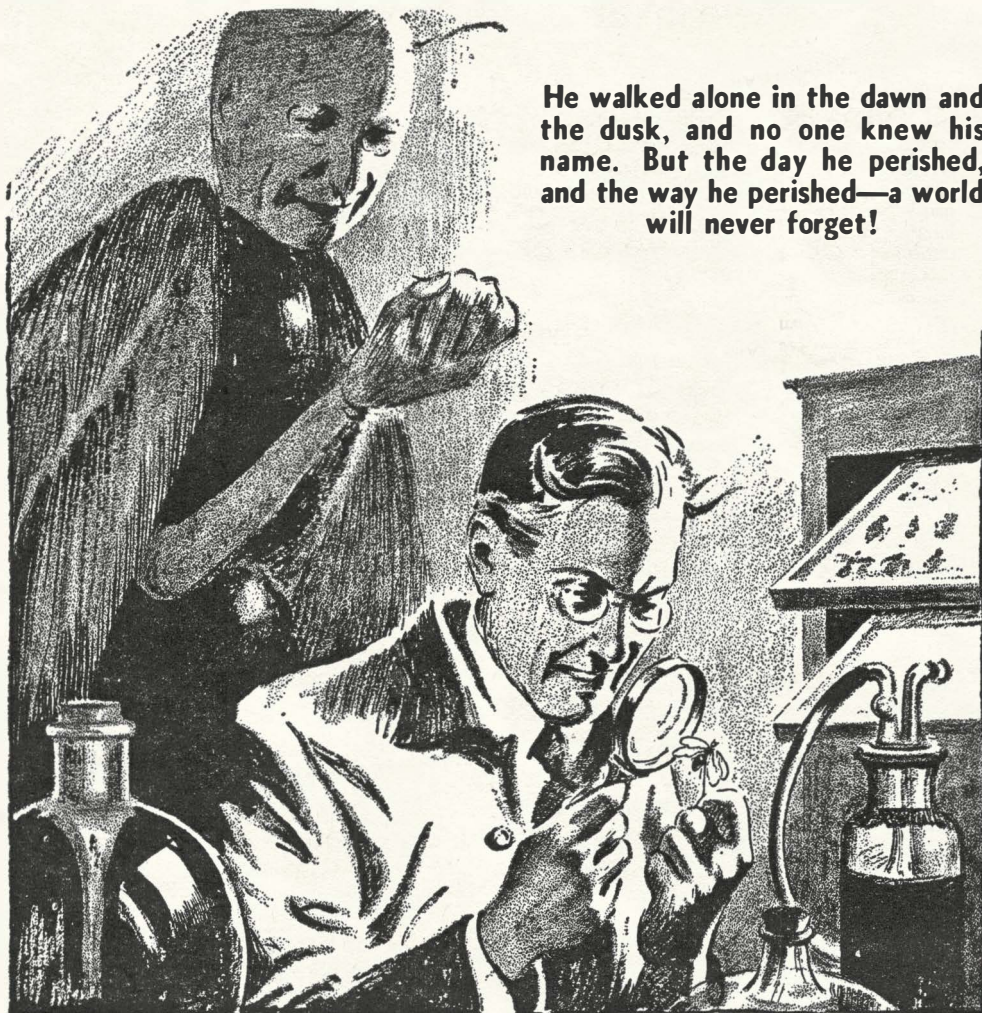


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He walked alone in the dawn and the dusk, and no one knew his name. But the day he perished, and the way he perished—a world will never forget!



MIMIC

By MARTIN PEARSON



IT IS less than five hundred years since an entire half of the world was discovered. It is less than two hundred years since the discovery of the last continent. The sciences of chemistry and physics go back scarce one century. The science of aviation goes back forty years. The science of atomics is being born.

And yet we think we know a lot.

We know little or nothing. Some of the most startling things are unknown to us. When they are discovered they may shock us to the bone.

We search for secrets in the far islands of the Pacific and among the ice fields of the frozen North while under our very noses, rubbing shoulders with us every day, there may walk the undiscovered. It

is a curious fact of nature that that which is in plain view is oft best hidden.

I have always known of the man in the black cloak. Since I was a child he has always lived on my street, and his eccentricities are so familiar that they go unmentioned except among the casual visitor. Here, in the heart of the largest city in the world, in swarming New York, the eccentric and the odd may flourish unhindered.

As children we had hilarious fun jeering at the man in black when he displayed his fear of women. We watched, in our evil, childish way, for those moments; we tried to get him to show anger. But he ignored us completely, and soon we paid him no further heed, even as our parents did.

We saw him only twice a day. Once in the early morning, when we would see his six-foot figure come out of the grimy dark hallway of the tenement at the end of the street and stride down towards the elevated to work—again when he came back at night. He was always dressed in a long black cloak that came to his ankles, and he wore a wide-brimmed black hat down far over his face. He was a sight from some weird story out of the old lands. But he harmed nobody, and paid attention to nobody.

Nobody—except perhaps women.

When a woman crossed his path, he would stop in his stride and come to a dead halt. We could see that he closed his eyes until she had passed. Then he would snap those wide watery blue eyes open and march on as if nothing had happened.

He was never known to speak to a woman. He would buy some groceries, maybe once a week, at Antonio's—but only when there were no other patrons there. Antonio said once that he never talked, he just pointed at things he wanted and paid for them in bills that he pulled out of a pocket somewhere under his

cloak. Antonio did not like him, but he never had any trouble with him either.

Now that I think of it, nobody ever did have any trouble with him.

We got used to him. We grew up on the street; we saw him occasionally when he came home and went back into the dark hallway of the house he lived in.

One of the kids on the block lived in that house too. A lot of families did. He said they knew nothing much about him either, though there were one or two funny stories.

He never had visitors, he never spoke to anyone. And he had once built something in his room out of metal.

He had then, years ago, hauled up some long flat metal sheets, sheets of tin or iron, and they had heard a lot of hammering and banging in his room for several days. But that had stopped and that was all there was to that story.

Where he worked I don't know and never found out. He had money, for he was reputed to pay his rent regularly when the janitor asked for it.

Well, people like that inhabit big cities and nobody knows the story of their lives until they're all over. Or until something strange happens.

I GREW up, I went to college, I studied. Finally I got a job assisting a museum curator. I spent my days mounting beetles and classifying exhibits of stuffed animals and preserved plants, and hundreds and hundreds of insects from all over.

Nature is a strange thing, I learned. You learn that very clearly when you work in a museum. You realize how nature uses the art of camouflage. There are twig insects that look exactly like a leaf or a branch of a tree. Exactly. Even to having phony vein markings that look just like the real leaf's. You can't tell them apart, unless you look very carefully.

Nature is strange and perfect that way. There is a moth in Central America that looks like a wasp. It even has a fake stinger made of hair, which it twists and curls just like a wasp's stinger. It has the same colorings and, even though its body is soft and not armored like a wasp's, it is colored to appear shiny and armored. It even flies in the daytime when wasps do, and not at night like all the other moths. It moves like a wasp. It knows somehow that it is helpless and that it can survive only by pretending to be as deadly to other insects as wasps are.

I learned about army ants, and their strange imitators.

Army ants travel in huge columns of thousands and hundreds of thousands. They move along in a flowing stream several yards across and they eat everything in their path. Everything in the jungle is afraid of them. Wasps, bees, snakes, other ants, birds, lizards, beetles—even men run away, or get eaten.

But in the midst of the army ants there also travel many other creatures—creatures that aren't ants at all, and that the army ants would kill if they knew of them. But they don't know of them because these other creatures are disguised. Some of them are beetles that look like ants. They have false markings like ant-thoraxes and they run along in imitation of ant speed. There is even one that is so long it is marked like three ants in single file! It moves so fast that the real ants never give it a second glance.

There are weak caterpillars that look like big armored beetles. There are all sorts of things that look like dangerous animals. Animals that are the killers and superior fighters of their groups have no enemies. The army ants and the wasps, the sharks, the hawk and the felines. So there are a host of weak things that try to hide among them—to mimic them.

And man is the greatest killer, the greatest hunter of them all. The whole

world of nature knows man for the irresistible master. The roar of his gun, the cunning of his trap, the strength and agility of his arm place all else beneath him.

Should man then be treated by nature differently than the other dominants, the army ants and the wasps?

IT WAS, as often happens to be the case, sheer luck that I happened to be on the street at that dawning hour when the janitor came running out of the tenement on my street shouting for help. I had been working all night mounting new exhibits.

The policeman on the beat and I were the only people besides the janitor to see the thing that we found in the two dingy rooms occupied by the stranger of the black cloak.

The janitor explained—as the officer and I dashed up the narrow rickety stairs—that he had been awakened by the sound of heavy thuds and shrill screams in the stranger's rooms. He had gone out in the hall way to listen.

Severe groaning as of someone in terrible pain—the noise of someone thrashing around in agony—was coming from behind the closed door of the stranger's apartment. The janitor had listened, then run for help.

When we got there the place was silent. A faint light shone from under the doorway. The policeman knocked; there was no answer. He put his ear to the door and so did I.

We heard a faint rustling—a continuous slow rustling as of a breeze blowing paper. The cop knocked again but there was still no response.

Then, together, we threw our weight at the door. Two hard blows and the rotten old lock gave way. We burst in.

The room was filthy, the floor covered with scraps of torn paper, bits of detritus and garbage. The room was unfurnished, which I thought was odd.

In one corner there stood a metal box, about four feet square. A tight box, held together with screws and ropes. It had a lid, opening at the top, which was down and fastened with a sort of wax seal.

The stranger of the black cloak lay in the middle of the floor—dead.

He was still wearing the cloak. The big slouch hat was lying on the floor some distance away. From the inside of the box the faint rustling was coming.

We turned over the stranger, took the cloak off. For several instants we saw nothing amiss—

At first we saw a man, dressed in a somber, featureless black suit. He had a coat and skin-tight pants.

His hair was short and curly brown. It stood straight up in its inch-long length. His eyes were open and staring. I noticed first that he had no eyebrows, only a curious dark line in the flesh over each eye.

It was then that I realized he had no nose. But no one had ever noticed that before. His skin was oddly mottled. Where the nose should have been there were dark shadowings that made the appearance of a nose, if you only just glanced

at him. Like the work of a skillful artist in a painting.

His mouth was as it should be, and slightly open—but he had no teeth. His head perched upon a thin neck.

The suit was—not a suit. It was part of him. It was his body.

WHAT we thought was a coat was a huge black wing sheath, like a beetle has. He had a thorax like an insect, only the wing sheath covered it and you couldn't notice it when he wore the cloak. The body bulged out below, tapering off into the two long, thin hind legs. His arms came out from under the top of the "coat." He had a tiny secondary pair of arms folded tightly across his chest. There was a sharp round hole newly pierced in his chest just above these arms, still oozing a watery liquid.

The janitor fled gibbering. The officer was pale but standing by his duty. I heard him muttering under his breath an endless stream of *Hail Marys*.

The lower thorax—the "abdomen"—was very long and insectlike. It was crumpled up now like the wreck of an airplane fuselage.



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I recalled the appearance of a female wasp that had just laid eggs—her thorax had had that empty appearance.

The sight was a shock such as leaves one in full control. The mind rejects it, and it is only in afterthought that one can feel the dim shudder of horror.

The rustling was still coming from the box. I motioned to the white-faced cop and we went over and stood before it. He took his nightstick and knocked away the waxen seal.

Then we heaved and pulled the lid open.

A wave of noxious vapor assailed us. We staggered back as suddenly a stream of flying things shot out of the huge iron container. The window was open, and straight out into the first glow of dawn they flew.

There must have been dozens of them. They were about two or three inches long and they flew on wide gauzy beetle wings. They looked like little men, strangely terrifying as they flew—clad in their black suits, with expressionless faces and their dots of watery blue eyes. And they flew out on transparent wings that came from under their black beetle coats.

I ran to the window, fascinated, almost hypnotized. The horror of it had not reached my mind at once. Afterwards I have had spasms of numbing terror as my mind tries to put the things together. The whole business was so utterly unexpected.

We knew of army ants and their imitators, yet it never occurred to us that we too were army ants of a sort. We knew of stick insects and it never occurred to us that there might be others that disguise themselves to fool, not other animals, but the supreme animal himself—man.

We found some bones in the bottom of that iron case afterwards. But we couldn't identify them. Perhaps we did not try

very hard. They might have been human—

I suppose the stranger of the black cloak did not fear women so much as it distrusted them. Women notice men, perhaps, more closely than other men do. Women might become suspicious sooner of the inhumanity, the deception. And then there might perhaps have been some touch of instinctive feminine jealousy. The stranger was disguised as a man, but its sex was surely female. The things in the iron box were its young.

BUT it is the other thing I saw when I ran to the window that has shaken me the most. The policeman did not see it. Nobody else saw it but me, and I only for an instant.

Nature practises deceptions in every angle. Evolution will create a being for any niche, no matter how unlikely.

When I went to the window, I saw the small cloud of flying things rising up into the sky and sailing away into the purple distance. The dawn was breaking and the first rays of the sun were just striking over the housetops.

Shaken, I looked away from that fourth floor tenement room over the roofs of lower buildings. Chimneys and walls and empty clotheslines made the scenery over which the tiny mass of horror passed.

And then I saw a chimney, not thirty feet away on the next roof. It was squat and red brick and had two black pipe ends flush with its top. I saw it suddenly vibrate, oddly. And its red brick surface seem to peel away, and the black pipe openings turn suddenly white.

I saw two big eyes staring into the sky.

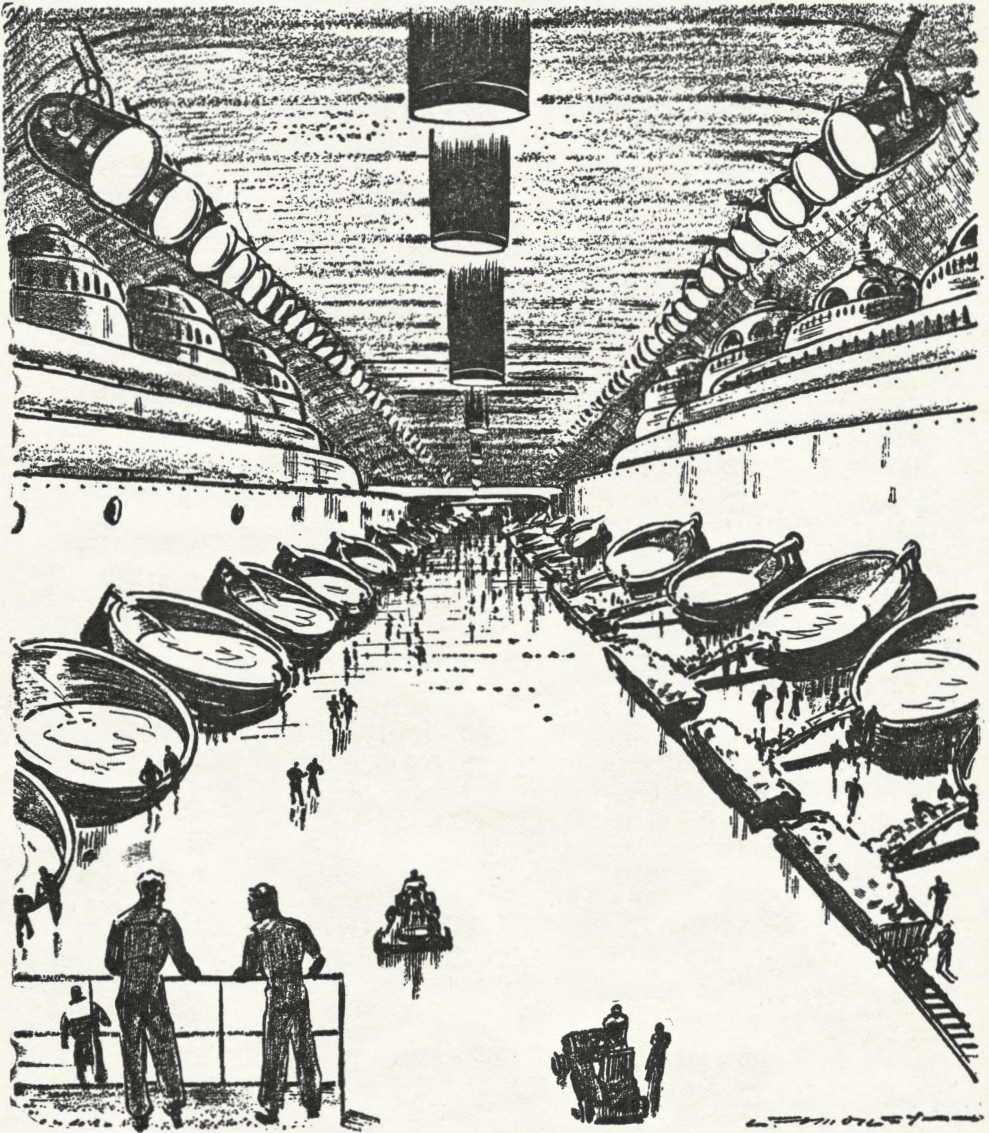
A great, flat-winged thing detached itself silently from the surface of the real chimney and darted after the cloud of flying things.

I watched until all had lost themselves in the sky.

Our Director Meets Trouble

A Novelette

By John E. Harry



Listen to the sad saga of Our Director—whose business it was to grow food in water—and whose biggest problem was to keep from drowning himself in the hydroponics tanks!

CHAPTER ONE

We Feed the World!

JIM PERRY, general director of Hydroponics Station No. 23 for some two years, kicked his heels happily against his desk blotter and leaned back

until the springs on his chair creaked. Jim Perry was very, very happy. Two years of his directorship had seen the station climb to second place in production and efficiency. While those who knew were inclined to split the credit for the feat with his secretary, that fact bothered Mr. Perry not at all. The heads of the Hydroponics Service, in Chicago, were not numbered among those who knew. They had sent him a tidy little recognition in the form of a just-received administrative promotion in salary from ten to twelve thousand credits a year.

Jim Perry fished a flattened cigarette pack from his shirt pocket and dug deep, searching for a tag to put the ultimate period to his sense of well-being. Then his face fell.

As usual, the pack was empty.

"Gertrude!" bellowed Jim Perry. "Gertrude! Where in hell are you?"

THE doorway to the outer office opened, and Gertrude, Perry's trim, efficient secretary, looked in. "What's the matter now?" she asked coldly. "Got the D.T.'s again?"

"Young lady," growled Perry, "please remember that I am your superior and address me accordingly. I may be forced yet to take stern measures with you."

"Such as putting me in the nitrate mines?"

"Such as some such thing!"

"Ha!" said Gertrude nastily. "Just try. Just try to get along without me! See how long you'd hang on to that two thousand credit boost in pay. Why, you'd be out as director so fast—"

"Woman!" roared Perry in a terrible voice. "Did you come in here to start a debating society? And on government time to boot!"

"What was it you called me in here for?" asked Gertrude. "I heard you bellowing like a wounded elephant and came running in to save you from some terrible

fate. And look what I get for my devotion! What *did* you want, anyway?"

"My cigarettes are all gone," said Perry accusingly.

"So what? You don't think I took them, do you?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," Perry told her. "As punishment you can scam up to the canteen and get me another pack."

"My dear sir," said Gertrude frostily, "do you think I'm an errand boy? I'm extremely busy—"

"What, did the manicurist drop in this morning?" snarled Perry.

"—very busy this morning," Gertrude went on, ignoring him. "If you want to keep that extra two thousand a year, you'd better let me keep working. After all, at least one person in this office should keep busy if we want to keep growing plants here. Go up to the canteen yourself. You're usually there anyway during working hours."

"Merely to make sure none of the section directors are killing Government time," Perry assured her hastily. "However, what you say does have some sense—particularly the part about your getting back to work. To your grindstone, me proud beauty!"

As the door closed behind the girl, Perry picked up the intraphone on his desk and dialed Charlie Hammond, director of the Section of Solutions. After a moment's talking he put down the phone and headed out through Gertrude's door to the corridor. As he passed her desk, heaped high with forms she was working on, she gave him a baleful stare.

"And I suppose you're disappearing for the rest of the morning?"

"Nothing of the sort. I have an important conference," Perry hedged, from the doorway to the corridor. "Charlie Hammond and I have some burning questions to discuss."

"Burning thirsts, you mean," said Gertrude, scowling. "I suppose this—con-

ference—will take place in the canteen?”

“Well—heh, heh—yes,” admitted Perry. “We had hoped to toss a couple down the hatch betimes. During the pauses in conversation, as it were.” The door slammed behind him as he ducked out into the corridor.

Gertrude clucked despondently. “What’s the use!” she exclaimed to herself. Shoving the stacks of forms aside, she reached down into one of the drawers of her desk and pulled out the latest issue of a romantic magazine. Leaning back in her chair, she began to read, happily oblivious of the forms that waited reproachfully for her attention.

ONCE UPON a time, two years back, Jim Perry himself had occupied Charlie Hammond’s job, that of director of the Section of Solutions. Although for a time it had appeared that he might remain right there, and Charlie remain as his assistant, a lucky break with a congressionally-appointed general director (who’d tried to wash out growing tanks with a lye solution) had raised him to the unbearable eminence of general director himself, while Charlie took over his old job. Now, after two years, Perry had almost forgotten that he’d ever held a job as degrading as mere Section Director—practically manual labor—and took a keen delight in all Charlie’s troubles, which were numerous.

As everyone knows, the job of Solutions-Section director in a modern hydroponics station is wearing under the best of conditions. Under adverse conditions it can become a nightmare. That fact is implicit in the setup of the Hydroponics Stations themselves.

The stations were made possible, of course, by the discovery, shortly before 2000 A.D., of a uranium isotope (U-235) which, through atomic power, made possible low-cost power to provide light needed by growing plants. The first indoor

growth of plants on a commercial scale in nutrient solutions (about 2000 A.D.) proved to be such a huge success that within a hundred years no more plant food was grown on soil, as had been the custom previously.

The vast areas of the North American Union were deserted by farmers, and given over to intensive use by grazing cattle watched and guarded by the hard-bitten “pioneers,” men who lived outside the cities. Concentration of growing facilities in the hydroponics stations made possible a population of almost ten billion people in North America alone. And when the Federated Unions of South America, Europe, Africa, and Eastern and Western Asia followed the North American Union’s example in food growing, their populations also increased proportionally. Now the world held more people than would have been dreamed possible a few centuries before—and they were all well cared for. But the pressure of population meant that no breakdown of the highly developed, complicated civilization could be allowed. Even a momentary interruption of production would mean hardship for millions.

Since the time the first station was set up, the Section of Solutions carried the heaviest load of responsibility for proper growth of the plants. Now, in 2321, the responsibility was greater than it had ever been, for the newly developed, high-producing strains of plants now grown were much more cranky than the older, less efficient growers, and required a solution that was little less than exactly perfect.

CHARLIE was gloomy again, Perry found when he stepped from the escalator on the hundred fifty-third—recreation—level and breezed into the canteen. Charlie stood disconsolately by the stainless-steel bar, a foaming tankard only half drained before him. He looked as if at any moment he might begin to

weep dolefully into the glass of beer.

"Heigh-ho, heigh-ho!" Perry sang out cheerfully. "What ails thee, lad? Me-thinks thou hast an evil expression on thy puss."

"Evil isn't the word," growled Charlie. "I'm a bad guy to drink with today, J.C." Since Perry's promotion to general director, Charlie had taken to calling him by his initials. Perry hated it. "The world looks black and gloomy."

"It's going to look a lot blacker if you don't stop calling me J. C.," warned Perry. "There's no sunlight in the nitrate mines. . . . Petey!" he yelled to the barman. "Haven't you learned yet to draw me one and put a head on it as soon as I come through that door? Now, Charlie my lad, what's bothering you most?"

"It's my assistant, as usual," growled Charlie. "Fred Stirling, his name is. You know him, don't you?"

"Stirling," said Perry meditatively. "Yes, I think so. What's the matter with him?"

"What isn't the matter!" snorted Charlie. "He couldn't figure the osmotic pressure of a solution of bath salts! Honest to Pete, it burns me up the way they've requisitioned all the good men from me for other stations. In the past two years I've had six assistants—six of them!—and all good men until Stirling came along. They requisitioned them away from me at a dizzy clip and gave them high-pay jobs—all but Stirling. Will they ever requisition him? No! I've had him for eight months now, and it looks as if he'd stay forever."

"Whyn't you fire him, then?"

"Can't," gloomed Charlie. "He's a hydroponics career man, and in my ignorance I recommended him for the job myself. So now I haven't the right to discharge him."

"Assistants," muttered Perry to himself. "Always inefficient. I had a terrible one once, name of Hammond. Charlie

Hammond. He's a section director now, in some station. God help them!"

Not to be swerved from his grievance, Charlie kept right on. "Suppose I tell Stirling there's something I want done. Does he do it? Oh, after a fashion—the fashion of a child of ten. I've got to check all his work, to make sure it's properly done. I might as well do it myself in the first place. Can I take a little annual leave and go on a vacation like a normal section director? Not me. If I did, I'd likely come back to find the solutions are Scotch and soda! Discouraging."

"Oh, I don't know," said Perry, toying with the idea.

"That's not all. I always hoped that when I got to be section director I could do like you—let my assistant do all the work while I wallowed in ease and alcohol. What happens? I'm doing as much work as I ever did. More, by golly—I haven't even got Gertrude to help me any more. I tell you it's tough, J. C."

Perry's eyes sparkled. "Initials again, hey? Suppose I give you an easier job—digging nitrate, for example? Back to work, you parasite, before I forget myself and give you a boot in the snoot!"

CHAPTER TWO

Headquarters Cracks Down

THOUGH Jim Perry didn't realize it, he himself was soon to join Charlie in the depths of woe. In fact, even as he was turning bottoms up with a flourish in the canteen, Gertrude was laying on his desk a letter, just received by facsimile beam from Chicago, that was packed with gray hairs for him. All unconscious of the dire things that awaited him, Perry pushed open the door of the office with a large smile, the innocent foam scarcely dry on his upper lip.

"Any urgent business lately, Gertrude?" he beamed.

"A letter, on your desk," she told him. "It came just after you went to the . . . conference."

When Perry picked it off his desk, he glanced at it idly and then put it down again, its full import not striking him. Then a thrill of horror went through him. He picked it up again and gave it an agonized glance.

"Gertrude!" he bellowed. "Gertrude! Did you put this here?"

Gertrude, who knew him well enough to expect this reaction, came in from the outer office.

"Who else?" she inquired in an acid tone. Then, to herself, "Typical male reaction. No control over himself at all. Disgusting!" Perry didn't even reply, and that alarmed her. When he failed to return an insult, she knew the matter was very, very serious.

"Oh, it can't be as bad as that!" she said fearfully.

"Get me Charlie Hammond!" said Perry. "Get me Davis! Get me Yates! Get me Carter! Get me all the section directors or their assistants! And hurry up!"

As Gertrude ducked out to her office again, Perry sat down with the letter, searching it for a hint that the whole thing was a grisly joke thought up by some big shot in the National Office at Chicago. He found none. It was in deadly earnest.

The letter was headed, "*New Type of Experimental Oat to be Put Into Production*", and his dazed eyes went from that innocent-looking heading to the body of the letter itself. This tricky, experimental plant, minus growth data and exact solution formulas, was to be tried out here—at Station 23! He'd have to shift fully half his production to this oat—which had to be grown in the dark!

And worst of all, he had just three days to get the whole unhappy mess into full production. If any of the kinks in the thing caused a lost crop -

Perry groaned hollowly. "Gertrude!" he wailed. "Gertrude! Come here with the remedy!" After two years of smooth sailing, Jim Perry saw breakers ahead. Large, ominous ones—and directly on his course!

GERTRUDE had contacted only Charlie Hammond and Yates, director of the Section of Development, when Jim Perry sent out his SOS for the "remedy"—the bottle of Scotch she kept in her desk for just such an emergency. Those two, therefore, were the first to get to Perry's office, a few minutes later, and without a word Perry handed the letter to Yates to read.

Yates, a dapper, correct little man, read it aloud in a mincing tone, his eyebrows raised superciliously.

". . . Department of Pathology report which states that this vitamin is essential to sound bone and tooth structure . . . extremely elusive . . . but has at last been isolated. The richest natural sources are the cereal grains . . . umph, umph . . . and particularly oats. Experimental work at the Central Laboratories here in Chicago has developed a new strain of oats . . . high in this vitamin . . . if proper growth conditions are maintained. These conditions . . . umph, umph . . . temperature . . . umph . . . and, most important retardation of normal chlorophyll development . . . umph . . . requiring . . . absence of light during the first week of growth . . . restricted light thereafter. Solution . . . giving optimum growth and vitamin production has not yet been . . . entirely perfected . . . used here consists of dipotassium phosphate, three milligrams per liter; ammonium sulphate, umph milligrams per liter; potassium chloride, umph, umph; ammonium sulphate, umph; potassium nitrate, umph; and an unbalanced solution of trace elements consisting of ferrous citrate, man- ganous sulphate, borax, copper sulphate,

and zinc sulphate in the following proportions . . . Triangulation not worked out, but should not be too difficult. Since your station has achieved the highest rate of improvement during the past two years, it has been decided to try cultures on a commercial scale first there . . . half your tanks will be devoted to this purpose and it is sincerely hoped that you can report that the necessary changes have been made and slips set some time within the next three days. Yours very truly . . .”

Yates glanced up. “This should be a highly interesting piece of work,” he commented.

Perry moaned. “Interesting, he says! Interesting! Ye gods!”

“An unbalanced solution of trace elements,” Charlie quoted bitterly. “Triangulation not worked out—but should not be difficult! Should not be difficult! Damn you, Yates, I wish I had just half your optimism.”

Yates smiled precisely. “Oh, come, it isn’t so bad. Here’s a chance for you to distinguish yourself with a neat piece of solution work.”

“Chance to get kicked out on my tail, you mean!” snarled Charlie. “Triangulation not worked out yet! No wonder they didn’t work it out! With that unbalanced ratio of trace elements, the trig formulas won’t work. It can’t be done mathematically. In other works, we can work out the best ratio of elements by cut-and-try. A couple of thousand different solutions to make up and test—and we’ve got to have the proper formula worked out, ready for the seedlings, inside of three days! Those lice—shoving a half-baked experimental job off on us like this, and telling us to get it into commercial production inside of three days!”

“It’s a stinker,” agreed Perry. “And if anything goes wrong, of course, they’ll accept no excuses. They judge by results, and this is going to be a bad, bad job to get results on! Half our production to be

switched to a new, untried crop, on three days’ notice, and a question of produce—or else.”

He shook his head. “Wonder what’s the big rush on this thing.”

“I THINK I know,” said Yates in his dainty way. “There’s been a five million credit grant voted by Congress recently for study of this new vitamin and its effects. Tharovin, it’s been named. No doubt the foundation set up for the study has requisitioned a large amount of tharovin-bearing plants for quick delivery from the Hydroponics Service, and this order is the result. Most likely, several of the top-ranking stations will be put to producing such plants in the near future.”

Perry nodded. “We produce it, or else.”

“There’s been a good deal of basic work done on the vitamin all over the country in the past few months. Even my Section had a crack at it.” Yates smiled deprecatingly. “It’s thought now that it holds the secret of dental caries—tooth decay, that is—and all sorts of bone disorders, as well as having some obscure effect on the brain tissues. Recent advances in medical science have done away with nearly all contagious diseases; and now investigators are beginning to believe that tharovin deficiency is at the bottom of most hospital cases that are being received—except accidents, of course.

“Deficiency of this vitamin has been recorded, unknowingly, of course, in even ancient literature. In the Middle Ages, before the formation of the Federated Union, we know, poultry developed cannibalism through tharovin deficiency. That was before the year 2000, when there were still independent farmers in the Plains; and it had been observed that feeding sprouted oats to poultry prevented them from developing cannibalism. The sprouted oats, low in chlorophyll, were apparently comparatively high in tharovin even

then, although the plants used for growth in soil in those days were extremely inefficient. Brewer's grains, which contained sprouted barley, had the same effect, though they weren't quite so efficient. Barley probably didn't carry as much tharovin as sprouted oats. So, almost four hundred years ago, the existence of tharovin was indicated by a method of controlling cannibalism in poultry—"

Charlie had been wrinkling his forehead, bored by the lecture. "Cannibalism?" he interrupted. "What's that?"

"The poultry pecked each other to death," Yates snapped. "Don't tell me you've never heard of cannibalism before."

"I've heard of cannibals," said Charlie, turning to look at Gertrude, who had just come in from her office. "They used to eat people." He eyed the secretary's luscious figure appraisingly. "Yum!"

"Beast!" said Gertrude. Then, to Perry, "The other two directors were working in the tank levels when I called their offices. They're on their way up now."

As Gertrude started out again, she smiled meltingly at Charlie. "Don't think I'm really annoyed," she confided. "Really, I like my men virile."

"Oh, boy!" grinned Charlie, getting up to chase her.

"Down, pup!" barked Perry. "If anybody gets virile around Gertrude it'll be me. I don't have any intention of letting the best secretary in the station get married out from under my nose."

Gertrude had paused in the doorway. "Best one, hah?" she inquired. "Then how about recommending me for a raise in pay?"

"Trapped!" ejaculated Perry hoarsely. "It just goes to show, a man can never win!"

DAVIS, the Director of the Section of Illumination, was inclined to take the letter lightly at first, since at first glance it didn't seem to affect his

section to any great degree. But Carter, of Plant Care, set up a howl even louder than Charlie's.

"Half our tanks?" he bellowed. "In oats? Half of them! By Godfrey, it can't be done, not in three days! Not half our tanks!"



Jim Perry tapped the letter on his desk. "It's got to be done."

"It can't be done, I tell you! Those tanks are full to the brim with immature food plants."

"Tear 'em out."

"Tear 'em out?" wept Carter. That was heresy! Tear out his beautiful plants—before maturity? "We can't! What about our commitments to the retail outlets?"

Perry actually smiled. "That's the only joyful tidings this letter bore. Any commitments we can't meet will be prorated to the other stations in this Region. The Regional Office is to work out the exact amounts."

"Don't make me tear out those immature plants," begged Carter. "Give me a

week to empty the tanks—then I can do it properly, taking only matured crops. Be reasonable! Only a week.”

Perry felt sympathetic, but there was nothing he could do. “The letter says three days.”

“It’s only a suggestion.”

“Hah!” snorted Perry. “Don’t you know what’d happen to us if we ignored that *suggestion*? The seedlings must be placed in the tanks within three days. You’d better arrange to have the seeds pricked into the sprouting flats yet this afternoon—if they’ve come. They were to be flown out, and should be here by now.”

“All right,” Carter said dully, a broken man. He would literally have given a year’s salary to be allowed enough time to clear the tanks in an orderly fashion, without waste, taking only mature crops. He was a methodical man, and it hurt him to do business in this haphazard, inefficient way.

He got to his feet. “I’ll arrange for it now, and work out the best possible manner of clearing the tanks. Some of them will be empty for fifty hours, you know.”

“I know,” said Perry, realizing how unhappy it would make any Plant Care man to have perhaps ten or twenty percent of production capacity lying idle for two full days. “Nothing we can do about it, though. I’m sorry.” Perry turned to Davis, an evil gleam in his eye.

“You thought you were out of it, didn’t you, Davis? Get set for a shock. You’ve got to develop switchboards to enable you to switch off every individual set of radiators in the station. It’s got to be done within three days.”

“What?” screamed Davis. “That’s an impossibility, man!”

Perry showed his teeth in a vicious grin. “I agree with you. But the National Office in Chicago doesn’t. Tell it to them. They don’t realize it.”

“But, man—there are a hundred and thirty-one tank levels, with a thousand tanks on each level, and a set of ultra-violet radiators for each tank. A hundred and thirty-one thousand of them!” He closed his eyes to visualize the maze of conduits and wiring carrying juice to all those radiators, and 131,000 separate switches to be properly connected into that maze. A shudder of horror ran through him.

“It can’t be done!” he cried, his eyes wild. “Not in three days!”

Perry tapped the letter. “It’s got to be done. The letter says this crop needs darkness for the first week, and after that only enough light to enable it to manufacture food for growing.” He paused. “After the first week you’ll need rheostats in the circuits, too, for dimming the radiators.”

Davis was a broken man too. “I’ve only got two hundred men in my section,” he muttered. “Two hundred men to put in 131,000 switches in three days, and 131,000 rheostats in the following week.” His eyes staring, he got to his feet and tottered to the door. Perry turned to look at Charlie Hammond, the sole remaining occupant of the room.

Even Charlie’s eyes had begun to glaze as he realized the enormity of what had to be done.

“Gertrude!” yelled Perry. “Gertrude! Bring the remedy, right away! If we act quickly enough, this one, at least, can be saved!”

CHAPTER THREE

“Trouble, Step Right In!”

DURING the next three days Jim Perry thought that things were as bad as they could get, but as usual he was overly optimistic. Davis, who was getting little sleep, kept weeping on his shoulder, to the effect that two

hundred men absolutely couldn't connect 131,000 switches in three days. Carter, who got even less sleep, could do nothing save moan about the murder being done to his immature plants, and the level after endless level of tanks standing idle after they'd been cleared.

Charlie Hammond, who apparently got no sleep at all, didn't even make his usual trips to the canteen, by which sign Perry knew that his case was the most serious of all. The fourth day, however, things got worse, for Trouble dropped in, in person—and in more ways than one.

Gertrude announced it. "A man here to see you," she said. "An inspector out of the Regional Office."

Perry, whose own eyes had become red-rimmed from lack of sleep by this time, groaned inwardly.

"What next?" he growled. "All right, show him in."

The newcomer was a heavy-set man with a stubborn, antagonistic face and apparently possessed of the typical check-up man's unpleasant mentality. He leered at Perry happily as he came in.

"Some li'l houri you got working out there, brother. What's her name?" Then, as Perry scowled, he hurriedly added, "I'm checking up on the experimental oat crop you've been ordered to put in production."

Perry stared at him coldly, with all the aversion of the producer for the political check-up man. Under his stare, the newcomer's eyes dropped.

"Uh—my credentials," he said, offering his papers. "My name's George Trouble."

"George Trouble?"

"That's right, brother."

"Umm," said Perry, stifling a desire to grin.

"You got the oats in the growing tanks yet?"

"The seedlings were placed last night," Perry told him. "Within three days, as

instructed. Half the tanks now contain this crop, also as instructed. And, finally, the ultra-violet radiators are dead over the tanks containing oats. *Precisely* as instructed. Anything else?"

"Solutions worked out properly?"

"Four thousand, three hundred and fifty-eight separate solutions were made up and checked for proper osmotic pressure, triangulation, and balance of elements. By the way, just what *was* the idea of that unbalanced solution of trace elements?"

"Don't ask me," said Trouble. "I'm no expert on solution chemistry. I'll have to make an actual physical check to see that conditions are as good as you say they are."

"Fine. I'll have one of the men show you around."

"You can show me around yourself," said Trouble truculently. "And things had better be right, or you'll do a lot of explaining."

Things were right, as Perry knew from the reports of his section directors. The oats seedlings were in the square, flat quarter-acre oak tanks, their rootlets already reaching out hungrily into the richly nutritious water that surrounded them; the overhead ultra-violet radiators were dark; an actual count by Trouble showed some hundred-fifteen-thousand odd tanks, scattered through every level, devoted to the new crop.

The count itself took twelve long hours, and Perry, who'd been getting little sleep as it was, was dead on his feet by the time Trouble had finished. But the inspector insisted that no one else could answer his questions properly. When at last they finished, Perry turned to the Regional Office man.

"I hope that's all," he said bitterly. "If not, feel free to call my apartment any time. Just wake me up from a sound sleep any time there's something you want to know."

"Don't worry; I will," promised Trouble.

As Perry dragged himself to the nearest escalator, he had one grain of hope to sustain him. To himself he murmured, "But now, *nothing* else can happen to me."

He did not see the figure of Fate, who must have been standing somewhere near, leering at him. For he was wrong again.

THE really bad news came the following day, when Charlie Hammond came dragging into Perry's office in the afternoon. Since their day-and-night work to get the proper solution formula worked out inside of three days, almost all the Solutions Section men had taken time off to catch up on their sleep. No exception, Charlie was showing his face for the first time in two days. One look at that face told Perry that all was not well with the Solutions Section.

"What is it, man?" he gasped. "Another inspector?"

"Worse than that," muttered Charlie, lowering himself into a chair like one who is suddenly very, very old.

"Worse? How could it be?"

"It's Stirling," said Charlie. "My assistant."

Perry closed his eyes tight and waited numbly for the blow. It came.

"We worked out the solution, you know, by trial and error; the trig formulas for figuring the proper ratios wouldn't work because of that unbalanced solution of trace elements. After we ran off over four thousand tests, we picked the optimum formula. Stirling hadn't been helping us. I didn't think his mental equipment was up to the strain of what we had to do. When we finally got the thing worked out, though, I gave Stirling the formula and told him to do the actual solution mixing."

His voice broke. "You wouldn't think he could mess *that* up, would you?"

"For heaven's sake, man, don't keep me in suspense. What did he do?"

"The fool saw that the trace-element solution was unbalanced, so without asking anybody about it, he balanced that first. Everybody else was asleep," Charlie admitted honestly. "We'd all been working day and night, except Stirling—"

"Give!" thundered Perry. "What then?"

"Well, balancing the trace element solution threw the nutrient elements out of *their* ionization balance. So Stirling simply applied the trig formulas and balanced them up that way. In the end, he had a perfectly normal nutrient solution. You can find a dozen like it in any textbook on five-salt solutions. Nothing at all like the deliberately different solution the laboratories recommend for maximum vitamin development."

"Oh—oh!" muttered Perry. "Well, it's been nice knowing you, Charlie. Next time we meet we'll probably both be in the nitrate mines, and Stirling will have your job—or mine. Stirling!" he muttered, his brow darkening. Then he brightened. "Maybe we can still change the solution."

"You know better than that!" protested Charlie. "At this stage of their development, experimental plants are always as delicate as babies. A sudden change in food would throw their whole digestive system out of order. Don't forget, they've been on this solution for some fifty hours by now."

"Yes, of course," admitted Perry. "Well, I guess there's nothing for it but to raise 'em in that solution. Vitamin production will be cut, and we'll probably get a red-hot kickback on it. But after all, it's our first crop. As long as we get even fair vitamin production, they'll have to give us another chance."

"That Stirling!" muttered Charlie. "If only I hadn't recommended him for the job myself! He'd've been down in the nitrate mines so long ago—"

"Charlie, my boy," said Perry, "what you and I need is a little foam clinging lovingly to our upper lips."

TROUBLE did not spot anything specifically wrong but like all investigative officers he spent his time criticizing minor points of procedure and noting them on the endless reports that he had to be filling out almost constantly.

The result was that Gertrude got called in more frequently with the remedy. And Charlie took to dropping in for a consolatory dram or two.

It was such a convivial moment that was rudely interrupted by Trouble himself, a couple of days later. Fortunately, he did not come directly into Perry's office. They heard his rough voice as he talked to Gertrude.

Suddenly there was the unmistakable, pistol-sharp sound of a slap, well-delivered, and Gertrude's chilly voice. "Keep your hands in your pocket, you flea-bitten Lothario!" Charlie snickered and went to the door to see what was going on.

Gertrude's back was straight and uncompromising as she sat by her desk in the outer office, and one of Trouble's red

cheeks held the whitened outline of an undoubtedly Gertrude-sized hand.

Although the tableau spoke for itself, Charlie could not resist asking, "What gives?"

"This—this Neanderthaler tried to kiss me."

"And you slapped him? Tut-tut, Gertrude, I thought you liked 'em virile."

"Men, yes," said Gertrude haughtily. "Gorillas—no!"

Charlie started to snicker again, but his eyes crossed Trouble's.

"You laugh, do you?" said the investigator, shaking one stubby forefinger at him. "Think it's funny, do you? Well, see if you can laugh at what I came to tell you. Your assistant just burned out the switchboard controlling the ultra-violet radiators, and none of them can be turned off any more. Right now every radiator is burning full strength, even over your tanks of oats. In another hour there won't be a milligram of tharovin in the whole station. Laugh *that* off, hyena!"

Turning, he stalked out furiously. Charlie didn't even have to turn around to know that Jim Perry was already reaching blindly for the bottle in his desk.



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CHAPTER FOUR

Chlorophyll, I Love You!

“A THOUSAND man days!” roared Davis. “A thousand man days of work on those switches and rheostats, and he burns them out in half a second! He ought to be shot!”

“There, there,” soothed Perry, who agreed with him. “We couldn’t shoot him, dammit. He’ll be fined, of course.”

Davis subsided, still rumbling like a volcano trying to work up courage to erupt. Perry tapped his fingernails with a pencil.

“We’ll have to get those lights turned off. Every second they burn, more chlorophyll develops and we lose more tharovin. You’ll have to pull the master-switch, Davis, and black out the whole station while you work at getting that switchboard patched up again.”

“What?” screamed the harried Davis; but his voice was drowned out by Carter’s agonized bellow.

“Not by a damn’ sight! You’ll kill all my other plants if you do that!”

“It’ll only be for a couple of days,” argued Perry, “while Davis gets another switchboard built.”

“A few days will be too long! Some of those tanks are only one and two days from maturity now. They need every second’s illumination if they’re to mature properly.”

“We’ve got to do something right away,” muttered Perry, wondering if his hair wasn’t turning white. “Damn that Stirling anyway! What the hell was he doing at the switchboard in the first place?”

“The first week’s growth was ended,” explained Davis, “and it was time to start giving the plants restricted illumination. Of course, Stirling wouldn’t put in a hit to the Section of Illumination, like a nor-

mal man. He had to do it himself. Where there were individual tanks of oats scattered here and there on a level, he pulled the double throw switch over to the rheostat all right. But some levels had nothing but oats in their tanks, and he couldn’t be bothered to pull a thousand switches individually. He tried to hook the whole lot together in parallel by tying a piece of haywire to the back of the board, on the proper terminals—he thought. Well, he’s no electrician. He hooked one lead on the wrong terminal, and blew out the whole board and the master fuse. Half the contacts were fused beyond repair, on the board. We replaced the fuse and shunted the switchboard out of the circuit. That way there’s no short, and we can feed juice to the radiators; but the switches aren’t in the circuit any more, so we can’t cut out the individual radiators as we did before. They’re all on—or they’re all off.”

Charlie came in through the door, his face mournful. One hand held some stalks of oats, immature yet, just beginning to head out. They were green—such a bright, poisonous green that they hurt the eye.

“Chlorophyll!” groaned Perry. “Well, I guess it’s too late to do anything at all now. Did you have them analyzed for content?”

“With that color I don’t need to have them analyzed,” said Charlie grimly. “They’re so full of chlorophyll that their root volume more than doubled during the past two hours.”

“Storing food manufactured in the leaves,” explained Carter, of Plant Care, to no one in particular. He was professionally interested. “That’s an almost unbelievably high rate of food manufacture. Chlorophyll content must be higher than that of any plant known to science now.”

Perry held his head. “The lab said that vitamin content varied inversely with chlorophyll development. By that, we must have a tharovin content that’s a

minus quantity—if not less than that!”

The door opened again, this time to admit Trouble, who was followed by the dapper Yates, Director of the Development Section, and another man, portly and important-looking, whom Perry didn't know.

Trouble's face was ominously gloating. "I think you can guess what I'll be reporting on this fizzle," he told Perry.

Perry bent his head, indicated a spot at the back of his neck. "Hit right here," he said. "Get out your axe and don't keep me in suspense."

Yates coughed delicately. "Er—Mr. Perry."

It was so unusual for any of his Section Directors to use formality with him that Perry looked up in astonishment. "Yes?"

"I thought I'd better introduce Mr. Downey. He's from the Central Laboratory at Chicago. The work done on tharovin there was his personal responsibility. He tells me he flew out to Station 23 to see how the crop was coming along."

"Er—yes," said the portly man. "How do you do, Mr. Perry?"

"Badly," said Perry, looking him over. So it was this fellow who would wield the axe, instead of Trouble! "You know, don't you, that our tharovin yield will be nil?"

Trouble looked triumphant, but Yates and Downey both smiled.

"It doesn't really matter any more," Yates told him in his precise way. "Mr. Downey tells me that he received word en route that his technicians have succeeded in synthesizing tharovin. The synthesized product is not only cheaper, but actually purer than that made from plants. High-tharovin oats have proved to be a still-born product."

This seemed altogether too good to be true. "You mean—" gasped Perry—"you mean that it doesn't make any difference about our failure to get a yield of tharovin from this crop?"

Downey was smiling even more broadly than Yates. "That's right, Mr. Perry. Nor is that all. I've had quite a talk with Mr. Yates, and he's been telling me that you overcame almost insuperable obstacles to get the crop into commercial production within the time limit set by the National Office. Personally, I wouldn't have believed that what you did could have been done inside of three weeks, let alone three days."

Perry almost blushed. "Well, thanks," he said, leering at Trouble.

"I fully intend to give you the strongest kind of recommendation for your devotion to orders," said Downey. "I shall state in my report how resourcefully you met your problems and overcame them, getting a tricky experimental crop into commercial production inside of the time limit set by Chicago—a limit which, I may add, they probably didn't expect you to keep to. In the future, your station will almost unquestionably be picked as the best-fitted to work out any new experimental crops on a commercial basis in a hurry!"

"Awk!" croaked Perry. He wasn't at all happy about that; the thought of going through another nightmare like the last two weeks turned him cold with horror. A glance at Trouble's angry face, however, made him feel better.

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Downey," he said, and almost meant it.

GERTRUDE came in from the outer office just then. In one hand she held a letter, evidently just plucked from the facsimile recorder, and her face was a study. She handed the letter to Perry and fled again, not waiting for the explosion that she was sure would come. Perry read it, the smile frozen on his face. Slowly he sank back into his chair.

"Read this," he said, handing the letter to Charlie. "Read it."

Charlie read. "It will be necessary to have all tanks switched back to produc-

tion of normal food crops. We urgently request you to have this production change made within twelve hours—”

“It can’t be done!” cried Carter wildly.

“It’s got to be done,” Perry told him coldly. He flapped his hand for silence. “Go on,” he told Charlie.

“War has broken out between the city people and the herders. The plainsmen have begun systematically slaughtering the vast herds of cattle in their care . . . at least partial starvation faces the city people . . . storage stocks below normal . . . production cut through sabotage in many stations. Production must be stepped up . . .”

“War!” said Davis blankly. “Why—why—that’s unheard of! There haven’t been any wars for over a hundred years!”

“Nothing could justify—” began Carter, but he was interrupted by Downey.

“Let me see that letter, will you, please?”

When he had it, he read it over slowly, nodding his head. “Well, it’s come, then,” he said sadly. “People will starve before it’s over. I’ll have to leave for Chicago again immediately. No doubt there’ll be attempts to synthesize food enough to carry us through, and I’ll be needed.”

“It should be an interesting problem,” said Yates. “Certainly there’s a solution.”

“Of course such synthesis can be done, even now,” Downey replied. “As you know, Mr. Yates, the barriers are cost and the extreme slowness of the process. It is a slow, laborious job requiring many technicians—too many, I’m afraid.”

“That’s molecular synthesis, you mean, done chemically?” When Downey nodded, Yates went on, “Why not use artificial chlorophyll cultures—let them build the carbohydrate molecules you need? A chlorophyll culture could replace a technician, be on duty twenty-four hours a day and never get tired.”

Downey smiled. “Out of the frying pan, my boy. The necessary chlorophyll would

be more difficult to synthesize than the starches and sugars themselves.”

“Natural chlorophyll?”

“Almost as bad. It’s difficult to extract it from plants in large enough quantities. The trouble is, there aren’t any plants that are high enough in chlorophyll to make extraction pay.”

Perry, who had been listening dumbly, gulped twice before he could speak. “Wait a minute. Do you mean that the only bar to synthesized carbohydrates is lack of a high-chlorophyll plant? Is that what you mean?” Slowly, unbelievably, his hand went out to his desk-top, where lay a small bunch of wilted oat plants, their brilliant green a vivid splash of color against the neutral gray of the desk. He touched them gently.

“If chlorophyll is all you need, gentlemen,” he said dramatically, “it’s here!”

PERRY HARDLY dared believe it was true, but there was no question that he was a Big Man because of the development of the high-chlorophyll oat. The fact that he had nothing at all to do with that development made absolutely no difference, it seemed.

Downey wrote letters about it, and reports. A whole corps of experimental technicians descended on the station.

After them came the newsmen for the facsimile-papers and the news-broadcast services. They interviewed Perry and popped flash bulbs at him until he finally wished he’d never as much as heard of chlorophyll.

In desperation, he finally gave all credit for the development to Stirling.

“Yeah,” he answered their excited questions a bit bitterly, “it was Stirling who was really at the bottom of the whole thing. And how! The oats were originally intended for vitamin production, you know. After the Solutions Section men had worked out the proper solution for optimum vitamin production, Stirling

worked out another one—to give the highest chlorophyll production.”

Only to himself did he add, “And no tharovin at all!”

None of the newsmen even heard his last sentence; they all tore off in search of this new source of copy. Perry leaned back in his chair, mercifully alone at last.

“Gertrude!” he shouted. “Tell Charlie Hammond to come over and we’ll have a couple of quick ones before anybody else comes barging in.”

TROUBLE found them guzzling there some minutes later, but Jim Perry didn’t even bother to look guilty. He was a Big Man now.

“What can I do for you, my man?” he asked pontifically. He suddenly felt almost affectionate toward the check-up man. Trouble’s scowl, he thought to himself, was becoming an astringent necessity to his well-being, like salt—or alcohol. “Want a nice sample of chlorophyll?”

“Look here,” growled Trouble, “why didn’t you tell me this man Stirling was the one who did the work on that chlorophyll solution?”

“Why didn’t you ask me?” Perry said blithely. “Have a little snort?”

“I don’t drink during working hours,” the other said austerely. “You’d be wiser if you didn’t either. About Stirling—”

“What’s it to you?” said Perry, nettled.

“Just this. My job carries an appropriation for an assistant’s salary. That position has been vacant for some time.”

“No wonder,” muttered Perry.

“I wanted a good solution man as my assistant, so that he could take samples of the tanks when I do check-up work in a station, and test them to see if the proper solution is being used.” He scowled accusingly. “The right one wasn’t used here.”

“And look where it got me,” grinned Perry.

“Well. When I took on a solutions man,

I wanted the best. At first I thought of requisitioning your Solutions Section director.”

“Who, me?” cried the startled Charlie. “Save me, boss!”

“Apparently, however, Stirling is the real brains of the Solutions Section here, while Hammond spends his time tipling with you. I can see why you tried to keep me from realizing this—you were afraid I’d take Stirling away from you. Well, brother, your scheme has fallen through. I intend to put in a requisition immediately for Stirling’s transfer, making him my assistant!”

“I won’t initial it!” cried Perry. Then, deciding he was laying it on a bit too thick, he backtracked. “I’ll let him go if you give him personal recommendation.”

“Then I can’t send him back. Why that?”

“That’ll show you really need him for the job. Otherwise you might be hiring him just to spite me, and later fire him again. The recommendation will keep you from doing that. Of course, if you aren’t sure you really want him—”

“I’m sure, all right,” declared Trouble. “You won’t trick me out of getting him. Just so you don’t change your mind, I’ll have your secretary type out the transfer slips and my personal recommendation right now.” He went out to Gertrude’s office, clicking the door shut behind him.

“This, my boy,” declared Perry solemnly, “requires pledging in the waters of Scotland.” He poured out a couple of generous measures, and they raised their glasses in a wordless toast.

As he was about to drink it, however, the clattering of Gertrude’s typewriter, in the outer office, was interrupted by the unmistakable, pistol-sharp sound of a slap and Gertrude’s icy voice.

“I told you once to keep your hands at home, you big baboon!”

“Thou art forgiven,” he told Charlie generously. “My cup runneth over!”

THE MAIL BAG

(Continued from page 8)

Cummings to Neil R. Jones. I tried to read "Doomsday on Ajiat" but gave up halfway through.

The departments, "Fantasy Circle" and "Mail-bag", are a real asset to the magazine. Particularly interesting was the excerpt from "The Time Machine." Does anyone know why this section did not appear in the regular books or anthologies containing it? I can't see anything objectionable in the excerpt, and it certainly isn't long enough to make its deletion necessary.

Reckon that about rounds up my viewpoints this time. I am very happy to see that *Astonishing* is coming out every other month now, and hope it will not be long before the magazine is appearing every month.

Sincerely,

Solomon Eich,
New York City.

Why the quotes around "lady", Irena?

Dear Editor,

I enjoy your magazine a lot, and hope you will have a little room for one of your "lady" readers.

Here is the way I rate the stories in the June edition.

1. "Storm Cloud on Deka"—super.
2. "Out of the Sea"—a fine plot. But I hate huge and terrible monsters. The illustration of these monsters was scary too.

3. "The Unseen Blushers"—but how did it get the title?

4. "The Band Played On"—really good comic—and the pic was quite appropriate. Use Bok for comics, more and more. He isn't nearly as good on straight illustrations.

5. "The Crystal Circe"—It had a peculiar ending that I just didn't care for.

6. "The Impossible Invention"—Whoo-sh!
"The Crystal Circe" picture on page 67 was beautiful! The cover was fine, too.

Please let me know all requirements for both illustrations and manuscripts, as I have some good ones that are only waiting to be set down.

Thank you for an interesting mag. Keep up the good work.

Sincerely,

(Mrs.) Irena Daggett,
Allyn, Washington

Putrid? Say not so!

Dear Editor:

At last your magazine has made the grade, or at least with me. The June issue is the best of the three years that you have been on the market. Please don't get me wrong. I don't mean just because yours is the first mag I ever wrote to that it is the best I ever read. I've read some of the best old ones and all of the new ones, but the real reason I decided to write was that I thought you have made the most improvement in the same length of time of any mag.

To begin with, in the June issue you have the best of a long line of terrible covers. At last you are getting an artist who can draw. (Virgil Finlay is always good.) The interiors, done by

a vast collection of putrid artists, turns in one or two good pics by Mr. Morey. (He's coming into his own again.)

In the departments, "Viewpoints" is of course first by a big lead. I liked the info on Ph. D. Smith. "Fan Mags", "The Mail Bag" and "Fantasy Circle" rank in that order to complete the review of the dept's.

"The Crystal Circe" was the best story I have read in many a long day. I thought it was the tops. Second place was copped by "Storm Cloud on Deka", but only then because of Mr. Smith's gift of the gab, not because it was life-like. In third place we have "Out of the Sea". Leigh Brackett is always good for a story that is as old as the hills.

Among the short stories we have the usual space filler and one good one. The good one is "The Unseen Blushers", although the title is in no way related to the story. In fifth and sixth place we have, in that order, "The Impossible Invention" and "The Band Played On".

Constructive criticism is now in order, I think. First, increase the size of your mag, raise the price and then include per issue one book-length novel. Get if you can some of the authors mentioned on page eight in the dept., "Viewpoints", also a few more artists like Paul (cover), Rogers, Krupa, and other such notables. They are well worth the price you will have to pay. Well, I guess that about winds me up except that this is, in all the years I have been reading SF, the first time I ever wrote to a mag.

Also would you do me a favor and tell the other editors to go together and buy a rope for Mr. Bok and Mr. Smith to have a private necktie party with?

Very sincerely yours,

Charles F. Derry,
Lanham, Maryland

Tony meanders where Einsteins fear to tread.

Dear Editor:

Although I've been reading *Astonishing Stories* for a long time, this is the first letter I have ever written to you. And what prompted me from my long silence? It was that superb October issue of *Astonishing!* It affected me so greatly I just had to comment upon it.

First, I will take up the matter of the cover. A real, honest-to-goodness authentic-looking s-f cover! And without undraped females and bug-eyed monsters, too. This is the first time in a blue moon I've come across a cover on any s-f magazine that looks so real, so like what a cover ought to be. Honestly, I didn't think Morey was capable of such.

About these guys harping on the covers with B.E.M.'s on them, holding struggling females in their clutches: I agree with them one hundred per cent. Nothing looks so ridiculous or incongruous as a spacesuited hero rescuing a scantily-clad girl from the clutches of a B.E.M. out in the void of space. Please have your artists put spacesuits on the females too. Surely they are not so much tougher than the males that they can stand the rigors of space without a suit. Those kinds of covers certainly belie the type of mag they adorn. *Astonishing* is sup-

posed to be a little scientific at least. I like undraped females on the covers when they are in surroundings appropriate to their condition of dress.

Now I will take up the matter of the interior illustrations. They were the best aggregation of interior pics that I've seen in a long time, in any mag of *Astonishing's* type. Leydenfrost's drawing for "Thunder in the Void" was plenty, plenty good, and that illustration for "The Vortex Blaster Makes War" was a honey, especially the girl in the foreground. I wonder who drew that illustration; there was no artist's name that I could find, but the drawing looked like Leydenfrost's work. All of the other pics were good.

While I'm on the subject of illustrations, I might as well take up a word or two with those guys who are criticising Wesso's over-stuffed spacesuits. If you ask me, I think a spacesuit would have to be plenty bulky and overstuffed to withstand the rigors of the frigid vacuum of space. Besides keeping a person's bodily heat from radiating away, it would have to maintain a normal air pressure within the suit in order to keep one's body from exploding. I think Wesso's suits are the only ones I've seen that really come close to what spacesuits should look like.

Here's how the stories in the October issue rated with me. "The Vortex Blaster Makes War," by Smith, comes up heading the list, with "Thunder in the Void" following a close second, and Neil R. Jones' "Jameson" story third. I liked Doc Smith's "Storm Cloud" story in this issue a lot better than the one in a previous issue—"Storm Cloud on Deka." I was somewhat disappointed with the latter story; somehow it did not come up to Smith's old-time standard. Coming up fourth, and also the best of the short stories, was Joseph Gilbert's "The Eternal Quest", although I did not quite understand its drift, especially toward the last. "Nothing" was a nice little short story; there was some good reasoning in it. I didn't care much for "Remember Me, Kama", and, as for Cummings, I see he has come up with another time-travel story. He must have an inexhaustible supply of them. But his story, "Miracle", seemed above his usual standard.

The little controversy about the neutron between Frederic Kammler and Isaac Asimov provided me with a minute of interesting reading. They seem to be in the dark as to the nature of the neutron and the effects of gravity on said particle. I have decided I shall clear up matters for them, I hope!

Well, if they've been keeping up with the concepts of present-day physicists, they should know that a neutron is a heavy particle composed of a proton and an electron in combination. It has the mass of a hydrogen atom and is a neutral particle; that is, it has no electrical charge, either positive or negative. The reason for this is that the positive and negative charges of the proton and electron cancel each other. Now Mr. Asimov's letter seems to imply that gravity would not affect a neutron. I can't see how this is the case. Every particle of matter, no matter how infinitesimal, has a certain amount of mass. Therefore, if it has mass, it's bound to be affect-

ed by gravity, just as any other thing in this world. I believe a neutron would be influenced by gravity even more than other atomic particles, because, in having a neutral charge, it would not be affected as easily by other forces and electrical fields interfering with the work of gravitation.

And as to the nature of gravitation—well, anyone's theory might be as good as mine, I guess, but since I've gone this far I shall go on. Since the force of gravitation does not exhibit any of the measurable physical qualities of any of the radiant frequencies ranging throughout the entire ether-wave spectrum—as for example, light, X-rays, gamma rays, alpha and beta rays and others—we must come to the conclusion that it is not an electromagnetic wave. But neither does the force generated by a magnet exhibit the measurable physical properties of the above-mentioned radiations—that is, in the way of mass, exertion of pressure, effect on material atoms and velocity. Einstein claims that light and other radiations have mass and exert pressure. Thus it would seem that gravity and magnetic force are similar in nature. In physics textbooks, the field of energy around a magnet is simply designated as lines of force. This gives no explanation whatever of the exact nature of this force.

If this theory of the similarity of magnetic force and gravitation is not acceptable, we must then look to Einstein and Jeans for an answer. They seem to have resolved the whole universe into nothing more than a mere mathematical concept. In other words, the universe is made of nothing, a matrix of nothingness which they call the space-time continuum. And to go further, the stars, planets—in fact all these insignificant blobs we call matter—are just crumplings or corrugations, some large and some small, in the four-dimensional space-time continuum!

Therefore I can fabricate a technical hodgepodge of words and say that gravity is a sort of force-warp produced by a bending or crumpling of the four-dimensional spacetime continuum encompassing bodies of matter, as a direct result of that matter's effect upon the configuration of the ether itself. I can further support my theory in that Einstein says that space-time is constant. Therefore, instead of these warps exerting their influence at random throughout the universe, they tend to remain in concentrated loci of influence. This would explain the tendency of bodies of matter to come together under their mutual attraction. The continuity of the universe is not to be disrupted.

I may have stuck my neck out with all this abstract meandering, but I'm prepared to take all of the controversial brickbats and bombs that will probably shower on my humble head. So come on, all you amateur Einsteins—I'm challenging you!

Now to get back to more commonplace things. I would like to say that *Astonishing Stories* is the best mag for its size and price I've ever had the pleasure of reading. The stories are more like those of the "good old days" of science fiction. Oh, if it was only a monthly! Nor would I mind seeing the price increase to twenty or even twenty-five cents if we could get a larger magazine with longer stories and departments

and a lot of the artists, Bok and Finlay. And how about putting captions under each interior illustration to show what scene in the story it is depicting?

In closing I want to add my request to that of George Ebey's for deadlier-looking guns (he calls them sizzle gats). The artists should make them more authentic-appearing, not like water pistols.

Sincerely yours,
Tony Raines,
Brinkman, Okla.

Can you take another, Mr. Asimov?

Dear Editor:

Your October issue was the best to date, and that was mostly because of the superb art work. If you can keep using art work of such a high degree, I'll gladly pay ten cents more every two months. (You're not kidding me about going bi-monthly, are you?) By the way, who drew the beautiful girl—er— I mean picture on page 39. It was ———. (You can put any adjective in here you please; the sky's the limit!)

Now to drag out the old ladder, and make the authors climb. I don't know what's come over Cummings. His "Miracle" was a miracle. Yet, unfortunately, the other six stories were better. So Cummings still occupies the last broken rung. The sixth rung goes to Pearson's short short. You make the next five rungs rather hard for me. But, since no one else ever agrees with me—"The Eternal Quest" second place. There, I did it. "Remember Me, Kama" fifth. Because the ending was a let down, Jones' story fourth. Kuttner third, and, of course, Smith first.

All for a dime. I don't believe it.

To Mr. Asimov—

Since I appear to be the only one attempting the impossible, I won't disappoint you. But before I present my latest *opinion*, I'd like to straighten a few things out with you, in regards to our last exchange.

You seem to have misunderstood me in one minor fact. I already took it for granted that your planet couldn't rotate, and said so in the first line of the last paragraph. But I did propound a passable reason why your planet still couldn't hold together. All you did was to play scientist, and then ask me what holds a neutron together. Am I to believe, by that question, that you are a Cummings fan; supposing that a neutron is made up of atoms Mr. Asimov, please. Otherwise, I can't quite perceive what you mean by, "What holds an ordinary neutron together?"

Then that parenthetical thought, "Gravitational forces are insignificant in the atomic world." It's now my turn to ask, "For God's sake, why?" Why should a neutron be exempt from gravity? What would Einstein say?

He *might* say, "So, my formula for gravity has a limit? It stops about, around—er—near—Where does it stop? Oh, dear, more headaches."

You see, Mr. Asimov, an electron is the second smallest particle in the universe, if it is a particle. It is known to have a mass. Any mass will create a gravity field (except *your* neutron, of course) and no matter how *insignificant* it is, it is still in proportion to the electron, as the

Earth's gravity field is to the Earth. I hope you see what I mean.

In the beginning of my last letter I, innocent as a new-born babe, came out with what I thought was nearly a universally accepted theory, as to how the earth was formed. And I was amazed and flattered when you asked *me* for proof. I agree with you that no one can prove any theory of planetary birth, unless they actually witness it. And I can't find any human being who might live that long.

Yet because you asked for proof, brings to surface the thought that you must disagree with that theory. I wonder if I may have the privilege of listening to your theory? At least I'd have the courtesy to try and point out places where you might be wrong, and not sit back, fold my hands and ask you for proof.

I wonder where science would be today if scientists didn't accept some theories that could never be proved. Most of Einstein's theory is based on the belief that the velocity of light is the supreme velocity. No one asks him for proof, for as yet they can't prove that it isn't. Nearly everyone accepts Einstein's theory, but what would happen to it if we suddenly found something that traveled faster than light? Ask Einstein to prove there is such a condition as a space warp. Ask Eddington to use better proof than the red shift to support his "Expanding Universe".

Such theories can never be proven in our time. In the future some other Eddington or Einstein may prove them false. Until then we can only believe the present theories.

What I am driving at is this, Mr. Asimov. When some one presents a theory, everyone is skeptical at first. They try and poke holes into it, by scientific proof or by logic. If they don't succeed, or no other theory can supplant it, it becomes an accepted fact until some future scientist finds it unsatisfactory. That's what happened to Ptolemy's, Newton's and Kant's theories. In fact, Sir James Jeans recently changed his planetary theory so that the chances of other planetary systems are now 1 in 8. I'll believe him now until someone proves he's wrong.

I'm sure I can't.

Now, do you or don't you have a different theory as to how the Earth was formed?

By the way, before I forget about it. Would the Earth be affected if a meteor hit the outer fringes of its atmosphere? No, of course not. The Sun's atmosphere happens to be many times the diameter of the Earth. Our atmosphere is not a radiation, is it? No, of course not. Yet a cold block of iron gets all hot and bothered and lets off steam when it enters our atmosphere. Why? Friction, of course. It does a lot of damage—even to a stubborn planet that won't absorb radiation. What's that you say? Its velocity isn't that much? Okay, if it goes any slower, it would be thrown from the Sun by centrifugal force—because there's no gravity to hold it, and the Sun's equator rotates more than 4000 m.p.h.

Cordially yours,
Frederic G. Kammler

(Continued on page 111)



SCIENCE fiction is a kind of reading that tends to stir up the imagination and focus the attention on wonders. That's an oft-repeated remark, but it is still true. At one time it was the general opinion of science-fiction fans that people who read this type of writing would sooner or later become scientists. That was not really true, for they were not a selected group of people with a set identical outlook, but a wide and representative group whose only distinction was a certain alertness and a penchant for fantasy.

Among the readers of science fiction, one finds minds seeking and thrusting at the unknown and the borderlands of science. It is second nature for a reader of super-scientific adventures to gain a wider vision of things and to speculate on what may be the next discoveries awaiting Man's find. To speculate like that is normal for people of a democracy in the Twentieth Century, for ours is a generation which is beginning to really collect on man's heritage of the earth.

Yet there are many things which we do not know, and among them may lie some very odd and some very threatening discoveries.

One fan magazine, *Pluto*, started a department for out-of-the-way notions which they called "The Department for the Propagation of Understanding and Prevention of Cruelty to Pet Ideas." In their issue of July, 1940, M. Spivis sets forth some ideas on the old theory of spontaneous generation. This theory was held

by biologists hundreds of years ago and is generally discarded today. That it may still have something to it is Mr. Spivis' notion, and he bases it on an understanding of the most recent chemical ideas.

Here is what he has to say:

"It is universally admitted that it is quite impossible for a complete animal or insect to be evolved in one step; but there is a theory on the possibility of a one-celled organism being created spontaneously from inert material. This creation might be brought about by man, or could possibly take place in nature.

"Everybody knows that it is possible to produce synthetic compounds of living organism. If it is possible to produce these compounds why is there not a possibility of constructing a simple organism and inducing the spark of life? It is true that to combine the constituents of the simplest living cell would be an enormous task, even without furnishing the vital spark.

"As to what the spark of life is, it would be difficult to define. It might be a mixture of certain chemicals, cosmic rays, the sun's rays or something of which man has not the slightest idea. Regardless of what life is, it stands a good chance of being discovered.

"Man has been present on earth but the smallest fraction of an instant, according to the geological time table. Life of one form or another has been on earth several million times longer than man has existed. If this is the case, there have been millions of chances for life to evolve

spontaneously without the knowledge of man. It is probable that conditions in ages past were more suited for new life than is the present. It was warmer then, and the countless billions of simple life beings did not exist as they do today.

"What conditions, you might ask, are best suited for *abiogenesis*? The following, in my estimation, would afford the ideal opportunity—

"Organic solutions are formed in nature by the combining of certain inorganic materials, which may be brought together by erosion, weathering, earthquakes or other forces of nature. Warming of the formed solutions and further chemical reactions are brought about by the Sun. As the life-forming fluid becomes warm, small bits of lifeless protoplasm are formed. At the completion of this stage, the spark is added to the tiny jellylike globules which pulsate slightly and then quicken into the rhythmic activity which we call life.

"Do you realize that it might be possible for a new life form which has not existed to arise daily at some point on this planet? It might be that an infinite number of life forms, which were thus spontaneously generated, failed to continue existence due to unfavorable environmental conditions. A new life form could precipitate into being in a pond or stream in your vicinity, but the chance of this unconceived bit of life continuing existence for more than an instant are very few, as there are indeed already teeming hordes of pre-existing life ready to devour and be devoured."

Think over the significance of that. The creation of life, which we always think of as something that happened in the remote past, millions of years ago, is not over at all and may be happening today!

We talk learnedly of pools of slime in primeval eras when the earth was hot and boiling seas enveloped the planet.

But here we are presented with these same things right in the midst of our present-day surroundings. In some stream in Brazil or swamp in Florida or even perhaps some stagnant water tank in metropolitan Chicago, life comes out of darkness and some brand new creation comes into being from the inert matter surrounding it.

And then there is the question of life that originated outside the earth. Its forms may likewise be unknowable. Extraterrestrials may be among us now and simply be unperceived, save perhaps for some fluke of light or accident of nature. We are thinking of something fan Kenneth B. Pritchard saw and reported in an article in the magazine *The Fantasy Fan* in August, 1934—

"EVERYONE has seen shadows, but I'll wager that there are exceedingly few who have seen the kind I did, beside those who were with me at the time it happened.

"You have heard weird stories of shadows or of people who cast none. What I am about to relate is true; I have witnessed to prove it.

"It was twilight of a summer day in the year 1927 or '28. Our little group was gathered in the rear of our homes—we called it the back yard, though it was composed of roadways. We were talking and the stars began to peep out of the skies. The street lamps began to glow and the windows of the surrounding houses began to show light. And thus the stage was set.

"Our eyes wandered. About fifteen feet away lay a large shadow. It was mainly because of its size that I thought it might have been caused by a friend of mine sitting by a window in a near-by building. I became curious; thinking I could attract his attention so he would come and join us, I walked to a point of vantage. There was no one by the win-

dow, yet the shadow persisted in remaining!

"Upon looking further, being fully aroused, I could find no cause for its existence. There was no possible or probable source of blocked light. I did not forget the sun, the stars or the sky itself. I found no flaw; the heavens and all ordinary lights were normal. But there was a shadow covering an area of from 100 to 150 square feet.

"The others gave it up. We could draw no satisfactory conclusion. I can tell you that it was an eerie feeling I had, observing a disembodied shadow. My mind went riot with thoughts of time-travellers, visitors from space, etc.

"Since then, I have tried to think of it as being caused by a kink in an otherwise clear atmosphere, but my reason seems to tell me differently. What was it? What strange thing had occurred that evening? Was this planet of ours visited by some half-seen beings from another world?"

Kenneth Pritchard swears that that is a true experience. He has had a number of very curious little observations, most of which he reported to the fan magazine. One might imagine that perhaps there was an element of willful self-delusion, or simple error in his observations. That is all possible, but it is not necessarily so. The whole point is that there is nothing melodramatic about the things he saw.

He stood to gain nothing from inventing them.

John Bauer, a member of the Chicago Science Fiction League of many years ago, wrote in their official fan organ, *The Fourteen Leaflet*, for May, 1936, a little account of something he had seen—or rather not seen.

"I MET him at Tremont, while purchasing groceries at the village store. He was a well-built young man with a pleasant smile that revealed

a set of perfect white teeth. It developed that he also was camping in the nearby state park, and so together we set out down the narrow gravel road that led to the camping grounds. Night had come on since we left Tremont and the bright, full moon, rising behind us, lent a weird aspect to the scene. The shadowy rows of corn took on the appearance of a ghostly army recalled to life by some magic of the moon. As we strode along in silence, I noticed that the moonlight cast my shadow at least ten feet before me. Then—my blood froze in my veins as I realized that there was but one shadow on the road. My companion cast no shadow! With my mind in a whirl, I continued onward mechanically, striving to control my terror and to form some plan of action.

"At last, my nerves could stand no more and I dashed madly down the road, nor did I stop until I reached my comrades at camp. Inquiries made later revealed that no one of the young man's appearance had been in the camp."

The last of the vampires, perhaps? We have a theory to account for this no-shadow phenomenon of vampites. Perhaps they are pseudo humans made of some newly created matter that does not quite partake of all the elements of protoplasm. Like the thing which could not be seen but only cast a shadow which Pritchard encountered, a vampire can be seen by reflected light on the delicate apparatus of the human retina (and the cloudy details filled in by the mechanism of the brain which always touches up impressions it receives). But the polarized light of the moon passes right through the vampire substance and hence there is no shadow.

Here's an article that appeared in *Spaceways* for June, 1941. It is entitled, "To Mr. Fort" and was written by Chris E. Mulrain, Jr. We give you part of it.

CHARLES FORT—you must have heard of him or read about him.

“Fort said, ‘I think we’re property.’ He wrote and believed that. And because this was his principle, he died, and the man who published his last two books was murdered.

“Charles Fort’s first book was published in the year 1919 by Boni and Liveright. It was *The Book of the Damned*. It has been said that Fort began to gather his material for this, his first book, some time in 1904. Fifteen years of research were spent before he offered his findings to the world. The second book, *New Lands*, was published in 1923, *Lo!* in 1931 and his last, *Wild Talents*, came out the day he died in 1932.

“Charles Fort wrote on many strange things. He wrote of facts that escape the vision of ordinary men. Yet all of his facts and findings are based upon the reports of others. He did not make up these strange facts. They were brought to him by the newspapers of the world, such as the appearance over Boston Harbor, on December 21st, 1909, of the bright lights of an airship—and in the following week it was seen nine different times in as many places throughout New England. It was not until 1910 that an airship was flown from Albany to New York.

“Then there was the strange disappearance of Dorothy Arnold; when she vanished, an unearthly swan made its appearance in Central Park Lake in New York City.

“But it remained for this man of small stature and mild manners to bring them together and present them to the world. The world turned its back on him and called him ‘an impudent little boy.’ There were those who believed in this bit of human clay that had the courage to stand up to science and challenge the wrath of cosmic demons. These men stood by him.

“A member of this strange group was

Claude H. Kendall, publisher of the last two of Fort’s books. Charles Fort often said that anyone who delved too far below the surface would be removed. And so it was to be. Fort died before his book was released.

“Then on the morning of November 26th, 1937, the newspapers carried the news that Claude Kendall had been found murdered in his hotel room, a bed sheet wrapped around his throat. There was no doubt of murder according to the coroner’s report. A strange man was seen to have entered the hotel with Kendall, and yet he was not seen leaving. The doors and all the windows in the murdered man’s room had been locked on the inside. And the stranger had vanished into thin air.

“To appreciate Charles Fort one must read from his books. Brief accounts concerning him touch only lightly upon the magnificence of this man. The tide of time flows swiftly as the years drift by, his books wallow upon the surface. One by one they begin to drop off and the finger of time hastens the day when only a few shall have a record of these happenings. As these persons are removed, as Fort and Kendall were, there shall be fewer to challenge the unknown.”

Was Charles Fort put out of the way before he could collate his volumes of data of the incredible and unknown? Or did he simply die by natural causes? Was Claude Kendall killed, not by a man, but by some extra-terrestrial agent, some agent of the beings that are supposed to have humanity as “property”? This is an ugly thought, a rather dreadful one, but we are not sure that it is correct. We are not sure because as humans we do get away with things, we do make discoveries, we do even publish and succeed in keeping such things as Fort’s books.

But there is another item from a fan magazine which I shall close this article on, which gives me cause to pause. Frank-

ly, it is definitely a matter for concern. In a previous column, we mentioned H. P. Lovecraft, the writer of weird stories. Lovecraft had invented out of his own head a mythology of monsters which he used in his stories. It so happens that in Lovecraft's mythology, the world and humanity once were property, the property of unearthly beings known as "The Elder Ones" who had lost their ownership but always plotted to regain it. Certain books were fancied by Lovecraft to hold the secrets of these Elder beings, chief among which was a volume called *The Necronomicon*.

Donn Brazier, writing in *Frontier* for November, 1940, tells briefly of this mythological work and its kin and also closes with a true incident connected with the Lovecraft lore that is suspiciously like the Fort danger.

“IT IS a tribute to the masterfulness of H. P. Lovecraft that he could invent a consistent, convincing mythology—the Chthulhu mythology. As summarized in *The Outsider*, the collected stories of H. P. Lovecraft, the legend that this world was once occupied by a non-human, evil race who exist 'outside' in wait to recapture their former rule forms the theme of the mythology. Facts and hints at facts were supplied by *The Necronomicon*. I wasn't sure that it did not exist until March, 1938, when at that time, Claire Beck published some letters from Lovecraft to James Blish. One of them stated: 'All the terrible and mysterious books so darkly mentioned in weird magazine stories are imaginary. I invented *The Necronomicon*, Clark Ashton Smith thought of *The Book of Eibon*, Robert E. Howard is responsible for *Unaussprechlichen Kulten*, Bloch is the parent of Ludvig Prinn's *De Vermis Mysteriis* and of the shocking *Cultes des Goules*.'

“These books were told of so con-

vincingly that many fans searched libraries for them. In that same issue of Beck's *Science Fiction Critic*, Lovecraft wrote: 'I feel quite guilty every time I hear of someone's having spent valuable time looking up *The Necronomicon* at public libraries.' This doesn't pretend to be a complete article of the story of *The Necronomicon* and in fact would not be written except for the following interesting story. I learned it from one of my correspondents. I shall change the name of the persons concerned.

“In substance, my correspondent wrote: 'I have a Catholic friend who is studying for the priesthood. Last summer I showed him the stories which referred to *The Necronomicon*, etc., and he became just as interested in them as I was. Moreover, he thought he could do something about it. He thought he could find at least a clue to the work in the large religious library at the seminary. Then he happened to think of Dr. Zor, one of the teachers who had travelled in Arabia and could read Arabic and was the kind to stick his fingers in this sort of thing. He wrote to him. The doctor wrote back that he was peremptorily advising him to desist from such unprofitable browsings!

“After my friend returned to the seminary he learned that Dr. Zor had died shortly after sending him that letter. Another priest questioned him about this and soon became sick and was not expected to live!”

Can it be then that Lovecraft, by mere invention, guessed so close to the truth that the Fortean overlords began to frown upon the search after his imaginary work for fear that it would lead to the real clues?

We do not know. This column is open to opinions for our readers and if any can supply more items of the "outside" category, we'd be glad to hear from them and perhaps print them in some future study of the matter.

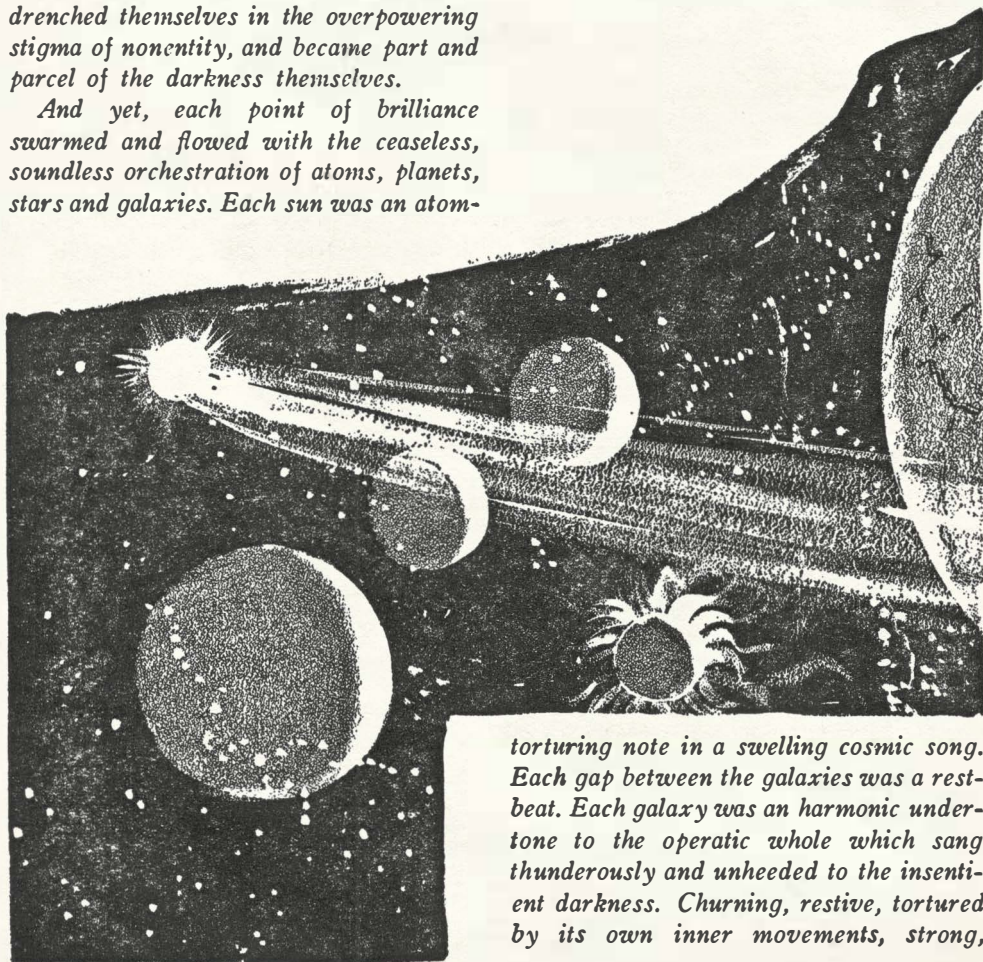
ABYSS OF DARKNESS

By ROSS ROCKLYNNE

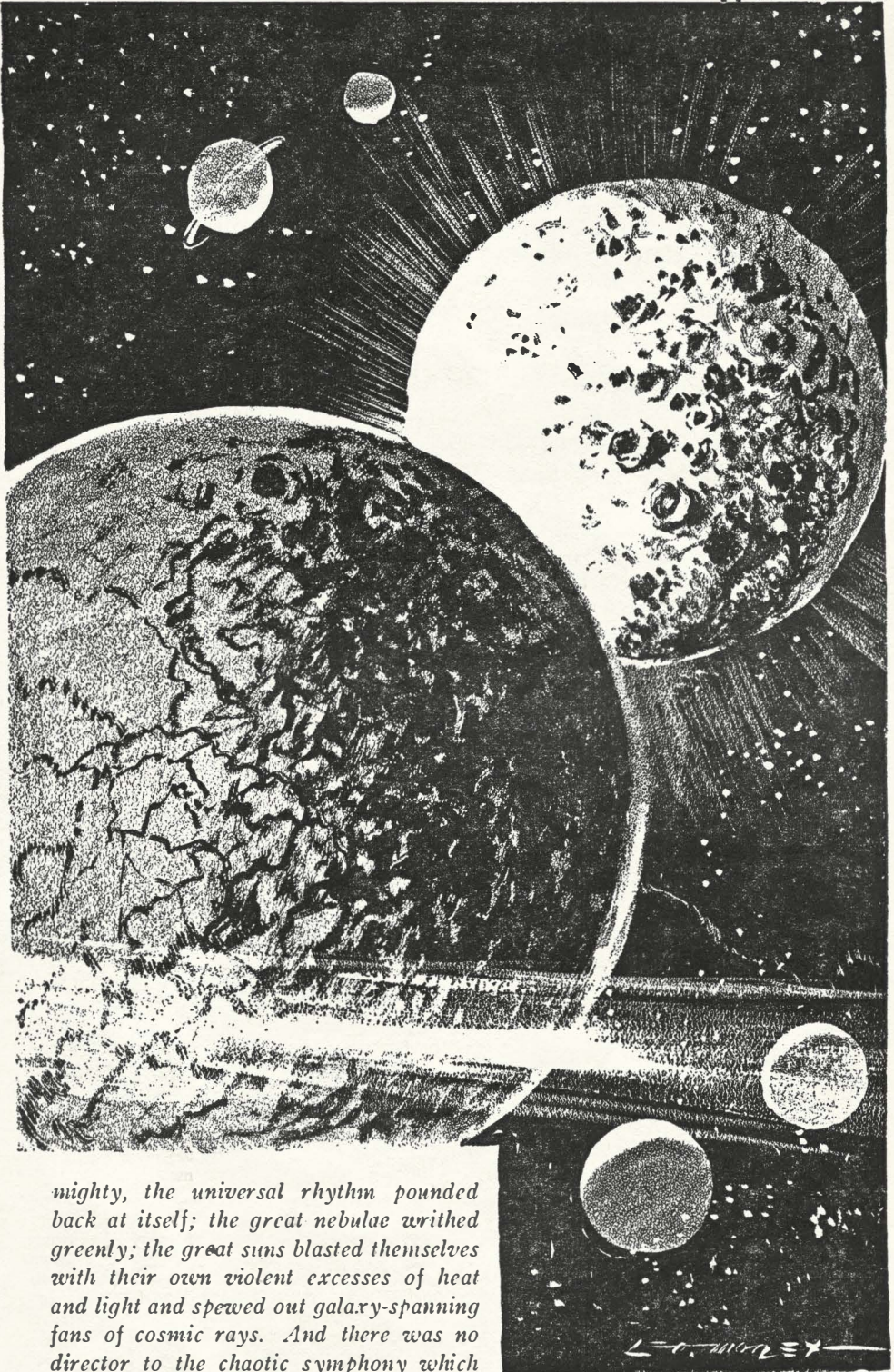
Of darkness the cosmos was made. There was nothing else, nothing—unless one chose to consider the throttled points of brilliance which the darkness, at intervals of unmentionable light-years, permitted to remain in its realm. These were the universes; and, though they stretched without number toward the unseen horizon of space-time, they were so small, so uni-dimensional in the frightful sea of lightlessness, that they submissively drenched themselves in the overpowering stigma of nonentity, and became part and parcel of the darkness themselves.

And yet, each point of brilliance swarmed and flowed with the ceaseless, soundless orchestration of atoms, planets, stars and galaxies. Each sun was an atom-

“The years are wasted, and I have grown. Eons will remember my name. But—I have been alone, and I have never escaped. Was it for this that I have roamed the galaxies?”



torturing note in a swelling cosmic song. Each gap between the galaxies was a rest-beat. Each galaxy was an harmonic undertone to the operatic whole which sang thunderously and unheeded to the insentient darkness. Churning, restive, tortured by its own inner movements, strong,



mighty, the universal rhythm pounded back at itself; the great nebulae writhed greenly; the great suns blasted themselves with their own violent excesses of heat and light and spewed out galaxy-spanning fans of cosmic rays. And there was no director to the chaotic symphony which

was now frightful, now gentle, now bestial, now soothing.

Soothing to him who lay alone in the seventeenth band of hyper-space. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Yellow Light

HOW long he had lain here, it was beyond him to know. But there must have been a beginning, for, before there had been sight, there had been thought, and quiet, entombed darkness.

Therefore there must have been something before the thought.

But what?

The trickle of awareness ran first through his memory swirls, the awareness of an Outside, a Something beyond himself. Thus had his visions unfolded and the magic of the universe flowed into him. The great stars and nebulae presented themselves to him in all their pageantry, and he was dazzled by the splendid hot colors, the poetry of their motions; the soundless songs they sang moved him beyond intelligent thought.

He was charmed by the opulence of this enormous gesture which the universe made toward him. He was flattered by the radiant energy in which he was laved, and which his embryonic body absorbed into the complex energy patterns that composed his great mass. There was peace and quiet and beauty and thoughtlessness, and a kind, celestial attention to his needs. He lived without strife or the need for understanding in a plentiful Arcadia.

He was contented.

He was an energy creature, now more than two millions of miles in girth and growing apace, and he did not understand the awful, ineradicable shadow that had fallen across his life.

His Mother had not come for him.

THE slow millions of years trooped away to die. The universal restive hum continued, and the universe changed its face. There were new, green-hued nebulae on the stage; there were new stars emerging in fiery grandeur from the wings, with their attendant trains of self-effacing planets. He watched it all, reaching out and out to the limit of his visions, hanging pendant in his great auditorium, surfeited with his great happiness, and never once hearing a discord. There was no evil in him.

"Who are you?"

The low muttering of drums, the harsh clangor of a cymbal, and the heartbeat of the universe seemed to still.

The uttered thought swept inward to impinge on his memory swirls, and the even, steady, undisturbed throb of his consciousness was broken. Chaos, indecision, wonder, fear—these were his. He faltered in his own mind for the source of the thought. It had not originated there. He swept out with his visions.

Far away, across the blinding white width of a galaxy, he saw the creature. There was a strange shrinkage of his spirits. Life! Life other than his!

He was quivering with dread, his vanity shattered by a revelation he had not considered in his way of life. Liquid sparks of vari-colored flame fled his vast swollen spheroidal body. Life, other than his, to divide the universe with him!

The incisive question came again, whispering at him with demon-intonations. He forced his trembling vision rays to play over the smaller, different body that was pendant a thousand light years distant—a globe of milk-white radiance, throbbing with the slow pulsations of life, and at its heart a glowing ball of green light. Their visions locked and they were staring at each other in hard, bright wonder.

"I did not know there was other life," he whispered.

She answered with scorn: "Did not

know there was other life! Where is your Mother, Large Body? What is your name? What are the yellow dots that dance in your purple light?"

He looked inward on himself, looked at the star-yellow globes which truly marred the perfection of his purple central core. He was flooded with shame, overflowing from some instinctive well of knowledge, that the great pulsing center of his body was not clear purple. He looked up, dazed. Mother? Name?

"I do not know what you mean, Green Light," he whispered.

"Why hasn't your Mother come for you?" she demanded sharply. "Why hasn't she given you a name? Why hasn't she taken you from the seventeenth band into the first band of true space? How long have you been lying here? You are big and swollen and unnatural. You are big enough to have been plunging through the star-ways for more than a million, perhaps five million years."

HE SHRANK back from the awful indictment her words hurled at him. A great, helpless confusion grew in him. A thousand shafts of shame speared his monstrous vanity, and his pride in himself and his central importance drained away. He was no longer the hub; he existed somewhere on the outer rim of being, and he was whirled without purpose or will in a vast, involuntary arc. It was not he who whirled the universe in its spectacular pageantry; it was he who was whirled, he was but a minor actor in the show.

He emitted his thought faintly: "Have you a Mother? Have you a name?"

She was staring at him with the cold, instinctive knowledge of her kind, the knowledge that only a green light had. Deep buried within her, there was a heartless pity for him and the enormity of the thing that had happened to him.

"Every creature has a Mother, Strange One. My Mother was here but a million years ago. It was then she named me. I am known as Star Glory." A proud quiver of sparks rained in molten beauty from her tiny body. She added dreamily, "It is a beautiful name. What a pity that you have none."

A forlorn resentment rippled over his glowing, swollen sphericity.

"But I shall have a name," he flared. "I shall have a name as soon as my Mother comes. It shall be as strong a name as yours is beautiful."

"Your Mother must be dead," she said heartlessly.

"No!" he cried, agonized. "No!"

"Your Mother is dead," she added, goading at his pain with thoughtless knives. "Else why is it that you are still here when you are so big? Nothing," she said with her chilling wisdom, "could keep your Mother away if she were alive. She is dead. But do not worry. Soon my Mother, Crescent Moon, will come again, and she will release me. Perhaps she will also release you. In the meantime, let us talk. What do you think of the stars?"

"They are beautiful, beautiful," he whispered, shaken in a torrent of fear and wild doubt.

"Yes, of course, they are beautiful," she said complacently. "But they are powerful also. I wonder if they are more powerful than I. I should like to pit my strength against them, to tear them apart and fling their flaming remnants in thousands of directions." She brooded for a thousand years on her luscious dream. Presently she added, "Do you think you could destroy a nebula?"

He had no answer for her in his dumb, stricken misery, and she talked on and on, for thousands of spinning years, laying before him a picture of the universe as described by her Mother. He learned of a great concourse of lenticular, egg-

and ring-shaped galaxies spreading across the sky for seven billions of light-years, the shining motes at last drawing up short on the awful black shore of the solid sea of lightlessness which stretches away forever.

"My Mother told me that once a creature crossed the great abyss. His name was Darkness. I do not believe it. There is nothing beyond our universe."

He learned of the forty-seven bands of hyper-space.

And then came her Mother.

HE SAW her from afar, her great flawless body with a single ripe star of green light hanging pendant at her core. She emerged from a distant nebula, the brilliance of her flight leaving her a broad fan of incandescent sparks. He heard nothing of what occurred between small and large green light, for they spoke only to each other.

His memory swirls writhed with a poignant-sweet eagerness. She would come for him! He would be freed, freed from the awful stigma of nonentity, of namelessness. He would mingle with other youths, green and purple lights, and he would cavort with them through the corridors of the stars, dashing in mad abandon the length of a thousand galaxies. He would toss suns and build and shatter solar systems. He would slip up and down the forty-seven bands of hyper-space, and once more the wild, sad, powerful symphony of stars would sound ringingly in his memory swirls. He would have a name.

He watched them, Mother and daughter, trembling in his eagerness. By some strange knowledge he knew that Star Glory had been snapped from the seventeenth band of hyper-space by her Mother. What happened affirmed the knowledge. Star Glory surged into glorious motion, as she tried her heretofore unused and unusable propellents. She lost girth as

she fled at increasing speed across the quiescent galaxies and into the far distance. Proudly her Mother followed after her. They were gone.

Gone? He knew a sudden stab of fright. He was seized in the relentless talons of horror.

"Come back," he cried. "Come back!"

But would she come back? Had Star Glory, the small one of the green light, forgotten him and her promise? It could not be so. He was not doomed to lie here, shrinking from the terror of his awful abnormality. He was without a Mother!

Slowly wheeled the stars in their vast orbits. Slowly coiled the powerful grim nebulae. Swiftly darted bearded comets across the age-old bright universe. The thousands of years were slipping away into the dusty past, and his own soul was shriveling within him. He was alone, the abandoned, the forgotten, the ill-born.

The Mother of Star Glory came back.

He saw her with his all-encompassing visions, driving toward him on the invisible thrust of her propellents. Slowly she came, the flawless green light, and her coming presaged a dull, thudding agony within him. His swollen body contracted under the impulse of his dreadful thoughts. She hung now in the first band of true space, drenching him in the slow, reluctant sadness of her unuttered thoughts, and he could not bring himself to speak.

"Star Glory told me of you," she said into the throbbing silence.

"I have no Mother of my own," he whispered. "Star Glory says she is dead."

The green light held his visions with her own. There was in her a shudder of pain, but tenderness and love also.

"Yes," she said gently. "She is dead. How she died, why she died, I do not think that even Oldster would know; and though he did, it would be wrong, cruel, to disturb him."

She paused, bending on him a look of gentle pity. "Now you are ready for your freedom. Your name shall be Yellow Light."

There was a constriction of shame in his memory swirls. "Yellow Light," he whispered faintly. "That is my name?"

He felt the soothing touch of her thoughts, binding him strongly in her outflowing gentleness. There was a bitter sadness in her voice when she spoke.

"Yes, that is to be your name. You must try to be proud of it. For they will call you that anyway! Yellow Light, you are in the first band of true space!"

There was a click in his consciousness which told him that such indeed was the case. He was free. He hung poised in throbbing uncertainty, surrounded by all the bright beauty of the far-flung galaxies, drinking into him the radiant energy which swept in plenitude through the rich burning fabric of space.

The green light hung a distance away, clouding out the xanthic blaze of a diadem of clustered stars.

"Your propellents," he thought whispered gently into him. "Try them."

He remembered the soaring flight of Star Glory, the vast distances which had eroded away to nothing under the great velocity that was hers. He was trembling in his eagerness, as he explored the complex mechanism of his swollen body. His propellents thrust out. He felt the first surge of motion, but like a great clumsy animal he fumbled in unequal spurts. There was no sense of direction in him. He traced a slow tortuous path through the hub of a restlessly churned galaxy. He weaved from side to side, and yet thrilled to the motion that he gave himself. But it was hard, hard. Why did he not move with the ease and grace and swiftness of Star Glory?

He drew his propellents in at last and halted, turning his proud glance on the green light.

"I moved," he cried excitedly.

She hung a distance away, quivering, and he had the feeling that she was shrouded in horror. Vast emptinesses yawned in him. He was shaken with her voiceless compassion. For what? For whom? He did not dare to think the true thought.

"I moved," he whispered, and the complex energy fields contracted toward the yellow-specked purple core of his body. He was faint, burning in the fire of her chaotic broken thoughts.

At length she answered, "You moved, Yellow Light. Yes, you moved. Come with me." She went slowly, accommodating her pace to his as they followed the resplendent aisles formed by the gyrating stars.

CHAPTER TWO

"You Must Fight!"

THOUSANDS of light-years inward toward the center of the universe she went with him, pointing out from afar darting groups of the creatures who lived between the stars. "Dark Nebula, Comet, Bright Star-Cloud, Incandescent, Star-Hot, Blue Sun, Mighty, Sparkle, Valiant. . . ." So she reeled off great lists of names which he had no trouble impressing on his memory swirls.

She told him of the forty-seven bands of hyper-space, and bade him follow her. It was hard. He struggled with the strange mechanism of his mind which permitted ascension or descension into the strange facets of the universe. She waited for him anxiously in the second, the third, and halted him there. Here, some strange

hyper-law had flattened all the mighty, proud, three-dimensional suns and swarming galaxies into a two-dimensional projection of themselves, and there was no depth and no beauty. He shuddered at the ugliness of a depraved universe, and was caught up in horror by the tight black skin of nothingness which somehow seemed to be removed a step from, and parallel to the compressed plane of meaningless brilliance.

"What is beyond there?" he whispered.

She answered, "No one knows, and no one shall know. Energy creatures have tried to break that invisible barrier; we are not so equipped. It is the mystery of the third band."

Patience, then, she went on ahead of him, and waited until his incredible clumsiness allowed him to ascend into the fourth band. He hung there and saw his great young body repeated and repeated in long ranks that stretched away until his visions could no longer see them. The dark, dead images frightened him. They passed through the seventh band, where a soft, mellow, languid radiance washed through a starless cosmos. And through the tenth.

His progress was slow, wearisome. The green light abruptly grasped at his thought swirls, and clicked him back with her to the first band of true space. He faced her, dreading her next words, somehow understanding what was in her mind.

"I am alone now," he said, with a sinking sensation.

She trembled. "Yellow Light, Yellow Light," she cried softly, and there was deep, foreboding grief in her. "Why is it? Why must this be? But I cannot stop it. It is done. I do not know why it was done, or who did it. It may be the enormous meaning that transcends time and space and has its answer somewhere, far above us. Oldster could tell you! Oldster! But Oldster dies, alone, in the fif-

teenth band of lightlessness, and he wishes to die and be no more! Yellow Light, I am sad!"

He said dully, for he was beginning to see something of himself, "Now what is there for me?"

Involuntarily she moved back from him a half-million miles, as if he had lashed her. She was shaken, her thoughts contorted with her sadness for him. Chaotic bubbles of liquescent light fled from her contracting body.

"Play!" she burst out violently. "There!" She pointed into the far distance and he saw, as his visions caught the scene, a swarming group of green and purple lights in abandoned fantasy of motion about a violet sun. "You will play with them. No more can I tell you!"

"What is my purpose in life?" he asked quietly.

"Play, Yellow Light! Play! Purpose? It will be revealed to you."

She turned. He spurred after her in mounting fright, terrified of her leaving him. But when he faced her again, his thoughts were paralyzed, and he could find no word to say. So she went, leaving him in his flaming loneliness.

HE HUNG there, quiescent before the stars, searching in his mind for something that he surely should have, and yet aware that somehow, subtly, he had lost memory of it. He searched into the far, far distances and saw only the gaunt mystery of tortured matter. He was entombed in a mausoleum of light-surfeited space. His horror was real.

What was he to do? Play? So had the green light instructed. He looked toward the playing youths and there was in him a constriction of fright. He moved off unsteadily, weaving uncertainly in his great clumsy stride, his approach a painful, slow process of indirection, of formless motion. Angrily, he sought for the full power and

strength that must be his. His propellents did not respond to his agonized efforts.

He stopped millions of miles from the swarming youths. He knew he had no courage to face them. He was engulfed in fear, and he was not of them. He spurred back along the direction he had come, and with craven heart immersed himself in the dead lightlessness of a dark nebula. He hung there, trembling with his self-loathing, living over again the dreadful pity that Crescent Moon had bestowed on him. Why? Why was there pity for him? Who was his Mother? What had happened to her? Why was it he had been allowed to remain in the seventeenth band too long and what had it done to him?

Who was Oldster?

Oldster! The name awoke in him a terrible fascination. He knew a strange reverence for the mysterious creature, a strange kinship. Oldster wished to die! Yellow Light brooded on the ghastly thought, revolted and at the same time charmed by his revulsion. He must visit Oldster! He would know!

He thought for awhile, for the passing thousands of years, on the horror of those things that Oldster, the all-wise, could tell him about himself. Then came pain, and the pangs of a new fear. He trembled. Oldster would tell him—what?

“Ah, no,” he thought starkly. “I am afraid! I cannot go before him—yet.”

A blank, unnamed desire to go, go anywhere, surged unrestrained through him. He activated his propellents with an abrupt awkward surge, and emerged slowly from the deep night of the nebula, casting about with his visions like a creature that emerges affrightedly from its lair. He saw no energy creatures, and thus brought himself again into the splendid brilliance of the stars.

He looked then into the far distances, and he thought he saw his destiny beckoning to him. Out there, beyond the circle of life, he must go! Why? He did not yet

know the answer, and yet he must go.

So he went, pursuing his erratic course across the quiescent jewels that lay scattered on the limitless ebon cloth of the universe; and so for fifteen millions of years, life other than his did not know him. At last, saddened, his own mental involutions revealed to him, he returned, knowing that he had fled, not from life, as he had thought; not with a desire to await some change in his body that would make him like other energy creatures; he had attempted to flee that from which all the soaring grace of Star Glory’s flight could not take him—himself.

“I have gained nothing,” he thought sadly, as he hung on the ragged shores of his own galaxy. “The years are wasted, and I have grown. I have been alone, and I have never escaped. I am the same. I am Yellow Light, and I have not been proud of my name! What matters the discoloration of my purple light? What matter the pitiful deficiencies that encumber me? I have not fought. Yellow Light, Yellow Light,” he cried softly, “you must fight!”

TOWARD this end, holding his courage erect, he sought out life, and found it, his visions resting at last on a titanic violet sun around which swarmed a horde of energy creatures, purples and greens. He was imbued with the sacred hope of a new fulfillment, and yet the pangs of dread ate at his thought swirls. If he failed, where would he turn?

It was a thought that had no answer, but he felt that then he would know true horror. He would have to escape! Where? Where lay escape from the cruel taunts of life, escape from himself? He was suddenly trembling with a nostalgic yearning for an invisible, intangible something that he could not name, that came trembling out of the reservoir of his clouded memory. Shaken by the thought, he drove

slowly toward the blazing violet sun.

On the outskirts of the milling crowd of green and purple lights, he stopped. He watched with a rigid fear of discovery that slowly turned to a tremulously eager excitement.

This was a game the youths were playing, a staggering game of cosmic proportions. Below, coloring the heavens virulently in its baleful violet glow, a huge sun was growing. Vicious whirls of tortured gas fled across its face. Geysers of torn, disrupted matter arced upward like a hot tongue to lick toward nearby stars. The sun was in visible pain from its colossal weight pressing inward on itself.

Beneath the comparatively calm exterior, a furnace of titanic heat explosions raged. Now and again a planet-size fragment belched upward to fall in a futile frenzy of frustration as its parent dragged it back with inexorable gravitational fingers. The gargantua was three millions of miles in diameter, and the excited youths were skillfully adding to its mass by stripping a nearby galaxy of stars.

Yellow Light watched eagerly, charmed by the consummate skill with which a young purple light delicately lowered a hundred-thousand-mile star into the ravening maw of the monster. He understood, too, the mechanics which demanded such precision. The sky-monster was a cosmic powder-dump, primed to respond instantly and with suicidal force to an untoward exterior intervention. It sought for release, even as it fought to maintain stability.

All this Yellow Light saw, and saw too the clamoring youths as they fought for their turns. One by one, stars were selected, swung on tractor beams, discarded as their masses proved their danger. One by one, while the breathless youths watched, solar masses were lowered through the immense gravitational field, until the oceans of gas that tripped across the monster's face licked at the proffered

morsels and swallowed them in a greedy burst of inchoate flame.

Yellow Light's swollen body rippled visibly with his desire to enter the delighting game. He turned now, still undiscovered, and stealthily reached out toward the denuded galaxy, with a tractor ray drawing back toward himself a flaming mass which he thought would answer the purpose. His thought swirls throbbed in anticipation.

Slowly the sky monster grew, racked with its incredible stresses of heat and weight. Yellow Light hung back, lacking the courage to claim his turn, trembling with an inner frustration and dread. Finally, he could stand it no longer. A green light, the center of attention of a hundred energy creatures, completed her task with swift, complacent proficiency. Yellow Light activated his propellents and moved into the breach, at the same time thrusting his ripe young sun out on the tip of his tractor ray.

“STAND back!” he cried tremulously. “Stand back! It's my turn!” He began to swing the lump of flaming matter in vast clumsy arcs.

The youths churned back in a great scattering cloud, back and away from the untoward length of his ray.

They were staring at him, Yellow Light knew. He felt a convulsion of panic. The sun almost slipped from his awkward grasp. Determinedly, he continued to swing it, aping the motions of those who had preceded him. Then suddenly, like an angry hive, the horde of youths swarmed in, closed about him in a sphere, nimbly dodging his tractor ray.

“Who is he?” . . . “An adult!” . . . “What is he doing here?” . . . “It is not his turn!”

A hundred outraged cries rang in his thought swirls. A single purple light detached himself from the throng and cried

with vast scorn, "Who are you, Yellow Light? What do you do here? Go away, large one!"

Yellow Light was sick with fright. "It is my turn," he whispered.

They sensed his great clumsiness, his fear.

"Yellow Light!" a half hundred of them cried in mockery. "Yellow Light! Yellow Light!"

The sun slipped from his grasp, started to fall toward the writhing violet sun. Paralyzed, he stared after it. He emitted a great wild cry, and plunged with his awkward stride after it. He caught it again on the tip of his tractor ray, and the pack of youths roared in high fury, "He is destroying our sun. Stop him! Stop Yellow Light!"

The gravitational drag of the star was beyond belief. Plucked at with their thousand spears of insult, he fought with his falling sun as if his life depended on it, and he swung it free, in a vast arc, only to have it spin away in a mighty spiraling orbit. It disappeared beyond the titan's farther rim, whirled swiftly, and came into view on the opposite rim just as it struck that heaving surface. The youths gasped concertedly, and suddenly they scattered back and away.

Yellow Light, for a moment of unbelief, held his visions on that terrible prelude to catastrophe. Then he too urged himself back a light-year, stunned.

The gargantua's surface rippled with planet-size tidal waves, bulged for an infinitesimal second at its equator. The outraged matter at its core, pressed beyond endurance by the sudden application of a force and mass it could not compensate for, swelled up against its constricting confines, and gave up all its supernal heat and energy in one huge upsurge of liberation. Million mile cracks appeared on the crazily agitated surface of the star, deepened into vast gorges from which puffs of matter and light were emitted with frightful

velocity. Pounded at insensately from within itself, the whole star broke apart with one vast detonation which bathed the heavens in demon-light. It threw its fragments with unequaled savagery upon the sky, destroying in their course the tattered remnants of the two galaxies which had fed it. The inferno reached for fifteen light-years across space, and Yellow Light, visions blacked out by the ravening brilliance, was hurled back on the wave-front of the explosion.

Dazed, he finally thrust out with his parapropellents and stopped. From his vantage point, he saw the remainder of the conflagration. The brilliance died. Chaos was on the universe. New suns flared into life; freed matter settled into the stability of solitary, sedately coiling nebulae; flaming gases fled in great mist clouds across the gaps between four newly formed galaxies. Of the giant sun there was nothing. It had died and its convulsions had remade a tiny corner of the universe.

H E HUNG there, shivering, knowing that there was something he must do. He must get away! He was too late, for from a hundred different directions the youths converged on him, until once more he was encircled with their outraged cries.

"He destroyed our sun!" The purple light who thus spoke reached out with a pressor ray. Yellow Light was ignominiously jarred a half-million miles to one side.

"Yellow Light, Yellow Light!" the voices cried. Another pressor ray flung him in an opposite direction. Feebly, he tried to resist.

"I did not destroy it," he panted, with an upsurge of rage. "I would have added to it successfully if there hadn't been interference! It wasn't my fault!"

A half-dozen rays, tractors and pressors both, stopped his protests, tore at

him, pushed him, whirled him, until great foaming puffs of brilliance were erupted from his over-size body. In a fury, he lashed out with his own rays, but they were clumsily, ineffectively guided.

The youths cried out their devil's song: "Yellow Light! Clumsy one! Yellow Light!"

"Stop it!"

A new voice burst through the mocking clamor. As if by magic, Yellow Light's torturers ceased their battering of him, and he whirled, finally focusing his visions on the newcomer. Star Glory! A great starved eagerness leaped up in him at sight of her flawless milk-white sphericity with the round, clear green light as her core.

"Stop it, I say!" said Star Glory coldly. The youths stared at her. One of them burst out in excited voice: "Stop it? Why should we stop it? He is a clumsy fool. He destroyed our star with his clumsiness. Look at him! Yellow Light!"

"Yellow Light, Yellow Light," the attendant throng muttered half-heartedly.

"Stop it!" cried Star Glory. She bent on Yellow Light a look of tenderness. She said slowly, "It is not right that you should treat him this way. I was with him in the seventeenth band. He had no Mother. He was in the seventeenth band too long. My own Mother, Crescent Moon, says that he was in the seventeenth band too long. She rescued him. If he is clumsy or has yellow lights at his core, you must blame it on his long stay in the seventeenth band, not on him. Something happened to him."

The encircling youths were quiet, and involuntarily drew back from him.

Yellow Light felt the hot flood of a terrible shame as the meaning of her words flowed into him. He trembled, caught halfway between an emotion of blind anger and futile despair. He held himself rigid, aware of the pity in which the uneasy youths held him.

Horror mounted within him.

"Say no more, Star Glory," he whispered imploringly.

"I was in the seventeenth band with him, myself," said Star Glory eagerly. "It was I who told him his Mother had died. And then it was I who begged my Mother to rescue him." She rotated languidly, as she repeated her tale again and again.

Yellow Light writhed in the agony of the indictment all unwittingly hurled at him, as she thus bathed at the center of attention.

"I can stand it no more!" he cried in a terrible voice.

Star Glory whirled in surprise, apparently remembering him again. She turned then to the throng, as a sudden thought struck her. "I know where there is a sun perhaps larger than the one Yellow Light so clumsily destroyed. We will go there!"

The youths, already forgetting the object of their late mockery, burst out with eager assent, milling about her.

"And Yellow Light may go with us!" said Star Glory magnanimously. "Come, Yellow Light!"

With a final delighted glance at him, she activated her propellents and shot away, the whole concourse of youths streaming after her, a chain of lights sweeping across the newly created galaxies. With blurred visions, Yellow Light stared after them. Then, a lost thought spurring him on, he went frantically after them.

It was in vain. His flight was cumbersome, pitiful in its fumbling attempt at a great velocity. He stopped finally, the youths gone, shuddering in a horror that was directed on himself.

"I am alone," he thought starkly. "I have failed. I am lost!"

Then, for the second time, came a flashing memory. There was something he must find! There was something he must look for! There was something that was for him. and him alone! He thrust out

wildly with his visions, hoping that he might see, or sense, the nameless reality of that which must be his. There was flaming matter—that was all.

But in his mind the flame of his desire burned fiercer and hotter, consuming him in terrible, bright clearness.

"I will find it!" he vowed passionately to the poised assemblage of stars. "I will find it—and I will know peace!"

CHAPTER THREE

The Inner Band

HE WAS young, in the life-scale of energy creatures: but thirty millions of years had passed since his birth. Already there was in him an unyielding black bitterness, tinged white from afar with the unseen bright beacon of his hope. In search of the fulfillment of an unnameable desire he went, and the millions of years passed.

He was a specter of the stellar legions, weaving through their impersonal ranks, searching deeply beneath their scalded faces, reeling with the suffocation of his continued failure as he found no clue. The bands of hyper-space knew him, as he thrust himself into them with laborious mental effort. From first to forty-seventh, where all space was filled with cubistically distorted stars and galaxies. And he knew nothing of the forty-eighth, the chilling band of life. He was a purple light and he did not have the instinctively guarded, natural wisdom of the green.

He was forty millions of years in age, and he met Star Glory. He saw her flashing toward him from the far distance, bright with her perfection, searing him with the memory of the awful thing she had revealed to him. He froze, choked with an emotion he could not label.

"Yellow Light!" She thrust out her parapropellents, halting before him in sharp curiosity. "Where have you been?"

His great loneliness ebbed from him in a swift tide as he was washed in the cruel tenderness of her gaze.

He blurted out thickly, "Everywhere, Star Glory! I have sought. I have searched the universe over—" He halted.

"You have searched?" she demanded. "For what? Oh, Yellow Light, for what have you searched? Is not everything you desire around you?"

"No," he whispered, "no!"

She came closer. "For what do you search?" She was eager with tremulous curiosity, striving to reach into his memory swirls with her thought bands, to reach in and draw out his innermost thoughts. He closed his memory swirls against her, overcome with shame.

"I do not know for what I search," he gasped. Then, in bitter frenzy, he cried out, "I do not know! There is in me a terrible yearning! There is something I must find. It is here, Star Glory, and yet it is not here! I have not found it!"

For long she stared at him, and he was again aware of the wisdom that was hers, a wisdom he could never accumulate, and which she would never indulge. Suddenly she filled him with nameless horror.

"Leave me, Star Glory!" he whispered. "Leave me!"

She rotated with slow, piercing thought. "Perhaps," she said presently, "you are on a fool's quest, Yellow Light. But I will leave." She did, though he would have had her back the moment she was gone. He turned and blundered in slow, zigzag fashion in the opposite direction, a vast sickness growing in him—fool's quest! So Star Glory had said. But she could not be right! Else why this thunderous longing that beat in his mind?

His meeting with Star Glory had a strange result. Thousands of years later, a group of youths came flashing toward him, circling him in dizzy brilliance as they taunted his clumsiness with their own grace.

"Yellow Light!" their devil's-song blasted out. "Yellow Light! He searches and does not know for what he searches!"

"Star Glory would not have told you!" he cried in his mortification, but at the same time he knew that her vanity had betrayed him.

"Yellow Light!" the dervishes called mockingly. "How can he find what he does not know?"

"I will find it," he cried, goaded to consuming rage.

"He will find it. Yellow Light, the clumsy one, the yellow one, will find it! As well could he solve the mystery of the third band—" and they whirled away, their knife-thoughts still in his brain.

He quivered, his thoughts rioting uncontrollably under their mockery, his body expanding and contracting under the dreadful indictment. They were not like him! They did not have to search for a chimera! Poor Yellow Light, the deluded. And then came thought of the third band. . . .

Slowly the thought unfolded, like a flower that has been in the darkness too long. Then, by some alchemy of the mind, he knew, as he had always known that he and he alone could solve that mystery. He halted on the threshold of soaring emotions, exploring the astounding discovery.

"It must be what I seek," he thought in awe. "The third band! The third band! It is mine!" By laborious mental command he clicked into it.

Before him stretched the thin, patterned plane of white brilliance that was the three-dimensional universe projected onto a two-dimensional plane. The third band! And beyond the depraved ugliness of com-

pressed galaxies stretched the tight, ebon skin of nothingness, reaching without end into diminishing distances.

"It is mine," he whispered with a terrible bright clearness of purpose, and without doubt he hurled himself at that dark curtain, behind which mystery, darkly ominous, lay entombed.

It parted and closed behind him.

HE HUNG poised, hardly daring to think on the incredible occurrence. But he was here! He was choked with the pride of his feat, a feat no other energy creature had ever accomplished. He was the only living being able to penetrate that dark wall! And though around him was the sheerest darkness, the thought was intoxicating to his senses.

Darkness! Nothingness! He waited, trembling with the revelation of his mightiness. He sent out his vision rays for what must have been long light-years. There was nothing. A chilling doubt began to arise.

"No," he cried at long last. "No! There is something! There is at least a galaxy, a far galaxy, a new universe!"

And far away, a mote of egg-shaped light, he saw it—a galaxy! Energy formed and foamed away from him as his body contracted to half its size under the emotions of thanksgiving and pulsing wonder. Involuntarily, he lashed out with his propellents, surged into glorious, parsec-eating flight. Through him flowed such strength and power as he had never known. His speed mounted, for the galaxy grew apace, nor did it seem to weave from side to side. He was flying, straight and true, with all the grace of Star Glory herself!

And still faster!

His mind numbed with the utter enigma of that which was happening. He, Yellow Light, the malformed, the ill-born, was great. He was the eater-of-space, the faster-than-light, owner of the inner band!

He hungrily drank in the celestial beauty of a million stars as the galaxy subdivided within itself, and now lay spread across the endless darkness with spiral arms outstretched to receive him. And into it he plunged, drenching himself in the radiant energy which throbbed through space, in mad excitement hurling himself in graceful loops and arcs around flaming hulks of matter. From one end of the majestic galaxy to the other he plummeted with incomparable ease and strength, slicing dead red cinders into dozens of separate pieces, hurling them with skill unsurpassed around other stars to form complete, complex solar systems. He devoured stars whole, converted them into energy, then contracted his body until energy coalesced, flowed together and formed new lumps of matter. He flung it from him at light speed, in wanton abandon. Stars exploded as his titanic bullets struck them, and he reformed them with ironic mercy. "I am master!" he exulted, and halted on the edge of the galaxy to see the dead emptiness that stretched away forever. He threw himself into it, and with delight watched the galaxy shrink. It was gone. Again he cast about him with his visions, and a nimbus seemed to settle about his mind.

"This is the birthplace of matter," he whispered, and why he thought it he did not know. Yet, it was truth. Untold years, numbering in the tens of millions, seemed to pass through the dark fabric of space, and there was a manifold rustling of energy growing from nothing. He saw the motes of light glowing in prismatic beauty, swirling in eldritch dances as they pirouetted about each other, melted together, and assumed the guise of matter. Matter which darkened and swelled and seethed. Matter which churned against itself, colliding, flaring in molten beauty, gaining mass from a magical source, and thundering upward to sun size.

All around him space was ruptured and

cast out of being, as the illustrious miracle took place. Suns of fiery magnificence swarmed through the infinite extents of a new-born universe. They erupted and clawed at each other with gravitational drags; and planets, steaming-hot, shot out from their writhing interiors.

He moved with the pomp of a conqueror through the flaming legions.

"This is mine," he cried, and there was no voice to deny him.

No voice! No life! The thought was a clanging discord.

"There must be life!" he cried violently.

THUS he saw life, and its energy beat strongly at him. Space swarmed with life. He saw groups of energy creatures, far away on the ragged shores of the numberless galactic accretions. They had no knowledge of him, Yellow Light, for they moved and played on, intent on themselves and their own pursuits. In Yellow Light grew a vast cunning. He moved with insolent, powerful grace toward a nearby sun, a lost memory tugging at him.

He hovered over the star, proceeded to reach out to a nearby galaxy with jabbing tractor rays, bringing back smaller stars. He dropped them, thus adding to the star's bulk until it became a ravening furnace of indigo violence. It grew, swelled, became a dangerous celestial bomb. And now, with infinite skill and precision, Yellow Light lowered suns delicately, in constant stream, apparently absorbed with lofty fascination in his game, apparently unaware of the energy creatures who, one by one, left their own games as they noted Yellow Light's tremendously careless skill. They came darting from all directions, tens and hundreds of them. They watched in silent awe as Yellow Light fed the madly undulating rind of the ripening star with a flawless technique which soon had the monster a billion miles through.

And then they came by the thousands! Yellow Light felt such joy as he had never known. If only Star Glory, if only those other taunting youths, could see him now.

They pressed closer about him and his bulging star, voiceless. They knew that he did not see them, and if he did see them, would not deign to notice them. He felt a great pity for their smallness, their inferior strength. He cast a side vision at them, sweepingly, carelessly, then returned to his effortless task.

They appreciated his recognition of them, and finally they could contain themselves no longer. A chant grew, swelling with voluminous roar against his thought swirls.

"He is great! The greatest of the great! See the star he has built! Oh, there can be none greater than this stranger in our midst. We are the luckless ones, and we writhe in our shame!"

They whirled about him, in their thousands, crying out their praise, their worship, their intense admiration. His thought swirls rioted uncontrollably as their litany drew him to the pinnacle of his happiness. He saw now that there was truly no limit to his magnificance, and no limit of size to which he could take this star.

He played his visions over them, as they whirled in awkward adoration, and a hideous, mind-destroying doubt crawled through him. He froze in horror, stricken dumb. It seemed as if his very life-force was draining away.

"He is great," said the weaving throng doubtfully.

The truth burst in him with white-hot intensity. Something crumbled in his mind, and with a wild, mad thought blasting at the hovering expectant thousands, he spurred back and away.

"Go! Vanish!"

Space was still, and the energy creatures were gone. And, as if they also expected his command, the stars commenced to pale. They faded to redness, to dark-

ness, to non-being, and darkness wrapped itself around him. He shook in a series of trapped convulsions, drew his visions in about him like a shroud. He hung there, unable to still his dreadful thoughts. Then, involuntarily, there was a click in his consciousness. When he again looked, the familiar ranks of galaxies and stars, unchanged, surrounded him.

He was back in the first band of true space, and he knew he was mad.

The inner third-band—a dream-dimension—and each creature had been but a replica of himself. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

The Betrayal

FOR long thousands of years, he was afraid to move, for he knew what he would find. He was filled with a dull, dead weariness in which thoughts trickled slowly. And yet one thought stood out with burning clarity. He had not found that for which he sought.

"I will never find it," he whispered in agony. Never? The thought was unbearable.

Then came whispering to him the name that flowed like a great unseen river through space. Crescent Moon, the Mother of Star Glory, had twice mentioned him. Oldster—the wise.

"He must not die!" he cried violently. "He must not sleep! I will find him!"

Abruptly, his horror was washed away in the great fear that Oldster would die before he, Yellow Light, could speak to him. That must not happen! Oldster would know, and Oldster would answer. He trembled with his longing, and entered the fifteenth band of lightlessness, engulfed in its funereal obscurity.

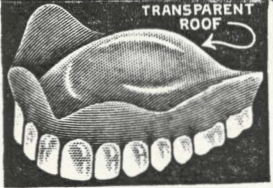
"Oldster!" He cried the name out, but in all this infinity, he did not feel the beat of a life-force. Oldster was far, far away.

(Continued on page 102)

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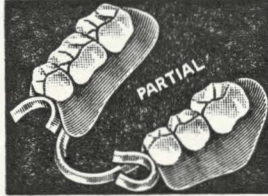
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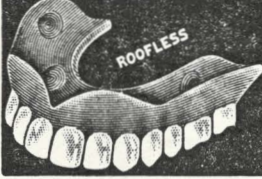
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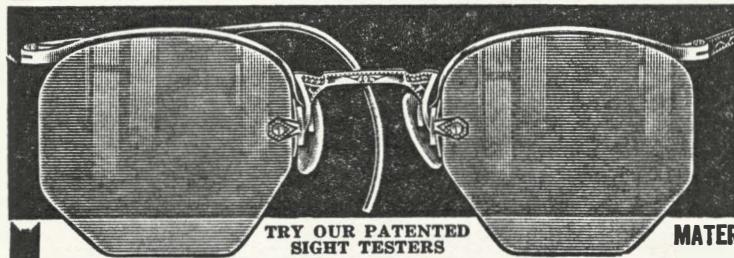
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ASTONISHING STORIES

(Continued from page 100)

Nonetheless, he began his search. He blundered for untold thousands of years that swelled to millions, seeking for the merest wisp of thought that might emanate from the somnolent hulk of the terrifying creature. The invisible light-years fled away as he weaved out from a center. And finally, so faint as to be almost without being, came a single mental vibration, wordless, meaningless.

He drove toward it, a terrible fright seizing at his mind. The strength of the thought hardly increased, and yet he felt now the faint, pulsing beat of a fading life-force. Oldster it surely must be!

"Awake! Awake! I am Yellow Light. Do you know of me? I was without a Mother. She died. Oldster!" Over and over again, without end, a single goading thought that impinged with monotonous insistence on the dying creature's brain.

The pulse of life fluttered, increased in strength with spasmodic, dreadful surges. Yellow Light leaped into the breach, hammering at it with his thoughts.

Then came a muttering, a mumble, a restless jumble of agonized thought, a great wave of delirious horror. Spellbound with the futilely lashing thoughts of the creature, Yellow Light was held frozen.

THE formless thought ceased abruptly. Came a hollow, stricken voice, as if borne on leaden wings from a distance infinitely far, "Go away! Away! There is nothing for you here. I am tortured again!"

"I did not mean to bring you pain," cried Yellow Light violently.

"But you have brought me pain, a pain I thought to escape," the old creature burst out rackingly. "Who are you? Why do you torture me? Ah, I will soon know."

Yellow Light's thought swirls were seized with tight bands of energy which relentlessly, cruelly explored through the

ABYSS OF DARKNESS

accumulated memory of his life. The probing bands withdrew, and the thousands of years, pregnant with foreboding silence, trooped away.

Then came Oldster's dull whisper, "Yellow Light is his name—Vanguard! And I had thought myself done with Sun Destroyer! Oh, Yellow Light, whose true name is Vanguard, there is an evil heritage on you, and I see no end, no end!"

The fluttering fingers of horror touched at Yellow Light's brain.

"My true name is Vanguard," he whispered, but before he could complete the thought, Oldster reached into him, and one by one tore away the veils drawn over his identity. Acutely revealed was the story of that creature from an age long-gone; of Darkness, the dreamer, who had plunged across the sea of lightlessness, in search of a purpose, and had found it only in death; of Sun Destroyer, his daughter, who had returned along his path only to die in the mad fantasies of her disordered mind, after bringing into being her child, Vanguard.

"Vanguard!" Yellow Light said starkly. "That is my true name! But—but Oldster! Death—birth! I understand none of these."

"Nor shall you." It seemed as if Oldster's memory were fleeing backward along a trail which took him to the day when he was young. He muttered restlessly, "What might I not have spared myself had I not sought the answer to those problems. Oh, Yellow Light—Vanguard—leave me. Leave me! I cannot help you. I am lost; we are all lost, and there is no answer!"

Yellow Light surged forward in violent denial.

He charged passionately, "There is an answer, Oldster. And you know that answer. I have searched. I do not know how long I have searched! What is it? What is it that haunts me, Oldster, so

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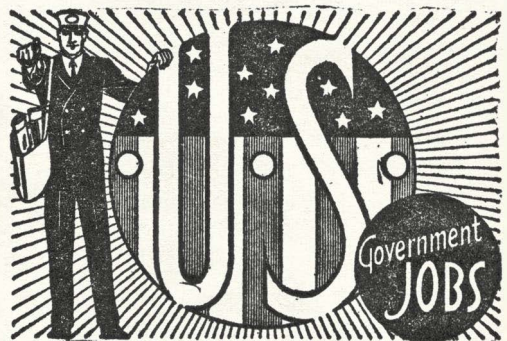
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PURIFIES BEFORE YOUR EYES

that it drips on me like an acid, eating at me until I am mad with the desire to find it? I am lost if you do not tell me!"

"There is no real answer to your dream," Oldster said dully. "My son, return to the inner third band!"

"The inner third band?" The scalding memory of the dream-dimension returned. "I cannot! There is nothing for me there, Oldster. I will not live in dreams!"

"You have lived in nothing else," said Oldster sadly. His thoughts left Yellow Light momentarily, then came back.

He whispered, so that his voice was barely audible, "If you really wish to find that which you seek—there is Star Glory!"

"Star Glory!" and suddenly he was shaking, his mind seared unaccountably with the thought.

"But—but—" he whispered. But Oldster had drawn his thought bands in around him and would say no more.

Yellow Light hung in darkness unutterable, palsied with an unknown horror. Star Glory! He must seek her out, and his search would at last be rewarded. But why? Why?

HE DROPPED to the first band of true space, and, with erratic, strangely eager propellents, lashed himself across the moundless star-fields. He found her, in the course of a thousand years.

He intercepted her course, and for long moments, quivering with his mad exultation, he held her visions with his own.

She, in turn, returned his stare, and he sensed a peculiar change coming over her.

She spoke at last, faintly:

"You are strange, Yellow Light, strange. Why is it that you are here?"

He was caught in the grip of an emotion he could not name. "I do not know, Star Glory! I have been sent by Oldster—I do not know why I have been sent!"

ABYSS OF DARKNESS

For long and long, she bent on him the growing glance of cruelty and paradoxical tenderness.

She whispered at last, "Then I think that I know. Yellow Light, follow me!"

He poised, trembling with unexplainable dread. He watched Star Glory as she receded, and then it seemed to be the last he knew. A nimbus settled over his thought swirls, and he remembered only that under the terrible spell of her receding green light, he had cast out his own yellow-specked purple light. Two globes—green and purple—collided in mid-space, merged, and became a pulsing ball of luminescence.

He stared, gripped with a sense of loss.

Star Glory he saw. She hovered over the white, pulsing ball, and he knew with poignant certainty that it was life—life that he and Star Glory had created. And she, though her green light had merged with his purple, had magically acquired another light, while his was gone, gone!

"Gone!" he cried in agony, and did not know why he was agonized. Suddenly he saw Star Glory and the energy child disappear.

He went after her in a frenzy, and found her again in the seventeenth band of hyper-space. She was hovering in strange benediction over her child. Yellow Light moved toward her in leaden motion.

"Star Glory," he whispered.

She turned toward him, and read his unspoken question. Her thoughts were cold.

"You will die," she said heartlessly.

"No!" he cried.

"Yes. Thus it is, thus it must be." She was impersonal, uncaring. "Oldster wishes to die. You knew that. It is not strange that he should point out the path of death to you. Perhaps," she added, with demon-humor, "it is what you were searching for!"

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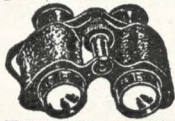


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ASTONISHING STORIES

"I did not search for that," he said dully. He stared at the energy child, hanging pendant in the seventeenth band, where propellents were useless. A memory, a longing that was old, tugged at the roots of his brain. But he could not place it. A great, deathly weariness was working grimly in his body.

"My purple light," he said helplessly. "It is gone. But yours has returned!"

"And will return three times more," she uttered, and there was the shadow of her own eventual doom hanging over her words. She rotated restlessly. "Go, Yellow Light! There is a law which governs us—and I can do nothing about it. Had you been like Oldster, if in your wisdom you had known the secret of the purple and green lights . . . Ah, Oldster brought his own torture on himself. He will never die!"

She turned from him, and so he left her, the talons of his dissipation into the energy from which he had been formed clawing at his propellents, rendering them almost entirely useless.

He drifted without purpose the length of a galaxy, striving to drink into him as much of the beauty around him as he could before he was negated. It was useless. His brooding thoughts returned to Oldster, and the great treachery that Oldster had practiced on him. Bitter fury goaded him to a flaming, zigzag flight. He remembered suddenly the soaring grace of his flight in the inner third band. And so came the great thought!

The inner third band! His memory swirls throbbed with excitement. He could go there!

"Oldster, Oldster," he whispered, the wild fire of hope burning in him, "had I listened! But it cannot be too late!"

It could not be too late. It must not be! He threw himself into the third band with his waning strength, tremulous with

(Continued on page 108)

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ABYSS OF DARKNESS

(Continued from page 106)

thought of the dream-life that awaited him. He flung himself at the impalpable dark skin behind which lay the dream-dimension.

It was as if he had flung himself against a solid wall.

"I am lost," he said starkly, "and my search is finished. . ."

CHAPTER FIVE

A Race is Born

"I HAVE been waiting for you," said Oldster.

"You betrayed me!" said Yellow Light, trembling with dread. "I have come before you to die, Oldster! You will know that I am dying; you will know that it is you who have caused it, and you will never forget. You will live in horror of the memory, but it will return, and your sleep will be broken and you will never be at peace again!"

The aged creature's thought rays rested on his rioting memory swirls with singularly gentle touch.

"Peace, my son," he whispered, his words aching. "I have given you more than you could have given yourself, Yellow Light! You stayed in the seventeenth band too long, and emerged to find yourself lacking in the great grace and power of motion which other energy creatures possessed. Such is the penalty—such was the heritage of Sun Destroyer, your Mother. But there was another heritage which she gave you, all unwittingly. It was fitting that she called you Vanguard, for you are the vanguard of a new race, of which the yellow light is the symbol!"

The dying creature drew back a slow light-year.

"You mean—" He groped with the blinding thought.

"Yes, yes!" Oldster's thoughts reached

ABYSS OF DARKNESS

out with swelling strength and glory. "You are a step upward along the path of evolution, and you have given birth to a new race. Another mystery of space has been shattered. And there are more, Yellow Light, more! Long, winding and bitter is the path, but it ascends to a land of promise I cannot guess at.

"I see a glimmering—for a moment I understand the enormous purpose behind the cycle of life and death. The years have fled, and I have thrust all the bitterness of my life behind me, but now and anon, in my death-striving dreams, I see a tremendous purpose. Whither? I do not know. But you are a touchstone on the path, as was that first creature whose mutation allowed him ascent into the hyper-spacial universe, as were a million, a billion others. From them stemmed the new races. The Star Glories, the others, the unnumbered billions of others, were shadows with no meaning. My son," Oldster whispered, and it seemed that he himself felt the rare brilliance of ultimate meaning, "you are great!"

YELLOW LIGHT hung exhausted, no longer fighting, bathed in the blinding significance of the word. Great! He dreamed a dream that lay billions of years in the future.

"Yellow lights," he muttered. "I see

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them—and they are no longer different. And from me they stem!"

He fondled the thought with languid, luscious introspection, hardly aware that every passing moment brought him nearer extinction. He passed in thought over the mad, mad years of his life, as he blundered through the heavenly corridors, seeking and not finding, stretched on the agonizing rack of his own thoughts, tortured with dreams. Now it seemed as if all memory of his pain was softened.

"Yellow Light," he thought sadly. "I should have been proud of my name."

He could no longer focus thoughts. He knew he was dying. And yet, dying before the wise old creature, a lost remembrance plagued him.

He fought with himself. "I must know," he thought in stark horror, knowing that he could no longer form the words. "I must. Oldster! Let me die then—but first let me know! For what did I search?"

Soothingly, faintly, gently came the answering whisper. "For the seventeenth band. But it was beyond recall—the seventeenth band, backward in time the length of your life when you were but a child; when you knew nothing of life, even your own; when the universe seemed to sing a great song of peace. You remember, Yellow Light! Now you know that your search was in vain, save in death!"

Oldster's voice was gone, and Yellow Light sank into an abyss from which even he knew there could be no return. "Save in death," he repeated, as the darkness yawned; it was truth.

He thought he heard the pounding, soundless rhythm of a swelling song as the universe singled him out and made him the center of being, the hub of the great wheel, the master, the supreme audience. It was good. He imagined himself to be very young again.

THE MAIL BAG

(Continued from page 80)

The guy's a genius, Gene avers.

Dear Sirs:

Well, chalk this up as my first letter to dear old Astonishing, though *not* my first letter to a science-fiction mag.

I've a few criticisms and comments to make, so pull up an asteroid and make yourself comfortable while I rattle off on a few well-chosen words concerning the October issue.

Cover: Typically Morey style. Not so hot.

Interior pics: Aaaaah! My favorite s-f artist bar none. *Leydenfrost!* Th' guy's a genius! Have at least two pics by him every issue, and a cover by the master very often.

Second best was Lawrence for the "Vortex Blaster" yarn. Very good, but nobody can beat Leydenfrost.

I also liked the pic on page 60 for "The Eternal Quest." Could you volunteer some information as to who drew it?

Musacchia and Giunta were both good, with Morey taking the usual lemon. What fans see in him is more than I can fathom.

Well, the stories rated thusly—

1. "Thunder in the Void." Kuttner leads the parade head and shoulders above the rest.

2. "Doomsday on Ajiat." I'm very sorry we're going to lose Prof. Jameson and his metal men. I always loved them.

3. "Miracle." The highest that Cummings has ever rated with me. The Grand Hack honestly seems to be improving. I sincerely hope so, for Ray really tries hard.

4. "The Eternal Quest." Though I've never read exactly the same type of story before, it seemed somewhat ancient.

5. "Nothing." Only fair.

6. "Remember Me, Kama!" Very poor.

7. "Vortex Blaster Makes War." Ditto Smith. Although I hate the word when used to describe s-f, there is nothing to say except that it was "utterly silly."

As to the departments, they are all swell. I enjoyed "The Fantasy Circle" and "Viewpoints" just as much as I did "The Mail Bag."

Gene Hunter,
Jefferson City, Missouri

Yum yum for Finlay—phooey for some of the others.

Dear Mr. Norton:

Darned if that Finlay cover wasn't a honey. The girl especially. Yum yum! Give us more. How about a few illustrations by Finlay? Morey also did a fine job of illustrating Smith's yarn. He's at his best at space scenes.

I take back all I said of you. You really have a swell mag now. The only story I didn't like in the June ish was "The Band Played On." Just a lot of trash.

If you must stay quarterly, increase the reading matter about a hundred pages. Fifty pages for every nickel, and charge twenty cents for your mag. Okay.

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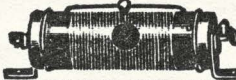
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VIEW POINTS

(Continued from page 6)

Personals

John E. Harry, whose second "Our Director" story is in this issue, is peculiarly well qualified to write about the problems of scientific food production. Harry, when he isn't writing, runs a large mechanized farm in Ohio, and has actually experimented with hydroponics—the science of growing food in water. . . . Malcolm Jameson is a former officer of the United States Navy, now on the retired list. His true-life adventures make a story as absorbing as any fiction. Says Jameson: "I'm never at a loss for characters, whatever else my stories may lack. Hero or villain, renegade or fanciful devotee to a cause—I've met them all, and characterization is merely a matter of putting them down on paper." . . . Paul Edmonds, who returns to our pages after a long absence with "Night of Gods", is about to don the khaki of Uncle Sam's Army. . . . Ross Rocklynnne's story in this issue is the concluding novelette of the "Darkness" trilogy. The first of the series, "Into the Darkness", was written several years ago, and rejected by almost all the magazines then existing because it was "too off-trail". Finally accepted by a courageous editor, it was returned to the author when the magazine that had accepted it was suspended! But when at last it did appear it was voted a howling success by the fans, intrigued by the utter strangeness of the energy-creatures. . . . Martin Pearson's "Mimic", in this issue, is based on fact. Not only is it true that "protective coloration" of the type described is carried to a fantastic degree by some insects, as mentioned in the story—but a man in Greenwich Village, New York, was found dead under almost exactly the conditions narrated in the story, mysterious metal box and all, only a few months ago!



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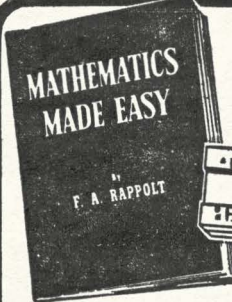
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