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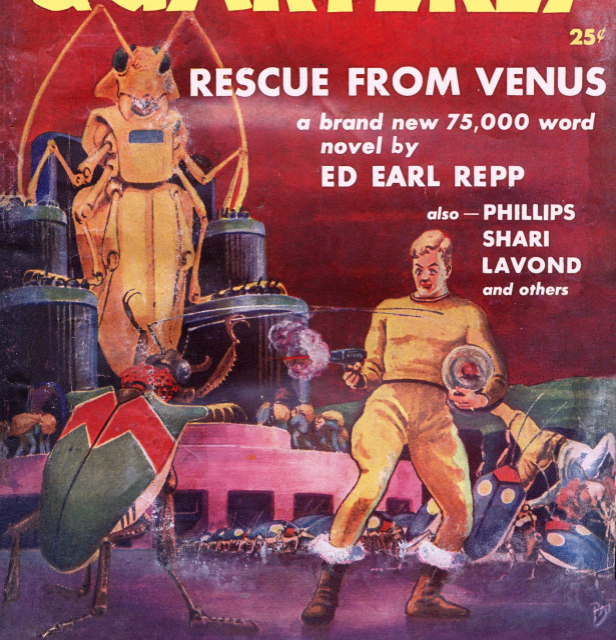
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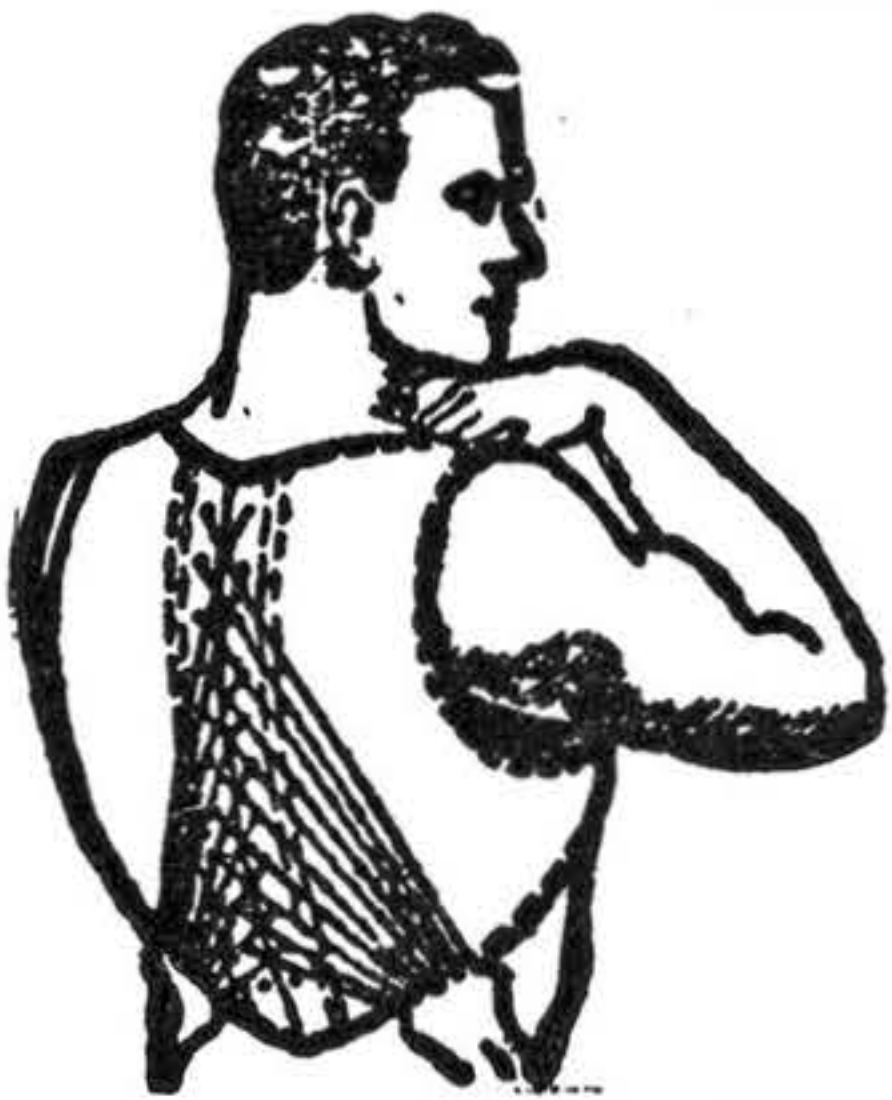


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Science Fiction QUARTERLY

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RESCUE FROM VENUS Ed Earl Repp 4

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It was the most gorgeous thing they'd found—and the most deadly!

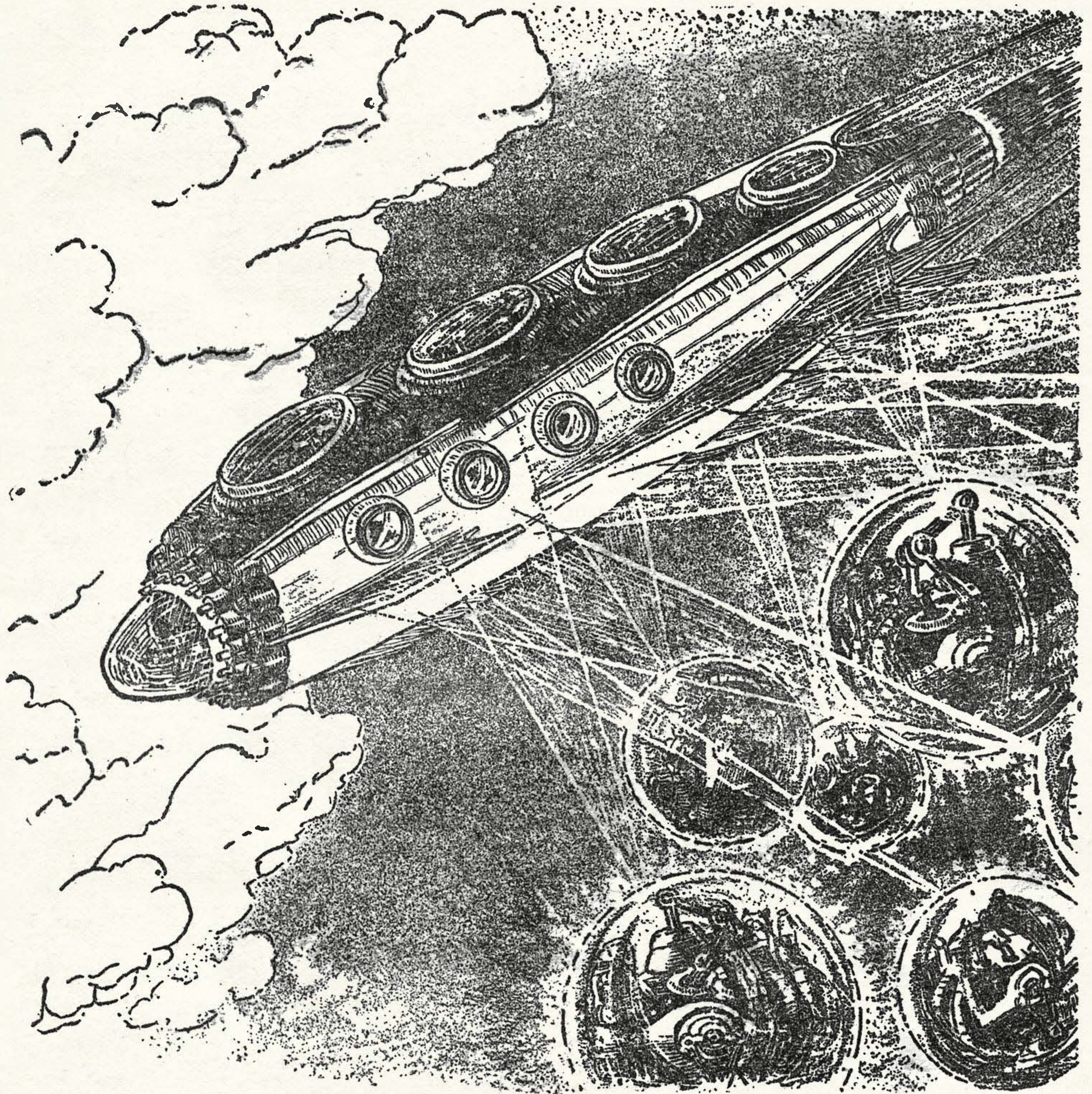
WEAPON OUT OF TIME James Blish 135

Why did that relic from the dinosaur age look so familiar?

FEMINTOWN, MARS Clarence Granoski 141

When those Martian beauties got riled, there was TROUBLE!

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RESCUE FROM VENUS

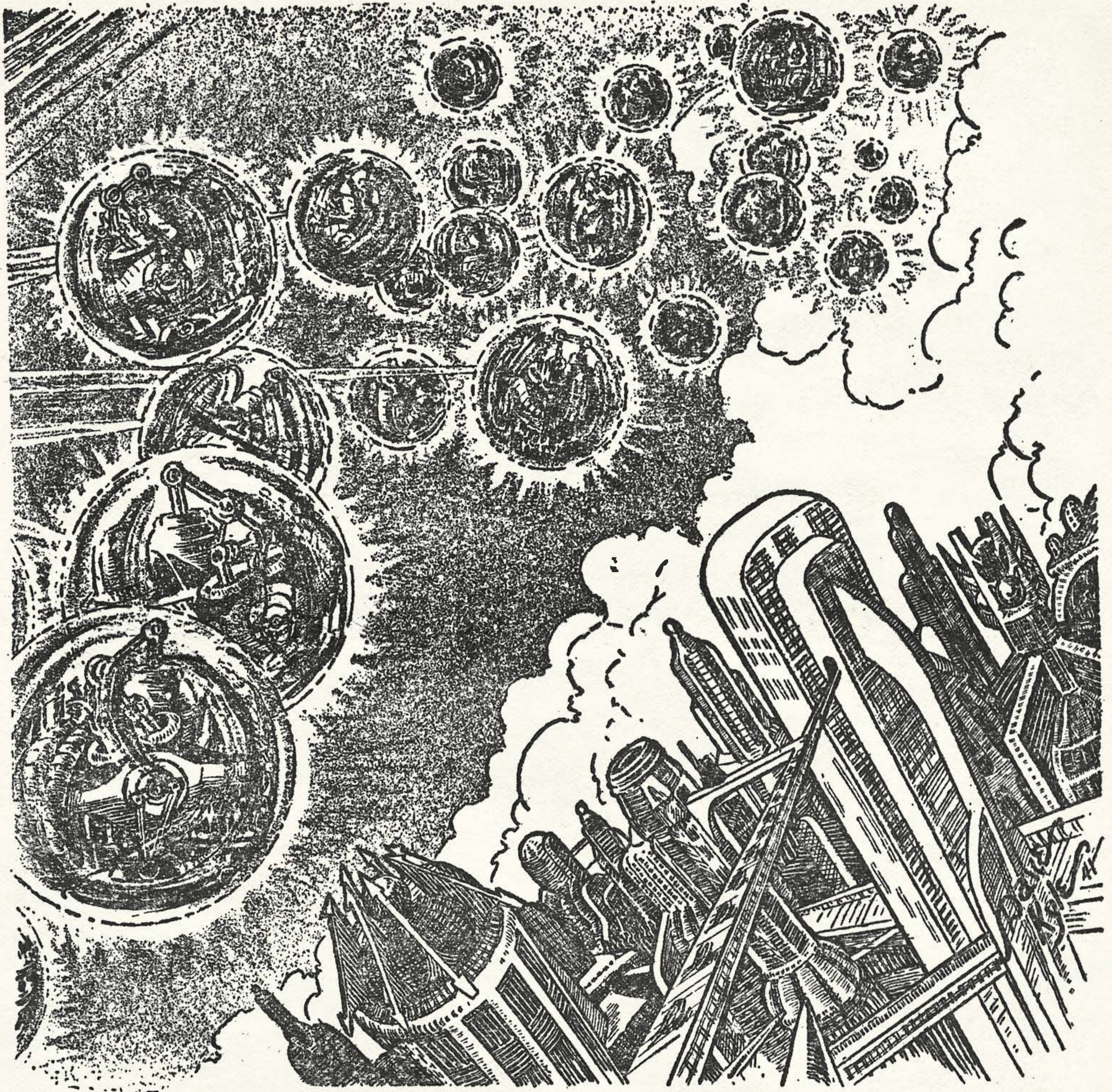
A Brand New 75,000 Word Novel

by ED EARL REPP

Was it too late to save the seven brave men of science who had made up the crew of Earth's first expedition to Venus? Professor Jarvison, his daughter, Elizabeth, and young Corwin Trumbull, who had been given one year of life by doctors on Earth, had crossed the void, hoping to be in time. But here on Venus were two races, locked in mortal combat. And the lost scientists had landed on the wrong side of the planet!

GRAVELY DR. BADGETT completed his rigid examination of the young man before him and straightened. He removed his

stethoscope, laid it carefully aside and shook his snow-white mane in a gesture of defeat. For a long moment he stood looking into the expectant



"The ship shuddered from stem to stern as if she had been struck by a meteor."

features of his patient, then spoke with an air of finality.

"Just as I had anticipated, Corwin," he said with open frankness. "Heredity has placed its mark upon you and you're going the same way your father went. But your cardiac troubles are even more advanced than his were at your age. You have a normal strength that should keep you going for a year. Beyond that . . . well, there's absolutely no hope. It grieves me, son, but you have one more year to live. Medical or surgical science can do nothing for you."

Young Corwin Trumbull, naked to

the waist, his bronzed, athletic torso glistening like velvet in the glare of the arc lamp suspended over the operating table on which he now sat, blinked incredulously at the old family physician. Some of the color drained from his fine lips and he swallowed with difficulty. Then like a man clutching at a straw to spare him from drowning, he brightened for an instant.

"You're kidding me, Dr. Badgett," and his voice was husky. "I never felt better in my life. Look at this!"

He flexed his muscles and they writhed like ropes beneath his glow-

Complete 60,000 Word Novel

ing skin, and watched the physician's seamed face for a hopeful sign.

But old Doctor Badgett was not kidding his patient. As one of the foremost cardiac specialists in his day he had been the private physician for the Trumbulls of Virginia for two score and five years. He had in his files a complete record of the physical failings of the family from Corwin's grandfather down to Corwin himself. While Corwin's grandfather had lived to respectable age, cardiac troubles virtually sliced ten years from his span of life. It sheared possibly twenty years from Corwin's father. Now it was taking its toll from the last of the Trumbulls. And Doctor Badgett positively knew that unless some miracle or an act of God interceded, Corwin Trumbull would be a dead man at twenty-five.

"I'm not kidding, Corwin," the physician replied quietly. "Life is too serious a thing to be joked about. I must repeat that you have but one more year to live. Today life belongs to you. In a year you will belong to life. That is all, son."

Corwin Trumbull, clean-cut and vigorous, sat stunned. The rumbling din of the traffic far below sounded like dull thunder in the quiet office of the physician. He had gone to Badgett with a heart that throbbed somewhat faster than it should, hoping to find some trivial cause at the root of it. Instead, he found heredity's mark stamped upon it in four large letters, D-O-O-M!

True, his father had succumbed to cardiac troubles two years before, but the thought that he, Corwin Trumbull, had inherited the curse, had never occurred to him. Now he was going like his father had gone—a vigorous life, a brief illness and then death!

"Just—just what is this curse that is wiping out the Trumbulls, Doctor Badgett?" Corwin finally gulped. "I've a right to know."

The physician nodded toward a

small closet-like room in which he developed his X-ray plates.

"I'll show you, Corwin," he said bluntly, striding quickly to the closet. He returned in a jiffy with a dripping plate which he held up to the light for him to see. For a brief space thereafter, the condemned heard a complete discourse on the sad fate of the Trumbulls.

The cardiac troubles of the family, it seemed, was something that completely baffled medical science. Nowhere in all medical history was there a hint of similar cases and Corwin Trumbull was thoroughly shocked to learn that half of his heart had already turned to stone while the other half, fighting valiantly nature's battle for preservation, was gradually losing to the forces of petrification. The petrified half showed plainly in the plate, like a lump of dark-gray rock. In a year, Badgett told him, petrification would strangle the *mitral* and *tricuspid* valves, snuffing out his life.

But Corwin Trumbull did not have the aspect of a sick man. To the contrary, he was the picture of perfect health and vigor. His skin, tanned leather-brown by the warm southern sun, betrayed rippling muscles underneath. He had the body of a young Tarzan and his nut-brown eyes were as clear and sparkling as his sandy hair was unruly. He had a fighting man's chin and the fighting spirit to back it up. He had played right end on his football team at college until he graduated a year before. Not until the past few months did he actually begin to realize that something was radically wrong inside of him. He had noticed it clearly one day while making a long swim down the Rappahannock which ran along the entire length of the Trumbull estate of which he was now sole owner and master. His heart began suddenly to labor and he grew moderately exhausted.

For the time being he had thought himself to be merely out of condition, but when the symptoms swept over

him again the next day and the next, he grew alarmed and sought out Dr. Badgett for a diagnosis. He wondered alarmedly if his affliction would compel him to give up his vigorous, athletic existence, for a wheel-chair. He rebelled at the idea and told himself silently that he'd rather be dead a thousand times than spend a single month in a wheel-chair.

"I suppose," he said to the physician gloomily, "that I'll have to sit around from now on like an old man with both feet in the grave. I couldn't stand that, Badgett!"

DOCTOR BADGETT thumped him warmly on the shoulder.

"I don't think so, Corwin," he assured him, "but I wouldn't over-exert myself if I were you. You know how far you can swim before exhaustion overtakes you. I would not advise your going further than that in anything. You can continue leading a vigorous life, with moderation, of course. In fact I advise it, for strenuous exercises will doubtless aid your heart in its struggle against strangulation. It's a peculiar malady, Corwin, and if I guess correctly, those valves will close up when you are asleep or inactive. You probably will not know when Saint Peter punches your ticket. But buck up now and enjoy life while you have it. Come back in a week or ten days and let me have another look at you.

Corwin nodded thankfully. With the air of a hungry man taking the slack out of his belt, he slipped into his shirt, shoved the tails into his trousers, buttoned it hastily and affixed his scarf. That done he gave Badgett a tight-lipped smile and stalked out of the office. The physician watched his broad back vanish, shaking his head sadly at the inability of medical science to cope with such a tragedy as this. And it was nothing short of tragedy, for there was a young man in the full bloom of health, vigorous, clear-minded, an asset to any community, dying on his feet and

nothing could be done about it. And to condemn Corwin Trumbull, Badgett realized suddenly, to an untimely death was like drawing the blood of a son of his own, so close had he been to the family throughout the years.

Leaving the physician's office, Corwin Trumbull went straight home and eased himself in a big chair in the library of his palatial estate to consider his sad predicament. He swallowed hard a couple of times to drown a choking lump that kept rising in his throat, and sat very still. Had he been a man of lower morale and less affection for those whom he held dear to him, he might have given away at once to cursing the parent who had bequeathed him the damnable plague that was expected to see his end in twelve short months.

When Colonel Trumbull passed into the Beyond, Corwin had been left very much alone in the world. His mother had been called away years before, giving her life that a second son might be born to her. Neither lived and she had become a sort of a shrine of honor to both the surviving Trumbulls. Then Corwin's father had left him the wealth of the family, but he could not turn to riches now for solace.

At no time in all his life had he felt so alone in the world as now. Of friends, he had many, yet in this hour they did not count. He felt that he wanted to confide his woes to someone closer to him—to tell of his death sentence. But to whom? He shrugged his broad shoulders and ran a tense hand through his unruly hair.

For two solid hours he remained in the chair, trying to reconcile himself to the ultimatum of Dr. Badgett. Death had missed him several times during his short span of life. But it had missed. He knew now that it was coming and would not fail to strike him down. At this thought he laughed bitterly, mockingly as though he really enjoyed the situation of being condemned to die.

But what could he do to break a big

monotony of waiting for the end? he asked himself time and again. He was not the type of person to hurl himself with reckless abandon into life's wheels of gayety, despite the fortune at his command. He was not a squanderer or a playboy. The idea of starting to burn the candle at both ends was out of the question and he penetrated the innermost recesses of his brain for a decent plan to spend his remaining days.

He was not in the least frightened over his predicament. But to say that he was not discouraged and somewhat resentful would be ridiculous. He did not want to die in a year, in ten years or a hundred. He had everything in the world to live for and youth despises death.

A smiling colored servant presently appeared in the library. Corwin greeted him with a nod, ordered a mint julep and continued wracking his brain. But try as he might he could not decide upon any particular course to pursue.

Finally the servant returned. Lost in thought, Corwin did not even see him. At length he discovered his julep on a tray beside him. A neatly folded newspaper had been placed within easy reach. As he sipped at the tall glass, he glanced over the paper abstractedly. He was not in the mood to read the current events. Casually he thumbed the pages glancing over each with a spiteful, almost scornful look.

Presently he reached the classified advertising section. That gave him an idea. He set his glass aside and hunted out the help wanted columns and the business personals. Perhaps here, he thought, he would find some occupation to take his mind off the future.

He looked over the leading advertisements with a new-born eagerness. A tailor had a vacancy for a pants presser. That job did not appeal to him and he smiled at the thought of himself pressing gentlemen's trousers. He skipped to the next adver-

tisement and read it tensely. He blinked several times and read it again, then snapped his fingers gleefully, gloatingly. This was *the* one! With a year to live, what, he asked himself almost aloud, could be better than a job like this?

ATTENTION! I want a MAN between the ages of 25 and 35 who is NOT AFRAID to risk his life for the advancement of science. Must be free from home ties, have normal use of both hands and feet and a clear brain, preferably a registered aviator with not less than one hundred solo hours to his credit. My project is fraught with supreme dangers and only men with unlimited intestinal stamina need apply. Project may last one year. Interview Dr. Mars F. Jarvison, 312 Magnolia Avenue, immediately.

CORWIN TRUMBULL read that ad through a half dozen times before he cut it carefully from the page. Then, holding the small square of paper between tense fingers, he sat on the edge of his chair staring at it as if debating whether or not to interview the advertiser.

Certainly he was qualified for the job, whatever it was. He had a thousand solo hours to his credit. But would Jarvison hire a man who was condemned to die in twelve short months? Supposing Jarvison's project lasted more than a year. Would he care to gamble on a man who would leave him in the lurch by turning up his toes at some critical moment? Hardly, Corwin thought. But, he decided quickly, it would be interesting to find out just what Dr. Jarvison's project might be. Moreover, there was a slender chance that Jarvison would take him on if the job was still open.

He shoved the advertisement into a pocket, drained his glass and hastened out to his roadster. Hopefully and somewhat jubilant, he drove away, finally to find himself at 312 Magnolia Avenue. It was in the suburbs, an estate of magnificance, with a white mansion set well back from the thoroughfare in a grove of trees. A private driveway led up to the house and he

did not hesitate to turn his car into it.

He had expected to find a line of applicants a mile long when he reached the Jarvison residence. He was mildly pleased to find competition lacking entirely, as far as he could observe from the outside. Parking his roadster at the side of the driveway he mounted a short flight of marble steps and pressed the doorbell button. His summons was answered promptly.

If he had been confused and bewildered at the pronunciation of his doom, he was even more so when the door opened. But the sensations were vastly different and his bewilderment was quite pardonable, for he found himself looking into the radiant features of as fair a southern belle as ever came before his eyes.

She smiled at him with devastating effect. Her glistening white teeth, dancing blue eyes, proud chin and wispy brown hair gave her smile the warmth of a sunbeam. She was dressed in a trim riding habit sans the hat and her hair flew in wisps about her temples in a slight draft that swept through the house at the opening of the door. She was scarcely more than twenty-one or -two, Corwin judged quickly. Her features were as finely chisled and as fair as the virgin marble of the steps up which he had just climbed. He grinned at her sheepishly and handed her the clipped advertisement at which she gave a perfunctory glance.

"Oh, yes," she said in a pleasant, musical tone. "Father is in his study waiting to be interviewed. Won't you step in, Mr . . . ?"

"Trumbull—Corwin Trumbull," he volunteered. "I hope I'm not too late for the job."

The girl laughed pleasantly. Corwin was thrilled at its carefree ring and felt suddenly downcast at his own limited lease on life.

"Hardly too late," she responded, stepping aside to permit him to enter. "You see, you are the first applicant.

No others have appeared yet and father is beginning to think the city is full of jelly-fish instead of real men."

"There are not many registered aviators along the Rappahannock," said Corwin. "Maybe that stopped them. It's early yet. The advertisement only appeared in this afternoon's *Herald*."

"That's true, Mr. Trumbull," the girl agreed, appraising him shrewdly with indirect glances. "But it did not take you long to take advantage of the proposition. Father likes promptness. I hope he finds you qualified for the job."

"Thank you, Miss Jarvison," Corwin beamed hopefully. "I hope so too. It would take a mighty big load off my mind."

She gave him another warm, hospitable smile and led him down a hallway toward the sanctum of Dr. Jarvison. The door hung ajar and he caught a glimpse of a broad-shouldered man hunched over a paper-littered desk. Miss Jarvison pushed open the door and ushered him into the presence of her father.

"Mr. Trumbull to see you, father," she said, motioning Corwin to a chair beside him. "He came in answer to the advertisement."

Dr. Jarvison, deeply engrossed in his papers, nodded without looking up.

"I'll talk with him in a jiffy, Beth," he said quietly. "As soon as I finish these calculations. Make yourself comfortable, Mr. Trumbull."

"Thank you, sir," replied Corwin as Beth Jarvison sauntered lightly out of the room. She glanced back suddenly and caught him staring after her. Youth smiled at youth, but Corwin's heart was heavy with regret that his days were numbered.

He ran his eyes swiftly over the scientist, seeing a high, massive brow, clean-shaven features and thick silvery hair. Observing his profile at a certain angle, he noticed an unmistakable likeness between father and daughter. And Dr. Jarvison was a big

man. His shoulders were straight and powerful. He had the waist-line of a man who rides horses as a rule rather than an exception. He was strictly an outdoor man and though his hair was white, he had the aspect of a much younger man.

HE cleared his throat suddenly with a deep rumble, sat erect and swung his swivel chair around so that he might face his first applicant. His eyes, like the girl's, seemed to twinkle. But Corwin was quick to see that they held the qualities of a man accustomed to penetrating into the deeper mysteries of life.

"Well?" he drawled in a pleasant voice, appraising his applicant critically.

"I came in answer to your advertisement," Corwin replied anxiously. "Thought perhaps I might satisfy your requirements."

"I see!" Jarvison asserted gravely. He leaned forward with his elbows resting on the arms of his chair. "What gave you the idea that you wanted the job, sir?"

Corwin twisted a trifle uneasily under his steady gaze.

"A man's got to have a job, and I need money," he stated tersely, surprised at the ease with which he fabricated. It dawned upon him suddenly that if he had ever wanted anything in his life, he wanted this job, whatever it was, for he sensed in it something worthwhile. He also sensed that it might place him in further contacts with Beth Jarvison and he wanted it more than ever.

The scientist studied him for several seconds during which time his eyes covered every inch of him. He noticed an odd, jade ring of heavy, engraved gold on his left middle finger. From that his eyes wandered to his neat, polished oxfords and then he speculated on the expensive material of his garments. He also noted the bulge of muscles when Corwin tensely lifted a hand to smooth out his heavy silk cravat.

"You look a far cry from starvation, young man," Jarvison commented abruptly after summing him up.

"Oh, I'm not quite that bad off," Corwin laughed. "A man can need a job and still be a few jumps ahead of the wolf."

"Of course," the scientist agreed. "Your name, sir, oh, yes—Trumbull."

"Corwin Trumbull, free, white and twenty-four!" Corwin volunteered.

Jarvison's brows went up suddenly in surprise.

"Corwin Trumbull?" he boomed incredulously. "Well, I'll be— Young man, don't tell me you are not Colonel Corwin Trumbull's son or a very near relative! I thought there was something familiar about you. Corwin Trumbull, eh?"

"Yes," said the other. "I'm Colonel Trumbull's son. Did you know my father?"

"I did," Jarvison nodded. "For many years, long before you were born. But we'll not go into that now, however. Why does my proposition interest you? Your father left you well-fixed, didn't he?"

"More than I need," said Corwin, wondering what effect the unexpected development of affairs would have on his chances of securing the job. "But I have reasons of my own for wanting the job."

"What are they, Corwin?" the scientist demanded bluntly. "You can't possibly be serious, young man!"

"I was never more serious in my life, Professor Jarvison," Corwin asserted gravely. Then, realizing that the scientist was not to be denied every bit of information that he might glean from his applicants before he selected one for the job, and wishing to be fair with him, he launched into a detailed account of events preceding his visit. "So you see," he said in closing his frank confession. "I have but one year to live. I want to pass that time as honorably and as rapidly as possible. I don't want to have time to think about my future. Your adver-

tisement appealed to me as offering the only logical means to that end. I would accept it regardless of whatever dangers the job may hold, or where it might lead. I would like nothing better than to devote the remainder of my days to the advancement of science if it will help humanity or broaden its knowledge. If your project is to last a year, then I consider myself worthy of your consideration for the job. If it lasts longer, well, I would hardly be a good investment for you."

"You're right!" Jarvison exploded, scratching his head as if he were puzzled. "You certainly would not, Corwin. But I admire your stand and your predicament certainly grieves me to say the least. I'm glad you realize that this is strictly a business proposition with me and no matter how close you might be to me through my friendship with your father years ago, I could not risk investing in you without full confidence. But," he saw Corwin's jaws drop with disappointment. His eyes twinkled. "But," he continued. "I do not believe my project will last a year, my boy, and before you accept my proposition, it is only fair that I give you a brief outline of my plans."

"You mean then that you are willing to take me on in spite of what I told you?" Corwin's face brightened.

"Badgett said you'll live a year, didn't he?" the scientist countered. "You are sure of living that long, for I know Badgett. He's got you marked off on his calender and probably knows to the day when you'll drop off. Well, according to my calculations my project will hardly last more than ten months at most and I'm willing to gamble on you that long."

Corwin nodded gratefully.

"Just what is your project, Professor?" he inquired eagerly.

"IT is one filled with well nigh unthinkable dangers, Corwin," the scientist asserted gravely. "And if you care to withdraw your application after I've explained my plans to you, I

will not blame you in the least, for the dangers are almost beyond human conception. It will take a man of iron nerve to do what I shall demand of him. But I would rather have a man of your predicament associated with me than any other because, realizing the nearness of death as you do, you will have little fear of danger. In other words, doomed to a slow death, you would probably welcome a swift and sudden passage into the Beyond rather than linger under the mental torture of waiting for the Reaper to swing his scythe. I will not have a coward associated with me, young man, and your circumstances, as I have already observed, make you anything but that. However, before I go further, I want you to understand that your affliction would not in any way interfere with the success or failure of my venture inasmuch as we shall all be dead or back home before the time Badgett has given you, has expired."

He paused as if to let what he had said sink deeply in the mind of his applicant. Once more he gave Corwin Trumbull a quick, shrewd once-over and if he had expected to see signs of withdrawal in his sun-tanned face, he was doomed to disappointment. Instead, Corwin Trumbull was sitting tensely on the edge of his chair, the living image of fearlessness and eagerness, his every sense alert to the adventure which he sensed the job offered.

"But here's what I'm going to do, sir," Jarvison said with perfect confidence in his plans. "I'm going to visit the planet Venus—"

"You're going to *what*?" Corwin Trumbull was awe-struck. In fact he was almost shocked from the edge of his chair. He stared at the man before him as if he had suddenly lost his mind.

JARVISON smiled pleasantly, unruffled by his incredulity.

"I'm going to leave this earth in an interplanetary ship, Corwin," he re-

assured him with perfect confidence. "And I intend to go straight to the planet, Venus."

"Good Lord, man," Corwin stammered. "You can't be serious! Why, it sounds incredible—unbelievable!"

"Of course," chuckled the scientist. "Everybody thought Columbus was a lunatic when he made known his belief that the earth was round. In more recent times, skeptics said it simply couldn't be done when our own Lindbergh started out to conquer the Atlantic in an airplane. Yet he did it—"

"But that is different, professor," Corwin interjected excitedly. "In Lindy's case there was only a matter of a few thousand miles and he knew what to expect. As for flying to Venus, why its millions of miles from the earth, across a sea of space that no man has ever dared venture into before."

"When I leave this earth, Corwin," said the scientist evenly, "I expect to encounter Venus at its closest position to this globe, or between the earth and the sun, a mere *twenty-six million miles away from us. That, young man, is only a short cat-hop when one considers the vast distances in space. However, I must disagree with you when you say that no man has ever ventured into space before. You are quite wrong there."

"Wrong?" Corwin stared at him intently. "Do you mean that others—"

"Exactly," Jarvison cut in. "Though it is known only to a few scientists and no laymen whatever, *others have gone into space* to conquer it even as Lindy started across the Atlantic. That is why I am going, Corwin, not for personal gain or triumph, but to find out what happened to the men

* Venus rises with the sun and is at its closest position to the earth, a distance of 26,000,000 miles, when its orbit carries it between the earth and the sun. It is therefore 67,000,000 miles from the sun. When it is behind the sun Venus is then the sun's distance, plus 67,000,000 from the earth, or 160,000,000 miles from the earth at its greatest distance.

who have already departed from this earth. In other words, my venture is to be one of mercy as well as exploration."

"You mean you are going to Venus to rescue another party of space adventurers?" Corwin could hardly believe his ears. "I never saw anything in the papers about any such thing!"

"They left with utmost secrecy, Corwin," said Jarvison. "Just two years ago today and because I am the man who built their space ship, I have volunteered to go and look for them."

"But why all the secrecy?" Corwin inquired. "It would create a sensation!"

"And ridicule from the skeptics!" grunted the scientist. "That is the reason for the secrecy, Corwin. Science does not like ridicule and scientists seldom make a statement unless they can really prove it. However, seven very dear friends of mine went into space to explore the planet Venus, using a ship of my invention. What has happened to them, nobody knows, or can guess. They might have met with disaster somewhere out in space, or they may have reached their goal and are stranded there with a wrecked ship. Anyway, that is my opinion and when members of the Society for Celestial Explorations of which I am secretary, called for volunteers to go to the rescue of our friends, I offered my services because, perhaps through some miscalculation on my part in building the machine, I felt obligated to volunteer. I—"

"But why didn't you go with your friends?" Corwin asked tensely. "Certainly if you built their ship, you would necessarily understand its operation better than they."

"Of course, sir," said Jarvison. "But I remained behind because the Society demanded it. They demanded that I begin at once to construct another space ship to be held in readiness to go to the aid of our friends should they not return at a given time. They were allowed just one year in which to

make the voyage and return. We have waited an extra year hoping they might turn up or attempt to communicate with us, thinking they may have landed back on earth in some out of the way corner of the world. But our wait has been futile and now we plan action. A rescue expedition must go into space after them and I am of the opinion that we shall find them stranded on Venus!"

"Why did they go into space in the first place?" Corwin demanded anxiously.

Professor Jarvison gave him a strange look.

"Why did Columbus start across the then unknown Atlantic?" he countered gravely. "To increase human knowledge more than anything else. That is why my friends went into space in my ship to which I devoted my life to construct!"

"It is almost unbelievable," commented Corwin. "And you want to take me with you on your rescue flight, eh?"

"You understand to some extent now, Corwin," Jarvison replied, "just what sort of dangers go with my proposition. They are unthinkable and even an old astronomer like myself cannot know what to expect out there in space. There will be, among unknown things, the danger of meteors, space-storms of unequalled violence, collisions with asteroids and there will be the vast Meteor River to cross—"

"Meteor River?" Corwin's jaw dropped. "A river in space?"

"A river of flying meteors, Corwin," the scientist replied. "Unlike anything on this world. But we shall have to cross it to get to Venus and it is only one of thousands of dangers that confront the space venturer. It is only fair that I tell you that our lives will not be worth the time it takes to breathe after we leave this sphere. But I have no fear and if you wish to go with me, I shall be glad to have you. If you care to withdraw your application, you are at liberty to

do so. But in either event, young man, you are sworn to secrecy about my plans and all that I have told you. Is that understood?"

"Perfectly," Corwin muttered. "Perfectly, sir."

II

CORWIN TRUMBULL'S lips trembled and he swallowed with difficulty as he debated with himself whether or not to accept Professor Jarvison's strange proposition. The very magnitude of the scientist's plans overwhelmed him. He looked at him closely for some sign of madness. Seeing none, he began suddenly to anticipate such a voyage into space as Jarvison had outlined to him. The adventure intrigued him, fired his imagination to its utmost. Meteor River? Venus? The idea of seeing them fascinated him and without further hesitation he made his decision.

"I'm going with you, Professor Jarvison!" he said as if his pent-up excitement had suddenly burst loose from his lips. Their hands came together in a firm clasp. "But," Corwin continued, overwhelmed, "how do you plan to get to Venus? No airplane could do it! Why did you advertise for a layman to accompany you when many scientists would jump at the chance? What will Miss Jarvison do if you fail to return, and when do you plan to leave?"

"Not so fast, young man! Not so fast!" the scientist held up a hand to halt the barrage of questions flung at him, and laughed. "To begin with, I am prepared to leave this sphere within twenty-four hours. I do not intend to leave in an airplane. As I told you, I have an interplanetary ship at my command. I will show it to you later. I advertised for a layman, a young layman, because, considering the sad fate of our departed friends, none of the members of the Society cared to take the risk. They are too old, anyway, and in a project like this, young blood is almost a necessity. I decided

on a layman because he is less apt to dispute my judgment than a young scientist, and we must have perfect harmony to survive. I cannot perform my task alone and Beth, my daughter, can hardly be depended upon to do all the work necessary en route to Venus, although she is a very capable young woman. Therefore—"

Corwin interrupted him with a gasp of surprise.

"You mean," he blurted, "that Miss Jarvison is going with you?"

Jarvison laughed good naturedly.

"Certainly she is going with me!" he snorted. "There's no stopping her when she sets her mind on something. In fact she's just as interested in this venture as I am and I'll have to take her along or she'll prevent me from going, somehow!"

"Then I'll take the job with pleasure!" Corwin grinned eagerly. "But I don't mind saying that I think you'll find me a mighty poor investment."

The scientist regarded him speculatively and frowned.

"You need not exert yourself at any time during the trip unless something unforeseen happens, Corwin," he said. "There will be many dangers, but little actual work."

"Badgett said I'd have normal strength for a year," said Corwin. "But you'd have your hands full if I should turn up my toes between here and Venus or maybe in the middle of Meteor River!"

"Oh, I don't know," the scientist shrugged, admiring the other's cool nerve. "Beth and I have managed before in tight places. Who knows, the trip to Venus might cure you entirely, sir."

Corwin laughed outright.

"I've learned to know that when Old Doc Badgett dooms a man, he stays doomed, Professor," he said earnestly. "He gave my dad the same warning that he gave me today. One year to live and dad lasted just that long. So I've given up hope of recovery."

"Nonsense, young man!" the scien-

tist drawled. "Why, it might be possible for the surgeons of Venus to supply you with a new heart!"

"Surgeons of Venus?" Corwin stared at him. "You believe Venus has smarter medical men than we have here—that the planet is even inhabited?"

"I have always maintained that the earth is not the only sphere in the universe inhabited with intelligent beings," said the scientist earnestly. "Why not? This world is only a grain of sand in an infinite sea of sands. As for the Venusians being more intelligent than our own people remains to be seen. But who knows?"

"It's a great incentive for me to make the trip," said Corwin with a sign, "But I have my doubts about anything like Venusian surgeons supplying me with a new heart. Besides, if life does exist there, it would hardly be creatures such as you and I. They may not even have hearts!"

"That's true, sir," said Jarvison frankly. "Yet anything that lives in animation must necessarily have some central system from which to derive its power of force which is the heart of anything. Now, Corwin, what would you regard as a just compensation for your services?"

Corwin creased the crown of his hat abstractedly.

"I hadn't given it a thought, sir," he replied.

"Every man is worth his hire," said the scientist. "I am able to pay well."

"Then would twenty thousand dollars be too much?" Corwin inquired with a queer sense of reality.

"Cheap at the price, Corwin!" the scientist chided. "I'm ashamed that you place such a low value on your life!"

Corwin laughed hopelessly.

"I'm going to die anyhow," he said, "and I didn't think it worth even that much."

"Well," Jarvison drawled. "I'm going to boost it to a hundred thousand

and I'll feel that I'm playing square with you!"

"Whatever you wish," said Corwin. "You can make out your check payable to some association for medical and surgical advancement with the stipulation that the money is to be devoted exclusively to the study of the human heart."

"That's mighty noble of you, Corwin," the scientist enthused. "Just think what that will mean to sufferers of heart ailments? Any particular association in mind, sir?"

"None whatever," replied Corwin. "You choose one."

"All right," Jarvison removed a big check-book from his desk and withdrew his fountain pen from his vest pocket. "I'll make it out to the International Association for Medical Advancement."

"Good!" Corwin ejaculated. "I'll just make a note of that, for before I leave this earth I want to have drawn up a will. Dad left me a million or so. It won't do me any good if I never return, so I'll fix it that in event of my death the Association will get everything I now possess, for the alleviation of cardiac troubles."

"I'm glad you have your father's philanthropic traits, son," warmed Jarvison. "That is a fine gesture and I'm sure that you are paving the way for future relief among heart-sufferers."

FOLLOWING his rather lengthy interview with the scientist, Corwin was invited to remain for dinner. After that he asked Beth Jarvison if he might remain longer. The big Trumbull home on the Rappahannock was all too gloomy and there was a ray of sunshine in Miss Jarvison that fascinated him even more than the scientist's daring project. She at once granted him the privilege, for after all, Corwin Trumbull was no ordinary soldier of fortune seeking amusement. Like herself he was a clean-cut representative of the real Southern aristocracy and she had liked him from

the first. Leaving Jarvison to pore over his plans, they retreated to the veranda where, under the light of the moon, he told her of Dr. Badgett's verdict. She shuddered, promptly changed the subject and gave him a real lesson in astronomy which she knew so well.

Beth Jarvison certainly knew her stars, he commented to himself as he listened intently. She sat beside him in a deep-cushioned lawn couch. He was fascinated by her extensive knowledge of the heavens and he regarded her quizzically when she gave some astronomical term with which he was ignorant. Her lustrous hair brushed his cheek suddenly and made his heart beat faster than it ever had before. He drew in the thrilling perfume that emanated from it and sighed hopelessly.

"I never knew astronomy could be so interesting, Miss Jarvison," he remarked presently. "I've always had the job pictured as a grind at which a man grows hunch-backed watching through his telescopes for some faint flicker of light that might indicate the presence of a new star."

She laughed musically. It was a carefree laugh and it made him wince at his own helplessness.

"It is thrilling to watch the skies, Mr. Trumbull," she responded. "But do you find it hard to call me Beth? I think we should abandon all formality in so far as we are to be cast together in the facing of mutual dangers on our journey to Venus."

"Thank you, Beth," said Corwin promptly. "It is a beautiful name and a beautiful girl possesses it, if you don't mind my saying so."

Beth Jarvison certainly did not mind. She was eternally feminine when it came to a compliment. But she blushed and he grinned sheepishly at his boldness. She gave him a devastating look.

"You wouldn't kid me, would you, Corwin?" she laughed.

"I meant it," he hastened. "Honest! But do you know, Beth, I don't think

you ought to risk going with us to Venus."

"And why not?" she demanded petulantly.

"It's too dangerous for a girl," he replied promptly. "Aren't you the least bit afraid?"

"Afraid?" she laughed again. Her white teeth glistened in the moonlight. "Oh, you brave men! You think a woman is a weak, jelly-fish of a thing that ought to be cuddled and kept in a glass cage! Afraid? Of course I'm not afraid! Nor am I going to be left behind when father takes off, you can bet on that, Corwin!"

"But we may never return," insisted Corwin earnestly. "You are so radiant, so young, that it would be a crime to remove you from all that is beautiful here."

"You are getting poetic already, Corwin," she chided, laughing. "I suppose you will break out next with a stanza of *Tipuca!*"

"You mean the one that reads: 'And two things have altered not Since first the world began; The beauty of the wild green earth, And the bravery of man?'" he recited dramatically.

"Oh, you *do* know it, don't you?" she laughed. "That is the stanza, Corwin. But men are not the only creatures on this wild green earth who have courage! We women have always had it! A man will whine over his little, insignificant hurts, but it takes a woman to bear her pain in silence. The bravery of man! That is a lot of hoey, Corwin Trumbull!"

"You are going along in spite of the inconceivable dangers?" he grinned at her derision.

"In spite of anything!" she replied. "I would not miss such a trip for anything in the world. And it's silly to say we may never return. I have every bit of confidence in father. His new ship is a great improvement over the first one. There can be no errors with him at the controls. Oh, I thrill at the very prospect of going, Corwin!"

"DO you really believe we'll even reach Venus?" he inquired quietly.

"Of course I do!" she replied earnestly. "We would not go if we were not confident of winning success."

"Well, for your sake, Beth," he said, "I hope for nothing but success. As for me, well, my life doesn't count. I'm as good as dead right now—and I hate to die now that I've met you."

"Oh, Corwin," she shuddered. "Please don't say that again. Doctor Badgett might have made an error in his diagnosis."

"Very unlikely," Corwin shrugged. "He is reputed to be the foremost cardiac specialist in the world today. Besides, X-ray plates don't lie. God, if they only did!"

He shook himself out of a melancholy mood that was clutching at him and laughed bitterly.

"Oh, well," he added dismally. "I'll manage somehow to hang on until you are returned home safely. After that—"

He snapped his fingers resignedly.

"After that, then what?" she demanded softly.

"Life or oblivion!" he mumbled bitterly.

"Then let us hope that it will be life, Corwin," she said.

He looked at her curiously.

"You don't mean that you care?" he asked casually.

With a sudden display of courage that astonished him, he took her hand. She did not withdraw. The soft texture of her skin fired his blood.

"A woman with any kind of motherly instinct grieves at the untimely death of youth, Corwin," she said evasively.

"Then your attitude toward me is just motherly?" he inquired.

"You forget that I only met you this afternoon," she countered.

His face brightened.

"To me it seems that I've always known you, Beth," he ventured. "Of course I could not expect a girl to

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fall in love with a man dying on his—”

She withdrew one of her hands and placed her fingers across his lips. Impulsively he took her in his arms. She did not struggle from him. Instead she drew closer to him as if the night had grown chill and she wanted warmth.

At that moment Professor Jarvison appeared on the veranda. If Beth had seen him, she failed to betray the fact. And Corwin, drinking in the fragrance of her lustrous hair, seemed senseless to everything but her presence beside him. Her father smiled ironically and scowled.

“What is the meaning of this, young lady?” he demanded sternly.

Beth jumped and pulled away. Corwin’s eyes popped and he felt suddenly weak. His face reddened and his ears burned.

“E—e-eh I’m sorry—” he sputtered, groping blindly for words. “I can explain, sir—”

“Never mind trying to explain, young man!” the scientist growled. “I witnessed the whole scandalous affair, sir! What do you mean by coming into my house and mashing over my daughter? I must say that you are indeed a fast worker! By the way, isn’t it a wonderful evening, Corwin?”

Corwin stared at him, bewildered, swallowed his Adam’s apple a couple of times and gave a tight-lipped smile. Professor Jarvison laughed amusedly at the effects of his stern, but little-meant rebuke.

“It is a wonderful night,” Corwin found his tongue and gave a sigh of relief. “I couldn’t resist its temptations—a romantic moon and the charm of a beautiful girl!”

“No need to explain, Corwin,” hastened the professor. “I was young once and I have no objections to a Trumbull of Virginia.”

“Thank you, sir!” Corwin looked at the glowing dial of his wrist chronometer. “It is time I departed, anyway. I have much to do to get my affairs in shape before our take-off for

Venus. I’ll have to do it all tonight so I can instruct my lawyers in the morning. Shall I come to—er work before ten tomorrow?”

“You’ll find father at work long before sunrise, Corwin,” Beth interjected quietly. “He’s an early bird.”

“Then I shall be on hand shortly thereafter,” Corwin grinned. “I never was a late-sleeper.”

“Any time that will be convenient for you,” Professor Jarvison informed him. “You will have no special duties until we take-off and it will not take long to explain your watches aboard the good space-ship, the *Comet*.”

“I’m mighty anxious to see the ship, Professor,” Corwin said. “She must be something out of the ordinary.”

He bade them good-night and hurried to his roadster. His blood sang joyously as he waved at Beth and pressed the starter button on the ball of the gear-shift. His powerful X type motor turned over with a low hiss and the car leaped ahead. He drove home rapidly, got his lawyers from their beds and sat down to his tasks.

III

THE SUN had scarcely finished spraying its first rays of a new day on the Jarvison estate when Corwin appeared there prepared to begin work. He was ushered into the scientist’s private study by a negro maid. Professor Jarvison was already there and he greeted him cheerily.

“Good morning, Corwin!” he said, rising from his chair. “I see you kept your promise to be here early.”

“Promises are made to be kept, sir,” said Corwin. “Besides, I’ve so few Virginia dawns left that I couldn’t afford to miss this one. I’ll hate to leave them when my time comes a year from now!”

Professor Jarvison hung his head to avoid his eyes. He did not like to see the haunting glitter that lurked in

them. It was almost unearthly; a glitter betraying his passionate sadness that he was trying to smother with recklessness.

"Forget the future, Corwin," the professor advised. "Live for the present and get all you can from it. I'm going to keep you so busy that you will not have time to think about life and death. I've decided to put you to work at once!"

"Then lead me to it!" Corwin grinned eagerly. "You'll find me willing to learn and willing to work!"

Together they left the big house through a rear door. The sun was well up now. Corwin breathed deeply of the cool, early morning air. The perfume from banks of shrubbery that abounded on the estate permeated the atmosphere. How good, he thought, to be alive! How unkind fate was to him with its grisly fist of death hanging over him like a bludgeon!

Professor Jarvison led him through an arched bower of blooming roses. Just beyond stretched a great landing field. Long buildings on one side of the field loomed up ahead. In front of an open hangar stood several trim airplanes. One big structure, standing probably a score or more feet above the others, impressed Corwin as being the scientist's great workshop and laboratory. Huge windows lined the walls on all sides and as they approached he heard the hum of activity within.

"Are your men working already, sir?" Corwin inquired curiously.

"My men work all the time," replied the scientists. "I have three shifts of eight hours each. The men on the job now are due to knock off at seven o'clock this morning. Another shift will go on the job."

"I thought you said you had built the *Comet* under strict secrecy," Corwin remarked.

"True, Corwin!" Jarvison nodded. "Each man in my employ is sworn to secrecy and is paid to maintain it. No mechanic, helper or flunkey is permitted to leave my estate. They are

under constant guard. To prevent details of the ship from reaching the outside, I personally censor all outgoing communications between the men and their friends."

"Then they live here?" Corwin was amazed.

"Yes," replied the scientist. "They have lived on these grounds since the day I laid the keel for the *Comet* and they will not be permitted to leave until my ship has taken-off. Each man is under contract. None have ever quit and I've never had to discharge one. Pretty loyal bunch, Corwin."

"But why all the secrecy, professor?"

The scientist knitted his brows and stepped over a beetle that crawled under his feet.

"My work is well known to the Society for Celestial Explorations as I told you, Corwin," he replied, "but stops there. Science will keep my secrets religiously. Should the news get out, I would be besieged by persons, scrupulous and otherwise. The agents of unscrupulous nations would pounce upon it. Were the details of my inventions to get out, Corwin, they would cause the greatest upheaval since the invention of the submarine and high explosives. The *Comet* and its equipment could be used in a most deadly fashion and foreign powers, not held in leash by the World League, would do almost anything to secure her secrets so that they might conquer superior nations. And I believe they could do it, too, with the implements at her command."

"It must be a wonderful machine," Corwin commented.

"The *Comet* is a wonderful machine, young man!" said the scientist proudly, without a trace of egotism. "It's the greatest invention since the discovery of fire—and the deadliest!"

"Deadly?" Corwin glanced at him curiously, surprised that a good-natured man like Professor Jarvison who could not even step on a beetle, should want to work out the details of destruction.

"Yes, Corwin," he replied. "Deadly to the extreme. You do not think I would dare venture onto another world without adequate and effective means of defense, do you?"

"Hardly," Corwin admitted. "May I ask what kind of weapons you have?"

"I CAN explain them in a hurry," nodded the professor. "It may astound you, but then I was astounded myself when I accomplished the task. I have succeeded in harnessing the sun's vast heat for use in weapons. The *Comet* is equipped with four batteries of ray guns which project beams of intense heat instead of the commonly known projectile of steel. These beams, when projected, have an intensity of 75,000,000 pounds of heat per square inch, or sufficient heat to destroy the greatest modern structures in an instant. They would melt the greatest of battleships instantly and sink them before you could wink an eye.

"Aboard the *Comet* there are devices for attracting this awesome heat into reserve tanks, maintaining a constant supply of power for the ray batteries. With this heat in reserve, the guns can be used constantly for a period of thirty-six hours even when the sun itself is hidden from view. To obtain this deadly heat, I had to neutralize space, atmosphere, and all interference between here and the sun and get at its very surface. Analyzing that terrible heat I discovered that it is made up of shattered atoms, the deadliest, most powerful things in the universe. It is like electricity—we know the power is there, but do not know what causes it. But I assure you that solar heat is far greater than the heat generated by electricity.

"Light travels at the speed of 186,411 miles per second, Corwin. My heat rays will have the same velocity and they will contain the terrific heat of 100,000 degrees centigrade. All batteries are insulated so that the operators are safe from the heat.

They are mounted on gimbals and can be swung in any direction. As for personal weapons—side arms, I should say—"

"You mean you also have pistols that project heat rays?" Corwin interrupted, overwhelmed.

"I have, Corwin," Jarvison grinned. "When we land on Venus, we will disembark from the *Comet* armed with small ray guns of the size and appearance of the German Luger pistol. I have evolved a pistol that projects rays in the same fashion as the battery guns. Each pistol is equipped with a cylinder chamber which accommodates twelve small shells or cartridges. These cartridges contain an inside area of four square inches each. In other words, each shell contains 300,000,000 pounds of heat. When fired by trigger, the gun releases a ray of the same centigrade power as the batteries and when the load of twelve shells is used up, the pistols can be reloaded as you would reload an ordinary revolver. But twelve heat-cartridges are sufficient to destroy practically an entire city of say the size of Baltimore. So you see, Corwin, we will be well able to take care of ourselves on Venus unless, of course, the Venusians, assuming the planet is inhabited, have weapons that are more deadly than mine."

"Lord!" Corwin murmured. "I can understand the secrecy now. If those instruments of destruction were to get into enemy hands, we would be wiped out in a hurry! How did you ever conceive such things?"

Professor Jarvison chuckled.

"Just stumbled on them, Corwin," he said modestly. "Rather accidentally."

"I don't believe it, sir," Corwin asserted. "Accidents like that don't happen. But how do you propose to keep your secrets after the *Comet* takes off? Won't your men talk when they are released?"

"Perhaps," nodded Jarvison, "but no one man has been permitted to

understand any one thing thoroughly. Even the mechanics who made the final assemblies of my devices could not tell you how they operated or how they were principled."

THEY reached the big building. Armed guards were everywhere now. They were a hard-faced lot and seemed perfectly capable of shooting if necessity required it. Two of them stepped from the door of the building to allow them to enter.

"This is the *Comet's* hangar, Corwin," the professor stated.

"That's what I suspected," replied Corwin, glancing about anxiously.

The scientist led him through his superintendent's office and into the mammoth hangar itself. He was awestruck at what he saw there. If he had expected to see some sort of an airplane with wings, landing gear, prop and fuselage, he got the shock of his life when he beheld the *Comet*. It departed so abruptly from any flying machine he had ever beheld previously that his amazement was quite pardonable.

He blinked several times to make sure he was seeing correctly.

"Is that it—the *Comet*?" he asked Jarvison excitedly.

"That is the *Comet*," the scientist said simply. "Does it astound you?"

"Astound me?" Corwin stammered. "Why it stuns me completely, sir. I expected to see an airplane, frail and tiny!"

Jarvison chuckled softly.

"You couldn't expect to navigate space in an ordinary plane," he said, glancing up to the top of the space-flyer where a dozen men, reduced to mere flies in size by the staggering proportions of the *Comet*, were engaged in some work.

Corwin made no reply. All his attention was on the *Comet*. In fact he was trying to take in its many details in one prolonged look. But it was so immense that he failed miserably.

The *Comet* was indeed an astounding creation to behold. It looked like

a monster, metal cigar, perhaps a bit narrower in the middle, and, he judged, probably two hundred feet in length. Underneath it had great steel runners for landing gear. On top of its upper structure were four great turrets which he decided at once contained the strange sun-ray batteries. They were evenly spaced down its back which was carefully streamlined with narrow, metal fins. Up in its nose was a great observation room with thick quartz windows like the exposures in a dirigible gondola. Giant steel rudders and elevators extended from her pointed tail. From underneath them projected two score or more multiple exhausts. Wide bands of transparent quartz extended around the ship's narrow body between each turret, giving it the appearance of some monstrous, segmented worm. Directly under its sharp nose protruded more exhausts.

He saw at a glance that many men were at work knocking down their structures like shipyard workers preparing a ship for launching. Other men were loading supplies aboard through a great open hatch. An overhead crane rumbled over with a load of boxes, barrels and other paraphernalia which was lowered speedily into the machine.

Appraising the machine and its attendant activity with awe, he allowed the scientist to guide him to the nose of the ship. His heart thumped with excitement as he went. He wondered how the ship was to be propelled, for he saw no underslung motors and props. The smooth, blue-steel surface of the flyer was unbroken except for the turrets on her upper structure and the wide quartz bands.

"What the devil are those bands for, professor?" he asked, unable to keep quiet any longer.

"They are stabilizers, Corwin," Jarvison replied readily. "They assist in keeping the ship on an even keel."

Corwin shook his head blankly and continued with his employer to the

opposite side of the machine. There a number of men were at work assembling boxes, casks, bags and crates for loading. The crane overhead dropped its lighter and the provisions were hoisted up. While the scientist stood talking with one of his foremen, his new employee continued on along the ship, his eyes popping.

Presently he encountered a wide stairway that ran up from the floor to an open door leading into the ship. He lost control of his curiosity and carelessly placed a foot on the first step to mount and explore the interior of the flyer. Instantly a gong sounded somewhere inside and two armed guards appeared at the door to challenge his ascent. Hearing the alarm, Jarvison hurried forward.

"You couldn't get in the ship without an order from me, Corwin," he said, chuckling. "The instant you put your foot on the step you set off an alarm. But come on. I'll make arrangements now so that you can have full run of the *Comet*. But I warn you not to allow your curiosity to get the better of you. You might touch something and get hurt, or—"

"Or perhaps touch a magic button of some sort and fly away without you, eh?" Corwin grinned sheepishly.

"Exactly, young man!" the scientist warned. "That very thing could happen at this stage when the ship is ready for flight."

"Then I assure you I will touch nothing, sir," said Corwin earnestly.

Jarvison led the way up the stairs with Corwin at his heels. The two guards stood on the landing and appraised him sullenly.

"This is my new assistant, Mr. Trumbull, gentlemen," the scientist informed them quietly. "Mr. Trumbull will have full liberty in the *Comet*. Please see that he is not put to any inconvenience."

The guards nodded without comment and stepped aside to allow them to enter the ship. Professor Jarvison led him down a short ramp into the

flyer. To say the least, the central chamber of the machine was a complete puzzle to Corwin. It was virtually filled with strange dials and instrument panels. Mechanical devices were everywhere and like the interior of a submarine the walls were laced with conduit. His curiosity was aroused at once, but he kept his hands off and his eyes on.

"THIS is the *electro-dynamic* room, Corwin," the scientist volunteered suddenly. "The motors controlling this section of the *Comet* are here. There is a set of motors for each chamber between the quartz bands, but you will have nothing to do with them. They are all operated from a control panel forward. I will lead you there."

They passed through another machine room and then entered the living salon. Corwin was amazed at its luxurious appointments. It rivalled a first-class stateroom of an ocean liner. There were divans and easy chairs, with a dining table firmly bolted to the deck.

"You sure believe in traveling to Venus in comfort, Professor," he remarked.

"Beth rowed around until I had to add all this truck to our equipment," the scientist grumbled. "Personally I would not have bothered with so much comfort. I can't seem to be able to impress her that this trip is a scientific venture and not a pleasure jaunt."

Corwin grinned.

"Where is Miss Jarvison this morning, Professor?" he inquired intently.

"She went out for an early-morning flight," replied the scientist. "She likes to see the sun rise from the altitudes. She'll be along shortly."

"Cloud-hopping, eh?" Corwin laughed.

They sauntered leisurely into another cabin which proved to be the ship's galley. Several men were there storing provisions where they belonged. Overhead was the open hatch

through which other workers guided the loads of the crane. They continued on into the control room of the ship far up in the nose.

There Corwin got his first glimpse of the *Comet's* control system. On the walls in back of the quartz observation ports were great panels virtually covered with instruments. There were levers, dials and valves, more than he had ever seen before in one spot. And there were several electrical generators on the deck which were the only apparatus which he knew by name. He readily confessed his ignorance in mechanical things and the professor smiled amusedly.

"I'm glad you are frank about your knowledge of mechanics, Corwin," he said cheerfully. "I'd rather have an ignorant man than one who professed to know everything. Usually that kind of fellow knows little or nothing!"

"I studied physics in college just to be in style," Corwin confessed. "I'm sorry I did not pay more attention to it. What are those generators for?"

"They create the impulse for the ship's gravitational nullification," replied Jarvison. "This energy is sent through the hull to electro-magnetize it, or in other words, to nullify the forces of gravity upon it. Since gravity and electro-magnetism are the same, the *Comet*, when insulated against gravity, will just fall away from the earth when she takes off."

"That sort of proves the Einstein theory, doesn't it?" Corwin asked intently.

"It does!" the professor responded. "Gravity and electro-magnetism are the same as I shall demonstrate when we take off. All that is necessary to send this ship into space is to turn on the electro-magnetizing systems and insulate the hull which is, for the most part, an alloy of highly magnetic metals comprising, among others, a certain percentage of beryllium steel. Since gravity and electro-magnetism are the same, there can be no interference or laws existing between

them. One therefore nullifies the other. Here is a general idea of how we shall proceed to Venus, Corwin.

"We shall drop off the earth into space with the *Comet* insulated against the earth's gravitational influence, until we get into the magnetic pull of the planet we are aiming at. To do that is simple indeed. Delicate instruments will warn us when we are within the influence of Venus. Then we shall decrease our insulation as necessary to allow us a safe descent upon the planet.

"To give the ship greater acceleration in space, I have added a rocket-drive system which will contribute immensely to our safety as well as our inter-stellar velocity. This system, incidentally, is lacking in the *Meteor*, the ship taken by our lost friends two years ago. The rocket-system in the *Comet* can be used to great advantage should anything go wrong with the gravity nullifiers. In other words, if the nullifiers cease to function by accident we shall still be able to proceed under rocket propulsion until repairs can be made."

"Very interesting," Corwin grinned. "But you have not told me when you plan to leave for Venus, Professor."

"We will leave the earth at sundown tomorrow evening, young man," replied the professor earnestly. "By leaving at that time we shall meet Venus when it is at the zenith on the day after. It will take us approximately seventeen hours to reach the planet after we leave our earth's atmospheric envelope."

"Seventeen hours to do twenty-six million miles?" Corwin gasped incredulously. "Why it's incredible—the ship would burn up at that speed—like a meteor!"

JARVISON laughed at his innocent ignorance.

"Meteors only burn up when they come into contact with the earth's heavy atmospheric envelope, Corwin," he responded. "In space there is no atmosphere. It is only a vacuum,

void of all atmospheric resistance. There will be no friction there to burn us up. It is a different matter, however, when we get into the neighborhood of Venus. Then we shall have to slow down to eliminate the danger of friction. Possibly we shall have to slow down in passing asteroids which may have atmospheric envelopes of their own. But in vacuum, we need have no fear."

"But we'll have to breathe in that vacuum," Corwin spoke up anxiously.

"Of course," the scientist chuckled. "I've prepared for that, Corwin. The *Comet* has apparatus for supplying us with oxygen. Without it we could not survive in the rarefied regions."

"But twenty-six million miles in seventeen hours, sir," Corwin gasped. "I just can't take you seriously."

"I would be holding the ship down to low speed at a million miles per hour, Corwin," the professor informed him simply. "You must remember that she will be dropping through space and increasing her velocity every instant. With the additional propelling powers of the rocket system, her speed can be increased to almost the velocity of light. Yes, young man, we could drive the *Comet* through space at the velocity of one hundred and eighty-six thousand miles per second if we chose. But that speed would be dangerous, disastrous to us because our journey is a short one indeed. At that speed we could reach Venus in a little more than two minutes after leaving the earth's atmospheric envelope. We would either over-shoot our objective and collide with the sun before you could bat an eye, or burn up like a meteor in the heavy atmosphere of Venus. Now let me acquaint you with your duties, Corwin.

"During the entire voyage you are to take the readings of the instruments and present them to me at certain intervals. I will teach you how to read the *sphereographs*, *gravimeters*, *atmospheric gauges*, *compression dials*, *electro-magnometers* and the

various other instruments important to our safety. We shall work in two hour shifts. Beth will help you at the gauges while I navigate at the controls. She understands everything. Today you may go over the ship, study the positions of everything and learn all you can. Your quarters will be in the cabin at the end of the catwalk near the rocket combustion chambers in the tail. Have your duffle stowed aboard not later than noon tomorrow and let me advise you to bring along ample warm clothing, for we shall encounter some bitter cold in space that the *Comet's* heaters may not be able to overcome completely."

Corwin nodded eagerly.

"I shall have my bags brought aboard in the morning, sir," he said, "and if you can trust me to keep my curiosity under control, I'll study this ship from stem to stern."

"Then you had better get busy," the professor urged. "It's a good day's work to go through the *Comet*. On the chart table over there you will find a manual explaining the various instruments and how to read them. Get it and soak it in. When I return I'll try you out on the readings which you will find as simple as reading a clock. I'll see you later, Corwin, and don't forget that we leave at sundown tomorrow evening!"

"How could I forget, sir?" Corwin grinned. "I've dismissed everything else from my mind!"

"Good!" Jarvison grunted, turning away. He swung toward the exit. Corwin watched him vanish from view, then looked around trying to decide where to begin his studies. He found the manual on the chart table. With a will he settled down to learn as much as he could about the *Comet's* mysteries.

IV

"I WOULDN'T touch that switch if I were you, Corwin Trumbull!"

Corwin Trumbull, as eager as a

youngster with a new toy, jerked his hand away from a small switch on the central control panel and looked up sheepishly at the sound of Beth Jarvison's voice. She had crept up to the control room unnoticed and he saw her standing at the door. Trim and dainty in her white flying costume, her arms akimbo, she looked at him like a stern mother about to chastise an unmindful youngster.

So interested had he been in his study that he jumped almost out of his wits when she spoke. He swallowed hard and groped for words.

"I—I—I'm sorry, Beth," he stammered. "My curiosity got the best of me again. I just couldn't resist the temptation to see what would happen if I pressed the switch down."

Beth Jarvison eyed him remonstratively for a moment, then laughed.

"You're like a kitten exploring the cellar for the first time, Corwin," she chided. "But you would not have done any damage by pulling that switch. It merely controls the lighting system. But had you pressed down the one next to it, you'd have sent the *Comet* right through the roof!" She paused to shudder. "Lord only knows where you'd have ended up!"

"Perhaps on Mars or—or maybe not at all," he laughed shakily. "It's a good thing you happened along. I might have banged things up a bit!"

"And father would have wrung your neck!" she laughed.

"No doubt about that," Corwin acknowledged. "No doubt he sent you to keep an eye on me, eh?"

"Perhaps he had something like that in mind," she smiled. "Anyway he asked me to come aboard and explain some of the details of your job to you. He's tied up with some scientists from New York who have come down to see us off tomorrow evening. There will be a farewell dinner tonight at home. I presume you will be there?"

"I haven't been invited," he replied.

"I guess father overlooked it," she

hastened. "I know he meant to ask you. Will you come?"

"With bells on, Beth," he enthused. "I'll be there!"

"I'll be expecting you, Corwin," she told him. "But let us get down to business. There is much for you to learn."

For hours she explained and illustrated to him the intricate details of his job as instrument-attendant. Beth Jarvison knew the *Comet* and its mysteries as thoroughly as she knew her own trim little airplane. But frequently she had to remonstrate with him for paying too much attention to her and not enough to her painstaking explanations. He found it difficult to keep his eyes from her. Yet he managed to learn much and forget little, so careful were her pointers. And when she finally decided that it was time for her to take leave and attend to other duties, he boasted modestly that he could read the instruments backward if necessary.

He proved no disappointment to her and was quick-minded. He grasped readily. In fact he learned so quickly that she predicted that he would be handling the *Comet* alone long before they reached Venus. She allowed him to escort her to the exit. The guards nodded silently.

"Then I'll see you at dinner, Beth?" he paused on the landing.

She nodded.

"If you keep your hands off the *Comet's* controls, you will," she warned him, smiling. "If you don't—!"

"I know when I'm licked, Beth," he grinned. "I promise!"

"You had better," she chided.

She started down the stairs to the hangar floor. Corwin looked up at the sound of the crane rumbling overhead. It was rolling forward, a long, heavy chain dangling from its carriage, and it was swinging like some great pendulum. In great arcs it swished back and forth, with the crane gaining momentum as it rum-

bled forward. At a glance he saw that if the operator did not observe the dangling chain in time it would smash into the stairway leading up to the ship.

He shot an anxious look at the man in his cabin. The operator was nonchalantly nibbling at a sandwich, unmindful of the fact that he had overlooked winding up the chain after discharging a load somewhere. Nor did he hear Corwin's voice when he yelled at him.

As for Beth, she was taking her time in descending the stairs, unaware that she was directly in the path of the swinging chain. Corwin's blood froze as he realized that it would strike her before it could be withdrawn upward or the crane stopped.

With a bound he cleared a half-dozen steps, clutched for a hand-hold on the railing and jumped again. He was carried directly behind her. She halted at the sounds of his feet, but before she had time to be surprised he grabbed her roughly and shoved her under the railing. She dropped a good eight feet to the floor, scraping her knees cruelly as she fell forward. She looked up and gasped as the heavy chain swished overhead, smashed into the stairway and shattered it like so much matchwood.

But not before Corwin Trumbull leaped clear. The instant the chain struck he flung himself into the air in a great leap to clear the remaining steps. She saw him land on both feet, turn a complete somersault and sit up, panting and gasping.

IN alarm the crane operator snatched at his controls. The chain hissed upward as the spindles raced. Corwin sat deathly still on the floor, his head cupped in his hands, his blood pounding at his temples under the terrific pressure of his abnormal heart. He seemed afraid to open his eyes lest he find himself in the land of flowing robes and glowing haloes.

Beth was at his side in a trice.

"Oh, Corwin," she dropped down beside him on her knees. "Are you hurt?"

He looked up with a sigh of relief.

"Shook up a bit," he panted. "Sorry I had to be so rough with you."

"I might have been killed," she said gratefully, looking up with quick anger at the crane operator. He stared down, white-faced.

"Hurt, miss?" he called anxiously.

"No I'm not!" she flung back hotly. "But if you hadn't been sleeping on the job, it would not have happened!"

"I'm sorry, Miss Jarvison," he called down apologetically. "It was an accident—my oversight!"

She made no reply and looked back at Corwin to find him appraising a barked hand. It was bleeding from its scraping on the gritty floor.

"Why, you are hurt, Corwin!" she breathed.

"Just a few scratches," he hastened.

She dabbed at them tenderly with her handkerchief, unmindful of her own skinned knees.

"Come with me to the super's office," she urged, "and let me put some caustic on them."

"Guess I'd better," he said gratefully. "I wouldn't want infection to interfere with my voyage to Venus."

He stood up and accompanied her to the office where she quickly painted the cuts with the contents of a mercurochrome ampoule. That done she left him with her gratitude for his quick-action, ringing in his ears. He returned promptly to the *Comet* where a gang of men speedily erected another stairway. He watched while a hasty examination of the ship's hull was made and sighed with relief when it was reported that no damage had been done to it. Then he returned to the control room and for the balance of the day he remained there, studying the many instruments.

He saw no more of Professor Jarvison or Beth until eight that evening when he appeared at the big house

in dinner garb. He had rushed home and changed clothing, ordered his black servant to pack his bags, and returned quickly to the Jarvison estate. And needless to say he enjoyed himself hugely in Beth's company. She was the only woman at the dinner.

Jarvison's guests were white-haired scientists, members of the Society for Celestial Explorations. They talked in terms that were alien to Corwin and he soon lost interest in everything but Beth.

After a lengthy farewell speech by an austere scientist who, Beth informed him, was the secretary of the Society, Professor Jarvison led his guests to the *Comet's* hangar. Though he did not seem to realize the fact, Corwin Trumbull, as he once more appraised the big machine, stood on the threshold of his life's greatest adventure. What he did realize, however, was that he was madly in love with Beth Jarvison.

In her evening gown she was indeed lovely. Her charm radiated itself even to the old scientists who took a special interest in her. She was a very courageous girl to make the flight to Venus and they did not hesitate to tell her so. Her face was flushed with the excitement of making the trip and she betrayed her eagerness to be off by her remarks.

Members of the press were made conspicuous by their total absence. Not a reporter or photographer had been invited to this gathering of eminent men. As a matter of fact, Professor Jarvison's project was unknown to the press. He was a man who despised notoriety and hated ridicule. In that, he was no different from many orthodox men of science. Time enough to acquaint the world with the facts and proof of his accomplishments after he had made a successful voyage to Venus.

TIME passed all too swiftly for Corwin, but he slept little that night. In his intense excitement

sleep was impossible. But he was sufficiently rested to appear at the hangar bright and early the next morning. Jarvison's scientific guests had remained that night to be present when the *Comet* took off at sundown. He had little time for him. The hum of activity in the hangar was at its peak. Corwin observed the moment he appeared on the job that the *Comet* had been stripped for launching into space. And she had been given two coats of paint which, much to his amazement, made the ship snow-white on one side and dead-black on the other. He did not know that this peculiar method of painting would tend to make him more comfortable in his flight to Venus. The white paint would reflect the sun's burning rays, while the black would absorb them when warmth was most needed in space where unknown low temperatures were likely to be encountered.

Professor Jarvison seemed everywhere at once. He had a million tasks, it seemed, to be done before sundown. His good nature seemed to have left him, for he was snappy and curt now. Corwin heard him yelling some orders from the top of one of the turrets. The next time he saw him he was down on the hangar floor supervising a gang of painters who were to go over the flyer once more. A man of tremendous energy was Professor Jarvison and now that the time for his departure was drawing near, he was not wasting a single minute.

Corwin went to the control room where he studied the instruments for an hour before he was interrupted. Once more he saw Beth regarding him from the door. But this time she did not catch him toying with the controls. He was busily engaged in reading the manual. For the balance of the morning she remained with him, helping him. She seemed bubbling over with intense excitement.

"Just think of it, Corwin!" she breathed at length. "We take off for Venus tonight! I'm so excited I don't know what I'm doing half the time!"

"I've begun to get worked up myself, Beth," he grinned. "I can hardly believe, though, that we are actually going to leave this old earth and visit another world out in space. Doesn't it seem a bit far-fetched?"

"Far-fetched?" she said lightly. "I should say not! Why for as long as I can remember I've talked with father about making this trip. We've lived it for years, Corwin!"

"It is certainly costing him a lot of money," Corwin said. "This ship must have cost a fortune alone to build, to say nothing of all the expense going with it."

"Father himself hardly knows what it cost," she said quietly. "Anyway, he has ample funds. What is money anyway when seven of the greatest, bravest scientists in the world are somewhere out there in space—lost?"

"They may be dead," Corwin grunted gloomily.

"Perhaps they are," breathed Beth. "But I am inclined to side with father on that subject. I think we shall find them alive on Venus!"

"And if you find no trace of them?" Corwin inquired.

She shrugged sadly.

"Then they are indeed lost," she replied, "unless they landed on some other planet—Mars, for instance."

"Do you think we might go there and look?" Corwin asked eagerly.

"It is possible," she said. "I know father will not want to give up if we fail to find them on Venus. It would be terrible if they were alive on some planet hardly inhabitable, unable to return home."

"I imagine it would be pretty uncomfortable," said Corwin. "I hadn't thought of that."

"A great many of our neighboring planets are not habitable," she said. "That is, in forms of life as we know them here. Take Mercury for example. It is immensely closer to the sun than either the earth or Venus. One side of it is always exposed to the

sun while the other side is turned away from it. The cold side is always dark and has a probable temperature of 450 degrees below zero. The hot side is believed to be ten times hotter than the hottest temperature known on earth. So it would be pretty horrible if those poor men landed on Mercury!"

"And how!" Corwin gestured.

The hours sped rapidly. Noon came and went and before they were hardly aware of it the sun hung low in the west. Like automatons the workmen labored with last minute jobs. Professor Jarvison made a final inspection of the *Comet* and announced to his guests that she was ready.

Sundown!

A mighty cheer went up from the workmen and scientists alike as Corwin, Beth and her father mounted the stairs and paused on the landing. The two guards descended, relieved of their duty. Bubbling over with excitement, Beth was like a youngster anticipating a trip to the seashore. But Professor Jarvison's set face betrayed the seriousness of his venture. And Corwin felt a bit shaky in his stomach.

After a brief exchange of greetings with the scientists and men below, they stepped inside the machine. From the ramp Jarvison directed the removal of the stairway. Tensely Corwin watched the big crane roll forward, drop its chains and rumble away to the far end of the hangar, carrying the stairs with it. He glanced at Beth. Her face was flushed. Suddenly the professor waved to a man who stood tensely at a unit of machinery to the side of the hangar. Instantly he pressed down a lever and the roof of the building began to swing open like two great doors. Fascinated they watched, aware that the time had arrived at last for the *Comet* to make its departure from the earth. They waved once more to the visiting scientists and stepped back into the machine.

PROFESSOR JARVISON automatically twisted a wheel-valve on the bulkhead beside the ramp. Instantly Corwin heard the low hiss of compressed air as the ship's door swung to a close, sealing them in as hermetically as if the door had been welded. Few words were spoken. But each daring space venturer breathed tensely. Even Beth, at the last tense moment, grew serious as she realized suddenly that they were leaving the earth. She was overwhelmed at last, but unafraid. Corwin marveled that this slip of a girl could be so fearless.

They retreated immediately to the control room and held a brief conference.

"For the present, Corwin," Professor Jarvison said crisply, "you will have nothing to do but watch and learn. Just keep your eyes open. Beth will take care of the instrument readings."

"As you wish, sir," replied Corwin, visibly relieved. Despite his earnest study of the instruments, he was keenly afraid that some misreading on his part might cause sudden disaster for the machine and its occupants. He hung back while Beth went to the panels and glanced over them. With admiration he watched her make some adjustments.

His attention was drawn to a unit which had been placed in the middle of the floor that afternoon. It was a sphere about three feet in diameter and was mounted on a pedestal. At first glance he thought it was a geographical atlas. But this sphere was criss-crossed with thousands of narrow lines and at the cross-section of each line was a disk giving the location and size of the major planets in the earth's solar system. It was a miniature planetarium and though he was not aware of the fact, it was to guide them through unexplored space to their objective, Venus, which would be invisible to them almost until they were within its gravitational influence.

Corwin appraised the instrument for an instant as the scientist took up his position at the controls. Professor Jarvison pressed a small button near at hand and the planetarium glowed with many white dots and the lines took the aspect of countless glowing wires. The tiny disks began to assume various colors from brilliant blue to flaming red and much to Corwin's amazement he saw that they were moving like planets around their orbits.

At the controls, Jarvison stood upon a slightly upraised platform from which he could observe with little effort the planetarium. It was before him like a compass and binnacle stands in front of a ship's helmsman. There was also a periscopic screen before him. This was about a yard square and was of jet black onyx. He pressed another button and the screen glowed and Corwin saw in it the entire interior of the hangar with its open roof. Every detail was clearly shown, even to the visiting scientists and the workmen who stood away, watching the ship intently and waiting for her to take off.

Professor Jarvison looked up at his millionaire employee and studied him for an instant. His eyes twinkled with excitement, yet he seemed the personification of confidence.

"Well, Corwin!" he said suddenly. "Are you ready?"

Corwin grinned. His face turned considerably pale.

"Ready sir!" he said tensely.

"Hadn't you better sit down in that chair over there?" the professor chuckled. "It is arranged to do away with the shock of our take-off. Better sit down. The shock might knock you flat or more serious yet, break your legs!"

Beth eyed him with a little laugh.

"You won't feel it after we get off, Corwin," she smiled. "The sudden rise of the ship is apt to hurt you. I've a chair here by the panels."

He promptly sat down, not wishing to chance having his legs broken.

From his seat he was watching Jarvison place himself in a chair behind his controls. The legs were equipped with some kind of shock-absorbers which he could easily see. He glanced at Beth as she eased herself into her seat.

A bell sounded through the ship suddenly. Professor Jarvison looked up. His lips were tight-drawn.

"Taking off!" he snapped crisply. "Keep your eyes open, Beth! Watch that *gravimeter!*"

Corwin automatically looked out through the observation windows. Through them he saw only the forward walls of the hangar and the darkening sky overhead. While he looked up, the scientist swung down a small lever. Instantly the generators began to hum. He studied a small electro-magnetometer in front of him, then slowly shoved the lever to the right. The *Comet* began to throb quietly as the electro-magnetic current shot through the hull.

But the only thing that told Corwin Trumbull that the machine had taken off was that he found himself staring suddenly into the sun! An instant previous he had seen nothing but the hangar wall in front of him and the darkening sky overhead. Now he saw the sun, which had been invisible except for its afterglow. It was like a great ball of coagulated blood floating majestically on a crimson-splashed horizon!

The *Comet* was at last on her way to Venus!

INSULATED against the earth's gravitational influence she had, in the fraction of a second, plunged through the open roof of the hangar and stood high in the sky as if some monstrous hand had picked her up and hurled her into space. And when Corwin Trumbull, in his intense excitement, stood up, his legs felt as if the bones had been removed from them. It was like rising in an express elevator, but hundreds of times greater. His knees buckled and the weight

of his torso seemed to press him down to the deck. He got up laboriously, grinning, took a few steps and soon overcame his difficulty which was similar to that of a landlubber trying to maintain equilibrium in a rough sea. As the flier raced on the feeling that a great weight was pressing him down gradually diminished and before long he felt perfectly at ease.

An uncomfortable warmth stole presently over the ship as he wondered how far they had gone from the earth. He removed his leather jacket and sniffed the air. It bore a faint odor of carbon. Fearing something untoward he commented about it to Professor Jarvison.

"The smell of carbon comes from the electro-magnetic distributors, Corwin," the scientist volunteered. "The heat is caused by friction. It will be pretty warm until we get into the rarefied atmospheres. Then I'm afraid you'll be mighty glad to put that jacket back on, and a couple of sweaters to boot!"

Corwin peered through the observation ports, but he could not see the earth, for the ship's nose was pointed away from it and heading directly into the sun. At least so it seemed to him. But in reality the ship was racing sunward on an angle, its white side reflecting the sun's hot rays to keep down the temperature within.

"If we had an observation window in the deck, sir," he said quietly. "We might have a look at the earth. I'd like to see it once more."

"I was just going to ask you if you cared to look at it," chuckled the scientist. "As for an observation port in the deck, I've made a better arrangement. The *Comet* is equipped with periscopes that reproduce her entire surroundings on this screen before me. In other words, Corwin, the *Comet* has *eyes* trained in every direction at one time so that we can see not only what is in our neighborhood in the rear, but on all sides

as well. Step up and have a look at the earth."

Corwin needed no second invitation. While Beth took some readings from the instruments and jotted them down on a pad, he stepped quickly to her father's side. Professor Jarvison manipulated a dial slowly as if *tuning-in* a reproduction of the earth on the screen. Corwin watched breathlessly. Suddenly before his eyes there appeared on the screen a great sphere. It had the aspect of a new moon except that it glowed a dull red on the western portion. In the rays of the sun the Pacific Ocean, in spots, glared like a monster mirror. A great fog bank gave up a purple glow while in one place black clouds threatened stormy weather for whatever ships that might have been cruising there.

"Is that the earth, Professor?" Corwin was astounded.

"It is, sir!" Jarvison grunted. "Isn't it beautiful?"

"I can hardly believe it!" Corwin exclaimed. "Why we must be thousands of miles away from it already! I hardly expected to see it just that way—a great globe!"

"You were expecting it to look as it does from your airplane eight or ten thousand feet up, I presume," Jarvison laughed. He looked at his instruments and chuckled. The gravi- altimeter glowed before him. "But I'm going to hand you another surprise, Corwin," he continued. "We are exactly twenty thousand miles away from the earth and the miles are clicking off faster than you can wink your eyes!"

"No—?" Corwin Trumbull could have been struck down with a feather.

To double check on his reading, the scientist called to his daughter for a verification.

"Thirty-one thousand miles!" she called back earnestly.

"Hear that, Corwin?" Jarvison laughed proudly. "That means that we have covered eleven thousand miles in the time it took me to give

you a reading of the gravi- altimeter!"

"But we've been in the air hardly more than a minute," Corwin was dumbfounded.

"We've been in the air just one minute and thirty-three seconds," said the professor, glancing at a chronometer. "I'm holding the *Comet* down until we get beyond the earth's atmospheric envelope, hence our slow velocity. Shortly we shall enter vacuum and then I'll show you some real speed!"

Corwin was overawed and said nothing. Dumbly he watched the screen and its terrifying picture. The earth was swiftly diminishing in size, it seemed, as the *Comet* sped away from it. Slowly it dissolved until at length it appeared no larger than a full moon. The sun, standing in the heavens dead ahead like a molten ball, seemed many times more brilliant than he had ever seen it before. And the *Comet* was headed straight for it and Venus whose orbit had brought the planet between earth and sun.

They could not even remotely observe Venus due to its position directly between them and the sun. But the little planetarium told its position as clearly as if it were visible. The planetarium such as invented by Professor Jarvison stood every chance of becoming man's recognized space- compass.

CORWIN was spellbound by the utter greatness of it all and moved about like a man in a trance. The whole thing seemed like an incredible dream. But it was very much a reality and out there in space he felt suddenly like an atom flying through endless time.

Minutes seemed like hours to him as he loafed in the control room waiting to be ordered to his tasks. The scientist sat at his controls as though he were perfectly at home. Corwin peered through the observation windows. Mars and Jupiter and other planets of the solar system hung in

the offing like flashing gems in a limitless black pit.

Suddenly his sharp eyes observed a faint light spring up far to the left of the *Comet*. At first it had the aspect of an automobile headlight appearing in the distance. But this luminosity was red and before he took his eyes from it he saw that it was growing larger at a fascinating rate. He heard Professor Jarvison give a sudden grunt.

"Fire-ball meteors coming our way, Beth!" he said quietly. "How far away are they?"

"According to the meteorometer," said Beth promptly, "they are eight hundred miles North of our course and will pass underneath."

"Good!" her father grunted. "But keep a close watch on your meteorometer, Beth. We are approaching the meteor strata!"

The cluster of fiery balls shot forward until Corwin had the inspiration that they would surely strike the *Comet*. Their brilliant light was almost blinding. His every nerve tightened and he held his breath in anticipation of the collision. But his fears were groundless, for the cluster hissed through the heavens in a tremendous downward sweep and vanished almost as quickly as it had appeared.

Then with a suddenness that shocked even the scientist, another cluster appeared in space. Corwin saw it instantly—dead ahead as if the mass of fire had been hurled from the sun with ominous intent. The *Comet* seemed doomed now if it had not before and for an instant he felt rooted to the deck. Coming straight toward him at an incredible velocity, the fire-balls bore down upon the diminutive ship as if to swallow it in a flaming gulp.

Professor Jarvison twisted his controls and snapped a lever far over. The *Comet's* hull seemed to crackle under the force of increased electromagnetism. It shuddered from stem

to stern and they were almost pitched on their faces by a sudden, sharp lurch.

White-faced, Corwin stared at the oncoming menace, not knowing that the scientist had changed the *Comet's* course to avoid it. Except for a faint hiss the fire-balls made no sound and as they came closer he automatically counted seven great balls of flame in the cluster. They had the appearance of rockets.

Once more the *Comet* gave a fierce lurch. He felt his legs buckle at the knees. But he kept his eyes glued on the meteors and with sudden relief he saw that they were going to pass overhead, how high, he had no way of knowing until Beth gave a reading of the meteorometer.

"Three hundred miles over!" she called to her father. "That is a bit too close for comfort, father."

"I'll say it is, Beth," Jarvison replied earnestly. Perspiration dripped from his forehead.

With a terrific flash of light the cluster seemed to rise almost on the *Comet's* nose and go hissing sternward high overhead. Jarvison levelled his ship off again and headed back on his course. Corwin did not know it, but the scientist had dropped the ship underneath the cluster like a sea-going pilot would warp his vessel around to escape a sideroller. Jarvison, however, had sent his ship many thousands of miles off her course to avoid swift destruction.

"The meteor clusters frighten you, Corwin?" he quizzed.

Corwin laughed tensely.

"Of course!" he replied. "I'm not made of stone! I thought that mass of fire would strike us sure!"

"When we get beyond the outermost fringe of the earth's atmospheric envelope, young man," Jarvison said seriously. "You won't even be able to see the meteors. They'll be hurtling through space like masses of cold metal. They only get hot when they strike atmosphere and friction. Then

we'll have to watch out, depending solely on our instruments to warn us of their presence."

CORWIN whistled nervously and stole a glance at Beth. She was wasting no time at her tasks and was giving all her attention to the instruments.

"I expected in Meteor River to see a stream of fire streaking through the sky," he said.

"You won't," grunted Jarvison. "Instead, Meteor River is a stream of flying, cold metal and meteoric rock. We will not even see it."

"Then we'll be flying *blind* as we do in airplanes?" Corwin inquired.

"Exactly," said the other. "At least so far as Meteor River is concerned. When we get beyond it, however, flying will be safer, though there is a great danger of running into asteroids."

"You increased the ship's speed to escape that last cluster, didn't you?" Corwin asked intently.

"I did, Corwin," responded the scientist, "and we are now flying upside down."

"Upside down?" Corwin was amazed. "It doesn't feel like it!"

"No, it doesn't," agreed the professor, "but we are, nevertheless. Our top structure is now facing the earth while our landing runners are facing the sun, or Venus, I should say."

Beth gave a sudden gasp and cried out in alarm.

"Watch out, father!" she warned. "An asteroid is bearing down on us from the west, four points off!"

Corwin peered out into space. It was black, Stygian black, and he saw nothing. Then suddenly he thought he observed an object just off to the left. He looked closely and then his blood froze as a monster ball sped before the sun, creating a near eclipse. The asteroid was so close to the *Comet* that, though it was scarcely more than four or five miles in diameter, it seemed almost as large as the sun it-

self. He looked anxiously at the scientist.

Professor Jarvison, as though nothing could ruffle his confidence, sat rigidly at his controls, his eyes on his instruments.

"That's one asteroid that the world never knew existed," he remarked suddenly. "Most likely it is a space-tramp, a vagrant body that strayed into the solar system."

"Is there a chance of us colliding with it?" Corwin asked tensely. "Supposing its gravitational pull draws us into it!"

Professor Jarvison laughed.

"It hasn't enough gravitational power to hold a needle on it, Corwin," he volunteered. "Nor has it an atmosphere. It's just a small, dead body and was doubtlessly hurled off from some major planet or star. As for colliding with it, well, there's always a chance of colliding with some menace in space."

But Professor Jarvison had no intention of sending his ship into the asteroid. The *Comet* was going at an incredible velocity now, much faster than the little asteroid was traveling. To avoid it he twisted a lever and sent the electro-magnetic impulse through the ship's hull in greater waves. The *Comet* fell away from the menace and in no time it passed from view entirely like an aimless juggernaut.

V

BETH gave a sigh of relief and relaxed.

"Give you a thrill, Beth?" Corwin grinned at her. His face was pale.

"I thought it was the end of us, Corwin!" she breathed. "I knew the asteroid was there, but could not see it as we could see the fire-balls. I was afraid our *asterograph* might not function properly!"

"Your father never cracked a smile and seems to have perfect control of the ship at all times," said Corwin

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admiringly. "He's as cool as a cucumber!"

"Well," Beth said frankly, "that asteroid gave me my first real scare so far and I hope we don't have any more close-shaves with them."

"You said it, Beth," Corwin asserted. "The less I see of asteroids and fire-balls the better I'll like this trip. They gave me a feeling that I wouldn't last until my year was up! I thought Doc Badgett's death sentence was coming off sooner than he expected!"

Professor Jarvison called to him suddenly.

"I'm going to give you a lesson in handling the ship, Corwin," he said simply. "I want you to learn now before we get beyond the gravitational influence of the earth."

"Why, in particular?" Corwin stepped up.

"Because," said the professor, "in another hour or two you may find yourself unable to stand on your feet, there being no gravity to hold you down. You will float in the air until we feel the pull of Venus. I think you should know how to run the ship in case something happens to Beth or myself. Do you think you can keep a straight course toward the sun? There's hardly a chance of anything dangerous coming into our path for some time and Meteor River is a good two hours ahead yet."

"If you think it's safe for me to take the controls," said Corwin, "I'll be glad to do it. I'm certainly not earning my keep standing around!"

"I believe it'll be safe, Corwin," said the scientist. "I want to inspect the ship and see that everything is in order. Besides, I'm getting hungry. We'll have to eat now because in an hour or so it'll be a job, for you won't be able to pour a cup of coffee due to the absence of gravity. Just hold the control wheel and keep it steady. Watch the screen constantly for any unforeseen signs of danger. Those small planetoids you see there are

hours away, so you need not worry about them."

Corwin took the controls enthusiastically. But he could not understand why the scientist was so careless in turning over the controls to an inexperienced hand. But Professor Jarvison felt the need of an inspection tour and knew what he was doing. The *Comet* would fly herself without a helmsman for that matter, and danger seemed absent. Besides, he was getting hungry. He glanced at his watch. The *Comet* was five hours from the earth. As he moved toward the engine compartments, Beth turned on a small, compact radio, wondering if she could pick up any of the nightly programs broadcast back home.

The instrument set up a dismal howling which sent goose-pimples up Corwin's spine. But he did not even look toward the sounds. He kept his eyes glued on the screen. The small planetoids hours away seemed like small, twin moons.

Suddenly he heard a strange, musical sound coming from the radio. It was different from anything he had ever heard before and he stole a quizzical look at Beth. She was manipulating the radio dials carefully. The thing scratched dismally and then from the ugly sounds they heard the soft, mellow voice of some silver-toned singer. It seemed too sweet, too mellow and golden to come from a human throat. No voice on earth, they were quick to decide, had ever been so soft, so enthralling.

It began to rise and fall as the singer—was it a singer?—transposed emotion into song. First it was appealing, then resentful. But it was fascinating and the song was a super-masterpiece sung by a super-voice.

After a moment of listening, Corwin decided that it was a woman's voice. But whose? Where did it come from? Certainly there were no singers on earth with a voice like that. It was perfect, super-perfect!

"HOW do you like *that* concert, Corwin?" Beth breathed tensely.

"It is beautiful!" Corwin responded. "Where is it coming from—Italy?"

"Italy?" Beth stared at him curiously. "Hardly! In all our world there is no voice like this, Corwin! I must call father to hear it!"

She pressed a button twice. Back in the engine chamber a bell rang as many times. Quickly Professor Jarvis, sensing something wrong, came running to the control room.

"What's wrong?" he demanded, running up to the controls.

"Nothing, father!" Beth hastened. "I called you to listen to this radio broadcast! I haven't the slightest idea where it comes from. Corwin suggested Italy!"

The scientist stepped to the radio and listened for an instant.

"That voice is not coming from our earth!" he exclaimed suddenly. "More likely it is coming from Mars or perhaps even Venus!"

"Mars or Venus?" Corwin was amazed at the professor's matter-of-factness.

"Where else could it come from?" Jarvis demanded. "Certainly not the earth. The lady with the golden larynx is without doubt broadcasting from some other planet! Being closer to Venus than any other planet, I'm inclined to believe it's coming from there. But I'm amazed that we can receive it here!"

There came an awesome whistle in the radio and as suddenly as it had come, the golden voice died away. Beth tried frantically to bring it back, but gave it up as futile after a moment.

"Oh, shoot!" she exclaimed disappointedly. "I wanted to hear them announce their station!"

Her father laughed.

"Don't get over-anxious, Beth!" he chided. "If that singer is on Venus, we'll doubtless hear more from her. We were lucky to hear as much as we

did due to the interference created by the electro-magnetic generators in the ship."

He retreated promptly to the galley and soon returned with a warm lunch which they ate hungrily. They found, however, that the coffee was rather weak and luke-warm and seemed so sluggish in the pot that it poured almost like molasses. The gradual decrease of gravitational influence over the ship was beginning to have its effect. Also the extreme lightness of the air.

"This will be the last coffee we'll have until we get into the gravitational pull of Venus," the professor remarked. "I had a hard time boiling it and in a few moments it will not pour at all. On earth water boils at 212 degrees fahrenheit. Up here it boils at 170 degrees which is not enough heat to boil out coffee. As for your breakfast eggs, Corwin, I'm afraid you will have to go without as they will not fry up here."

"I can manage on sandwiches," Corwin grinned.

Beth returned the tray to the galley and washed up the dishes. The scientist put Corwin on the panels and took over the controls once more. Gradually they sensed a change come over them. They felt so light that they seemed to weigh hardly ten pounds. Almost every step caused them to rise involuntarily from the deck.

"Better strap yourselves into your chairs," Jarvis advised suddenly. "The further away from gravitational influence the *Comet* gets, the less weight we shall have. We shall float in the air like feathers if we do not strap ourselves down to something solid. The chairs are bolted to the deck. I feel like a puff of smoke right now!"

And so did Corwin and Beth. Corwin made for his chair and missed it by a yard to go hurtling up to the roof where he banged his head sharply against the plates. He floated majestically back to the deck and fortunately landed prone beside his

chair. Beth was spared his experience for she had known beforehand what to expect where lack of gravity played havoc with animate and inanimate things. She laughed amusedly as he eased himself into his chair and strapped himself into it with a safety belt the scientist had provided for that purpose.

Her chair was within easy reach of the radio and she began once more to attempt to bring in the golden voiced singer. But the instrument was utterly silent and she gave it up after a bit to watch the instruments on the panel.

Time passed slowly. There was nothing for them to do but sit and watch. Professor Jarvison had belted himself securely in the pilot's seat and was giving his attention to the controls. By the chronometer in front of him it was midnight, earth-time. The velocity indicator showed a velocity of 1,453,000 miles per hour. But the *Comet* might have been standing still as far as any sensations were concerned with regard to speed.

"Aren't you afraid of breaking up the machine at that speed, professor?" Corwin inquired tensely, watching the velocity indicator on the panel.

The professor laughed quietly and surveyed him through twinkling eyes.

"Hardly," he said. "We are merely falling through space, inert. There is no vibration to shake anything loose."

STEADILY the *Comet* plunged on toward the sun which was visible once more, it having been hidden behind the storm mass for some time. She went through space like a meteor until suddenly Beth tensed in her seat and called out a warning.

"A swarm of meteors in the vicinity!" she sang out. "It must be Meteor River, father!"

Instantly the scientist grew tense. He looked at the instruments on the panel before him. The indicator showed meteors dead ahead and

streaming through space like a vast river of metal and rock.

"Meteor River!" he breathed tensely. "We are half way to Venus!"

Corwin peered through the observation ports and saw nothing. Suddenly Jarvison pressed down a switch. Twin shafts of light shot into space from the ship's nose. They were so brilliant that they almost blinded Corwin and he cringed, mistaking them for flaming bodies. But his eyes quickly grew accustomed to the powerful light, yet he could see no meteors.

The scientist, watching his controls and instruments anxiously, abruptly lifted the ship at a sharp, dizzy angle. She shot upward as Corwin caught the glint of a flying body hurtling through the light beams. It was followed immediately by others and seemed so close that the *Comet* was in immediate danger of being struck by the missiles. But one look at the meteorometers showed him that they were quite a distance away, yet they seemed so incredibly large.

Through the twin light beams Meteor River coursed its way in a straight line through space. With the powerful beams illuminating the stream of missiles, they glistened and glittered like so many diamonds, the bright nickel element in them reflecting the beams like polished mirrors. They made no sound in passing. All the missiles seemed speeding onward to some unknown destiny at a fixed velocity, like the current of a deep river.

Steering by instruments alone, Professor Jarvison sent his ship high above the metal stream and for some seconds thereafter they saw the missiles hurtling beneath them. The stream, he judged, must have been several thousand miles wide and of unknown depth. He knew that it was composed, however, of fragments of broken up planets and asteroids, flying about through space.

The *Comet* safely sped over the

stream and went on at a rapid clip. Having lost some time in passing through the celestial storm and navigating cautiously over the stream, he now sought to catch up on his schedule allowing them seventeen hours for the passage between earth and Venus. Of Venus they saw nothing, for the planet was directly between them and the sun. But he knew its exact location, for it was charted on his planetarium. In consequence he aimed the *Comet* at it blindly and relied on his instruments to tell him when he reached the outer fringes of its gravitational influences.

Hours passed. Far behind them the earth glittered like a red ball. It seemed no larger than a tennis ball now. At length Beth's sharp eyes detected a movement of the indicator-needle on the gravi-altimeter.

"Gravity, father!" she announced promptly. "Are we in—?"

"We are, Beth!" her father interrupted as if reading her mind. "We are in the pull of Venus! You can see her now—seven points off the port bow! I went a bit off our course so we could get a view of her from the side! In two more hours we shall land!"

EAGERLY Corwin peered through the windows. Off to the left he saw the sun, and what a fiery Titan it seemed. It appeared nearly twice as large as he had ever seen it from the earth. And its rays were much hotter. In fact he found suddenly that the rays were coming through the observation windows like a blast from an open furnace. He did not know that in turning from his course the scientist had flung the white side of the *Comet* to the sun so that its great heat would be reflected and not absorbed as it would have been had the black side been facing it. Nor did he stop to realize that they would have been burned to a crisp had the professor overlooked this important detail of his navigation through space.

His only thought was that he wanted a look at Venus.

But Corwin Trumbull was doomed to disappointment just then, for Venus itself was hidden behind a dense envelope of dark clouds and they were too far away yet to see through any holes that might have existed in them.

"The clouds are a God-send to Venus, Corwin," Professor Jarvison remarked, sensing his disappointment. "They are not only a sure sign that there is much water on the planet, but act as a veil against the sun's great heat. Without that layer or layers of cloudy vapor hanging over its surface, Venus would soon become an arid planet. Their presence has always led me to believe that the planet is the most likely one in the solar system, outside our own earth, of course, that could contain highly intelligent life. As a matter of fact, I have every reason to suspect that the surface of Venus is very much like that of our own planet."

"Being so close to the sun," Corwin commented, "it must be pretty hot there in spite of the clouds."

"I've made an extensive study of Venus, as much as I could see of it through my 300 inch telescope back home," said the scientist quietly, "and have come to the conclusion that the climate of the planet, particularly at its polar regions, is very much like that of our own tropical countries. As for the climate at its equator, it would naturally be hotter than at its poles. And you must remember that Venus gets twice as much heat from the sun as does the earth, being 26,000,000 miles closer to the sun than our world."

Corwin went to the observation windows and looked down upon the cloud-blanketed world they were to visit. By now he could see the mass of clouds tumbling like a black sea beneath. The *Comet* was hurtling toward them with the hiss of air slipping along her stream-lined hull. In

the heavy atmosphere she was not traveling more than an even thousand miles per hour, just fast enough to prevent friction from overheating her. But Professor Jarvison soon reduced her speed to a mere 500 M.P.H. She was in the clouds now and while the instruments gave him his exact altitude he did not know the thickness of the cloudy ceiling.

As far as he knew the cloud-blanket might have extended to within a few hundred feet of the planet's surface. Therefore, caution became the rule and he gradually slacked his ship off as she buried herself in the tumbling black vapors. The sun was blotted out instantly, but appeared again in the rifts. The gravi-altimeter gave them an altitude of seven miles, but dropping vertically the ship's velocity was reduced to less than a thousand feet per minute. No use courting destruction, the scientist thought, with success within grasp.

VI

IT WAS with relief that Corwin saw the clouds thinning out below. Being a registered pilot back home he knew the danger of a low ceiling to an aviator. A rift in the upper blanket disclosed the sun again and he had his first astounding glimpse of the surface of Venus. He stared down upon the planet as if transfixed, his eyes riveted upon an area of strange, white markings that bore the unmistakable characteristics of a great city.

As for Professor Jarvison, his heart beat rapidly as he studied the planet's surface as it was reproduced upon his periscopic screen. He slacked off the *Comet* until she hung motionless in space and went speedily to the observation windows to look at the world below. Beth left her panels of instruments and stepped up beside him.

For years Professor Jarvison had contended that all the major planets

contained some form or other of intelligent life. Why the earth alone? He had ridiculed the supposition that the earth could be the only planet in the universe inhabited by highly intelligent beings. The very idea had been absurd to his way of thinking and now he was convinced that he had been right, at least so far as Venus was concerned.

There was no mistaking the curious white markings on the planet. They were made by hand. From the altitude at which they looked down, the peculiar markings had the aspect of a colony of trap-door spiders extending almost as far as he could see in either direction. Thread-like lanes separated them as orderly as a street through a thickly populated city on earth. Beyond the areas were dense patches of green which he characterized instantly as thick vegetation.

"I knew we'd find intelligent life on Venus!" he exclaimed suddenly. "Those circular markings prove it! I'll wager everything I own that we'll find a city of people there! The circular markings we see from here are unmistakably the roofs of tall, cylinder-like buildings! I wonder if the *Meteor* could have landed there and our seven friends are being held captive!"

"We shall soon find out, father," said Beth simply. "I can see no reason why the people here would want to hold them in captivity unless they thought them such strange specimens of creatures that they put them in a zoo or something!"

Corwin looked at her curiously.

"That's an idea, Beth," he said tersely. "Maybe there is such a vast difference in the appearance of the human from the Venusian that they have done what we do back home when we get our hands on a strange creature—lock it up in a cage for folks to look at!"

"Possibly you are right," said the scientist. "We have no way of knowing what happened to them until we

land and make inquiries. If the Venusians prove hostile—”

He did not finish, for as he spoke his eyes detected a number of objects rising suddenly from the white city.

“Look!” Corwin cried instantly. “Do you see those objects coming up? They look like some kind of aircraft, Professor!”

Beth regarded the objects tensely and saw that they were spheres! And they were glowing like emerald balls in the sunlight. Quickly she counted them. There were an even forty of them in line-formation. They shot up swiftly, ominously, like a squadron of spherical aircraft.

“Venusian aircraft, sure as the devil!” Professor Jarvison grunted unemotionally. Corwin looked at him, wondering if it were possible for him to know what fear was.

“And they might be bent on attacking us!” he snapped anxiously. “They are certainly coming toward us in a business-like fashion to say the least!”

“We are in for some sort of a reception, all right!” said the scientist. “They must have observed us up here and are coming up to give us a welcome.”

Corwin sensed danger in the coming of the strange fliers. His heart thudded loudly with excitement. Suddenly he saw another squadron of the green globes rise from the white city. They came up in a wedge formation.

“Here comes another bunch of them!” he snapped. “They are headed straight for us!”

They don't look hostile, Corwin,” said Beth with suppressed excitement. “Why should they be hostile toward us? We have done them no harm.”

THEY riveted their eyes on the squadron closest to the *Comet*. By now they were within a mile or so and they were really big spheres indeed, being, the scientist judged accurately, several hundred feet in diameter. They glowed like green

emeralds and were somewhat transparent although not sufficiently for them to see through them. Wondering what sort of elements they were composed of, the professor suddenly frowned.

“Radium!” he ejaculated. “Why didn't I think of it before!”

“What do you mean?” Beth glanced at him quizzically.

“Those fliers are composed of radium, Beth!” her father replied. “There's no doubt about it! That's what makes them appear so green and transparent! The reaction of sun rays on radium!”

Suddenly the first squadron halted in mid-air. Then without warning they opened up with a battery of hissing green rays which struck the *Comet* almost broadside! The ship shuddered from stem to stern as if she had been struck by a meteor. A vivid emerald glow illuminated her interior and on the instrument panels a strange flicker of brilliant green light played over the dials like St. Elmo's fire.

Professor Jarvison rushed forward instantly to see what effect the mysterious rays had upon his instruments. He was stricken speechless with fury when he saw that the flicker of light had burned out the fuses and played general havoc with the delicate platinum indicator-needles of the instruments. One delicate gauge was destroyed entirely and the gravi-altimeter was a melted mass!

“Radium rays!” he shouted with dark rage. “They've melted the needles of our instruments!”

“What?” Corwin and Beth cried in unison. They were at his side in a trice, staring at the useless instruments.

“Those ships are hostile!” the professor bellowed. “They mean to destroy the *Comet* and us with it!”

Corwin and Beth looked at him blankly as another battery of green beams struck the *Comet*. A ball of green flames flickered across the

panels and jumped like ball-lightning across the control room to the instruments arranged around the periscopic screen.

"Fight back at them, father!" Beth screamed with sudden fear. "They'll ruin the ship and we'll be killed!"

Professor Jarvison leaped suddenly into action. He rushed to the controls, put the machine into motion with a sharp explosion of her rocket system and guided her straight at the glowing spheres. As he went he pressed down speedily four handy levers which controlled his deadly sun-ray batteries. Instantly Corwin saw four molten beams leap out in as many directions from the upper hull. Then with a shout, the scientist piloted his flier so that the beams would strike the row of green globes as he swept past them horizontally.

Almost instantly they saw a half dozen of the spheres crumple in molten masses and go hissing down. Then two of the sun-rays struck the others like a scythe cutting grain. Like magic they wilted under the appalling heat of the sun-beams and plunged downward to crash somewhere in the dense foliage surrounding the Venusian city.

"That will teach them a lesson!" the scientist shouted tensely. "They'll have to get better weapons than radium-rays to beat the Jarvison sun batteries! Dang them! And they can't hurt the *Comet's* hull, either, for she is immune to their rays, strangely enough. But ruin my instruments, will they? I'll fix their clocks!"

He shot the *Comet* around sharply so that his forward batteries would be concentrated on the oncoming formation. But the wedge of Venusian machines was approaching more cautiously now as if the swift destruction of the others impressed their pilots that the Earthian invader was not to be trifled with lightly. Wondering at their hostility, Jarvison projected his forward beams. Instantly the sphere at the apex of the wedge melted and dropped in a mass of

green fire. A half dozen machines behind it went down like punctured balloons, leaving emerald streaks in their wake.

The others fell back as if fear gripped the souls of their pilots and masters. Professor Jarvison, sensing swift victory, shouted gleefully. White-faced and tense, Beth watched them through the observation ports. Corwin stood beside her, aware suddenly that he was trembling with excitement.

"Guess this attack on us explains the mystery of the missing *Meteor* and her crew!" the scientist remarked gravely as his sun-rays once more bit ruthlessly into the Venusian formation. "The *Meteor* must have been attacked as we are being attacked and was either forced down or destroyed. She was not equipped as we are for heavy fighting and her sun-batteries were not near as powerful as the *Comet's*. But they'll not destroy the *Comet*! I'll teach them to respect us!"

BUT the remaining fliers needed no further teaching, for as Jarvison maneuvered the *Comet* to take another deadly crack at them, they suddenly turned tail like a flock of frightened birds, broke formation and whirled away at a terrific speed. To give them added acceleration he unloosed his beams at their backs. Three more went down in green flames and Beth shuddered.

"They are retreating, father!" she cried. "Let them go!"

"I ought to destroy every one of them!" her father growled hotly. "I feel we'll have to do it later, anyway!"

Angrily he switched off the ray-batteries, suspended his ship motionlessly in mid-air and went swiftly to the ports to look down upon the great Venusian city.

"Every Venusian will be our enemy now," Corwin remarked grimly. "Do you plan to land in the face of hostility?"

Professor Jarvison glanced at him earnestly.

"Of course I'm going to land!" he said brittlely. "I'm going to drop the *Comet* in that great open space—that plaza, in the city down there. But I'll fly a flag of truce with the hope that they will recognize the fact that we come in peace. If they show further hostility, I'll show them that they can't kill my friends and get away with it!"

"You think it's worth the risk?" Corwin inquired, watching the retreating spheres. Instead of retreating back to the city, they were heading recklessly for the distant curvature of Venus and were rapidly getting out of sight.

"I'll risk everything to learn for sure just what happened to the *Meteor* party, Corwin," replied Jarvisson bluntly.

"Perhaps those spheres do not belong to the city beneath us, father," Beth spoke up. "They have vanished over the horizon. If they belong in the domain below us, don't you think they would retreat there to protect it from a raid from us?"

"By all human reasoning, they would," her father grunted, "if they had the nerve. But I'll have to admit that their retreat clear away has me guessing. I don't understand it unless the men or Venusians in the machines haven't the nerve of a jackrabbit!"

"They stayed in the fight until you almost wiped them out," Corwin reminded him grimly. "That shows nerve, doesn't it? That last bunch might have retreated the instant they saw that the first ones could not destroy us or bring us down!"

Professor Jarvisson shrugged and said nothing. He snatched up a pair of powerful binoculars and peered down at the Venusian city. He was amazed at the city of white; that its thoroughfares were totally deserted. There was no sign of any living thing anywhere and the whole place had the aspect of abandonment. But he was not fooled in that. Like a true general he smiled grimly.

"They are probably hiding, waiting for us to land," he remarked to himself. "They won't have long to wait!"

With that he handed Beth the binoculars and returned to his controls. With confidence born of the fact that the *Comet* had survived the Venusian radium-rays, he placed the slip under the influence of the planet's gravity and dropped her slowly toward the great plaza. Tensely Corwin and Beth watched the white domain beneath. As the ship dropped down they saw that it was really a beautiful city, though all the structures were precisely identical in the matter of shape. To Corwin they had the appearance of so many Towers of Pisa. Some of them, they observed, were indeed tall and Corwin guessed correctly that a number of them were considerably taller than the highest skyscraper on earth.

They could see no traffic of any kind on the thoroughfares which seemed to have been laid in white marble or quartz. But then the glare of the sun through a great hole in the clouds made close examination almost impossible. It was almost like looking down on a great snow field until the hole in the clouds closed up. Then a dark shadow fell over the place like a gray blanket. Yet they saw no signs of life and were mystified.

"Break out the sun-ray pistols, Beth!" the scientist ordered suddenly. "Arm yourselves with guns and plenty of cartridges and hand me a belt. We may need them in case of emergency!"

BETH went quickly to a chest in a corner and snatched up three pistols which Corwin could have mistaken for German Lugers. She handed him one of them, together with a belt filled with tiny cylinders which looked like ordinary .45 calibre automatic cartridges sans the bullets. Being somewhat of a gun enthusiast and a crack shot with a pistol, he was

quick to see that the Jarvison sun-ray pistols were somewhat different in structure from the Luger. But from a distance they could have been mistaken for the same, though the barrels of the Jarvison pistols were perhaps three inches longer and instead of being loaded by inserting a clip of cartridges in the butt as in the loading of a Luger, the ray guns took only one shell at a time which was shoved into a shuttle, or special chamber, well back on top of the barrel. The trigger departed abruptly from any Corwin had ever seen. Instead of being of the approved style, it was a button-trigger underneath the barrel which automatically broke the metal seal over the ends of the cartridges and operated camera-like shutters in the muzzle of the pistol releasing the sun-rays or holding them within the gun as the user required.

"I should have taken time to give you a lesson in using that pistol, Corwin," the professor looked up from his controls.

"It looks simple enough," replied Corwin, strapping the cartridge belt around his waist and placing the pistol in a stiff leather holster. "I think I understand how it works. Is it loaded?"

"It is," interposed Beth quickly. "I'll show you how it operates." She removed her own gun from its holster and held it up before him. "When this little pin," she continued, pointing out a small pin projecting from behind the breech, "is sticking out, the gun is loaded. When the cartridge is empty, all you need to do to eject it is to press the pin which throws out the spent shell. Then you place another one in the magazine here, slide back the carriage and shoot by pressing the trigger button. Sliding back the carriage cocks the gun. The pin punctures the shell and lets the ray heat into the barrel where shutters, controlled by the trigger, project the beams. This little gadget here on the side of the butt is a safety catch. When it is up you cannot shoot the

gun. You merely press it down like you do on an ordinary automatic when you are ready to fire. Do you understand it now?"

"I think I do, Beth," he replied. "Thanks. Nothing to it if you are accustomed to shooting an automatic pistol. Pistol shooting is sort of a sixth sense with the Trumbulls, handed down to me, I suppose, by my feudal ancestors. Ever heard of the Trumbull-Galt feud that raged in the Blue Ridges up until almost recent years?"

Beth's face reddened a bit and she glanced at her father. The scientist's lips tightened and then he laughed.

"You bet, Corwin!" he said inoffensively. "The Jarvisons were friends of the Galts! That's why your father and me were—er—such *distant* friends, I should say."

Corwin was taken aback.

"I thought you said you and dad were real friends," he muttered.

"We were," said the other simply. "But that was before a Trumbull killed the Galt who was married to my sister. It was a fair duel, I suppose, but it split your dad and me. We were just kids then."

"And you never patched it up?" Corwin asked quietly, aware that he had innocently touched on a delicate subject.

"Your dad was a stubborn critter, Corwin," replied the professor. "But like you, he never had anything to do with the actual fighting of the feud. You see, we lived in the lowlands. When my older sister married into the Galt clan and moved to the mountains, the Jarvisons were by the marriage, bound to side with the Galts. The killing of her husband naturally riled us up and your dad and me broke off our friendship over it. It was silly, of course, but we never patched it up."

"Forget about it!" Beth admonished. "What do we care how many Trumbulls or Galts were killed in that old feud. It's all over now and

we've more important things to think about now!"

"You're right, Beth," agreed her father promptly. "But when Corwin told me he was a Trumbull, it helped a lot in having me select him for the third member of this expedition. The Trumbulls had plenty of nerve and from the cut of Corwin's chin I knew he was no exception to the rule that a Trumbull is a born fighter!"

"And that's what our family history says of the Galts and their clan!" grinned Corwin. "They were gluttons for punishment. Your landing on Venus in the face of hostility proves that, Professor!"

THE scientist chuckled amusedly and abandoned the subject to give his entire attention to the task of setting the *Comet* down in the great plaza. Like a dirigible dropping slowly to the ground in a vertical landing, the interplanetary flier was brought down with scarcely a bump as her runners touched Venusian soil. Standing excitedly at the observation ports, Beth and Corwin were overwhelmed by the towering height of the circular structures that rose above the plaza. They were like great white cylinders with large, deep-set windows and massive pillars.

There was no sign of life anywhere, yet Professor Jarvison, studying the weird white scene as it was reproduced in his periscopic screen, felt that the Venusian city was far from being deserted. He vaguely sensed some sort of a trap. The silence of the place was appalling. Not a breath of wind stirred about the great machine as it rested on the paved plaza. Nor was there a tree or even a bush to be seen. The place was of snow-white stone which he took presently to be virgin marble. The only moving thing they observed was a fountain near the entrance to the tallest structure on the edge of the plaza.

From it spurted a beautiful tri-colored liquid that had the sheen of a humming bird's breast. It was

green, crimson and gold and could scarcely have been water, for the sun was not glistening upon it, being hidden behind a bank of dull gray clouds. It seemed alive as it geysered up and sprayed back into a great basin.

"The place looks peaceful enough," Corwin commented suddenly. "There must be life here. What do you suppose could be the reason for the deserted aspect of the city, Professor?"

"Looks like a trick to me!" the scientist grunted. "Maybe they are waiting for us to show ourselves, knowing that they cannot destroy our ship, and are in hiding to kill us with their radium-rays. I didn't expect such a cold welcome!"

"You mean *hot welcome*, father," Beth reminded him tensely. "You forget the fight with the Venusian fliers!"

"I expected the Venusians to rush the *Comet* the moment we landed," he replied. "But no doubt they are keeping their eyes on us. They may even have their ray guns trained on us at this moment."

"It does seem dangerous to expose ourselves," said Corwin, "but it must be done if we are to learn anything about the *Meteor* party. We'll have to go out. Maybe they are waiting for us to show some sign of friendliness."

"That's what I've been thinking, Corwin," responded Jarvison. "We'll have to take a chance. Now that we are here, I'm not going to back down or be run off without a stiff fight. I'd show a white flag, though I doubt if the Venusians would recognize it as an offer of truce."

"Then let's go out boldly," suggested Corwin. "I could stand a breath of fresh air. Perhaps it wouldn't be a bad idea if just you and me went out into the plaza, leaving Beth in the ship as a matter of precaution. She could cover us with the sun-batteries in case of an attack. They might not expect a girl with us. That would fool them, assuming they are to be fooled."

Professor Jarvison nodded.

"The people here are highly intelligent, Corwin," he said. "Their buildings show a tremendous structural improvement over what we have on earth. I doubt if they can be fooled easily into thinking just the two of us ventured into space."

Beth, who had been silent for several minutes, intently watching the fountain, spoke up suddenly.

"Just get it out of your heads if you think I'm going to stay in the ship while you go out!" she said. "If you leave the *Comet*, I'm going right with you!"

Her father shrugged.

"We won't argue that point, my dear," he said resignedly. "It would do no good. But until we learn what's what, you'll have to remain in the background. At the first sign of trouble, you must return to the ship while Corwin and I cover your retreat. Once aboard you can in turn cover us and we may be able to get inside again without disaster."

"If they hurt either of you, father," she vowed solemnly. "I'll turn the sun-batteries loose and burn this place to the ground!"

CORWIN glanced at her and saw that she meant just what she said. But it amused him to think of a lone girl fighting single-handed perhaps the entire population of Venus. He had little doubt that the *Comet's* weapons could wreak a terrible vengeance on the city and that she could operate them at their deadliest if need be. But in event of their deaths, could she take the flier into space and return to earth alone?

Professor Jarvison, thinking along the same lines, spoke up.

"If anything happens to Corwin and me, my dear," he said tensely, "don't you wait to destroy the city. I've taught you how to fly the *Comet*. The instant you see us fall, you take off immediately and return home."

She said nothing and they both knew that her mind was set on aveng-

ing them regardless to the cost to herself if anything befell them.

"Well! Corwin said quietly. "I'm ready to step into the open when you are, Professor."

"Good!" ejaculated the professor gruffly. "The longer the delay, the longer the uncertainty as to our reception. I feel they are waiting for us to make the first move. It may be our last, Corwin."

"What's the difference?" Corwin grunted. "So far as I'm concerned, I might as well die now as in a year from now!"

Both Beth and her father glanced at him curiously, saw the terrible recklessness in his eyes again, and mentally patted him on the back for his courage.

"That's a bold way of looking at it, Corwin," the scientist said. "The risk is great, but nothing risked is nothing gained. The men in the *Meteor* party risked everything in being the first humans to venture into space. If our lives are given in an effort to learn where they are and save them from their predicament whatever it is, they shall have been well-spent. Let us hope for the best for ourselves and our friends who at this moment may be stranded somewhere."

He took Beth by the arm. Together they left the control room and made their way to the exit amidships. Corwin fell in behind them, his every nerve tingling with excitement. At the door the scientist, without further delay, pressed down a lever. Hydraulic pressure instantly forced open the door. A collapsible stairway shot to the pavement in the plaza. Then placing Beth behind them, they stepped out and walked boldly down the companionway to the pavement, expecting anything to be shot at them from the buildings nearby. But they were ready, for in their hands they clutched their sun-ray pistols, firmly resolved that if they were to meet death, they would meet it fighting.

They found little difference between the atmosphere of Venus and

that of the earth. Except for its lightness which made their throats and nostrils tickle, it was almost like the rarefied air an aviator breathes at an elevation of ten or fifteen thousand feet above the earth. But it was uncomfortably warm which was quite to be expected since Venus is closer to the sun than the earth by a good many millions of miles. And there was a musty smell of damp vegetation in the air, mingled with the not unpleasant odor of Venusian equiseta or horsetails which grew to enormous sizes in the steaming jungles surrounding the city.

But once on the pavement in the plaza the three intrepid space adventurers sensed more than ever that they were being closely watched by invisible eyes. Breathlessly, Beth peered first in one direction and then at another in the hope of catching a glimpse of an animated object. She saw nothing in the way of motion. Only the towering, cylinder-shaped buildings indicated the presence of life.

After a tense wait at the bottom of the companion way they started a slow walk toward the mysterious fountain. Nothing happened and they felt renewed confidence. But they could not overcome the weird feeling that they were being intently watched. Once gaining the fountain they paused. It stood in front of the tallest structure in the vicinity. The beauty of the glittering liquid fascinated them for a moment. It bore a strange, salty tang and the professor judged silently that it came from some mysterious mineral springs.

They were about to proceed to the entrance of the building when from somewhere near at hand came a sudden high-pitched shriek that was neither human or animal. It curdled their blood instantly and brought them to a quick halt. Corwin crouched, bringing up his ray gun, and began searching for an invisible enemy. It came again and Beth gave an exclamation of alarm. Her father bit his

lips in tense anxiety and cast about grimly for whatever he could see.

He saw nothing, but felt the presence of some strange entity, there, yet unseen. Then once more they heard the terrifying shriek. It dawned on Corwin suddenly that it sounded like the scream of a woman in mortal agony. They stood rigid halfway between the fountain and the building entrance, expecting momentarily to see a horde of Venusians charge out at them.

VII

BUT so far as animated life was concerned, they might have stood in a deserted city. They saw nothing and the mortifying shrieks could not have been made by wind screaming among the higher pillars of the tall buildings. There was no wind. The air was without motion—dead! They decided that the sound came either from some savage throat or from an instrument of some sort. But from which direction? They did not know, for it seemed to bear down upon them from all sides.

Again the awesome shriek fell upon them in a prolonged, dismal volume. Then to their utter astonishment it gradually became mellow, soft and golden. They listened intently as the sounds continued, rising and falling and gathering more and more rhythm as seconds, dread seconds, ticked off on their chronometers.

Suddenly they decided that the silver larynxed singer whom they had heard over the *Comet's* radio amplifiers en route to Venus, was mysteriously broadcasting again! The shrieks had suddenly transformed into soft, melodious notes. But the owner of the voice might have been some tremendous giant for all they could tell, for the song seemed to come from some hidden loud-speakers and as clear as the ring of some musical bell!

Though magnified many times, it was very mellow and appealing. It

rose and fell with increasing volume until the very plaza seemed to tremble vibrantly. They listened, feeling certain that they would soon go mad if forced to endure it for any length of time, for it was so loud and vibratory as to impinge sharply on their senses. And, too, it had a sort of hypnotic quality with it that seemed to entice them closer to the towering white building.

It was almost distinctly human in tone, though this voluminous artist was capable of ascending his or her—they could not tell now whether it was the voice of a man or woman—voice a full octave above the highest C known on earth. It was this unaccustomed pitch that impinged so sharply on their senses, yet there was some irresistible quality accompanying it that almost compelled them to continue on to the entrance of the building.

Yet not a single animated creature was in sight!

At this, Professor Jarvison marvelled as they felt themselves being drawn irresistibly toward the spot where the velvet-throated singer was holding concert. He felt sure now that it was in the towering white building. For it was there that the song enticed them with its compelling lure.

As they started inoffensively forward the voice fell suddenly until it was scarcely audible. But it reached them, fascinating and alluring. And as they went on they began to feel that harm could scarcely befall them from a creature possessing such a beautiful voice. It could scarcely mean disaster, for it seemed to radiate the quality of a soul. Perfectly aware that it held an all-powerful influence over them, they made no attempt to shake it off. As if suddenly commanded to do so they holstered their pistols. That done, the professor grasped Beth by the arm and led her forward. Corwin fell in beside her, realizing that the putting up of their weapons was a peaceful gesture that even a savage mind could grasp.

Suddenly Professor Jarvison thought he caught a slight movement high up among the white pillars of the cylindrical buildings. He was not sure he had seen anything. It might have been a shadow. He looked upward along the round wall of the building. It rose a full two thousand feet in the air. It could have been an exact replica of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, but this building was perfectly straight and seemed as new as the day it had been erected.

Its white, virgin marble was beautiful and lustrous. He could see no faults anywhere in the great white blocks. He wondered suddenly if human hands had built it! Or was Venus inhabited by a type of highly intelligent beings differing from all earthly conceptions of mankind?

Through his wonderment he heard the voice of the silver-toned singer. It was very soft and low now, almost pleading, and was drawing them unerringly to the entrance of the monstrous building. They followed where it led, feeling perfectly serene and calm now. Surely no harm could come from the owner of a voice like that. It was too beautiful, too divine.

THEIR hearts thudding against their ribs with the thrill of adventure and aware that they had suddenly become as carefree as children skipping off to school, they marched straight toward the building's great entrance. The hypnotic influence of that voice had them in its spell and they knew it!

Behind them spouted the gorgeous fountain. The mysterious liquid that geysered up from it seemed shot with fire. The spray seemed aglow with a strange warmth that they suddenly felt penetrating their backs. Corwin felt the warmth. It was like standing beneath a great sun-arc, only the radiations from the fountain made his blood tingle. And he became aware of a biting sensation around his heart. For an instant it half-frightened him. It gave him a sudden fear

that his end was at hand, but the sensation quickly passed away.

"I'll gamble that fountain is spouting some form of liquidized radium!" the scientist ejaculated suddenly. "More likely it is radium salts. It has a profound effect on the blood stream and the heart! I feel a strange warmth from it that penetrates to the depths of my spine!"

They did not turn around to glance at the fountain. Their eyes were riveted now on the entrance of the building. The silver-voiced singer continued with the song. But the startling volume was gone. It was now soft and pleasant, a beautiful thing to hear until suddenly it rose far above the highest pitch known on earth. Then it made them flinch as the sound struck their auditory organs like the prick of a dagger. Yet it was a note of startling beauty. With that the voice died away and they became aware that their senses were ringing from the vibrations.

The moment the strange concert ceased, the plaza became thronged with life. From the towering buildings came unnumbered beings, some of whom walked upright like men while others sped through the air with the majesty of soaring birds. They made no sound and seemed as light as feathers both on their feet and in the air.

The three adventurers from the earth saw them instantly. With a sudden shout of warning, Professor Jarvison jerked his ray gun from its holster. Beth and Corwin did likewise and crouched, back to back. But they withheld their fire and grimly appraised the strange creatures that came pouring from the buildings into the plaza.

They were wingless, yet they sped through the air toward them like darting hawks. Some invisible power, it seemed, kept them aloft. Those on foot walked forward stiffly. All of them appeared bedecked in glistening armor, like the scales of a fish. Its gleam would have outdone the metal-

lic sheen of any humming bird's breast feathers.

They wore strange coniform head-pieces that also gleamed with the peculiar metallic sheen. And the earthians saw quickly that their feet were strangely webbed, like those of a sea gull. As they sped through the air it was easy for the professor to see that they used their webbed feet as rudders and elevators for steering. They flicked them this way and that like a fish flapping its tail to guide it through the water.

As those in the air drew near and hovered directly over their heads, they saw that their physical structures were amazingly human. But they could not tell for certain whether the scale-like armor was skin or protective coverings for their bodies. They were too high for them to get even a fair glimpse of their faces. The head-pieces they wore came well down. But they saw that on their broad shoulders were fixed small devices which Jarvison guessed promptly enabled them to fly.

They had two arms like the earthman, but they were, like their bodies, scale-covered. Each of them carried a strange, wand-like stick or tube with a small green ball on the end. The tube was perhaps fifteen inches in length and the ball a trifle smaller than billiard ball. Those on foot marched swiftly to the *Comet* and without hesitation began to board the flier.

Professor Jarvison uttered an exclamation of alarm as he saw them rise swiftly to his ship's door. They did not use the companionway, but merely soared into the air and flocked into the machine.

"They've taken over the *Comet*!" he growled with quick anger. He looked up at the creatures hovering overhead. They were regarding them intently, it seemed, as if undecided whether to drop down and attack or remain in the air. "Looks like we walked into a trap all right!" the scientist continued angrily. "That

singer had us hypnotized into leaving the ship. We're caught!"

Suddenly one of the foremost Venusians hovering overhead, darted swiftly downward, holding his mysterious balled-tube before him in a threatening manner. Corwin saw him immediately. Quick as a flash he released the safety on his sun-ray pistol and flipped up the gun. But hardly had his finger began pressing the trigger than the descending creature darted sideways swiftly. A thin beam of green light hissed from the ball on his tube. The tip of the beam struck Corwin squarely on the head. His ray-gun flew from his hand and clattered on the white pavement. He slumped inert without a sound.

Beth screamed and would have risked a shot at the creature had not her father grasped her arm as she raised it.

"Don't shoot, Beth!" he commanded grimly. "They'll kill us! We are trapped and there's no use trying to fight such odds."

"But they've killed Corwin!" she cried determinedly. "We can't let them get away with that!"

She tore her arm free from her father's grasp and once more attempted, indiscreetly, to get her pistol into action. But suddenly she seemed to freeze in her tracks, unable to move a single muscle, her eyes riveted on the approaching Venusian. She tried to scream, but even her vocal chords refused to respond. She stood stock still, her pistol half-raised.

CORWIN TRUMBULL lay in a heap on the pavement. He might have been dead for all his two companions knew. But such was not the case. The Venusian beam had knocked him insensible. He might have had better sense than to attempt to fight such a horde as filled the plaza. They could have wiped them out with little effort had the Venusians so desired. Professor Jarvison knew that and he raised his hands above his head in a gesture of surrender.

As he did so the Venusian dropped down in front of him. As if that was a signal for the others, they likewise floated down to stand erect on their webbed feet. For several seconds the Venusians appraised them with nonchalant curiosity and Jarvison had his first glimpse of their faces. They were human! No doubt about it, though their skin seemed scaled. Their head-pieces hid their eyes except for tiny, pin-point holes in the helmets which betrayed the existence of visionary organs.

The first creature to descend suddenly looked straight at Beth. Then as if her bones suddenly melted, she slumped to the pavement, dropping her gun as she sank down.

Professor Jarvison was amazed at this for the creature had not used his ray tube upon her. Awed and alarmed he glanced at her. She was sitting weakly and rubbing her temples.

"Beth! Are you hurt?" he breathed at her tensely. She said nothing, but continued to rub her temples as if she suffered a violent headache and was insensible to everything but the throbbing pain.

With an oath her father swung his pistol at the head of the Venusian. But it never landed on that coniform head-piece. The creature merely looked at him steadily for a scant instant and Professor Jarvison's arm froze over the Venusian's head. It might have been turned to stone, for try as he might, he could not move it. He realized then that the other had rendered him powerless by sheer force of will which froze his threatening arm, leaving him in full command of his senses.

Angrily his eyes roved over the Venusian. He saw quickly that the creature's scales were artificial. They were of glistening green metal. Around his man-like waist he wore a wide belt bearing the same metallic sheen as his scaled armor. He had the aspect of a warrior of medieval times, except for his webbed feet and

strange balled weapon. It might have been a war club. But the scientist knew better, for Corwin had not stirred since the green beam shot from it rendered him unconscious. He was quick to see that the webbed feet were also artificial. They were strapped about the Venusian's ankles like sandals. They were veinless and the webs of soft, pliable metal, emerald in color.

As he stared at the Venusian, trying to penetrate the pin-holes in his helmet for a glimpse of his eyes, the professor felt a peculiar sensation at the base of his brain. Suddenly his arm went limp and fell to his side. It was numb and he could not have used his pistol had he tried. But he knew better now. And by some strange force the Venusian held his gaze riveted on the pin-holes of his helmet. It was like being held under the spell of a hypnotist, yet that strange sensation at the base of his brain made him flinch. At first it had felt like something alive and crawling there. Then it became sharp, almost like the prick of a needle in the back of his head.

He felt suddenly that the Venusian was trying to communicate with him by mental telepathy, or transferring his thoughts by force of will. He was sure of it when a question was stamped in his mind as clearly as if it had been spoken to him outright.

"What brings you to *Ranos*?"

HE might have expected the Venusians to ask him something of that sort, but certainly not in his own language! It was a shock to him, to say the least, when the Venusian's thought vibrations impinged upon his brain. He had hoped the creatures would be capable of communication yet it never occurred to him that they might understand his own tongue and be able to converse with it through mental telepathy. And what was *Ranos*? Was it the Venusian name for the planet Venus? He wondered as he stared in amazement at the bird-man before him.

"We came here to learn what could have become of a number of my fellow scientists who left our world for this planet two years ago," he said aloud. "They left our planet in a space-machine such as we came in and we have heard nothing from them. We thought perhaps they were stranded here. We came to rescue them if they are still alive, and to study conditions here. We came to Venus with no intention of doing its inhabitants harm. We came in peace, for purely benevolent and scientific purposes, yet you attacked us the moment we came through the clouds! Now you would kill us by strategy! Why do you object to visitors here on Venus—visitors who mean you no harm?"

"Venus?" the Venusian questioned without uttering a word. "What is Venus?"

"Your world—this planet," responded the professor quickly. He holstered his gun and stole a quick glance at Beth. She had risen and was standing over the inert form of Corwin. "Venus," Jarvison continued, "is what we of the Earth call your world."

"*Ranos* is our world!" the Venusian spokesman vibrated mentally. "You call yourselves *men* in your world which we have named *Romo*. It is the red planet beyond Meteor River."

Professor Jarvison was overawed at the ease with which he received the other's powerful thought vibrations. The Venusian's thoughts were transferred to his own brain without as much as a single movement of his rather thin, but shapely lips. No need of a spoken language here. The strange creature could project and receive thoughts as rapidly as he, Jarvison, could think.

"How do you know we call ourselves *men* on our world?" he inquired, more at ease now that he knew Beth suffered no injury.

"We of *Ranos* know many things that man of *Romo* does not know," the other replied.

The horde of glistening bird-men

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watched the professor intently, their faces inscrutable.

"What do you call yourselves here—*man*?" he asked aloud.

"*Man* on Romo—*Rano* on Ranos!" the Venusian telegraphed quickly. "We are *Rano* here."

"Then does Ranos have the same language as Americans on Romo?" the scientist asked incredulously.

"We can converse mentally in any language," the Venusian said silently and with much force of mentality.

"How do you accomplish that?" Professor Jarvison arched his brows.

"By reading the thoughts in the brain of the subject as you on Romo read books."

"You know we read books?"

"Ranos knows many things," the Venusian informed him.

"But how do you read thoughts?"

The Venusian shrugged his broad shoulders.

"How do you talk?" he projected.

"It is just natural with you to talk, as it is natural for the Ranosian to read the mind. But you will learn many things before you return to Romo. Ranos has watched Romo since the beginning of human life there. Ranos knows more about Romo than you do yourself! We knew of your coming long before you arrived here. The coming of man to Ranos has been expected!"

In a quandary, Jarvison stared at him with an incredulous look. This seemed to amuse the Ranosians, for they abandoned their inscrutability and smiled to themselves.

"You mean that we shall be allowed to return to the earth unharmed?" he demanded promptly.

"Ranos does not mean to harm its visitors, Professor Jarvison!" the Venusian telegraphed. The scientist's jaws dropped at the mention of his name. It was incredible that these creatures of another world entirely from his own, could even know his name. "You shall be allowed to return to Romo when you wish to go!"

"But what about my companion

who you killed?" the professor growled, with swift anger.

"He is merely stunned," the Venusian informed him. "His brain has been suspended temporarily. We knew the danger of his weapon. He made the first hostile move."

"He did not!" the scientist retorted. "Your fliers attacked us in the air! We expected trouble from you and when you darted down at us my companion did what any other man would do—start fighting for self preservation!"

"The fliers were not Ranosian fliers," the Venusian informed him forcefully.

"Then who were they?" the professor demanded. "They came from here!"

"THEY were *Ballu* machines!" vibrated the Ranosian. "They come from Ballu, an uncivilized domain on what you would call the North Pole of Venus. They war upon Ranos occasionally and they were raiding us when you came. Your coming attracted them upon you and instead of plaguing Ranos they set out to attack you instead."

"And you say they are uncivilized?" Jarvison regarded him curiously.

"The Ballus are behind the Ranosians in culture," the Venusian informed him. "They lack our intelligence as do the men of Romo."

Professor Jarvison grinned.

"You believe in being frank about us anyway," he said aloud. "No offense. I can see for myself that Ranos has a higher mentality."

"Man is between Ranos and Ballu," the other told him silently, "being neither as intelligent as Ranos, nor as savage as Ballu. You are welcome on Ranos, but you will not be on Ballu which is the Ballusian name for Venus or Ranos. Your seven friends are at Ballu. They landed there by error—"

"You mean—you mean," the professor cut in anxiously, "that they are here and alive?"

"They are alive at Ballu," the other

advised him. "Their ship smashed in landing because a Ballu *kith-ray* destroyed its instruments causing the pilots to under-estimate their landing velocity."

"*Kith-ray?*" Jarvison eyed him dumbly.

"You call it radium," the Ranosian vibrated.

"How do you know our friends are at Ballu?" the earthian demanded.

"Ranos has an intelligence service more efficient than Romo," the Venusian volunteered. "We know that your friends are being held by Ball, who is the *ruling intelligence* of his domain, for scientific experiment. Ball does not understand man of Romo, and what he does not understand he experiments with until he does!"

"Will he harm them?" Jarvison demanded anxiously.

"He will kill them in time," said the Ranosian. "Ball realizes that he and his people lack the intelligence of Ranos. He is unscrupulous and ambitious. It is his belief that if he can combine the intelligence of the Romosian with the Ballusian and produce a higher intelligence than we of Ranos, he can gain absolute control over this planet. In other words, he is endeavoring to absorb the brains of your friends into the brains of seven Ballusians. It is a transmutation of human matter, but it will only mean the death of your friends who are at this moment being held in a state of *suspended animation* in Ball's Palace of Science."

Professor Jarvison's lips drew tight across his teeth as he realized the danger in which the members of the unfortunate *Meteor* expedition had been placed.

"You say you expected us here?" he inquired intently, wondering if he could successfully enlist the aid of Ranos in an effort to rescue the earthians from Ball's ruthless clutches.

THE Venusian shifted from one webbed foot to the other.

"The Universe is an open book to

Thala," the creature vibrated. "Ranos has watched the development of Romo intelligence from the beginning and when man learned to fly we understood that he would eventually learn to navigate space. We watched you carefully and praised you, Professor Jarvison, among ourselves for the genius you displayed in building the *Meteor* and the *Comet*. We watched you during your entire flight from Romo to Ranos!"

Jarvison gaped at him, open-mouthed, incredulous that these people could have brought the earth under such close scrutiny. He began wondering immediately how this had been accomplished. He also wondered suddenly who *Thala* could be and, reading his mind as definitely as if it had been an open book, the Venusian's reply impinged upon his brain.

"*Thala* is the Empress of the Ranosians," Jarvison grasped. "She is the Science Mistress of Ranos! She will welcome you in the Hall of The Sciences. We will present you to her when your companion revives."

Professor Jarvison glanced anxiously at Corwin. He was stirring now. Beth was giving him her attention. She was massaging his forehead vigorously, for she had intercepted the Venusian's powerful thoughts to learn that he had been merely knocked out.

"*Thala* is a woman scientist, then, eh?" Professor Jarvison grunted. "A feminine master mind?"

He felt the Ranosian laugh mentally. The others joined in. The scientist might have heard their chuckles of amusement, but not a sound came from them. Their amusement was purely mental and the vibrations were transferred to his own brain.

"In your way of saying it—yes," the Ranosian vibrated. "But *Thala* is more than a mere female here on Ranos. She is the *Ruling Intelligence*."

"Does she sing?" Jarvison inquired, suddenly remembering the mysterious concert and wondering if she had been the one giving it.

"Thala sings to the Universe," the other telegraphed. "But it is purely mental. No Ranosian has vocal organs. We communicate by mental-wave entirely. But Thala expresses her musical mind to the Universe by audifying it through Fifth Dimensional broadcast. By it she communicates with the other planets."

"I see," grunted the professor strangely. "We never heard her on earth—Romo."

"No, I suppose you did not," the other responded silently. "What you call the Heaviside Layer is the reason. There is also another reason. An envelope of Cosmic Electricity surrounds Romo through which ether vibrations do not penetrate. Thala is experimenting in Sixth Dimensional broadcast to overcome it. Already she has created what you call static in your receiving apparatus."

VIII

AFTER his first signs of returning consciousness, Corwin rallied quickly. He was not long in regaining his feet, though he was still dazed when he stood up. Before the professor could lend him a hand in rising, the Venusian spokesman was at Beth's side. He shoved his balled tube into his metal belt and assisted him up. When Corwin beheld him he grinned foolishly, aware that he was too weak to resist further.

"You drew your weapon and we struck you down to protect ourselves," the Ranosian's thought-waves impinged on his brain. "We had no intentions of harming you and you mistook our descent as a hostile gesture."

"Who are you?" Corwin blurted, incredulous that the Venusian could speak his language.

"I am *Thaden*, Second to Thala, appointed to escort your party to the Hall of the Sciences," the Ranosian informed him mentally. "Thala awaits you there."

He turned around and faced the

other Venusian bird-men. They stood at stiff attention. The earthians felt his powerful, vibrating waves as he addressed the throng. But neither could understand the language in which he communicated with it. His telegraphed thoughts impinged upon their brains in a weird jargon, unlike anything they had ever heard on earth. It was more like the queer raspings that had preceded the development of Thala's mysterious song through the *Comet's* radio receivers en route to Venus.

But presently Thaden turned to his guests and instructed them to follow him. Then slowly he took the lead toward the entrance of the towering building. Professor Jarvison and his two companions fell in behind him. The Ranosians took up the rear and the procession marched into the building.

When they entered the place they found it even more spacious than they had previously guessed. Never on earth had they ever seen such rare architecture. The lobby was an awe-inspiring sight. It had a high proscenium arch which was dotted with many glowing spheres. Professor Jarvison saw immediately that it was a miniature reproduction of the solar system showing the relative positions and dimensions of each planet, satellite and the sun. The arch itself was illuminated in a depthless green light. The spheres seemed to float in it with no visible support. And they revolved like miniature worlds! The red sun was the only globe that did not move about an orbit!

He stared at the sight. It was like looking into the Universe from an advantageous position. He recognized quickly the Earth, Mars, Venus, Jupiter, Mercury, the Moon and the satellites of Jupiter, Pluto—all of them bore the characteristics he had learned so well through his great telescope back home. And there was Saturn with its rings, as well! But this Ranosian planetarium contained more heavenly bodies than any earth

astronomer had ever suspected belonged to the solar system.

He would have liked to remain in the lobby to study the whole thing, but Thaden led them quickly to a great doorway at the side. They followed close upon his heels and entered upon a gently ascending ramp which wound upward into the higher reaches of the towering cylinder. As they went up they glanced through the windows between the massive pillars. They seemed made of transparent metal whose sheen was as beautiful as the spray in the fountain below.

Suddenly Thaden passed into another wide opening, leading from the ramp. He led his wards into another tremendous hall which was even more fascinating to the professor than the one below. Strange instruments of science stood everywhere in the great room. He appraised them with delighted eyes, wondering what they were for. The Venusians, he told himself in silence, must be great students of science. Strange-looking devices attracted his attention as they passed down the center of the hall. They looked like machines of some kind, what kind, he could not guess. In general the hall impressed him as being a veritable Scientific Exposition. He itched to be turned loose there to study the instruments and their principles and consoled himself with the thought he might be offered the opportunity later after his presentation to Thala.

HE was anxious to meet this feminine master mind of science who Thaden had said was the Ruling Intelligence of Ranos. And in leading them to her, the Ranosian guided them around a mammoth tubular instrument that came down through the ceiling of the hall and vanished in the floor. It was virtually covered with strange dials, gauges and levers. He wondered what the thing was for until it dawned upon him suddenly that it could be the cylinder of a tremendous telescope.

They entered another door and found themselves once more on the winding ramp. Corwin remarked to Beth about the absence of mechanical lifts. Thaden intercepted his thoughts.

"Ranos needs no elevators," he projected. "When the Ranosian rises, he flies."

Finally they reached the largest of all the halls in the great structure. It was the Hall of the Sciences and the throne room combined. The instant they entered the room they saw Thala, sitting majestically on a throne-like platform at the end of the hall. Their eyes riveted upon her they followed Thaden forward. He halted presently at the throne, bowed with gallant grace and stepped aside. The earthians stared at the Ruling Intelligence of Venus.

Had Thala been chiseled out of a block of mother-of-pearl and life breathed into the figure, she could have been no more beautiful! She sat at perfect ease on her glorious throne and appraised the three visitors through flashing, gem-like eyes. The mere word *beautiful* hardly described her. She was gorgeous and—she was human!

In her own world, Beth Jarvisen was considered the ultimate in feminine loveliness. But there was something more delicate in the charms of Thala. By comparison, the earth-girl's features seemed harsh, rugged. Though Beth was an outstanding example of refined earthian aristocracy, evolution apparently had advanced Thala to the stage where there was as much difference between them as between our Puritan daughters and the slender sisters of Pocahontas.

And Beth was aware of this the instant she saw Thala. Yet the smile that played about Thala's moist, ruby-red lips assured her that her rugged charms had not gone unnoticed by the bewitching feminine master scientist of Ranos!

Thala was a rare gem to behold indeed. Her eyes were like living pearls, glittering with opalescent beauty in

the rays of a setting sun. Her skin was soft and lustrous, almost transparent, and they could see most of it except that which was hidden from view by a short tunic and a wide breast-band, for she was nearer to being naked than a chorus girl in rehearsal. Her short-cropped hair glowed like strands of green gold. It was held into place on her rather high forehead by a narrow band. Her hands were very small, but capable. The nails were green as emeralds. On her small, shapely feet she wore shining sandals of green, flexible metal. Physically she was perfect, super-perfect! Yet she seemed hardly more than a girl of twenty-four or -five.

Professor Jarvison stared at her in open-mouthed wonder. What kind of a world was this Venus to be ruled by a mere girl? he wondered. Was the scheme of things so vastly different here that the female reigned supreme instead of the men? How did she, Thala, become a scientific master mind in such a short span of life? She was no more than twenty-five, and here he, Jarvison, was sixty-two, had been a scientist practically all his life, and what he didn't know about science would fill many volumes! How did Venus come to have a human race so far in advance of any on the earth?

SHE stepped down from her throne platform and in the Ranosian gesture of greeting, placed the tips of her first three right hand fingers on his forehead. With Beth and Corwin she repeated the gesture and on each occasion they felt more than the slight touch of her fingers. A tingling, almost vibratory sensation swept through them at her touch, as if she was alive with electricity. But what astounded them most was the fact that her touch left three small green marks on their brows!

"The mark of Thala, O friends," she vibrated to them simultaneously, "will guarantee your safety in Ranos and allow you to roam where you will with perfect confidence that no harm

will befall you. We are indeed honored to have you visit with us. Unfortunately, your predecessors landed in the domain of our enemy, Ball of Ballu. We attempted to guide them to Ranos, but Ballu, being nearest to Romo at that time, was on the *Meteor's* course. Before they could reach Ranos, Ball's fliers were upon them, caused them to crash and took them captives."

"Thank you, Thala," said the professor quietly. "We did not anticipate such courtesy here. As a matter of fact, we landed expecting to be killed, for we had no way of knowing that the fliers that attacked us in the air were not your own. Thaden has already told us of the predicament of our friends of the *Meteor* expedition. We are indeed grateful that you attempted to guide them to safety."

"We would have gone further to help them, O friend," Thala projected softly and sympathetically, "but to interfere with Ball would have meant the declaration of war which we choose to avoid if possible. I'm afraid we cannot avoid it much longer, however, for the raid upon us today, as you would express yourselves on Romo, has been the straw that broke the camel's back!"

Professor Jarvison scowled.

"In that case, Thala," he said bluntly, "you can rely upon us to assist in every way possible. The *Comet* and her guns are at your command!"

She smiled gratefully.

"That is indeed a generous offer, O friend," she vibrated. "But I hope we will not be forced to accept, though beyond doubt you and your space-flier would render distinguished service. Your sun-batteries, I am forced to admit, are more deadly than any weapons we have on this planet. And I was considerably surprised to find that the *kith* or radium rays of the Ballusian fliers are ineffective on the cobalt steel hull of your ship."

"You saw the fight?" Corwin spoke up suddenly.

Thala looked at him earnestly and

saw that his face was aglow with excitement.

"Thala sees all and knows all," she projected. "I witnessed the attack upon you and I know that you left Romo with but one year to live."

"How do you know that?" Corwin blurted incredulously.

"It is the dominant subject in your mind, O Corwin," she vibrated quickly. "But supposing we forget about such an unpleasant subject for the present. You must be fatigued from your exciting journey. Please permit Thaden to show you to the quarters I have selected for you to occupy during your stay here."

"That's fine, Thala," said Professor Jarvison, realizing for the first time that he was very tired. "But first I must see to the safety of my machine."

"Your flier has already been taken care of," Thala nodded. "Expert mechanics have taken it from the plaza to a hangar nearby. With your permission I will order its instruments repaired so that you may safely use the ship whenever you desire to do so."

"That's kind of you, Thala," beamed the scientist. "Are you sure they can repair the instruments?"

Thala smiled amusedly.

"The mechanics of Ranos," she projected modestly, "know every single bolt and nut in the *Comet*. In fact there are many blue-prints of it hanging in our hangars!"

"You mean you actually copied my ship before we landed here?" Professor Jarvison stared at her incredulously.

"From the day your mechanics laid the keel, O friend," Thala responded, amused at the incredulous look on his face.

"Then why didn't you build a ship like it here and visit us?" he grunted. "You must also have watched us build the *Meteor*!"

She nodded.

"OUR telescopes are powerful, Professor Jarvison, as you will see shortly," she vibrated. "That is why it is not necessary for us to risk space passage. Why risk a life when we can see all we want to see through the telescopes? We could have visited Romo long ago, as we could have visited Mars and the other planets. But it is not necessary, for our telescopes show us everything!"

"Well, I'm not from Missouri, Thala," Jarvison laughed, "but you'll have to show me!"

"It will be a pleasure, I assure you, O friend," she smiled radiantly as if catching his joke.

Thaden, who had been standing unobtrusively aside, stepped forward. They looked up at him at the feel of his thought vibrations on their brains, as he invited them to follow him to their quarters. Thala mounted her throne again and sat down, watching them leave the room. Thaden, who was apparently a Ranosian nobleman, led them quickly into a great hall that was lined with curtained doorways. At length he halted, showed Beth her room, then motioned the professor and Corwin to rooms opposite it. His task finished, he bowed slightly, bade them quiet rest and retreated back to the Hall of Science.

He did not even take the trouble, it appeared, to usher them into their respective rooms and they reasoned at first that Thaden was a mighty poor host. They did not know, however, that once a room was given a guest in the Hall of Science, that room became the guest's inviolate domain during his visit, except when chamber servants appeared to perform their duties.

Inside they found their rooms plainly furnished with a sad lacking of chairs. The beds, however, were extremely high with coverings of metallic silk. Instead of closets there was great chests for the storing of wearing apparel. For the morning toilet there was a small fountain in each room, bubbling with the same glittering liquid that sprayed from the

great fountain in the plaza. As the liquid sprayed upward and fell back, it created a pleasing, musical sound like the low babble of a woodland brook.

THEY lost no time in retiring, but despite the fact that he was virtually exhausted from the excitement of events occurring since the *Comet* left the earth, Corwin could not sleep. He rolled and tossed on his bed of metallic silks and fought hard to drive from his mind certain demoralizing thoughts that crept persistently into it. He visualized old Dr. Badgett standing over him, repeating over and over again his dread verdict:

"Frankly, Corwin, you have but one year to live—"

He could hear those words as plainly as if he were in Badgett's office listening to them! They rang in his ears like wails of menace.

"One year, at the most, Corwin and—"

Corwin Trumbull had a great desire to live. For long, terrible hours that seemed like eternal ages filled with agony, he tossed on his Ranosian bed, fighting hard to get some rest. Frequently he would doze off by sheer force of will power, only to awaken again with a sudden jerk, realizing all the more clearly the cruel meaning of Badgett's edict.

He looked presently at his wrist chronometer. It registered 3 o'clock, earth time. How long he had lain on the bed, he had no way of knowing. But he did wonder what time it was on Venus. The sun was shining through the clouds outside, casting a long shaft of light into his room through the windows.

In disgust at his own inability to sleep, he got up, donned his clothing and sat on the bed, conscious that he was hungry. Suddenly he heard the sound of foot-falls in the hall and looked up to see Professor Jarvison entering the room.

"Sleep well, Corwin?" the scientist asked quietly.

Himself considerably refreshed, he was quick to see that Corwin had spent a sleepless night. His face was haggard and drawn and his eyes were glassy.

"I've had a devil of a time, professor!" he grumbled gloomily. "Couldn't sleep a wink for thinking what old Doc Badgett said! It's hell to have a death-curse on you!"

"Forget it, son," the scientist advised quietly. "I have been thinking of stating your case to Thala and seeing what she thinks of it. Besides, I was about to suggest that you take a good bath and a rub-down from that little fountain over there. I believe it would do you good. It might even effect a cure for your heart ailments!"

Corwin looked at him curiously.

"How could a lot of funny-colored water cure a heart that's partly turned to stone?" he demanded with an air of disgust.

"That is not water in that fountain, Corwin," the professor stated earnestly. "Just what it is, I do not know for sure. But I strongly suspect it of being *radium salts* or a similar radio-active element in liquid form. We know that radium is about the only genuine cure-all there is on earth. That is why I suggested that you bathe in this peculiar liquid.

"The manifestations of radium, Corwin," the scientist continued quietly, "are queer indeed and though the element is strongly suspected of concealing the unsolved mystery of life and matter, man knows actually little about it on earth because he has never acquired sufficient quantities to enable him to delve into its mysteries. But it is known that radium gives off strange radiations that bombard the afflicted portions of the human anatomy effecting certain cures.

"The peculiar green glow that radiates from the fountains may contain the qualities believed to exist in radium. What little of the element I have seen on earth gave off the same pale green radiations, all of which

makes me believe that the liquid in the fountains is either radio-active or a form of radium salts. Though I know little of the element itself I can readily see that everything on this world speaks loudly of its existence in great quantities. Even the wearing apparel of Thala indicates it as does the flying costumes of the Ransian bird-men. Everywhere you can look you will see an indication that radium plays a great part in the scheme of things here on Ranos! This sphere fairly radiates it.

"Possibly radium exists on this planet as iron exists on earth. From what Thala said, Venus is a much older world than the earth. That is contrary to the theory of our astronomers that the planet is younger. In any event, I do not now believe that the earth is old enough yet to contain great deposits of Uraninite from which radium is taken. Its presence here in apparent great quantities almost proves without question that Venus is older than our planet.

"The few grams of radium found on Romo are insufficient to reveal to man the secrets that doubtless exist in large quantities, or possibly man has overlooked its most vital qualities. But I've a hunch, Corwin, that you will need have no further fear of the future so far as Dr. Badgett's edict is concerned. Perhaps I made no idle suggestion that we may find a physician here on Venus who may be able to cure you of your cardiac troubles. We shall discuss the matter with Thala at the first opportunity given us!"

CORWIN'S gloomy features brightened a bit and he looked at the scientist hopefully.

"Do you really believe that Thala is the master scientist Thaden said she was?" he inquired quietly.

"I do, Corwin!" Jarvison replied earnestly. "One look at her eyes betrays a higher intelligence than we have on earth. Her being a master scientist probably accounts for her

being also the Empress of the Ransians!"

"The greatest brain must rule here, then," Corwin remarked. "The Ransians seem profoundly scientific."

"You are right, Corwin," said Professor Jarvison. "Being of stronger intellect than her subjects makes Thala the Ruling Intelligence."

Corwin was silent for a moment.

"What do you plan to do now that we have reached your objective—Venus?" he asked presently.

"Do as the Venusians do, I suppose," the scientist grinned good-naturedly. "I cannot say definitely just what we will do, Corwin. Of course I am anxious to see what can be done for the members of the *Meteor* party. Until I've had a conference with Thala, I can make no plans for the future. Our most urgent task, in my opinion, is to contact Ball of the Ballus and try to negotiate for the release of our seven friends."

"I'm afraid it will take more than negotiations to free them," commented Corwin grimly. "Wiping out Ball's fliers as we did won't increase his brotherly love for us!"

"Time will tell," the professor grunted, "but we can't wait too long. Thala and Thaden both asserted Ball would eventually kill those men."

"Well," Corwin yawned, "you can't visit a strange planet without involving great risks. But I certainly would not return to earth without giving Ball and his Ballus something to remember us by!"

Suddenly they heard that glorious golden voice again. Or was it a voice? The room seemed to re-echo its soft mellowness. It rose and fell with a passion, stamping each golden note upon their minds as clearly as if they were sitting in an auditorium on earth listening to some silver-throated opera artist. They knew instantly that Thala was broadcasting once more through her mysterious Fifth Dimensional microphone or whatever it was she used to project her musical thoughts into the ether.

Why she did this, they did not know. Thaden's cryptic explanation in the plaza had failed to enlighten them and they wondered at it with boundless curiosity. They listened intently for a few moments. This time they did not intercept the scratchings and roarings and shrieks that they had caught the day previous. The tone was soft and golden now. It seemed to refresh Corwin as he listened, fascinated, and fill him with renewed vigor that comes only from satisfying rest. He thought suddenly that it was like the soft music that soothes the savage beast and he relaxed back upon his bed that he might catch every note.

At length Beth, looking much refreshed and radiant, appeared at the door and motioned to them. They arose at once and went to her. Together they strode through the hall toward the throne-room, silently worshipping the strange concert that overwhelmed them with its inconceivable beauty. Curious to watch Thala giving her Fifth Dimensional broadcast, they went forward eagerly.

If they had been astounded when they first beheld Thala, they were completely overawed when they entered the throne-room. It was filled with Ranosians as human in appearance as was Thala herself!

Metallic benches, which had not been in evidence anywhere in the hall when they first entered it after leaving the *Comet*, appeared everywhere. Upon them sat, as if engrossed deeply in the Fifth Dimensional recital of their Empress, no less than five hundred Venusian noblemen who would have passed on earth as perfect specimens of humanity. And they were as white-skinned as Thala, and as scantily garbed, though none but the beautiful Ruling Intelligence wore a band about his head.

Females were made conspicuous by their absence. Beth was quick to observe that as she stood, awe-struck, with her father and Corwin just inside the room. Thala, sitting on her throne before a queer apparatus, was

the only female in the place, outside herself.

THE earthians were quick to appreciate the strange audience. The Ranosians wore short tunics. Their heads were either closely shaven or entirely bald. Not a bit of hair could be seen on their broad, powerful chests, strong legs or muscled arms. They had prominent features, with peculiarly glittering eyes. Their foreheads were high, extremely high. Yet they were indeed handsome despite their lack of hair which, in the final analysis, is a one strong connecting link between man and an animal. And the Venusians were as far advanced over man, it appeared, as man is over the great apes!

The three earthians, after taking quick stock of the gathering, looked at Thala. Her lips were parted in a kindly smile and her *thoughts* echoed everywhere. But she was not singing as she sat before her Fifth Dimensional broadcast apparatus. Her smile was fixed, as if it radiated the purity of her soul. They did not move. Yet she swayed emotionally as she sat, like some earthly prima donna singing a Wagnerian love theme. Her small hands were clasped across her breasts dramatically. She was an imposing sight and it thrilled them.

Fearful lest they disturb her, they remained tense just inside the great room. Overcoming his astonishment, Professor Jarvison began instantly to wonder what kind of an instrument she was using for her recital. It was plainly an apparatus for the reading of the mind and broadcasting the result so that it was transferred to the minds of her listeners. But why the Fifth Dimensional apparatus when all she had to do to stamp her thoughts indelibly on the minds of others was to project them? Was it as Thaden had said, a means of communicating with other planets? He wondered dumbly as a tall, handsome Ranosian left his bench and stepped toward them silently. He smiled, revealing

teeth that were as white and perfect as the pearls that flashed in Thala's mouth.

They appraised him curiously as he strode up to them. He was indeed a fine specimen of man! His shoulders were broader than Corwin's and more shapely. Instead of being built wedge-shaped, which seems to be the ultimate in man's conception of strength, the Ranosian was more lithe and sinuous. His muscles rippled beneath his soft, almost transparent skin. As he came up they saw that he was entirely bald and that his head had not been shaven.

"I am Thaden," the Ranosian's thought waves impinged upon their minds softly. "You do not recognize me?"

Professor Jarvison was stupefied. So the Ranosians did wear flight costumes after all! he told himself silently. Thaden grinned, reading his thoughts.

"We have been waiting for you," he addressed them silently. "Thala is telling the Universe of your arrival on Ranos. Please be seated until she has projected her message."

He turned and glided noiselessly toward the throne where a long bench, draped with a green, metallic cloth, stood vacant. The earthians followed him, studying the cut of his muscular back, belted waist and shapely limbs. He had the physique of a Greek god, from the soles of his metal sandals to the crown of his bald head! Halting before the bench he bowed gracefully and motioned them to be seated. Then he sat down beside them hospitably.

Facing Thala, they watched her intently. Thaden seemed to become entirely oblivious of their presence beside him, for his eyes glued themselves upon his gorgeous Empress. She continued her recital uninterrupted and they listened, or rather thought they were listening. They did not seem to realize that the Ranosians had no vocal organs and that Thala's strange recital was purely mental. Though they did not know it, the Ranosian

vocal chords had long since been discarded by evolution, for a less difficult and complicated method of communication and expression—mental telepathy.

Within a few moments Thala brought her recital to a close as suddenly as she had begun it. They saw her turn several small dials on her Fifth Dimensional thought-transmitter. Almost instantly the three earthians heard a low crackle and sputtering coming from the apparatus. They wondered at first if she was going to continue her recital. Then an entirely new note impinged itself on their minds. It dawned upon Professor Jarvison abruptly that someone was answering Thala's broadcast!

The sputtering resolved itself swiftly into a sort of song. Thaden, who was sitting next to the scientist, looked at him earnestly.

"The planet you call Mars is acknowledging Thala's message," he vibrated softly. "The Martians are elated that Romo is becoming an intelligent world. They say that soon Romo will be considered eligible to join the *Intelligent Five!*"

Professor Jarvison stared at him quizzically, incredulously.

"*Intelligent Five?*" he had the presence of mind to think his query rather than speak it aloud and risk interrupting the reception.

"**YES,**" Thaden vibrated with just enough force so that his thoughts would not clash with Beth's or Corwin's beyond. "The Intelligent Five is a close association of five of the most intelligent planets, those which you call Mars, Venus, Jupiter, Uranus and Pluto. When Romo has become eligible to membership in the circle, the association will then be known as the Intelligent Six. Only then will the Romosians be taught the *kantos*, the language of the Cosmos, in which the Martians are replying now. It is equivalent to your Romosian Esperanto, though the *kantos* is a musical thought best transmitted and

received by virtue of a wider range of vibratory notes. In communicating with the Intelligent Five, Thala does so by Fifth Dimension because the distances to the planets are too great for the transmitting and reception of ordinary telepathy such as we engage in at close quarters."

For a long minute Professor Jarvis thought over Thaden's voluntary information, trying to figure it out. At length he looked at the Ransian.

"You mean," he asked silently, his lips moving in spite of his efforts to think rather than speak his thoughts, "that the planets you mentioned contain life of higher intelligence than Romo, the earth?"

Thaden smiled amusedly at his moving lips.

"That is so," he vibrated tolerantly. "Romo has the least intelligent beings of any planet of the Intelligent Five. I do not mean to insinuate that the Romosians are uncouth savages, O friend, but they are far beneath, for example, the Martians, in mental and scientific advancement."

"But aren't there planets containing life of lower intelligence?" the professor thought.

Thaden smiled again and nodded.

"I expected you to ask that," he projected softly. "You are uneasy in the thought that we Ransians look down upon you with scorn. That is not the case, O friend. But if it will place you at ease, let me say that such planets as Saturn, Mercury and Neptune contain life on a much lower scale than Romo!"

"Well," the professor grinned. "I'm glad of that, Thaden! You had me thinking for a moment that we Romosians were lower than a worm's heel!"

IX

AT THE completion of her tasks of informing the planets of the Intelligent Five of the arrival of the earthians on Rans, and receiving their respective replies over her mys-

terious Fifth Dimensional apparatus, Thala turned quickly to her three guests from Romo. Already on the throne they felt the eyes of the Ransian noblemen upon them. They stood up as Thala approached them and by mental telepathy she presented them to the gathering.

The Ransians regarded them curiously, but betrayed no airs of superiority. Instead, they seemed considerably impressed by the earthians, aware of the fact that Professor Jarvis, by virtue of his fundamental knowledge and theory of the sciences in which he gloried, was head and shoulders above the general run of Romosian intellectuals. They knew that it required a man of great skill and intelligence to evolve and construct a craft capable of conquering space.

After introducing them to her audience, Thala began promptly to explain, by mental telepathy, the facts surrounding their visit to Venus. She went into some detail regarding the development of human life on the earth and its approaching relationship with that of her own sphere and the planets of the Intelligent Five. She explained how, only 12,000 years before, the Romosian emerged from the animal stage and built his first fire. She was lavish in her praise that man had progressed as rapidly as he had down through the years.

While she projected her powerful thought-vibrations, Professor Jarvis wondered how she knew so much of the earth. How did she know that only 12,000 years before, man built his first fire? But the scientist was destined to learn a great many things about Thala and her super-mind before he returned to Romo!

Presently she dismissed her audience with a flick of her small hand and turned back to her earthian guests. The gathering broke up immediately and the noblemen departed, all except Thaden and two other handsome Venusians. The latter were quickly introduced as Thad and Thero, First and

Third to Thala. By this introduction, the professor took it for granted that Thad, Thaden and Thero, in the order of their names, ranked next to the Ruling Intelligence. And that was the case, for the three Ranosians were of higher intelligence than any of the others, except, of course, the Empress herself.

Quaint politics that, Jarvison commented to himself. Or was it politics? But he quickly dismissed the subject and looked at Thad and Thero. He was silently commenting on the fact that they both had the full bloom of vigorous, adult youth. It dawned upon him suddenly that he had not seen an old Ranosian in the gathering. Every one of them seemed in the full-bloom of youth in the middle twenties. With this recollection, Thala's thought-waves drew his attention.

"Nor will you ever see a Ranosian who does not possess the bloom of youth, Professor Jarvison," she vibrated with a mental laugh. "Modern Ranosians do not grow old. Perfect birth and life-control is something we have developed here. But before we get into the sciences of Ranos and the unfortunate plight of your friends at Ballu, wouldn't you care to lunch with us?"

Corwin had long been aware of a gnawing sensation in his vitals. It had been many hours since they had eaten and he was feeling the effects of the fast. He had begun to wonder if the Ranosians imbibed in victuals, for he had seen nothing to indicate it if they did.

The mention of lunch made him hungrier than ever.

"It would be a pleasure to dine with you, Thala!" he said boldly. "In fact, I'm about starved."

"Please forgive my thoughtlessness in not offering you food before, O friend," she projected earnestly. "You see, we Ranosians eat but once a day and I completely overlooked the fact that the Ranosian system requires more food than our own. We shall dine immediately!"

"Your hospitality is indeed generous, Thala," commented the professor. "We accept it with utmost gratefulness, I assure you."

"I am very thoughtless, O friend," she vibrated. "But come! We need delay no longer."

THADEN stepped forward and mentally asked Beth to accompany him to the dining salon. She accepted readily and took his arm. He was indeed a fascinating escort, she thought, and, intercepting her thought-waves, he projected his thanks.

Thala nodded at Corwin, inviting him to be her escort. He was quick to accept and as he lightly took her arm, the soft touch of her warm skin made his blood tingle. She smiled into his face as if she enjoyed the feel of his rough hand. Professor Jarvison, between Thad and Thero, followed behind them.

The earthians could have been smitten down with a feather when they entered the dining salon which opened off from the throne room on the left of the platform. The salon was a great room indeed, with a long banquet table of metal standing in the center. Long benches were in place beside it and in front of each dining place was a small, compact, transparent box to which were attached several flexible tubes of pure white material. Within the transparent boxes, which were fixed firmly to the table, were a number of small compartments containing vari-colored fluids.

The earthians were at a loss as to what to do when they were seated at places along the table. They regarded the devices in front of them with embarrassment and felt like uncultured peasants at a stately banquet, ignorant of the proper silver to be used on the occasion.

Thala at once sensed, or intercepted, their embarrassment and gave them a lesson in the use of the Ranosian Diner. She lifted one of the white tubes attached to her dining ap-

paratus and placed its spotless white tip in her mouth. After drawing upon it for an instant, she looked up at her guests and smiled hospitably.

"Synthetic food seems best for the Ranosian system which does not demand much nourishment, O friends," she projected. "The victuals of Romo would not agree with us. Just draw on your dining tubes and I'm sure you will agree with me that this lunch is delicious!"

Thaden and the other two noblemen drew on their tubes, changing from one to another. There were four tubes, Professor Jarvison saw, attached to each box. He placed one of them in his mouth and sucked inwardly. When the liquid reached his throat he found it delicious indeed. Never on earth had he tasted such a delicately-flavored substance, and he had always been accustomed to the best of everything in the way of food.

"Tastes considerably like our Romosian consommés, Thala!" he said enthusiastically. "But I've never tasted any quite so delicious as this."

He drew on another tube and siphoned a somewhat heavier liquid into his mouth. It was deliciously spicy and hunger satisfying. He wondered what it was and was on the point of making an inquiry when Thero, sitting beside him, looked up.

"It is a kind of consomme, professor," he projected, smiling. "But it is derived from microscopic fungi that abound in the higher atmosphere over Ranos. All our food is taken from the air because it is pure. You would be surprised to see what it contains in the way of food elements!"

"Yes," Thala added. "When Romo becomes as old as Ranos and the soil will not produce food of sufficient vitamins necessary to perfect health, you will have to look to the atmosphere for existence."

"Quite amazing!" the professor responded between sips. "But Ranos seems to abound with forests. Any soil that will produce such luxuriant flora as we observed in landing, ought to

provide sufficient food for almost any number of people!"

The noblemen exchanged glances with their Empress.

"Ranos has a great belt of flora extending the entire circumference of our equator, O friend," she vibrated. "But it is not what you think, or what it appears to be. That flora is composed of malignant growths in which terrible beasts reside, and neither is fit for consumption. That entire belt of flora and fauna, O friends, was propagated by Ballu with the idea of destroying Ranos. He hoped that its spreading would eventually defeat us, but it proved to be a boomerang. As a result both Ballu and Ranos must wage a constant battle against being devoured by the growths and its dreadful, synthetic beasts."

The earthians looked at her in surprise.

"That Ball must be a terrible creature!" Beth grimaced. "Why does he wish to destroy Ranos?"

"Because he is jealous of our superior intelligence," Thala vibrated. "Also, he would make me his queen if he could—his slave, I should say—despite the fact that the Ranosians and the Ballusians are born sexless!"

"Born sexless?" Professor Jarvison almost choked on a draft from his diner. "How could that be, Thala? You are a woman! Thaden is a man! Male and female!"

"I AM the only woman, as you call it, on this world, Professor Jarvison," she projected earnestly. "It is easily explained. Our ancestors were once like the Romosians, but their females gradually protested to the birth of offspring. The scientists delved into the secrets of life and produced synthetic children in test tubes. In doing that they learned to control sex. In time, they abandoned the idea of sex entirely and produced only strong, powerful warriors such as you see in Thad, Thaden and Thero. The wars of the male naturally put the

female in the background until she was omitted entirely from the scheme of things. And so it has been down through the centuries!"

"But you—you are a female?" Professor Jarvison spoke incredulously.

"I am the last of the Ranosian females," she vibrated earnestly and with open frankness. "But I assure you that I am quite sexless, being feminine in physique only."

"And yet you are considered the Ruling Intelligence of Ranos," the professor was flabbergasted. "Despite the fact that the female has been omitted from the scheme of things as you stated?"

"I am the Ruling Intelligence," Thala responded with a proud toss of her head, "because of my higher mentality. I have been such since the last of the old dynasty of scientists bequeathed me the secrets of life that the female might never entirely vanish from the face of Ranos. With these secrets, handed to me for the injustice the male dealt the female, I have everlasting life and barring violence I should live forever: The old instinct of the male for the female still exists in the Ranosian and while sex is something almost forgotten, my subjects derive spiritual enjoyment in their union with me that overshadows any physical relationship between the sexes."

"You startle us, Thala!" Jarvison shook his head weirdly. "It seems incredible!"

"For you, but not for us," Thala projected. "You wonder how old I am, don't you?"

He nodded.

"At first I took you for around twenty-four or -five," the scientist asserted. "You look no older."

She gave a lively, mental laugh that rang musically through their minds.

"I am one thousand *years of age,

*The Venusian year lasts only 224 days as compared with 365 days of an earth year. During the Venusian year there are only

O friends," she volunteered silently. "Now you should be startled, considering that immortality is only a dream on your world!"

And the earthians were indeed startled. In fact they were overwhelmed. They looked at her closely for signs of jest. They saw none.

"A thousand years old?" Beth gasped. "You cannot mean that, Thala!"

"The word of Thala is the word of truth, pure enough in itself to go unquestioned," admonished Thad suddenly in angry vibrations. "Thala is the Ruling Intelligence of Ranos because she knows the mysteries of life and because every Ranosian wishes it so. There is not a Ranosian living who would not gladly give his life to protect her, for she alone has made it possible for youth to triumph over old age!"

"I did not mean to question the truth of her word, Thad," hastened Beth. "It just seemed too incredible!"

"Naturally," Thala agreed. "Thad, Thaden and Thero are among my most loyal nobles, O Beth. You must overlook his keen regard for me. You will find such loyalty wherever you go on Ranos."

"I should think one would get tired of living forever," said Beth.

"If I was certain of a natural lifespan, I'd be happy!" spoke up Corwin. "You never know how much you want to live until your doctor tells you you've got a year left and no more!"

AN unpleasant note of sadness and resignation crept into his voice before he finished. Thala and her three noblemen looked at him curious-

slight changes in seasons, for its axis is very little inclined and the planet travels a nearly circular orbit around the sun. However, conditions on Venus are only theoretical and telescopic observation is constantly hindered by the presence of opaque veils, or cloudy layers, perpetually hanging over the planet. The theory that Venus is younger than the earth is guess work, scientists judging by our own conditions.

ly. But before they could project any thoughts they might have had for him into his mind, Professor Jarvison spoke.

"Which brings us to an inevitable discussion of your cardiac condition, Corwin," he said earnestly. "It appears to me that our charming hostess, with the secrets of life at her command, could do something that would at least alleviate your trouble temporarily and give you a longer lease on life than the year Badgett gave you!"

Corwin laughed softly, recklessly.

"I'm afraid we've put Thala to too much inconvenience already!" he said.

"Not at all, O Corwin!" Thala put in silently. "Nor would it be inconvenient for me to give you an examination. Perhaps I can do something for you."

"When old Badgett dooms a man, Thala," Corwin looked at her gratefully, "he stays doomed. He gave me a year. That's all I expect. But I would gladly submit to an examination if you feel there is the slightest chance that Badgett made a mistake in his diagnosis."

"Your cardiac specialist made no mistake, O friend," Thala vibrated. "The moment I looked into your eyes I knew you suffered from a deadly cardiac affliction. Your physician was generous with you, when as a matter of fact, you will not live a year without prompt and effective attention!"

Beth gave her a startled glance.

"You mean he will die sooner than Doctor Badgett expected?" she asked, frightened. "Oh, Thala, you *must* do something for him!"

Thala watched her curiously for a moment. Then she smiled knowingly.

"You love him, don't you, O friend?" she projected her thoughts so softly that only Beth felt the vibrations on her mind. The others continued eating, oblivious of this transference of thought.

Beth's face reddened with a blush. She nodded shyly and said nothing. But no reply was necessary, for Thala read her mind as easily as if it had

been an open book. She reached across the table and gently patted her hand which lay beside her transparent diner.

"I will see what can be done about your case, O Corwin," she projected so that her vibrations impinged on the brains of all present. "If you will submit to a transmutation of the elements, I believe I can return you to Romo with a heart that will never bother you again. But before I do so, I must have time to study your case and prepare myself for the operation. I must confess a certain ignorance as to the Romosian organs, because they are so vastly different from those of my own people. You are the product of nature while the Ranosian is purely synthetic, the products of the maternity tubes of Ranos. However, if you care to place your life in my keeping, I will do what I can for you."

Corwin looked at her warmly.

"Why not?" he said recklessly. "If I die during the operation, what difference does it make? I'll die anyway. It might as well be now as in six months or a year!"

"There is a chance that you *will* die, O friend," she responded earnestly. "And there is a chance that you will survive. I have never been called upon to attend such a case as yours, for cardiac troubles are unknown to Ranos. However, I will gladly make an attempt to save your life."

"That's all I ask, Thala!" Corwin told her frankly. "If you fail it would make no difference."

"You are wrong, O friend," smiled Thala. "It *would* make a difference, a great difference, to one who dearly loves you."

She looked straight at Beth, who blushed and hung her head.

"Who is that?" Corwin demanded baffled. "I have no relations who would shed a tear over me."

"It is not for me to say, O Corwin," Thala projected to him. "You are a man. You should know without being told!"

He looked at her curiously for a

moment, then shrugged indifferently. He drew on a tube of his diner that he had not touched before. The liquid that flowed into his throat was much lighter than either of the others and tasted somewhat like hot chocolate. He agreed with his companions that the whole luncheon was as delicious and hunger-satisfying as anyone could desire, furnishing all the nourishment of a full course dinner on earth of steaks and all the trimmings. But the Ranosian scheme of dining was odd indeed, he told himself silently.

THEY supped quietly and without further discussion for a few moments until Thala once more projected her thoughts into Corwin's brain. He looked up to see her regarding him wistfully.

"Until after I perform the transmutation upon you, O friend," she vibrated, "you must abstain from partaking food of any kind. That is essential."

"Anything you wish, Thala," he replied. "But if I'm to die, I'd like to do it on a full stomach!"

The Ranosians laughed mirthfully in thought.

"The worst and most deadly enemy of the Romosian," Thala vibrated earnestly, "is his consumption of great quantities of solid food. Your dieticians recommend that you eat heartily. And you go blithely on your way, eating anything and everything. You think you are building up a great reserve of strength and health. But you merely lay yourselves open to disease."

"Our rugged constitutions require heavy food in large quantities, Thala," Professor Jarvison put in. "You must remember that we are savages by comparison with you Ranosians."

"That is true," Thala vibrated promptly, "but until you overcome the need of solids, you will be doomed to short lives."

"The Romosian is most contented after a good dinner," the professor

grinned. "I'm afraid a good many of them would be content to be short-lived rather than starve themselves into longevity."

"Romo will see the light ere long, O friend," Thala laughed in silence. "The eating of food also passes through evolution even as you have passed from the animal state to your present status. Until recent times, as you probably know, man of Romo ate his food raw. It passed into a new stage of evolution when you began cooking it. It will continue to moderate until you find yourselves eating but one meal each day, and that in liquid form, for the gradual shrinkage of your digestive organs will demand it."

X

FOLLOWING the pleasant, satisfying lunch, they retired again to the great throne room. It was deserted. The metal benches upon which had sat the immense assembly of an hour before, were gone, leaving the hall as clear and smooth as a ballroom floor. Professor Jarvison was quick to observe a part of the great cylinder he had seen previously, as it filled a corner of the hall. Wondering if it was some sort of a telescope, he turned to Thala.

"May I inquire, Thala," he asked intently, "what that great cylinder is for? It seems to rise from the floor into the ceiling!"

"Of course," Thala vibrated promptly. "That is the cylinder of our great *Univeriscope*. Through it Ranos has learned much about Romo and the other planets. Would you care to see it in operation?"

"I would like nothing better!" the professor nodded eagerly. "Unless it be that we rescue the seven members of the *Meteor* party!"

"You can do nothing for them, O friends," Thala responded. "At least not at this time. But I will let you see them after we've shown you the *Univeriscope*."

SFQ

The earthians looked at her anxiously.

"You mean that you can give us a glimpse of those seven men?" Professor Jarvison demanded, incredulous. "You informed us they were in Ballu—miles away from here!"

"That is true, Professor Jarvison," projected Thala. "They are held captive in Ballu. In fact, Ball has them in a state of *suspended animation*. But I can let you see them in an instrument you would call the *Menta-Viz*, a device similar to your television, but which is operated by mental vibrations instead of electrical energy."

"You astound me, Thala," the professor asserted. "There seem to be so many implements of science here that I'm in a quandary. I trust I may have the privilege of studying some of them before I return to earth!"

"You may, Professor Jarvison," she returned. "After what you have done for science, you deserve it!"

Slowly they strolled out of the throne room, with Thaden and Beth leading the way. They encountered the ramp again and descended to a room below where the base of the mammoth Univeriscope projected downward from a high ceiling. Here Thala paused and addressed Thad and Thero in the Ranosian thought-language. The two nobles left the group and walked speedily to a great panel that took up a large section of the wall near the huge cylinder. Expertly they manipulated a number of dials and at once the earthians heard the low hum of some hidden high-speed machinery. The panel went aglow with a pale green luminosity that cast a weird light over the room.

Thala motioned her guests to follow her and then led them to a wide balcony that extended around the room about midway between the ceiling and the floor. Scarcely had they mounted it when they heard a new mechanical note. They looked back to see the floor of the room slide back like great sliding panels, revealing the upper-surface of the globe-dotted

proscenium arch in the lobby of the building!

Projecting downward, narrow tip facing the great dome, which the professor had previously judged was some sort of a Venusian planetarium, was the huge Univeriscope. To Professor Jarvison the apparatus was not unlike the telescopes of his own world. But this one was a hundred times larger and how more powerful he, of course, could not guess. But from what the Ranosians had already mentioned of its power, he had not the slightest doubt in his mind but that it would reveal objects he had never seen before.

For an object-instrument it had a great conical tip like the head of a skyrocket. But before he could get a good look at it, Thala commanded him to follow her to a small metallic desk which stood on the balcony beside a waist-high railing. She sat down quickly and placed her long, tapering fingers on a series of square keys that controlled the giant astronomical machine from the observation gallery.

Instantly the planetarium went aglow with the gorgeous colors of the spectrum. The mammoth Univeriscope swung on its axes until its observation-tip was focused on one of the glowing spheres in the dome beneath them. A pale beam of light suddenly shot from the conical tip. The sphere took on a deep red hue.

GRADUALLY the sphere grew in size and as it became larger, Professor Jarvison saw upon it familiar characteristics that made him gasp. It changed from a ball to a disk as it grew larger and almost before he was aware of it, he found himself looking, not on a dome, but upon a great reflector-like surface. Fascinated, he watched it. Suddenly the red hue vanished and splotches of green took its place. Then it became a deep brown which gradually resolved itself into definite shape. The three earthians were astounded when on the gigantic reflector they saw a great

city as clearly as if they were flying a thousand feet above it in an airplane!

Professor Jarvison mopped his brow excitedly and shot a quizzical glance at Thala. She looked up at him wistfully, reading what lay in his mind.

"You are right, O friend!" she projected. "The city you see is the one you call Washington—the capital of your country."

"Good Lord!" Jarvison exclaimed. "I can't believe it, Thala!"

"It is there before your eyes, O professor!" Thaden, standing close-by with Beth, put in. "You do not believe what you see?"

He looked at the earthian closely, as if unable to understand how Jarvison could be so incredulous about what he had just seen. Queer persons, the Rimosians, he thought, being unable to believe their own eyes.

But Professor Jarvison had witnessed what to him was a miracle.

"Why," he muttered. "I never dreamed you could bring the earth so close to you!"

"The Univeriscope will disclose to you even greater powers than that which you have just observed, O friend," Thala informed him silently. "I will focus it upon your own estate that you may see how we happen to know so much about you."

She turned to her controls again and concentrated upon them in earnest. Thad and Thero came onto the balcony and stood leisurely beside her, watching the mammoth reflector. They showed no emotion. Their faces were inscrutable, as if the miracle the earthians had just seen was an everyday occurrence. And it was, for the Ranosians amused themselves with observing at close-hand what was going on in the Cosmos. Every Ranosian dwelling was equipped with an instrument of the television variety which reproduced what the Univeriscope revealed on its mysterious reflector. And for both scientific purposes and

amusement, the Ruling Intelligence of Ranos made daily explorations in space with her great astronomical instrument.

But the moment she pressed the button on her control desk, the scene on the mammoth reflector vanished. The Univeriscope was slightly moved and lowered. Quickly a new scene took definite shape before the eyes of the amazed earthians. Before they had time to blink, they found themselves looking down upon familiar scenes. There under their very eyes lay the Jarvison estate on the outskirts of Richmond! There were the buildings, the *Comet's* great hangar and the many shops! And in the center of the whole thing was the imposing Jarvison mansion, displayed as clearly as if they had been looking at a picture of it through a *Third Dimension Macyscope!

Dumbfounded, the earthians stared, speechless, at the scene. Amused at their incredulity, Thala brought the picture even closer and they saw two men standing at the main entrance of the *Comet's* hangar. Professor Jarvison recognized them instantly as two of his special guards whom he had kept on duty to watch the estate during his absence. They were talking earnestly. In a moment they parted and started on a tour of the estate as their duties required.

"Why those men are Dawson and Rolph, two of my guards!" the professor exclaimed suddenly. He mopped his brow again with intense excitement and shook his head incredulously. "Pinch me, Beth!" he added, "and see if I'm awake!"

"You are wide awake, father!" Beth laughed tensely. "I see the guards as plainly as if I were looking down upon them from the roof of the hangar! And I always thought that your tele-

*The Macyscope, patented in 1925, is a two-colored, spectacle-like device for clarifying Third Dimension pictures to the eye. Third Dimension pictures are classed as those being too jumbled for the naked eye to observe clearly.

scope was about as powerful as any would ever be!"

The scene changed again. The forms of the two guards increased in size until they vanished completely from the reflector. Then they saw a black beetle crawling slowly across the lawn in front of the hangar. On the reflector it looked as large as a giant sea-turtle.

"Now, O friends," Thala vibrated to them promptly, "you can understand how we knew so much about Romo and the other planets of this and many other solar systems."

"**B**UT good heavens, Thala," Jarvison grunted, "how can you penetrate the clouds that must hang over your objectives in opaque veils? Besides, you must penetrate the veil over Ranos!"

"The Univeriscope projects a beam of cold, invisible light that neutralizes vapors," Thala vibrated quickly. "This beam of light is created from a radium base."

"But it only required a few seconds for you to project your objects on the reflector!" the professor mumbled. "Light travels one hundred and eighty-six thousand miles per second. By all reasoning it should have taken your beam—let's see—a little less than three minutes to reach the earth! And yet it all happened in the twinkling of an eye! I cannot understand it!"

"Ordinary light does travel at that velocity, O friend," Thala projected. "But we have discovered vibrations in light that travel much faster. We have delved into the secrets of radium and have found many things that you do not know on Romo. For instance, radium contains a sub-element that produces a light that travels at a velocity far beyond Romosian comprehension. It is almost instantaneous, though we have measured its velocity at what you would call sixty trillion miles per *kor*, which is Romosian for half-second."

"Great Scott, Thala," Jarvison exploded. "That must reduce *light years to light hours!"

"It does, O friend," Thala vibrated. "Yet we hope to go even further than that. We are experimenting now with light and its vibrations. It is our hope that we can step up the velocity as you step up electrical energy from low voltage to high voltage. We hope to reduce what you call light years to light minutes and even light seconds."

"It sounds incredible," the professor nodded.

"Naturally," Thala projected. "That is because you cannot possibly comprehend it. Your civilization has not advanced to the stage of Ranosian culture. Your black tribes of Africa do not understand aero-dynamics, for example. You do not understand our *vibra-light* because, as in the case of your uncivilized Africans with aero-dynamics, your brains have not yet developed to the degree that makes such things simple for the Ranosian."

"I am compelled to agree with you, Thala," the professor declared, suffering a severe set-back in human ego. "But man of Romo is not accustomed to being classed as a savage or a mental embryo. He likes to believe himself supreme in all things, but from what I've already seen of civilization here, he must necessarily go a long way before he can honestly call himself civilized."

"Ranos has a great advantage over man, O professor," Thala informed him, "in that every Ranosian is born with a mature brain. Even the synthetic embryo is capable of thinking for itself and by the time the physical body is developed, its brain has become a super-brain."

"Sounds like the product of Poe or Verne or Wells," the professor grunted dubiously. "But I would like to see it done with my own eyes."

"So you shall, Professor Jarvison,"

*The distance light travels in a year at 186,000 miles per second.

Thala obliged. "Shall I continue demonstrating the Univeriscope?"

"By all means," the professor urged.

SHE gave her attention once more to her control-desk. Her fingers settled on several keys and the scene on the mammoth reflector vanished. The sphere which was the earth took shape again and the object-tip of the great Univeriscope was swung mechanically upon another. Once more they saw the globe dissolve itself into a reflector.

"The Univeriscope, O friends," Thala remarked silently, "is why we Ransians have no desire for interplanetary travel. Through this instrument we can, as I have shown you, easily see what exists upon the surface of our planetary neighbors. With it we have learned your language, even as we have learned the language of the Martians, the Jovians, the Uranians and even that of the *Tar-Leks* who live on *Tarra*, a planet in the Pleiades. For years we watched with interest the construction of your interplanetary fliers and by reading your mind we learned that you intended to visit us."

"How did you read our minds at such great distances?" Jarvison demanded skeptically.

"With an instrument we call the *toth*, or *Menta-Viz* in your language. It is an attachment to the Univeriscope. I will demonstrate it to you shortly."

"A world of miracles," the professor remarked to himself as Thala projected a scene on the reflector. Then aloud: "What great power exists in the Univeriscope, Thala," he added, "that permits you to neutralize such tremendous distances?"

"Radium, O professor," Thala looked up and projected. "While the instrument is somewhat along the lines of your telescope, it is powered by the energy in radium atoms which we have harnessed. For our object-glasses we use Sub-element Seven in

liquid form. This has tremendous magnifying qualities brought into being by the cracking of the radium atoms so that a close relationship is created between the liquids and the solids. Do you grasp it, O friend?"

Jarvison laughed, as did Beth and Corwin.

"Sure, I grasp it, Thala!" the scientist grunted. "About as much as I can solve the mysteries of matter! That is, not at all. But do not let my ignorance stop you. What planet are you showing us now?"

On the great reflector the scene was changing. They saw a flat terrain massed with thick vegetation. This resolved itself swiftly into a great colony of dome-like mounds.

"I am projecting Saturn upon the reflector, O friends," Thala vibrated without looking up. "It contains one of the lowest forms of culture in the solar system. You see the Saturnian dwellings—the mounds? They are a burrowing culture and live underground. But once they were highly civilized, though now they have left the surface of their planet to exist like animals.

"A constant fear of a terrestrial cataclysm lowered the Saturnian culture. They feared and still fear that their planet will sometime run against the inner rings, producing a wreck of matter and the destruction of the world."

"What are the rings about Saturn?" Professor Jarvison cut in, eager to solve a mystery that has kept man guessing since the discovery of the body.

"The rings about Saturn, O professor," Thala responded, "are composed of millions upon millions of small satellites, some of them no larger than the size of your fist, others the size of the planetoid Eros. Yet they are all minute moons, accounting for the beautiful glow of the rings. Should Saturn itself run against the inner ring of tiny satellites—and it will happen ere long—the planet would be wrecked as you would hold a thin

wine-glass against a rough emery wheel. In constant fear of this, the Saturnians have burrowed underground in the hope that the collision might spare them. But that will not be the case. The planet will be destroyed eventually."

Fascinated the earthians watched the reflector. From one of the mounds crawled a grotesque creature which Thala quickly magnified so that they might look upon it closely. The thing crawled on four legs and was completely covered with bristle-like hair. Its fore-legs were shorter than the hind ones, but more powerful. In place of hands they had scoop-like appendages equipped with mighty claws. It was easy for the earthians to see that the Saturnians were some form of rodent resembling the gopher species.

The creature carried a great pile of dirt out of his burrow and dumped it over the side of the mound. Then he quickly retreated to his hole.

"And once the Saturnians were human beings?" Corwin spoke up suddenly.

"They were like the Ranosians at one time, O Corwin," Thala responded silently. "Fear reversed their culture and instead of advancing it, they were retarded so that a retarding process of evolution has reduced them to the culture of rodents."

"Unfortunate indeed," Professor Jarvison commented. "But fear can make a beast of any man and living under it constantly can do most anything."

"You are right, Professor Jarvison," Thala projected.

MARS was the next planet to come under the close scrutiny of the earthians. Needless to say that Professor Jarvison, accustomed as he was to seeing strange sights through his own private 300-inch reflector on earth, was amazed beyond description by the miracles performed by Thala and her Univeriscope.

The supposed canals of Mars, he saw, were not canals at all, but were

deep earthquake faults like the open fissure that extends for miles through the Sierra Nevada Mountains in the Mammoth Lakes district just north of Bishop, California. Life on the planet was something to marvel at.

The Martians were tremendous beings, indeed, ten feet tall, the professor judged. And though they were covered with thick coats of hair, they were decidedly human and, as he could see by their magnificent cities which were perched almost on the edges of the quake faults, highly intelligent.

"Constant evaporation from the Martian body of its moisture," Thala volunteered, "due to the intense dryness of the air on the planet, caused them to grow hair as a means of protection. There was a time on Mars, O friends, when its inhabitants faced a very great danger of being destroyed. This was when they found that they must fight against the loss of the moistures in their bodies through evaporation, or perish.

"They discovered that they had but two courses to follow to fight the evaporation. One of them was to develop thick, alligator-like hides to save themselves from extinction by shutting out the air from their bodies, or growing thick coats of hair. Intelligently they chose the latter, knowing that the former would retard them to the barbaric stage rather than carry them to greater heights of civilization. In consequence, they developed coverings of hair and successfully overcame the evaporation of their body liquids so necessary to life. Results are that the Martians are today high in the esteem of the Intelligent Five."

The cities of Mars were marvels to behold. They towered into the heavens majestically and were cubically perfect. The cubical scheme of structure, the professor decided, had been followed as a protection against the great earthquakes that must rock the planet from pole to pole.

Martians were everywhere, seeth-

ing millions of them, as they went about their affairs, perhaps unaware that they were being so closely watched from Venus. Wherever the astounded earthians could look, the reflector showed Martian aircraft. Their flying machines looked like monster doughnuts with pyramided devices above and below them. They raced through the dry atmosphere at an unbelievable speed and Professor Jarvison was quick to observe that they were built on the gyroscope principle. Some of them were large enough to accommodate hundreds of passengers.

Avowed to visit Mars at some future date, Professor Jarvison revelled in this Ranosian celestial exposé. Beth and Corwin, standing with Thaden, watched the reflector intently. Thad and Thero, amused at the earthians' astonishment, leaned carelessly over the balcony railing and enjoyed the scenes as Beth or Corwin would enjoy a motion picture at home.

Suddenly the scene on the reflector changed again and Mercury, the smallest planet in the solar system, was given the place of Mars. Its diameter of 2,845 miles was quickly magnified as though Thala was in haste to have it over with. They scarcely had a chance to study the small body as a sphere, for the rapidity of the changes from a mere bright dot to an expanse of terrain on the reflector gave them only a momentary glimpse of it. They saw that its surface was a desolate desert and its life nothing but the lowest form of living filth. One glance at it was sufficient for Thala and she sent it flashing from the reflector with a swift jab of a finger on one of the buttons.

"Filth, nothing but filth exists on Mercury, O friends," her thought waves told them. "To look upon it is degrading to the mind and morale of cleaner things. I shudder at it!"

"I agree with you, Thala," Beth commented. "The Mercurians look something like the gila monsters of our own desert lands."

"The little planet was inhabited at one time by a low species of *homo sapiens*," Thala nodded, "but a sudden change of atmospheric conditions caused the poor unfortunates to die out. The planet became a desert and that environment gradually recreated a new life in the form of filth. Before you return to Romo, O friends," she continued silently, "I will show you many more planets of our own and other solar systems. I will show you Jupiter and some of the great worlds far beyond it. For the present I will let you see your seven friends at Ballu and then I have affairs of State to attend to, after which tasks are disposed of we shall see what can be done to restore Corwin's health back to normal!"

AS if in sudden haste she pressed another button on her control desk. From a handy drawer she removed a strange-looking helmet which she quickly donned. It was attached to the desk by a number of hair-like wires. Reaching under the panel she pulled out a small screen which glowed with the green luminosity of an emerald held up to the sun. She pressed another series of buttons and the fascinated earthians saw the screen change to a deep red in color, then to a dead white which gradually resolved itself into a fathomless gray.

The great Univeriscope swung to a sharp angle.

"You are focusing the Univeriscope on Ballu, Thala?" the professor inquired. "If Ballu is at the North Pole of Ranos, how can you focus the instrument upon it from the South Pole? To do so you must necessarily overcome the curvature of the planet's equator!"

"Quite so, O professor," Thala vibrated quickly. "The feat is accomplished by triangulation and the bending of light."

"But you said your *Menta-Viz* was operated by mental force," the professor shrugged, baffled.

"And so it is," Thala responded

amiably. "When the Univeriscope is focused upon Ballu, my own mental-power will direct its beam to the spot where your seven friends are held captive. By the same mental process their forms will be projected upon the *toth* screen as I will show you now."

Dumbly the three earthians watched the screen of the *Menta-Viz*. Suddenly they saw upon it the picture of a great cylindrical structure which might have been any one of the buildings about the plaza. The Ballusian building increased in size until it vanished from the screen. In its place they saw a great room similar to Thala's own throne chamber. But this one was filled with implements of science at which many Ballusians labored. They might have been Ranosians, except that they were not quite so finely developed physically. Nor did their rather handsome faces possess the kindly tolerance of the Ranosians. They seemed hard and cruel. The cut of their lips, tight-pressed and thin, betrayed their cruelty, their ruthlessness. And instead of being bald as were the Ranosians, they had a light growth of hair on their heads which extended halfway down their backs along their spinal columns.

Suddenly from a great open door in the hall, a tall Ballusian walked with the arrogant gait of some egotistical potentate. Around his rather thick, shapeless waist he wore a wide metal girth in which was stuck a long tube. Professor Jarvison guessed correctly that it was some sort of a weapon, for it was similar to the *kith-tubes* of the Ranosians. They watched the Ballusian swagger toward a group of Ballus who were laboring at some monster test-tubes.

"It is Ball himself!" Thala looked up at her three noblemen, Thad, Thaden and Thero, who had grouped themselves about her. There was a note of fear in her thought-vibrations which the earthians detected instantly. The faces of the three Ranosians became

inscrutable and their eyes flashed with a gleam of bitter hatred. "He is going to hold conference with his Ministers of Science!" she continued, shuddering.

They saw Ball halt arrogantly before the Ballus. The Ministers of Science bowed to him until their heads almost touched the floor of the hall. Suddenly the earthians felt his strong thought vibrations. They came to them as distinctly as if Ball was standing a yard away, projecting his thoughts into their minds. Thala shuddered and closed her eyes. The thought-language of Ball was distinctly alien to the earthians, yet as it weirdly reached them like the voice of a talking picture, they sensed in it something untoward.

Thala gave a sudden start and looked again at her courtiers. Thad nodded back, and the earthians felt his thought waves as he conversed with his Empress in his own language. Thaden and Thero watched Ball as if he was a venomous snake, coiled to strike. Ball, after a moment's mental-talk with the Ballusians, walked away to the far end of the room where a number of great test-tubes stood in a line. The Ministers of Science followed close on his heels.

"What did he say, Thala?" Professor Jarvison inquired anxiously. "I thought I detected the word *Romo!*"

"You did, O friend," Thala vibrated promptly. "Ball is angry that you destroyed his fliers when you arrived on Ranos! He said he was going to dispatch a great fleet of fliers to capture or kill you! That means that he will attack Ranos again and war will be the outcome! Oh, how I despise war!"

"IT will be war, O Thala!" Thad put in forcefully. "Ranos has submitted to his raids with little resistance for many years! Thy warriors grow restless and weary of waiting for thy word to fight back!"

"With your super-intelligence," Professor Jarvison spoke up, "you

ought to be able to wipe this Ballu off the face of Venus, Thala!"

"You do not understand, O professor," Thala responded. "Ballu is a powerful nation! They outnumber the Ranosians three to one because they have stolen our secrets of synthetic creation and are making use of them in the creation of many warriors. They are indeed fierce fighters, but they have been somewhat afraid of us in the past. Since the people came in the *Meteor* they have grown bolder. Let us watch the *toth*!"

Ball and his Ministers of Science strode swiftly to the big test-tubes and paused there. The instant the earthians saw the giant tubes, they gasped. With an oath Professor Jarvison bent low over the *toth* screen that he might look closely. He counted fourteen of the tubes. In seven of them were the lost scientists! They stood erect and seemed to float upright in the tubes! Their eyes were closed as in death. Their arms hung limply at their sides. Over their skulls were grotesque helmets from which ran many wires.

And the lost scientists looked like death itself! They were shrunken and white, as if starvation had sapped all strength from their maltreated bodies which were naked except for a series of metal bands extending around their shrunken chests, waists, wrists and ankles. From these bands ran other wires connected to a thick cable at the top of the tubes.

"My God!" the professor groaned piteously. "The members of the *Meteor* expedition! They are dead! I know it—can see it!"

"No, O friend," Thala projected reassuringly. "They are not dead—yet! But Ball is killing them with his experiment—his attempt to create a higher Ballusian culture by transmuting the brains of the Romosians into the brains of his own kind. Your friends are in suspended animation, a state of apparent death. But Ball will surely kill them and his experiment will fail, for the Romosian brain

will not amalgamate with the Ballusian due to a difference of matter. The Romosian brain is composed of phosphorus, while the Ballusian brain is composed of radium-dioxide!"

"But surely Ball must know that, Thala!" the professor growled.

"Ball does not know that, O professor!" Thala vibrated.

"We could tell him his experiments will fail!" Jarvison suggested fiercely.

Thad and his two brother noblemen laughed silently.

"We have already advised him that he will fail, Professor Jarvison," Thaden projected. "It did no good, for he accepted our intervention as proof that he would not fail. It gave him the idea that we had merely said that to discourage him; that we knew he would create a higher culture, and did not want him to do so. Ball is a blundering ass!"

"But I'm not going to stand by and watch him kill my friends!" the professor vowed furiously.

"You can do nothing, O friend," Thala vibrated. "Even if your flier was immune to the kith-rays of the Ballusians, you could not land at Ballu and rescue your friends. The moment you landed and left your ship, Ball would destroy you!"

For a long moment, as if silently debating with himself on his chances of flying to Ballu and attempting a rescue of the lost scientists, he stared into the *Menta-Viz* screen. There they were—his seven friends! There was poor Dr. Butler, the greatest meteorologist the world had ever known! Beside him was Dr. Houston, the vertebrate-paleontologist. Next to him was Dr. Bryan Mortimer of the California Institute of Technology, a foremost authority on the science of physics. Next in line was Dr. Larkin, rocket expert. In the other three tubes were Doctors Morse, Ireland and Sprague, three of the best scientific brains ever produced on earth.

There they were—seven brave men, the first men ever to leave the earth

on an interplanetary flight, laid out for certain death by the ruthless ruler of Ballu who was offering their lives that he might realize his ambition to rule the whole of the planet Venus! And he was ruthlessly offering the lives of seven of his own subjects in his efforts to create a higher culture of Ballusians.

The poor devils, as Professor Jarvis saw, were in the same unfortunate fix as the seven earthians. They were shrunken and drawn. They had the aspect of decaying bodies as they floated in the test-tubes. The blood might have been drawn from their veins, for they were white as death except for their faces which had turned almost black, caused, in all probability, by some strange transmutation process existing between them and the earthians.

There they were—seven men whom he had known most of his life, had gone to college with several of them! In the building of the *Meteor* they had all lived at his home for months on end. They had grown intimate and had parted the best of friends when the *Meteor* took off on its unfortunate flight to Venus. They would have stood by him were the situations reversed. He knew it. They would have gone through hell if it had been the *Comet* that had crashed, to save her occupants from the sort of torture Ball was subjecting them to!

“DESTROY me, would he?” he growled fiercely at Thala. “Maybe he would, Thala! But if I went to Ballu, I’d go with one thought in my mind! Come back with my friends or die and take Ball with me to Hades!”

“My sentiments perfectly, professor!” Corwin agreed quietly. “We braved many terrible dangers to get to Venus! Going to Ballu would be tame! If Ball is scheming to come here after us, I suggest that we go to Ballu after him instead. That’s a bit of strategy he won’t be expecting, I’ll gamble!”

“But it would be certain death for you, O friends, to go to Ballu,” Thala projected anxiously. “You would not only lose your lives, but fail to help your fellow scientists as well. Besides, Romo needs you! You must go back and carry to your people the good wishes of Ranos!”

“I do not worry about my people on Romo, Thala,” the professor stated bluntly. “If I never return, they can build another ship like the *Comet*. My friends are in great danger in Ballu. They would gladly give their lives for me if the situation was reversed. I have decided to go to their assistance. If there was some way by which I could locate the building where they are being held—”

“There is a way, O professor!” Thad put in with an eager twinkle of his eyes. Jarvison looked at him curiously and saw that the Ranosian was eager for a fight. As leader of the Ranosian warriors he had rankled over Thala’s hesitation in retaliating against Ball for his raids on Ranos. He wanted action and the new threat from Ball made him anxious to strike first. “There is a way, O professor!” he repeated. “I will go with you to Ballu and guide you to its Hall of Science where your friends are held captive. If Thala will consent I will take a great fleet of Ranosian fliers with me. Perhaps with the aid of your flier we can put Ball in his place for once and for all!”

“Excellent!” Professor Jarvison exclaimed. “That is indeed generous of you, O Thad. But I would not ask that you risk your life for me!”

“I would go against Ball for Thala and Ranos!” Thad vibrated loyally. “I would die for Thala as would every other warrior of Ranos! It would be good to die that she may have no further fear of Ball and his raiders!”

He looked quickly at his beautiful empress and conversed with her in silence for a moment. After a rapid exchange of thoughts, his eyes grew brighter and he looked back at the professor.

"Thala has consented, O professor!" he projected eagerly. "I am to take a great fleet of Ranosian fliers and accompany you to Ballu. Thala sees much wisdom in Corwin's suggestion that we strike at Ball before he strikes again at us. She will go with us in your machine, the *Comet*!"

XI

PROFESSOR JARVISON was taken aback as were Beth and Corwin.

"Go with us—in the *Comet*?" gasped the scientist. "Why, if we go to Ballu, Thad, we may never return! It will be a battle of men—not for women!"

"A battle of men, O professor," Thala projected quickly. "But should you win over Ball, how would you rescue your seven friends from their plight? You know nothing of suspended animation. You would kill them the instant you removed their bodies from the tubes. That is why I wish to go with you, in your machine. You will doubtless fight your way to your friends. I will be on hand to return them to animation, to save them from death!"

"But I figured to capture Ball or one of his scientists," Professor Jarvison argued briskly, "and force him to release our friends safely! No need for you risking your life, O Thala!"

Thala smiled tensely.

"Ball would not release them alive, O friend," she projected promptly. "He would see that they died, unquestionably. No, O professor, you cannot hope to rescue your friends alive unless I go with you. I alone can restore them to animation."

Professor Jarvison was quick to see the wisdom of her vibrations. Of a certainty Ball would, in event of his defeat, be reluctant to release his seven earthian subjects alive. It would, in all likelihood, be a simple matter for him to kill them even with his own captors standing over him, and lay the blame for their deaths on nat-

ural causes. He, Jarvison, might kill Ball in retaliation, but that would not save the seven earthians. He realized suddenly that without Thala's help, he was powerless. If he did succeed in reaching Ball's Hall of Science, what good would it do the earthians if he could not release them safely from the test-tubes? He did not know the intricate secrets of suspended animation! Thala alone, of all the Ranosians, could release them safely. If she was willing—

He shrugged, realizing how helpless he was without her.

"Then it is agreed that you go with us in the *Comet*, O Thala," he grunted. "Your reasoning that I will fight my way to the side of my friends is correct. I will fly the *Comet* direct to Ball's Hall of Science. Then we shall battle our way to our friends. Supported by your fliers we may succeed!"

"Thad will lead ten thousand Ranosian fliers to Ballu, O professor," Thala returned silently. "He will surround Ball's Hall of Science to protect us while we do our tasks inside. Thaden and Thero will go with me in the *Comet*. We shall also take with us one hundred bird-men who will enter the Hall ahead of us to destroy all opposition inside!"

"Excellent!" Jarvison exclaimed again. "How soon can we go? While you are making ready, I must go to the *Comet* and make some repairs on her instruments!"

"The *Comet* has already been repaired," Thala informed him silently. "Our mechanics have gone over her from stem to stern, making repairs where needed."

Jarvison gasped incredulously.

"They repaired the instruments that Ball's rays destroyed?" he inquired.

Thad replied for her.

"I took the liberty, O professor," he advised, "to see that the necessary repairs were made. You will find the *Comet* in as good shape as she was

when you left Romo! We can proceed against Ball whenever you wish."

"Then we shall go at once, O Thad!" the professor smiled gratefully. "No need to delay."

"We must delay a brief time, O professor," Thala put in. "I cannot let Corwin go to Ballu in the condition he is in. His infected heart—"

"Let's not waste any time on me, Thala," Corwin spoke up promptly. "We can take that matter up when we return to Ranos!"

"O friend," Thala informed him quickly, "unless I can overcome your affliction before we go to Ballu, you will never return alive! If your heart is weak you cannot hope to survive Ball's rays. Should you be struck by a *kith* ray squarely, it will shrivel your heart to nothing. With a strong, vigorous organ, you may survive. Otherwise, the shock of the *kith* alone will be sufficient to kill you!"

"But it will take days, maybe weeks, for me to get over the operation, Thala," Corwin argued. "You must remember that seven human lives are in danger. What is one life against seven? I can take the chance!"

Thala glanced at Beth and caught her eye. Then she looked back at Corwin.

"I WILL not permit you to take that chance, O Corwin," she vibrated firmly. "If you should die, your death would sadden the life of Beth Jarvison. She loves you, O Corwin, and for her you must do everything within your power to live."

Beth hung her head, blushing. Corwin was flabbergasted. A sparkle sprang into the professor's eyes, but he said nothing. Corwin overcame his surprise at Thala's open frankness and took Beth by the shoulders.

"Is that true, Beth?" he half whispered. "Do you want me to live—for you?"

She looked up into his eyes. He saw a tear glisten down her flushed cheek.

"It is true, Corwin," she breathed.

"I love you! I do not want you to die! Without you life would—"

"Then by the gods, Beth," Corwin cried, "I'll do whatever Thala says. She can operate right now! I'm ready! But I hate to take the time when even a few hours may cost the lives of seven brave men!"

"The operation will be over in less than half an hour, O Corwin," Thala put in. "Success or failure, it will be done before you know it."

"If it fails?" he glanced at Beth and found her watching him closely.

"It must not fail, O Corwin," Thala vibrated. "It must not fail!"

"Then let's get it over with, Thala!" he suggested eagerly. "The sooner the better. If it fails, you will have done your best, and I'll do anything now for a chance at life!"

"Perhaps we had better put Corwin under the care of someone here after the operation, O Thala," said Professor Jarvison, "and proceed to Ballu. It would be an injustice to those seven brave men to wait days or weeks here for Corwin to recover."

"We will not have to wait, O friend," Thala informed him. "We shall place Corwin in the *normalizer* directly after the operation. Within a few moments thereafter, if the operation is successful, he will be normal in every respect and will be able to go with us to Ballu!"

"Then you'll do it immediately?" Corwin asked, unafraid. He felt no fear. In Thala he saw only a chance to live. And he wanted to live now—for Beth Jarvison. He was eager, anxious to proceed with the experiment, and to him it was no more than an experiment in which his life was at stake, and live or die as Fate willed. He had utmost faith in the ability of Thala as a master-scientist. Why not? Wasn't she capable of performing scientific miracles? If she had lived a thousand years, couldn't she possess a greater knowledge of life's mysteries than any earthly physician whose span could be no more than four score and ten?

"Immediately, O Corwin!" the beautiful scientific empress of Ranos responded. "We shall go at once to the transmutation room."

Without hesitation she led them away from the balcony and they soon found themselves ascending the spiral ramp once more. Arm in arm Corwin and Beth followed her while the professor and the three Ranosians took up the rear. As if lost in deep concentration, Thala walked majestically alone, looking straight ahead of her. It was apparent to Corwin that she was either extremely worried or anxious over both the Ballusian situation and the impending transmutation.

In time they passed through the big room with its many mysterious devices of science. Thala led them off to the left, into a comparatively small room which was filled with great test tubes and strange apparatus. The first thing Corwin saw, however, was a long table of green metal. It had every aspect of an operating table and for the first time he felt a sinking sensation deep in his stomach. He had always held a deep-rooted fear of medical surgery. It came upon him suddenly as he visioned Thala standing over him with scalpel and tweezers, cutting away the affected part of his heart. Intercepting his thoughts, Thala paused before the table and regarded him curiously.

"You need have no fear, O Corwin," she vibrated softly. "The transmutation of the elements is a common thing on Ranos. As for cutting you open, well, we do not perform operations of that character here."

Corwin sighed with relief.

"Then it's not going to be a bloody surgical operation after all?" he asked, relaxing.

"No, O friend," Thala smiled amusedly. Her teeth flashed in the glow of a number of great radium lamps that lighted suddenly when she pressed a contact button at the side of the table. "You seem to have the wrong impression of a transmutation of the elements. Ranos has long ago learned

the science of surgery without the knife. We perform our surgery in the Fourth Dimension and I assure you that there will be no pain. The transmutation will be in the Fourth Dimension."

"That makes me feel better, Thala," Corwin grinned. "Would you mind telling me what this—er—transmutation is?"

"Now, Corwin," Professor Jarvisson chided, grinning. "Do not stall like a youngster in a dentist's chair!"

"I'm not afraid of the operation, Professor," Corwin retorted. "I'm just anxious to know all about it. An operation on a man's heart is not to be taken lightly, you know. I'm just curious about this bloodless operation because, so far as I know, we don't have bloodless operations back home."

"Of course," Thala vibrated. "Curiosity is what makes progress in the Universe. I shall be glad to explain the transmutation, O Corwin."

"Do so by all means, O Thala," Jarvisson spoke up. "I'm as interested as Corwin."

"**W**E shall inject into his arteries a toxin of *radiumized rayolin* because of its consanguinity with the blood, O professor," she informed him quickly. "It will be no injection such as you would have on Romo. There will be no needle or hypodermic instruments. It will be done in the Fourth Dimension. The radio-active force of the injectives will stimulate his blood, attacking the diseased tissues of his heart. This, coupled with exterior applications of *radio-thallium*, known to us as *Sub-Element A*, will work toward expanding the shrivelled section of the organ."

"Very interesting, Thala," the professor grunted, baffled. "Do you believe the transmutation will be successful?"

"I have every hope, O professor," she responded.

"Then you can operate whenever you are ready," Corwin said to her quickly.

He realized suddenly that he was trembling in every nerve. But here was a chance to live. He needed no urging to grasp at it. Why not? He would die anyway if the transmutation failed. Why not take a chance, gambling perhaps a few months against years?

Thala addressed her three noblemen. They took up positions beside instrument-dotted panels nearby. She waved Beth and her father aside and calmly ordered her patient to strip to the waist.

The sinking sensation continued in Corwin Trumbull's stomach as he speedily slipped off his shirts and laid his broad chest bare for Thala to work over in an effort to restore his heart to normalcy or—kill him. He felt that he was going to his doom as Thad stepped forward suddenly to assist him on the long metallic table. He lay flat on his back, his eyes upon Beth, who stood trembling nearby in her father's arms. He looked up suddenly at Thala as she placed a warm, soft hand over his heart. There were no indications of uncertainty in her flashing eyes. There was a smile on her lips, a confident smile that went a long way toward giving him courage.

He did not stop to think about the manner in which he had been prepared for the transmutation. It was all so different from any earthly preparations for a major operation. There were no emetics, no long robes and no fussy nurses or internes fluttering about to make him nervous. Nor were there any visible instruments of surgery. No glistening knives and other instruments on hand to inspire fear in the patient. Nor did the room reek of ether. He might have been up for examination!

He had been asked merely to strip to the waist and lay himself upon the green metal table. Even his boots were permitted to remain on his feet! He gave himself willingly enough to the ordeal, but cold sweat stood on his brow and he trembled from head to toes.

Beth and her father stood in the offing silently and watched Thala as she removed a curved, glowing plate of metal from a transparent container near the head of the table. They saw her nod to Thad who quickly lifted the patient's head and shoulders upright until he was in a half-sitting posture. He managed a tight-lipped smile at Beth, realizing that the transmutation had begun. Her soul cried out a silent message to him to have faith and confidence in his Ranosian benefactors. The look in her eyes gave him greater courage. It was a look of love and it filled him with a wild desire to live.

Immediately Thala placed the metal plate around his back and held it in place while Thad pressed him back upon the table. The sides of the plate fitted under his arms and over his shoulders snugly. The metal felt warm, very warm to his bare skin. Before he had time to speculate upon this phenomenon, another curved plate, shaped to fit a man's chest, was placed over his torso. Both plates met at his sides and were locked tight. Thad had connected eight metallic tubes to the right side while Thala performed a similar task on the left. The tubes, Professor Jarvis saw, ran beneath the table to a globular test-tube which was half-filled with a glowing green liquid. It began to bubble almost the instant the tubes were attached to the plates around Corwin's torso.

A helmet of green metal was slipped over his head, coming well down over his eyes. To this were attached many thin wires which ran to the head of the table and down under it. Breathing softly, Corwin could not see a great radium-arc lamp that Thala dropped down over his chest on a suspension cord. But he felt its warmth. Or was it cold? He could not tell, though the brilliant rays that radiated from the arc were as frigid as a polar wind.

"Now Corwin," Thala projected to him suddenly as he lay still as death

on the table. "We are going to *suspend* you so that you will in no way feel the excess chill of the transmutation lamp. By suspending you, I mean we shall place you in a state almost identical to death itself. But have no fear. We have complete control over your life at all times. Are you ready, O friend?"

Corwin licked his lips feverishly. His muscles twitched nervously.

"Shoot the works, Thala!" he grunted courageously. "I'm ready!"

SHE smiled amusedly at his slang and nodded at Thaden who stood tensely at a panel nearby. Instantly he pressed down a small lever. The room became black as night except for a stab of light that shot downward from the transmutation lamp. It struck directly over Corwin's heart. He went inert, becoming as limp as a rag. Thad quickly reached under the table and removed a helmet from a container there. In the dim light of the lamp, the tense earthians saw him hand it over to Thala. As he donned it they observed that attached to it was a pair of projecting, binocular-like spectacles that fitted over her eyes.

After donning it she took hold of Corwin's right wrist and felt his pulse. Satisfied, she took a narrow metal band and placed it around his wrist. A thin wire ran from it to a small ball attached to a panel. The ball went suddenly aglow and the earthians saw that it contained some form of liquid which, it appeared, rose and fell with every throb of Corwin's pulse.

Suddenly a stab of light shot upward from some sort of a lamp underneath the table. It seemed to meet the beam projected from the transmutation lamp above. The plates around the patient's body went aglow with a pale green luminosity. Fascinated, the earthians watched. The pulsating liquid in the ball on the panel stilled and made no movement. As if it was an indication that life had fled from

his body, Beth watched it, transfixed, a look of intense anxiety written plainly on her flushed face.

By some strange power the plates around his torso became suddenly transparent. Thala bent down as if to peer through them into Corwin's body! From her goggles stabbed twin beams of brilliant green light that made the earthians' eyes smart. She straightened suddenly and projected a silent invitation for them to step up to her side. They did so quickly, and much to their utter astonishment they found themselves looking at Corwin Trumbull's internal organs as clearly as if they had been removed from his body and laid out on a slab for close scrutiny!

Beth shuddered and turned her head. As for the professor, he was fascinated by the weird sight. Mechanically he looked for the heart. Half of it was shrivelled, turned to a stony gray color. And it was not beating! There was no flow of blood anywhere within Corwin's body. He gave a grunt of alarm and looked anxiously at Thala.

She pressed a button near at hand and the beams disappeared from her goggles. Before he could comment on the deathly aspect of Corwin's heart, she sent her thought-waves impinging on his brain.

"He is in a state of suspended animation, O professor," she informed him. "It is like death, but not death as you know it. His organs are inactive. Only the tissues of his body are alive. Look at his heart, O friend, and you will observe why I did not wish him to go to Ballu in his present condition. Only his great strength has kept him alive! The slightest shock of a *kith ray* would surely kill him!"

"Half of it is turned to stone, it appears," the professor remarked. "The auricles are closing, petrifying, apparently. His is a strange case of cardiactasis. I've never heard of anything like it before. But why do you say the shock of a radium ray would kill him when it failed to do so yester-

day when one of your bird-men struck him down with a beam from his tube?"

"My warrior struck at his brain, O professor," Thala vibrated quickly, "to stun him. The beam had little power else it would have killed him, particularly had it struck over his heart. The Ballus will not try to stun their victims. They will shoot to kill. A *kith ray* is shot in various degrees of intensity and Ball would quite naturally project his deadliest upon his enemies. A strong, vigorous heart may react against a *kith beam*. A weak one such as you see in Corwin's body would cease to function under the shock. He would die instantly."

"How do you plan to restore his heart to normalcy, then?" the professor inquired anxiously.

"AFTER the injectives have had time to attack the diseased tissues sufficiently to soften and dissolve them," she vibrated softly, "I will remove the organ and rebuild it with synthetic flesh and tissue—"

"Rebuild it—with synthetic flesh?" Professor Jarvison was thunderstruck. "Why, I never heard of such a thing, Thala!"

"Naturally," she vibrated promptly. "If you were a Ransian you would have heard of it! All flesh is synthetic here!"

Jarvison shrugged helplessly.

"But rebuilding a human heart, O Thala," he said, shaking his head incredulously, "seems preposterous anywhere!"

"Not to the Ransians, O friend," Thala smiled at him. "Now, if you do not care to watch the transmutation, you may step aside—"

"If I'm not in the way, I'd like to see it," he hastened.

"Then you shall," Thala projected, snapping on the twin beams in her goggles again.

Beth had no desire to remain and watch the removal of her lover's heart. She left the transmutation table immediately and walked swiftly to

Thaden who stood at his post at the panel.

As she left, Thala pressed several buttons on a small keyboard at the side of the table. Almost at once Professor Jarvison observed the flow of blood through Corwin's veins. His heart began laboring immediately as the injectives began attacking the diseased tissues. The gray color took on a vivid blue hue. Within a moment this changed until the diseased tissues were dissolved. Watching intently through her mysterious goggles, Thala projected her thoughts into the professor's mind.

"The injectives act like powerful acids upon diseased tissues, O professor," she vibrated voluntarily. "See? The elements which we have placed in Corwin's veins have already dissolved them and we are ready now to remove the organ."

Jarvison made no comment. He just watched, fascinated. He saw that the blood in Corwin's arteries had changed suddenly from a deep red to an emerald green. The heart suddenly ceased beating and the flow of liquid through his arteries likewise stopped as if it had congealed. Out of the sides of his eyes he saw Thala take up a peculiar instrument that in some respects resembled a pair of triangular tweezers. To this she attached two thin wires by means of plugs. Then to his utter astonishment the device vanished from his vision with a flicker of greenish-red light! Yet by her actions it seemed that Thala still held the mysterious instrument in her steady hand!

But he could not see it! She went through the motions of dipping into Corwin's anatomy to fish out his heart. Watching intently he could have been knocked down with a feather when he saw her rise erect suddenly and hold up before her goggles for minute examination the very organ that Dr. Badgett had asserted would see Corwin Trumbull's end in a year! Like a dentist holding up an extracted tooth for his patient to see, she care-

fully looked over the misshapen mass that was Corwin's heart.

"Good Heavens, Thala!" the professor ejaculated. "What have I seen anyway?"

"You have seen me remove Corwin's heart by Fourth Dimension, O professor!" she responded earnestly. "Or did you see it?"

"I swear I'm not sure what I saw, Thala!" he grunted, perplexed. "First I thought I saw some instrument in your hands. Then it was gone! The next thing I knew you had his heart out of his body! How did you do it?"

"By Fourth Dimension," she vibrated promptly. "Can't you see, O professor, that we have exposed his internals by Fourth Dimension? It is as if they were lying upon an open slab. The instrument is of the Fourth Dimension and is made invisible to the naked eye by *vibra-rad*, a form of highly oscillatory electricity emanating from radium. The vibrations are so rapid that they neutralize and suspend matter, making it possible to operate, as you have observed, without surgery."

"And with it you cut the arteries?" Jarvison demanded dumbly.

"If you prefer to call it *cutting*, O friend," Thala masked her impatience with a warm smile.

HE shrugged, baffled, and before he could put another question to her she turned away from him to a small metal table on which stood a row of vari-sized test tubes. Into one of these she placed Corwin's heart. The professor could not see what took place there, for her activities were hidden behind her body. He stared into Corwin's anatomy. No blood spurted from the severed arterial channels. He saw that it had been congealed in his arteries by some mysterious process of suspended animation. Awed by Thala's scientific magic, he tried to look over her shoulders to see what she was doing.

He saw nothing, for she was working in a cold darkness now. He,

glanced quizzically at Thad, many questions on the tip of his tongue. But the nobleman was giving all his attention to certain instruments at Corwin's head. He refrained from querying him, fearing that to divert his attention from his tasks might prove disastrous to the operation. In silence he stared into Corwin's vitals. The room was so silent that he could hear the ticking of his wrist-chronometer.

After a scant moment or two, Thala turned suddenly to her patient. Once more she held in her shapely hands the strange Fourth Dimension surgical instrument. And in it was Corwin's heart! No longer did it appear diseased! The gray portion that had been rock had been removed. In its place had been laid layers of synthetic tissues. She had completely rebuilt the left auricle and ventricle!

XII

ONCE MORE Professor Jarvison saw Thala perform a scientific miracle. This time she placed Corwin Trumbull's reconstructed heart back in his anatomy with such ease as to make the earthian scientist gasp with awe. With her miraculous Fourth Dimension surgical instrument she closed the severed arteries. Then touching several tiny buttons on the side of the transmutation table, she caused his blood to start circulating through his body.

Within a few seconds after this weird feat, the contents in the transparent globes beneath the table began to bubble. Watching the restored heart of his friend as if transfixed, the professor saw it give a series of sudden twitches. Then the contents of the globes seemed to boil and then begin to beat with a slow, steady rhythm. And with it beat Corwin Trumbull's synthetic heart! The professor studied the organ through incredulous eyes. Beth remained away, fearful lest she witness the flight of life from the man she loved.

SFO

The plates surrounding Corwin's torso went suddenly aglow. The radium arc overhead cast a flood of cold light down upon his body. The tubes connecting the glowing casing to the instruments beneath the table seemed to pulsate with every feeble throb of his heart. A luminous green fluid, thick as blood itself, coursed through his veins and arteries. Jarvison shivered as the cold light bit into his vitals.

Corwin's muscles began suddenly to twitch and his lips went purple. A cold sweat mounted on his face. His heart seemed suddenly to expand. With this Thala gave a silent ejaculation of relief. Jarvison looked at her curiously. Without hesitation she pressed a tiny key at the side of the table. Corwin gasped and began coughing and the plates about his torso took on a pale, phosphorescent glow like the moon on an extremely cold night.

Suddenly from somewhere in the great Tower of Sciences came a dismal shriek that sounded to the earthians somewhat like a thousand police sirens bellowing a startling warning to pedestrians to clear the streets. Coming at a pitch beyond anything their auditory organs or brains were accustomed to, the dread sounds hammered at the reasoning powers of Beth Jarvison and her father. So suddenly had it come upon them that Beth gave a startled cry and rushed to her father's arms. The professor recoiled and looked to Thala for an explanation for which he did not have but a second to wait.

"The Ballus!" her thought-waves impinged upon their brains with a tremor of alarm and fear. "They come to Ranos!"

Thad, Thaden and Thero dashed away at top speed without even pausing to consult their empress. Nor did she stop them. A grim warning, sent to them by Fifth Dimensional broadcast from some watch-tower in the city, had called them to duty. The Ballus were coming, bent on another raid upon Ranos. But this time they were

coming to avenge themselves against the strange space-flier of Romo, and to capture, if they could, its intrepid crew of earthians.

The Ballus had stolen a march on her! Through their own instruments of intelligence they had spied upon Ranos even as she had spied upon Ballu with her *menta-viz*! They had learned through their own intelligence system that the Ranosians were planning an attack upon Ball in an effort to retaliate for their many raids and, at the same time, to effect the rescue of the seven earthian scientists.

"The Ballus!" she vibrated anxiously. "They come again to Ranos! This time, O professor, they come for you and Beth and Corwin! The beasts! The signals of my warriors say that many Ballusian fliers are nearing Ranos!"

"Good Lord, Thala!" the professor groaned. "Do you suppose they knew what was going on here, with Corwin laid out unable to defend himself, and took advantage of it?"

"Exactly, O friend!" Thala projected promptly. "Ball tricked us! While we were spying upon him with the *menta-viz*, he was misleading us into believing that his attack would not take place for some time! Even then his fliers must have been on their way to Ranos to destroy the *Comet* and take you prisoners for his experiments!"

"But what about Corwin?" the professor demanded gruffly. "We can't let him lay here! Can't you do anything for him—bring him back to life or something?"

Without replying she pressed some tiny buttons on the transmutation table. Corwin's whole body jerked instantly as if he had been electrocuted. A ripple of green flame seemed to flash over his torso plates and no longer could the professor see into his vitals. The transparency vanished abruptly. Corwin gave way to a spasm of choking, as if the strength of the elements transmuted into his system was suffocating him.

Beth and her father watched him, white-faced. She could not take her eyes from him now. He writhed for an instant on the table and his fists opened and closed as if he was in deadly pain. Quick as a flash Thala raised the radium arc until it hung suspended a dozen feet over their heads. Ripples of blue flame, almost like St. Elmo's fire, flashed over the tubes connected to the torso plates. Corwin struggled, cried out once, and went limp.

BETH gave a fearful gasp. "Oh, father," she cried, "he is dead! I know it!"

"Have courage, Beth," her father whispered to her.

Somehow he felt in his bones that Corwin Trumbull had died when his body went limp. He felt a terrible disappointment, but no anger at Thala. She had done everything within her power to restore him to normal health, he realized. If Corwin died it was no fault of hers. But he raged inwardly at the apparent desertion of the three noblemen when their remaining at their posts might have saved his life. He hadn't a single doubt in his mind that his young friend was dead until suddenly Thala began removing the helmet from his head.

"You can help, O professor!" she vibrated suddenly. "Assist me in removing the plates! The transmutation has been a success!"

"A success?" Professor Jarvisson could not believe his senses. "You mean that—that he is not dead; that he will live?"

"Exactly, O friend," Thala informed him curtly.

"But I thought he was dead?" the earthian cried.

"I merely animated him to see what reaction he would have to his synthetic heart, O professor," she projected quickly. "Then because the pain was too great for him at the moment, I suspended him once more. He is merely unconscious now and if you will

help me remove the plates we will soon have him up and about."

Quickly the professor began unloosening the torso plates. Beth, a hand over her mouth in a gesture of fear and uncertainty, stood silently aside, watching. Her lips moved in silent prayer that Thala had been right, that the man she loved had survived one of the strangest operations she had ever heard of.

Within a moment the torso plates were removed from Corwin's body. He lay flat on his back on the table. Jarvisson looked hard over his heart for the telltale incisions that, to his way of reasoning, must have been made by Thala in removing the organ from his body. But there were no signs of an incision! Corwin Trumbull's broad chest was without a single scar!

Waving him aside, Thala snatched up a narrow metal band which she swiftly placed around Corwin's head, snapping the ends together in the front. To this she affixed a thin wire. A similar band was placed around his wrists so that the ends came together over his pulses. Then around his chest she snapped a band, bringing it together directly over his heart. Gathering up the wires she plugged them into a panel at the side of the table. Instantly they began to glow with the pale green luminosity that predominated in all things on Ranos.

Before the incredulous eyes of the earthians, his body began to glow with a red-green tint. His skin took on a strange transparency through which they could see his veins and arteries. Suddenly he stirred, groaned once or twice and licked his dry lips. Quickly Thala removed the strange apparatus from him and gave Beth a reassuring smile. Unnerved, Beth merely stared back and would have suddenly fallen in a faint had not her father escorted her to a handy bench.

Corwin Trumbull's eyes fluttered suddenly. From his parched lips came a half-whisper.

"Beth!" he groaned. "Where are you?"

Beth Jarvison was beside him in a trice and he became vaguely aware that she was holding his head in her arms, smiling through joyous tears. Professor Jarvison, standing at the end of the table, regarded him happily, curiously.

"Oh, Corwin!" Beth cried abruptly. "I'm so glad it's all over! Thala informed us that the transmutation was a success and that you will live!"

Thala lowered the radium arc again and its cold light flooded over her patient and his beloved. He felt a new strength surge into his body with the flood of light. It made his synthetic heart tingle with an itching sensation. Automatically he placed a hand over it and would have dug at the spot with his fingers. But Thala promptly pushed his hand away and with her own warm hands massaged the spot. He gave her a look of gratitude, scarcely realizing that the transmutation had been performed and that his infected heart had been restored to normalcy by the scientific genius of the beautiful empress of Ranos, who could work miracles with the radio-active qualities of radium.

FOR a long moment he lay quiet, trying hard to think what had happened to him. He tried deliberately, purposely, to feel any aftereffects of the operation. There were none except the uncomfortable itching around his heart. And that was swiftly disappearing under Thala's soft palms. There was a slight buzzing sound in his head which Thala, reading his thoughts, quickly explained.

"The buzzing sound is caused by the flood of radio-active elements through your veins and arteries, O Corwin," she volunteered. "The itching sensation about your heart is a good indication that the synthetic tissues are functioning perfectly. It will vanish shortly. Now, do you feel strong enough to stand?"

"Strong enough?" he replied boldly. "Why, Thala, I could lick my weight in wildcats! I never felt better

in my life! What the devil did you do to me, anyway?"

"We have no time to explain, O friend," Thala informed him bluntly. "Even now the fliers of Ball attack Ranos for revenge against the *Comet* and to make you prisoners! Already Thad, Thaden and Thero are leading our fliers and birdmen into battle. You must come quickly if you are to rescue your friends at Ballu! This is an ideal opportunity, for Ball has dispatched most of his fliers to attack Ranos, leaving Ballu practically unguarded. We shall proceed there immediately!"

"Holy mackerel!" Corwin was off the table in a trice. "I go to sleep and waken with a healthy war buzzing over my head! How do you know Ballu is practically deserted?"

"By mental-wave reception, O Corwin," she responded as he quickly donned his shirts and jammed the tails under his belt. "Ball is making a great attempt to capture you—and me—if he can, and has sent many fliers here."

"You?" Professor Jarvison demanded. "Why does he want you?"

"Because with me in his power he could rule this planet," Thala informed him. "He hates the Rancsians! If he could kill me, he would destroy every Ranosian instantly!"

"That's strange, Thala," the professor asserted. "I don't quite get it. What effect would your death have upon the Ranosians?"

"Your ignorance is pardonable, O professor," she vibrated promptly. "When I die, the Ranosians die with me, for I alone am responsible for their lives. As the Empress of Ranos, certain life-giving radiations emanate from me that makes life in my subjects possible. That is one of the evils of synthetic birth. Therefore, should I be killed, these emanations would cease to exist. In consequence the Ranosian culture would die out the instant life fled from my body!"

"Then Ball will never lay his hands upon you, O Thala!" Corwin swore vehemently. "You have been very kind

and generous to us! You have given me life and I owe it to you. The Trumbulls of Virginia always pay their debts! I'm going to hunt down this Ball of Ballu and kill him if it's the last thing I ever do!"

Thala looked at him sharply. He saw there were glittering tears in her gemlike eyes.

"You cannot hope to fight Ball and win in physical combat, O Corwin," she projected. "He is so strong, so powerful, and he has many Ballus at his command who would tear your throat out before you got to him! Oh, you must board the *Comet* and fly away from this planet. We shall work out our own destinies."

"When we leave Venus, Thala," Professor Jarvison reminded her determinedly, "we leave with our friends or with the knowledge that they were beyond our assistance! We could never face our people on Romo if we failed to do our duty in the matter of their rescue. It isn't sporting to run out on them without doing everything humanly possible to aid them."

"Nothing I can do or suggest will alter your determination?" Thala put to him earnestly.

"No, Thala," the professor replied grimly. "We are going to Ballu, even if it means our destruction!"

"Then I shall go with you as I promised, O professor!" Thala projected, thrusting her shapely chin forward defiantly. "I shall go with you in the *Comet* and we shall take many Ranosian fliers with us to help you rescue your friends and—and perhaps teach Ball the lesson he deserves!"

The alarm rang again through their brains in a prolonged, agonizing wail. Beth recoiled from it and Thala comforted her with a soothing thought-transference. Professor Jarvison laid a heavy hand on Corwin's shoulder. There was a look of cold determination in his eyes.

"I never intended the *Comet* for warfare, Corwin," he said tensely, "but she is well equipped for almost any emergency, and I believe, judg-

ing by the way we brought her through our previous encounters with the Ballusian fliers, she is what I might call war-worthy. Moreover, I think she is somewhat immune to the Ballusian rays because of some neutralizing element in the alloys of her hull. After our skirmish with the Ballus I have little fear for the *Comet* in future combat. As for ourselves personally, the risk of going to Ballu need not be stressed. Nevertheless, I am going there if I have to go alone. Do you feel capable of going, after what you have been through? Or would you prefer to remain here in Thala's palace with Beth?"

Corwin's lips drew tight across his teeth in a reckless smile.

"I never felt more capable in my life, sir!" he said quickly. "Nor have I ever felt better. I signed on this trip fully aware of its dangers, and I'm not going to be left behind now. I wouldn't think of it. Besides, I can see by the look in Beth's eyes that she won't let you go to Ballu without her, either."

"That is right, father," Beth spoke up bravely. "I won't stay behind and you can put that in your pipe and smoke it!"

Professor Jarvison looked at her curiously for an instant, then shrugged.

"Then let us be on our way," he said grimly. "If Ball has sent most of his fliers to attack Ranos, now is our best chance to aid our friends at Ballu. While the Ranosians are engaging the Ballusian spheres, we can slip to Ballu undetected. I have a plan that may get us there without a single skirmish!"

WITHOUT further hesitation they hurried down the spiral ramp that led to the plaza outside. The appalling wails of the Fifth Dimensional alarms beat down upon their mentality like the shrieks of tortured demons. Thala alone was immune to the terrifying things, being conscious only of the vibrations which, to the earthians, caused extreme mental anguish.

That, garbed in individual flight costume, encountered them beneath the great great dome on the first floor. In his right hand he clutched his *kith-gun*. He ran up to his Empress instantly.

"I have one hundred fliers waiting to accompany the Ranosians to Ballu, O Thala," he vibrated quickly. "Let us make haste. Even now the Ballusians come over the forests to attack. Our warriors have taken to the air to meet them!" He turned quickly to the professor. "I have had your flier, the *Comet*, warped from her hangar, O professor," he added. "On board are two score and ten warriors who will act as Thala's personal guards. You will go aboard at once. With my hundred fliers I will follow where you lead."

"Excellent, Thad!" the professor grunted tensely. "We shall go aboard immediately. But you forgot that I cannot lead you to Ballu, for I do not know where it is."

"I have arranged for that, O Romosian," Thad projected promptly. "Taro, one of my best pilots, will pilot the *Comet* to Ballu while you stand watch at your sun-ray batteries. My warriors do not understand your weapons and the actual fighting will be up to you as far as the *Comet* is concerned."

Without further delay they rushed out of the great tower. Once outside, the earthians saw that a great change had come over the plaza. Where previously it had held the aspect of a marble-floored park, a monstrous, gaping hole confronted them now. And from it, like tremendous balls shot from some mammoth underground gun, darted a continuous line of Ranosian space-fliers. They hissed upward so swiftly that the earthians had little chance to study them individually. They did observe, however, that they were very much like the spheres of Ballu, though perhaps a deeper green in color. A towerlike superstructure rose a dozen feet or more above each flier, and at the very

top was a small, transparent ball. Before they had time to speculate upon this attachment, Thad urged them forward, following a narrow walk around the great pit.

As they went toward the *Comet*, for which Jarvison looked about anxiously, the Ranosian fliers continued rising from the underground hangar. They darted skyward with a low hissing sound, took formation just beneath the layers of opaque clouds that hid the sun from view, and then sped away in the direction of the great belt of synthetic vegetation that Ball had propagated in his ruthless efforts to subdue Ranos for his own personal advancement.

Following Thad along the narrow walk that led around the underground hangar, the earthians saw that the great pit was brilliantly lighted. Within it Ranosian mechanics swarmed like ants that had been stirred into feverish activity by some dangerous intruder in their colony. The fliers continued rising as if there was no end to their number, and Jarvison wondered if the entire subterranea of Venus was utilized by the Ranosians to house their apparently numberless machines. They arose into the air perfectly spaced and perfectly timed, and there was no delay in their taking squadronlike formation and heading to meet the enemy when they attained a certain height. Like great green bubbles they hissed away, grimlike, in the direction of the approaching invaders of Ball.

Thala, her gemlike eyes glittering in the gloom like the penetrating orbs of an earthly feline, a brilliant green robe hastily thrown over her scantily-clad body, hurried forward at Thad's side. They rounded a towering structure, and in a great nook stood the *Comet*. A dozen Ranosian guards, garbed in individual flight costumes, immediately stood at attention as their Empress and First Nobleman approached. Their eyes flashed with green fire, and they bowed until their heads touched the marble floor.

Professor Jarvison saw at a quick glance that the *Comet's* companionway had been lowered. He marveled that the Ransians should understand the intricate workings of the flier without so much as the scantiest lesson in its handling. Even as he approached the companionway he heard the soft hum of the machine's electromagnetic generators.

Thala and Thad paused just at the foot of the companionway and engaged in a quick exchange of thought-vibrations. The earthians did not know what was said, or rather projected, between them. But Thad quickly turned to the professor.

"Taro has been instructed to rise to an altitude of fifty thousand feet, O professor," he vibrated quickly, "and wait for me. I will come quickly with one hundred fliers and we shall proceed to Ball high above the clouds. In doing that, we may avoid any encounters with the Ballusians who are coming beneath the clouds."

"As you say, Thad," Jarvison replied grimly. "It was my plan to fly above the clouds. But we shall meet you there."

"One thing more, O Romosian," Thad added silently. "You need not fear for the safe handling of your flier. Taro knows his business and he knows your ship, for we have had him study it in every detail from the day you laid its keel on Romo. I would suggest, in fact I demand that, inasmuch as Thala will be aboard, Taro be allowed undisputed command of the machine as far as its piloting is concerned."

WITHOUT waiting for a reply, he left them and darted into the air, propelled by his flight apparatus. They saw him fly head-first into the pit. Then he was gone. Quickly Thala went up the companionway, a guard on either side of her. The Ransians, it appeared, were taking no chances with anything. That was proven by Thad's orders that Taro be given full

command of the flier, orders that did not entirely set well with Professor Jarvison. But he could do nothing about it and though he might have protested, he remained silent, realizing that after all the Ransians were volunteering to aid them in rescuing the lost scientists. No matter how he hated to turn his machine over to alien hands, he had to be diplomatic about it. He said nothing and followed Thala up the companionway.

Scarcely had they entered the ship than one of the Ransians standing guard on the landing swung down the lever that controlled the collapsible stairs. There was a hiss of compressed air as the companionway shot into its shuttle beneath the machine. The door clanged shut instantly, sealing them hermetically within.

Led by two flight-garbed warriors they retreated to the control room where Taro, a powerful Ransian, bowed gracefully to his Empress. He was a handsome specimen of Venusian culture and was garbed only in a short tunic that barely reached his knees. On his small feet he wore a pair of pliable metal sandals. Directly over each of his flashing eyes was a small green dot, placed there evidently to show his rank as a pilot of outstanding ability.

"Taro bids fair to become a Ransian nobleman, O friends from Romo." Thala remarked mentally after she had introduced them. "He is a master bird-man and stands far above all of my warriors intellectually."

In acknowledging the introduction, Taro faced each one of the earthians individually and stiffly snapped the palm of his right hand to his forehead in a form of military salute.

"My Empress is too generous, O Romosians," he vibrated pleasantly. "Taro only desires to serve without thought of reward."

"Are you sure you can handle the *Comet*, Taro?" Jarvison inquired anxiously. "It seems incredible that you could pilot a ship so alien to you."

"Through the goodness of my Em-

press, O Romosian," Taro projected quickly. "I have learned to know this flier even better than you know it yourself. I must confess a great ignorance of your weapons. But I need not worry over that, for Thad has said you are an expert in handling them. I will devote my time to keeping the *Comet* out of line of the Ballusian rays."

"Then let us be on our way," the professor urged, appearing satisfied.

"Yes, Taro," Thala vibrated grimly. "Let us be on our way. You will proceed at once as ordered."

Taro bowed again and stepped quickly to the controls. Uneasily the three earthians watched him closely and saw instantly that he was as familiar with the controlling devices of the *Comet* as he might have been those of one of the Ranosian fliers. With perfect assurance he manipulated the instruments that started the electro-magnetic generators to greater effort. They hummed quietly and finally droned as they reached the velocity required for gravity nullification. Glancing at the gauges he suddenly sent the nullification energy through the cobalt-steel hull of the ship. Instantly they felt the flier leap into the air. The shock was more prolonged, but no greater than that which emanates from a quick-starting elevator when leaving a low floor abruptly and continuing to the top of its shaft.

XIII

THEY DROPPED through the veils of opaque clouds like a plummet. So rapid was the ascent that Professor Jarvison watched the indicators anxiously for any signs of friction. But before he had time to get really worried, Taro brought the *Comet* to a stop high above the tumbling masses of clouds. Up there the sun was shining brilliantly and within a moment after they attained the altitude where they were to await the

coming of Thad and his squadron of a hundred Ranosian fliers, they observed them rising in line formation.

Fascinated by the strange sight, Beth and Corwin watched through the observation ports. Taro, Thala and the professor watched the periscopic screen. The ascending spheres were shown in it clearly.

"They look like a bunch of green balloons," Corwin remarked suddenly to Beth. "They don't seem to whirl like the fliers from Ballus."

Thala looked up quickly, intercepting his thoughts.

"The spheres of Ballu are built on a gyroscopic principle, O Corwin," she volunteered. "Our fliers, like the *Comet*, are gravity nullifiers."

"But what are those towers and transparent balls that rise above each flier?" Beth inquired curiously.

"They are weapons," Thala responded. "They are to the Ranosian fliers what your father's sun-ray batteries are to the *Comet*."

"Strange-looking weapons," commented Corwin.

"Perhaps," Thala vibrated. "But not so strange when you face them. Death and destruction are hurled from those transparent balls, O Corwin. They hurl it in every direction simultaneously or in any direction as desired. Perhaps some day the Universe will banish war, death and destruction. I look forward to that time when the Cosmos will settle down to an existence of peace."

"An excellent thought, Thala," put in the professor. "Even now on Romo we are endeavoring to outlaw war. But as long as we have unscrupulous politicians whose ambitions are realized only through war, it shall be with us. You are indeed fortunate in having only the Ballus to fight. On Romo, where there are so many different nationalities and cultures and where each is always prepared to leap at the other's throat, one nation never knows who it will have to fight. You are much nearer to realizing your de-

sire for an existence of peace than we are on Romo. Here you have only Ball to defeat."

"Defeating Ball is easier said than done, O Professor," Thala advised him. "The Ranosians have been at war with the Ballusians since back in the beginning here and neither culture seems to gain by it. This eternal fighting brought about the creation of synthetic life on Ranos. When the ancients realized the great necessity of many warriors, and that nature was too slow in satisfying their needs, they set about to create man after his own image. And in creating sexless men, as I have already informed you, they permitted the female of the species to die out almost completely."

"Man will go to almost any extremes to win his wars, O Thala," the professor nodded.

But the creation of synthetic warriors did not win for Ranos," Thala responded quickly.

"Perhaps the coming of the *Comet* will change your luck," Corwin put in from the observation ports. "I've got a hunch that Mister Ball of Ballu is going to be put in his place this time. But with Taro at the controls and the professor at the guns, it looks as though I'm due for a quiet time of it, with nothing to do but look on as an interested spectator."

"You will get your chance to display your nerve when we land at Bal-lu, Corwin," the professor informed him. "Remember, we'll have a stiff fight on our hands to reach those seven scientists."

"Yes, O friends," Thala vibrated. "That is where the greatest danger lies—appearing in the open where the Ball can destroy us with his kith-rays. We are comparatively safe in the *Comet*, for Taro can maneuver the flier so that no kith-rays will strike us squarely. But before we go further, we must equip ourselves with flight-garments. We will need them when we leave the ship. They will permit us to fly and give us greater speed than if we moved about on foot."

She looked intently at one of her warrior bird-men who stood stiffly nearby, his eyes ever upon her. The Ranosian went quickly to a green metal box that had been carried aboard. From it he took their costumes as the fliers of Thad's special squadron shot up to the level of the *Comet*. By expert maneuvering the pilots of one of the fliers shot his sphere close to the observation ports of the hovering *Comet*.

FASCINATED, Corwin and Beth had their real glimpse of a Ranosian space-flier. The sphere was tremendous indeed and seemed made of some form of semi-transparent glass instead of metal. The machine glittered in the hot sun like a monstrous emerald. Suddenly a great window was shot open along its equator and as it came closer they saw Thad standing beside it. He waved at them grimly and then Thala, as if intercepting his projected thought-vibrations, went swiftly to the *Comet's* ports. From a distance of several hundred feet she held a brief conference with her First Nobleman. With a wave of her hand she turned then to Taro and with a silent command ordered him to proceed. Her orders given, she set to the task of donning her flight costume. That done she assisted the earthians and when they were properly garbed, gave them instructions in individual flight.

Taro expertly sent the *Comet* into the higher regions where the light atmosphere was less apt to cause friction. The Ranosian spheres followed closely, too close, in fact, for Jarvison's personal comfort. He did not know that Taro's activities were being directed by thought-transference from Thad. The Ranosian pilots maintained a perfect distance from the earthian flier and when it attained an altitude of several hundred thousand feet, they swept into a pyramid-like formation around it so that each sphere would have unobstructed range and radius for its ball-like

weapon on top of its tower. At the same time they kept well-clear of the *Comet's* sun-ray batteries, fully aware of their deadliness.

As yet they failed to get even a glimpse of the marauding Ballusian fliers. Certainly none of them were above the cloud-layers or Jarvison, peering anxiously into his periscopic screen, would have observed them. But once in the higher regions, Taro silently levelled off the *Comet*. As if he had been born in the control room, he unerringly reached for the instruments that controlled the rocket drive system. The mighty exhausts belched streams of vivid blue fire. The *Comet* gave a sharp forward lurch that almost spilled Thala to the deck. She would have fallen had not Corwin grabbed her gently. The warriors thronged about the room looked at him suspiciously.

With a brilliant exhibition of perfect timing and co-ordination, the Ranosian fliers fell in with the fast pace of the earthian machine. They maintained their same formation and in the periscopic screen they looked like so many asteroids hurtling through space.

Venus was entirely blotted out now by the clouds. Except for the *Comet* and its escort of a hundred spheres, the skies seemed entirely deserted. But not for long, for even as he watched the fliers, Jarvison saw one of them project a sudden, sizzling green ray that bit into space ahead and slightly downward. Just above the uppermost layer of clouds far ahead he saw a sudden burst of green flame as a Ballusian flier melted like so much molten metal and vanished from view. Then he saw a great squadron of whirling spheres as they shot up from the clouds and came forward in a tremendous line formation.

"The Ballus!" he shouted tensely.

Before he could make another exclamation, Taro sent his powerful thought-waves impinging on his mind.

"At your post, O Ranosian!" he commanded forcefully.

Professor Jarvison dived at the instruments controlling his sun-ray batteries. Before he could scarcely think, the Ballu fliers whirled up. Their speed seemed incredible, for they appeared literally to leap forward in one tremendous burst, carrying them almost into the Ranosian formation before he could bat an eye. Startled by the sudden appearance of the enemy, Thala clamped a hand over her mouth. Beth, white-faced and tense, uttered a little cry of anxiety and stepped away from the observation ports. Corwin remained, fascinated, watching.

The fliers of Ballu looked more oval than spherical, now that he was in the position to observe them from a comparatively close-up point of vantage. There were more than four score of them in the upper regions to challenge the *Comet* and its Ranosian escort. But already the Ranosians had scored the first direct hits, for almost before he could think twice, six of the Ballusians were plunging downward in masses of molten metal. Watching their fiery descent into the cloud-layers, he wondered how many Ballusians had been sent to their doom by the straight-shooting Ranosians.

Looking upward he saw the ray-batteries of the Ballusians open up with a potent menace. Their rays were projected from periscope-like devices that extended from both top and bottom of their spheres. Instantly the space above the *Comet* flashed with brilliant explosions as several Ranosian fliers melted before the deadly radium rays of the enemy. A molten mass of green metal hurtled downward with a roaring thunder past the *Comet's* nose. His features stoic, inscrutable, Taro was unruffled by the close-shave. Watching the periscopic screen he had seen the falling mass approaching and as if judging perfectly the velocity of its descent, he merely increased the *Comet's* rocket acceleration enough to slide aside.

That bit of expert piloting on Taro's part, gave Professor Jarvison much confidence in him. He was aware now why Thad had insisted upon Taro taking over the controls. Taro was a faster thinker than any earthian. His brain worked like lightning and there was perfect co-ordination between that brain and his sensitive hands, And it required rapid thinking to keep out of danger with so many fliers plunging incautiously through space.

SUDDENLY the Ranosians broke formation and went after the enemy in a concerted charge. The Ballusians let loose a swift barrage of rays at them. But as if fear clutched at them, they scattered. Thrown upon her own now, Taro sent the *Comet* into the fray. Jarvison had no time now to watch the Ranosians. He gave his attention to the Ballus, his hands upon the remote-control triggers of the sun-ray batteries.

Taro suddenly increased the flier's velocity with a quick rocket discharge and aimed it at a Ballusian. Professor Jarvison needed no command to put him into action. His forward battery opened up with a streak of fire. The beam caught the Ballusian in a direct hit. The flier merely crumpled, then exploded before its terrific heat. It tumbled down with a roar to vanish in the clouds.

From an angle a green ray suddenly struck the earthian machine. Green fire flickered over the instrument panels. Beth gave a little cry of alarm, expecting the ship to crumple beneath her feet. The rocket exhausts missed fire for an instant and then picked up with a deep-throated roar.

The *Comet* was undergoing a real test now. Taro sent it forward at another Ballusian like an arrow unloosed from a bow-string. Jarvison fingered his instruments with pride in his own genius, for the machine was functioning perfectly. This was practically the first real test the rocket-drive system had been given. Except for a few moments while the flier was

en route from the earth to Venus, the rocket system had been untried. From under its laterals now vomited dozens of vivid blue firestreams. They shot in a long line behind it, like the tail of a comet.

Once more a Ballusian kith-ray glanced along its cobalt-steel hull. The flier shuddered involuntarily and again the flicker of green electricity slithered snake-like over the panels. Then Jarvison projected a sun-ray at the Ballusian ahead. He missed. Taro glanced at him unemotionally. A slight, half-smile passed over his lips when the earthian's next effort bore fruit. This time the Ballusian exploded with a great puff of green smoke. It lingered in the skies for an instant and was wafted away in the flier's slipstream.

Far away now the Ranosians were engaged in a running dog fight with their enemies from Ballu. Whirling, gyrating, they spun about each other like so many green dots. The skies there were shot with green rays. Taro glanced, smiling confidently, at Thala.

"The Ballusians run, O Thala!" he projected with enthusiasm. "They run like cowards!"

Eagerly he swung the *Comet's* nose around and headed for the fast disappearing combatants. Within a moment they came upon the field of battle. The sky ahead was filled with glinting spheres, it seemed. Searing, hissing rays stabbed through the Heavens, reaping terrible harvests from both sides.

Like one in a daze, Thala studied the dread scene of death and destruction, in the periscopic screen. Her delicate skin was colorless with the horror of it all. But the fight was over almost as quickly as it had started. Scarcely more than five minutes had elapsed between the projection of the first ray by the Ranosians and the rush of the fliers from Ballu at them. Things moved too fast almost to be realized. And the Ranosians won decisively, though not without horrible

losses. They sent the last Ballusian down in flames. Then with the same mechanical perfection so characteristic of them, they swept into formation again and whirled up to the earthian.

Thala saw at once how badly her escort had been decimated and gave a low mental groan. Twenty-seven of the hundred fliers had gone down in flames or had been disintegrated in the air by the Ballusian beams. But Taro was happy.

"We have lost but twenty-seven fliers, O Thala," he projected calmly. "The Ballusians were eighty in number! Thad has destroyed them all! It is a day of triumph for Ranos, O Ruling Intelligence! Aye! It is a day of triumph for Thala, and we have only begun!"

Once more they took up their interrupted journey to Ballu. A squadron of twenty fliers of Ball appeared suddenly far down below, just above the clouds. From Thad's own flier shot a hissing kith-ray. It struck the Ballusians a deadening blow and before they knew it half of their number went down inert. The others dropped back into the clouds and did not reappear.

"How long will it take us to reach Ballu, Taro?" Professor Jarvison asked the pilot presently.

"We shall be there in less than thirty minutes at the velocity we are now traveling, O Romosian," Taro responded without removing his eyes from the periscopic screen. "Without further interruption we should be over Ballu very quickly."

Suddenly Corwin, watching the space ahead through the observation ports, saw a great wedge of Ballusians appear ominously above the clouds. He gave a shout at the professor. But Jarvison and Taro had already observed them. Nor had Thad missed them. The Ranosians broke formation again and went plunging down for a new engagement. Taro quickly sent the *Comet* toward the wedge at a hurtling pace. Thala and Beth clung to a

railing, the deck of the machine slanting at a sharp angle. This time the Ranosian pilot seemed bent on performing a new trick and Professor Jarvison did not sense it until it almost happened.

Gaining on the Ranosians, Taro passed them like a shot, the nose of the *Comet* aimed squarely at the point of the hostile wedge. Then as a collision seemed imminent, he levelled off and shot upward at a dizzy angle.

THE flaming tail of the *Comet* caught the wedge of Ballusians in a great swirl of fire! So hot was the stream of blue flame that shot from the rocket exhausts, that it literally baked the Ballusians within their own fliers! It was like the flame from a giant blow-torch! Instantly a large number of Ballus went out of control to go gyrating dizzily through space, red hot! Others, their driving forces deadened by the terrific heat, dropped like plummets through the clouds, to crash somewhere on the Venusian terrain.

The Ranosian spheres lost no time in plunging after those that had escaped the fiery blasts. Within a moment the skies were clear of enemy craft. Professor Jarvison beamed upon Taro.

"That was about the quickest thinking I ever saw, Taro!" he enthused warmly. "I'd never have thought of using the firestream from the exhausts as a weapon! Why, at close quarters it can't be beaten and the way you did it you took in *some* space, too!"

"One must think rapidly to live in the vicinity of the Ballus, O earthian," Taro vibrated modestly.

"My hat is off to you!" Jarvison added earnestly. "You are a master pilot and a master warrior!"

Without replying, Taro sent the *Comet* into the higher regions again. The Ranosian escort reassumed its formation and, without losing a single flier in this last skirmish, headed again toward Ballu.

In their strange, metallic flight cos-

tumes, the three earthians looked no different from the warriors who stood about the ship. Taro did not take time to don a flight-suit, possibly because he was not to leave the flier when it landed at its destination. As a matter of precaution he was to remain at the controls, ready to take the machine into space upon the return from Ball's Hall of Science of the rescue detachment, or upon the first hint of unforeseen danger.

He sent the flier forward at a terrific pace. Friction screamed an ominous wail along the hull of the *Comet*. From the clouds below hissed a sudden, sizzling green ray. It struck the machine broadside! Instantly its interior went aglow with a bright green luminosity and a coating of fire seemed to envelope the instrument panels. The periscopic screen gave a blinding flash that stung the eyes of those watching it. Beth screamed and hid her face, expecting the flier to go to pieces. She grasped at Thala and clung to her, horror-stricken.

The *Comet* faltered, lurched sideways and shuddered from stem to stern. The electro-magnetic generators missed, causing the machine to give a sudden drop that carried her almost to the upper strata of clouds. The rocket exhausts went dead, coughed like some dying monster, then picked up again. Corwin and the professor clung to handy railings, expecting the machine to plunge on down and crash. A sudden pick-up of the generators renewed their hope and as the exhausts began belching the explosions of magnesium in a long, searing stream behind her, they felt confident that she would survive the shock of the deadening kith-ray.

The green glow inside vanished as quickly as it had appeared. Tensely Jarvison rushed to the instrument panels to see if the indicators had been disintegrated by the ray. He saw quickly that they were undamaged, and gave a sigh of relief. As he returned to his post at the gun controls, the ship shot forward under Taro's

expert handling. The *Comet* had survived the force of a radium ray shot at her broadside. He was elated.

"By George," he exclaimed to Taro excitedly. "I believe the *Comet* is in some way immune to radium rays! Just why, I don't know! She shook off that broadside like a dog shaking off water! Even the indicators and instruments did not melt this time! What did you do to those instruments, Taro, when your mechanics repaired them?"

Taro looked at him queerly, as if amazed that the earthian could be so ignorant of metals.

"Did you not detect when you looked at the instruments," he vibrated softly, "that we replaced your platinum indicators with those of uranium? Uranium, because of its close relationship to radium, is partially immune to radium rays and the average ray will not disintegrate it."

"Uranium, eh?" Jarvison grunted. "Perhaps that has something to do with the apparent immunity of the ship to radium rays! There is a large percentage of uranium alloyed with cobalt-steel and beryllium in the hull!"

"That is what I suspected, O Romosian," Taro projected. "Otherwise, that broadside would have sent us down instantly!"

"Then we have nothing further to fear from the kith-rays of the *Ballus*!" the earthian exclaimed confidently.

"I would not be too sure about that," Taro informed him. "We have not survived the deadliest of Ball's kith-rays yet! But we discuss things of little importance to us now, O Romosian! Stand to your batteries! The *Ballus* come from below!"

AND they were coming, a great wedge of them, from the clouds below. The scientist galvanized into action the instant he saw them in the periscopic screen. He jabbed at the controls of his sun-ray batteries. Instantly they heard the whining hum of the sun-powered weapons as they sent annihilating beams into the on-

coming wedge. Long, widening rays hissed into them. A score of Ballus folded up and melted! In great dripping globules of inert, molten metal, they dropped downward. His eyes riveted on the screen to see the results of his accuracy, he saw several of the spheres vanish in puffs of ghostly green smoke!

Quick as a flash he swung his guns upon the others. With a single, swift barrage he swept away the entire left wing of the wedge! They dropped down in scores and in some instances nothing remained of them but puffs of emerald-colored vapor!

Beth, having regained her composure now, stood with Thala before the observation ports. She shuddered at the swift destruction of the Ballus by her father's hand. She wondered how many Ballusians went to their doom with each machine. Thala enlightened her, shuddering.

"Each flier of Ball carries two score and ten warriors, O Beth," she vibrated. "With the destruction of each sphere, that many beings go to their deaths. Oh, it is too horrible. But it is a case of destroying or being destroyed and we must kill or be killed ourselves!"

"But think of those lives," Beth cried. "They are being destroyed just to satisfy the ruthless whims of Ball!"

"It was ever so in the history of humanity, O Beth," Thala vibrated. "Millions must die that one must live! Is it not so on Romo, the earth?"

"It is, Thala!" Beth agreed. "The great World War for example. Millions of brave men went to their doom that the world might be made safe for a few politicians!"

"And someday—someday," Thala shuddered at the thought, "there will be a war between the planets—world against world!"

"Then we shall really learn to know what war is!" Beth commented. "This fighting will appear as child's play. But such a war will not come in my time!"

"No, Beth," Thala projected ear-

nestly. "But I will see it! I will be a part of it, for I am endowed with everlasting life and only violence can relieve me of it!"

XIV

THE skies were free of the enemy now. Far below the clouds a great aerial battle raged between the forces of Thala and those of Ball. Just which side was winning, they of course did not know. The thick layers of opaque clouds hid the battle from view. Taro shot the *Comet* toward Ball as rapidly as it could go without friction-damage. The Ranosian escort held to its formation about the great, dark flier as it sped through the sun-bathed Heavens.

They saw no more Ballusian spheres for the time being. Taro knew the reason. The fliers of Ball were too busily engaged with the Ranosian space-fleets down beneath the clouds to bother about what took place in the upper air-stratas. Though he was not aware of the fact, the Ballus were giving ground before a mad, insane determination of the Ranosians to put a final stop to Ball's raids upon peace-loving Ranos!

But long before the *Comet* reached the domain of Ball, they could see, through a great hole in the clouds, the towering, cylindrical structures of the dominion, rising like tall poles into the sky. They appeared to differ little from the Ranosian structures. The only architectural difference, Professor Jarvison thought as he peered through the ports at them, lay in their conical roofs and in their coloring. Where the Ranosian cylinders were pure white, the Ballusians' were of a dull gray.

As they swept onward, the Ranosian escort ever at hand around them, Professor Jarvison had a sudden inspiration to re-charge the storage tanks of his great sun-ray batteries. Instantly he manipulated the necessary devices and for a long moment thereafter he allowed the tanks to

automatically *breathe* in the tremendous heat of the sun. Intricate apparatus attracted the sun's terrific heat direct from its great photosphere of flaming gases and stored it away in special tanks to be projected to the accompaniment of death and destruction.

A grim smile on his lips, he watched intently the instruments that would tell him when the ammunition-containers were filled. Except for a low hissing, sizzling sound, the operation was silent. Quickly the vast, awesome heat was stored away in the concentration tanks. The *Comet* was now ready for twelve hours of constant ray-projection. He smiled with satisfaction at the thought that there was sufficient power in the tanks to lay all Ballu in ruin if he chose to do so.

Suddenly Taro shot the machine into the higher reaches of the skies. The *Comet* leveled off at an altitude of fifty miles and shot across the Heavens with its multiple exhausts searing the rarefied air in a deep-throated roar. Corwin watched the screen, alert and expectant, for the appearance of any Ballus who might rise from the domain far below. Telescopic devices attached to the screen brought Ballu very close. They were thankful for the great hole in the clouds just above the place.

But he saw no whirling spheres anywhere in the sky. Ballu lay like a miniature city of towering, spike-like structures and thread-like thoroughfares. It stretched far and wide and they could not see its greatness due to the comparatively small dimension of the hole in the clouds. Abruptly as if by signal, the machine and its escort made a sharp dive downward. So unexpected did it come that Corwin was hurled violently away from the screen. He landed against the instrument panels and lay still, afraid to regain his feet on the sharp angle at which the deck stood.

Fortunately for Beth and Thala, they were sitting quietly on a cushioned bench at the observation ports.

Though the shock of the sudden descent hurled them against each other, they maintained their seats. As for the warriors standing about, they had known beforehand by mental telepathy that Taro was set for a sudden charge at the domain below. They kept their feet.

Like a meteor the *Comet* snarled downward. The Ranosians maintained the same mechanical formation around it like a squadron of stunting airplanes. Recovering his balance and peering anxiously into the screen, Professor Jarvison saw that his ship's nose was aimed directly at the domain of Ball. Instantly he grasped at the sun-battery controls. But Taro's thought-vibrations impinging on his mind kept him from unloosening a deadly barrage upon the place.

"Not yet, Romosian!" Taro ordered. "You may destroy the Hall of Science. That would be disastrous to your friends who are held captive there! Hold your fire until I give the order! When we get closer I will point out the Hall of Science to you. Then you may fire without fear of destroying your friends from Romo!"

JARVISON made no reply. But he stood ready to follow Taro's orders. His deadly batteries were aimed upon the city. Only a touch of his fingers upon the controls was necessary to send great havoc and destruction sizzling down upon it.

"Look at the screen, O Romosian!" Taro vibrated suddenly. "See the tall cylinder standing in the center of the park?"

"I see it, Taro!" Jarvison braked promptly.

"That is Ball's Hall of Science!" Taro projected. "Do not fire upon it! Your lost friends are there! But spare no other building! Destroy all but the Hall of Science if you can! We are taking Ballu by surprise else they would have been in the air to meet us! They do not expect us and most of Ball's space-fleet is engaging the Ranosian fleets at Ranos! Project your

rays when ready, O earthian, and may the Superior Intelligence, which is your God, have mercy upon the misguided devils who would defile the beauty of Thala!"

"Amen!" the earthian grunted.

They were still ten miles or so above Ballu when he sent the first barrage of sun-rays sizzling down upon it. Traveling with the velocity of light, it required only the scantiest fraction of a second for the beams to reach their target. No sooner had he touched the controls that put the batteries into action than sudden death and destruction visited itself upon a score of close-packed cylinders in the domain below. In the periscopic screen they saw a great cloud of smoke rise from the area of desolation. Then the Ranosians got into action with their disintegrating rays.

Corwin climbed to his feet and rushed to the observation ports in time to see the Ranosians break formation and go hurtling without fear or caution at the domain. They dove through the hole in the clouds and, followed by the *Comet*, shot across Ballu at a dizzy pace, laying ruin in their wake.

Caught by surprise, Ballu was long in rousing itself to action. Ball had not anticipated a counter raid. That was proven by the fact that there were no fliers in the skies over his domain keeping watch. Or perhaps it might have been Ball's personal egotism that had kept his home-squadrons on the ground. As for the *Comet*, Taro sent it hurtling back and forth across the skies like some monster of retribution, while Jarvison cut wide swathes of destruction the length and breadth of the dominion. Within a few seconds the space below the ship was thick with smoke and vapors that told of death and devastation.

But Jarvison kept such a close look out that he gave the Hall of Science wide berth with his deadly sun-rays. Time and again the *Comet* sped over the great tower, yet he kept his rays away from it and sent buildings close

to it tumbling down in flames. The Ranosians, as if by pre-arrangement, also took care when in the vicinity of the Science Tower. Their rays disintegrated cylinder after cylinder.

Then with startling suddenness, a fleet of several hundred Ballusians emerged from the smoke and halted, bewildered, in the air, as if searching for the menace that had so unexpectedly visited them. They looked for the source of the strange red rays that destroyed whole city blocks at a single sweep. They hovered in the air just long enough for Professor Jarvison to aim his batteries upon them. Then they vanished completely before a barrage of red death. A stiff breeze, hot as a breath from Hades, was fanned up by the hissing rays. It swept away the puffs of green vapor that marked the passing into nothingness of the Ballusians.

Awe-stricken, Corwin watched through the ports as the machine hurtled on and on in its flight of destruction. Thala and Beth, their faces white and seemingly bloodless, stood beside him. They saw another squadron rise upward. This time the Ranosians flung themselves forward in a concerted charge. From their spherical guns on top of their towers shot green rays that spelled quick doom for the Ballus. They were disintegrated before they had time to collect their wits.

The green vapors cleared rapidly and they had their first look at the terrible havoc the *Comet* had wrought upon the terrain. Wide stretches of desolation, smouldering and red, lay everywhere except in the close vicinity of the Hall of Science. Towering structures just seemed to have vanished. In some places there were great, yawning holes in the ground, like the craters on the face of the Moon!

Taro, peering in the screen, gave a triumphant mental-laugh. Jarvison glanced at him and saw that his gem-like eyes were narrowed. They flashed like twin gimlets.

"A day of triumph for Ranos and

Thala!" he vibrated forcefully. "The coming of the Romosian machine brought a new era for the Ruling Intelligence. A curse upon Ball and all his kind!"

Far in the interior of Ball, they beheld a dozen wide shafts of pale green light suddenly pierce the sky like beams from a powerful searchlight. They swept across the Heavens with a restlessness as if searching for the intruders. Almost as soon as they appeared, Taro shot the *Comet* into the sun.

"The land-gunners are in action, Romosian!" he vibrated at the professor. "If one of those rays strike your flier, it will be the end! Search them out and destroy them!"

WITH that he pulled the *Comet* around and held her between the Ballusian gunners and the sun so that she might escape detection. Instantly Jarvison fingered his battery controls, took quick aim and unloosed a dozen streaks of fire toward the source of the great green beams. The terrible force of the sun-rays sent monstrous chunks of molten ground flying into the sky. The green beams came no more from that direction.

But in another section of the domain a radium battery opened up. One wide, green beam struck the *Comet* a glancing blow along the port hull. She rattled from nose to laterals, shaking weirdly as if it was about to disintegrate. The watchers at the observation ports were knocked flat upon their backs, Thala with them. Half-dazed they scrambled to their feet, looked about blindly for a moment and then rubbed their stinging eyes.

"Keep away from the ports!" Jarvison yelled at them. "Don't expose yourselves or you'll be killed!"

The screen went dead suddenly and came alive again. The machine fell perhaps five thousand feet with the temporary knocking out of her electromagnetic generators. Static hissed throughout the interior and a coating of green ice frosted the ports. Jarvi-

son felt as though he had been struck by lightning. Yet he clung to his controls with a flash of nausea sweeping over him.

Taro worked at his post like a demon. The ship was falling rapidly and in the screen he could see the ground rushing up to consume them. Sensing death, Jarvison shook his head savagely to free himself of the nausea that had swept over him. Fiercely he glanced at the screen and got the location of the radium gunners. Resolved to take them to death with him he quickly unloosed a series of red rays in their direction. Great chunks of molten ground flew into the air.

Suddenly Taro, by some marvelous feat, got the electro-magnetic generators working again. They droned laboriously under full power. The gravity-nullifying impulses shot through the *Comet's* hull. She pulled up with a jerk that crumpled the legs of all those standing erect upon her decks. But her awesome descent was checked! The rocket exhausts belched with a roar. A long tail of flame shot out from beneath her laterals. Like a great, gray cigar, she dropped back into space under all the power she could muster.

Corwin gave a gleeful shout. Beth was too horrified to make a sound. She cringed on the floor beside Thala, incredulous that they had not crashed. Corwin's synthetic heart thudded against his ribs. Excitement did not make him weak now. But he had to admit that he had certainly received a terrible scare, with the *Comet* falling like a plummet beneath his feet.

As if the sudden rise into the higher regions was a signal to the Ransosians, they came up with a rush. Taro halted the flier in midair. With the arrival of the Ransosian fliers at that level, he closed his eyes and assumed a thoughtful aspect. From Thad he received his orders, projected to him across a space of several hundred feet. Instantly he dove the machine downward again.

SFQ

"Thad orders us to the Hall of Science of Ballu!" he vibrated at Jarvison. "The time has come when we shall make a bold attempt to rescue the seven Romosians there. Thad orders us to drop down beside Ball's Torture Tower! The real danger begins now, for on top of the Tower is a kit-battery! You will take great care in your aim, O Romosian, and burn the top from the cylinder! Be careful!"

He aimed the nose of the *Comet* squarely at the Hall of Science. Tensely Jarvison stood at his battery controls. He watched the screen, waiting. Suddenly he fingered his controls. Just as a great green kith-beam started upward, he projected red death from his sun-ray guns. Instantly the top of the Science Tower vanished in a puff of vapor! The kith-beam missed them by a few hundred feet. But it snared a half dozen Ranosian fliers. They went to pieces and fell like so many particles of scintillating emeralds!

Like a madman, Taro flung the *Comet* downward. From another part of the city of cylinders came a sudden green ray. It missed the flier cleanly and caught a Ranosian sphere just beneath. The green flier went to pieces instantly. But before the Ballus could get in a telling shot, Jarvison had them spotted. With a muffled oath he let loose a molten beam. The Ballusians never knew what struck them, for they were flung into eternity in the fraction of a second.

By now Taro had plunged the *Comet* to within a few thousand feet of the Hall of Science. Cautiously he leveled off, righted her and dropped down slowly with a mere spit of blue fire hissing from her exhausts. As they slid down past the towering cylinder in which the seven lost scientists were held in suspended animation, a band of Ballusian warriors started projecting thin green rays at them from the structure. But they proved innoxious and ineffectual to the great *Comet*. The small beams, doubtless projected from hand-guns, merely slipped off

the hull like a reflection from a mirror.

It would have been an easy matter for Jarvison to send the warriors to their doom. But to fire a sun-ray at the cylinder now would cause it to crumble and crash down upon the very men he sought to rescue. He wondered suddenly if Ball himself was in the tower. Had he, realizing that the rescue of the seven earthians was imminent, deliberately killed them rather than allow them to get out of his hands? Or would he, knowing that the Ranosians would kill him on sight, offer to exchange the earthians for mercy? Professor Jarvison asked himself those questions, but found the answers lacking.

BEFORE he had time for further speculation, Taro set the *Comet* down in the great park surrounding the Hall of Science. Within a hundred feet of the entrance he landed. Immediately the warriors in the machine snapped to attention, gripping their kith-tubes in preparation for accompanying their Empress and the three earthians into the tower. With his sun-ray batteries trained on the great cylinder, Professor Jarvison stood tensely at his post and looked to Taro for the command that would send him to the realization—or to disappointment—of his hopes. He glanced tensely into the periscopic screen.

At a glance he saw the Ranosian spheres hovering in a great circle around the Hall of Science. Their threatening attitude warned the Ballusian warriors within that they would tolerate no treachery. And the Ballus withheld their green-rays. The cylinder seemed to have been suddenly deserted. But Taro knew differently. He knew that the Hall of Science was alive with the warriors of Ball's guard of honor. A mental-contact with Thad told him that much, for Thad was holding earnest conference with Ball, demanding that he turn over the seven earthians and surrender.

Assuming a tense, listening atti-

tude, Taro intercepted the thought-waves of the Ranosian nobleman and the scheming ruler of Ballu. Having established mental-contact with Ball over the distance of several hundred feet existing between his flier and the Hall of Science, Thad wasted no time in demanding the release of the earthians. And he informed Ball in no uncertain terms just what conditions under which he could surrender.

"Thala will spare the life of Ball and his noblemen on one condition only, O Ruler of Ballu," Thad projected strongly.

Taro glanced quizzically at Thala who was also intercepting the exchange of thought-vibrations between her First Nobleman and the Emperor of Ballu. As for the three earthians, they could intercept nothing that was projected between Thad and the Balusian ruler. Nor could they have understood had they been able to *tap* the thought-waves of the two, for Thad and Ball communicated in the mental-language of the Ranosians.

"And what is that condition, Ranosian?" Ball demanded. Taro nodded at Thala as their eyes met.

"Your lives will be spared," they intercepted Thad's waves, "on the condition that you accept exile on the planet Mercury!"

"And if I refuse to accept, O Ranosian?" Ball returned belligerently.

"Then," Taro and Thala intercepted Thad's sharp vibrations, "you and your noblemen shall be killed! Ranos has suffered much from Ball! We suffer no longer! Either you accept our conditions, or we will destroy you!"

"You are bold because of your advantage over Ballu at this moment, Ranosian," Ball parried. "If my fleets of fliers were here—"

"Even now your space fleets are being destroyed by those of Thala, O Ball," Thad cut in sharply. "Waste no more time! Do you accept our conditions, or must we destroy you?"

"Destroy me, Ranosian," Ball countered triumphantly, "and the seven earthians perish with me!"

Thala gave Professor Jarvison a startled look.

"I am afraid for the lives of your friends, O professor!" she vibrated anxiously. "They still live in suspension, but Ball threatens to kill them if we destroy him!"

"The dirty murderer!" Jarvison growled. "What can we do, Thala?"

She held a silencing finger to her lips, closed her eyes and once more *listened-in* on the thought-transference.

"Then they will have to perish, O Ball," Thad informed him cunningly. "We allow you thirty seconds in which to decide! If you do not accept our terms unconditionally, you will die and all in your cylinder will die with you!"

WITH that, Thad broke off his mental-contact with the Balusian. Swiftly he turned to his warriors within his great flier. He gave an order to aim the kith-batteries upon the Hall of Science. Time passed swiftly. He held up his hand, informing his gunners that when he dropped it, they were to project their deadly disintegrating rays. Just as he was about to give the signal, he felt Ball's powerful thought-waves vibrating on his brain. Thala and Taro grew tense as they intercepted them.

"We accept the Ranosian terms of surrender," they caught the Ballu's waves. Thala's face became flushed with a greenish hue. Taro's eyes brightened and he looked joyously at the three earthians. They stared back dumbly. Once more he assumed his listening attitude to *tap* the broadcast of thought between his chieftain and the defeated ruler of Ballu. "We accept the Ranosian terms unconditionally, O Ranosian!" Ball continued. "As for the seven Romosians, they still live. You may have them. But you will have to get them from the test-tubes yourselves, for I will have nothing to do with them. Should I attempt to release them and they die, you would think I killed them deliberately. Hav-

ing accepted your terms, I will, as a matter of precaution, give you no excuse to destroy me. Therefore I turn over all responsibility for the Romosians to Thala. Come at once to the throne room and receive our official surrender, O Ranosian!"

If Thala and Taro had possessed vocal organs they would have shouted gleefully at that. Quickly the Empress informed the earthians what had transpired. Professor Jarvison looked incredulously at his daughter and Corwin. It seemed incredible that Ball would surrender so quickly and so easily.

"Then let us go to the scientists immediately, O Thala!" he cried eagerly. "The poor devils! Two years in suspended animation! God! What tortures they must have gone through! Let us go to them at once! They are my friends! I have known them for many years! I cannot wait to gain their release from Ball's clutches. And perhaps we should hurry before that murderer changes his mind! Are you armed, Corwin?"

"I'm ready to go, professor!" Corwin responded grimly. "But if I were you, I'd go out carefully. Somehow I feel that Ball is up to some sort of a trick to get us into the open where he can cut us down."

"Bosh, Corwin!" the professor grumbled incautiously. "He wouldn't dare do that with so many Ranosians on hand! Besides, he has surrendered. He would not have done that if he was not perfectly aware that the jig was up for him! Let's go!"

He left his post at the sun-battery controls. As he passed the periscopic screen he saw the Ranosian fliers dropping down to a landing. One by one they settled down in circular formation about the Hall of Science as if to cut off any retreat of those within the towering cylinder. Instantly their exits were flung open. From them poured columns of flight-garbed Ranosians who immediately took to the air again and headed directly for the entrance to the cylinder.

CONTRARY to Corwin's hunch, Ball surrendered without treachery. It would have been foolhardy for him to attempt any further resistance. For at that moment a great fleet of Ranosian fliers hove triumphantly into view overhead. Ball knew instantly that his once vast space-fleets had been destroyed. He gave up without a struggle, content with his lot of being exiled to Mercury. His noblemen surrendered with him and in his great throne room he handed over to Thala all scientific documents of Ballu as an earthian general would transfer his sword to a victorious enemy.

After receiving the official surrender and flanked by hundreds of her warriors, Thala went directly to where the seven scientists were held in suspended animation. Expertly and with the aid of Thad and Thaden, she released them from the giant test-tubes. As she did so, the earthians saw that she was very sad. Sad that Thero had lost his life in the great battle that had raged over the belt of synthetic vegetation dividing Ranos from Ballu. But in her quick-thinking mind, she had already chosen a successor for the nobleman.

As a reward for his services as a master pilot, Taro was to become Third to Thala.

Months passed before the *Comet* was ready to return to Romo. Thala and her noblemen made it a holiday for all Ranos. A tremendous gathering of Ranosians was on hand in the plaza to see the Romosian flier take off. They gave the ten Romosians a great ovation which caused them to shudder under the terrific force of so many mentalities. But they smiled through it and retreated to the interior of the flier.

The door of the machine hissed shut when the companionway was withdrawn. They went promptly to the control room.

"I rather hate to leave," Corwin remarked to his companions, "but I'll be mighty glad to get back home."

He placed an arm about Beth's

slender waist and hugged her close to him.

"What's your hurry, Corwin?" inquired one of the rescued scientists who was now back in the bloom of health.

Corwin grinned sheepishly.

"Well, you—er—see," he stammered. "Beth and I are going to be married when we get back to earth and the sooner we get there the better I'll like it!"

Professor Jarvison arched his brows in feigned surprise. He looked

sternly at his daughter, then chuckled.

"That's what I suspected," he grinned pleasedly. "I congratulate you on your choice of a man, Beth. You chose well despite the fact that he has a—er—synthetic heart!"

"It might be synthetic, father," she retorted proudly, "but it beats like a heart of gold!"

Within a few moments Ranos was many thousands of miles behind them and the *Comet's* nose was pointed at a brilliant world far ahead—Romo, the Earth!

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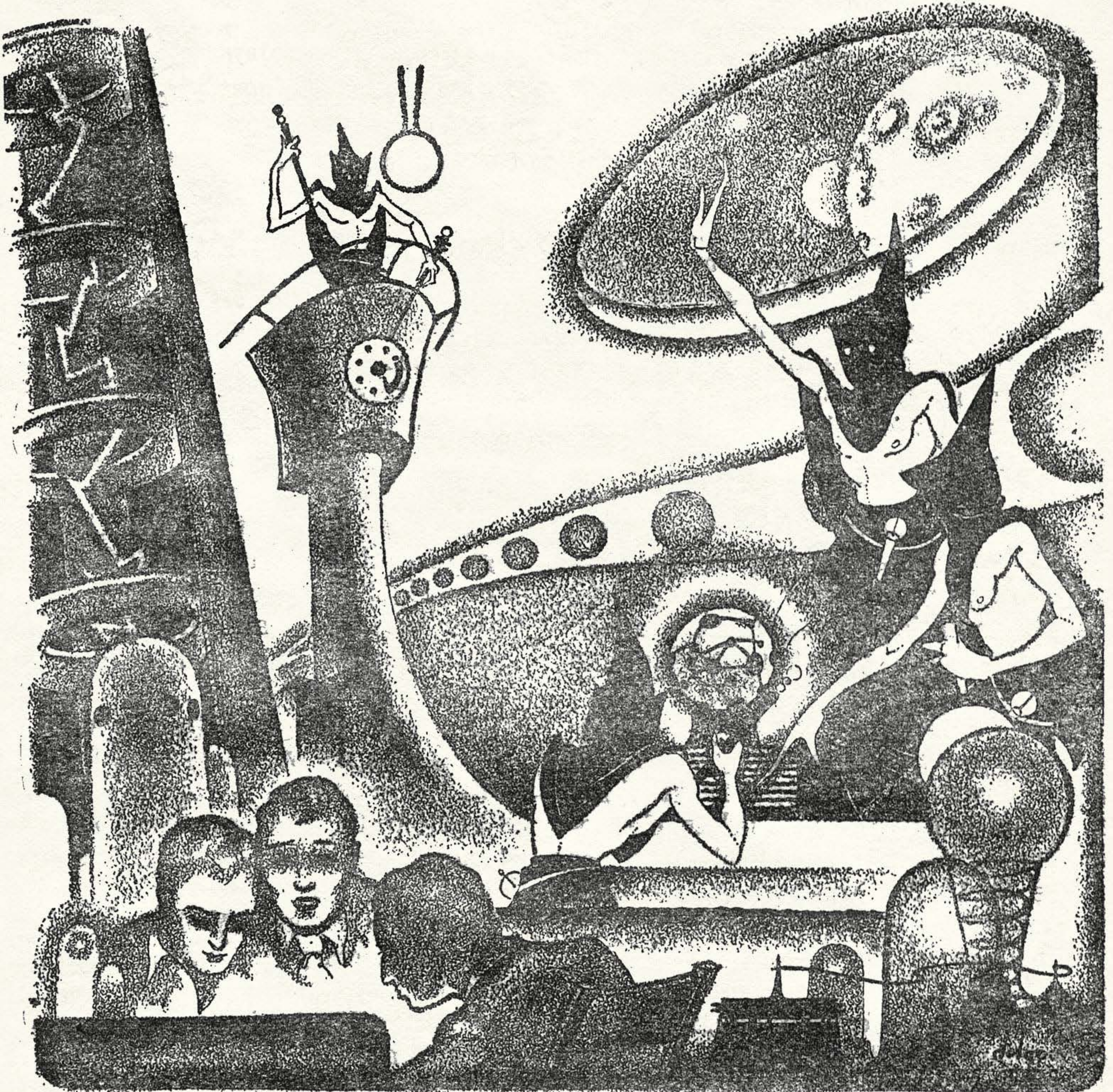
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COSMOS EYE

By MARTIN PEARSON



The entire cosmos was an open book to them; with the mechanical eye, they could search the farthest stars and plumb the deeps of the planet.

But perhaps there are beings in the depths of the void who resent being spied upon.

SOAKED TO THE skin, we climbed up the hillside and banged on the door of the lonely house. The light shining from its window was our only hope of shelter in this deserted district, and the voice that called in response to our knocking was all we needed to push the unlocked door open and, dashing in,

slam it in the face of the downpour.

We entered a big wide room which seemed dwarfed at first because it was filled with a mass of mechanical stuff which I took at first to be a radio station. The man who had called out to us, and he was alone, had evidently been working at it, for he sat swivelled around in a chair, one hand on a

control which he had evidently just turned off.

He was an oldish man, well built, white haired, with an appearance of intelligence and learning on his firm features that belied the rough working clothes he wore. He stared at us with his very bright blue eyes and waved us to a place before the fire that was burning in a fireplace.

We peeled off our wet jackets and warmed ourselves.

"Make yourselves at home. It looks as if the storm is good for several hours yet and you may as well be comfortable. If you're hungry we can rustle up some eggs and coffee."

We started to protest his generosity but he overruled us with a wave of his hand.

"My name is Lamprecht, Stephen Lamprecht, formerly of State University, now retired. I live up here in order to pursue my studies in peace, but I'm particularly glad to see you boys here tonight. College students, aren't you?"

We nodded and introduced ourselves. He seemed genuinely pleased to see us, more so in that we recalled his name, remembering it as that of a co-author of the text in Physics used at State U. in freshman year. He had, we remembered, been associated with the college in that subject years before.

When we were rested and dry, he called our attention to the apparatus that filled most of the room and remarked, after observing our numerous glances at it, that undoubtedly we were curious.

"Yes," Bob answered, "it's a radio station or television experimenter, isn't it? Seems to have something of each."

"That's partly right," Lamprecht answered, "but let me explain it more fully. I can show you some very interesting things with that machine."

WE went over to the apparatus and looked it over. I recognized what was undoubtedly a large televi-

sion receiving screen; I could spot a whale of a lot of radio equipment and wiring. Then there were other features. There was a framework of wire rising to the ceiling, which I noted now was domed to accommodate it, which looked very much like the framework of a reflecting telescope. There were several other web-works of wire projecting from the sides and curving around to join the top of the telescope framework.

The controls were many and apparently the machine was capable of very delicate adjustments, there being several dozen small studs and many dials and slides.

"The thing is a new sort of telescope, to put it crudely," our host explained. "It's an adaptation of the electrono-telescope of a new type."

"You mean that it catches the light rays of a star on a television sender, band, is then received on a sender which can then amplify the vision enormously?" Bob had read something of the sort.

"Yes and no." Lamprecht was delighted that we were not entirely ignorant. "It uses that means to a certain extent in the final process, but I do not need the light beams of a star or light of any sort.

"Let me explain. You must surely know that everything which exists is composed of matter and that all matter casts off electronic impulses and emanations, even though in the majority of such instances we cannot detect these resultants of the eternal breaking down of all matter into energy."

We nodded in agreement. It was perfectly true that all matter is constantly disintegrating into energy, but the process was extraordinarily slow and gradual, in most cases stretching almost into infinity.

"Now if that is so, it is not necessary to have light which is reflected off the surface of an object to see it; we can use the emanations of the very objects themselves to do our viewing with. That is if we can isolate and amplify these emanations.

"While working on that problem in connection with the radio-telescope, I accidentally found a way to create a space warp within the vicinity of the object focussed on, that renders distance negligible. In this apparatus I have the perfect cosmic eye.

"It can pick up and project on this screen anything anywhere in creation. That is a literal fact. If a stone is lying on a plain on a planet a million light-years away, the light reflected from that stone would take a million years to cross to the Earth to be seen. This machine focusses to cover that point in the universe, creates an instantaneous dimensional warp in the ether near that stone, a few inches from it, a few feet or miles from it, or even within it, from which point the telescopic effects are obtained. Thus there is no point in space which I cannot observe in minute detail from this room."

It took a few seconds to digest that. It was rather terrifying to consider. It meant that here before us was the means to solve every secret of the universe, to probe every planet and every star, to go to the very ends of creation if need be!

Then the inevitable reaction set in and I looked at Bob and he shot a glance at me that told the same story. We were dealing with a lunatic. We'd better humor him for we were in a tight spot.

LAMPRECHT guessed our thoughts. Without a word, he sat down before the controls, pulled a switch, and pressed several buttons in rapid succession. There was a humming from somewhere within the mass of machinery, dial faces lit up, and the television screen glowed. It filtered rapidly in blacks and greys, then a scene came to focus.

It was the face of the moon, the most common object of astronomic observation. Seen as if with a good twenty-inch reflector but viewed amazingly clear without the slightest

flickering of atmospheric interference.

A roll of thunder reminded me that outside it was mad weather, the most impossible weather for observing that can be imagined. Lamprecht lifted a finger to have our attention, then shifted several more controls.

The disc of the moon rapidly drew closer, now only part of the face of Luna showed up in the screen and still it was enlarging. A single crater showed up bright and large in the center and grew until that single feature alone occupied the televisor. That in turn grew outwards, and now it seemed that we were within the crater walls themselves, for the floor came towards us rapidly. Bob and I watched in startled wonder. The screen came to a rest finally when the floor of the crater, the surface of the moon was about five feet away from us judged by what we saw. It was greyish rock, shining cold and harsh, shadows black and clear cut, pebbles and pumice-like rocks lay about and a few crystals of some frozen gas.

"Well," said Lamprecht turning in his seat to gaze at us, his bright eyes twinkling, "am I crazy?"

We couldn't believe it. There was that scene. Perfect.

"Draw up seats and I'll show you a lot of things while you're here," our host suggested. "I have some unpleasant suspicions in my mind which I won't trouble you about, but I'd like you to see as much as you can while you can."

He shifted some more keys on his panel. The moon dropped from sight instantly and we were in space; some flashes of light, and the screen showed dead black, a black dotted with innumerable very tiny and very brilliant white specks. The celestial void!

"Watch this carefully," the physicist remarked and the space scene disappeared. It reappeared again, flickered, shifted, then was replaced.

Red light on black walls. There was a throbbing as of giant motors and

great dynamos. (It suddenly dawned on me that the thing could pick up sound when sound was to be had.) The interior of a mighty vessel, gigantic and powerful, made of a metal so black as I have never seen mined on Earth. Crimson lights lined along each wall threw a ruddy glare all about.

Black-hooded figures were standing around the ship in various posts, some watching strange dials, others poring over huge charts bearing some incomprehensible configurations. Some were hunched over ponderous wheels and levers occasionally moving one at the command of other demoniacal characters whose piercingly unpleasant red eyes peered out from under dark hoods to the transparent portholes set in the ship. Through them, distorted somewhat by the thick green glass, could be seen the lights of stars, some moving faster and some slower across the ports, and occasionally some bright-lit body flashed by, giving a realization of the astounding speed at which the interstellar craft travelled.

"From Tau Ceti," Lamprecht's voice sounded odd and strained. "I've traced them back. They're on a mission of death. Death to anyone who dares penetrate the secrets of their native temple crypts. Set deep in the rock of their ugly black world are their massive structures, grim and vast, without windows or doors, whose bases go down to the very core of the planet. At the lowest depths live their highest priests, studying the universe through instruments similar to this one. They are working out plans for a cosmic blitzkrieg which is to conquer the galaxy for them thousands of years from now. But meanwhile they are always scanning for beings on any other world who may master the methods of vision and may be able to penetrate their chambers, find out their plans. When they discover such, they dispatch ships such as these through many light-years of space if necessary to destroy their observers.

This ship is one of them. I have been watching it for months."

WE FELT oddly disturbed about that. The ship gave us an unpleasant feeling, it was so real and so very inhuman. The scene faded out. The screen showed darkness again, broken only by a flicker of red-gold light. A star strewn galaxy. A galaxy of galaxies whirling past us in a flash of opalesque color. A star shining alone in the void. Then a glint of milky white light and we gasped as a beautiful scene unfolded.

Soft and flowing meadows thickly sprinkled with gay bright flowers set in the velvet grass. Flowing hills and dales, trees and fluffy clouds and blue sky. Four white marble columns supporting a golden dome set in a circle of pale rose stone. In the center rose an altar upon which stood a statue portraying some divine winged and antennaed being.

On the grass around the shrine many young people were dancing. Fair-haired, bright eyed, laughing boys and girls of angelic appearance clad in brilliant polychromatic garments.

Encircling the structure were many small discs set flush with the grass. From openings in the center of each, great bubbles were popping up to float in the air and then burst with a musical pop. The dancers swirled about among the bubbles and sang a weird and fascinating tune.

One of the spheres came into focus and we followed it as it rose higher and higher in the air. Apparently it would not collapse as did the others. It rose far above the heads of the singers and high over the dome. The land below us fell away and we floated above the hills and through the cottony clouds. Our speed increased and soon the ground fell away at a terrific pace. The horizon stretched and came to an end, we saw only the continental and oceanic outlines of a great planet. This in turn receded and became only a green ball, then a dot and finally only

a flash of light winking in the darkness of outer space.

Lights flashed by, the lights of suns and worlds, the misty glow of comets, and then another steady dot approached. This in turn grew and became a world sphere. But unlike the last this was not marked by outlines of land and water. It became an unbroken sheen of metal glowing in the sun that illumined this globe.

BOB and I were engrossed by now in the screen. We had virtually forgotten where we were. Lamprecht was manipulating the controls with ease and familiarity, he was guiding us through the universe.

Soon the seemingly unbroken metal surface resolved itself in to squares of great rooftops divided by black lines that must be streets miles deep. Lower we swooped. The roof tops came nearer and we saw that most of them had small gardens or even dwarf arbors growing on them. People luxuriously clad strolled among the plants and engaged in various pleasures.

Our vision sank to a level with the roofs and then lower into one of the streets between the Cyclopean structures. Row upon row of windows flashed upwards before us and now we swirled for a moment through a mass of clouds filling the street. Emerging beneath we saw that the edifices stretched for perhaps a half mile further down before the ground was seen.

The street floor that we finally reached was brilliantly lit by great white glowing globes that cast a sun rivalling glare upon the scene beneath the cloud bank.

The first and uppermost street level we found to be a vast way of shining metal upon which people walked about their businesses. With a brief instant of blackness we passed through this onto the second level where single wheeled dynaspheres rolled along carrying light freight. And on down to a third level beneath that where long moving belts carried all manner of

heavier freight. And still we dropped past a fourth and fifth level and more until we came upon levels dimly lit and poorly ventilated on which fronted doors, windows of small poorly kept homes. Below even these we swooped emerging eventually into a vast room where our descent stopped.

In the center of this cavernous chamber was a long pool filled with a bubbling cobalt liquid. Around the sides of this pool extending into the fluid were pumps and pipes and contrivances of many types. The walls were panelled with large copper instrument boards before each of which was stationed a man. Other men were going from place to place with tools or metal hand carts filled with substances which they dumped into the pool. The room was evidently quite hot and the work hard, for the toilers gave every evidence of exhaustion. There were several husky overseers whose thick leather belts hung with weapons which gave the only impetus to continue. We saw one man stagger and fall; the overseers simply seized his living body and heaved it into the liquid.

Lamprecht did not linger any further. Up and out we sped. Blackness again and then a flash of light and the scene reflected the interior of a simply furnished cabin which housed a radio-telescope before which sat three men in silent attention. With a gasp we realized that we were looking at ourselves, looking at us from a detached point in a corner of the roof!

LAMPRECHT laughed. "I want to show you something right here on Eearth that is fully as astounding as what you have seen up there. This machine can penetrate the interior of the planet as easily as it can probe the interior of stars."

The point of observation as depicted in the screen dropped from the corner of the cabin to the floor, then passed through and nothing but impenetrable darkness showed. We felt that the vision was moving down,

down and down, then Lamprecht's fingers came to a halt on the controls.

There was a sudden glint of light in the darkness as if from a spark shot from some metal thing. A glimpse of something white and shiny. Dim yellow points of glow, the eyes of some soul-chilling creature of the eternal dark. A continuous grinding and scraping sound and the slow motion of the eyes tunneling upwards. Another spark and the impression of huge claws and a long beaked mouth lined with rodentlike teeth grinding its way steadily through the stone. A sucking noise as of some living thing absorbing ground clips or rock splinters into its maw. The dread eyes moved fast for such a creature and always upward.

"What is it?" Bob's voice was hushed. "It's nothing that was ever dreamed of."

"I don't know its exact nature," the operator of the machine remarked, "but I know that it seems to live and move about in solid ground as naturally as animals in air and fish in water. It must breathe the very rock of the planet."

HE shifted the scene abruptly. The black sky of space showed on the plate.

For the next few hours we saw many things. We forgot time and place and just gazed around entranced at the worlds of space.

We watched a savage, armed only with a spear and shield, battle with a huge dragon-like monster in the midst of a thick steaming jungle. We viewed a vast battle in which millions of men fought on a continent-wide battle field of a world many times the size of our own. We saw lovers dreaming in a weird garden on a planet of a galaxy beyond our own. We entered the hearts of huge suns and saw the unbelievable flame creatures that live there in houses of pure fire. We watched a slave sale in the market place of a queer walled town of a world in the Pleiades. We saw beings

of solid ice building great castles of frozen air on a frigid world of a dead star. We watched a crude and small rocket ship take off for the first time to attempt to cross the space between two planets of Albireo while an entire world waited with baited breath.

ONCE we again peered in on the space ship from Tau Ceti and this time the hooded beings were preparing to stop and land. Lamprecht opined that they were rapidly reaching their goal and would soon carry out their dreadful mission. Again we sped away to look upon more pleasant scenes.

So the night passed. Worlds and suns, life and death, love and hate, all flashed before our eyes. We heard songs and dirges, words of endearment and cries of anger, screams of glee and shrieks of fury. The tales of a universe were laid before us.

On request we were passing rapidly across the planets of our own system. We saw barren Mercury and steaming Venus. The uncanny ruins of Mars fascinated us, and on the screen now we were held by the sight of waves of ammonia dashing themselves against an ammonium sea wall in the thick yellow Jovian atmosphere, when suddenly the machine went dead.

Bob and I gazed at each other a bit befuddled, then rubbed our brows to clear our senses. Lamprecht had shut off the machine and now was sitting staring pale-facedly upwards at a corner of the ceiling. We followed his gaze.

In one corner of the wooden roof there was a depression. We had not noticed that before. The dent was creaking downwards as if some heavy thing was pushing on it from above.

Bob and I leaped from our seats. Lamprecht yelled for us to seize our coats and run.

"It's the Tau Cetians! It was I they were after! Don't let them catch you! Hurry!"

Then with a crash there was a break in the ceiling. A face peered through.

A face of such hideous malevolence that I shall be haunted the rest of my life by it. The two red eyes fixed themselves on the old inventor and held him rigid with horror.

Bob and I waited no longer but dashed wildly out the door and away, falling and stumbling down the dark slope into the night. I hurled a glance back and seemed to see a cast metallic black thing looming over the cabin.

Then the lights in the hut flickered out and we heard a terrible scream.

They tell me in the village that we came running into the inn screaming incoherently and then collapsing into unconsciousness. It was not for several days that we were able to be up and about. We returned in daylight to find the cabin. Where we thought it had been was now only a vast scooped out pit in the side of the mountain.

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CALLISTAN TOMB

By PAUL DENNIS LAVOND

When tomorrow's plagues come out of space, perhaps the mines on the distant worlds will offer antidotes. And the men who work those mines will be heroes in the eyes of the sick, but to each other, it will be just a tough, dangerous grind.

RAWSON stirred his huge bulk and snapped on the audio set at his elbow. "—bringing to you," it said abruptly, "flashes from the news fronts of the solar system.

"We have received from Earth a steady flow of bulletins on the plague. Our last report announces the death of Commissioner Wheelock, statesman and scholar of New Britain. The Commissioner, said the report, was eased of his pain by an injection of carbon monoxide in solution. His life had been surrendered by his attendant physicians a week ago when drawings were made for distribution of the radium ship's cargo and his group's number did not come up.

"Flashed from Calcutta: Dr. Mohan Shar, member of the Eurasian Presidium, is under treatment made possible by the arrival of Thursday's ore consignment from Callisto. Despite the advanced stage of the disease into which he had passed, it is confidently predicted that Dr. Shar will shortly reach complete recovery. That is all."

The audio fell silent, and Rawson cut off the current. "Hear that, Foley?" he asked.

His bunk-mate, a thin, bald Irishman, sat up. "Sure," he said. "Shar's a fine man. I'm glad he's pulling through the Sickness all right. Have you ever seen a case?"

"Two of them. Haven't you?"

"No—not yet. I'm part of the regular staff on here—I was working on the old five-hour day when the Sickness came to Earth and you extras shoved us out of bed with your three eight-hour shifts. Tell me about the

Sickness. What does it do to them?"

Rawson scanned the ceiling evasively. "One of the cases I saw broke out on the Earth-Jupiter ship. The man knew he had it; his number was passed a few times; so he set off to come to the radium as long as it wouldn't come to him. I don't know how he came through the cordon—I guess it was bribery."

Rawson hesitated. "They say it's a kind of cancer, but this man. . . . Well, he didn't look like any cancer patient. It came through his skin all over in tight lumps like apples. He got red and shiny in the face, too. Skipper had to get the surgeon to give him the monoxide and chuck him out. . . ."

"Go on, man," urged Foley, noting the big American's pause. "What was the other one?"

"The other one? He was my brother."

"Oh. . . . Sorry," said Foley. "Then there's no one who knows better than you what we're doing. I thought it was the pay that brought you—but Lord knows you earn it every second. It's a job for real men down in the mines where we go. . . ." He trailed off into silence as Rawson stared at him with something indescribable in his eyes.

"Don't talk about it then, Foley," said the American. "Do you think I don't know what the risk is down bottom? Do you think I don't know why the replacements and extras keep coming in and never going out? Don't talk about it at all, and maybe you and I will get along better while we last."

A bell rang clearly through the

cramped quarters. "First notice," said the Irishman. "Get your kit."

The two snapped on respirators—Callisto, of course, has an atmosphere, unbreathable but inert; you don't need a space suit, but you do need oxygen,—took up their lamps and tools and sidled through their narrow bulkhead.

They walked in the open around the huge bulk of the ore-ship that was waiting to take a full load of crude pitchblende from the little mining settlement to Broadstream, six hundred miles away on the curve of the tiny moon's horizon. There it would be refined into pure radium that was packed into needle-like interplanetary cruisers, flashed to the stricken Earth.

AT the mouth of the mine by the elevator opening twenty men assembled. Shift B was ready to hop into the cage on the split second that shift A was out of it. Some laughed at this at first—but one second meant a cubic yard of ore that would not be wasted on Earth.

Men staggered from the elevator, grimy and fagged with their killing pace of the past eight hours. "Get in!" yelled Foley to his crew—he was the foreman—and they snapped onto the unsteady platform. There was a sickening drop that wrenched their stomachs; they snapped on their radium-exciter lamps and clipped them onto their hats. The greenish glare showed the slick, wet, wooden-shored walls of the vein, dripping with water condensed by the pressure that obtains a mile beneath the surface of a planet. The men did not risk "bends," the terrible disease of most high-pressure workers, for their atmosphere was insoluble in their blood. Krypton and neon replaced the nitrogen of Earth that dissolved under pressure and reappeared in great bubbles when the pressure was released.

They picked up the tools abandoned by the last shift and trotted in formation down the long dim corridor, past the mouths of the peristaltic tubes and the heaps of slag, coming to a halt at

the jagged tunnel wall of pitchblende.

"Back up," said Foley, removing a slim metal tube from his kit. "We're going to try a shot."

With a gleaming drill he bit into the wall some dozen feet and rammed home the blasting charge. The men braced themselves against the walls and tensed their muscles as he swung a hammer against the ramrod.

There was the dull, coughing roar characteristic of trinite as the bomb exploded, and a spider's web of cracks and seams spread slowly over the raw face of the rock. As the foreman sprang back the surface collapsed into a pile of rubble. Smoothly the crew shoved wooden shoring into the loose heap and swung heavy beam braces against the roof. A second crew plunged oversized shovels into the ore and dashed their loads into the mouth of the peristaltic tube that led a mile up to the surface. The tube buzzed a warning signal as it went into operation. Its massive bands of metal contracted and expanded rhythmically and the ore flung into its cavity slowly started for the surface; a lift of over a mile.

"Eighteen cubic yards," announced Foley sonorously as he checked the estimate off on his tally-board. He turned on a man savagely. "Batten that timber down," he yelled. "We can't take chances with anything down here." The worker touched his cap ironically, swung a sledge against a plank.

The last of the rubble had vanished into the tube and the tunnel was safe—or as safe as it ever was—for another blast, shored walls already slick with water.

"We're blasting," cried Foley. He picked up the electric drill and cut it into the surface, bearing down as the bit sank into the rock. Another gleaming capsule vanished into the drill-hole, was thrust home by the ramrod. The little Irishman raised a maul and slammed it against the mushroomed end of the rod.

With appalling suddenness the charge exploded and a geyser of rock sprayed out from the mine-face. Rawson spun about as a chunk of ore shot by him. He saw it smash into a great beam that should have held, but didn't.

"*Cave-in!*" he screamed, and in the greenish glare of his headlamp he saw the beam slowly topple over and a great collapse of the rock ceiling down the whole length of the corridor. Chunks of ore fell about his head and he felt a sickening shock at the base of his skull as he dropped. Screams rang in the air, but he was falling asleep; unconscious.

SOMEONE was shaking his shoulder, and little shocks of pain ran down his arm. "If you're dead," a voice shouted in his ear, "stay dead, but if you're not get up and make yourself useful!"

"Hello, Foley," he said dizzily as he sat up. "Who's left?"

The little foreman helped him to his feet. "You, me, Pyle and Vogel," he said. "All the others are gone for good." Rawson didn't know Pyle, but Vogel and he had exchanged greetings now and then. The four men cast their lamps about them and surveyed their position.

"More than a mile underground," said Vogel flatly. "And our power's off, so we can't use the drills and scoops. We're in a little pocket at the very end of what used to be the tunnel. So I guess we're going to . . . I guess we're going to die. . . ."

Foley stared at him for a moment, then suddenly smashed his palm across the man's face. Evenly, then, he said: "Remember that my commission as foreman doesn't expire at the option of the crew. So long as you're alive you take my orders. And you obey them."

Pyle, a thin young man, seemed overcome with a fit of ague. He was trembling in every limb and his eyes rolled wildly, returning again and again to the fading patch on Vogel's

cheek where the foreman had struck him.

"We're going to dig with our bare hands," said Foley. "We have hours of life left to us, and it's a sin to waste them. Something may happen."

"Yes," said Pyle shrilly. "Something may happen." He flung himself on a wall and clawed at the chinks of rock, tearing them from their bed. On Foley's nod the two others silently fell in beside the boy and picked at the surface. The foreman watched for a moment and picked up a long drill that trailed a useless length of wire. Hefting it, he unscrewed its bit and handed it to Pyle. "You can use this as a crow-bar," he said. "I'll look for more."

All together they tore into the wall, and slowly a new tunnel, at a forty-five degree angle with the old, was formed.

"SIX THOUSAND feet or more on the vertical to go," said Vogel pantingly as he bore down on his improvised wedge. "And we've dug about fifty feet in two hours. . . . My guess is that we've got just about ten hours more to live."

Rawson, a huge chunk of ore in his arms, paused. "I thought that we weren't going to talk about it," he said evenly.

Pyle had been tearing at the rock frantically; without stopping he panted, "Something might happen. Don't fight now. Something might happen." It was his constant liturgy. Rawson wondered if he were going mad. At best they were keeping themselves occupied; no one really believed, he was sure, that help would come in time. He hefted the rock and walked back to the mouth of their ragged tunnel.

"Drop it here," said Foley, who was stacking the excavated ore. The little space they had was nearly filled with it.

The big American let the rock fall at the mouth of the peristaltic tube, now silent and still. "How long does

the respirator work?" he asked abruptly.

"It depends. Twenty hours, sometimes. In any case, not long enough for us. . . . Let's get back to the diggings."

Foley flashed his head-lamp over the ceiling of their new tunnel. "I don't like that flow-bulge," he said. "Get a stick of timber if you can find one long enough."

Rawson rummaged through the piles of wreckage and wrenched out a slender beam. "Will this do?" he asked.

Foley eyed it. "It's long enough, at least," he said. "Jam it in—there." The prop was shoved against the ceiling, and they swung their bodies against it to batten it into place. Then they waited to see. Slowly the beam arched under a pressure greater than the soft Callistan timber was cut to resist; as the men stood aside it snapped with the noise of a gunshot.

"Even at this, light gravity rock flows when there's a mile of more rock over it. Our ceiling's descending faster than I thought; it's pretty hard to estimate when you've been used to working with shoring."

Rawson was staring in fascination at the roof of their tunnel, his head-lamp making a glaring spot of green radiance on the dead-black ore. Foley clapped him on the shoulder. "Get back to the face," he said.

Again they were scratching at the yielding wall of rock, tearing fragments from it bodily and prying others loose with cunning leverage.

Rawson felt a shortness of breath, and wondered about the respirators. Twenty hours, maybe, he thought. Suddenly he had to speak.

"Foley," he cried, "why don't we try a blast?"

The foreman looked at him blankly; then his face seamed into a grim smile. "If the others are willing," he said. "Only you have to realize that it would be pretty close to suicide for us, without shoring. If it comes clear we'll have gained fifteen feet or so in

a hundredth of the time it'd take us this way. If it doesn't. . . . All in favor?"

"Why not?" said Vogel. And, flatly, "I hope it fails!"

Pyle coughed nervously. "If you think there's a chance. . . ."

"That settles it, I think," said Foley. "Hold your crowbar while I tap." They bit slowly into the wall, making a ragged drill-hole. Silently Foley produced a gleaming capsule of trinite and rammed it in.

"Stand back to the mouth of the tunnel," he said. They retreated; Foley was left alone in the triple glare of their headlamps. He raised his improvised sledge—the grip of an electric drill—and slammed it down against the protruding stump of the crowbar.

In one awful moment, as Rawson saw it, there was the clashing jump of the bar, the reticulated explosion across the face of the rock, and the roaring collapse of their tunnel as Foley sprang clear of danger.

THEY surveyed the wreck blankly. A long silence was broken by a sobbing wail from Pyle. "Trapped," he choked. "More than a mile under the surface of this damned moon!"

"Last chance gone," said Vogel grimly. "Now we sit down and die."

"So nobody was fooled?" asked Foley quietly. "Well, keep your heads now, at any rate. If we're going to die let's do it like little gentlemen."

"A pair of dice or a deck of cards would help," said Rawson. "Or we can play word-games like 'Ghosts' if you know how to spell. I don't. I never could win at that game."

Foley sat down placidly, his back propped upon the pile of ore that choked the silent peristaltic tube. "I don't know the game," he said. "Do you think we ought to pray?"

Pyle was aimlessly turning over his head-lamp, which he had taken from his sweaty hat, and the solid flare of green from the lens swung over the

men and their cramped quarters. His hands were twitching.

"Put that damned thing down!" Vogel was irritated.

"No," said Pyle stubbornly. Then he cried out; turned to Foley suddenly. "Listen!" he yelled. "This lamp is a radium-exciter!"

"Sure it is," said Foley.

"Yeah, but listen! The tunnels are crawling with radium. Can't we open the lamp and take out the element? And turn it on the walls and just blast our way to the surface?"

Vogel and Rawson looked up. Foley glanced at them, and slowly shook his head.

"No go," he said. "You could start the action, but how could you control it? The whole mine'd burn up, and it wouldn't stop then—it would go on to all the other ores around that are rich in radium."

"And there are a lot of those," said Rawson, suddenly seeing the impossibility of the scheme. "The whole planet's radioactive. It would be another sun, and we don't need one. Shelve the idea for reference."

Pyle nodded slowly, staring at them. There was a shattered look on his face, and his eyes gleamed in the light of their lamps. "I see," he whispered. "You don't want to be saved. You won't take a chance for your own lives."

"There's no chance in it," said Rawson harshly. "You open that lamp and the planet goes up in flames before you can say scat. That means that everybody on the planet dies, and a lot of people on the other moons of Jupiter die too. And then there's no radium at all to cure the Sickness except what they can get on Mercury and Deimos. Forget it!"

Pyle stood up, still turning the lamp over in his trembling hands. Slowly he said, "If you won't, I will." He took a tool from his pocket and pried at the lens of his light.

Vogel sprang to his feet and snatched the device from Pyle's hands. "Sit down," he ordered angrily, "or

I'll knock you down." The younger man looked at his empty hands for a moment, and with the swiftness of a madman snatched Vogel's lamp, cap and all, from his head, and darted to the other end of the tunnel. He scrambled madly at the rock, and hit a weak spot, a spot they hadn't tried because it led down, into the lower galleries of the mine. He quickly enlarged it, and rolled through.

The three started in pursuit, following the bobbing green light that Pyle was carrying, and came to a confused halt when suddenly it winked out.

"We'd better go back," said Foley wearily. "The tunnels branch out down there—we'd never find him." Draggingly they returned to the place of the second cave-in, to stare blankly at the tumbled rocks.

"AND now we wait for the whole world to explode," said Vogel wearily. "Is there any reason why he can't do it?"

Foley rubbed his brow. "It'll take quite a while to open the lamp without smashing it up," he said. "Maybe he will smash it. He'll have to turn it off and work in the dark, and once you get the case off it's a delicate little machine."

Rawson was listening with half an ear. He thought he heard a vague clanging sound—untraceable. "Listen to that," he said. "Where does it come from?"

The little foreman looked about sharply, then pressed his ear to the metal casing of the peristaltic tube. "Wait a minute," he said. Then he opened his mouth wide and rested his teeth on the tube. "Bone transmission," he explained absently, the words distorted by the configuration of his lips and mouth.

The others followed suit. Rawson almost cried aloud when he heard the regular scrapes and taps from a mile above. Taking up a bit of rock he smashed it against the casing three times. A moment, and the noises

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ceased; there sounded three regular clinks from the surface.

"They know we're alive now," Foley said tensely. "What will they do?" With disconcerting suddenness the answer came. The warning signal of the peristaltic tube buzzed loudly, and the device went into rumbling squeaking, clanging action. The three men stared as great chunks of rock vanished up the shaft.

They looked at each other. "It was never done before," said Foley, "but—Vogel, you go in first."

Silently the man wedged his shoulders in the mouth of the tube. Systolic and diastolic bands collapsed and swelled, and he was smoothly carried up out of sight. Hastily the two others crammed themselves into the mouth of the device.

Rawson felt the walls of the tube with his hands. They seemed at once slimy and rugged as they weirdly sucked him with irresistible force to the surface. He tilted his head back and let his lamp lay on the feet of Foley, a few yards above him.

"Any trouble down there?" called back the foreman.

"No," said Rawson grimly. "I was just wondering if we'll reach the surface before Pyle opens his lamp." He gave a sudden cry as an abnormally tight systolic band closed on him. "Are there any more narrow ones up there?" he asked. "I nearly got fractured hip just now."

"That was defective, I think," called down Foley. "I noticed it myself. Keep calm, man. We aren't through yet."

The clanging action of the bands became noisier, and Rawson, though he couldn't be sure, thought that their speed had been increased.

For many long minutes he tried to coordinate his breathing with the rhythmical pulsings of the tube, and again looked up when Foley shouted for his attention. "Vogel says he sees light ahead," called the little man. "They must have put a lamp in the shaft for us."

"That's good," Rawson tried to say, but he had a little picture brought to mind of the crazed Pyle tinkering at his murderous device far down below in the dark. And the picture included also a boy who looked like his brother, except for the blotched red swellings of the Sickness, and a tiny, furious star that shot swiftly around a calcined and blackened planet.

And then he was out of the tube and in the light of the distant sun.

"CUT IT out!" snapped Foley at the men swarming around with inane congratulations. "There's a maniac loose down there. He's trying to open his lamp and excite the radium in the mine. He'll blow up the planet! Have you got anything to stop him?"

Camp Supervisor Teck stiffened. "Finney," he ordered, "Run for the Chief Engineer. Tell him to rig a blanket wave between frequencies three and three point two." He turned again to Foley. "If he doesn't get it open in the next two minutes we're safe. And if he does . . . we'll never know it. How was it going through the tube?"

"No trouble, except a couple of tight bands. Are you going to send a rescue crew down that way?"

"I think we'd better. If they don't get the blanket wave set up in a hurry we'll have to." Swiftly he detailed a group of eight to the tube. With a great metallic groan the mechanism was reversed, and the men were swallowed down into the crust of the moon.

Teck touched a stethoscope to the struts of the device. "No trouble yet," he announced to the circle of men. "They're telling each other dirty stories." There was a crackle of laughter from the group.

"Now they're coming out at the bottom. Wait—yes, their exciter lamps have gone out." He looked up smiling. "That means the blanket wave is working." Again Teck applied the stethoscope. "I can't hear them now. They had electrics, so I suppose

they've gone to look for Pyle." He reversed the tube again, to its normal upward flow, and sat down to wait. A few minutes passed, then—

The tube coughed suddenly. "Something coming up," said Teck. He speeded up the systole and diastole; it seemed as though the mechanism would tear itself apart with the violence of its drive. Chunks of rock dribbled over the lip of the tube, and then the limp figure of a man was disgorged. "Is this Pyle?" asked the supervisor.

Rawson scanned the lax figures. "Yes. Did they kill him?"

"Just a needle of paralyte, I think. It'll wear off in a moment." Swiftly Teck strapped down the arms and legs of the unconscious man. The eyes opened, and in them was the stare of madness.

"Pretty hopeless," said the supervisor, turning away.

"Oh, well. . . . One man crazy,

and seventeen dead. No wonder they cancelled my insurance," said Rawson.

"What about it?" Foley asked. "They didn't mean much. Their work did; it meant the chance of living to millions of people."

"Sure. I know it; I work here, don't I? And I'm not quitting. . . . But— But let's get to sleep, I mean. We need it." They trudged away; were halted in their tracks by a yell from the men around the peristaltic tube. They spun around.

Rocks were pouring from the mouth of the tube. The supervisor picked one up, held it to the distant sun and scanned it. "Ore!" he cried, his words carrying to Rawson and Foley. "And the highest grade stuff I've seen in a long time!"

Rawson looked at Foley and smiled; received Foley's smile in exchange. Then they started off once more for their bunks. It had been a hard shift.

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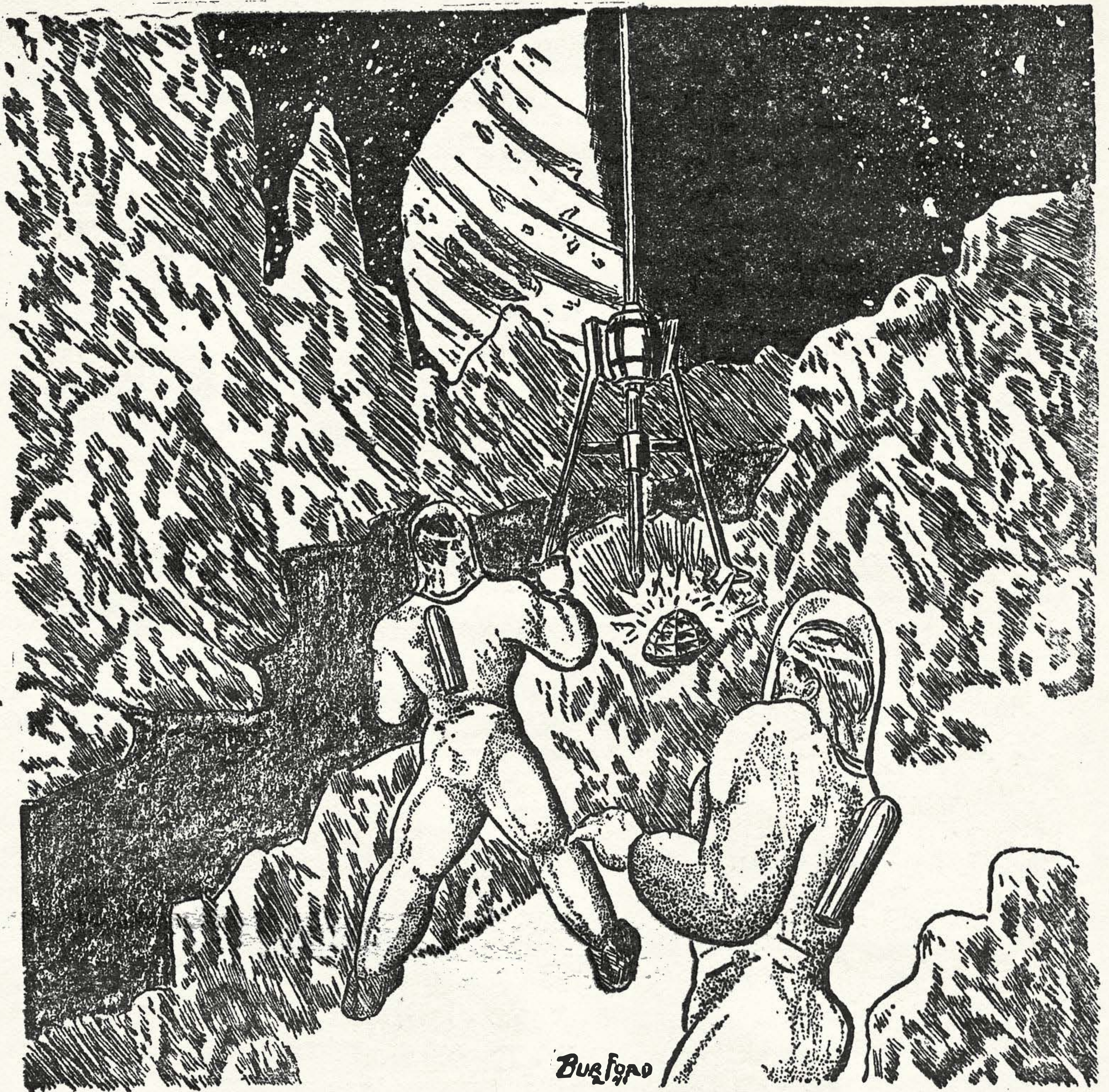
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"Mother of Jove! Did you ever see such a jewel?"

THE LIFE JEWEL

By OLIVER SAARI

It was a thing of staggering beauty, this jewel from the little moon. But there were strange things about it; strange thoughts that came into the minds of the two men, driving them to actions they could not understand.

"**I**MAGINE," said the smaller man, "a cosmic broom sweeping space for millions of years. That's Jupiter."

"What the hell you talking about?" growled the big man, jockeying the space-launch toward the whirling

boulder of space seen through the noseport.

"A broom. Jupiter's gravity's been sweeping the solar system clean since the birth of the planets. We're bound to find pennies in the dust."

"Better be something more than

that," Daggett grunted. "We ain't burning fuel out here for our health. I never knew Old Jove had so damn many worthless moons."

The ship landed with a jar that sent the tiny world spinning a full ten seconds off its orbit.

"Space tub!" snarled the big man, slamming the controls into land-lock. "Getting harder to handle every day. If we don't run into something pretty soon—"

"What you need is a drink," said Drake, tossing him a bottle of scintillating Venus Elixir.

Daggett downed half the contents with a heavy gulp. He drank too much of the poison, Drake knew, but it helped keep the hopes higher. They couldn't go on from moon to moon, always finding nothing. Surely out of all the comets, meteoroids, and planetary debris that mighty Jupiter had caught and held, there would be at least one metal-veined planet core or crystal-carbon deposit. Drake had gambled his last credit on that, and Daggett his ship.

But Daggett was slow to cheer, even with the Elixir.

"We should have stuck to jumpin' asteroid claims like I wanted," he muttered, wiping his lips with the back of a hairy hand.

Drake pushed a space-suit at him. Sulkily the big man climbed into it. Drake donned his own, picked up the bulky sample borer, and led the way into the lock.

They went through the same old routine: let the air pressure shove them out on the rocks, set up the borer in a likely spot, and pull out core after core of worthless igneous rock while the leprous crescent of Jupiter leered mockingly down.

"Jumping claims was easier," Drake admitted, shifting the borer and looking about for another likely spot, "but I still say—"

Something made him stop and stare uneasily at the rocky crags about them. There was a chilling, ancient

feel to this place. It didn't lie in the cold, bright stars—Drake was used to those—nor in the jumbled rocky spires that gleamed all around them in the Jupiter light, nor in the yawning chasms that split the rock all the way to the nearby horizon. The chill may have been in the hard black sheen of the rock, or in something Unknown that lay in the shadows.

Daggett had taken the sample borer and was rounding a shadowy buttress. Before he was out of sight, the big man stiffened and let the borer slide out of nerveless hands.

"Mother of Jove!" gasped Daggett. "Did you ever seen such a jewel?"

Drake could feel the muscles tighten in the back of his neck as he rounded the basalt spire. He almost knew what he would see, even before his eyes caught the splendor in the rocks.

A FOUNTAIN of blue fire, glowing out of the solid rock with an unearthly brilliance. A pyre of infinite beauty, a jewel whose tiny facets bent every stray beam into a thousand intricate patterns. No diamond had ever had its luster, no sapphire its pure color.

"Twenty thousand carats if it's a gram!" Drake marveled. "And it's something new! I've never heard of a jewel like that."

It was crystalline in form, and half-embedded in the rock. In the rough it exceeded the brilliance of any cut diamond. Its color was the purest greenish blue Drake had ever seen.

"Twenty thousand carats," Daggett was muttering dazedly. "Lessee, that much crystal-carbon would bring a couple of hundred thousand credits. This ain't crystal-carbon but—"

"Credits be damned," breathed Drake. "Did you ever see such a beauty?"

"Oughta be worth a lot more than crystal-carbon," Daggett nodded. "Maybe even five hundred thousand credits!"

Drake tore his gaze from the thing

in the rocks and the world grew dark to his eyes.

"Let's get it out before it vanishes," he urged at Daggett, who was still counting untold wealth on his space-gloved fingers. "I've got to feel that thing in my hands before I'll believe it!"

He felt a curious, uplifting eagerness, an urge to take this jewel in his hands and carry it off with him out into space, to the planets. . . .

He pushed Daggett aside and sank the bit of the sample borer into the rock beside the jewel. Again and again he sent white-hot chips flying, cutting away the rock. Finally the jewel came loose in his hands—eight pounds of scintillating glory. It radiated a strange warmth that carried through his gloves, up his arm, and set him quivering with a weird emotion.

"Let me see it," said Daggett thickly, extending a hand.

Drake felt as though he were giving away a part of his arm.

"Maybe there's more of them on the rock," he suggested.

Daggett's eyes glittered under his visor as he turned to survey the black spires about them. Inevitably his gaze returned to the jewel in his hand.

"Yeah, maybe," he said.

Once more Drake tore his eyes from the indescribable beauty of the jewel and bent his gaze to their rocky footing. Under the meteoric dust, the black rock still looked strange to him. It didn't have the rich metallic quality of a planet-core, but neither did it resemble the granite texture of an ordinary asteroid. A comet-core, perhaps, from beyond the solar system, caught in Jupiter's grip millions of years before.

The jewel, at least, was something the eyes of man had never seen. Perhaps there were more of them. Untold riches waiting to be picked!

Drake shouldered the sample borer and trudged down a cleft in that strange moonscape. The little world was only a couple of miles in diameter.

If there were any more of the jewels, it wouldn't take long to find them.

Jagged shadows criss-crossed in his path. There were strange outcroppings in the rock, huge faceted crystals sending needle spires toward the Jupiter-light. Green they were, but somewhat like the jewel, though they were dull and lusterless. Drake touched one with his hand. Even through his space-glove he could feel the chill of it, a cold repulsion. After that brief contact he avoided the green crystals as he searched the ground for more of the jewels.

But he could find no more jewels.

"It's a rare thing we've stumbled on at that—" Drake began, then turned to discover that Daggett wasn't behind him.

"Gus!" yelled Drake into his phone, but only the faint static crackling in his earphones answered him.

Drake swiftly retraced his steps. He climbed an almost right-angled bend in the planet's surface to come within full sight of the ship. Daggett was nowhere to be seen; but there was a light in the control room port, and a man's shadow looming suddenly across it. Daggett was in the ship!

"Hey!" Drake cried, stumbling into a run.

He came to the ship at last, and found the outer lock tightly closed. He swore at his own carelessness. Five hundred thousand credits at stake, and he had taken his eyes off Daggett. If the bum was thinking of going single. . . .

"Open up!" yelled Drake, kicking at the curving hull with a steel-toed boot.

Daggett probably already had his space-suit off and couldn't hear him.

Drake swung the bit of his borer into the steel door plug near the locking mechanism. Its diamond tip sent out a shower of white hot metal chips. Suddenly there was a whir. The door opened outward of its own accord, twisting the borer out of Drake's hands, throwing him back in a cloud

of escaping air. The lock was open, inviting. Daggett was letting him in!

CAUTIOUSLY Drake stepped into the opening. It seemed like a trap. He was unarmed (fool!) and Daggett had their private arsenal at his command. How easy to turn the flame ray on the airlock and scatter Drake's carcass out on the rocks as a cloud of ashes!

But there wasn't anything else Drake could do except get in.

Slowly the inner door opened. Drake stepped cautiously up to it, ready to launch himself into the cabin.

Daggett stood there, holding the jewel in one limp hand, brushing the other hand across his eyes. He didn't have a gun. Drake stared at him in amazement, slowly climbing out of his space-suit.

"What's the idea?" he managed at last.

"Why—I was gonna go—" Daggett stammered.

"That's what I figured. But we'll both go, see?"

The big man nodded absently, rubbing the jewel between his palms.

Drake looked again at their amazing find—and suddenly forgot all about Daggett's strange actions. The jewel shone, now, with a light all its own. Its fire cascaded in an emerald blue flood that at once blinded and soothed, drowned out the dark suspicions in his mind. Suddenly he wanted to go, to leave this little moon at once. He felt an almost uncontrollable urge to leap to the controls and send the ship hurtling into space. Not toward the colony at Ganymede, not toward the striped crescent of Jupiter, but even farther. . . .

"Let's get going," Drake said suddenly. "We'll get rid of that thing. Come back later to see if there're any more of them in the rocks after we find out what it's worth."

Daggett nodded without saying anything.

Drake seated himself before the controls and soon had the ship accelerating

as swiftly as her worn engines would allow. Not toward Ganymede, as she should have been, but sunward!

With one-half of his mind Drake wondered vaguely why he hadn't turned the ship toward the Jovian moon, where some wealthy trader would pay a staggering sum for the jewel; but coolly he went on setting the course that would swing them past Jupiter's mighty bulk.

"Where you headin' her?" came Daggett's startled voice.

"Earth," Drake said.

His mind suddenly made up the explanation. Of course they were going to Earth. Too much risk involved in dealing with those two-bit traders on Ganymede. If the wrong one caught sight of that jewel, Daggett & Drake, Inc., preferred wouldn't be worth a cent on the market.

But Daggett didn't ask for an explanation. He reached for a bottle of Venus Elixir.

JUPITER dwindled as Drake hurled the little ship over the asteroid belt. Days of acceleration, days under a weight of 2 g's, cooped up in a narrow cabin in the presence of a fabulous, unknown treasure. Daggett held the jewel in his hand much of the time, his face glowing palely in its blue radiance. His supply of Venus Elixir was running short, but the jewel compensated somewhat for the stringent rations of the "poison".

"Half a million credits," Daggett mused again, watery eyes playing over the blue crystal possessively.

"Two-fifty," Drake corrected grimly. "Sure, we'll get a half-million—maybe more if we make the right connections. But it's only half that for you, don't forget."

"Sure," Daggett nodded absently, unconvinced.

"There's something I don't understand about the jewel," Drake went on in a more placable tone. "Haven't you noticed it? It's got a light of its own—radioactive, maybe. But I get

the queerest impression that it's watching us, waiting—"

"You're going nuts too," Daggett laughed harshly. "It's nothin' but a rock, a damn pretty rock. An' it's worth money."

Drake eyed him with contempt. The big man was too drink-sodden to see what was obvious—that their treasure wasn't anything ordinary. Possibly it was just another crystal-carbon, born under still greater temperatures and pressures in some distant sun. But Drake, somehow, felt that it was something much more unusual.

"Forget it," he snapped. "And don't pull any more of that lone-wolf stuff. Don't tell me you came in the ship to keep out of the rain, back there on the moon!"

"I dunno," muttered Daggett.

And somehow Drake knew what he meant. He had himself felt that curious impulse to leave the little moon. He was sure that by leaving the tiny world they had missed something—something they hadn't been meant to see. It was as if they'd been prompted, or ordered to go by—what?

But Daggett would still bear watching. If he hadn't had any wrong ideas back there on the moon, he had them now!

Daggett had plenty of time to hatch his ideas on the Jupiter-Earth run. The long trip, a nerve-straining grind even on a luxury liner, was almost more than the two men cooped up in Daggett's ship could stand. For Drake there was the growing necessity of watching Daggett, of keeping on the alert. For Daggett, growing visions of even greater wealth within his reach—and the knowledge that his supply of Venus Elixir was almost gone.

Just outside the orbit of Mars the big man downed his last bottle. Eyes red from drink and 2-g coma, he slammed the empty bottle against a steel brace, showering Drake with broken glass.

"Cut it!" snapped Drake, half-pulling his weapon.

"Why didn't you take her to Gany-mede?" Daggett snarled.

"I'd have told you," Drake said, "but you didn't ask."

Daggett didn't say anything after that, but his eyes still held that funny look. Drake felt them on him all the time, following him around. He kept on the alert, knowing what was passing in the big man's mind.

But the human system demands rest, even in space. Tired, utterly, hopelessly tired, with days yet to go. That was the situation Drake was finally turning around in his mind. He knew he wasn't going to make it. He would have to get some sleep.

Daggett's rasping snore cut across his consciousness like a rip-saw. Daggett, resting in slothful security, knowing he had but to wait. . . .

A thought passed in Drake's mind, slowly, passively. How easy to kill Daggett now and have it over with. Yes, that was the sensible thing to do. He would probably end up doing just that. . . .

Suddenly Drake opened his drooping eyes. Daggett's snoring had stopped. Daggett was standing behind him, pointing a gun at the back of his neck. Drake knew all that, and couldn't move a muscle! He could feel his life swinging on a thread.

Before that thread could break, something exploded in Drake's brain. Daggett thought he was asleep; that gave him the element of surprise. Before the big man could send a lethal bolt crashing into his brain, Drake had him by the throat with one hand and was bending back his wrist with the other. Daggett's breath was in his nostrils, Daggett's curse in his ears.

Drake's initial lunge carried them down the narrow floor, hard against a steel bulkhead. The $\frac{1}{2}$ -g acceleration made Daggett's weight advantage less overwhelming, but there was still 200 pounds mass behind the big man.

They rolled back and forth. Drake still held the lethal-gun away from his body, but his grip on Daggett's throat

was slipping. Daggett was pommeling his face with a huge fist.

With a desperate heave, Drake slammed the big man's back against the wall. Daggett snarled, strove to bring his gun to bear.

Then, suddenly, he dropped the gun and lunged unexpectedly, feet braced against the bulkhead. Drake's head hit something. Pinwheels blinded him, a roaring filled his ears. Then all these telescoped into a restful darkness.

DAGGETT'S stubbled face was the next thing he saw. He closed his eyes to shut out the vision. He couldn't move his hands; they were pinned beside him as he was tied to one of the cabin chairs with loops of wire. But the strange, unfathomable part of it was that he was still alive.

"I'm going to kill you," said Gus Daggett, as if voicing a simple, obvious thought.

"Why didn't you?"

"I thought I might get lonesome," Daggett said coarsely. "Thought you'd like to keep me company. You ain't in a hurry to go, are you?"

"I see. No hurry," Drake drawled back at him.

He knew what had happened. He'd been knocked out, of course, and Daggett hadn't had the nerve to kill an unconscious man. There were two or three days yet, and Daggett hoped in that time to be able to work himself into the proper point of frenzy. In the end he would kill Drake. That was a foreordained fact. The big man couldn't back out now, whatever came up.

"I knew I made a mistake when I teamed up with you," drawled Drake in a tone as contemptuous as he could make it. "You filthy Venus leech-rat, if you had an Earthman's guts you'd feed your own worthless carcass to the buzzards."

Daggett's face darkened. He reached for his gun; then, seeing that was what Drake wanted, thought better of it. He twisted his unwashed face into a mirthless smile.

"You ain't goin' yet," he leered. "I know you'd just as soon, but you ain't. Just to make out you want to stay longer, I'm gonna show you something!"

With trembling paws Daggett lifted the black wooden box that held their precious find, and opened it before Drake's eyes.

Again Drake forgot everything but the jewel. Each time it had been more beautiful—but this time the all-powerful force of it reached into his very mind, probing, caressing. . . . It was no longer a thing of crystal but a live, sentient entity, there in the black box in Daggett's hand. It seemed to Drake that if he could but look forever at its brilliance, he would care for nothing else.

Daggett jerked as if stung. Abruptly he closed the lid of the box, shutting off the wonderful glow. He'd hoped to drive Drake to a fury, showing him the jewel, but Drake's face was calm. Instead, Daggett's own mind had felt the return of a strange and disturbing premonition. . . .

"It's mine," the big man insisted. "My treasure, my ship. You understand?"

"Don't be too sure," Drake said slowly. "Maybe it doesn't want to be your treasure."

Daggett relaxed and laughed at that. It seemed to put him in a good mood.

"Still got funny ideas about that rock, I see," he observed, replacing the box gingerly in its niche. "You know what I'm gonna do with it? I'm gonna go back and buy that dive at Ceres Center—you know, that place with the little blonde you used to like."

Drake wished that the big man would shut up, because he was doing some very involved thinking. Once he had gone through one of Earth's best universities. He'd almost forgotten, in the bitterness of the thing that had driven him out to the asteroids many years ago. But now some of it was coming back to him, a possibility hint-

ed at by some chemistry or biology professor 'way back when the universe was rosy and full of imagination.

"Gus, let me see that jewel again," he said suddenly.

Daggett roared with mirth, as if laughing at some huge joke.

"Wouldn't you like to?" he taunted. "But you ain't going to. Ever."

AFTER that Drake closed his eyes and tried to sleep, leaving Daggett alone in his castle. The wire that bound him cut into his arms and slowed circulation, but the overpowering tiredness in him let him forget that—forget, even, the daring thought that had stirred in his mind when Daggett had shown him the jewel.

His subconscious, however, would not let him forget that thought. Reluctantly his brain turned it over, as if being forced to accept a premise beyond belief.

The suggestion of that chemistry professor kept coming back. The possibility of a life without metabolism, subsisting on energy gleaned from solar radiation and cosmic rays alone. Such life might take almost any form and exist under any conditions. . . .

In short, Drake slept and dreamed that the jewel was suddenly sprouting arms and legs—offering to shake his hand, wanting to be his friend!

When Drake awoke, he could feel the shifting stress of acceleration. Daggett was puttering with the ship's controls. That meant only one thing: the big man was finishing up the course, preparing for a landing on Earth. It also meant that Drake could count his remaining life-span in hours, perhaps minutes.

He wondered if the big man would give him the benefit of a lethal-bolt before sending him out through the airlock. He didn't mind dying so much, but out in space a man could feel himself slowly being blown apart by internal pressure. It wasn't an instantaneous death, nor a pleasant one.

"Gus," said Drake. "Couldn't we

talk this thing over? You're a reasonable man. If it's only the money you want—"

Daggett turned from the controls. Sobriety was taking its toll upon him; his hand was shaking. And in his eyes was fear. Seeing that fear, Drake knew it was useless to talk. The big man wasn't open to reason.

But what did Daggett fear?

The question sent a chill through Drake. Had something happened while he'd been asleep? Something to unnerve Daggett and make him forget his half-million credits?

"No sale," Daggett forced it out at last. "You ain't got anything left to bargain with. I'll be showing you through the lock soon as I get the course set."

His voice, too, held that inexplicable fear. Daggett was sensing things his small mind couldn't understand.

Drake's eyes strayed back to the cause of it all—to the jewel in the black box. The cover was closed, but somehow he could still see the thing within. It would be the rarest, most beautiful gem in the solar system. Millionaires would fight for it. Men would be killed for it—he, Drake, was only the first. Scientists would try to analyze it, unless—

Suddenly Drake experienced a crystallization of thought that caused him to stiffen in his bonds. Everything that had happened since they'd first seen that tiny moon of Jupiter was suddenly clear to him in all its strangeness. He should have come to the obvious conclusion long ago.

The little moon hadn't been an ordinary chunk of rock. It had come from outer space, from the unknown. *And it had been inhabited.* Beings with minds old beyond imagining, born when some cosmic explosion sent that world hurtling into space.

Crystalline, silicate life! Those cold, green crystals, so much like the jewel but repellent. They were living things that had lain and thought for millions of years, never moving, living off free cosmic energy! Minds so powerful

that they radiated a tangible wall of thought—yet so different that any intercommunication with the earthmen would have been futile.

And they hadn't wanted to be disturbed. Drake remembered Daggett's actions back on the moon, and his own eagerness to leave. Those impulses hadn't been free-willed. They'd been subtle walking papers, delivered by beings to whom their disturbing human minds were merely chaff to be brushed away!

The jewel, too, must be a living entity. But why was it so different from those others? Why was it warm and beautiful when the green crystals were cold? Drake knew the answer, but he had the feeling that it was told to him—by an intelligence so different from his own that it was wordless!

The two earthmen had gone to the moon expecting to find treasure in the form of glittering crystal-carbons. In their minds had been a thought-picture of what they most wanted to find and carry away. And one of those cold, aloof crystalline beings had been tired of its ageless, unmoving existence. It wanted change, a place nearer the sun.

So it had copied from their minds the picture of treasure—it had become that treasure! Whether by altering its own crystal structure, or by simply forcing the picture on the earthmen's minds, it had become the most beautiful and irresistible gem in the universe. A jewel that lived!

That cast a strange light on their little drama. Drake laughed bitterly. Daggett was going to kill him to gain a treasure that wasn't theirs, that could never belong to either of them.

The big man wheeled around, startled, dragging at his lethal-gun. His face was pallid with a fear that still had no reason—unless he, too, sensed that alien presence in the ship with them.

"Gus," Drake said, "take another look at your treasure. Just one more look!"

Daggett's eyes narrowed at that. He feared a trick.

"I'll look at it enough. But you'll have to be leaving first."

He reached for the pliers in sudden determination. In a moment Drake was free, flexing his cramped muscles. He eyed the big man coldly. But his mind was seething with a sudden wild thought. Could their living jewel sense what was going on? Could it understand that Daggett was doing a thing that might end in destruction for all of them?

And if it knew—what could it do?

"THIS way out," Daggett said, making a gesture toward the airlock.

Drake walked slowly to the lock, his mind voicing a last plea for help to a being who couldn't possibly understand him. But Drake knew how it could help if—

At the lock he turned. Daggett wasn't looking at him any more, and his gun-arm was dropping limply. Sweat beaded his brow, and his eyes were puzzled as he stared straight at the black box on the shelf.

Drake's last wild idea grew in a sudden surge of hope. If the crystal thing had once made them believe it was a beautiful gem, why couldn't it copy any thought image from their minds? If Drake were to think of something utterly horrible, and if the jewel wanted to help. . . .

"Take one more look," urged Drake softly. "Tell me if it's your jewel now!"

Some unknown force was pulling Daggett toward the wall.

"God!" he gasped. "Help me, Drake!"

"I can't help you, Gus," Drake said grimly, "and you can't help yourself. Take a look at your jewel and tell me what you see!"

Daggett's resistance was going down. Every muscle in his body stood out like a taut spring. He raised his gun slowly toward Drake, then let it fall to the floor.

In another moment he had the black box in his hand and was opening it. Drake caught a glimpse of the thing within before he shut his eyes, but the full force of it was concentrated on Daggett. Shapeless, intangible, but soul-chillingly horrible was the thing that had once seemed beautiful.

Daggett reeled back with a hoarse cry, clawing at his eyes. He dropped the box, and the Thing rolled across the floor. He turned his back to it and ran, ran, till he smashed himself against a steel wall. Again and again he rammed the wall, striving to throw his tortured body out into the airless void. Fear was at his heels, a living fear that was wholly mental—and therefore mind-destroying.

Finally the steel wall won. Daggett sagged first to his knees, then to the floor. His body wasn't quite spent, but his mind was burned out. Daggett would never spend his half-million credits.

THE silence in that little cabin was the most painful thing Drake had ever known. There was only the rasp of Daggett's breathing.

He knew what had happened. The crystal being had seen in his mind the picture of human horror. It had wanted to help—and by the same necrom-

ancy that had made it a beautiful gem, it had made itself horrible. But it had done more. It had caught the flame of surprised horror in Daggett's mind and had built upon it, fed it, driven it on. No human mind could stand against a force like that!

Drake was still staring at Daggett's prone form, not daring to shift his eyes. The jewel had proven itself friendly to him by destroying Daggett and saving his life. But would it stop there? It had been able to overcome Daggett's will, to take complete control of his body. Drake knew it could do the same to him, if it willed.

Then his head began to turn. He couldn't control that, so he closed his eyes—and relaxed.

Before him on the floor lay the blue jewel in all its former glory! The same warmth, the same soothing attraction—a token of friendship from an intelligence so great and all-encompassing that it understood human justice and human emotions!

"You little faker," Drake laughed, "you don't fool me any more."

He picked it off the floor and placed it carefully in the box. A jewel like that was worth more than the world could pay—even if it was an imitation!

EARTH'S MYSTERY MAN

WHO IS HE?

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"They were enveloped in a cloud of vapor."

ROCKET'S SWAN SONG

By VIC PHILLIPS

There were the trim, neat rocket ships racing around the moon and here was the ungainly contraption which the old man said would outstrip them? Could it be possible? It had to be; a pair of lives depended upon it!

"FUEL?"

"All tanks full."

"Ignition response?"

"One hundred points."

"Refrigerators!"

"Operating. Shock harness secure at all points." Rusty Barnes finished

the routine responses to the questions of Sooi-Lynn, his co-pilot. That was the final check. He settled back in the acceleration shock harness and grinned across at the slim little Venusian in the harness beside him.

"Three seconds." Sooi warned.

They watched the color of the starting light on their control panel creep up through the spectrum toward the final red.

"Contact." Rusty snapped. Sooi tensed instinctively as Rusty closed the ignition and swept the throttle forward. The rising thunder of their own atomic blast crashed out astern. The whole Spaceport shook as ten other violent earthquakes of power were lashed into fury all round them.

The eleven huge launching pits of No. 8 Spaceport belched torrents of incandescent fire. The racing fleet, a handful of streamlined silver daggers, stabbed madly upward toward outer space. The uprushing torrent of air that followed bore with it the swelling roar of the multitude packed in the viewing stands surrounding the Spaceport.

The fifty-seventh running of that Great Classic of Rocketry, the Lunar Trophy Race was under way. Some of those eleven ships would never return.

Far out past the stratosphere the Deauville special plunged on a fraction of a second ahead of the fleet. Rusty Barnes and Sooi-Lynn struggled painfully out of their take-off blackout. The little Venusian retched miserably; blood dribbled out between his compressed lips. Rusty automatically wiped away the trickle of blood that oozed from his own nostrils. He quickly checked the position of the rest of the fleet with the proximity gauge.

"My God, that few feet per second extra acceleration does things to you," he grunted as he felt his stomach untangle itself from round his spine. "But we're leading them."

Sooi wiped his lips.

"Sometimes I wonder if it is worth it," he wheezed. He would spit blood for the rest of the race and two months after.

"It will be if we win this time." Rusty said grimly. "If we can take the top haul this is our last race. With that purse in the pool the Pilots'

Union will be able to pull out and start their own Rocket Transport business. Then maybe some of us will get to die with our stomachs inside us."

Sooi smiled wanly. "With this ship we'll win all right, if it's a straight race," he added.

"It'd better be." Rusty muttered, "But I wouldn't be surprised if old Jon Carew and the Interplanetary Rocket Transport outfit tried something before we're through. We'll have to keep our eyes open; those rats won't stop at anything."

A STREAMING plume of brown dust followed the car as it screamed along the dirt road, heading for No. 8 Spaceport. It swung around a corner, took it too wide, mowed down a line of fence posts and plunged to a jarring stop in the roadside ditch. The girl at the wheel dazedly shoved a mass of copper-red hair out of her eyes as she got her bearings. She slammed the car into reverse. The atomic engine howled but nothing happened. She swore with desperate viciousness as she tried the forward speeds but there was no action.

"That's pretty strong language for a young lady to use ain't it?" The girl swung around.

"Uncle Morgan! Where did you come from?"

"Didn't come from nowheres Myrna. I live around here." Some of the agony of blasted hope faded out of the girl's face. She gripped the little grey-bearded man by the shoulder.

"Uncle you've got to help me. I've got to get to the Spaceport."

"Whut fer?"

"A man's life depends on it! I've got to get there before the race starts."

"Cain't do that gal, they've took off already. Seen 'em myself." The girl stared at him unbelievably, "My God I'm too late." The words were just a whisper; she seemed on the point of collapse.

"Too late for what?" Morgan snapped.

"Rusty Barnes." The girl said tonelessly. "He's going to be killed." She sank down in the car seat. Morgan yanked her up.

"Come on girl. Pull yourself together. Who's going to kill him? Who's this Rusty Barnes? One of them dern fool racing pilots I bet." The girl gulped.

"One of them? He's the best pilot in the race, that's why they're after him. Jon Carew is going to have him killed."

"Jon Carew? That old rat still up to his lousy tricks? Whats he going to do? How'd you hear about it?"

"I'm his secretary. If Rusty wins this race he and the Pilots Union are going to form their own Rocket Transport line with the best pilots in the system. Carew doesn't want that kind of competition."

"Sounds like Carew all right. Come on gal. He was eliminating competition when he gypped me out of the patent rights on the Mark VI fuel injector. Maybe we can throw a monkey wrench."

"What do you mean Uncle? What can we do? The race was already started. Where are we going?"

"Come along and don't ask so darn many questions. Carew won't try anything till the fleet is out of range of the Earth observation stations. Maybe we can get in touch with this Rusty Barnes before anything happens."

"Well let's hurry. Don't just walk." The girl urged as they started across the field towards a collection of weatherbeaten farm buildings. Morgan jerked his thumb toward the ditched car.

"More haste less speed gal," he said laconically. He led the way to a big barn. They stepped into the dim, musty interior through a small side door. An indistinct shape loomed hugely in the gloom. Morgan snapped a switch. A ribbon of light appeared along the ridge of the roof. It widened

as the halves parted and slid down outside the walls, leaving the building roofless.

A giant cubical box, measuring some twenty feet each way stood in the center of the building. In the side that Myrna could see were two small, square windows, one above the other. A system of shutters was rigged around all six sides of the box. They were open now but when they were shut they would conceal it entirely. There were even sleeves on the four stumpy legs on which it stood. The shutters were finished with a peculiarly clear, high-lustre varnish and apparently designed to operate from inside the box.

"What is it Uncle?" the girl asked in bewilderment. "Some kind of incubator."

"Course it ain't, y'fool gal. Come on in." The floor was two feet thick and strangely dead and solid underfoot. A spacious room covered the whole floor area. There was a studio couch, a comfortable bunk and two well-worn armchairs. Everything was bolted down. On the far side of the room a ladder led up through a square trap, apparently communicating with the upper level.

A table equipped with a console of small levers stood in the middle of the room. A group of Bowden control cables led up from the levers, fanned out along the ceiling and disappeared into small fittings in the outer walls. These were the shutter controls, Myrna concluded.

"Shut the door and tighten those latches." Morgan directed as he seated himself at the control table. "I been waitin' for an opportunity like this," he muttered and pulled down five banks of levers. Myrna screamed in startled alarm as she stepped back from the door and floated weightlessly up to the ceiling. She bumped gently against it and started down again.

"Uncle! Help!"

"Cut your clatter gal!" Morgan ordered as he sat with his feet tangled securely in the chair rungs. "If this

dang business works that boy-friend of yours has maybe got a chance."

"**WE'RE** dead of course and still alive." Rusty Barnes muttered grimly. "If Carew and his outfit are fixing to do anything they've gotta move quick. Once we've swung around the moon there's nothing in Space can touch us. How's the rest of the fleet doing?"

Sooi checked the proximity guage.

"They're all ahead of us but one. We're decelerating right on schedule."

"Good." Rusty grunted. "We're going to cut this turn around the moon so short it'll make their hair curl. We'll be on our way back by the time they make their turn further out." It was only the terrific acceleration of the Deauville Special that made it possible for Rusty to take the ship around the dangerous inside course. The rest of the racing fleet was pulling away from them as they decelerated, permitting the lunar gravity to warp their course into half an orbit around the satellite.

The moment of their acceleration had to be timed to the hundredth part of a second. The entire power output of a racing rocket was concentrated in drive. There were no manouversing jets, such as were included in the equipment of the slower commercial ships. Nothing less than the gravitational field of a major satellite would have any appreciable effect on the terrific course speed of these man-made comets.

Rusty's eyes were glued to the course record needle as its black line precisely obliterated the thin, red hair-line representing their plotted course on the chart. He shaded the deceleration down a trifle.

"All the fleet past us now?"

"No, that one ship is still astern of us. It's right on our course."

Rusty grunted. "No one else's got enough acceleration to try this stunt. Who is it?"

Sooi snapped on the rear visi-

screen and brought the image into focus.

"Oh-oh." There was a hint of alarm in his voice. "It's number fourteen, one of Interplanetary's entries."

"Huh? Carew's gang! They must have some reason for hanging on our tail."

"There's your reason!" Sooi screamed. Rusty snapped his gaze to the visi screen. He saw the trailing ship clearly in focus. A sudden spurt of flame stabbed out from the nose.

"My God! They've launched a torpedo!"

"Rusty! It's going to hit us? DO something! Pull over!"

"Pull over? What the hell do you think this is a bleedin' wheelbarrow we're pushing?" With desperate, expert speed he did all that could be done in the way of manouversing a racing rocket in the few seconds before the torpedo overtook them. He cut the inside half of the drive tubes and their course shaded imperceptibly toward the moon.

"Rusty, we'll crash that way! Our course is already cut down to the last possible degree!"

"We'll have to chance a landing on the Moon!" Rusty grunted, intent on the controls. "We haven't enough course speed to get outside that torpedo. If it touches us we'll be blown to little smidgins!"

SOOI looked sick.

"And if we miss it the Moon will get us." he added hopelessly. "The Pilots Union won't get their rocket transport outfit this trip:"

The streaking torpedo surged up astern. Sooi held his breath as it slid smoothly between their tail fins, seemed to hang for a moment outside their observation port, so close they could have touched it, then it was gone, vanishing in the glare of the sun ahead.

"Well we won't die that way." Rusty muttered tensely as he cut the outside tubes of the drive and opened

up on the bank on the moonward side, reversing his previous manoeuver. "We might pull out of this yet."

"We're working against the Moon now." Sooi reminded him. For a long, aching moment they watched the creeping black line of the course recorder. It seemed to steady, then almost imperceptibly it dropped further away from their plotted course.

"They've got us." Rusty muttered grimly. "Stand by to crash!" They were swinging in, the deadly, insistent drag of the Moon warping their course into an ever tightening curve in spite of the screaming power of the drive. They raced their shadow below them as it wiggled and humped madly over the nightmare tangle of broken Lunar landscape.

Their shadow drew inexorably closer, growing ominously bigger as they raced toward their rendezvous with disaster.

Ship and shadow coincided.

They ripped across the floor of a vast, coliseum crater. Dust, rocks and rubble towered soundlessly to a terrific height above the bleak, airless surface of the moon. Rusty and Sooi blacked out in the crashing thunder of destruction as the ship piled against the far wall of the crater.

The screaming hiss of escaping air dragged Rusty back to consciousness. Already his skin was beginning to burn with the strain of internal pressure. Sooi was still out, blood streamed from his mouth and nose. Rusty struggled madly from his shock harness and tore at the fastenings that imprisoned the little Venusian.

Blood welled sickeningly into his throat and burst out from under his finger-nails as he fought the obliterating agony of oxygen-starved lungs and dragged his co-pilot through the emergency lock into the fuel room. He slammed the door and collapsed.

"Rusty! Rusty, wake up. We're losing air!" It was Sooi's insistent voice that brought him back to life.

"We'll have to find the leak and plug it," Rusty mumbled dazedly as he struggled to his knees. They scrambled madly around the confines of the tiny cabin, tracking down the faint, fugitive voice of the leak. Sooi located it under the sash of one of the direct vision ports. He slapped a handful of emergency patching cement over the leak and the stillness within the cabin was absolute. They sat staring at each other across a gap of silence bridged only by their labored breathing.

"About one hour," Sooi said weakly.

RUSTY nodded wordlessly, "There's always these," he said, and touched the tiny capsule of death that hung by a thin chain around his neck. All the racing pilots carried these tiny lockets for just such emergencies as this. That way they could meet death on their own terms.

There was a long moment of silence. Rusty looked past Sooi, outward to the bleakness of the Lunar landscape. The last of the dust thrown up by the violence of their crash was sifting rapidly down, laying a soft, gray veil across the port. It tempered the brilliant white glare of reflected sunlight from the colossal, broken walls of the mighty crater. In a few minutes it would conceal them entirely from a possible rescue ship.

Oddly impelled, he lifted his eyes to the incredible grandeur of the shattered, fairy battlements that reared far above them. This his eyes froze unbelievably on a tiny object that seemed to float high up toward the top of the crater wall.

"Sooi!" he gulped, "C'mere. Look! Do you see what I think I see?"

"Yeah. What is it? It isn't a ship, they don't build ships like that."

"Damned if I know," Rusty muttered, "but it's controlled; it's moving." Breathlessly they watched the incongruous cube increase in size as it floated uncertainly toward them. As it approached they could see parallel lines along its faces. They shimmered

SFQ

and quivered with movement. Awkwardly it inched its way down, lurching dangerously as it approached the surface. Then it dropped abruptly, the four stumpy legs sinking solidly into the light pumice dust.

"Well it looks like some human built it." Rusty conceded, "Look at those lines of bolt heads." He was interrupted by the broken, stuttering scream of the emergency radio receiver.

"That's human enough," Rusty barked in amazed relief. He switched the receiver onto voice.

"Hello in there. Are you alive?" The voice sounded impatient. Rusty snapped on the transmitter.

"Sure, we're all right. Who are you?"

"Dont' ask a lot of dang fool questions. Are you hurt? How's your air holding out?"

"Got about an hour. Can you get us out? What the devil's that crate you're riding in?"

"Sure we kin git y'out, y'dern fool. Whataya think we came for? And mind how you speak about this ship."

"Ship— ? You mean that thing's a—?"

"Rusty, hurry and get out of that wreck." A girl's voice commanded worriedly. Rusty felt suddenly cold. He clicked off the transmitter automatically. He knew that voice.

"It's Myrna Morgan, old Jon Carew's private secretary." He answered Sooi's inquiring look. "There's something behind this," he turned back to the transmitter.

"Listen, what's going on? Did Carew send you?"

"Goldern it, do you want to be rescued or don't you?"

"Carew or not, I'm not going to die here," Sooi cut in.

"How are we going to get over there?" Rusty asked. "That direct sunlight will burn us up in a matter of seconds even without emergency suits on, and we haven't got enough air to wait for night.

"Y'got any refrigerator fluid left?" the receiver demanded.

"Sure, plenty. But what's that got to do—"

"Get some blankets or bandages or something, soak them in the stuff and wrap them around you. That'll keep you from cookin' till y'git here. Now quit stallin' around."

"O. K." Rusty snapped. He clambered into his emergency suit. Sooi followed his example. Together they rifled the first aid kits of their bandages, ripped the sponge rubber out of the crash pads and locker seats, grabbed anything that would absorb liquid and bundled it quickly around themselves. Rusty tore open a service panel and smashed half a dozen of the thin refrigerating pipes with one swing of a wrench. The thin, blue fluid spurted out, they rolled around under the shower, soaking themselves completely. Rusty scrambled to his feet but Sooi stayed where he was on the floor.

The little Venusian had passed out again, the blood he had lost hadn't helped him any. With a grunt Rusty hoisted the clumsily wrapped figure to his shoulders and turned to the emergency hatch. It swung open and he struggled outside.

The strange cube seemed to be right on top of him. It was impossible to judge distance in that airless void. His feet sank knee deep in the light, fluffy pumice dust. Direct sunlight, untempered by any atmosphere burned fiercely down. In a moment they were enveloped in a cloud of vapor as the refrigerator fluid boiled off them. It hid the cube completely as he plunged blindly ahead through the clinging dust. A couple of stupendous leaps took him clear of the cloud. The cube seemed a long way off now. He leaped again and crashed jarringly into it.

He staggered back then started around the giant box, looking for a way in. The billowing cloud of vapor trailed and swirled around the cube.

He found the door and clambered inside with his burden.

As soon as the door was closed air started hissing into the room from above. A trapdoor in the ceiling opened and two figures descended. Rusty flung off his wrappings and opened his helmet.

"Rusty! Are you all right?" The girl asked with relief in her voice.

"Sure I am, but what are you doing here? Is Carew in this somewhere?"

"No he ain't," Morgan snapped. "Myrna here claimed Jon Carew was out to get you. We came along to see what we could do about it. Sorry we couldn't save y'r ship young feller but we did get pictures of your craft being attacked."

"Well we were sure glad to see you," Rusty said fervently, "my copilot here is kinda played out. Have you got a first aid kit?" Sooi responded quickly to the stimulants Myrna ministered.

Rusty looked around him and suddenly realized the incongruity of this comfortably furnished room on the surface of Earth's satellite.

"Say—wait a minute," he said slowly. "What the heck are you and what the devil is this?"

"This is my Uncle Henry Morgan," Myrna supplied.

"Glad to meet you," Rusty said quickly. "But how does this thing operate? I didn't see any rocket tubes."

"Course y'didn't, y'dern fool, there ain't any."

"But how—"

"How nothin'. I never could see no sense in blastin' around in a rocket astraddle of enough explosive to wreck half the Solar System. This here's a degravity ship."

"A de—?"

"—gravity ship, and pull y'r eyes back in." Rusty gulped and recovered with an effort.

"I'm afraid I don't get it," he said uncertainly.

"'Course you don't," Morgan snapped. "I bin workin' on this for

the past ten years, ever since old Jon Carew pirated my last invention. But I got him now; this'll finish off the derned old skunk." Morgan's chin whiskers jutted belligerently. "His rocket fleet won't be worth a hootin-hell when I get these things goin'. They're cheap to build, they don't use no fuel an' there ain't no limit to the load they kin pack."

"Y-Y-Yeah—but how does it work?"

"Nothin' to it son. I just polarized gravity, same as light an' cut it off with two polarising screens."

"BUT just a minute, gravity isn't like light."

"'Tis too," Morgan snapped. "They're both radiant forces 'cept gravity radiates in reverse. All I had to do was find the right kind of crystal to polarize it. Took me ten years but I finally got it. Turned out to be grape sugar."

"Grape sugar? But how—?"

"Just treat it right in the presence of the correct catalysts an' it works. Y'git the right syrup, paint it on a flat surface, at right angles to gravity, y'see, an' let it crystallize. Then y'give her another coat with the surface stood on end, in line with gravity an' the crystals form the opposite way. The first coat polarizes gravity and the second won't let the polarized force through. Nothin' to it. Anything above the two coats is weightless."

Rusty blinked dazedly, well—go on," he said weakly.

"Glad to son," Morgan agreed happily. "Guess y've seen the shutters all round this here construction. Well, they've all got a double coat of the crystals an' they're impervious to gravity. When I wanted to leave the Earth I just closed her off by shuttin' the shutters, opened up the ones toward the Moon and the Lunar gravity came in through the spaces between. Yanked us out here in no time. We been waitin' fer you."

"Waiting?" Rusty burst out, "—y-

you mean you traveled faster than the Deauville Special?"

"Sure, this ship steps along at a pretty fair clip."

"Well what are we waiting for now?" Sooi asked weakly from the floor. "Let's go home."

"Now your'e talking sense." Morgan agreed and moved to the control table. Rusty followed him interestedly. Morgan pulled down five banks of the short levers. Rusty's step carried him in a slow somersault to the ceiling. He yelled in astonishment. Myrna burst into laughter and Morgan cackled a dry accompaniment.

"Guess y'didn't expect that, young feller, huh?" Morgan chuckled, then stopped abruptly. Somehow something didn't seem quite right. Without a word he opened the side shutters and there, ominously dark with the swift approach of Lunar night, the tremendous walls of the mighty crater towered threateningly above them. They hadn't moved. There was a sudden stillness in the room as the others sensed Morgan's tension.

"Somethin' must be hanging on the outside," Morgan muttered.

"Dust—on the top?" Myrna suggested tentatively. Morgan shook his head.

"On top it wouldn't make no difference, the bottom shutters would shield it." Myrna subsided and they stared in disquieting silence at the looming bulk of vast crater wall.

CRASH!

The landscape vanished in a blast of incandescent flame. A mighty surge of concussion slammed them into a heap in one corner. The floor tilted sickeningly, teetered a moment and dropped back.

"An atomic bomb!" Rusty yelled incredulously.

I"SH zshat damn Carew agin'!" Morgan yapped. "Where'sh my teesh?" Myrna restored them to him and they crowded back to the window in time to see another fountain of destruction leap up further off. A ship

flashed out of the night and into the sunlight above them. Its bow tubes flared madly, warping its course as it came round to dive on them again. They watched helplessly as it seemed to hang motionless at the apheilon of its turn.

"They're going to get us!" Sooi moaned. Then the ship burst silently into an intollerably brilliant nova.

"Well, I'll be damned," Morgan breathed incerdulously, "Sompen' musta hit it."

"My God it must have been that torpedo that missed us!" Rusty realized in amazement. "That ship followed us in. Of course he'd be on the same orbit as the torpedo. They just coincided."

"They may be other ships," Myrna said slowly. "We can't stay here." Morgan didn't answer, he was staring fixedly at the window.

"By golly there's our trouble!" Ice on the windows!"

"You're crazy!" Rusty barked. "There isn't any atmosphere on the moon."

"Cain't help that, there's ice on our windows. Look there." Rusty looked closely at the delicate filigree traced on the outside of the window. Somehow it didn't look like water crystals but he'd seen that formation somewhere.

"Refrigerator fluid!" he burst out. "It must have evaporated off us and condensed on the ship when the sun went down. It'll be cold out there now—cold enough to freeze even that stuff. But there can't be much of it. That wouldn't hold us would it?"

Morgan nodded slowly.

"It sure would son. The lift of this ship depends on the pull of the Earth on the mass inside it. There's too feet of lead in the floor for the Earth to pull on but the Earth is a long way off and we're sitting right on the Moon. It wouldn't take much outside for the Moon to pull on to counteract the drag of the Earth."

"Couldn't we go out and scrape it off?" Myrna asked.

"Think you could do it without damaging the varnish?" Morgan snapped.

"Too damn bad we can't ask the Earth to turn on more gravity," Rusty suggested.

"Huh?" Morgan stared at him. "Maybe you got something there son. Maybe if we give the Earth something more to pull on—"

Myrna got it. "Fill the ship up full of Moon-rocks!" she finished triumphantly.

"Load a ship to make it go? You're—"

"She ain't neither," Morgan snapped. "That's just what we gotta do. Fill this lower room and we'll about double our mass."

"Sounds screwy to me," Rusty muttered as he helped Morgan into Sooi's safety suit. Sooi protested weakly but he was in no condition to do anything else. They shoved him upstairs with Myrna, pumped the air out of the lower room and started filling it with rock fragments.

They worked fast in the light Lunar gravity and the room filled rapidly. Myrna was right, there were other ships. Twice the lambent trail of an exhaust streaked by, high above the crater. Stabbing columns of incandescent destruction fountained silently into the blackness of the Lunar night but they were not even close. Evidently the ship was letting loose at anything that resembled a cube and on the broken surface of the Moon there were countless crystalline fragments that could be mistaken for Morgan's ship in the dark. Rusty realized grimly the reason for the tenacious viciousness of the attacks of Carew's men. They had to eliminate their intended victims now to save their own hides.

THE job was done. They crawled back into the ship over the rocks and sealed the door shut.

"We've got to hurry," Myrna urged as they climbed into the upper room.

"The Earth is rising, it's getting lighter, they'll see us in a few minutes."

From the upper window Rusty could see a silver glow spreading above the crater rim, heralding the rise of Earth. Its full face would reflect a radiance ten times brighter than Moonlight on the Earth. There would be no chance of further concealment. He caught a glimpse of a curving exhaust trail far out over the rim of the crater.

That ship was still scouting around for them. No it wasn't! The rim of the Earth swelled ponderously brilliant above the horizon. The feeble light of the exhaust trail paled out in the flood of radiance. Then he saw the black, nose on, silhouette of the ship itself, heading directly toward them, a swelling black speck against the glowing silver background of the Earth's sunlit face.

"They've seen us! It's coming!" he yelled in sudden panic. Morgan snapped down the banks of auxiliary control levers, and they lapsed into dizzying weightlessness.

"Are we rising?" Myrna asked hopefully.

"Danged if I know," Morgan barked. "I cain't—"

A tremendous surge of power hurled them violently upward. "We're shore climbing now gal!" Morgan shouted.

"My God they've hit us!" Rusty groaned. He lurched to his feet and struggled to the window. "Open these shutters." Morgan scrambled to the control table and poked two levers. "Hey!" Where's the Moon? By golly we've made it! We're up!"

A fading exhaust trail glowed faintly as their erstwhile pursuer vanished over the horizon.

"Well, he won't git us now," Morgan gloated. "We'll be halfway to Earth by the time he turns around." The surface of the Moon dwindled rapidly below them as the Crate accelerated homeward.

JON CAREW gazed out over the vast concourse of people packed in in the viewing stands of number Eight Spaceport, but he didn't see or hear them; his mind was back in the projection room where he had just witnessed a pre-view of the official confirmation pictures of the race. He was a strong, ruthless man and it was his policy of savage opportunism that had built the vast rocket transport Empire that he controlled.

The only possible threat to the power he wielded was the development of some more efficient method of Interspatial travel. That was why his research laboratories were the most completely equipped in the System, that was why his agents knew the inside of every other laboratory from Mercury to Pluto. But if he was to believe what he had just seen all their efforts had failed.

The confirmation pictures of the Race, taken with the sealed, automatic cameras installed in every racing ship, had revealed a tiny, cubical object far off to the side of the course near the beginning of the Race. It could have been a flaw in one camera but not in ten and it had appeared again, or another one like it as the fleet swung around the Moon. It had moved with obvious control across the surface of the Moon and if there was only one of it, it had traveled faster than the fastest Racing ship built. Ten cameras couldn't lie and unless it was from outside the System they had passed up something, a big something.

Strangely compelled he lifted his eyes and there, before his astounded gaze was the original of the pictures, hanging motionless above the center of the Spaceport. The trained powerful glasses on the object. It was obviously Earth-built and the simple construction probably meant there wasn't much money behind it. It should be easy to handle this, whatever it was. A man came to his nod, listened to his instructions and vanished into the crowd.

MORGAN nursed the ship carefully lower, coming down in the spot Rusty had indicated. The ships of the Racing Fleet lay directly below, fanned out around a circle, their sterns toward the center. The pilots, waiting to start their victory parade, were gathered in the space enclosed by the oversize drive tubes of the Racers. They moved back between the ships as the strange looking box dropped jerkily lower. Finally it touched and Morgan opened all the shutters. Rusty swung open the door and crawled out with the others behind him.

"Hey it's Rusty!" Someone yelled in surprise.

"Sooi! You crazy little coot."

"You guys can't come around here; you're dead, you crashed."

"How did you get back?"

"What happened?"

"Shut up you mugs!" Rusty belted. "Listen! and listen fast. This thing is a Space Ship. It's going to put every rocket ship in creation out of business. We made it back from the moon in twenty hours. We figure to turn this Pilots' Union into a transport company and cut you all in on it but we've got to get rid of this ship before Carew and his crowd get hold of it. If you don't think Carew's interested just look who's coming."

"That's Carew's chief dirty-worker all right." One of the pilots yelled. "What do you want us to do Rusty?"

"These Racing ships have all got some fuel in their tanks and you can see where their exhaust tubes are pointing."

"We getcha Rusty."

"Say no more. C'mon gang, let's get going."

"Some of you men see that Carew's crowd doesn't get in here before we're finished," Rusty yelled.

Several of Carew's men came running; the pilots and mechanics waited for them in the dark alleys between the ships and efficiently slugged them into slumber.

The exhausts of the Racers blasted into action almost simultaneously. The center area became a blazing inferno. Within ten seconds all that was left of Morgan's hapless ship was a shapeless mass of lead, burnt wire and fused rock.

A dead silence dropped down over the whole vast crowd as they caught something of the drama of the brief, violent action.

"Oh-oh. Here comes Carew," Rusty said softly. The Pilots gathered behind Morgan and his crew. Carew approached and looked over the group.

"Myrna! What the devil are you doing here?"

"Oh, I just came along for the ride—you murderer!" she gritted. "And before you fire me I quit!"

Carew started and changed color slightly as he saw Rusty.

"No, you didn't get me this time," Rusty told him softly.

Carew didn't answer, his face reddened as he looked at Morgan.

"I might have known you'd be behind this."

"'Course I am y'dern fool an' we ain't through with you yet."

"So that's the way it is," Carew snarled. "But just remember, all of you, I play rough." He turned and stalked away.

Morgan glanced around at the crowd of pilots grouped behind Rusty. Sooi's face lighted up.

"Don't worry, we like rough games," he said and there was a growl of approval from the others.

"Yeah, but playing rough won't buy us equipment," Rusty cut in. "Where are we gonna get the money?"

"From Carew of course, he's got plenty." Morgan pulled a cartridge of film out of his pocket. "These are the pictures I got of Carew's ship shooting you down Rusty. That should be enough dynamite to blast the old rat loose from all we'll need," Morgan chuckled dryly.

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

Of Science Fiction Quarterly published quarterly at Springfield, Mass., for October 1, 1940

State of New York)
County of New York) ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Louis H. Silberkleit, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the publisher of the Science Fiction Quarterly and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown, in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Louis H. Silberkleit, 60 Hudson Street, N. Y., N. Y.; Editor, Cliff Campbell, 60 Hudson Street, N. Y., N. Y.; Business Manager, Samuel Dinerman, 60 Hudson Street, N. Y., N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Double Action Magazines, Inc., 60 Hudson Street, N. Y., N. Y.; Samuel Dinerman, 60 Hudson Street, N. Y., N. Y.

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5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is (This information is required from daily publications only.)

LOUIS H. SILBERKLEIT, Publisher.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 3rd day of October, 1940.

MAURICE COYNE, Notary Public,
(My commission expires March 30, 1942.)

WEAPON OUT OF TIME

By JAMES BLISH

It was obviously machinery, and looked like the remains of some sort of weapon. But it came from the unthinkably distant past, eons before the first men walked upright; what could it be? What manner of being had made it? They would find out for themselves, in their time machine.

OF the eleven men in the spacious laboratory the engineer Claypool seemed to have the least important rôle in the proceedings. He sat quietly beside MacAllister, smoking a pipe, only half listening while Kennedy called off names.

"Sell."

"Here," the ethnologist responded nervously. He was the youngest of the group, and his eyes shifted back and forth uneasily from Kennedy's fish-like ones to the monstrous apparatus back of the stage.

"Henders."

"Here," said Henders, watching Sell contemptuously.

"Miller."

The burly sociologist raised a hand absently from the rear of the room, where he was helping Heath assemble his automatic rifle.

"Blair. Heath. Blakeslee. Crowell. Jamieson. All here. All right, gentlemen, we'll get down to business." The expressionless face moved from side to side like a mechanical toy, surveying the assembled men. "We have quite a line-up of sciences here. First of all my science—paleontology." He turned to the table behind him and lifted from it a large oblong slag of gray rock. "You all know the details, but it's just as well to rehash them once more before acting upon them. This is a fossil, or as I prefer to call it, a relic, which was found in a Triassic stratum under my very backyard. I'll pass it around so you can refresh your memories as to its appearance. You'll notice that the im-

pression in it is not of any life-form which we know that existed in the Triassic era. In fact, it's not a life form at all. It's a bit of machinery, a rather complex bit at that. Badly damaged, but—"

"We know all this," Henders broke in impatiently. "It's obviously machinery, and we all agree that if it was designed by any race like us, it was probably a weapon of some sort. Let's go."

The fossil was passed negligently from hand to hand. They had all seen it before, and studied it, and only Claypool gave it much attention.

"What any machinery, weapon or not, was doing in an age long before the coming of man or even the mammals," proceeded Kennedy, ignoring the interruption, "is the puzzle we have set ourselves to solve. Sell thinks the pre-Adamites who built that machine were earthly in origin. I incline to the possibility of interplanetary visitors. In any case, it is likely that in a spot not far from where this house is now there was a sizable settlement of some kind, in which lived highly civilized—people. All of us, for various reasons associated with our sciences, would like very much to take a trip back into that remote year and see just what was going on—what people, millions of years before man, were present to build machines of such obvious complexity as the one which made our relic. Acting upon this assumption, I asked my friend Mr. MacAllister to work on the problem, since stasis-

fields are his specialty. This machine, which is new to all of us, is the result."

"Claypool built it," MacAllister said diffidently. "I only designed it. It's a very simple principle, based on a phenomenon discovered by Blanchet in 1967, which he called the Einstein Exchange. The government seems to be interested in it, which is why we had to do all this work in secret. An apparatus large enough to admit a plane would have been advisable; at present our preparation for such an expedition is somewhat inadequate—" Kennedy looked annoyed and the physicist broke off. "In any event the time shift is not a dangerous proposition. I've sent cats and things through and they came back all right. The process doesn't seem to harm them." He paused for a moment, then admitted, "Claypool sent me back for about ten minutes. It's a nasty-looking landscape you want to visit, even fifty years away from it when I landed, but there's no discomfort to the shift. Only a kind of lurch, as if you'd bumped the ground on the end of a seesaw, and there you are."

"What's the matter with the landscape?" Sell put in.

Henders swung toward him sharply. "MacAllister sends himself back there just to test a machine he'd never used before—and you're afraid to go with an armed party!"

"Afraid!" Sell snapped. "Someday I'll break your head, Henders, if I have to fight all the monsters of two billion years to get at you."

Kennedy's expression did not change, but he smiled to himself. Henders was not a valuable scientific addition to the party, but the enmity between him and Sell had been the only instrument which could provoke the younger man into coming.

"Are there any more questions?" he said. "If not, we might as well get started. Mac, take over."

MacAllister arose and switched on the current to the time machine which responded with a quiet unspectacular

purr. "Get the table out of the way, and everybody assemble on the platform," he directed, watching a large dial. "Put everything you want to take on there too. I've sent guns through without mishap, but I suggest that you point them all up in the air in case the shock should fire some of them."

With quick purposive movement the party climbed onto the metal plates, shouldering the guns as MacAllister suggested. There was a tense pause.

"Total strain 40," the physicist commented in a conversational tone. "Everybody set? Kennedy, I'm to keep the power on for you a week, right?"

Kennedy nodded, and MacAllister closed the master switch. The machine thumped once and was quiet again.

Two men remained in the laboratory.

"I THOUGHT it was supposed to be hot," said Henders.

"It should be," Kennedy returned, preoccupied.

They stood at the summit of a small, roughly conical hill, rising from a jungle like an ancient extinct volcano and a chill, misty terrain stretched away from them toward the invisible horizon. To the right lay a vast marshy plain; there was nothing else visible but the dense jungle, beginning at the very base of the hill. Nowhere was there any sign of a community such as Kennedy had confidently predicted. It was a savage and desolate country, enshrouded in cold fog.

"The vegetation is correct, anyhow," Kennedy commented, peering at the towering fern-like trunks. The ground at their bases looked slimy.

"I hope you're satisfied now," said Sell, shivering and staring in suppressed fear at the appalling landscape. "You and your damned theories. There's nothing here."

Henders sneered. "Afraid to get

your pretty new boots all nasty in the ooze, eh, Sell?"

"Shut up!" snapped the younger man fiercely, swinging on him. Miller stepped quickly between them.

"Stop brawling, you two," he barked. "Hell of a time to be bickering. Kennedy, what do you think has happened?"

The paleontologist squinted uncertainly off at the steel-gray horizon. "I'm not a physicist," he returned shortly. "But unless my own deductions are all wrong, which is unlikely, one of two things must have happened: we're at the wrong time or the wrong place."

Blair gave a short, uneasy laugh. "Easy to say, Kennedy. But what are we supposed to do?"

Something hooted softly in the motionless jungle, and Sell's shivering intensified for a moment. Upon Kennedy's wizened face no emotion showed, and his pale eyes continued to blink at an even rate. "If this is the wrong period of time, we've no way of knowing it or acting upon it," he droned. "If it's the wrong place, we have merely to mark our present position and go look for the right one."

"As large a layout as you describe ought to stand out like a sore thumb," Miller agreed, glaring at the others as if daring them to object. "That means it couldn't be to the—who's got the compass?"

"West," Kennedy supplied, looking down at the instrument in his hand. "No. On such an open plain we could see it. The choice is southeast, I should judge. The rest of this forested area seems too marshy to support a community of any kind. I can see water shining all through the northern sections."

"The sea is to the north, or will be," Sell said, biting his lip. "It'll be marshy all through here. I'll be damned if I'll wade through that. Did you hear that sound? Dinosaurs—"

"You're a couple of million years

previous to dinosaurs," Kennedy said. "And you've got a gun."

"What did you expect to do on this trip?" asked Henders, shifting his thumbs in his belt.

"All right," Miller broke in. "We'll plant the marker here and trek to the southeast. Heath, you and Blakeslee carry the autorifle. Kennedy, I guess you better stay in the middle—you're the only man that knows exactly what to look for. I'll point and Crowell can play rear guard."

"WHO named you captain?" Henders growled belligerently. The other shrugged. "Your funeral," he said. "Stay here and rot if you don't like my leadership. Sell will probably be willing to keep you company."

"Better the jungle. All right. What are we waiting for?"

The nine filed off down the hillside toward the waiting, silently misty jungle, and it closed behind them non-committally. Even Miller seemed nervous. Their eyes kept shying off from the path to either side. Only Kennedy plodded on doggedly over the treacherous ground, eyes on the heels of the man in front of him.

"Seems to be a path of sorts," Miller muttered from the lead post. "Can't tell if it means anything." "Maybe just an animal trail," Henders commented maliciously, and Sell glared at him.

The inexplicable cold and the absolute stillness of the wet air damped conversation and made of the forest a crouching, sentient thing, of every turn an ambush. The giant tree-ferns rose sheerly a hundred feet before bursting into showers of serrated leaves; and occasionally among the rough, stone-hard trunks they saw others of a chilling weirdness. They were sickly white, translucent, with darker central cores, and were topped not with leaves but with netted, ten-foot globes of the same leprous hue. They were the only objects which drew Kennedy's attention away from

the trail, and he frowned at them with an absurd air of concentration.

The others stepped after Miller with an equally absurd, mincing care, and the ground squished and trembled suggestively beneath their feet. They seemed either too intent or too nervous to talk. Once they heard that soft, sarcastic hoot, and wondered if its faintness were natural or due to safe distance. The jungle was even quieter than before, after the alien cry had died. The path, if it had been that, soon faded out and left them stumbling forward from hummock to hummock, grasping frantically at the boles of the cycads as they slipped.

"Going getting rough," Henders gasped finally. "Miller, stop a minute. I'm no damned iron man."

The group straggled into a small swampy clearing and sagged collectively. A sudden sharp crackling jerked their eyes in instinctive fright to the shrouded lead sky. One of the spheres topping the white trunks was splitting slowly in a jagged line, releasing a granular black cloud upon the moveless air. Tiny bodies, like B-B shot, pattered about them.

"Not dangerous, I imagine," Kennedy said without emotion.

"Kennedy, what are those things "

"Fungi. Just the fruiting bodies. There must be an enormous mycelium in the ground below. Possibly all the ones we've seen are branches of a single plant. Too delicate to leave traces in the rock."

"Those black things are spores, then—" He stopped abruptly and jerked his eyes over the huddled group. His lips moved silently.

"What's the matter?" Henders snapped.

For a moment there was tense silence.

"We're missing a man."

"Crowell!" Heath gasped, dropping the butt of the autorifle into the muck. "I thought I heard—he dropped back—"

Sell's lips twitched. "This damned

wild goose chase," he said hoarsely. "Something must have got him."

"Shut up," said Henders in an even voice. "Don't go to pieces yet, you half-man. He just wandered away when the trail gave out. He probably went back to the hill, but we'd better holler to him in case he tried to catch up with us and got lost." He raised his voice in a great bull-like shout, and the others joined him, Sell's cracked voice piercing hysterically through the other tones.

In a moment they were all hoarse, and the silence flowed back around them; the unfathomable depths muted the last echoes, and they faced the jungle wall in baffled fear.

"WE'RE not going back," Kennedy declared coldly. "I'm not giving up now. If he's on the hill, he's safe enough without us. If he isn't, we can't do him any good. Heath, get the rifle before it sinks completely out of sight."

Heath bent sullenly. "You're inhuman," he muttered.

"Somebody has to save a little reason here. If it weren't for my 'inhumanity' you'd none of you get back at all. Let's go."

The fearful procession wound again through the cold mists. The bogs waxed more and more treacherous as they moved forward, and even Henders was finally moved to suggest the inadvisability of going farther. Kennedy lashed him on with cold contempt, although there was not a hand in the entire party that was not skinned from frantic contact with the sandstone-like bark of the tree-ferns. Once Blakeslee's foot plunged down through a seemingly solid patch of grass, and he was hauled out, sobbing with terror, only after the turbid water had flowed up to his armpits. Both autorifle and cartridges were wet now, but they clung doggedly to them nevertheless. Someone made a feeble effort to sing about the old mill stream, and was snarled into silence.

The exposed ground was becoming more and more scattered, the incidence of pools greater as the journey proceeded. Soon they were moving beside a winding, stagnantly motionless stream, and jumping wildly over shallow greenish ponds. Blakeslee slipped again at the end of a spring and clutched at a translucent fungus stalk, and sprawled incredulously as his arms sank deep into the white substance. Before their astonished eyes the material of his shirtsleeves disintegrated into a fine haze of fibers.

"Grab him!" Heath cried. "The damn—thing's—eating him!"

Blakeslee began to scream in a continuous, high rasping note as they siezed him, setting their teeth on edge. Within the tenacious, sluggish jelly the skin on his arms was stripped away, dissolving into the bole itself—even while they tugged a deep red color spread slowly—

"Not a chance," Henders gasped, and at the same moment Miller snapped the safety on his pistol. At the shot the horrible high scream choked off, and Blakeslee slumped down so that his face fell against the deadly trunk . . .

"Come on," Miller said raggedly, and they plunged with desperate haste away from the scene. Heath stopped fifty feet away to be sick, then began to run blindly. The splashing that he made moved off at an angle to the sounds of the main body and faded slowly on the dank air.

In a moment Miller's sanity returned and he halted the flight. "My turn, since Kennedy's cracked like the rest of you," he rasped. "We've got to go back. We're crazy to go any farther. Do you still have the compass?"

"Yes," said Kennedy, his face once more under control.

"Let's go another way," broke in Sell, mouth working. "Let's not pass that—thing—I couldn't stand it."

Miller was counting again. "Heath is gone," he reported through blood-

less lips. All emotion had been drained out of him, and his voice came mechanically, like an old phonograph record. "He's got the autorifle, unless he dropped it."

"We still have the pistols," Kennedy said. "If there's really anything to use them on. Jamieson is gone, too."

"OH, GOD," Sell moaned. "Oh, my God. We'll never get back." He covered his eyes with both hands. Henders slapped him hard across the mouth, and he cowered back and was silent.

"Also," Kennedy went on mercilessly, "While we were working our way in, the water has been rising. Notice? I think the way we came is impassable now."

"You're a ghoul, Kennedy," Blair said. "Just because you can't drive us forward, you enjoy telling us we can't get back."

"This little creek looks deep," Miller pointed out. "Maybe we can swim part way."

Sell inched over to the brink and stuck his foot in cautiously.

"How's the water?" Henders asked, recovering a little of his normal contemptuous air. Sell opened his mouth to reply, and then suddenly jerked reeling away. A streak of black lightning darted back into the depths of the waveless stream.

"What was that?"

"Some kind of fish," Blair said, shuddering. "Like a barracuda."

Sell was convulsed with a silent, terrible laughter. "It must have been hungry," he gasped, giggling in short breaths. "Hungry. It took—the heel off my boot."

"It looks like we don't swim," Miller said grimly. "Let's get walking."

"Not me," Sell cried. "We haven't got a chance in that swamp."

"Then you can stay." Miller gritted his teeth and plunged back toward Blakeslee's corpse. For a moment nobody made any attempt to follow

him. Then Blair lunged forward and ran past him with an incoherent cry, and Henders followed. Blair was out of sight, but they could hear him thrashing through the muck. Then he screamed once, piercingly, and was silent. For an instant Miller, startled, paused, and the brief concentration of his weight was fatal. The ground broke beneath him and he sank swiftly. The last thing visible was his outstretched hand, opening and clenching convulsively. Then that too was gone, and a single great bloody bubble rose and burst. Henders did not stop to help him, but vanished into the cold mists.

"Miller tried to say something," Kennedy said, emotionlessly, like a child. "What did he try to say, Sell?"

Sell had been staring fascinatedly at the silent, oily stream. His shoulders jerked back. "You won't have long to enjoy it, Kennedy," he said in a clear, cold voice. "But I hope you'll think about the eight dead men on your soul. I'm a coward, but you won't have the guts to follow me."

With that he jumped deliberately into the stream. As the waters closed over him black shapes flashed, and the surface boiled. Kennedy stared after him, pale eyes blinking, and his fingernails drove into his moist palms . . .

FOR three days MacAllister waited sleeplessly by the stasis-generator, waiting for the big dial to indicate a body within its field. Once such a strain had shown, but reversal of the controls had brought him only an ugly gray amphibian about three feet in length, which looked at him sluggishly out of a nerve-racking third eye set in its flat forehead.

On the third night Claypool returned, and brought with him a diagram.

"Can I see the damnable fossil, Mac?"

The physicist waved tired assent. For a few moments there was only the crinkle of paper and the sound of the two men's breathing. Then Claypool sighed.

"You might as well turn the machine off, Mac."

"No," said MacAllister wearily. "It's only been three days. I promised to give them a week."

"It's no use," said the other, and pity showed in his eyes. "You see, I've just been checking a hunch on this fossil. Kennedy thought it was some kind of an extra-terrestrial mechanism, probably a weapon. He was half right. It's a weapon, but it's human-made."

"It's the smashed butt half of an automatic rifle."

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FEMINTOWN, MARS

By CLARENCE GRANOSKI

They called it Femintown, because the little Martian city was crammed with beautiful girls. Which was all very nice until those gorgeous blondes with eyes of baby-blue started out on the warpath!

EPHONY was groaning!
“Hmmmmm! Oooooohhhhh!
My poor head! . . .”

I felt sorry for the meek little fellow. Poor devil! His head, a couple of oversizes in contrast to his diminutive body, hung limply over the end of the bed and looked something like a big red apple on the end of a string—if you could call his long thin neck a string. Ephony generally wore large horn-rimmed spectacles over his studious-looking, innocent, big blue eyes—only now the spectacles were hanging precariously on one ear, and his eyes were closed.

It was coming again!

“Oooooohhhhh! . . .”

I held tight to the opposite bed, braced myself.

“Ohhh! Lord! My—my head! . . .” There were a few things I couldn’t catch—my own head wasn’t in such good shape either. “I’m through—I’m—I’m all done! . . .” Ephony was mumbling half incoherently. “I’m—I’m dying—I’ll swear off—I’ll never—Ohhh! I’m not going to—to—make it! . . .”

I could have laughed—but I didn’t. When the corners of my mouth started upward my head started buzzing like a gob of Enceladian hornets. I’ll tell you about those hornets sometime. But I wasn’t dying. And I knew Ephony wasn’t. Yuvac wasn’t like that. It just packed a wallop—kind of a subdued wallop that sneaks up on you like a snake in the grass—one you feel about eight hours later. And it was just about eight hours later now.

So naturally Ephony thought he

was dying. He didn’t take on Yuvac ordinarily. I didn’t blame him for groaning either, although I wasn’t thinking of Yuvac, that heady Martian wine known for its potentialities from Mercury to Uranus. Neptune and Pluto hadn’t heard of it yet. They hadn’t heard of Ephony, for that matter. But then, Neptune and Pluto were generally lucky.

I was thinking of Juanita, Ephony’s regular girl friend and a member of our Martian expedition. She was about four times his size—and probably packed a bigger wallop than seven quarts of Yuvac—and the proofs of his new thesis on Martian entomology ran to nearly 400,000 words. That was enough to kill almost anyone.

I gazed at Ephony speculatively. A trembling form sprawled diagonally across the opposite bed, he certainly did look like he was in bad shape. I got to thinking maybe I’d better swear off, too. Then my thoughts were interrupted. His big eyes opened and looked at me. For a second or two they were glazed and half crossed; then they cleared, brightened.

“That stuff—it’s dynamite,” he muttered thickly. His tongue was still hanging out; but his senses were coalescing. “If I may take the liberty of proper expression, what in—in hell happened?”

Boy—that stuff must have been dynamite! Anything that could successfully compel Ephony to use such terrible words as ‘hell’ just had to have something. I tried to sit up, changed my mind and fell back on my face. Somehow I managed to

wriggle round and face Ephony.

"What happened?" I echoed feebly. "Well, I, er—" I stopped. He had me—cold. I simply didn't know.

IT had been a hell of a bust, and had had its beginning in the control room of the *Earth II*, spaceship of the Ephony Entomology Expedition—a force consisting of half a dozen spacemen, including myself, with Ephony as sort of a figurehead and Juanita as self-assumed boss of the outfit. Ephony couldn't help that. Nor could we. Juanita was the impetuous type—somewhat bigger than any of the rest of us.

Well, when we were apparently stranded, our precious supply of aronite exhausted, leaving our proton tubes cold and dead, Juanita had suddenly blasted into the ship with a vial of the stuff. At that time aronite was the only known radio-active substance that would start the atomic action of rocket fuels. Instantly, members of the E. E. E. were more than just mildly interested. From what we could gather, Juanita had been on an excursion—a somewhat dubious excursion at that—into Femintown that night, and had returned with what our ship needed to return to Earth.

That called for a celebration. You can picture it. Here we were, Ephony's bug data all recorded, every one of us likewise yearning for dear old Earth, our fuel tanks full—and no aronite to start the proton rocket blasts. Then out of a clear blue sky—well, it was night but we didn't mind—in walks Juanita, tosses her furs contemptuously into a corner and yells "I got it!"

We didn't stop to ask her where she got it. Main thing was—she had it. So we proceeded to tap our stores of Yuvac. So help me, it was something inevitable, something that just had to follow in as natural a sequence as day follows night. A little later we quit tapping and made a good job of it.

It was around the time when the

navigator crawled on top of the instrument panel to sleep that Ephony made his momentous suggestion. Usually he was a poor companion, being generally much too occupied with his crazy insects—at times I thought that if Juanita actually did go batty enough to take the supreme plunge and marry him, she'd certainly deserve all the sympathy the nine worlds could give her, with maybe Eros and Earth's Second Moon thrown in. You may have a dim idea of our surprise, then, when he suggested that we go to a nite club in Femintown—yes, even the Martians have their nite clubs. But that was nothing. That fades into insignificance when the utterly impossible actually happened.

Juanita didn't demur!

That was epochal, history-making! But then, she's funny that way. Of course she'd taken on a few snorts of Yuvac herself—that precious amber fluid!—and when Ephony made his suggestion she'd been trying to coax the navigator to move over. She may have been tired though. I'm not much of a judge in such matters.

Ephony was free for the night! That was all that mattered. And events rolled out with uncanny smoothness. We packed the two remaining quarts of Yuvac in our furs and hightailed it for Femintown. We were singing at the time, but I've forgotten the song.

WITH its hundreds of domes and spires of glassite shooting into the Martian sky, Femintown is really unique. We gave it that name when we first arrived from Earth. It had another name as big as the moon—bigger—but it was in Martian, and I don't speak Martian any too well.

It was a city of women—and such women! I've traveled a little. I've seen the best in the nine worlds, and my eye for feminine beauty is appreciatively keen, but I admit I've yet to see an equal for a Martian damsel. Fact of the matter is, I was more

than elated over the prospect of going to Femintown. There were thirty-seven girls I wanted to get acquainted with. I know—I'd counted them during our daytime visits to Femintown for supplies.

We hit the first nite club with a bang. It was one near the center of the little city, and is the only one I remember going in. We barged in with a variety of whoops and heigh-hos, waddled across the spacious dance floor. In one corner we dropped into a couple of chairs, pulled up a table and hauled the jugs out of our furs. It was warm inside, but I don't remember whether or not we took off our furs.

Exactly twenty seconds later we were swarmed over by Martian girls! About thirty of them. It was a new experience for Ephony. Not that I'm such a killer with the ladies, but in the two months since our arrival on Mars Ephony had been doing nothing but chasing his damned bugs and insects all over the surrounding desert, and on those rare occasions when he had had time to visit the city Juanita had cleverly found other things for him to do. Oh, she was a great girl, Juanita. Great big and—but that has nothing to do with the nite club.

Generally speaking, Martian women are blonde. Very fascinating creatures, too. One thing struck me as being very nice. They all have a single type of hair dressing—a pompadour style over the top, and softened by flowing curls at the back and sides. Their features are exceptionally smooth and delicate, their lips a gorgeous crimson, their eyes a soft, deep blue. In Femintown they all dressed alike—in soft, flimsy gowns of a pure white Martian fabric. I'm not up on that stuff. For all I know the cloth might have been cambric or velvet.

IT was about the time that they had flocked around us like a swarm of bees that Ephony began to really enjoy himself. But then, so did I! I

opened the jugs of Yuvac. When they were gone I ordered more. Boy, I really hung one on. I've caroused a bit. I've guzzled Yuvac with the best of them, and still been at the table when the rest were on the floor. I've matched drink for drink with veteran soaks, and helped carry them out of places feet first. But that wasn't even a beginning.

Those girls must have lived on the stuff! Ephony and I were wallowing in it. We were so full it was pouring out our ears. Have you ever seen a dog come out of water and shake himself? Well, if we had done that we'd have splashed Yuvac all over the nite club. Our eyes were playing the damnedest tricks. The room started bouncing round like a fool top—only faster. And the girls! Hell, they were still the same as when we'd started!

About two hours and seven jugs later—I'm only guessing the time, though—the lights went out. A fine time for someone to turn out the lights! Or maybe it was just my eyes. Anyway, it got awful dark in an awful hurry. And when I finally came around again I was conscious of a strange, unearthly groaning nearby. That had been Ephony, of course. Then I discovered that we were in a sleeping chamber. Ephony was sprawled on one of the twin beds; I was on the other.

It was some minutes before I managed to orient myself to the new surroundings. The effects of Yuvac gradually evaporated. When the room stopped weaving like a scow in a tornado I eased myself off the bed to my feet. So did Ephony, only slower. He wobbled with marked unsteadiness for a moment, staring at me peculiarly. I saw him as though I were looking through the wrong end of Mt. Palomar's telescope. Then a curious fire flashed in his big eyes.

"Great Scott! The aronite!"

I dimly remembered the stuff.

"Well? . . ."

Ephony passed a trembling hand across his face. "I—I recall mentioning it last night!"

"Great Scott!" That was anything but adequate! My mouth dropped on my chest. 'My gracious' wouldn't do either, nor would 'darnit' or—oh, to hell with it. Recollection of the significance of that vial of aronite hit me like a thirteen pound maul. Last night, when Juanita had entered the ship, I'd been too elated over the prospect of going to Earth again to have been seriously interested. But now—aha, now it was different. Now I remembered that the women of Femintown considered aronite a god. Because it glowed in the dark—the qualities of radio activity were not yet understood by Martians—aronite was worshipped as the supreme deity. It occurred to me that the vial Juanita had had was the only one in Femintown. It had been suspended over an altar in the women's so-called Temple of Fate, a dome affair in the city's center. And Juanita had swiped the blamed thing!

Our horizon looked dark and dreary—bloody!

Our goose was cooked. At least if it wasn't within a short time it certainly would be paralleling the proper thermostatic conditions. We realized suddenly that the Martian girls had at last discovered their great loss. Theoretically, technically and practically—we were out on a limb!

WE were both thinking of the same thing—to get to hell out of here—when a tremendous shouting came to our ears. We rushed to an open balcony. In his excitement Ephony had difficulty in stopping, and if

I hadn't grabbed him in time, he'd have flopped over the glassite railing.

A hundred feet below us in a circular public square—I hope you can follow me—were the women of Femintown. Every last one of them! Boy, they were mad about something. They were all waving long swords and scimitars and knives, and howling as only women can howl. It was a hell of a din. I couldn't hear the speaker on the raised central platform. They couldn't either, for that matter. But I knew the speech concerned us—and the precious aronite now missing from their Temple of Fate.

I suddenly became aware of what had actually happened. They'd missed the stuff last night. Of course that was it. Its glowing luminescence was only visible at night, and would never have been missed in the daytime. And they didn't know where it was—until Ephony had blundered into spilling the beans.

Our situation looked very black—very black indeed.

I could see that the girls were desperate. It was a question of getting back their aronite, or our necks—and we needed that aronite, not to mention our necks. It dawned on me that we'd been a couple of goats. We'd been, practically speaking, shanghaied! Oh, those girls were clever. When we'd passed out at the nite club—I now knew that no one had turned out the lights—we'd been carted into this chamber—captives!

I grabbed Ephony's arm. "Come on! Quick! We've got to get out of here!"

Ephony must have had the same idea. He was right behind me as I dived across the room toward the double door.

Our flight lasted just that long. A split-second after I'd flung open the door we were going back the same way we'd come. Only now we were backing up! About a half a dozen Martian girls had been waiting outside to intercept us. Their swords were pointed at us menacingly as they advanced and we backed against the wall.

I thought we were done for. Maybe Ephony did too. At least, when he's excited he forgets his spectacles, and now they were again hanging on one ear. He'll break those damned things some day.

We stopped abruptly. We were as far as we could go. The wall rubbed my back and said: "Yuh can't go anymore!" Ephony was shaking like a palm leaf in a typhoon. I don't know what I was doing. And if I did, I wouldn't admit it. It tried to talk, but words wouldn't come. The swords were coming nearer and nearer. In a few moments they were touching us. I could feel the cold steel—or whatever the blamed things were made of—pressing against my stomach and chest. I didn't like it. I'm touchy about those things.

Then—the unexpected!

There was a howl from the outside corridor. The pounding of massive feet upon the floor. And Juanita barged in like a lion! She was yelling at the top of her lusty voice, and waving a glass vial over her head—the vial of precious aronite!

THAT was the end of the incident—for us, at least. Our scalps were saved. The infuriated Martian girls turned and gazed at the huge, old Earthwoman. Then they spotted a. Before Juanita could

explain, they'd thrown their swords away and swarmed over her. They have a habit of doing those things.

As I've said before, Juanita was big. Ordinarily she could have successfully matched herself against a score of Martian beauties. I'll bet a couple bucks on it—and I'm neither wealthy nor a gambler. But these particular beauties had a few other notions. They wanted their god back. And they got it. But not until they had poor Juanita on the floor, puffing and blowing like the blasts of a rocket freighter. Then they ran over her, raced out of the double doors and disappeared down the corridor with a burst of Martian laughter.

Juanita didn't feel much like laughing. She was sputtering and trying to get up when we reached her. Ephony helped her to her feet, and the three of us raced out of the building. As we ran down the streets of Femintown, Juanita began nagging poor Ephony. Her rage was something appalling. She was infuriated enough to have been two Juanitas. But I didn't listen. I was too interested in getting as far from Femintown as I could. The thirty-seven girls had long since been forgotten.

We got to the ship finally, running as fast as we could in the soft red sand, and as we entered Juanita paused long enough to close the double airlock. Then she plunged into the control room in our wake, roaring: "Quick! Start the rockets!"

Before we could get into our hammocks, the rockets were blasting viciously into the Martian desert, and the ship was skidding forward, rising on its stubby wings. Then we were in the air! I couldn't make myself believe it. The pilot pulled back the

vertical rudders. The rocket exhausts flared backward into the Martian landscape as we shot heavenward.

A few minutes later the automatic controls shut off the rocket tubes. The necessary liberation velocity had been attained, and already Mars was far below and astern. Acceleration pressure lifted instantly. We floated around crazily in the weightlessness until we finally were able to clamp on our magnetic shoes.

When I'd got my shoes on, and had managed to square off my mind to the new situation, I started toward the control room. Yes, I decided, this time it was final. I was going to quit the Triple E. I'd threatened to do that very thing every time we dropped back into the Earth's atmosphere. The rest of the crew even considered it a joke. But this time I was determined. It was quit or go nuts—and I was much too young to go nuts. Oh, I knew damned well that the next time the *Earth II* lifted off the home planet on another of Ephony's brainstorm excursions I'd be on board. I guess I wasn't so sure what I wanted to do—unless it was to hang around just to see what in hell could happen next in this screwy bunch—but one thing was certain.

I'd made up my mind to ask Juanita a couple of questions. In the first place, without aronite we couldn't fly. And we were flying—definitely! Something was screwy; something had to be explained.

I BLEW into the control room, all my courage up; but I changed my mind about those questions. Ephony was in the soup. Juanita was nagging him again—well, I guess 'yet' is the word I want. She had him backed

against the wall, and was really giving him a going over. I thought momentarily that I'd just as soon face the Martian girls and their swords. certainly, I didn't envy Ephony's situation.

"And now I'll show you what I did!" she was blowing into his blinking face. "You stupid men would never have thought of it. Turn off the lights!"

In the Triple E, when Juanita barks commands things happen. The navigator—his face was a pale yellow, but he was up and around again—complied hurriedly. The blackness of space enveloped the interior as the overhead lights blinked out.

"Now look at your control meters!" bawled Juanita.

We looked. At least, I looked to where they should have been. And there was nothing but blackness! Juanita barked another order. The lights came on again. The meters were all there! I confess I was dumbfounded—and few things dumbfound me. It was amazing. I couldn't talk. But I didn't have to, nor had I the opportunity. Juanita had the floor! And the ceiling! And the walls!

"They're not luminous anymore," she explained bitingly, "because I scraped all the radio-active compound off and put it in the aronite vial. And the real aronite I put in the exhaust excitors. We needed that aronite, and we can get along without luminous dials for the trip home. Maybe those Martians think they have their god back, because the vial will glow in the dark. But the radio-active glow will wear out and then—well, they'll have to get used to it—the hussies!

"And Ephony!" she howled. "You come here! I want to *tal'* to you! . . ."



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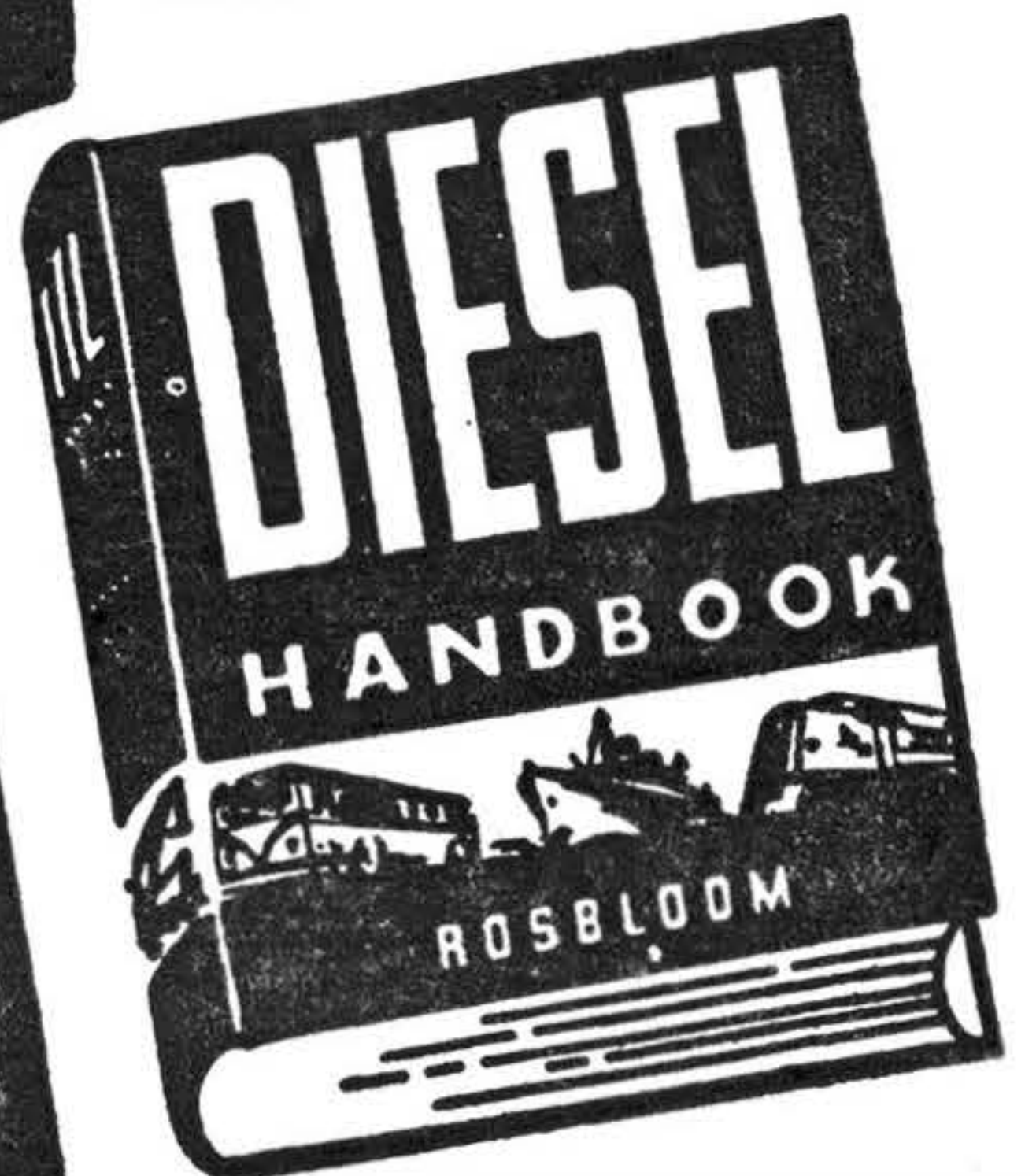
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