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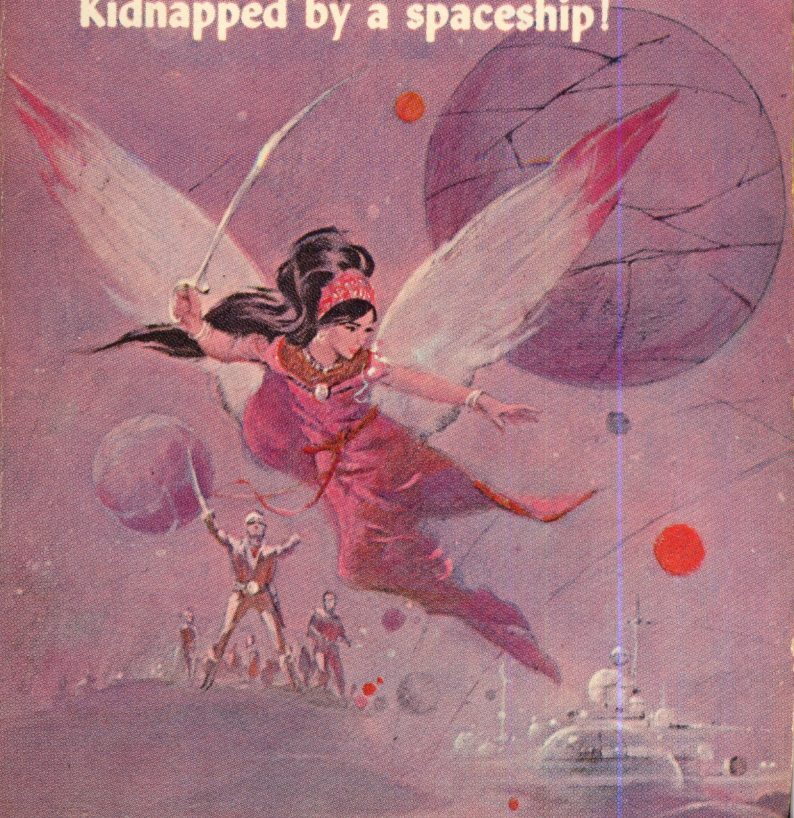
RAY CUMMINGS

TAMA OF THE LIGHT COUNTRY

Kidnapped by a spaceship!



SLAVE SHIP FROM SPACE

One midnight in August, the raids began. The White Summer Camp for Girls was struck first and when the confusion ended ten girls were missing and two were dead.

Hysterical witnesses claimed they saw shapeless forms lurking at the cabin windows. Several girls mentioned flashes of green-blue light. As stories trickled in from the surrounding countryside, it became evident that these inhuman invaders were attacking with a purpose—and from outer space. Why were the victims always young girls? How, despite the constant surveillance of the State Patrol, did the invaders strike?

A team of scientists and reporters left earth in a pioneer space ship to try and solve the mystery. Among them was the sister of the famous Guy Palisse who had disappeared into space ten years ago in an attempt to reach the moon. Reports indicated that he was dead, but near White Summer Camp the body of a winged girl was found. The last words she had gasped *were in English.* Was it possible Guy had reached his destination after all?

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TAMA OF THE LIGHT COUNTRY

by

RAY CUMMINGS

ACE BOOKS, INC.
1120 Avenue of the Americas
New York, N.Y. 10036

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An Ace Book, by arrangement with
Gabrielle Cummings Waller.

Magazine version serialized in *Argosy Weekly*.

Cover by Podwil.

To

Andrea van Waldron Hill
dearly loved granddaughter and
prodigious reader of these books.

Printed in U.S.A.

I

SCREAMS IN THE NIGHT

THE FIRST OF the midnight raids was made upon a girls' school on Moose Head Lake, in Maine. It was a summer camp, with something like eighty girls, almost all between the ages of fifteen and twenty. The affair—which occurred during the nights of August tenth and eleventh—was kept as secret as possible. It did not get into the newspapers, nor did the newscasters announce it until about a week later.

But it terrorized the immediate neighborhood at once, and little wonder. There were ten of the girls missing when, despite the confusion and terror, the others could be counted. Two more were dead. The principal, a Professor White, was wounded. Two of the other men teachers were killed, and one of the matrons.

I heard of the affair about noon of August eleventh. I was twenty-five years of age the summer when the mysterious attack upon the White Summer Camp in Maine started a chain of events which brought a menace to two worlds and utter chaos to one.

I am Jack Dean, a newsgatherer for the Broadcasters' Press Association, and occasionally I do some actual newscasting. I was in the New York studios of the B.P.A., and had just been on the air with a routine news account, when the aviator Jimmy Turk called me long distance from Boston.

"Take your plane and come up," he told me. His voice was vibrant with excitement. "Drop your work. Tell 'em it's business, the biggest piece of news this year—if you can get a release on it!"

Jimmy Turk was an operative of the newly established Interstate Flying Patrol, and a friend from my University days, though of recent years we had not seen much of each other. A short, stocky, red-headed little daredevil, this Turk—one of the most skillful wildest flyers in the service.

"Trouble up at Moose Head Lake, in Maine," he went on. "Meet you at Bangor—the Lanset Field. We'll go in my Dragon, so leave your tub-boat there. What time will you be up? Four o'clock? The devil! If you leave now you can be there by three, or earlier."

"For how long, Jimmy? An overnight job?"

"Tell 'em you don't know. A day or two. A week. Just tell 'em it's the biggest thing ever—if you get it for the air. It's been suppressed so far. I'm in it from the police end. Damn it, Jack, don't make me talk. There's no time."

I flew up the coast and met him at the Lancet Field in mid afternoon. He was wild-eyed, his fiery red hair tousled, his entire little body shaking with excitement. It was the

strain of waiting for me, I thought. With action I knew Jimmy Turk to be cool and calculatingly deliberate.

He hustled me into his powerful little Dragon—the smallest, swiftest thing that flies.

"I've been over there and back. It isn't far: half an hour or so."

We settled down in the tiny oval cockpit. He lifted us and we sped away over the forest reaches toward the famous lake. It was a surprisingly wild country for this day and age—a playground for summer vacationists, yet there were deserted lakes and unbroken stretches of primeval forest.

"Well, Jimmy, now that we're here, what's the trouble?" I said lightly. "Something drastic?"

"No trouble—nothing at all except about ten young girls abducted, a few killed, and a couple of other miscellaneous murders."

He told me all he had learned about it, which was little enough. It was wholly confused—a muddle of conflicting accounts, none of which dovetailed to make a rational explanation.

The White Summer Camp for Girls consisted of a group of log-cabin type bungalows set on a promontory of the lake, with a larger cabin as mess-hall. A boathouse with canoes, a dock, float and diving board were at the end of the point. There was a small stable with saddle horses, and a taxi runway leading from the lake to a hangar-garage which housed several small sport hydroplanes for those pupils whose parents would allow and could afford them.

The camp was one of the wildest portions of the lake. Unbroken forest lay about it, with only a few houses in the neighborhood and a dirt road leading to the nearest village three miles away.

The place was in a turmoil when we arrived. Planes lay thick on the water about the runway. The road was jammed

with automobiles. A police cordon about the camp managed to keep the crowd back, but within the lines there was a group of excited officials, investigators, and curiosity-seekers who had the connections to get inside.

The pupils—those who had not been killed, or abducted—had fled to their homes. Professor White lay unconscious in a Bangor hospital. What he had to tell, if there were anything rational, as yet remained undisclosed.

The affair was secret. It was kept off the air and out of the papers. But by word of mouth the news had spread like flames before a wind in prairie grass. We got through the lines. Jimmie had a conference with his superior; I wandered about the place, talking with as many of the excited people as I could, picking up a connected story of a sort for use, provided they let me give it out.

It was a weird, disjointed account. As far as I could piece it together, it ran like this:

At about midnight the previous night the camp was aroused by the wild screaming of some of the girls. The night was dark. This was a period of nearly full moon, but heavy clouds had obscured it. A fresh wind off the lake pounded waves on the shore and sang through the forest trees.

But above the noise the screams of terror-stricken girls had sounded. There were evidently screams from everywhere about the camp within a few minutes. But most of it was the panic of terror.

The original alarm came from one of the larger cabin dormitories where twelve girls and a matron were sleeping. The doors and windows were all open; the unbroken forest depths lay only a few paces away. Something or someone, human or otherwise, had made an attack. When it was over—in a few moments, no doubt, and before anyone from the adjacent buildings seemed to have reached there—ten of the

girls from the cabin had vanished. The matron lay dead just outside the doorway. One of the girls was found dead on the floor beside her bed; the other lay across the road at the edge of the forest.

The two men instructors, and Professor White, were discovered on the road; they had apparently been running toward the sound of the screams when they were struck down.

I had an opportunity later to see one of the bodies where where it lay in the police station of the nearby village. All the deaths were caused by a hole the size of a lead pencil which in some cases penetrated the heart, and in others pierced the brain. But there was no bullet. Nor had there been any sound of shots—every account agreed on that.

Some wholly soundless weapon had drilled the victims. The wound looked like a burn, as though a blast of intense heat had made a tiny round hole. Through flesh, or the bone of the skull, it was the same.

No one had seen any of the attackers. Hysterical pupils told of vague shadowy forms of men along the road. Huge men, some said, but others insisted they were small. There were other girls who claimed that they were not men at all, but weird monsters, half like beasts in pseudo-human form. And there was talk of dragging, shuffling footsteps in the underbrush—presumably the fantastic monsters dragging away their screaming victims.

Most of this was discredited by the investigators. The night was too dark and noisy to see anything, or hear very much. But the ten girls had vanished; there were five dead bodies—very tangible evidence! And the wounded, perhaps dying, Professor White.

There may have been strange footprints about the place. But if so, they were trampled upon and obliterated long before the authorities got there. There was another clue which appeared to be fact, since it was one of the few incidents

about which everyone agreed. The attackers used no lights, but there had been a few soundless, blue-green flashes in the darkness—tiny beams a few feet in length, instantaneous, like a miniature lightning bolt. Presumably these were the shots of some unknown weapon which had killed the five victims.

Jimmy Turk joined me. "Well, what do you make of it, Jack? Come here and meet Dr. Grenfell."

He led us to an excited group nearby and introduced us to a short, thickset, middle-aged man with a massive head and a stoop to his wide shoulders which made him look almost like a hunchback.

"Who was that?" I demanded, when, after a moment, Dr. Grenfell was called away.

"Important scientific fellow. Head of the Bolton Astronomical Research Society. He's investigating this—one of the first to get here this morning."

"What's astronomy got to do with it?"

"I'm damned if I know, Jack."

But we were very soon to find out!

Such was the beginning of the mysterious assaults. A heavy guard was placed about the White Camp that night. One or two of the male teachers and three of the women remained. Only one pupil continued to stay—an orphan girl who lived with the Whites both winter and summer. I met her a few days later.

Mrs. White was at her husband's bedside in Bangor. The professor still lay unconscious, hovering between life and death. His lung had been pierced; he had fallen in the road, struck his head and suffered a brain concussion. But the doctors hoped to pull him through. What had he seen in the darkness of that weird night? We all waited eagerly for the time when he might be able to tell.

The second night was as dark as the first. The cordon of

police and a few State troopers were hidden about the camp and in its buildings. But nothing happened. Jimmy's orders were to fly at about two thousand feet back and forth over the lake. I went with him.

We flew his Dragon without lights and with the engines fully muffled. Both of us realized that the authorities knew more of this thing—or suspected more—than we could guess. We were told to watch for any air vehicle rising or descending over the lake or the nearby forest; or for any strange lights. But there seemed to be nothing.

At dawn we landed at the village, turned in our report, and went to sleep. At about noon, Jimmy woke me.

"By the gods, Jack, listen to this!"

Reports were now coming in. Apparently the White Camp had been undisturbed, but from the town thirty miles away came the news that a young girl had vanished from her home during the night. It was an isolated farmhouse, with the girl's room on the lower floor.

Her parents said she had retired as usual; they had heard nothing, but in the morning she was gone. One of her window shutters had been taken off, the wood around its hinges burned as though by a blow torch.

"And there are others, Jack! This damnable, weird business!"

The reports continued to come through. Another girl was found murdered, her heart pierced by the same strange hole burned into her chest. She had screamed in the night and they had found her too late, lying by her bed; a chair been overturned with evidence of a struggle. And two sisters, sharing the same room, told of a horrible face at their window—gray, thick-featured, flabby. They had heard dragging, shuffling footsteps outside as the face vanished. One of them said it was like a man paralysed and trying to walk.

During the next few days a flood of incidents were re-

ported from this section of the State. But except for the first two nights there were no missing girls, and no murders. Merely strange things that girls claimed to have seen and heard. Some seemed to have a fair basis of rationality—however fantastic they sounded—but most of the reports were now the product of an overactive imagination.

"The thing is about over," said Dr. Grenfall, as he, with Jimmy, myself and one or two others, sat examining the reports in the dining hall of the White Camp. "There is nothing less dependable than reports from adolescent girls. This is hysteria now."

But there were some reports which were not the fantasies of hysteria. The aerial patrols had observed strange light-glows down in the forest. One pilot had even seen a shape rushing upward from the lake. He was several miles away from it and could not reach it with his light. He described it as shaped like a vague silver ball, mounting with tremendous velocity into the leaden clouds overhead. This was reported by one of the air patrols, fifty of which were on duty. And there were surface parties constantly searching the forests of the entire State. Every effort was being made to recover the missing girls, but it was all unavailing.

It was about this time that I met the girl pupil who was still living at the White Camp. Her name was Rowena Palisse. Romantic circumstances surrounded her. She was a ward of the Whites. Ten years ago her only relative, her elder brother Guy, had invented a space rocket and attempted to reach the Moon. The entire endeavor was acknowledged to be a suicidal voyage: he had provided no way of returning.

I had been fifteen then; I still remembered my boyish interest in this Guy Palisse Moonrocket. It had successfully left the Earth, but never was heard of again. My interest now

was renewed by meeting the sister of the adventurer who had so stirred my youthful fancy.

Rowena Palisse was twenty-two years old now—a tall girl of five feet ten or eleven inches. She was slender, with a regal aspect in her bearing. Her long brown braids hung forward over her shoulders in the latest fashion, and her long skirt and short-waisted jacket made her seem even taller than she was. She was handsome rather than beautiful, a girl of so queenly an air that she seemed born to command.

But there was a gentle, wholly feminine softness about her as well. I understood that she had been devoted to her brother Guy. As a child of twelve she had watched him with big, frightened eyes as his cumbersome rocket carried him away from her into the mysteries of outer space.

I found that look in her eyes now—a gentle, wondering softness, a wistfulness. There was a poise in her manner, a calm dignity; but under it the wistfulness was most apparent.

I stood before her, the afternoon when Jimmy Turk introduced us. She was a head taller than the wiry little patrol flyer. But I am several inches over six feet. She extended her hand and smiled up at me.

"I have seen you the past several days," she said. "I wondered when someone would introduce us."

I was with Rowena Palisse a good deal during the ensuing afternoons. I made the occasions. She was frightened at the events that had transpired, but there was nothing hysterical about her. Her mature, calm personality precluded hysteria.

I was more amazed at it when I realized that the investigators—there were a number of them who remained, including Dr. Grenfell—still felt that another assault might be made, and they were for some reason using Rowena as a possible decoy. She made herself prominent about the grounds, both

by day and night, though always carefully, secretly guarded.

Then there came a night, just a week after the original assault, when the trap was sprung. Dr. Grenfell, who was in charge here, had admitted me in the capacity of assistant . . . perhaps because Rowena did not hide her friendly interest in me; and because my imposing stature made me the logical choice to put up a good fight with any conceivable opponent.

It was a black, overcast night. There had been a great show of withdrawal of the guards that afternoon—though after dark many of them had crept back.

Jimmy and I, armed with automatics, crouched with Dr. Grenfell in the forest underbrush just across the road from Rowena's lighted window. She stood at it a moment, braiding her hair. And though there were a dozen armed men lurking close at hand to protect her, I marveled at her poise.

Her light went out. We waited, an hour or two at least. The heavy, leaden clouds hung close overhead. The wind swished through the treetops; the lake waves pounded the shore; the dark, silent buildings of the White Camp stood around us.

It began to rain a little. I was cold and stiff. Beside me the bulk of Dr. Grenfell's figure was a hunched black blob. At my feet Jimmy crouched like a coiled spring. There was a dim vista of the road, the roof outline of the building near us, and the vague black rectangle of Rowena's open window.

There came at last a sound, different from those of the forest to which we had listened for so long. An eerie, indefinable sound, quite close to us. We all three heard it. Dr. Grenfell stirred a trifle. Jimmy tensed, ready to leap.

A rustling of the bushes. Or was it out in the road?

I was swept suddenly with the chilling sense that this Unknown was supernatural—something advancing upon me, invisible, intangible!

From the darkness of the road the sound became clearer, turned into footsteps. But they were gruesomely unnatural, shuffling footsteps, like a wounded thing dragging itself heavily along.

A moment or two passed. Jimmy touched me in warning, but I shoved off his hand. Dr. Grenfell's flashlight was raised. We had arranged not to move, or shoot, until he turned it on.

Certainly something tangible was out there in the road. I thought I could distinguish a slowly moving, formless shape. Or perhaps two shapes, mingled in the darkness.

Abruptly there was another noise, a swishing, flapping sound—not on the road, but over it. A giant bird, perhaps, or a monster, flying. I saw something white, fluttering out there.

Dr. Grenfell flashed on the light. Figures appeared in the road some twenty feet from us—figures so fantastic that the sight of them barely registered on my bewildered brain. One was a gigantic man-shape; another, similar but smaller. And a great fluttering white thing behind and above them.

Jimmy leaped, with me after him. My shot and Grenfell's stabbed the darkness together. The forest rang with the other guards rushing and firing. From the road came an answering "shot"—a tiny stab of bluegreen light. It sizzled close past me, withering the shrubbery. The gigantic figure in the road made a slow but desperate bound into the underbrush. The smaller figure fell with our shots. The white thing was hit; it came fluttering down and lay quivering, flapping in the dirt of the road.

No one thought, those first moments, of pursuing the escaping figure. With swaying flashlights we gathered in the road. A man lay there, dead from our bullets—a squat, thickset fellow clad in rude garments of animal skins. His flat-featured face was heavy with pouchy gray skin and goggling, staring dead eyes.

Near him, the wounded white thing lay struggling in death agony—a girl, her blue-white draperies stained crimson with her blood. She was a small, strangely frail-looking girl, with huge blue-feathered wings nearly as long as her body. They flapped, and then were still. She lay sprawled on the road like a great dead bird.

We bent over her. She was still alive. For a moment she tried to speak, and it seemed that the words were English! I thought that she gasped, ". . . warn you . . ." but we could distinguish nothing else intelligible. She died seconds later.

II

FROM ANOTHER PLANET

THAT WAS the last of the incidents at the White Camp. But such an affair could not be kept secret. The world rang with it.

For a time, however, it seemed destined to be shrouded in mystery. Professor White died without recovering consciousness; the body of the man we had shot, and the strange winged girl with him, remained as the only tangible evidence. The giant figure which had made off into the forest was not caught. Nor were any of the missing girls who had been kidnapped, recovered.

There was a weapon found in the road the night when we gathered over the two bodies. It was evidently the projector of the bluegreen bolts, a small, globular affair, with a mesh of wires across its face, a firing mechanism, and what seemed an odd form of storage battery in its handle. What current it may have used could not be discovered. The thing was empty of charge when found; apparently its last available shot had been the blue-green stab which sizzled past me.

The two bodies were examined by many learned men before they were interred. Obviously the winged girl was nothing of Earth. Nor could the man be identified with any race on this planet. Yet the two were clearly not of the same race.

One extremely curious circumstance was brought out by this investigation. The man's body was short and abnormally thick-set—ape-like, but with a flabby, pallid, hairless skin. A

man of such build would normally weigh about one hundred and seventy pounds. I was present at the investigation. Gazing at the body, I was convinced it would weight at least that much. Yet on the scales it weighed a hundred and twenty-two. I felt the body . . . . small-boned . . . a light skeleton. And the flesh was putty-like, with what seemed to be microscopic air-cells in it.

The girl was an extraordinarily beautiful little creature, with great blue-feathered wings arching out from the shoulder blades. But her face, composed now in death, was humanly beautiful, with a delicate, ethereal beauty.

She seemed certainly no more than sixteen years old. Her clear white skin in life might have been flushed rose-pink. She had long, pale golden hair, blue eyes, and a strangely frail-looking body, yet rounded almost to matured girlhood.

She was four feet seven inches tall. Such a girl of our world, might have weighed a hundred pounds. This one, with allowance for the weight of the wings, weighed only sixty-five pounds.

Queer, inexplicable facts! And I could not forget that this dying winged girl had tried to speak to us in English. This, to me, seemed most inexplicable of all.

By the end of August the world was beginning to talk less of the affair. Then, on August thirtieth, Dr. Grenfell made public his theory, and explanation—and warning. It was more startling than anything that had gone before.

I give here, not the original paper which was couched in the technical and detailed phraseology of science, but the transcription made for the general public which Dr. Grenfell gave me to put on the air:

"The affair at White Camp occured on the night of of August tenth. On the previous night, upon one of the star-filled photo-diagram plates made in routine work of

the Lowell Observatory at Flagstaff, Arizona, a curious dot appeared which had no logical reason to be there. With a subsequent, longer exposure made a few minutes later, that dot became a tiny hairline streak of light, proving that it was in motion.

"Observations made at the Lowell Observatory that night established that the dot was something extremely small and quite close to the Earth—only a few thousand miles beyond the upper reaches of our atmosphere.

"The Mount Wyndam Observatory, near Summit, New Jersey, made similar observations during the early evening of August tenth. But the dot was moving fast, and soon disappeared to the northward. And the sky became overcast as the evening advanced, preventing further observation.

"The inescapable conclusion of both observatories is that this was some form of interplanetary vehicle hovering above our Earth. Spectrographs showed it to be shining with reflected sunlight. How far away it was, how great its velocity, or its size, could not be determined.

"Other strange facts came to light during that memorable week of August tenth, a shooting star of abnormal aspect was reported by many eyewitnesses in Maine. It fell very slowly from a point near the zenith toward the northern horizon. The "star" was pale white.

"A meteor, which generally is a mere fragment of star-dust burning with the heat of friction as it hits our atmosphere, blazes with a streak of fire for an instant; and then, consuming itself, burns out and vanishes. But this was different. It seemed to float down, glowing with a silvery light. A few moments, and then it disappeared from view.

"The observatory at Flagstaff saw nothing of this.

But at Mount Wyndam they saw it. The thing seemed a silvery metallic ball. It glowed with friction-heat and with sunlight. But when it descended into the night-shadow of Earth, it was seen no more. The time was 8:55 p. m.

"This, we believe, was a smaller vehicle descending from the larger one hovering out there in Space. As a tender comes from a liner lying outside the shoals, this silver ball came down with its occupants and landed somewhere in the forests or upon one of the lakes in Maine.

"And there were other facts: This small vehicle—though there may have been several of them—was observed subsequent to August tenth, upon at least two occasions by pilots of our patrol flyers. The sky, day and night, in Maine and vicinity, was during that week almost constantly obscured by heavy clouds. At a hundred thousand feet such vehicles would be safe from discovery.

"One of our climbing planes, with Navy pilot Rankin, present holder of the altitude record, on the night of August twelfth, and again during the day, ascended over Quogg, Maine to a height of sixty-two thousand feet—but discovered nothing. As a matter of fact, an interplanetary vehicle—this silver ball, for instance—could easily attain a velocity enabling it to follow the night-shadow around the world.

"We are therefore forced to the conclusion that the attacks upon the White Camp and elsewhere in Maine were made by beings of human form and intelligence from another planet. But which one? To our knowledge, whether or not any of the other planets of the solar

system are inhabited has been problematical. Yet—here *is* proof!

"We believe that these beings came from the planet Mercury, and have now returned there. Many astronomical and astro-physical phenomena recently observed lead to that conclusion. And so do the biological facts concerning the two bodies. Much of this is of too technical a nature to include here. I need only explain that Mercury revolves about the Sun once in eighty-eight of our days. That is the length of its year. On August tenth it and the Earth were near inferior conjunction—in other words, at their closest points to each other.

"The marauders came then, and now they have gone back, for Mercury, moving faster in its orbit than does the Earth, is rapidly drawing away from us.

"But why did they come? Certainly it was not with friendly intentions. Nor yet with the boldness of an invasion—an attempted conquest. They were prowlers in the night, using every effort to maintain secrecy, abducting our women—our young girls. Again, that is an inescapable fact: they made no move, did nothing save for the purpose of abduction.

"A dozen young girls have vanished. The prowlers have gone back into interplanetary space to Mercury or wherever they are native. The menace is over . . . *but is it?*

"We killed one of these men, and his companion, a fantastic young girl with wings. She was a beautiful girl, no more than a child—in racial appearance no more like him than he was like an Earthman. And, dying, the few words she spoke were English! That is indeed beyond all possible understanding of our logical science. Even the wildest conjecture cannot explain it.

"But we may imagine that the girl was not friendly to her companion and his fellows. She was captive, perhaps. With her dying breath she gasped something about warning us. Of what? Presumably the abduction of our women. And our imagination asks: Can there be so few women on Mercury that its men must come to Earth to steal ours?

"Is the menace over? When the winged girl and the man were shot by our guards the night of August seventeenth at the White Camp, a gigantic figure escaped into the forest. It seems impossible—with our aerial patrol and our multiplicity of watchers in the neighborhood—that one of the vehicles could have taken him away. We believe he is still on Earth. Every effort is being made to find him, but so far without success.

"Will the maurauders come back to rescue him, or to pursue their mysterious purpose? Can we believe that if the men of Mercury desire our women, the abductions are not to be planned upon a larger scale? Was this not a mere tentative foray to learn of conditions here?

"We believe just that! And when will the real attack be made? Mercury is speeding away from us now. Thousands, millions of miles are being added to the distance between it and the Earth. In eighty-eight days from last August 10th, Mercury will have completed one revolution about the Sun. But during that time the Earth will have moved along a distance requiring twenty-eight days more for Mercury to overtake us.

"Therefore, during the first week of next December, Mercury and the Earth will again be approaching inferior conjunction; again they will be at their closest point to each other. At that time we may expect another

attack. Undoubtedly it will be of far greater proportions, menacing the safety of our women everywhere in the world!"

III

THE ASCENT OF THE FLYING CUBE

THIS WAS put into the press and on the air on August thirty-first. I need not enlarge upon the public sensation it caused, which was mainly a combination of consternation, hysteria and ridicule. Then, within three days came a new sensation, more far-reaching, more astounding in what ultimately it was to disclose.

But at first it was merely an astronomical report—technical, and hence undramatic. It caused almost no public comment.

On the nights of September first, second and third, several observatories in different parts of the world saw what seemed to be a tiny cylinder just outside the Earth's atmosphere. Observational conditions were favorable. The cylinder—if it were that—appeared to be circling the Earth like a satellite. But with each revolution it approached closer. By September third it began to skim the thin outer atmospheric stratum, and glowed faintly with friction-heat.

It was very small—too small for an interplanetary vehicle. Indeed, except for the extremely favorable conditions prevailing, it would not have been seen at all. The scientists concluded, after many observations, that it had approached the Earth at a tangent, propelled only by the inertia of its own velocity. If it had once had power, that power must have been exhausted. The attraction of the Earth had caught and held it, the combination of forces resulting in its becoming a tiny Earth satellite.

But the centrifugal force of its velocity was lessening. Already the friction of our atmosphere was slowing it down. The Earth was drawing it closer. In a few more revolutions, coming down into the denser air strata, the friction-heat would consume it.

Both Jimmy Turk and I were in close connection with Dr. Grenfell and his associates. I had learned now for a fact what formerly had been only hearsay. For ten years, financed by the millionaire J. G. Bolton, the Bolton Society for Astronomical Research had been working to develop a practical means of conquering gravity. The problem was said to be solved.

I learned now that in the southern New Jersey workshops of the Bolton Metal Industries, an interplanetary vehicle was ready for trial. Had this weird affair in Maine not transpired, the Bolton spaceship might not have made its test flight until the following spring. The intention had been to try a voyage in the direction of the Moon, possibly to land there, and hunt for evidence of what had become of Guy Palisse and his Moonrocket of ten years ago.

The Bolton vehicle had now been rushed to completion. On the morning of September fourth, Jimmy excitedly arrived with the news.

"I've persuaded Grenfell to let us in on this, Jack! We're going, both of us!"

"Going? Where?"

"In the Bolton spaceship. They've got it ready! Well, ready enough, anyway, for a short test flight. They're going to try and get this cylinder that's circling the Earth. It has to be done at once—in a few more revolutions the thing will burn up."

We flew Jimmy's Dragon down to the Bolton plant that same day, where in the center of the huge cluster of buildings stood the laboratories and workshop for the building of

the spaceship. And among the busy and tensely excited scientists and mechanics, we found the pale, calm Rowena Palisse.

Strangely reticent girl, this Rowena Palisse! I told her so.

"Am I?" she mocked.

"I thought I knew you," I said. "We talked for a good many hours and many different times at the White Camp. You never mentioned this spaceship."

"It was a secret, Jack."

"You're going on it?"

"Yes."

"You must have known Dr. Grenfell for years. Somebody told me—"

"Yes. I have." She was amused. "All girls don't necessarily tell everything in their minds to every chance young man they meet."

I frowned, and at once she turned serious.

"When I was twelve years old, my brother . . . left me. I think, ever since then, I've been interested in astronomy—passionately so."

"Oh!"

A girl passionately interested in astronomy was something new to me. This was, indeed, a girl who in the midst of busy scientists did not seem out of place.

She added, "I studied under poor Professor White. He was teacher and father to me. And I've had some practical experience—I was one of the clockers of the last transit of Mercury. You see, even when I was a child, Dr. Grenfell promised me that someday he would take me to the Moon."

Her voice was slow, calm, but strangely intense. "I think I've been living for that—someday to get to the Moon . . . . My brother—"

Jimmy dashed up. "Come on. They say we can look over the ship."

We followed Rowena, who seemed as much at home here as any of these goggled, gray-robed laboratory workers. We threaded through a crowd in the inner yard and entered a square, flat building with a bulging dome-roof which housed the vehicle. It stood on a concrete platform, raised a few feet above the floor. It was an impressive, awe-inspiring thing: the first, the only one of its kind in the world. For a moment Rowena did not speak, but stood watching us as Jimmy and I silently gazed at it.

In outward dimensions it was an exact cube, each of its faces fifty feet square—a great sugar lump, girded with fantastic trappings. The upper face—the roof, so to speak—bulged convex with a dome-peak, as though up on the sugar-lump a little conical hat were set.

A low doorway with a thick bull's-eye pane was at the bottom of one face. There were round bull's-eye windows in tiers which indicated three stories in the interior. And girdling it near its middle, some twenty feet up, was a sort of outside balcony, or deck. Parallel with the base, this deck encircled all four sides. It was about ten feet wide, and eight feet high, entirely enclosed with metallic plates in which large circular windows were set like a row of portholes in an airplane cabin. The entire outer shell was of a dull-white aluminum color. The lights in the room glistened on it with a silver sheen.

"Well!" said Jimmy. He was speechless with awe. I turned and met Rowena's gaze. Her face was placid, calm, but her big blue eyes glowed with a fierce emotion more intense because it was suppressed.

"It is going to take me to the Moon, Jack—someday soon."

The Cube stood vibrationless. Yet somehow it seemed

trembling to be away—held here on Earth but eager to be gone. Like the restless spirit of man, which had created it, it was ready to dare everything for the adventure and conquest of the Unknown.

We entered the single lower doorway. I saw the door was some two feet thick, with mechanical fastenings upon its inner side like on the door to a bank vault. A few mechanics worked within, while the shop outside rang with the hum of the last details for the trial trip which was to be made the following night.

No one paid attention to us as we followed Rowena about the interior. I saw none of the mechanisms of the ship upon this visit, save in the cursory glance at the engine rooms and the banks of controls. Some time later, upon a far different flight than any one of us could now anticipate, Dr. Grenfell explained to me the fundamental operating principles and many of the working details.

Jimmy was not interested now—nor ever, for that matter. This Flying Cube was leaving tomorrow night to try and capture a little cylinder which was circling the Earth. And he was to be aboard: that was enough for him. His thoughts flew ahead, eager only to capture the cylinder. Twenty times he had asked me what I thought the cylinder actually was.

The interior of the Cube was divided into three stories. The lower was merely a single, low-ceilinged metal room with several small rooms partitioned off on two sides—cubby-holes which were an electric galley, storerooms for food and miscellaneous supplies, and a lower control room.

The main room looked somewhat like the small lounge of a dirigible. In the center of its grid-floor was a large oval bull's-eye pane—a window gazing downward. There were small rugs, and rattan chairs and tables. A phonograph, books set in metal shelves, and tables with chess, checkers and cards all added a feeling of comfort and relaxation.

To one side a narrow metal ladder, like a steep stairway, led upward. The second story had a single transverse corridor cutting it in half. It was fifty feet long; at each of its ends a door opened to the outer balcony-deck.

On each side of the corridor were four small doorways, giving access to as many rooms. Four of them were sleeping cabins, with windows and doors opening to the deck. The other four were instrument and machine rooms which held electric pumps for charging pressure tanks by which the pneumatic valves shifted the gravity plates, ventilators, chemical air-renewers, the heating and cooling system, interior air-pressure and interior gravity controls, and the lighting system—all small, compact mechanisms, and astounding tributes to man's inventive skill.

We ascended the ladder from the dimly lighted corridor. The top story held a circular central room surrounded by small cubbyholes which were additional instrument and control rooms. A tiny circular staircase led upward into the interior of the dome-peak—a small observatory with an ultramodern though not very large electrotelescope.

"Well," said Jimmy again, "there's plenty to it. Compact, isn't it? Let's see the outer deck—we haven't been there yet."

We descended to the middle story and went out one of the corridor end-doors. The deck interior was somewhat less than ten feet wide and eight feet high. Entirely enclosed, it was like a narrow corridor.

Doors and windows at intervals opened into the second-tier rooms, and bull's-eye panes were set in a row along the outer wall. There were similar panes both in ceiling and floor, and the ceiling held a row of hooded light bulbs. There were small lounge chairs out here. The deck was fifty feet long on each side; two hundred feet in all, it girdled the Cube, as the deck of a surface ship girdles its superstructure.

One of these fifty-foot stretches differed from the other three: D-face, Rowena called this section. An exit-porte was here—a low, six-foot square room bolted outside the deck. It was an airlock, in which the air pressure could be changed by pneumatic pumps and exhausts.

"For landing on the Moon," said Rowena.

Along the deck here she showed us somewhat similar, though more complicated portes in which guns might be mounted and fired out into a different air-pressure, or even into the vacuum of Space.

We wandered about the Flying Cube for fully an hour that late afternoon, tremendously interested. Yet with what intensified emotion I would have made that inspection if I could have seen into the future! The weird, stirring events in which I was destined to participate within the narrow confines of those enclosing walls! On that narrow deck, at those pressure-portes and airlock!

At 10 p.m. on the evening of September fifth the Bolton Flying Cube left the Earth in its attempt to intercept the cylinder.

The orbit of this mysterious projectile—if projectile it was—had been calculated. It would approach from the west, passing over the middle of North America, and reaching the longitude of the Atlantic seaboard at about midnight.

Its altitude was now estimated to be about two hundred and fifty miles above the Earth's surface.

There were nine of us on board: Dr. Grenfell, with five assistants, and Jimmy, Rowena and myself. We three had no part in the details of this departure. There was nothing we could do. We stood together, in the dimness of one of the deck lengths, at a bull's-eye window. We were silent—words seemed inadequate. The Cube had been resounding with the tramp of mechanics, but they had all left it now.

Jimmy glanced at his watch. "Nine fifty-five—we ought to be on our way soon."

Rowena stood beside me. I felt the pressure of her hand on my arm, but she did not speak. The portes were all closed now, save the lower door. Then the ship came alive with the hum of the air-circulating system, the pressure equalizers, the throb of the little pumps on the pressure-tanks of the plate-shifters, the hissing of the exhaust valves, and the low whine of the current in the magnetic gravity plates.

Through the deck window we could see the lighted interior of the workshop. The dome-roof was rolled back. The deep purple sky with blazing star-gems stretched overhead, waiting to receive us.

I heard Jimmy mutter, "Why the dickens don't we get going?"

The hum in the Cube's interior grew louder. The hissing of the shifting valves sounded. There was a slight quiver—a vibration of the deck floor under my feet. I clutched suddenly at the heavy fastenings of the window. It was nothing, however; in a moment even the tiny vibration was gone.

But outside the window there was movement. The room dropped away. I caught a glimpse of the white, emotion-swept faces of the men out there, gazing up at us as we lifted.

Then there was the open roof of the building, the grounds about it, and the high wall. A crowd of people had gathered outside the wall, for the news of our test ascension, however closely held, had spread to draw a thousand spectators.

Then there were trees and starlit landscape. For a few moments, I had the feeling that I was on the deck of a rapidly lifting airship. But only a few moments, for the landscape shrank amazingly—concave at first, with the horizon a great upstanding rim, like the upper edge of a circular bowl, with us near the bottom.

There were clusters of tiny lights to mark the villages far down, and moving lights along the roads—a passing airplane occasionally, but now far beneath us. Off to the west, I saw the line of seacoast, starlight on the sea.

How long we stood there I do not know. I can't recall that any of us spoke—even Jimmy was stricken into an awed silence. Slowly I became conscious that I was intolerably, suffocatingly hot.

The landscape was a landscape no longer, but a surface—the surface of the Earth. Cloudbanks were visible, but we were high above them, up in the starlight.

I saw with a suden thrill that the surface was convex—a great, upward bulging, curved surface beneath me, with shrunken, map-like contours of land and water, mottled with cloud areas.

The Earth! But I was no longer part of it!

IV

THE MYSTERIOUS CYLINDER

A STEP SOUNDED behind us. It was one of Grenfell's asisstants, "Come up. Dr. Grenfell thought you'd like to know that the cylinder is visible."

We ascended to the upper tier. Dr. Grenfell was alone in the observatory dome. Baker rejoined one of his fellows in the nearby control room. The other men were dispersed at their posts about the Cube.

I realized again how intolerably hot it was from the friction-heat of our rapid upward passage through the atmosphere. Dr. Grenfell sat hunched over the telescope. He was coatless and colorless. His rolled-up sleeves exposed his thick, muscular forearms, mottled with dark hair wet now with sweat.

There was barely room for us all in the dome-chamber. Through the circular overhead pane the star-field blazed in an almost dead-black sky. There was a new glory to the stars—amazingly steady and brilliant.

"Hot, isn't it?" Grenfell greeted us. "Have the cooling system on full, so it should be better presently. We've stopped ascending. The atmosphere is very rare here—little friction now."

His gaze fell on the quiet, intent Rowena. "Child, didn't I tell you this cube would be successful? Didn't I?"

He was triumphant. The test ascent was a success. The Cube was controllable—the secret of this form of interplana-

tery flight had been conquered! Strange, but in all my awe at this new experience, never once had I thought of that.

Jimmy was only concerned with the oncoming cylinder.

"Where is it, Doctor? I don't see it," he said.

Through the small telescope it was visible off to the west where the Pacific slopes of the Rocky Mountains showed, with the snow on their higher peaks still brightened by the fading sunlight.

The cylinder was a faint luminous dot. We hung poised and the dot grew, took form. Suddenly I realized that it was quite close to us; perhaps we were moving along with it. I do not know. But it seemed to be approaching at a leisurely rate. At first I could not guess its size, or its distance—the one factor dependent on the other, and nothing with which to compare either of them. A glowing, silver-white, bullet-shaped projectile, it sailed majestically along, heated luminous, with a faint trail of light-fire like a fan-tail behind it—gases from its heated metal burning faintly in this rarefied air.

We could soon see it plainly without the telescope. Grenfell spoke into a telephone mouthpiece.

"Baker? Raise us slightly. Can you see it? Close now. Swing D-face westward, if you can. A little—not much!"

Through the silent, vibrationless interior of the Cube, Baker's signal-gongs were ringing. And we could hear the hiss of the plane-shifter valves.

The electronic rocket streams were cut off now. The gravity plates were shifted, and our turning was aided by the streams of etheric pressure-vibration darting from each corner of the Cube like streams from a pinwheel. As we swung, the vault of the heavens moved around in a slow twist—then steadied.

Grenfell's voice was hurried, tense. "Dean, you and Turk

go down to the deck, on D-face. Stand by the exit-porte. I can only spare Gibbons for down there. You can help him with the manual locks. I don't dare trust the automatics. We'll have the thing aboard in a few minutes—if we're lucky. Rowena, child you stay with me."

The cylinder seemed no more than half a mile away now, and it was much closer when, a minute or so later, we gazed at it again from the deck bull's-eye window.

The man Gibbons stood by a series of hand-levers that operated the pressure doors of the lockchamber. Its inner deck-door was closing as we arrived.

The pane was of massive glassite, transparent. Through it the interior of the little lockroom, projecting out from the deck, was visible. The outer door-slide was closed.

Gibbons shifted a lever. "Hold that, will you?"

I held it, and he bent and opened a valve-cock. The outer door of the lock slid open—an aperture six feet wide and five feet high opening into the empty realms of Space. The air in the lockchamber, which had been under a pressure of one atmosphere like the rest of the Cube's interior, went out with a rush. The hiss and surge of it were audible with the first widening slit of the outer door.

No wonder care was needed in the handling of these controls, being operated in Space for the first time! If we had let this inner slide open, all the air in the Cube would have rushed out in a tornado blast—and we along with it! There was a heavy iron wrench which had been lying neglected on the floor of the lock. It went out like a windblown feather when the outer slide opened.

The glowing cylinder slowly approached. I judged it now to be no more than two or three feet long. It came point toward us. It was a silent, dramatic meeting—our poised Cube and this wandering projectile, coming together in the

starlight with the blazing firmament above and the Earth spread like a gigantic convex relief-map beneath us.

I knew that Dr. Grenfell was trying to hold us so that the cylinder might fall into the open outer door-slide of the lock-chamber. It needed several trials. The men were comparatively inexperienced as yet in handling the Cube.

We missed it completely at the first trial. It seemed to waver with the attraction of our greater mass. We circled it several times. The disturbance we caused made it rotate end over end upon an axis of its own creation. And with forward velocity destroyed, it began sinking toward the Earth.

Then at last we moved at it diagonally from above—a true aim this time. It settled through the yawning open porte and fell upon the metal floor of the lockchamber, to lie there with a fading glow as instantly it began to cool.

Gibbons slung the outer slide closed. Dr. Grenfell triumphantly joined us on the deck, Rowena with him, and soon the other men arrived. The controls of the Cube were set-locked. We were sinking very slowly back to Earth, so slowly that it would take hours to reach the lower atmospheric strata.

"No hurry," said Grenfell. "Don't let the pressure in yet—let it cool slowly."

It lay on the floor of the lock, apparently undamaged, though its metallic outer shell was fused, pitted and scarred by the friction-heat. It was a small affair, not much over two feet long.

"Now, Gibbons—easy at first. Don't be rash."

Opened pressure valves began admitting the Cube's air pressure into the near vacuum of the lock's interior. They hissed and sizzled, and after a moment Gibbons turned them full. The cylinder stirred, rolled and bumped against the lockwall.

In five minutes the inner door-slide was opened. A last rush of wind pressure sucked at me as I stood nearby.

Gibbons and Jimmy bent and entered the lock, gingerly carrying the prize.

"Not heavy," said Jimmy. "Thirty or forty pounds."

Our gravity equalizers in the inner shell-floor of the Cube's base were set to give us a gravity pull normal to that of Earth.

The cylinder had an Earth-weight of some forty pounds.

Jimmy and Gibbons laid it on the deck.

"Hollow," said Jimmy. He tapped it with his knuckles.

But Grenfell stopped him with a sharp command. "Don't do that! Want to blow us up?"

I had not thought of that! This could so easily be a bomb—a strange, deadly missile aimed at the Earth!

Jimmy leaped back as though the thing had stung him. Unreasonably, ludicrously, I took a step away and drew Rowena with me—as if that could help us.

"Don't touch it!" cautioned Grenfell. "Rance, look it over."

Rance, I learned later, was head of the so-called bomb squad of New York, and an expert in dealing with "infernal devices." He bent over the cylinder. Under the light of his flash he ran careful, practiced fingers along its pitted sides. Suddenly he straightened.

"Grenfell, look here. Something written—etched in the metal."

There were scrawled, handwritten words, burned away in places—almost illegible, but not quite. Three words:

FROM GUY PALISSE

As Grenfell uttered them, there came a cry behind me.

"From Guy—"

Rowena stood trembling, her face white as chalk, with the blood draining from it.

"Guy! Oh . . . if he's alive! If only . . . alive—"

I thought she would fall. My arm went about her, but she pushed me away.

"I'm . . . not so silly, Jack." She mustered a smile. "From Guy! Why, then, he must be alive. He must be alive!"

We carried the cylinder down to the lounge of the Cube's lower tier and gathered over it. Rance showed us its series of small vents through which some chemical charge giving etheric wave-pressure had propelled it by a rocket principle through Space.

"Open it!" Jimmy urged impatiently. "Can't you open it?"

Then Rance located the lever, embedded in the burned metal, by which presumably some hidden slide would move. But the lever was fused solid; the cracks of the slide were barely discernible along the scarred metal surface.

When at last we got it open we found that the interior was a series of compartments holding the operating mechanism. But there was one packed with a thick layer of what seemed a strange kind of paper, a hundred or more sheets covered with handwriting burned into them with a faint tracery of black hairlines.

Dr. Grenfell seized them, carried them to a light, and riffled through them.

"From Guy! He *is* alive! It wasn't the Moon he reached, but Mercury. He's alive!"

Fully half the sheets contained astronomical data, technical notes and diagrams. The rest contained a message from Guy Palisse. A message and a warning to us of Earth!

We sat there in the lounge of the Cube, listening breathlessly while Dr. Grenfell read the pages. And as I listened, I forgot the dim interior of the Bolton Flying Cube, hanging in Space high above the Earth's surface; forgot Rowena sitting white-faced and tense beside me, with her hand gripping my forearm. My thoughts conjured the naked, rain-swept copper hills of a strange planet.

V

THE WARNING FROM MERCURY

I AM GUY PALISSE (the message began). Ten years ago—I suppose it must be that long—I left the Earth in what was popularly called a Moon-rocket. Any scientific institution will know of me. Whoever finds this message, I beg you to turn it over at once to some recognized scientific society.

Particularly I want this to be delivered to the Bolton Society for Astronomical Research, in New York City of the United States of America. Dr. Norton Grenfell will remember me. And I want my dear sister to be notified that I am alive. Her name is Rowena Palisse. I left her in care of Professor and Mrs. White. They can be located in New York. Or, during the summer months, at the White Summer Camp for Girls, near Quogg, Maine.

I am preparing this quickly, unexpectedly. At first I thought I would use my cylinder to send an appeal for help, because we have been in trouble here. But just as I was ready to start writing this message, I learned strange and terrible things which far outweigh our own personal trouble.

The Earth is menaced. Earth's women—particularly the young girls—are in deadly danger. Here on Mercury the young girls of the Light Country, whom I am vainly trying to aid, have unwittingly been the cause of the menace threatening the girls of Earth. And we learned it a few hours ago.

So my message is a warning! I pray it may reach you in time.

I fear that I cannot leave Mercury, though I may perhaps

make the effort. My rocket is demolished. A week ago I would have said that there was no interplanetary vehicle on Mercury. I know now that there is one. But I have no access to it.

I want to give you a picture of what is here—what has happened to me. These two worlds—the Earth and Mercury—so many million miles apart, are now strangely linked with crossing, interwoven destinies. When you understand conditions and events here, the menace threatening you will be clearer and you will know better how to deal with it.

I have no time to write in terms you would wholly comprehend. So I must leave much to your imagination.

Ten years I have been here. Until the recent crisis—the whirl of events which I will try now to sketch for you—I had taken my place among the people of the Hill City, capitol of what is called the Light Country. They thought I was a god, miraculously appearing from the heavens. But the scientists, the learned men, the government, soon accepted me for what I am.

As you know, my age was eighteen when I left the Earth. I am about twenty-eight now. Time seems different here. I have lost count of Earth days, months and years. There are no days and nights in the Light Country. It is in a zone of half-light—always the same brightness, except for the weather.

There is generally a pall of gray cloud masses overhead. But occasionally there are the black storms, and then we have an inky night such as there sometimes is on Earth. Fearsome things, these black storms. They last for two or three Earth days—sometimes longer. I shall have much to say of one of them—it has played so large a part in the events which have brought us now into these dire straits.

My life for the first years was quiet in the Hill Country. I worked for the government, as does everyone. The men of learning were much interested in what I had to say of our world. I taught them English. They learned it readily, with their curiously retentive minds, capable of learning far more quickly than is normal to us of Earth.

I told them all I could of our civilization, our science, our weapons of war. And finally I was installed in the government laboratories. They were very primitive at first, but I helped make them less so. My rocket was smashed. I have worked to reconstruct it, and to devise other methods of gravity nullification. And I planned and built a projectile-cylinder by which I might communicate with Earth.

Slow, patient work for about ten years. The laboratories were established in subterranean rooms beneath the palace of the ruler of the Light Country.

I must be brief. There seems so much to tell you! I can give you so inadequate a picture. Around the Hill City is a barren waste of metallic coppery hills, jagged spires, canyons like gashes filed by some Titan metalworker in mountains of metal. Bleak landscape! For miles there is no blade of vegetation; no soil, save a metallic dust, worn by the rain and wind. Pools of water from the rain lie glistening in all the hollows. A fantastic landscape. It looks like nothing of Earth or the Moon.

This is the Light Country, the best region of Mercury. It is not quite so forbidding. There are oases—valleys where rock which was not metal has been worn into a soil. In them, with the abundant rainfall and the heavy humid heat, there is always luxuriant tropical vegetation, great spindly shafts of trees, flimsy and porous, and air vines with giant spreading leaves and vivid, exotic flowers.

In such a valley the capitol, the Hill City, was built. It occupies the bottom and the inner sides of a huge bowl-like

depression in the great metal plateau surrounding it. The level floor is perhaps five miles across.

The level streets, tree-lined, are really roads rather than streets. There is no congestion of houses. Fertile fields lie around the homes, each tilled by its controller. The low houses are built of the prevalent copper. There are gardens, trees, and always a profusion of brilliant flowers.

The outskirts of the City lie upon the surrounding inner slopes of the bowl. Boulevards, like concentric rings, circle the fifteen-mile area. And there are other streets running like spokes of a wheel from the valley floor up to the thousand-foot height of the upper circular rim. An artificial reservoir-lake is beside the palace, in the center of the valley floor.

Such is the Hill City. Its people, inhabitants of this Light Country zone, are generally smaller than Earth people. The men average perhaps five feet. They are heavy-set, squat fellows, with wide shoulders and thick chests, but of lesser strength than an Earthman, so that, though the gravity here is something less than half that of the Earth, they move about much as you do.

But it is not so with me here. On Earth I weight about a hundred and forty pounds. That is seventy pounds, more or less, here on Mercury. I can run with twelvefoot strides and leap some thirty or forty feet. The Mercutian men were afraid of me at first, but they are used to it now.

I shall never forget my first meeting with Tama. Like all Mercutian women she is winged with those sleek feathered wings which are the cause now of our disaster.

I am not one to try to explain the purpose of an all-wise Creator in thus endowing the females of this world. I think perhaps there is a logical justice to it. The male is created to

pursue, to capture, and enslave the female. At least, it was so on Earth throughout the early history of mankind.

But the women here are by nature given the means to be free. They are slight of body, small of stature—I suppose an average height at maturity would be four feet six inches, with a Mercutian weight of forty pounds or less. Winged from the shoulder with a ten-foot spread, they fly like an albatross.

They are free by nature. But man could not let it rest like that. At marriage, to insure submission to the will of her husband, the wings are clipped so that she may no longer fly—a cruel mutilation, an intolerable humiliation.

But for generations the virgins at marriage were forced to it, in surrender to man's conceit, the masculine desire for physical superiority and dominance. The virgins submitted, but always with a smoldering resentment and rebellion. I sensed that even when I first came here.

The resentment was always expressed. But I saw, with the passing years, how it was growing constantly stronger—a smoldering hate against this man-made law. A few of the young men, perhaps, were always in sympathy with the virgins, but not one had ever dared publicly proclaim that he wanted to take for a mate a woman with wings unclipped. I suppose it was partly personal pride, the fear of ridicule from other men—and partly because the laws of the country made such a union illegal, its parties moral outlaws, and its children illegitimate, to be put to death unless the mother's wings were clipped.

The rebelliousness of the virgins intensified for generations. Then, just about a year ago, a leader arose to fire them into deeds—a young virgin, inspired with the desire to right this wrong.

A Joan of Arc? A warrior? Yes, I have already seen her as that. And destined to be a martyr? I pray God it may not be so.

This leader is Tama. I met her first a year ago, when she was twenty years old. I think I loved her from the beginning, though we have never spoken of love. From the moment I met her, she was obviously one who fought against the possibility of love, because to her it represented mutilation.

There were always men who wanted her in marriage. Roc was one of them, a young Mercutian newly risen to power in the Hill City Government; a sort of captain of the army, and chief of police—it is all one here.

Roc hated me from the first—and the hate was mutual—but I taught him English, and for years answered all his avid questions concerning our Earth.

I wish that I had not. And I wish that I had inquired more closely into Roc's personal history. He never spoke of his family, but there were tales concerning him. I understood vaguely that some fifteen years ago—five years before I reached here—Roc's father had lived in the Hill City. They said he was a gigantic fellow named Croat; a clever man, versed in science, but an unscrupulous scoundrel.

Roc was only a boy at the time Croat tried to seize the Light Country Government. Roc's father raised an army which consisted of criminals, adventurers, and slaves of the barbarous Cold Country that rims the dark side of the planet.

Croat was finally defeated and sent into exile. It was said that he was still living in the Cold Country, a leader among those benighted savages, and surrounded by the criminals who had been banished from the Light Country.

The boy Roc remained in the Hill City, and in these passing years rose to a position of trust in the Hill City Government. He never spoke of his father. How could we know that they were secretly meeting? Slowly, carefully, they were planning this thing which has now burst upon us; but no one ever guessed that the crafty Roc was always merely a tool of the unseen, almost forgotten rebel, Croat.

I taught Tama English—and taught it to Toh, her twin brother, so that now they spoke it fluently. I told them about our Earth. And I recall how Tama smiled very strangely at me.

"It seems to me, Guy, that the women of your world have had a history and a struggle not so very different from ours."

I come now to the night just a short time ago when Tama told me her purpose; and with her brother Toh I became embroiled in the tumultuous events that now force me to send this warning to you of Earth.

VI

THE FIRST MURDER

I WAS SITTING alone in my bedroom in the Hill City, the capitol of the Light Country (went on Guy Palisse's message), one evening after the last meal of that day-cycle, when Tama's brother Toh came to see me. My room, with workshop adjoining it, lay buried in a dark, gloomy labyrinth of passages beneath the ruler's palace. The half-mile long artificial lake was near by. Water draining off the hillsides of the circular valley walls came down the vertical streets in open conduits and into the lake for the city's water supply. It drained from the lake in a wide, swift-flowing flume which penetrated the hill in a tunnel and spilled the surplus water outside the city.

The flume ran just above my subterranean room. I could always hear the vague murmur of the flowing water, especially after the rain of a black storm, surging with a lashing roar.

A storm seemed impending this evening. The normal daylight was gone. Heavy clouds were gathered close overhead, slowly circling in a lofty wind, the forewarning of a black storm. With ending of the cycle, darkness fell upon the city, as dark as I remember it on an overcast, stormy night of Earth. But there was no surface wind—only a heavy, steaming oppressive stillness, and a lurid green sheen in the air. A sinister portent of evil came with these Mercutian storms; and sometimes it was justified.

The storms whirled at times from the Fire Country, with a fetid, fiery, blasting breath. Or again, from the Cold Country of eternal blackness, with a sullen roar and a congealing cold.

With the darkness, the emergency lamps of the city winked on. A weirdness settled upon everything. The streets lay black with shadow, greencast with the gathering murk.

But in my underground room none of this was apparent. I was sitting in the little chair that I had built in Earth-fashion when Toh knocked on my door-slide, and I told him to enter. He stood before me; the light from my animal-fat lamp flickered with its yellow glow upon him.

He was a slender little fellow, this Mercutian youth of twenty-one—of pure Light Country blood, not squat and thick-set like the Mercutian men who so often have Cold Country native blood in their heritage. He was fairly tall for one of this world, straight and boyish. His thick black hair grew to the base of his neck. A ribbon of red was about his forehead. With his high-bridged nose, his face was not unlike that of a North American Indian youth. But there the resemblance ended. His short-sleeved jacket flared at the waist, and his wide trousers were knee-length, with a gaudy sash and dangling tasseled cord.

And in the sash I saw a knife sticking up.

"Toh, you have no right to wear that. Especially in the darkness of a coming storm. What if one of Roc's men should seize you?"

"No one will . . . seize me." He was panting, out of breath. He gazed furtively around my little room. "No one saw me come. The storm, it upsets the city, I came by your lower passage under the palace. The guard there was gone." He tried to smile. It was a strange smile indeed. "Or maybe in the darkness he did not see me."

"Why do you come?"

"Tama wants you," he said.

"Wants me?"

"Yes. Now. Come with me . . . to her. Will you?"

"Where?"

He gestured. "Out of the city. But near. We can most easily get there—in what you call half an hour."

"But—"

"I cannot answer questions." There was a hurried tenseness about him, and a pleading. "Guy—Tama asks you to come."

"All right," I agreed. "Toh, how is the storm?"

"Just the same. Not upon us yet."

"Maybe it won't break. I hope it won't."

"Do you?" he responded vaguely. "I don't know about that."

He was waiting impatiently for me to put on my shoes, resilient-soled buskins suitable for running over the jagged metallic rocks. For the rest, I wore only short trousers and a white, sleeveless shirt. In the heat of Mercury this costume was all I ever needed.

Toh gestured at the white shirt. "Have you no dark one? They can see you maybe, in that."

I changed it.

He said evenly, "Have you a weapon?"

"You know I haven't. None are available outside the sealed government rooms."

"We could not get in there?"

"Of course not."

"Well, then—" his voice trailed away.

I was ready. Bareheaded, like himself, I tied a band about my forehead to keep the hair from my eyes. I recalled suddenly that twelve years before, in a very similar costume I had run my college races back in the old days on Earth. That sent a pang through me. I was no more than a prisoner

here on this strange world. In all its affairs, there was for me only Tama.

"All right, Toh."

But he insisted. "Take a knife—like this." He waved his thin, keen edged blade. "You have one?"

"Yes. But Toh—"

"Please. Tama asked that you hurry."

I got my knife and we started out through the hundred-foot vaulted corridor, sloping upward. The murmur of the flume-water near by was audible as we crept forward. The guard was not at the gate and we slipped through the small opening; its bars stood wide open.

We were outside now, just beyond the palace garden wall. The reservoir lake showed its dim expanse of water, unrippled in the breathless darkness. Behind us loomed the government building. It should have been almost dark at this hour, but it was not. Many of its window-slits were lighted.

Toh pulled at me. "Come."

But some instinct made me linger.

The trees arched overhead, great spreading, spindly branches of the lush, porous vegetation of Mercury which grows with miraculous speed wherever there is soil and water. Through the tree branches I could see the luminous green haze of the sky. And nearby, spreading around us, was the circular city—mere dots of light now, winking like eyes in the murky, abnormal darkness of the coming storm.

Suddenly I saw, not fifteen feet from us, a dark form lying on the ground. I jerked from Toh's grip and with a single bound pounced upon it.

It was the guard. He lay on his back, his heavy-jowled face a contorted mask, his eyes staring. And on his chest, his thin leather shirt was ripped with a hole. There was a dark stain of blood.

Toh gripped me again. "Yes, I killed him! He tried to stop me from getting to you! Roc ordered you kept a prisoner—until this is over!"

"This—what?" I shook him. "Murder! Good God, Toh!"

He was shaking from fear or excitement. "Guy, now that you see him, help me carry him. He's too heavy for me."

He added, almost with a stark whisper: "Guy, the first murder! I did it! This is for Tama. All this—for Tama and the virgins."

A surprising, mature force came to him. "Guy, my friend, is it with me you want to act? With me and Tama? Or with Roc? He had you prisoner in there tonight."

He broke off, and we both stood listening. The city was in a turmoil; we could hear the distant murmur of voices in the streets; and nearer to us, voices at the palace doorways, in the garden—coming this way!

I cast my lot then.

"You mean, throw him in the flume, Toh?"

"Yes."

I lifted the body in my arms. The twenty-foot wide flume passed near us. I lowered my grisly burden gently into it to avoid a splash. There was blood on my shirt as I straightened.

"Gone, Toh."

The floating shape disappeared in the darkness.

There were voices at the garden wall, but we had not been seen. And then the first surge of the black storm broke upon the city. A sigh of hot wind stirred the fronds over us into a rustle. It rippled the mirror-like surface of the lake.

We felt a hot, sulphurous breath. Overhead the green-black sky was shot with luminous red streaks and puffs of red like tiny silent bombs bursting. And then, a moment later, came the dull staccato sounds of the thunder.

"It's on us, Toh."

We ran around the lake shore, circling its farther end, and plunged into one of the city streets.

VII

REVOLT OF THE WINGED VIRGINS

IT WAS a run of some two miles across the level of the city to where the street began the ascent of the inner slope of the valley-side. The street was like a wide road, with verdure over it, sometimes interlocking overhead; low stone houses were set back in gardens or small cultivated patches of field.

The emergency street lights were not adequate. It was dark everywhere—dark and confused. People were in the street, or gathered before their dwellings, apprehensive of the coming storm. But I saw that it was more than that—an excitement at something transpiring.

No one seemed to notice us as we dashed along. I had to measure my pace for Toh. With my giant leaps, I could at once have outdistanced him.

A city cart passed us, drawn by a gruesome, insect-like *brue*, a giant jointed thing. I heard a girl crying within the cart.

There were many girls flying about. Like huge, aimless, frightened birds, they flapped overhead. We passed a house with one of Roc's official carts standing before it. His yellow-jacketed guards were lined at the wall—gray-skinned, heavy, dull-featured men from the Cold Country. The *brue* in the cart harness stretched its jointed length at ease along the ground and lifted its head with an uncanny pseudo-human movement, as though listening.

And from the house came the screams of a girl.

"Toh! What is happening?"

But Tama's brother urged me to the other side of the street. We passed the house unnoticed by the guards. But I think that the *brue* was aware of me. Its head turned, with bristling, waving antennae.

Toh panted, "Faster, Guy. I can—go faster."

We climbed the hill, past the last of the houses. I carried Toh in my arms for a little way so that he might recover his breath. We reached the top of the cliff with its naked metal crags. The valley of the city lay stretched beneath us. Lights were moving everywhere. A party of flying girls went over us, their great wings waving as they breasted the wind, their draperies flowing behind them.

The naked, rolling waste of the uplands lay before us, the lurid sky hanging close overhead. The wind was increasing. Soon the rain would come.

"Which way, Toh?"

"Not far now."

We attained a nearby eminence, half a mile or so from the city rim—a level space of jagged, broken crags. The city was hidden from here. Boulders lay strewn about and rifts yawned like black gashes in a wild confusion of metal rock. The smooth places gleamed like burnished copper in the brief red lightning-flares of the storm. It was an inferno of glare and crackling thunder-puffs.

We crouched in the hollow of an arching rock-spire. Then Tama came. She had been waiting nearby, and came soaring from overhead, a dark blob against the red sky.

Toh gripped me. "There she is!"

Her body hung breast down. Her ten-foot spread of wings tilted, swayed as she circled, balanced and then began descending. She fluttered down, her feet dropping, her wings,

flapping backward as she righted herself to land on tiptoe before us.

"Guy—you came! I was afraid that Toh would not get in to you."

It was brighter up here than down in the city. The red sky painted Tama's deep-red feathered wings a lurid crimson. They were folded now as she stood before us, arching from her shoulderblades, with their tips just clearing the ground behind her.

She wore the usual silky gray-blue trousers, bound at her ankles. Her bare feet were encased in sandals, with gold cord crossing her instep and fastened to the lower trouser hem. A silken gray-blue scarf wound about her waist, crossing in front, passing up over her breast and shoulders, crossing again between the wings behind and descending to the waist.

Her hair was a glossy black. It covered her ears; and its two long thick plaits were laced tightly with silken cords. They came forward over each other; each was fastened to her body in two places—at the waist, and again where the plait ended, at the outside of her trouser leg, just at the knee.

I noticed that from her belt a knife handle protruded. I seized her outstretched hands.

"Tama, what is going on tonight? This turmoil—"

Several inches shorter than Toh, she stood like a child before me. But there was nothing of the child in her swift, vehement words. Nor in the flash of her dark eyes, the set of her jaw.

"Guy, I must question you—quickly. Please, will you answer?"

I held her hands and stood gazing down at her upturned face. The red sheen of the storm deepened its flush.

"Yes," I said.

"You know not—you know nothing of the events of the two day-cycles past. Today . . . yesterday . . . Roc has held you a prisioner."

"That I did not know, Tama. I did not realize—"

"No," she retorted cynically, "because you had work—no need to go out. But yesterday I sent Toh to try and get you. They would not let him in. And the things that are transpiring in the city—"

A vision of Roc rose before me: his hawk-like gray face; his long black hair, shot with white for all his youth, streaming over his ears; his leer as he assigned the work that I was to do, and told me to proceed with the completion of my rocket-cylinder.

Tama demanded abruptly, "Guy, can you get control of any weapons? We girls know nothing of such things. But you, in your work—"

There are no weapons used in the Light Country of the sort which on Earth would be called modern. Explosives are unknown. There are knives, feathered arrows flung with a sling, and several devices for longer range, mostly of the catapult principle—crude, mechanical things.

But I understood that the government had small electronic weapons, and defensive electro-armament. There is an electro-magnetic current known to the Light Country scientists. I suppose it is something akin to what is called electricity on Earth. But I had never seen the weapons developed from it.

"They are all sealed in the storehouse, Tama, under the palace. They keep an arsenal there in case of an attack of savages from the Fire Country, or a revolt of the Cold Country slaves."

The last phrase affected her strangely. "Revolt—of slaves.

Ah, yes!" There was a murmured, tense bitterness in her words. Then she added, "Could you get in there?"

"No, I don't believe so."

"Have you ever been in the arsenal?"

"Let me see—yes, once, years ago."

She thought a moment. The rain was starting now, in big, splattering drops. The wind was steadily increasing, and growing hotter: the storm was whirling down on us from the Fire Country.

Tama drew me closer under the overhanging rock. Toh crouched with us.

He said abruptly, "There was once a long-range ray. My father told me of it."

Again a vision of Roc rose jeeringly at me. It was Roc who originally had told me of this high-powered ray, a lost and almost forgotten weapon. Centuries ago, the Light Country civilization had reached a higher peak than now. There had been many wars with the neighboring savages of the hotter and colder regions. With these declining, and the population of Mercury steadily decreasing, the Light Country began turning primitive. The ray was lost now in the dim pages of history. It was almost a legend handed down from generation to generation.

Tama said, "What sort of a ray?"

I answered, "An electronic ray-projector. The ray-current itself is known. I think the government has small hand projectors. The lost mechanism was for long range and very high-powered—a death-ray."

Roc had smiled very strangely at me when he described what the ray must have been.

Toh put in again: "They are trying to discover that lost ray, in the government workshops."

"Yes," I agreed.

"But it is not ready now?" Tama asked.

"I think not."

"Then we cannot get it—nor can it be used against us. You cannot get any other weapons, Guy?"

"No. Tama, all these questions—you must tell me—" I gripped her. "Tama, this turmoil tonight—?"

"I will tell you what is the meaning of this turmoil, as you call it."

I listened, amazed at her vehement, passionate words. For months past, the virgins of the Hill City had been refusing marriage. There had been isolated instance of rebellion—I knew that, of course. But what I did not know was that two days ago, news had spread about the city of a law which Roc was proposing to the Government Council. That law had been passed this morning. And tonight it was to have gone into effect tonight.

"Forcing us into marriage, Guy! No longer now can we keep our wings until we take a husband."

They were clipping the wings of every girl in the city over sixteen years of age.

"So we will have no reason to refuse marriage, since we are mutilated anyway."

I thought of Roc's official cart as I had seen it before that house. And the girl screaming inside.

The city was in chaos. The girls had had two days warning. There had been plans, preparations. The thing that they had been contemplating for months under Tama's leadership was now forced upon them.

There was to be a flight—an exodus of marriageable young girls from the Hill City. There are five other large cities in the Light Country. The girls in them would soon come also. All day the word had been circulating. This black storm aided them in escaping. A preliminary rendezvous had been determined—a hundred miles or so off in the metallic barren desert toward the central Fire Country.

Even now the girls were flying there, singly and in groups, slipping from their homes—seeking out friends, to tell them also—winging away from the Hill City into the lurid, storm-filled gloom.

"And we have built little platforms," Tama was saying, "with handles, so that the girls can fly with them. We're taking the victims—the few we can gather who have already been mutilated this night. Guy, when you see the poor things! Their wings, once so beautiful, with the feathers clipped and plucked—the muscles cut, the blood streaming—"

Toh said suddenly: "I killed a man tonight."

She seemed not to hear him. I had leaped to my feet, pulling her with me. She stood now, clinging to me. And she was trembling.

"We—I want you, Guy. I want you with us. I will take you on one of the platforms. We will hide—off in the desert. We are going permanently, Guy. Two thousand of us. And there will be others come to join us. We've got to do it! There is nothing left now. We'll find soil, some little hidden valley where we can build shelters and grow food. There is nothing else left for us to do!"

She silenced my questions with her tumult of words: "Will you come? We need you—we are not such fools that we do not realize a man can fight for existence in the desert better than girls. There is Toh, and a few other young men are coming. We want a little band of men to help us—to lead us."

She ended with a wild appeal. "You of the great Earth who know so much—and yet you know so little of how the virgins of Mercury feel about their wings! Guy, will you come?"

VIII

THE FLYING PLATFORMS

WHEN SHE PAUSED, I said abruptly, "Yes, I'll come."

I stood watching her as she walked to the brink of the jagged eminence. She faced the rolling naked landscape, a dark blur in the murk of the storm. It was raining heavily now—hot rain that slanted down on the wind in great sheets.

The turgid green of the sky caught the raindrops and turned them all to emeralds, and to rubies when the lightning flashed in puffs like crimson bombs. One seemed to explode directly over us. The report was deafening, the crimson glare blinding.

Tama stood with upraised arms and her crimson-feathered wings outstretched. In the lightning her figure showed clearly.

A signal. And in a moment it was answered. From some other rocky point nearby two blobs rose into the air. They came soaring and swooping—two rectangular platforms with girls flying beside them, carrying them. They came with a rush, swept by the wind, then turned and steadied over our heads.

I gazed up, and a distant lightning flare illumined them clearly. One was a small platform, possibly twelve feet by six. Three long, flexible poles were fastened crosswise under its bottom and bound with vine-strands. The poles, some eighteen feet long, thus extended out each side about six feet.

At each of these handles a girl was flying—six to the smaller platform three on each side. I saw that the other platform was similar, save that it was several times larger, with sixteen girls bearing it.

They turned into the wind and with a great flapping of wings settled down on the rocks near us. The smaller platform was empty. Upon the larger, perhaps a dozen girls were lying. I went over and gazed at them, standing silent while Tama told them that I had joined the flight. They lay huddled, clinging to the low railing that outlined the platform.

A lump rose in my throat at the sight of their strained white faces. Some of them shifted their positions, trying to hide from me the white bandages, bloodstained, with which their mutilated wings were bound. The platform carrying them was presently back in the air. We watched it as it fled off into the face of the storm, away from the city toward the wilds of the Fire Country. A moment passed; then the lurid murk swallowed it.

"Come, Guy. I will ride with you and Toh."

Toh took his place on the platform; he gestured to me. My mind was confused, whirling with all Tama had told me—the shock of this catastrophe.

Then the confusion fell from me. I stopped, stood a moment in thought. And questions rushed at me.

I faced Tama. "Did that platform start for your distant meeting place?"

"Yes! Yes, Guy."

"And now you want to take Toh and me there?"

"Yes. All is ready."

"But is it?"

I knew vaguely the locality the girls had selected. "There is no valley with soil there, Tama."

"No. But I had to select a place all the girls knew. We

have often met there in little groups—to try and plan what we might do."

"And because you have been there before," I said, "Roc probably knows the place. He'll follow. Did you think of that?"

She had not. But it was too late now to change plans. Every moment girls were leaving the city.

"On foot, Roc cannot get there in less than two day-cycles," Toh said. "More, in this storm. The canyons will be river torrents."

It was true enough. The ferocity of the storm, here on the exposed height where we stood, was only too apparent. The wind tore at us and we were drenched by sheets of rain.

"Come," I said. "No more of this." I realized that the wind was tearing at our shouted words. I took my place on the platform. "Tell your girls to circle over the city, Tama."

She stared at me. "But, Guy—"

"I'll explain as we go. And I must know more about your plans. It will be death—out there in the desert—without every possible safeguard."

She gave the order and we rose into the wind. The light platform swayed and bucked as the girls struggled with it. For a time I thought they would lose control. They had had little practice. The wind caught us, bore us away in spite of their struggling wings. Then they pulled more evenly, turned us, held us soaring. They turned again; and more steadily this time, we swept upon the heels of the wind, out over the circular valley.

The lights of the storm-lashed city gleamed a thousand feet beneath us. Down all the inclined streets the water was pouring. The little lake by the palace showed its surface lashed by the wind.

I crouched by Tama. "Tell me, quickly, what preparations for food and equipment you have made."

They were surprisingly complete. It was obvious that there was no way by which we could now improve them.

We crossed over the city, and turned back while she told me.

"Our plan, Guy, is to gather at this meeting place. And when we are all there and the storm is past, we can find a suitable valley with soil."

There were girls rising occasionally from the city. One passed near us. I said abruptly, "Tama, call her."

She obeyed at once. And for all my ten years on Mercury, the action gave me a start. She stood up on our tiny, tilting platform, and I had the sudden absurd fear that she would fall—a thousand feet down into the city under us!

"Tama, you—"

I choked it back, as she spread her wings and leaped into the void to follow the other girl. She called to her, and the two came winging back to us.

The other girl was hardly sixteen. She gazed at me and smiled when Tama told her that I would help them.

"Tama," I asked, "how many young men are coming?"

"Twenty . . . thirty, perhaps. The platform bearing them should be gone by now."

It occurred to me that Roc, if he had learned of this, could so easily place a spy among those men.

"You think you can trust them?"

"Yes. We thought of that. They have all been in sympathy with us for months."

"Are there any others?"

"Other young men?"

"Yes. Who would have come—but have not heard of this?"

"Many others," she said.

"You know who they are?"

"Oh, yes. I have been testing them—talking to them, with caution, for a long time back."

"Then tell this girl who they are. She is under sixteen, isn't she?"

"Yes."

"Then Roc's men will not bother her. This new law does not touch her."

The girl listened eagerly while Tama translated. She was to stay in the city for a day or two, and find other girls of her age who would spread the word.

"Tell her to gather all the young men she can trust," I said to Tama. Have you any other platforms down there?"

"Yes. Lina knows where they are hidden."

The girl nodded. There would be other girls in a day or two who would be wanting to leave. And there were fifty or more waiting now to gather the victims of Roc's first execution of the new law, and bring them on platforms.

The girl left us and dropped back into the city.

Tama asked me, "Now, Guy, shall we start? I do not want to tire our girls, flying here in this wind and rain, with the long flight before them."

"Presently, Tama. Circle around a moment more."

I had been studying the situation beneath us. One does not give up his known world without a struggle. My rocket-cylinder was down there, in my workshop under the palace. It was practically ready for operation. The small cylinder with its mechanisms was ready. I could, I felt sure, even unaided and alone in the desert, find means to load its firing chambers, and launch it. I had been living for ten years in the hope of communicating with Earth.

And now it came to me clearly that even more important than my own desire to send a message to Earth was the fact that it might be the best thing to do for these girls. I saw myself now as their logical leader. The responsibility for their

safety would rest with me. And we were burning our bridges. This rebellion, this flight was an irrevocable step. The government, dominated by Roc, would never compromise.

We might be followed by the Light Country army, found, assailed. Or if not that, then there could be starvation in the desert, or death from savages or the strange fearsome animals that lurked in the Fire Country.

As though with prophetic vision I could see us embattled. And I knew that every one of these virgins would choose death before she returned beaten and yielded her wings to the mutilating knife—before she married and bore children, perhaps to suffer the same.

I said abruptly, "Tama, I'm going down to get my cylinder. We may have to send a message to Earth."

I told her why. There was no argument. Both she and Toh could see it.

"I killed a man tonight," said Toh, and turned his white face to his sister as he explained how he had killed the guard to get me out. "We are in this—there is no returning."

I had been pondering how I could best land and get to my room unseen. I knew that Roc would stop me, seize me if he could. The opened gateway and the vanished guard had perhaps by now been discovered, along with my own escape.

We were now almost directly over the flat roof of the palace. The easiest way to get to my rooms was from the lake—then over the wall, into the garden and through the corridor gate—the way Toh and I had come out. But I saw, as a flare illumined the scene, that there were figures below—not at the gateway, but so near it that Tama could not land the platform unobserved anywhere in that vicinity. And the trees would make a ground landing very difficult and precarious in this wind, almost anywhere on the city level.

But the flat roof of the palace seemed empty. It would take only a moment to touch the roof. Once I left the plat-

form, it could at once dart away. Even if it were seen from below, it could not be assailed quickly. Probably no one would realize that I had left it, and, from the roof, I would take my chances on getting down through the palace unseen.

"Then we will wait for you on the roof, Guy?"

"No! You would be seen. It would cause comment, and they would come up after you."

I thought I had a quick way of getting out of the city. I told her where to meet me with the platform, in a secluded place some distance away.

She gazed at me sharply when I described the place.

"Oh, I can get there," I smiled. "You forget, I am more agile than the Mercutian men. The whole thing will take no more than half an hour—if I have luck."

We were dropping toward the roof. Its flat top was a little lake of water with the rain pouring on it and gathering there. The men outside the palace saw us as we came down—there was no doubt of that. The red puffs in the sky were almost continuous now. The glare showed us clearly; and I saw the men staring up at us.

Half a dozen of the official carts were coming up to the main doorway of the building, the *brues* drawing them through the water on the roadway. Girls were being taken from the carts and shoved roughly into the palace. One went fighting, her cries floating up to us through the surge of storm.

We landed on the rain-soaked roof with a splash.

"I am going with you," Toh said suddenly.

"No. I can manage it better alone. If I meet anyone, he may not necessarily know that Roc had me imprisioned. Hurry now, and get this platform away. I'll be there, Tama, in half an hour."

The platform lifted. One of the girls had already shown signs of tiring. Tama took her place.

I crouched in the water by the roof palisade, watching the platform sweep away. From the ground the rooftop was visible. I didn't think anyone had seen me land.

I waited a few moments. Then I went to the hooded trap, opened it, and descended the ladder into the palace.

IX

MADMAN'S GAMBLE

THE UPPER STORY was dim and silent, but sounds came floating up the central spiral, and I heard the dragging tread of the Mercutians downstairs. I stood at the head of the spiral. No one was on it—no one in sight. It seemed as good a time as any. I got down to the main floor, and unexpectedly ran into a man.

"Ah, it is you, Palisse. They are rebellious, these idiot girls. Listen to them." He spoke his native language.

He gestured to a nearby room-arch. "Listen, Palisse. Roc puts the new order into effect at once."

"Yes," I said. I had pushed past him. Evidently in the dimness of this foyer he had not noticed that I was drenched with rain, nor had he seen that I was coming from the rooftop. He went past me and disappeared.

From a nearby room came the sounds of gruff men's voices, the terrified murmur of girls, a low moan—then a scream.

I did not linger. From the direction of the main doorway another party was bringing in a group of girls. I moved away toward the incline leading downward, and reached the underground level. There seemed no one down here—just a dim candlestick in a bracket bowl.

I reached the inner door-slide of my apartment. It stood ajar, but I could not remember leaving it so. Roc had been keeping me a prisoner, but he had not let me know it. Instead of sealing this inner door upon me, he had doubtless

put a guard nearby, to turn me back if I tried to leave my rooms.

But the guard was not here now. I hastened into my rooms. The doorway opened directly into my bedroom, which seemed undisturbed. It was not so long since Toh and I had left it. My single light was still burning. The door-slide to the lower corridor-exit was closed. I remembered distinctly that Toh and I had closed it after us.

In the silence, as I stood an instant upon entering, I could hear the sound of the flume-water outside, vicious now, an angry torrent swollen by the rain of the storm. I went into my workshop. My benches, shelves of chemicals—all my familiar apparatus were in order.

I gathered the loading chambers of the rocket-cylinder, fuses, the little coils of rotary magnetizers, and parchment sheets and etching pencils with which I could write a message. I could put them all into the cylinder's hollow interior, to keep them dry against the storm. Lastly, I collected the chemicals needed to complete the apparatus.

I piled all the articles on my center bench. But when I turned to the box where I kept the cylinder itself, I found the cylinder missing!

It turned me cold. I stared into the little box, in the shadows of the room corner. It was empty. But I had left the cylinder there. I searched quickly.

It seemed that I heard a sound from my bedroom. I had entered with my knife in hand. The knife now lay on the center bench. I seized it and rushed into the bedroom. But in my frantic haste I stepped too briskly. The lesser gravity of Mercury was not enough to hold me down, and my head struck the eight-foot top of the connecting arch. It knocked me dizzy, but I regained my feet, and reeled into the bedroom.

The cylinder lay on my bed. And behind the head-curtain Roc rose up to confront me.

"So you came back, Palisse. What a luck for me! I need you."

I was still dizzy from the blow on my head. I stood wavering, and saw that he was backing away from me, saw his grinning, leering face with the point of hair coming low on his forehead to give him a queer, Satanic look. His pointed ears came out from the locks of his hair as he listened.

"Where have you been, Palisse? In the rain?—well, that is evident."

His voice was unduly loud, trying to attract attention to us. He was backing behind my bed, and fumbling at his belt where I saw that he carried a small arrow-sling.

My head cleared. If I turned to close the door he would be on me. I said nothing. I was moving sideways to avoid the table. Suddenly I leaped and caught him at the bedpost, before he had got out his weapon. He twisted, seizing the hand that held my knife.

Together we swayed out into the room. The table went over and the light with it. For a moment we fought in the darkness, both silent, panting and grim. I was far stronger than he. And there is a curious fragile quality to the Mercutians. But his fingers clung desperately to my knife hand, and his other arm was around my neck.

We struck a chair and fell, still locked together. Suddenly he let go of my wrist and his groping hand found the smashed table lamp. He flung it into my face; the hot fat burned me. My swaying knife went wild.

The voices outside seemed nearer. I staggered to my feet, lifting Roc up, and with all my strength heaved his body away. It broke his hold. He crashed against the overturned table and lay still. There was a little glow of light

straggling in from the passageway, and in it I could see Roc lying in the wreckage of the smashed table.

I did not stop to investigate. The congealing fat of the lamp smeared my burned face, and was in my eyes. I wiped it away, then caught up the cylinder from the bed—a two-foot, cylindrical metal contrivance.

I hastened into my workshop, stuffing the apparatus from the center bench into the cylinder and closing it. In a moment I was out through the lower corridor doorway.

I went up the ascending passage almost at a run, the cylinder under one arm, and my knife in the other hand. There would be pursuit, I knew. I could already hear the voices back in my bedroom. Doubtless I had not killed Roc; perhaps he was only shamming as he fell.

The outer gate was ajar and I went through it into the open air. The storm was raging as before, with its red torrent of rain coming down. The trees bent their porous branches like reed in a wind.

I had hoped to be able to make off into the city without raising a cry after me, but the alarm was already given. A puff of lightning showed my surroundings clearly: the garden wall curving behind me, the stretch of lake wall with the waves dashing over it, and the other side of the triangle, hemmed in by the metal flume. Its ten-foot depth was depressed into the ground, the sides rising only a foot or two. It passed quite near me and I caught a glimpse of its turgid whirling current.

An arrow sang past me as, for an instant, I stood undecided. At the gate out of which I had come, men appeared. They stood shouting. I could see that the way along the lake was blocked by other men, who had heard the shouts, and now came running at me.

I was suddenly aware of a sound close behind me, a strange sloshing. I turned. A *brue* was slithering forward

through the water and mud of the path. In the lurid half-light its eyes gleamed balefully—a gruesome thing, ten feet long. Its upraised head, as it advanced, was nearly the height of my own; its feelers—muscular arms the length of the body, with the strength to crush me—waved over its head.

The watchful insect was partly between me and the flume. There was an instant when I was confused. A *brue* could leap suddenly, swift as a coiled snake. I turned the other way, back toward the wall. Arrows came at me, but a gust caught them and flung them away. The men by the wall scattered as they thought I was about to rush them.

The turmoil was rising around me. There were shouts from everywhere. Figures were approaching, it seemed, from every direction. I was caught, hemmed in. I saw a boulder lying under a tree and seized it, raising it aloft. It was a tremendous chunk, but it seemed light to my strength here on this little world. I had shoved my knife back in my belt, but it was awkward to have to cling to the cylinder.

The *brue* did not leap, but with lowered head came slithering toward me. I heaved the rock with one hand. It caught the giant insect full in its gruesome, pseudo-human face, mashing it. The thing let out a shrill, horrible scream and lay quivering.

The men behind me seized this opportunity to advance. A thrown knife winged past my shoulder, tearing my shirt. I went with a twenty-foot leap over the writhing, crushed insect, and reached the flume. Clinging to the cylinder, I plunged into the boiling, tumbling current and was swept away.

The water was hot, with a heavy mist of vapor rising from it. I sank, with my plunge, but desperately held to the cylinder. In a moment I came up like a cork. But for all my buoyancy, it was difficult to keep my head above the sur-

face. A chaos of spray and boiling, lashing water swept viciously down the incline of the flume. I could see dimly the smooth metallic sides rushing past me. Red puffs in the sky overhead illumined the sweep of passing tree branches.

I tried to swim, but could not. Momentarily I was under the surface, then up again, tumbling end over end, rolling—beaten against the rushing side of the flume when it turned a curve. The hermetically-sealed cylinder, with the air inside it, floated high. It jerked and pulled to escape from me. Once it got away, but I lunged and caught it again.

It was two miles across the city to where the flume plunged into the cliff tunnel. It seemed unending, yet I must have made it with incredible speed. Houses went by—dim shapes with lights in them, racing backward, momentarily visible over the flume edge. There was a great sweeping curve where the swollen torrent surged and slopped over the edge and I was very nearly flung over.

But presently I was able to keep my body from turning and found that I could swim a little. Then I tried holding the cylinder before me like a buoy and kicking it forward. I got along better after that. But the relief was short. The widening mouth of the tunnel entrance yawned out of the darkness ahead and swallowed me.

In the solid blackness I lost all track of direction. I could not see the sides of the flume. There was nothing but the inky chaos of sounds, a roaring reverberation now, and the beat of the waves against me. There was a dull thud as I struck the flume-side and was hurled back into the center of the current.

An interval passed of tumbling black chaos; then abruptly I saw the red lightning in the sky again. The cliff-wall opening swept backward and I was through the tunnel and in the open stormy night, outside the city valley.

The flume abruptly ended. I was spilled out in a great

cascade of water. The cylinder was torn from me. Rocks struck me. I felt myself rolling, tumbling on a rocky surface.

X

BESIEGED IN THE METAL DESERT

FOR AN INSTANT my senses must have faded. When they cleared, I was lying away from the water, save for the rain that beat upon me. And Tama and her brother were standing over me. The cylinder was unharmed. They had found it lying on the nearby rocks.

"You got it!" Toh exulted.

I was bruised and battered, half choked with water, but not injured. The platform was here. We mounted it, Tama, Toh and I crouching together with the precious cylinder held between us.

The girls lifted us; we struggled up into the night, circled the outside of the city valley, and headed out into the metal desert, toward the Fire Country. The storm seemed now to burst into the height of its fury. The whirling rotary clouds were at times close over us—green and red vapor masses, hurling rain and wind heavy with sulphur.

The clouds sometimes rifted into gigantic vertical funnels through which the clear daylight of the sky was visible. It brightened the scene, and the bleak, desolate landscape beneath us was at those moments clearly shown as great rippled sheets of metallic plateau, drenched with water—shining coppery, then cast with green—or blinding red when the lightning puffed—or again, a wild, broken area with spires and crags and boulders strewn as though some frenzied Titan had flung them.

And we swept over tiny valleys where soil had collected and trees and verdure had sprung up. The trees bent low in the wind; the rain-sheet blurred our vision of them as we struggled past.

It seemed unending. It would have been called a hundred miles on Earth. If the storm had not abated a trifle we could never have gone on. Tama relieved the girls to the limit of her strength—but Toh and I had to crouch there, helpless.

Then the deep pit of the cauldron valley, with jagged, upstanding buttes and spires towering over it, lay beneath us. We knew there would be caves down there to give us shelter. A great shaft of green-red light came down from a rift in the tumbling clouds. It fell like a cathedral shaft and disclosed the mile-wide pit floor. The close-encircling walls offered a measure of protection from the wind. Girls were down there, flapping about. Platforms lay discarded. Figures of girls and a few men were dragging supplies and equipment into the nearest caves.

The meeting-place at last!

The light from the clouds held only a moment—then it was gone and there was darkness in the little valley under us. We descended into it. There were at least five hundred girls here now. At intervals more straggled in.

The valley floor was naked metal rock, thickly studded with boulders. There was not a blade of vegetation; as I had anticipated, this was indeed no place where a permanent camp could be made.

But there were caves to give us shelter. In the dark confusion I located a dozen or so of the Hill Country young men and we got all the equipment sheltered underground. Meager supplies!—a few knives for weapons, agricultural implements, food-bulbs and seeds, a little clothing and personal effects.

With my strength and activity, abnormal on this small world, I raised the equipment in great armfuls and staggered into the caves.

As order gradually came out of the confusion, Tama and I began to feel that the situation was not quite as drastic as it had seemed at first. When the storm was over we could fly to find soil, and build houses there. We had carpenters' tools of a sort, and the wood on Mercury is very porous, easy to work. In the lush soil, vegetation grows rapidly. In a dozen day-cycles, with favorable weather, some of the food would be ready for harvesting. We had enough food with us now, with luck, to last that long.

The caves, most of them, communicated. It was presently an eerie scene inside, with animal-fat lamps spluttering flickering yellow light, and our blue-green bulbs—small battery affairs of the electro-current which a few of the girls had been able to secure—casting weird shadows on the walls.

For hours, while the storm raged, the girls struggled in. Presently we had about a thousand—although there was no really accurate means of counting them. Some were from the City of the Water, the second largest settlement of the Light Country.

"The word has spread there," said Tama.

We were in the cave which I had rigged for myself. Already I had started preparing my chemicals for the charging of the cylinder.

Tama added, "Every virgin in the Light Country will join us in time. Except those . . . unable to fly."

Some of the mutilated girls with us now were in pitiable condition. The exposure of the storm, the chill of the wind, the rain-soaked platforms upon which for so many hours they had lain inactive, had made them ill and fever was attacking them.

We prepared meals of a sort, and while the others slept I tried to arrange some form of organization by which with concerted, planned effort the necessary work of existing might be performed.

That night-cycle passed and the next day began. Day and night were alike in the darkness of the black storm. The rain fell in an almost continuous downpour. The wind surged and sang around the naked pinnacles that towered over the valley. Puffs of lightning came at intervals. Within our caves it was only a distant turmoil, but outside it was an inferno of raging, angry nature.

I posted the young men as guards at the cave-mouths, where they could see across the cauldron. It was about a mile in diameter, a pit depressed a hundred feet or so below the level of the surrounding plateau upland. The rim was broken with gullies and ravines and studded with pinnacles like great pointed church spires. The caves we had chosen were all close together at the bottom of one wall.

As one stood at the cave-mouths, all was a green lurid murk outside. The wind came only in fitful, crazy gusts down here at the cauldron bottom. The opposite valley wall could be seen only dimly, its rim outlined against the turgid sky. Then a lightning puff would momentarily redden everything with its glare.

I had my chemical reactions well underway. We expected every hour that the storm would abate. I was preparing to write this narrative, an appeal to Earth. Dr. Grenfell once said to me that within ten years he and his associates would conquer the secret of space-navigation. I hoped that might by now have been accomplished.

Two day-cycles passed. Again the storm lulled, but it still hung threateningly. We had just had an evening meal in our cave, when one of the young guards came rushing in. He

knew a little English but he forgot it now. He called excitedly to Tama.

She sprang to her feet. There was a flutter around the dim cave, for a dozen or more of the girls were here with us. Tama whirled on me.

Before I could stop them, several of the girls ran, half-flying, out of the cave. I rushed out, calling after them. The rain had ceased. The valley floor held black pools of water between the boulders. The sky overhead was brighter, with slow, funnel clouds with green shafts piercing them.

On the upper rim I saw the skulking figures of Roc's pursuing band. Our girls came fluttering from the caves to gaze up at them.

"Inside!" I called. "Tama, get them inside!"

It was too late! A group of them had run into an open space. From above, a long-winged arrow came sailing down. Tama shouted. But the arrow caught one of the scattering girls. She fell on the rocks with the arrow sticking up from her back.

From then, it was open warfare. All that day men were appearing in greater numbers on the rim-top. They did not dare come down, apparently, but were content to camp there in the upper crags and harry us. We did not know if Roc was with them or not—nor how many men there were.

They tried to open communication with us. I was in favor of it, but the infuriated girls refused. A last platform had arrived from the Hill City, with a few young men and nearly twenty mutilated girls on it. Roc's men flung a rain of arrows and stones at it as it came down. Two of the girls were killed.

But down below we were more wary now and kept cautiously within the caves whenever the sky was bright. The storm still clung. Then there came a period when the sky

was black as night again. We added to our guards; it seemed likely that Roc would take advantage of the blackness and come down.

The thought of that gave me an idea. If Roc were up there with these men, why couldn't I prowl out and seize him? I told this to Tama and Toh.

"If we could capture him, hold him as hostage—threaten his life—" Tama said.

"We could make him disperse his band," I finished. I desperately wanted them to be gone; they would hamper me, perhaps could even stop me from launching the cylinder. And when we were ready to fly from here, some of the girls undoubtedly would be killed by their arrows. There were many of the girls now who wanted to fly out in force and try to drive Roc's men away, but I was obdurate against it. These young girls, flying, armed with knives, to enter into deadly combat! It was unthinkable.

But Tama and I might prowl quietly out into this blackness and bring Roc back with us.

Toh wanted to go, but I would not let him. Tama could fly; and I, an Earthman, had unusual strength and agility.

We started out with a knife and a small electro-torch in each of our belts. We picked our way slowly to the floor of the valley. It was like the blackest of nights on Earth, save for that queer green-yellow sheen on the clouds. The wind swirled overhead, but there was no rain.

Tama walked beside me, her wings occasionally flapping slowly.

"We must keep together," I whispered. "When we get near the top, I'll wait, while you fly around."

"But keep out over the valley. If they fire at you, fly back down."

We arranged light flashes by which we could call each

other if it became necessary. We passed the line of caves, splashing in the pools of water which lay on the valley bottom. Then we began to climb. No lights were showing on the rim overhead; it seemed that Roc's men were back from the brink, in cave openings, perhaps.

Climbing was not difficult for me. With my weight less than half what it was on Earth, and my strength of muscle the same, I could leap up this ascent with ease.

And to Tama it was nothing. She flew from one crag, upward to the next, and waited for me to arrive.

There was a place where we had to cross a transverse ravine. It was too broad for me to leap with safety—sixty feet, perhaps.

Tama whispered, "Hold me, Guy."

I put an arm about her thighs; and as I crouched under her wings, we leaped together. She could almost sustain me. We fluttered over the ravine and landed scrambling but unhurt on its opposite lower brink.

She was laughing softly. "We get along very well . . . . Look there!"

Her tone changed abruptly. We crouched among the rocks gazing up to where the valley rim showed black against the stormy sky.

A dark shadow sailed slowly across the little valley, a thousand feet up. As it became clearer we could see it was oblong, with tiny lights upon it. Its small headlight ray was searching the plateau as though seeking a landing place. Then it passed over the rim and vanished.

That was the first I had heard of a flying vehicle existing on Mercury. We could see now, behind the rim-top, the answering signal-beams of Roc's men.

It took us an hour to locate the vehicle and get near it. But at last, without raising an alarm, we reached its vicinity. It had come down on the plateau perhaps a mile from the

cauldron-valley, concealed from the caves by an upstanding line of buttes. The figures of Roc's men on the upper plateau unwittingly guided us. Their small hand lights showed as they picked their way along the broken rocky upland toward the spot where the vehicle had landed.

Tama and I made a wide detour, ten miles to one side at least. Scrambling, running, flying, we made good speed.

Was this vehicle from the Hill City bringing Roc, perhaps, to join his men and plan what they were to do with the insurgent virgins? The scientists of the Hill City had never really admitted me into their secret activities. Flying vehicles had once been used on Mercury; had this one been reconstructed from the lost secrets of history?

We reached it at last, a great metal bird lying on the rocks. We crouched on the top of a butte, overlooking it. There were lights on its deck and in its portes. And hand lights showed a crowd of Roc's men swarming around it outside.

As I gazed, I received another shock. This was more than a mere flying vehicle: it was a space-ship! Its convex panes, the dome like a transparent bell over its deck, bore evidence to that. It was a ship from another planet. From Earth?

My heart leaped. But the hope was at once dispelled. Men appeared, working under the bell of the forward deck. It was brighter under there; we were not far away, gazing almost directly down upon them, for the ship lay close against the wall of rock. They were Mercutians, not Earthmen.

Then we saw Roc approaching. A chance beam from the ship struck him and clung. He stopped and waved his arms. From the deck of the ship, where a porte in the dome had been rolled back, a gigantic figure answered his greeting.

We had relinquished hope of capturing Roc now. With

all these men, and in the glow of light, it would have been too desperate an attempt. We watched Roc approach the ship, dispersing his men while he climbed aboard and met the giant figure on the deck. We could see them greet each other; then they turned and went into the ship's interior.

A moment later a light in a lower porte of the hull flashed on. It seemed to suggest that Roc and this giant were in the cabin.

"Tama, if we could get down there—hear what they're saying!"

It seemed barely possible. The cabin porte faced the butte wall, which was perhaps twenty feet away. The porte-hole was low in the hull, only a few feet above the rocks on which the ship rested. There seemed to be none of Roc's men down there; they were all on the other side.

We approached the brink. It was about a hundred-foot drop from where we stood.

"Can you lower us, Tama?"

"Yes. Hold tight, Guy."

I put my arms around her and we stepped off the brink. My head was at her waist, my arms about her thighs, my body dangling lower than hers to be out of the way of her wings. She struggled, flapping with all her strength to check our fall.

If we were not seen! It was fairly dark, but there was a reflected glow from the ship.

There was a wind moaning around this naked rock-butte. The wall slid up past us; the ship seemed to be coming up. Then we dropped into the twenty-foot wide space.

My feet struck the ground. The impact was not too severe. We fell in a heap, but were unhurt. The porte stood open, quite near us, and we could hear voices. We found a place where we could see, and ignored the fact that we were in a glow of light.

Within the small metal-walled cabin, Roc sat with the giant Mercutian. There was no one else in the room. They were conferring earnestly—the giant man talking, and Roc doing most of the listening.

He was a man of about fifty, this stranger. I could see him plainly as he sat sprawling his great lazy length on a padded bench. A man almost seven feet tall, I judged him—heavy-set, but not with the thick, barrel-chested look of the Cold Country natives.

He was a Light Country man, by his aspect, but head and shoulders taller than the tallest Mercutian I had ever seen. He was garbed in an animal skin belted about his waist; his limbs and torso were naked and hairless, with great muscles that glided beneath his skin as he gestured.

A long black mane of hair covered his head and ears. It was white at the temples, and came in a peak over his forehead, with that same Satanic aspect characteristic of Roc. But Roc generally wore a grinning, crafty smirk. This older man's face had an expression of rugged, intellecual strength, with its beak-like nose, eyes sunk deep under black bushy brows, and massive, square jaw.

It was Roc's father, the exiled Croat. They were talking in the Light Country tongue. I could understand some of it—enough so that in a moment I was tense with amazement. And Tama clung to me as she listened.

How long we crouched there I do not know. Abruptly I heard a *ting!* An arrow flashed past us! We started in a realization of where we were; the porte glow was on us, had disclosed us! A group of Roc's men were coming around the forward end of the ship. Another arrow sang past.

I leaped the other way. It was fifty or sixty feet to the stern of the ship. Tama fluttered above me. I recall that I shouted, "Tama, fly off!"

I ran the ship's length in gigantic leaps. From under the stern another group of men appeared, directly in my path. I landed among them. They tried to scatter; I made an effort to check my leap and take another to clear them. A stone hit me on the shoulder and an arrow sank into my leg; I stooped and plucked it out. Four or five men rushed at me, fell upon me, and I went down.

But they could not hold me. I plunged my knife into one of them and lost it as he fell. I stood struggling, kicking, flinging them off. But there were a dozen or more of them here now. They came back at me like terriers. Their shouts raised the alarm and more men arrived at a run. On the ship's stern over us, Cold Country men were peering down in amazed curiosity at our swaying forms.

I was the center of a struggling group. Then from over us, Tama came like a fighting eagle into battle. She swooped once and her knife ripped a man's throat. She went past, came swooping back again.

I tore myself loose, crouched and sprang. My thirty-foot leap carried me over them all.

"Guy!"

Tama swooped at me with a rush of beating wings, and seized me. A rain of stones clattered about us. A torch-beam fell upon us and held us in its disclosing circle of light.

I cast Tama off. "Fly away—before you are hit!"

I ran on. But she came with another swoop, and caught me as I rose in one of my giant bounds. She struggled and flapped, until the ship and its turmoil had dwindled into distance behind us, and my weight pulled us down again on the cauldron rim.

XI

THE PLOT AGAINST EARTH'S WOMEN

WE ARE STILL here in our caves at the bottom of the valley (continued the warning message from Guy Palisse). Tama and I got back safely, and there seemed no pursuit. Roc's men were quiet up on the rim. And after a time we saw the spaceship depart.

During these last three cycles I have been absorbed in this narrative, and in preparing my cylinder for launching. My chemicals are about ready and now I am finishing these pages.

We did not know that this message was to be a warning until we stood at the window of Croat's spaceship and heard him talking to Roc.

Even then, at first I was too amazed to grasp the full import of what they were saying. I am not overly skilled in the Mercutian language, but now Tama and I have had time to compare what we heard. Some of it we have had to infer. Croat was explaining to Roc his future plans. But we came in the middle of it, after Croat had been talking for some minutes.

Yet we learned much, and I set it here as a warning. Croat is now leader of the barbarous Cold Country government. He must have stolen the formulas of the Light Country scientific devices of former ages; for he has developed the lost death-ray projector, and the small heat-rays which at twenty paces can burn a hole through a man.

Roc, for all these years, was in occasional communication with his father, spying upon the Light Country government. We think it was Roc who secured the records. And Croat built the interplanetary flying ship in the Cold Country.

I must explain that the women of the Cold Country, through long generations forced to toil under every adverse circumstance of living, have long since lost any semblance of beauty. Heavy, pallid creatures, barely able to fly, they are, besides, few in number. There is now in the Cold Country scarcely one woman to ten men. The savage race is dying out.

No doubt it was Croat's idea at first to develop lethal weapons and attack the Light Country, to capture and enslave the flying virgins. Roc's part was steadily to agitate more stringent laws regarding the clipping of the virgins' wings. He and Croat did not anticipate what immediately happened—the widespread, open revolt of the virgins.

Meanwhile I—an Earthman—had come with tales of a greater world, a world with women, beautiful, who cannot fly. Curse my innocent readiness to tell Roc all I could of Earth!

And so I warn you! We got no details, as we listened there at that cabin porte. But we learned enough. Roc mentioned that he was leaving the Hill Country permanently. That is good. Without him, the government will be more conciliatory toward the insurgent girls. Indeed, it has been decided that they return and try to make peace. We feel that the government will now realize how drastic was that last law. And there are thousands of men—fathers, brothers and potential husbands of the girls—who now will see things in a different light.

The danger is not here but on Earth. Croat's ship is leaving for Earth; it may be gone by the time I can get this cylinder launched.

How little Tama and the virgins realized that their revolt would spread to menace the women of another world! But it has.

Oh, my accursedly loose tongue! I had told Roc of my sister, and of Professor White, with his girls' camp in Maine. I had made maps of the Earth countries for the Hill City government.

Roc had access to them. Croat has them now! From the way he talked, he will land in Maine. You can imagine how I feel—to have unwittingly been an aid to this menace! Croat even mentioned my sister Rowena, there in the spaceship. With diabolical cynicism he told Roc how amusing it would be if Rowena Palisse chanced to be among the captive Earthwomen whose beauty he would soon be able to display to his men of the Cold Country. Just a few Earthwomen this first trial trip, he said; then at each inferior conjunction he would make other raids.

My sister Rowena! I pray you guard her—if only this message reaches you in time!

What Tama and I will do when the virgins return to the Hill City, I do not know. One of our girls—a blue-winged child barely sixteen—heard this story from Tama; and she disappeared yesterday. We have been wondering if she flew to Croat's ship, possibly to hide in it and go with it to Earth—to warn you, Tama says, knowing that it would be just like the girl's unselfish courage.

The storm is really abating now. Roc's men seem to have left this vicinity. We think the spaceship has gone.

I must stop, and get the cylinder launched. If only it reaches you!

XII

NIGHT-PROWLING GIANT

DR. GRENFELL'S voice died away. And I—Jack Dean, a news-broadcaster who had never dreamed of such news as this—slowly became aware of my surroundings: the lounge of the Flying Cube; Dr. Grenfell at his table, with the pages of Guy Palisse's message before him and the Space-traveling cylinder at his feet; the other men, all sitting tense; Jimmy Turk wide-eyed, breathless.

The spell broke. But still I saw those naked, rainswept copper hills—the Mercutian spaceship, the giant Croat telling his son how he was about to raid the Earth.

How well this message explained what had already happened to us on Earth! Croat had come, as Guy Palisse warned. Croat's spaceship had come faster than the cylinder. He had made his raid, captured the desired number of girls, and his ship had gone back to Mercury. Croat had been left on Earth, perhaps; but in less than four months his ship would come again.

I became aware of a hand on my arm. I heard a sob. Rowena was sitting, staring ahead with tear-filled eyes. I put my arm around her, and she yielded like a child, clinging to me.

"Well," gasped Jimmy. "That explains it—by George, it does. Everything. He even mentions the winged girl we shot at camp. Poor little thing—come to warn us and we killed her! At the next conjunction that ship will come again. Palisse says it plainly. A raid in greater force!"

The men were all excitedly talking at once. Through the bull's-eye pane in the floor, the Earth's surface showed under us—a spread of mountains through a rift in the clouds: we were over the western United States.

"Get back to the controls," Dr. Grenfell ordered. "Good grief, we might have dropped and smashed on those peaks for all we knew what we were doing!"

We checked our descent and swept eastward. It was one o'clock the morning of September sixth.

Dr. Grenfell was glancing through the other pages which Palisse had sent. "He evidently hoped we would have a spaceship ready. These contain astronomical data concerning Mercury—facts unknown to us of Earth—its size, density, the inclination of its axis, orbital rotation period, axial rotation—the scientists of Hill City seem fully as advanced as ourselves for all the primitive, decadent civilization Palisse pictures. These notes will be of great interest—"

"To heck with that!" Jimmy muttered. "Dr. Grenfell when is the next conjunction with Mercury and the Earth—the time when they're closest together again?"

"The first week of December. That's three months from now."

"Doctor, that's when the Mercutians will come back! You said so—you warned of that in your public statement."

"I did, Jimmy." Grenfell's gaze was still on the pages of notes. He added slowly, "He has given us full landing instructions: how best to approach Mercury, the location of the Hill City. There's a sketch map here of that whole section of the Light Country, and details of the location of the valley where he wrote the message and dispatched the cylinder."

"Dr. Grenfell, we're going, aren't we?" I burst out. "If we can get there before the Mercutians are ready to start for Earth again—"

I felt Rowena's body grow tense. She sat erect, staring at Dr. Grenfell with tear-filled eyes, but still she did not speak.

Dr. Grenfell smiled grimly, and as his gaze met mine I saw that his dark eyes were smoldering.

"Oh, yes, we're going! Do you suppose, with the Cube successful, as undoubtedly it is, I would be content to make a futile trip to the Moon? We will take what weapons we can and attempt to join Palisse on Mercury. He evidently didn't come on Croat's ship or we would have heard from him."

"When are we going?" Jimmy demanded. "How soon?"

"At once! I won't wait for the next conjunction. It will be twice as long a voyage now—but what of it? We must go there at once!"

It was just before dawn of September sixteenth when the Bolton Flying Cube left Earth for its voyage to Mercury. There is so much which of necessity belongs in my narrative, that I pass over these ten days of preparation with only a summary.

It was soon decided that a considerable number of men aboard the Cube would be a hindrance rather than a help. The multiplicity of supplies and equipment needed, and the haste of this departure, made Dr. Grenfell desire as much simplicity as possible.

There were nine of us—the same nine who had been upon the trial ascent after the cylinder. I was not present when they tried to tell Rowena it would be better for her not to go. What she said I never knew, but she came back to me, white-faced and grim—and it had been decided she was going!

Nor was she a handicap. Accustomed to working among busy scientists, she was completely at home in this atmosphere. And those tears of thankfulness which had overcome

her when she learned after all these years that her brother was not dead—never again did she show such weakness.

The ten days of preparation were busy ones. Equipment had been prepared for a voyage to the Moon. The apparatus for landing and maintaining life on the airless, waterless Moon had been set up, and most of it was unsuitable for Mercury.

A multiplicity of details indeed—things necessary to the vehicle's operation for so long a flight: food, water, personal effects. I saw, when I was given the task of checking these items over, Dr. Grenfell's wisdom in holding down our personnel to nine.

There were weapons, and a great variety of scientific instruments, including the most modern wireless receivers and transmitters with which we hoped communication with the Earth might be established.

A series of exasperating delays seemed to afflict us, with Mercury daily adding tremendous distance to our voyage. But at last we were ready.

Everywhere in the world during those ten days the public eye was upon us. There was no way of keeping the affair secret. The message from Guy Palisse was given out in brief summary; the public knew that in December the Mercutians probably would come again, and that we were going to try and stop them.

We meant to capture Croat's spaceship, kill Croat, smash his ship, and thus end the menace—a simple enough plan. Yet such is the public mind that there arose a clamor of debate by self-styled experts who in reality knew nothing; astrologers and every manner of public-hungry charlatan who read the stars, gazed in crystals, or dealt the mystic card and solemnly foretold what was going to happen. And there were reporters with facile tongues who thought it clever to sharpen their wit at our expense.

Two startling incidents occurred on Earth during those ten

days. The first was the experience of the Reverend Arthur T. Hoskins, of Westville, Maine—a town about twenty miles from the White camp.

This report was never made public. I give it substantially as Dr. Hoskins told it to the authorities the following day. He was not a hysterical man, this middle-aged rector—nor a publicity seeker but a man of matured, logical intellect. We could do no less than believe exactly what he said.

On the evening of September eleventh, at about eight o'clock, he was sitting alone in his study on the ground floor of the rectory. He was an ardent lover of music. He sat before his radio, listening to a Mozart minuet, which was a favorite of his. There was no one but him in the house: his wife was attending a meeting of one of the ladies' church societies.

It was a cool night, but the rector, fond of fresh air, had his ground floor window wide open. The strains of the minuet floated out the window, and the rector was carried back into dreams of his boyhood. Then abruptly the music was split by the peremptory oscillating wave of the Boston Newscasting Studios. He did not tune them out. Instead, he listened, with the minuet fading, to an account of the Bolton Flying Cube which shortly was to make an attempt to reach the planet Mercury.

The rector was presently aware of a figure standing in the dimness of his garden outside the study window—a very tall man, apparently listening to the words on the radio.

The intruder saw that he was discovered, made a movement as though about to go away, seemed to think better of it, and came slowly forward. He presently stood head and shoulders in the window. The rector's study light fell on him.

He was a man of giant stature, bareheaded, with black hair graying at the temples. It was oddly cut, this hair—

close-cropped to the man's round skull, but gouged, as though the fellow had inexpertly cut it himself. His face was hairless, massive-featured, with a beak of a nose, wide, thin lips and a heavy jaw. His dark eyes were deep set under heavy black brows.

A rough-looking fellow, the rector thought. Yet his was, in a way, an intellectual face. But of what nationality? The rector was even more puzzled when the man spoke.

The rector said, "What do you want, my friend?"

"I was listening to that instrument you have." The heavy, thick voice spoke good English with an indefinable accent. He spoke carefully, as though it was an effort to get it right. And the man repeated: "—that instrument, there, which was talking to you."

The rector had shut it off. He made a move to turn it on again, but the stranger checked him. "I have heard enough."

The man's gaze was on the table where the rector's usual ten o'clock meal had been placed by his wife—a little stack of biscuits and a glass of milk.

"Food—give me—will you?"

It seemed, to the surprised Dr. Hoskins, that his visitor was about to climb in the window. And the rector felt a thrill of fear. There was something uncanny about this fellow—something unnatural. He wore a somewhat dilapidated suit which was far too small for him. And his soiled linen shirt, open at the throat, strained across his great chest muscles, causing a rip in the fabric.

He did not climb in the window, but he leaned far forward. "Give me that."

It was a command, but spoken as though the man were hardly aware of his tone.

The rector steadied his voice. "You are hungry, my man?"

"Yes. Very."

He wolfed down the biscuits which the rector handed him.

The glass of milk he eyed calculatingly, then smelled it tentatively.

Dr. Hoskins, realized with a vague shudder, that this man never had seen milk before.

At about this point a certain knowledge swept upon the rector. It had been growing on him with a shuddering fear, but now it swept him with conviction: this man, not much under seven feet tall, was not of this Earth!

Dr. Hoskins was no coward, but he had had no experience in deeds of violence. He was unarmed. His first instinct was to escape from his study. Then it came to him that he should make some effort to capture this fellow—apprehend him, or at least set the authorities upon him. There was a telephone across the room. But the rector, transfixed by the shock of his realization, did not dare move.

The stranger drained his glass of milk, tossed it to the floor, and appeared surprised when the fragile glass was shattered. Looking up, he met the rector's horrified gaze. He began what seemed words of thanks for the milk. But they died on his lips.

He stepped back suddenly from the window.

"You—think that you know me?"

Dr. Hoskins found himself looking into the muzzle of a leveled weapon—a strangely-fashioned weapon, small and globular, with a mesh of wires across its face. The man's huge gray arm, with his grotesquely short coatsleeve hanging halfway to his elbow, was extended. He held the weapon with steady fingers. His voice was quiet but now it contained a grim menace.

"I want you to help me. I came for that. Do not move—make no noise!"

The rector sat frozen.

"Is that your flying car in the little house outside? I am not going to hurt you. Answer me. Is it?"

The rector moistened his dry lips. "Yes."

"You able to fly it?"

"Yes."

It was a small sport plane, given to Dr. Hoskins by the members of his parish.

"Then come out. I want you to show me how to fly it. Come out, I say!"

Dr. Hoskins was somewhat rotund. And with his fright, he climbed over the sill with difficulty. The stranger gripped him by the arm, helping him; and, outside, he stood gazing down at him with a faint smile. He was indeed a gigantic man, head and shoulders above the rector. He cut a grotesque figure, the cuffs of his trousers hanging far up his legs. But he stood erect, commanding—and amused at his captive's fear.

"Stop shaking. I will not hurt you. If you shake like that you cannot fly your little car. You will kill us both. Do not do that!"

Still Dr. Hoskins could not speak. The giant pushed him down the garden path. Its shrubbery secluded it from the road and no one saw them. They reached the little wooden hangar.

The rector found his voice at last. "What do you want me to do?"

"Take us up. Can I trust you not to wreck us? Or must I kill you—and go away disappointed?"

Dr. Hoskins steadied himself. He gazed up at his captor's heavy gray face, and he managed a smile. "You will be safe with me," he said. "Where—where do you want to go?"

But that the man did not answer. They were presently in the little barrel-winged Dinsler and away into the starlight. The rector sat at the sticks, the stranger jammed beside him. There was barely room for them both in the tiny pit.

Beneath them lay the Maine forests; the starry vault was

overhead. Dr. Hoskins, occupied with the controls, found his nerves steadying. He demanded again, "Where do you want to go? It was unnecessary to threaten me. It is not my custom to refuse a service to my fellow man."

"Just around here." The gray arm gestured north toward the valley of the St. Lawrence with the distant mountains behind it. "Just around and back. I want to learn how to sail your little car."

For about an hour the astounded rector explained how the Dinsler was operated—the engine controls, and then the flying itself. His captor showed remarkable intelligence, almost as though he were familiar with engines, and this one was strange to him only in detail.

"Let me try," he commanded at last.

Dr. Hoskin's heart was in his mouth as he yielded his place at the sticks. But presently his captor had caught the knack of it.

"This is not difficult," the giant stated. "We will go back now."

"You are going to land us?"

"Land *you*. It is the little car I want."

The rector was momentarily emboldened. "To go—where?"

"Back home." His companion turned and in his sunken dark eyes the rector saw a gleam of irony. "I am trying to get—back home."

He said no more. He turned the Dinsler in an arc southward. A plane passed overhead, a Greenland freightship heading north from New York.

The stranger chuckled. "No one notices us? That is good." He gazed down at the lights of a little town set in the dark stretches of forest. "Those orange lights are the flying field?"

"Yes."

"I can read the number: M-4870. The 'M'—is that for Maine?"

"Yes."

"The number would tell us the town?"

"Yes."

"And you have maps here?"

The rector produced his field maps and explained them.

"Yes—I understand. I, too, have maps." He touched his clothes. "I have studied—been taught. And the landing fields of the other States are lettered and numbered like this?"

"Yes. Look here, my man, what are you—"

"I shall not use the public fields. The attendents would be curious. . . . Is that your settlement?"

They were back within sight of the rector's village. "Yes," he said. "Please take us down." He was trying to decide what he could do when they landed. The giant seemed to read his thoughts.

"Not there. We will have to find a more secluded place."

He landed them, with what seemed intuitive skill, in an empty field near a neighboring town.

"Climb out."

The rector got out of the cockpit and stood on the ground. The field, with no houses near it, was dim in the starlight. The rector saw that once more the strange weapon was leveled at him.

"You stand still until I have gone!" Again a gleam of irony shone in the giant's dark eyes. "I ought to kill you. I suppose I shall be sorry I did not. You will tell the officials all about me. That is your plan, is it not?"

"Why, I—"

"Well, you may, if you like! What harm to me? Tell them what you want." He leaned out of the pit. The engine was purring, and his low voice seemed to purr with it.

"You are what they call a man of God, are you not?"

It suddenly struck the rector that this amused, unhuman

giant was planning to kill him and then fly off. He stood stricken, clinging to the side of the cockpit.

"Take your hands off that! Are you a man of God?"

"Yes. I—"

"Then you will not dare speak other than the truth. I have some questions: I want the truth. Will you give it?"

"Yes," gasped the rector.

"There is a girl—a young woman. Her name is Palisse, Rowena Palisse. Have you ever heard of her?"

"Yes."

"Do you know where she is now?"

"They say, in southern New Jersey."

"The same settlement where they keep the Bolton Flying Cube?"

"I think so—"

"In that town, where does she stay? Has the building a number?"

"I don't—don't know. I have no idea—"

"Then that is all I can get from you. I think I will not let you talk about me."

The terrified rector felt his senses fading. The dim outlines of the field whirled about him. He realized clearly his deadly danger and the realization was too much for him. His pounding heart flung the blood into his head; then it receded. He felt himself fainting, falling, stricken by his own rush of terror.

And to this undoubtedly he owed his life. Simultaneously with his fall, he dimly saw a flash, heard a hiss, and felt a burning stab in his shoulder.

Then the field went into black silence as his senses left him.

They found the unfortunate Dr. Hoskins lying in the field the following morning, his shoulder pierced by a hole burned into it. His aircar, with the mysterious man, had vanished.

Undoubtedly, as the rector fell, the assailant believed he had killed him. He had left him lying there for dead—and flown away in the Dinsler.

That was the first of the incidents, That this mysterious man was Croat the Mercutian, we could not doubt. We recalled the giant figure who had escaped that night at the White Summer Camp when we shot the Mercutian man and the winged girl.

The forests had been constantly searched for that giant Mercutian, but without success. The message from Guy Palisse, picturing Croat so vividly, caused the search to be renewed with additional vigor. When it continued to be unsuccessful, there were many—Dr. Grenfell among them—who believed that Croat had got back to his Space-flyer.

The flyer, it was thought, had never descended into the Earth's atmosphere. The small silver ball which had brought the Mercutians down from their hovering ship and took them up again with their captives, must have rescued Croat.

But now, after these many days, it was proven that Croat was still on Earth, still in the vicinity of the original raids. We could picture how he must have been living—hiding in the depths of the forest by day, prowling at night to steal what food he could, and stealing clothes—trying to make himself less conspicuous, so that if seen he could pass momentarily for a man of Earth. There had been reports from various farmhouses of midnight disturbances. The authorities had discredited them as the products of public hysteria: but they were discredited no longer.

And Croat had been listening at windows, perhaps for the newscasters' voices on radio—hearing about the Bolton Flying Cube, trying to locate Rowena Palisse.

He had been unable to travel far on foot. But now he had Dr. Hoskins' little flyer, and had disappeared in it.

The assault on the rector was made on the evening of

September eleventh. All the day of the twelfth, by every means that was known, the Dinsler was searched for. And Rowena, in a hotel of that south Jersey town, was kept heavily guarded.

Then, at dawn of the thirteenth, came news of the Dinsler. It was sighted, passing slowly over a village near Philadelphia, heading southwest at a considerable altitude. Pursuit planes were sent up immediately after it, but not to hit it, for the orders were to take Croat alive if possible.

The little Dinsler sailed serenely on. The police pilots overtook it, to find its controls lashed and its cockpit empty. Pilotless, it had been launched and was riding the skies until its fuel ran out.

That was the thirteenth. Three days later, the Bolton Flying Cube, carrying Dr. Grenfell, Jimmy Turk, myself, Rowena and five assistants, left the Earth upon our voyage to Mercury.

XIII

IN THE AIRLOCK

"THERE'S THE SUN, Rowena. It's day!"

Day! Already the world had lost its meaning. Day and night were mere terms of our rotating Earth. Here in space the Sun blazed in its field of black; the stars gleamed untwinkling; the quarter Moon hung white, like a broken, curved limb against the dead-black infinity of emptiness. Time seemed eternal here.

Rowena stood beside me on the Flying Cube's deck. Together we gazed at the firmament. We were only a few hours into the voyage, and the Earth still hung beneath us, a great spreading expanse which filled the lower heavens.

We had long since passed through the atmosphere, ascending an edge of the Earth's conical shadow; now we plunged from it and the Sun blazed with a strangely flaming glory.

Rowena pointed to the Earth. "It's dwindling. Our little Earth—how small it looks now, Jack!" Her hand touched my arm. I seemed to feel a difference in that touch, as though her fingers were lingering, caressing.

"Rowena—"

Within me there sprang a sudden rush of emotion. I think, perhaps, that from the first moment I saw her I felt instinctively that in all the world, this was the woman for me—this girl, so queenly, aloof, but with gentle, wistful eyes.

Perhaps it was the starry firmament around us; the tiny Cube seemingly hung here motionless with great, soundless, blazing worlds strewn about the black heavens. And our Earth so small—dwindling every moment that we watched it. It was as though all this were drawing Rowena and me together, making us realize our littleness, futility, unimportance. And because we were so unimportant to all the universe, it made us that much more important to each other.

"Rowena!"

I must have stood there stupidly repeating her name. The length of deck was empty save for us two. Through the portes, mingled moonlight, sunlight, starlight and earthlight came slanting in soft silver shafts.

"Jack—"

She swayed toward me and then was in my arms, her arms up about my neck, her lips returning my kisses, with all her calm, regal poise swept away.

There was a moment when we floated off upon the torrent of a new-found love, clinging together, alone in the universe.

Then I heard a step, and a voice—Jimmy's voice: "Oh, I say— beg your pardon—I'm gone!"

"Oh!" Rowena cast me off. But Jimmy had made good his words, whirling like a rabbit and vanishing into the upper corridor doorway.

We both laughed.

"Oh," said Rowena. "How dreadful!"

"Dreadful? Rowena, dear—"

I touched her, but she moved away.

"Dreadful," I said, "that Jimmy should have seen us?"

"No, of course not."

"That you should—love me?"

"No—"

"Well, you do, don't you?"

"Jack—" Her smile was gone. She faced me with a quiet, level gaze. "Do you think so, Jack?"

Her eyes were shining, and in them I could not miss the light of her love for me. Then the spell broke; she laughed again.

"Dreadful, Jack, that I should yield to a thing like that—now, with this voyage ahead of us—with Guy, out there on Mercury."

We were presently talking of more sensible things. Dr. Grenfell had calculated that this voyage was to be a matter of some three weeks. Mercury would be on the other side of the Sun before we reached it. We would pass Venus in five or six days; the Moon we were already passing.

And we talked of Croat. It seemed obvious that he was the mysterious stranger who had assaulted the Maine rector.

"Still on Earth," I said. "His ship came, sent down its silver ball like a tender, while the ship itself hovered out here. Just about here, probably."

That had been on August tenth. It was now September sixteenth. Croat's ship had hovered out here while the ball went down into the Earth's atmosphere and stayed a week—the week of the raids. Then the ball had come up, with the Earthgirls captive, but without Croat. Mercury was drawing daily further away. The Mercutians, afraid to go back for their leader, had undoubtedly taken their ship back to Mercury.

"But we will reach Mercury before that, Rowena, and stop them, I said. "If we can get that vehicle and smash it, down on Earth they'll capture Croat in time, of course, and this threat will be removed."

We had no specific plans of what could be done when we reached Mercury. Rowena said suddenly, "I'm wondering if

Guy and Tama were on the Mercutian ship when it waited out here."

"But if they had been—"

"That winged girl who was shot at the White Camp did what she intended and stowed away on the ship. In his message, Guy hinted that he and Tama were going to try it."

This was the old Rowena again, discussing these affairs with calm logic.

"But if they did hide on the ship, Jack, it's evident that they were not able to get into the silver ball and descend. Either they were still in hiding, or Croat had found and captured them, keeping them up here in the ship, while he went down—"

It was all theory, of course.

An hour went by. The Earth shrank amazingly with our upward flight. And as the Cube turned and swung toward the Sun, using all of its giant gravitational force to pull us, the firmament shifted. The Earth seemed to come up even with us—a monstrous ball hanging level with the deck windows. The sunlight struck it full: a great reddish ball, shrinking and turning silver.

Again a step sounded behind us. A cautious step—Jimmy again.

"I say, all right for me to show up now?"

"All right, Jimmy," Rowena laughed.

He came toward us along the deck.

"You going to stand there forever? We've had breakfast downstairs. I told them you two were busy."

"Jimmy!" Rowena protested.

"Why not? You were, weren't you? Anyway, the Doc says for you to come down now—at once. That's an order. You're to have your breakfast and then go to sleep."

We followed him obediently to the second floor corridor, down the ladder-steps and into the lounge.

"You're sleepy," Jimmy added. "If you don't know it, that's your hard luck. We've all been up all night. The Doc has turned in, and Rance is in command."

At four P.M. Earth time it was Grenfell's plan for us to start the regular routine of watches which would be held throughout the voyage. It was now nine A.M.

Rowena and I had a light meal. She went to her cabin, which was off the second-floor cross corridor. Diagonally from her, on the corridor's opposite side, was the cubbyhole Jimmy and I were to occupy.

At Rowena's doorway we left her.

"Sleep well, Jack."

Jimmy whirled on her like a little bantam, gazing up at her with a frown. "And how about me?"

"You too, Jimmy!"

"Thanks."

He was grinning as we entered our room. "Nice girl, that. Crazy about you. Well, I don't blame her. You two giants look as though you were born for each other."

We lay in our bunks. Earthlight streamed in the bull's-eye window, until Jimmy drew down the shade.

I think that in a few moments Jimmy was asleep. But for a time sleep would not come to me. The interior of the Cube was silent except for the faint hum of the current in the gravity plates. There was no vibration, an utter lack of the sense of movement, though now we were plunging toward the Sun at a velocity which in comparison to the planets was still slow, but inconceivably rapid compared to any vehicle traveling upon Earth or in the air.

I drifted off into an uneasy slumber.

This must have been at about ten A.M. Dr. Grenfell was

asleep in his cubby up in the third tier. In the room next to Jimmy and me, Baker and Gibbons were sleeping.

It left Rance and two other men—Jones and Allen—in command of the Cube. Rance was in the little dome-observatory, at the telescope, working out a chart of our course. For all his skill with explosives and his experience with the New York bomb squad, he was versed in higher mathematics, and Dr. Grenfell depended upon him for much of the routine navigational work.

I have no idea what awakened me, but suddenly I found myself fully aroused, with the startled feeling that something was vitally wrong. Jimmy was peacefully snoring in the bunk over me. The Cube interior was silent as always. Our slide-door to the corridor was closed, as Jimmy had left it. My watch said three P.M. I had slept five hours.

The ominous feeling passed after a moment. I sat up in the bunk, thinking about it, and concluded that it must have have been caused by the strangeness of my surroundings when I had so suddenly awakened.

I tried to doze again: Dr. Grenfell did not want us to assemble again until four P.M. But I was restless. Jimmy's snores annoyed me. I went to the porte-window and raised the shade a trifle. Our window faced the Earth. How amazingly it had dwindled! It hung level with us—a full, round, sunlit ball, filling no more than a tenth of the visual hemisphere of the firmament. The tracery of its continents and oceans was plain.

And beside the Earth, to make the third apex of the triangle with our cube, the Moon hung cold and bleak—starkly black and white with shadows and sunlight.

I turned from the window, and decided I would go down to the lounge to wait for the four o'clock conference. Perhaps Rowena would be there.

As I passed her cabin door, I found it flung wide. She had

closed it, I recalled, when she retired. And in the corridor, just outside her threshold, lay one of her slippers. I stumbled over it, picked it up—and found my heart unreasonably pounding. She had been wearing these slippers when Jimmy and I had left her at this door five hours ago.

As I straightened with the slipper, I glanced into her cabin. It was empty. Its drawn shade was bright with the glare of sunlight. The bed had been occupied; a chair beside it was overturned.

All this was utterly unlike Rowena. I hurried down to the lounge. No one was there. The shades were drawn to bar the glare of the Sun, but on the other side they were up and the earthlight and moonlight streamed in full. The room was bright. And it suddenly seemed horribly empty and horribly silent.

I called, "Hello there! Any one around?"

From one of the adjoining machine rooms, Jones appeared, a big, florid fellow in white shirt and linen trousers. His inevitable huge black cigar was in his mouth.

"Hello, Dean. Sleep well?"

My sudden fear dissipated. "Yes. Where is everybody?"

"Asleep, I fancy. Allen went up to the dome a while ago to stay with Rance. I'm on duty here—but there's nothing much to do. It was the deuce keeping our pressure equal, but we've got it right now. Your breathing comfortable?"

"Quite." I had flung myself into one of the wicker lounge seats. But immediately I was up again. "Have you seen Miss Palisse?"

"No. She's in her cabin, isn't she?"

"No, she isn't. The door was wide open when I passed."

"Well, she didn't come down here—went up to the dome with Rance, probably."

But she was not in the dome. Rance and Allen were there,

and they had not seen her. Dr. Grenfell was still asleep in his cubby off the third-floor chartroom.

Fear was plucking at me. But Rance said with a smile, "Try the deck, Dean. She's probably Earth-gazing. She'll be glad to have you join her."

I hurried down, and again went the length of the second-floor corridor. This time, I peered into each of the rooms as I passed. Jimmy was still snoring noisily, Baker and Gibbons were asleep in the adjacent cabin, and all the other rooms were empty.

I went out to the deck and searched all four sides almost at a run. No one was there.

Panic was upon me now. Back within the Cube I called frantically:

"Rowena! Rowena, where are you?"

It aroused them all. "Rowena, where are you? Rowena, answer me!"

Jimmy came rushing out. "Jack, what in the devil—"

"I can't find Rowena!"

I tried to calm myself. She was somewhere here, of course.

Baker and Gibbons came tumbling from their room. "What's the trouble?"

From the third tier Dr. Grenfell was calling, "Dean! Dean, what is it?"

And from the lounge downstairs, Jones shouted up a similar question.

We were all in a moment wildly searching—shouting back and forth to each other, and calling:

"Rowena! Where are you? Where are you?"

The Cube echoed with our voices and the tramp of our feet.

But Rowena had vanished.

Stark horror seized us as we gathered in the lounge. Ro-

wena had vanished. But there was only a moment of that baffled horror; and then a new alarm.

Jimmy's voice bellowed from the second tier:

"Jack! Jack! Here she is!"

His words, "Here she is!" should have been reassuring. But his terrified tone combined with them was infinitely frightening.

I leaped up the ladder-steps, with the others after me. We met Jimmy. He was wild-eyed and breathless, waving his automatic.

"Jack, my God, she—Jack, he has—Come here!"

I went after him at a run, out the corridor to the deck, around one of its angles to D-face. Five minutes ago, as I ran this length, I had unheedingly passed the closed slide-door of the airlock room.

Jimmy dashed there now, and halted, with upraised weapon.

"Jimmy—look!"

In the little airlock, projecting out from the deck, Rowena was crouching. And beside her was the huge figure of a man. His arm was around her, holding her half caressingly, half in menace. His other arm hugged his upraised knees: in his hand, a strange globular weapon pointed at Rowena's breast.

It was Croat!

XIV

HUMAN PROJECTILES

"STEADY, JACK! He's got her!"

We could hear his voice through the door-slide, calmly ironic:

"Well, and so you found me!" said Croat. "It took you a fair long time to find me—did it not? Sit quiet, Rowena!"

We stood stricken with upraised, futilely gesturing weapons. We held each other back, fearful that one of us would make an ill-advised move to startle or anger Croat into killing Rowena. He could so easily do it by the merest pressure of his finger against the cylinder in his hand.

Gibbons stammered, "The air—I left it at five pounds."

"It is quite comfortable now," came Croat's slow voice. And I realized that the door-slide was slightly ajar. "This girl—Rowena Palisse, is she not? By your gods, a woman worthy of mastering Mercury. They will say, 'Croat's mate chosen from all the Universe could be no better suited to him.' I had no ideal"

We stood dumb with horror, listening to him. Past his great thick shoulder, Rowena's white face peered at us.

His arm tightened around her. "Do not be foolish, Rowena, or, as I told you, I will have to kill you. And that would be a pity. Sit still, while I tell them what they must do."

Dr. Grenfell stood at the pane. He was unarmed; he had shoved us behind him with a warning command. He put his hands up on the pane of the door and face close to it.

"You are Croat, the Mercutian?"

Croat shifted so as to face the door more comfortably. I saw now that he had both of Rowena's hands pinned by the tightness of his encircling arm. "Yes, I am Croat, the Mercutian. You seem to know me. That is strange." His gray face gazed insolently at Grenfell, though he was obviously puzzled. "My fame must have spread quickly to Earth. How did you—"

Grenfell had obviously recovered from his first shock of horror. He stood calmly, his shoulders hunched, every muscle tense.

"That's not important. We know you. I am in command here. You cannot escape."

"Escape? For a commander you are stupid! And you make still another error—you are not in command. You were, but now you are not. I command here."

I heard Dr. Grenfell answering, but it hardly registered in my mind. It seemed that Rowena was trying to attract my attention. I caught her glance, and the vague gesture of her head to indicate something behind her. And Jimmy was plucking at me, whispering, "When I first saw him he was starting to robe them in those Moon-landing suits." Then he stopped. "Look, he's got the Moon-suits behind him."

I saw then what Rowena was indicating: the pressure suits and helmets for disembarking upon an airless world. We had brought them in case of unforeseen necessity. My mind flashed back to what Croat must have done: stolen the rector's flyer to carry him from Maine to southern Jersey, then hidden himself on the Cube, having boarded it during the confusion loading for our departure.

We found later that he had stowed away in the small lower room where raw bulk foodstuffs were stored—those which obviously we would not need during the first part of

the journey. Then, while we slept, he had captured Rowena and forced her to tell him of the Moon equipment.

He had secured two of the helmeted suits—elastic, rubberite affairs, double-shelled, with an interior air-pressure circulating system made to withstand the explosive pressure of fifteen pounds to the square inch, and great goggled helmets like an old-fashioned sea-diver. Croat had been about to use them when Jimmy came upon him.

"But use them for what? And why had he tarried?

Croat was now arguing calmly with Grenfell. He said, "I am a different race from you. Perhaps you think I would not dare kill this girl and meet my own death almost at once? Perhaps an Earthman would be afraid to make good his threat. But that, I promise you, is exactly what I shall do. If you cross me—attempt to stop me—I promise it."

And we did not dare take the chance. Grenfell stood there alert, with Gibbons beside him. The door-slide was ajar. In a matter of five seconds Gibbons could have widened that slit, fired, and kill Croat. But in those five seconds the watchful Mercutian would have bored Rowena with the deadly blast from his little cylinder.

Rowena suddenly moved, twisting violently to test him. If she could distract his attention even for a moment—

It alarmed Grenfell. He warned her sharply: "Don't do that, child!"

Croat had not turned. His arm again tightened to hold her. And Rowena called:

"He sent an ether-signal for his ship. A flare—didn't you see it? His ship is coming!"

"We have been waiting for it," said Croat; and he added sharply: "Close that door!"

His weapon came up, swung at us, and back at Rowena. His gray face, the darting fire of his dark eyes, seemed sud-

denly inhuman. This was a man of a different world. He would plunge heedlessly into murder and suicide.

Gibbons snapped the deck-slide closed.

Baker exclaimed, "Grenfell, his ship is in sight! It was down by the Moon!"

The Mercutian ship coming! Then it had not gone back to Mercury, but had been waiting out here, perhaps for a signal from Croat. And I saw Croat now menacing Rowena, making her draw on the Moon-suit.

I plucked at Jimmy. "Come! We've got to get other suits!"

No one noticed us as we dashed away along the deck. Grenfell was murmuring to his companions—trying to plan something—watching, trying to dare make an opportunity to open the slide and leap in upon Croat.

We were gone only a minute or two. I came back alone, robed in a pressure suit, while Jimmy still searched for another for himself.

I passed Baker.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

He stopped short, turned and followed me back. I carried the helmet in my hand. Baker was stammering:

"You got one, Dean? I thought— He's taking her outside!"

The group at the slide stood transfixed with horrified confusion. Within the lock now were two grotesque figures, their round goggled helmets in place, humps on the shoulders where the pressure-batteries were assembled—bloated figures, with the air-pressure in the suits already operating. I saw that the rubberite of Croat's garment was stretched by his great height. He bent at the outer door-slide. Rowena was struggling now, but he held her, and turned with his weapon to menace the men on the deck.

Grenfell opened the inner slide and closed it quickly in a panic. The men were all shouting different orders at once. If Croat were to open the outer slide simultaneously with

the opening of the inner one, all the air in the ship would go out in a blast—death to everyone on board!

I came with a wild rush. A sudden madness was on me. I calculated nothing—chanced everything. Grenfell and the others scattered before me. They were all shouting but I did not hear them. I jammed on the helmet, locked it, started up the mechanisms. My suit began bloating; the pressure made my head roar. Then it cleared. Through the visor-pane I could see the deck, and the door-slide to the lock.

I rushed at the manuals. Baker was ahead of me. He swung the lever and pushed me through the opening slide. I stumbled into the lock. The slide closed instantly after me.

And in the next moment Croat opened the outer door. The lock-air went out with a rush—a torrent of pressure escaping into the outside vacuum.

Like projectiles, we three in the lock were hurled into the black void of Space!

XV

THE COMBAT IN SPACE

I RECALL that my first emotion was one of utter amazement. There was no sense of movement. I was motionless, while things moved around me—all very slowly, almost lazily. In the midst of them I seemed poised, unmoving.

There were the distant motionless stars—blazing points of white light in the dead black velvet of the void; there was the great ball of Earth, the Moon, the flame-enveloped Sun—all visually motionless. I had gone head first through the airlock door. Now I hung level, with no axial rotation.

But there was some movement. The helmeted figures of Rowena and Croat lay near me, perhaps twenty feet away. They were clinging together and rotating slowly end over end. Croat had lost his weapon. It floated fifty feet behind us. We were falling toward the Earth with a steady acceleration of velocity which soon would be meteoric swiftness. But none of it was apparent in the vastness of Space.

The Cube was over me. In all the glittering scene, the Cube now was endowed with the most obvious motion, a hundred feet or so above me, and slowly sailing past. It was turning on a vertical axis; from its corners faint etheric blue rocket-streams were visible.

Then far to one side, off by the Moon, I saw another object—the Mercutian spaceship—a great white bird-like shape. I twisted my head to see through the lower lens of the helmet visor. It magnified the image, showing Croat's vessel

speeding upward at us; its rocket-streams were behind it, fan-shaped like the tail of a comet.

How long I hung there I cannot guess. Time, like movement and like all these astronomical bodies of which I now was one, seemed hanging poised. And I think my mind, too, functioned differently, in a detached, faraway haze of thought.

I recall that I was helpless to move, save that I could kick and flounder. Celestial forces were upon me now, inexorable beyond all puny human influence.

It penetrated to my consciousness that the Mercutian ship was only a few miles away, and that Grenfell was manipulating the Cube around me—and around Croat and Rowena. I saw the yawning, opened airlock door. Grenfell was trying to get us back in it.

If only I could reach Croat I would try to strangle him with my grip, rip and tear at his bloated garment with the knife which I had in my belt—and rescue Rowena.

The bulk of the passing Cube pulled at me. I began rotating; the heavens turned over.

The Cube momentarily moved away to take a new position. I suddenly realized I was drawing nearer Croat, or else he and Rowena were drifting slowly toward me. The gravitational attraction of our bulk was pulling us together, but it seemed, at first, desperately slow movement.

The heavens again stopped rotating. I found the Mercutian ship directly under me. I gazed numbly down at it. A mile away? Ten miles? Distance could not be calculated here. But through the visor's magnifying lens I saw it clearly, and across this airless void I saw details with microscopic, undistorted clarity.

But my brain hardly encompassed what I was seeing. There was a commotion on the Mercutian ship's upper deck, under its bell-like dome. There were figures there, fighting! Hot flashes of blue-green were visible. Men were fighting.

And I thought I saw a winged girl, and other girls—Earth-girls?

It was a vague impression. Now there was a rush of figures into a round object standing on the deck—a man's figure, fighting, holding back other men as the girls crowded behind him.

Tumultuous, silent events were happening swiftly down on the ship's deck. There was one great blue-green flash. I know now that it must have ripped the ship's dome. The air rushed out with a great explosion and the dome lifted apart. The bodies of men were blasted out—dead instantly as they struck the airless, frigid void of Space.

The Mercurian ship was wrecked, and slowly turned over. But its mass held most of the mangled bodies rotating in narrow orbits around it. Gruesome satellites! A broken litter of wreckage, it began slowly falling toward the far-distant Earth.

And with the explosion, I saw the round object catapulted out from the deck. A small silver metal ball, with tiny door and a row of windows, it hurled free; and instead of falling, it seemed to rise.

I was suddenly aware that Croat and Rowena were within reach of me! My outflung hand stretched out to him and I touched a metal plate of his sleeve with my metal fabric glove. It gave us audiphone contact. I heard his breathing, his muttered oath. And then, as he realized he could hear me, his words:

"And you think you can save her? You—cannot!"

We locked together. He had seen the wreck of his ship, knew it was the end for him. His wild laugh sounded in my ear-grids with an eerie jangle.

"Death! A fitting death for Croat and his Earthwoman—twin stars, falling!"

And I heard Rowena's voice as I touched her. "Jack! Get away! Let me push at you! Don't let him hold you!"

His great arms seized me. Our bloated suits pressed together—weightless adversaries scrambling in a weightless void! He caught the wrist that held my knife and twisted it. But despite his giant size, I found that I was the stronger. The knife was above him. I forced it slowly down against all his efforts to stop me.

He gave a last wild laugh and tried to rip at Rowena's garmet. Then my blade punctured his suit. With the outrush of its air, I felt it go flat against me, felt his grip tighten convulsively—and his last human scream, with all the irony gone out of it, jangled at my ears.

His grip loosened. I kicked him free. Like a log shoved violently into water, his body floated away.

As I clung to Rowena I became aware of the Cube over us, the yawning lock-opening coming with true aim this time to swallow us.

We struck the lock interior, fell in a heap on its metal floor and the outer slide closed upon us.

XVI

FALLING STARS

MY SENSES very nearly faded; the air in my helmet was fouled, but in a moment I had the mechanism cleared again. Rowena held me; her voice rang in my ear-grids:

"Jack! Jack, dear—what's the matter?"

I gasped, "I'm all right—the oxygen—was clogged."

We were sitting on the floor of the lock. The pressure was coming in; I felt it against me. Across the lock, at the inner side, I could see the anxious faces of Dr. Grenfell, Jimmy and the others peering in at us.

The pressure came steadily and we yielded our garment-pressure to balance it. Presently they were equal. I saw Grenfell signal. The inner slide opened and Jimmy led the rush of men, pouncing upon us, lifting off our helmets.

"You're not hurt, Jack?" Jimmy's arms held me "Thank God for that! And Rowena—you all right, Rowena? Let me help you up." His face was white and drawn. "We were so helpless, standing inside, watching you out there."

They carried us to the decks and took off our suits. But there was no time for further talk. Outside the deck windows—out there in the starry vault—portentious events were sweeping slowly on.

The wreck of Croat's ship was far beneath us, with the Earth under it. Croat's body was still near at hand—but it was falling. Grenfell had the negative current in the gravity plates of the Cube-base, creating a repulsion there; and

Croat's body had come within its influence. His twisted shape, gruesome with the sagging helmet and the deflated suit hanging in wrinkled folds, was moving swiftly away from us. The Earth's attraction had caught it.

And the silver ball was mounting; it was quite near us now. The sunlight gleamed on half its sphere with a brilliant white glare; the earthlight painted its opposite side with a mellow silver glow. It was holding a vertical axis upon which it slowly turned, so that its tiny windows went in procession before us. Its power-streams were around it like a faint green-blue aura.

Was this ball coming to attack us? I thought. I was still far from my usual self—confused, with my head roaring and my muscles trembling. Rowena seemed similarly dazed. We stood together on the deck, clinging to each other and to the bull's-eye window fastenings as we gazed out into the immensity of Space.

Around us the deck was in turmoil. They were rolling one of the guns to the firing porte. Then Dr. Grenfell's voice sounded from the nearby deck speaker. He was calling from the dome-room of the Cube.

"It's all right! Baker, swing D-face toward them! It's all right— that's Guy Palisse and, I suppose, Tama!"

Guy and Tama! Rowena held me close. Have I said that only after Guy's message did she yield to the weakness of tears? Not so—for there were tears in her eyes now.

"Jack! He says—it's Guy!"

Again, Grenfell's voice: "I can see them at the windows. It's Guy, and a winged girl, and Earthgirls."

There was a rush of feet on the deck, but Rowena and I were in no condition to join the activity. We could barely stand and cling to each other. I felt that now the reaction was making everything seem so swift—our minds could hardly grasp it. Yet it must have taken half an hour at least.

The silver ball came level and poised. We saw faces at its windows. Rowena recognized her brother. I held her then or she would have fallen.

Another interval. Jimmy came beside me, volubly triumphant. But I hardly heard him.

Then Dr. Grenfell manipulated the Cube until D-face with its open lock-entrance moved slowly toward the hovering ball, which was poised with its porte fronting us. The openings met, with gravity holding the ball as though it were glued to us.

Another interval.

I murmured, "Rowena, they're here. In a moment or two—your brother, safe!"

"Yes, Jack, everything's blurred—we—what's the matter with us?"

"Just—blurred. I feel it too. The pressure change—being outside there. We're all right . . . "

A rush of feet. Excited voices. I saw Tama—strange, frail little girl—flowing garments—sleek-feathered wings.

And the Earthgirls, the kidnapped girls from the White Camp—frightened and pale, some of them sobbing with the joy of their rescue.

And then I saw Guy. He wore a torn white shirt and trousers, a band of red cloth about his forehead. And with him was a slim, boyish youth like a little American Indian chieftain.

Guy turned: "Toh, stay with Tama a moment. Is that my sister over there? Why, Rowena! You—you're not the little girl I remember!"

Rowena cast me off, and stood wavering with opened arms to receive him.

I recall how Guy explained that he and Tama and her brother had hidden upon Croat's ship, as in his message he

had hinted they might try to do. They had been discovered, caught, and held while Croat and some of his men descended to the Earth, using the silver ball as a sort of tender.

The silver ball had returned, with the girl captives, but without Croat. The ship had waited, hoping, expecting perhaps that Croat would signal. Twice, when heavy clouds were over Maine, it had descended.

Then, with the confusion of the Mercutian ship at Croat's etheric flare-signal from our Cube, Guy seized his chance to break loose. I had seen the fight on ship's deck.

Eight of the Earthgirls were saved. I heard Jimmy ask what had become of the others. Guy avoided the question and no one asked it again.

There was still one last scene out there in the black vault of the heavens. The body of Croat, and the wrecked ship with tiny dots of Mercutians' bodies revolving as satellites around it, were falling toward the Earth. We followed them down.

Again there was that slow, measured astronomical movement—a tiny instant of time amid the stars. But to us watching humans it was literally hours.

The Earth slowly grew larger, spreading beneath us—silver, turning yellow-red, then red like a map faintly tinted. And then with other colors coming to it: bluish oceans, gray-green continents, white-tipped mountain peaks, banks of obscuring gray haze and solid cloud areas.

The torn ship and the little dot which was the body of Croat fell steadily.

The Earth grew to a great shining surface spread half across the lower firmament.

The wrecked, falling ship was first to enter the atmosphere. It turned faintly luminous with friction-heat. Above it a tail of burning gases streamed out. It was falling like a plummet

within an hour—down into the denser air strata—blazing into a great fiery ball of burning gas until it was consumed.

Then Croat's body became a luminous point of light, a dot of fire, a little falling star.

It puffed into sudden brilliance at the end, as though the spirit of the man might be making a last ironic gesture; then it faded and vanished into nothingness, with only the unseen ashes like scattered stardust sifting down.

The events I have narrated are public property. I have tried merely to give what the newscasters have called "an actual eyewitness description."

There are some who have struggled for fame, and when they got it, found it anything but pleasant to possess. Take mine now: in the quiet that followed the extraordinary events of last year, it is not exactly fame, but it certainly is notoriety.

I do not find it pleasant, nor does Rowena, nor do any of the rest of us. The world is relieved that Croat's ship is destroyed, Croat himself dead, and the next inferior conjunction of Mercury and the Earth passed safely.

The affair is over. But now people want to know where Rowena and Guy Palisse are; and where is Jack Dean living? And why does not Guy Palisse or Jack Dean go on the lecture platform or into the motion pictures, or join a circus with that winged girl named Tama who came from Mercury? They could make lots of money: why don't they do it?

We answer: that is no one's business. Rowena and I are living in as much seclusion as we can find. Tama and Guy are near us. Jimmy Turk is still in the patrol service.

Guy is beside me now as I finish these pages. He likes the tone of these last paragraphs. But Rowena, who came in a moment ago, did not.

"Aren't you a little aggressive?" she said. "After all, every-

one who reads your narrative isn't necessarily insulting you. I believe you should change it."

"Not at all," said Guy.

Rowena kissed me and went outside.

"I'll think about it," I called after her. "Maybe I'll change it."

But I haven't.

It is night now. We are in a lonely spot where there are forests, and a lake. No, it is *not* Maine.

Tama is outside, flying up into the starlight. She likes it here on Earth, though flying is much more difficult for her here than on Mercury. But she is worried about her comrades of the Light Country. The Hill City government took them back, promised them new laws. But Tama is suspicious of those quickly given promises. She and Guy are returning to Mercury as soon as Dr. Grenfell will take them.

Tama keeps very secluded in the daytime here, but at night she flies out. We never grow tried of watching her. Guy called me to the window a little while ago. She went past with fluttering wings and flowing draperies and waved her white arm at Guy as she wheeled and soared out over the starlit lake.

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TAMA OF THE LIGHT COUNTRY

Are all the artificial satellites circling the Earth ours? How can we be sure that these little metal globes, these observational devices with their top-secret interiors, were all made on Earth? Perhaps there is one up there that was not?

When such a space satellite was located, it caused a furore. But that was nothing to what happened when it was accompanied by a mysterious rash of kidnappings—young girls were being taken away, carried off to some strange destiny in outer space!

TAMA OF THE LIGHT COUNTRY is the startling novel of the conflict with Mercury—the smallest world of the solar system—which harbored an unsuspected secret.